



The Scot's Reckless Claim

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Category: Historical

Description: "I've waited a long time for this moment, and I'm nae gonnae waste it by rushin' ahead."

Isla Galbraith will do anything to save her clan, even disguise herself as a man to assassinate the rival laird. Yet, while failing in her mission is one thing, being taken captive by her enemy is entirely another.

Laird Ewan Ballentine knows betrayal in war better than most, but the last thing he expects is an assassin in his tent – much less a woman. And when he captures her, he feels something sharper than her weapon: a spark—fierce, primal, and utterly dangerous.

Isla's true name will be her death sentence if Ewan ever discovers who she is. But being bound to him is a battle all its own. Will she continue to fight for her family or will she choose to fight for her heart instead?

Assassin. Captive. Lover... What will she become?

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

Total Pages (Source): 37

CHAPTER ONE

1 703, The Council chamber, Castle Galbraith, Scottish Highlands

Oh, Lord, preserve us! Let it nae be true! This cannae be happenin'!

Crouched in her hiding place in an alcove behind a wall tapestry, Isla Galbraith pressed her knuckles to her lips to stifle her horrified gasp as the dreadful news currently under discussion in the Council chamber sank in.

She knew it was wrong to eavesdrop, but amid the alarming rumors that had been flying around Castle Galbraith for the last few weeks, and her growing fear for her brother Gregory's life, she had felt compelled to take radical action. Accordingly, ahead of the meeting, she had stolen into the empty chamber and hidden away. But now, as the discussion progressed, she was beginning to regret it.

"This is the final chapter in this bloody war, and if we are tae survive as a clan, we cannae fail tae defeat Ballentine's forces. The scouts say his army is camped less than a day's ride from the castle, in Waverly Forest. He could launch his attack on us at any moment. We must get everyone inside the walls immediately and take urgent action to prepare for the upcoming battle," Isla's brother, the Laird of Clan Galbraith, declared decisively.

"Aye, I'll give the orders as soon as we're done here," said a voice Isla recognized as belonging to Kelvin Moore. Kelvin and his cousin Domhnall Hastie were Gregory's closest friends, in addition to being his war captains and military advisors. "From what the scouts say, Ballentine has about a hundred men with him, all mounted," he

added.

“If that’s right, then we can match those numbers.” That was Domnhall speaking. “There’s good cause tae be hopeful of defeatin’ an attack, even if it comes down tae open battle. But there’s another possibility we havetae tae consider.”

In her hidey hole, Isla waited, holding her breath to hear what that was.

“He could very well have concealed a bigger force elsewhere close by,” Domnhall explained.

A bigger force hidden somewhere, ready tae overwhelm us?

The very idea turned Isla’s blood to ice.

“Aye, that’s what I’d dae if I could,” Gregory said. “But how likely is it that he has more men? He’s already lost many fighters in this war, just like the rest of us. His resources are dwindle. ’Tis obvious that’s the reason he’s decided tae stake everythin’ on an all-out attack and put an end tae it once and fer all.”

“Likely so, but ’tis a desperate gamble. He could lose everythin’,” Kelvin observed.

“Maybe we should use the element of surprise and attack the camp first,” Domnhall suggested.

“That’s one possibility, aye, but I think we need more reliable information about his numbers before we dae that,” Gregory countered.

“Well, as it is, he has us more or less pinned down. How long can we last if he decides his best option is tae starve us out?” That was Domnhall again.

“Pardon me, m’laird, but it sounds as though we’re in sore need of Laird Allen tae send us reinforcements as soon as possible,” Isla heard one of the other councilmen say nervously, voicing her very own thought.

“Aye, and I’ve already sent a messenger tae inform him of what’s happenin’. I’ve nay doubt we can expect help from him very soon. But until then, whatever happens, we must handle it ourselves,” Gregory replied, his voice deep and unwavering.

Isla prayed silently that Laird Calumn Allen, the man on whose side they were fighting on in the war—the war he had started by conquering part of Ballentine’s territory—would indeed send an army to help them defeat the enemy at their gates.

“Would it nae be wiser tae come tae some agreement with Ballentine, m’laird? It would save many lives,” Isla heard the clan secretary, the elderly Malcolm Ogilvy, suggest.

Aye, quite right, Malcolm, Isla thought to herself, heartily agreeing with the old advisor’s sentiment.

“Ye mean we should surrender?” Gregory replied, his tone derisive. “I think ye’re goin’ barmy in yer old age, Malcolm. Ye should ken better. We Galbraiths would rather die before we dae that.”

The small hope that had flickered to life in Isla’s breast died at his words.

“Maybe I am goin’ soft in the head,” Malcom conceded, quickly adding, “but this is nae our war, ’tis Laird Allan’s. And yet here we are, with Ballentine heading tae our walls, and any of us here, along with our families, likely tae lose our lives in an attack or starve in a siege and then be killed.”

“We chose tae ally with Laird Allan in this fight,” Gregory responded in a tone that

brook no argument. "There was always a chance it would come tae this. We cannae go back on our word now. What would that say about us? I'd rather perish than have folks say we Galbraiths are cowards and turncoats."

Ach, Greogory, 'tis just that sort of stubborn pride that could get us all killed, Isla raged silently, her hand over her mouth to stop the protest that threatened to burst from her lips and reveal her presence.

"Kelvin, Domnhall, here are me orders. Start gettin' the villagers safe inside the walls immediately. I want this place locked down as tight as a drum," Gregory instructed his right-hand men. "And make sure any scouts who come in with news of Ballentine's movements to report straight tae me. When ye've done that, come and join me in me study tae plan our defensive strategy."

"Aye, m'laird," his war captains chorused in their deep voices.

"And Connor," Gregory told his private secretary, "send someone tae find Lady Isla and tell her tae put the plans in motion tae prepare fer an attack. She should arrange fer anyone who cannae fight tae dae their bit tae help. Tell her I'll speak tae her later."

"Aye, I'll go mesel' and find her straight away, m'laird," Connor replied.

"Good. Then come tae me study as well."

"Aye, will dae."

"All right." Gregory announced decisively. "This meetin' is now closed."

With a heavy sense of dread settling in her belly, Isla forced herself to stay put while her brother and the murmuring councilmen slowly vacated the chamber. When she

was finally left alone, she crept out from her hiding place and made her way to the door. Opening it a crack, she peeped out into the hallway. The Council members were quickly dispersing, and she saw Gregory disappearing through the door to his study a little further down the hall. Kelvin and Domnhall, conversing in low voices, were hurrying away to carry out their orders.

When she was satisfied the coast was clear, she slipped out into the hallway and made her way to her chamber on the first floor. She was about to mount the stone staircase when she heard someone call her name.

Connor.

She stopped and turned to him as he came up to her. Tall and rangy, he towered over her, his usually mild expression grim as he met her eyes.

“Aye? What is it, Connor?” she asked, hiding her guilt behind a smile as she struggled not to betray her ill-gotten knowledge to this trustworthy friend of long-standing.

Connor caught up to her and looked around to make sure no one among the bustling servants and other castle folk passing by were listening. Apparently satisfied they were out of range, he spoke softly. “Isla, I hate tae be the one tae havetae tell ye this, but we’ve just heard that Ballentine is mustering his forces nae far from the castle.”

Isla let her smile fade and her genuine alarm show on her face. “Ye mean he’s gonnae attack the castle?” she asked.

Connor nodded, setting his long, reddish curls bobbing. “Well, we cannae be sure, but everythin’ points tae it, aye,” he replied.

“Lord! What will become of us?” she murmured, trying to maintain an air of calm, as

befitted the lady of the castle, for anyone watching them.

“Gregory’s planning our defense right now. He says he’ll speak tae ye later, but in the meantime, he wants ye tae get everybody who cannae fight busy helpin’ with preparations fer what’s tae come. D’ye ken what tae dae?”

Isla nodded, her blood running cold again. “Aye, I ken. Me grandmaither left me instructions should something like this ever happen.”

“I’ll leave it in yer hands then. I have other things tae dae before I join Gregory and the others in his study. Perhaps I’ll see ye later.”

“Aye, perhaps,” she said after him as he hurried away.

Isla went upstairs to her chamber, and when she shut the door behind her, her false composure fled. Tears flowed from her eyes as she sank down onto her bed, the feeling of icy dread growing within her. It was accompanied by a myriad of frightening thoughts and images that ran through her head in a maddening whirl.

In her mind’s eye, she went back sixteen years, to the night that was stamped indelibly on her memory. The night when assassins broke into the castle and murdered their parents in their beds. Five-year-old Isla had not known that when she was awoken by screaming and shouting in the night, but she had sensed great danger in the air.

Acting on a protective instinct, she had jumped out of bed and pulled a sleeping Gregory, aged only four, from his. Then, pressing a finger to his lips, she had dragged him across the room to hide in a wardrobe, staying there, crouched silently among the clothing, until somebody came to find them.

It was only some time afterwards, when their grandmother had told her what a brave

and clever girl she was, that Isla finally understood her actions that night had saved both her own and Gregory's lives. By rights, they should have both been dead too, for someone had sent men to kill her entire family and wipe the Galbraiths from the face of the earth. The question as to who was responsible for murdering their parents and for what reason haunted her and Gregory, though they seldom spoke of it.

The terrible loss formed an unbreakable bond between them, and it left Isla with a deep-seated fear of being left alone—specifically of losing Gregory. As they grew to adulthood, she and her brother remained close. She grew to rely on him, and when their grandmother passed away, she never forgot Gregory was all the family she had left. Even though he was a grown man and the laird of their clan, she still retained that big-sister urge to protect him from harm, for she could not bear the thought of losing him.

In the last several months, since this war had started and they had been fighting on behalf of Laird Allan against Ewan Ballentine, she had been forced to watch Gregory ride out to battle with his men on many occasions. Each time she had felt sick with terror at the thought that she might never see him alive again.

While he had been away, she had prayed almost constantly for him to stay safe and for an end to the bloody hostilities. Half her prayers had been answered. So far, Gregory had always come back in one piece. But since then the war had only intensified, and now the attack on the castle was imminent.

I cannae let him keep fightin' this war, especially since 'tis nae truly ours. How much longer can his luck hold? I must find some way tae put an end tae the fightin' and keep him safe. But how?

Feeling utterly powerless but knowing her duty as the laird's sister and official lady of the castle, she pulled herself together, crossed to her dresser, and opened the bottom drawer. She paused for a moment, staring at the rolled parchment, which had

lain there forgotten for so long, hesitating to touch it. For doing so would make the nightmarish threat at their gates all too real. It contained the instructions their grandmother had left for her to face just such an emergency as this.

Nevertheless, she forced herself to extract it from the drawer and unroll it. Her heart clenched painfully to see their grandmother's flowing hand once more after so many years. With trembling hands and a lump in her throat, she began to read the long list of instructions for the lady of the castle to do her duty to prepare for an attack.

Wells within the walls must be secured. Water should also be stored in vats in the cellars of the keep in case the enemy infiltrates the outer walls.

As many candles and lamps as possible (and large quantities of lamp oil) should be speedily acquired, to be rationed and deployed only where strictly necessary.

Inventory food supplies. As much grain and produce as can be had in the time allowed must be brought inside the castle walls and properly stored within the keep cellars. Lay as much meat and fish down to salt as possible. In case of a siege, it will be necessary to ration food.

Plentiful supplies of tea and ale must also be ensured. Milk will come from the beasts brought in from the fields—lay in a good supply of fodder for them and the horses in case of siege.

As much firewood as can be gathered prior to any attack should be brought in and stored within the walls in several places where it is protected from fire. A good quantity should be regularly dispersed on the battlements for use in the braziers (to light arrows and such), and in the great hall for medical use (see below).

Ensure all healers are present within the castle prior to any attack and that there are sufficient medical supplies to treat those injured in battle. Set those who cannot fight

or give medical assistance to making bandages, dressings, and the like.

Prepare the great hall to be used as a hospital. Mattresses and cots should be brought in for this purpose and both hearths kept burning to maintain a good supply of boiled water.

Prepare the cellars beneath the keep to shelter the injured, sick, womenfolk, and children if the outer defenses are overrun. A separate part can be used as a mortuary.

The list Isla had hoped she would never have to read, let alone use, went on and on, each line hammering home their awful plight, and making her fear increasingly for all their lives, but most of all for Gregory's.

In a short while, she gathered herself and went downstairs to give the necessary orders to prepare for an attack. She toured the pantry and storerooms with the housekeeper and cooks, setting them to making a detailed inventory of all the food supplies and arrangements for storage.

After that, she sent a maid to gather all the women and older male servants of the castle who could not fight, as well as the castle healer Davina McGhee and her assistant. Once everyone had gathered amid an atmosphere of fearful anticipation, she held a meeting, going over each of the instructions on her grandmother's list and overseeing the division of tasks.

"If there is an attack, it will be me duty as lady of the castle tae help nurse the injured as they come in, so I'll be makin' mesel' useful helpin' Davina in the great hall. She'll need all the volunteers she can get tae nurse the injured. Even just offerin' hot tea and comfort can make a difference," she told them before closing the meeting and sending them off to go about their allotted duties.

However, at the same time as she was busy organizing all this, there remained a part

of her mind that was actively turning over the various possibilities concerning a plan to keep Gregory alive.

CHAPTER TWO

By the time the meeting finally broke up, Isla had still not seen Gregory to discuss what was happening. Deciding she had to speak to him whether he was busy or not, she went along to his study and knocked on the door.

“Come,” came his deep voice from the other side. She opened the door and went in, to find him standing around the large table with Connor, Kelvin, and Domnall. All four looked up when she entered, their expressions intent and serious. They had their shirt sleeves rolled up and appeared to be poring over maps and diagrams laid out before them, which she guessed were strategic plans for the defense of the castle.

“Isla. Are ye all right?” Gregory asked her as she approached them, his handsome brow creased into a worried frown. He unfolded his tall, powerful frame, pushed his long fair hair back from his face, and fixed his light gray eyes on her.

“Aye, I’m as all right as one can be in such circumstances, I suppose,” she replied briskly, though her heart ached to look at him. She dearly wanted to embrace him but held off in company, knowing he needed to appear strong at this challenging time. “I just came tae see how ye’re gettin’ on and tell ye that I’ve set all the preparations in motion should an attack take place, accordin’ tae Grandma’s instructions.”

Gregory smiled at her with obvious gratitude. “That’s good tae hear. Thank ye fer takin’ charge of all that, Sister. ’Tis one less thing fer me tae worry about.” He paused for a moment, then he said softly, “I’m sorry ’tis such bad news.”

“Aye, well, it was certainly a shock when Connor told me what’s happenin’,” she

lied, feeling only a little bit guilty for pulling the wool over his eyes. 'Tis his fault fer nae keepin' me informed .

“Are ye scared?”

She huffed. “Of course, I am! I'd be a fool if I wasnae, eh?” The others smiled at her comment.

“Aye, only a fool disnae feel afraid when he ought tae,” Connor murmured.

“And that's how ye lose a war,” Kelvin put in sagely, nodding his dark head.

“But I must tell ye, Gregory,” Isla went on, needing to voice her concerns, “I curse this war Laird Allan has dragged us intae. 'Tis nae our fight. This shouldnae be happenin'. Ballentine should be camped outside Laird Allan's walls, nae ours. 'Tis our folks who'll be dyin' if Ballentine attacks. When he attacks,” she corrected herself. A mixture of anger and fear rose inside her at the wrongness of it, and she clasped her hands tightly at her waist to keep it from erupting.

Gregory appeared to ignore her view of the matter. Instead, he said in a reassuring tone, “Things appear worse than they are. Laird Allan will send reinforcements as soon as he gets me message. In a few days' time, the picture may be very different.” He sounded confident, but again, she knew that went along with his responsibilities as the laird. Any doubts he harbored, he would keep to himself for the dark hours of the night.

Frustration sharpened her tongue as she retorted tartly, “Well, I suppose we must hope Ballentine waits politely fer Allan's men tae arrive before he attacks then. Mayhap we should invite him in fer tea while he waits.”

Kelvin sniggered, and Gregory smiled wryly, but he was clearly not going to be

drawn in by her sarcasm. “Since ’tis us Ballentine has in his sights just now, we havenae choice but tae defend ourselves if he decides tae launch his attack afore then,” he explained. “Remember, Isla, he and his men cannae just simply walk intae Castle Galbraith. These walls are ten feet thick, and me men are well supplied with weapons. We have our own water supply within the walls and should have enough general supplies tae see us through until the reinforcements get here. We can easily hold him off.”

Unconvinced, Isla burst out, “Can ye nae sue fer peace, come tae some arrangement with Ballentine and avoid the bloodshed?” She heard the pleading note in her voice and despised it.

Gregory shook his head. “I’ll nae renege on me word tae defend Allan’s cause.”

She wanted to shout, “Ye mean ye’re too stubborn!” But she bit it back. Instead, she simply pursed her lips and nodded. “Very well. Will we be dining together this evening as usual?”

“I’m nae sure. I think we’ll be too busy here.”

“All right, I’ll have some food sent in fer ye later,” she said, surveying them all. “I’ll leave ye tae yer plans then.”

“Aye, I’ll come and find ye when I’m free,” Gregory told her before turning back to the others and resuming the discussion while Isla left the room with a heavy heart.

It was only four o’clock and still light. Feeling restless and on edge, she decided to go outside and gauge the atmosphere among the villagers who were streaming into the castle for shelter from the coming storm. She stepped out past the guard on the keep doors and stood on the steps watching as the clansfolk made their way through the gigantic gates to what they hoped would be a safe haven.

The atmosphere was surprisingly subdued, with none of the usual chatter or laughter as the river of humanity flowed steadily into the courtyard, some lugging bundles or pushing handcarts full of their possessions. White-faced women carried crying babes in their arms, while scared-looking children pulled their younger siblings along. The old and sick and heavily pregnant were carried in on makeshift litters or supported by strong arms and shoulders inside the towering stronghold.

The cacophony from the livestock and the barking, sniffing dogs that ran loose among the incoming throng echoed from the walls. Sheep, pigs, cows, and goats streamed in along with the people. Those with horses or mules or donkeys rode or drove them through the gates. Chickens and other edible fowl rode in style, packed in willow cages on the beds of numerous carts and wagons pulled by enormous shire horses. More carts and wagons loaded with straw, hay, grain, turnips, and other produce, rumbled over the cobblestones of the courtyard, heading towards the rear of the castle to supply the kitchens and stables.

Among all this, groups of heavily armed soldiers moved rapidly about, their commanders barking orders as they deployed their men to oversee the influx.

The cold leaden weight lodged in Isla's belly grew heavier still as she watched the strained faces filing past her. The very air felt doom-laden, but she maintained her calm exterior and smiled and nodded encouragingly at the villagers, as was her duty as the laird's sister.

While she stood there observing the organized chaos, she could not help but overhear the conversation of the guards stationed directly behind her on the steps of the castle keep. They were talking to their replacements, who had come to relieve them of duty.

"What's tae dae, lads?" one of them asked the newcomers. "Is it true what the rumors say, that Ballentine's army is camped less than a day's ride from here?"

“Aye, it seems that way. Ye’re tae attend a briefin’ at five with the laird tae get yer orders,” one of the new guards explained.

“Jaysus, I never thought it would come tae this, the enemy campin’ at our gates. It’ll nae take him and his army long tae reach us once they start movin’.”

“The laird’s already sent a messenger tae Laird Allan fer reinforcements, so we only havetae hold them off until they get here.”

“Aye, that’s somethin’, I suppose. With luck, the laird might be able tae infiltrate some spies in the enemy camp and find out what Ballentine’s plannin’.”

“Aye, I’m sure he’s thought of that already... Well, ye two had best be off and get somethin’ tae eat afore the briefin’.”

“Aye, thanks, lads, we’ll see ye later at the barracks fer an ale or two, I hope.” The original guards departed, and the new guards settled into their positions by the door, pikes at the ready.

The comment about infiltrating spies had struck a chord with Isla. Like a seed, the idea took root in her mind. It sprouted and grew quickly, pulling her back inside the keep and upstairs to her chambers in search of privacy. By the time she had shut herself safely inside, the buds of a plan were already forming in her mind. She sat on her bed and thought.

A spy in Ballentine’s camp who could find out his plans to attack the castle could potentially turn the tide of the war, and everyone’s fates. In fact, it could avert an attack altogether, and her brother and his men wouldn’t have to fight. He’d be safe. They would all be safe. But how did one infiltrate an enemy camp without getting found out and killed for being a spy? Or rather, how could a woman infiltrate an enemy camp without getting discovered and killed as a suspected spy, or worse?

Various scenarios ran through her mind, and all but one ended in summary execution. With that possibility in mind, she realized that, even if an interloper avoided detection and discovered Ballentine's plans, there was no guarantee the attack would be called off. Then it came to her in a sudden burst of clarity, and the plan blossomed to full fruition.

Filled with resolution and knowing time was of the essence if she were to successfully safeguard Gregory's life, she hurried to put it into action. She fetched a cloth bag from her wardrobe, placed it on the bed, and spent the next hour packing it with the things she would need for a journey, including a candle stub and tinder box and her father's dirk, which she stole from Gregory's wardrobe.

When the clock on the mantel chimed midnight, she was ready. With stout riding boots on her feet, a long, hooded woolen cloak covering her entire person and concealing the dirk stuck in her waistband, she pulled on gloves, hoisted the bag, and left her chambers on silent feet.

Getting out of the castle unseen was perhaps the easiest part. Beneath the hulking fortress ran a network of underground tunnels, from which one could move invisibly to any part of the castle one chose. She and Gregory had played in the tunnels for hours when they were growing up, and Isla knew them well. Descending to the depths by a hidden door, she paused to strike a light before starting off along a tunnel that eventually emerged in the tree line of a copse a few hundred feet outside the castle gates.

She took off across the dark meadows, the half-moon lighting her way to the neighboring farm. There, she paused long enough to steal a horse before setting off in the direction of Waverley Forest. The knowledge that her mission to protect Gregory and all she held dear had begun in earnest spurred her on as she rode through the night.

There's nay other way than tae sneak intae Ballentine's camp... and kill him.

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CHAPTER THREE

“O ur spies’ reports indicate that Galbraith’s castle is well defended, and by now, he’s sure tae be aware of our presence. He’ll be busy beefin’ up his defenses even further,” said Ewan Ballentine to his second in command, Colin Balfour, the following evening.

The pair were sitting at the makeshift table in Ewan’s private tent in the military camp they had established in Waverly Forest. Each man had a dram of whisky set before him. Maps, parchments, and other papers carrying vital information cluttered the surface between them.

“Are ye sayin’ that ye think a head-on assault willnae work?” Colin asked.

“I’m nae rulin’ it out. As ye ken, Colin, I’d rather avoid a drawn-out fight if I can, but breakin’ intae the castle will be nay easy task, that’s for sure. We could end up losin’ a lot of men fer naethin’,” Ewan replied, his forehead creased in thought.

“Aye, I agree. But the only other option is tae lay siege tae the place and starve them intae submission’,” Colin said before pausing to sip his whisky. “That could take weeks.”

“Aye, I’m aware of that.”

“But Galbraith is bound tae have got a messenger off tae Laird Allan askin’ for reinforcements. Surely, we dinnae have time for a siege?”

“If I was Galbraith, I wouldnae set too much store on Allan sendin’ troops anytime soon. Remember the reason why I decided nae tae wait any longer tae challenge Galbraith? Because right now, half Allan’s army is still up near Dingwall, fightin’ with the McLoughlins over the clan’s whisky distillery. Allan’s forces in the south are at their weakest now,” Ewan reminded him.

“Aye, but he still has a powerful force at his disposal. Even fifty of his warriors fightin’ alongside Galbraith’s would likely see us off as we are at present.”

“I appreciate yer optimism, Colin,” Ewan said wryly. “Granted, Allan has a few hundred men down here still tae deploy. But the question is, will he wantae?”

Colin’s shot him a questioning look. “What d’ye mean?”

“Well, ye ken how Allan thinks as well as I dae. He robbed me of me land simply because he coveted the wealth such fertile land brings. So, he came and took it by force, lyin’ and claimin’ I stole it from him.”

His voice had become a growl and his dark brows knitted as he felt the pain of the insult afresh. The theft of part of his birthright by the bastard Allan was one of the injustices he had suffered at the villain’s hands that constantly twisted in his heart like a dagger.

“I ken what drives a man like that—’tis an insatiable hunger fer gold and power over others,” he continued.

“I agree with ye there, Ewan, but what’s that got tae dae with whether he sends reinforcements fer Galbraith or nae?” Colin asked, frowning.

“Och, he’ll send them all right. It would look bad if he didnae send anyone at all tae help out his ally. The question is, when will he send them?” He leaned forward and

rested his elbows on the table, looking at Colin intently. "I'll wager Allan intends tae take full advantage of the situation. I mean, if he beats us, he'll take over all that's mine. But I reckon he'll nae stop there. With Galbraith's forces already weakened from the battle, then what's tae stop him from takin' over the castle and Clan Galbraith fer himself?"

Colin gave a low whistle. "Naethin'," he said, nodding. "That makes good sense."

"Aye, but the trouble is, Galbraith just daesnae see it. Somehow, whether by design, gutlessness, or just sheer gullibility, he's allowed Allan tae convince him that he's an innocent man bein' slandered as a thief by me." He paused thoughtfully for a moment.

"Although there's probably more tae it as well. 'Tis likely Allan has somethin' Galbraith wants or needs, grain maybe. Could be he thought he had nae choice but tae ally with Allan. Any way, it daesnae matter. What matters is, that it would suit Allan very well if his reinforcements arrived just as the battle's windin' down. With both sides weakened, it would nae take much effort fer him tae finish both me and Galbraith off and make all we own his."

"So, ye think he's plannin' tae take over both clans at the same time?"

"That's just what I think, I've nay guarantee it's true. But even if I'm wrong, it's gonnae take some time for Galbraith's messenger tae catch up with Allan himself. He could be anywhere from here tae Dingwall. That buys us some time. In that time, there's always hope."

"So, a siege could work best then. If there's a delay in the reinforcements coming, Galbraith might give up and come over tae us." Colin smiled and drank down his dram. "That'll mean less bloodshed as well."

“Aye. That’s all tae the good. Of course, if Allan sends reinforcements in the next few days, we’ll havetae fight. But I feel it in me bones that I’m right about his intentions. I’m takin’ a gamble that we’ll nae see hide nor hair of any reinforcements fer a good while yet.”

“I’ll roll that dice with ye gladly, Ewan,” Colin said with a gruff laugh. “So, with that settled, what’s our next move?”

Ewan got up and stretched luxuriously, cracking his bones and yawning widely. “There’s nae time tae waste. Let’s go and talk tae the men about the plans. It should boost their morale a wee bit.”

“Aye all right.” Colin got up and followed Ewan out of the tent. Darkness had already fallen as they strode side by side across the well-organized camp to the rallying point in the center.

“Gather round, lads,” Colin called to the knots of men among the tents as he and Ewan strode past them. “The laird wants tae speak tae ye all about what’s gonnae happen.”

Minutes later, Ewan was standing on an upturned crate before his assembled troops. “Thank ye, lads. Now, listen well tae what I tell ye about our plans fer this wee venture of ours.” He went on to outline the strategy he and Colin had already agreed on. “So, ye’ll be pleased tae ken there’s likely nae gonnae be any fightin’ fer the moment. Nae if I can help it anyway.”

There came from the ranks a mixture of laughter, boos, and cheers, which made him grin. “I ken some of ye are disappointed, but ye should be happy ye’ll live tae fight another day, eh?”

He paused as he looked out at the faces, some of which he silently admitted were

more familiar to him than others. That occurred to him when he noticed one lad hanging back from the front row. He was a short, skinny specimen wearing a too-big uniform jacket, with a cap pulled low over his head and a kerchief concealing his lower features. But Ewan could make out enough of him to be sure he did not know the lad.

Shrugging it off, he turned his attention back to the sea of expectant faces in front of him. “But just because ye dinnae have tae fight just yet, I dinnae want any of ye usin’ that as an excuse tae shirk yer duties. Attend yer trainin’ sessions every day, keep yer blades sharp and yer equipment and gear ready in case we havetae fight. All right, lads, now off ye go tae yer rest.”

As he stepped down from the crate, there was a ragged chorus of “Aye, m’ laird,” from the men, who began to disperse, the majority seemingly cheered by news of the temporary reprieve from fighting.

Ewan headed back to his tent with Colin. When they reached it, they stopped outside. Ewan turned to his second-in-command and slapped him on the shoulder. “Well, lad, I’m gonnae turn in.”

“I’m nae hittin’ the hay just yet,” Colin replied. “I’m gonnae dae me rounds of the perimeter first and make sure the guards are all awake.”

“They’d better be, or they’ll get me boot up their arses,” Ewan threatened before breaking out in a smile. “Well, bad as I feel fer leavin’ ye tae it, I’ll bid ye good night. Wake me up if anything happens though.”

“I will. Go on and get that much-needed beauty sleep.” Colin laughed as he turned and went off about his duties.

Ewan went inside and prepared to sleep. Clad in his shirt and trows, he lay on his cot,

propped against the pillow. For a while, he looked over the papers he had brought from the table, his mind turning relentlessly. Eventually, with a large yawn, he gave in to his fatigue, blew out his candle, and turned on his side under the blanket. Gradually, his mind quieted, and he fell deeply asleep.

He did not know what woke him, but suddenly, his eyes snapped open and every one of his senses was alert. He lay still in the pitch black, his ears straining. Then, he heard it—the unmistakable sound of stealthy movement nearby.

Reacting quickly, he rolled over, saw the flash of a blade arcing down towards him, and reached up to grab the arm of his would-be assassin. The blade halted inches from his neck. A fierce struggle then ensued in the darkness, punctuating it with panting and hisses as he and the murderous intruder battled blindly with each other.

But Ewan soon realized he was the stronger out of the two of them and managed to twist the other's wrist. His assailant let out a sharp cry of pain and dropped the blade. Ewan quickly fell upon the shadowy figure and pinned it down to the floor next to the bed, kicking the blade aside as he did so.

What the hell was going on, he wondered as it dawned on him that he was battling a man much smaller and weaker than himself, someone who was gasping for breath now he was straddling him and practically sitting on his chest.

He moved his weight a little, not wishing to kill whoever it was before he could interrogate them. “Ye may as well stop strugglin’ and save yer strength. I have some questions tae beat out of ye before I kill ye,” he growled. But that only made the intruder fight all the harder. Nevertheless, it was remarkably easy for Ewan to keep him immobilized while he reached over and struck a light.

He held the candlestick above his captive's face, which was obscured by a dark-colored woolen cap. A recent memory flashed into his mind as he wrenched it

off—of the lad he had not recognized, dressed in an outsized uniform jacket, lurking in the ranks. The candlelight flickered, illuminating his captive, who still thrashed vainly beneath him.

“Who the hell are ye, ye sneaking, cowardly bast—” he snarled, then suddenly stopped, perplexed by the sight of the long golden plait which had fallen out from beneath the cap. “What the devil?” he exclaimed softly, staring down with amazement at the face of his attacker and doing a double take. “’Tis a lassie!”

When he had recovered from the initial shock of the revelation, his fury rose. “Who are ye and what d’ye mean by comin’ in here and trying tae kill me while I’m sleepin’?” Despite her terrified expression, he shook her roughly by the shoulder. “Tell me, damn ye!”

But she refused to answer and simply shook her head, her eyes wide with fear. Yet he glimpsed defiance there too. He leaned down menacingly, holding the flame of the candle near her face. She pulled back as far as she could, grimacing.

“Ye’d best tell me right now if ye wantae live,” he hissed, feeling a pang of guilt at threatening a woman.

But she just tried tae kill me!

Again, she shook her head, keeping her lips pursed. “All right, if that’s how ye wantae play it,” he told her, “I’ll offer ye a choice. Ye can either tell me what I wantae ken this minute, or I can drag ye outside and strike off yer head in front of me men.

“Or maybe ye’d prefer it if I left ye tae the mercy of me soldiers? I’m sure ye understand how dangerous a military camp can be fer a lassie. It wouldnae be a pleasant experience. Ah, ye dinnae like that idea, I see,” he said, nodding as her really

quite remarkable eyes widened further with obvious terror. “Ye’re defiant, but ye dinnae wantae die, eh?”

“A-all r-right, I’ll m-make a deal with ye,” she suddenly burst out, her dulcet voice cracking with desperation. “I’ll t-tell ye what ye wantae ken if ye promise nae tae hurt me!”

Ewan placed the candlestick on the bed and leaned over her, one hand either side of her head, staring down into her luminous gray-green eyes. “That’s better. Nae that ye’re in any position tae dictate terms, but I agree nae tae hurt ye, as long as ye tell me the truth. I’m interested tae hear what ye have tae say fer yersel’.” When she hesitated, he barked, “Come on then, I’m waitin’!”

She flinched, her fear almost palpable. Yet he spied the flash of defiance in her eyes again as she stuttered breathlessly, “A-all right, b-but give me a chance tae breathe, will ye? Ye’re squashin’ the life out of me.”

“Dinnae try anythin’,” he warned, shifting most of his body weight from her ribcage and waist to his arms as he hung above her. Pinned as she was between his thighs, Ewan was suddenly very conscious of her warmth and the smallness of her form beneath him.

“Thank ye,” she murmured, taking in deep breaths.

She’s polite for an assassin.

He let his eyes rake over her flawless complexion, heart-shaped chin, small, slightly turned-up nose, and full lips. He had to drag his eyes away from her fair tresses, which shimmered in the candlelight like the proverbial spun gold. She certainly looked an unlikely killer.

It went against the grain to treat a woman so roughly, but he knew it was necessary to continue to scare her to get the information out of her. He put his face close to hers and growled in a menacing tone, “Speak or face the consequences.”

“M-me name’s... Annie Dean. I come from the village yonder.” She pointed her eyes in a vaguely northerly direction.

“All right, Annie Dean, if that’s yer real name, which I doubt, who sent ye here and why?”

“A-a man, I d-dinnae ken his name, I n-never saw him before, but I met him in the inn in the village, and he offered me a good deal of money tae come here an’... seduce ye,” she stuttered.

Ewan, despite his anger, could not hold back the laughter that burst from him. “Seduce me? Ye have a bloody funny way of goin’ about it,” he said between his chuckles. “Is that what ye think seducing a man is, creepin’ up on him when he’s asleep and shovin’ a dagger in his throat?”

“Nay!” she protested, wriggling under him. “Of course, I dinnae. B-but?—”

“But what?”

“B-but I couldnae seduce ye because I couldnae get close enough.”

“And?”

“A-and the order was, if that f-failed... I was supposed tae kill ye instead.”

The admission infuriated Ewan afresh. “I think ye’re lyin’,” he told her accusingly.

“I’m tellin’ ye the truth!” she cried, wriggling again.

“Stop doin’ that!”

She stopped. Ewan thought for a moment as he looked down into her eyes. Possibly the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen, they shone in the candlelight, betraying the fact she was holding back tears. Despite his anger, he felt another twinge of guilt for subjecting her to such treatment. But he was determined to find out who she was. He had to.

For this was not the first attempt on his life. But only he and Colin and a few men sworn to secrecy knew about what had happened a year earlier, when an assassin sent by Laird Calumn Allan had gotten into the castle at night, intent on killing him. Caught dozing in his bed, Ewan had nevertheless managed to fight the man off and question him before he killed him. However, he had sustained some nasty knife wounds before the intruder had finally given up.

That was when his sister Deidra had run into his room, and he had been able to do nothing to help her when the intruder had grabbed her as he had run out, kidnapping her. He could still hear her muffled screams as she was forced out of the castle at knife point, only to vanish.

Without even waiting for the healer to tend to his wounds, he had begun formulating a plan to rescue her. At dawn the following morning, he and Colin had ridden out with fifty handpicked men, heading to Allan’s stronghold, three day’s ride distant. Once there, they had staged a daring rescue and freed a terrified Deidra from a stinking cell in the dungeons. Every day, he thanked God for letting him bring her home safely.

However, just before the rescue, he had seen Galbraith and a party of his men ride out of Allan’s castle, which had convinced him that Galbraith was complicit in Deidra’s

kidnap.

Revenge was part of the reason he was here now to attack Galbraith, Allan's ally in the war that power-hungry maniac had manipulated them all into. But he also wanted his lands back, and Galbraith was his route to getting close to Allan and defeating him once and for all. He looked forward to having the pleasure of killing both of them.

All this ran through his mind as he stared down at his captive. Was she another of Allan's assassins, sent to murder him and take over his clan?

What shall I dae with her? I'll keep her close, watch her.

"I'm gonnae let ye up, and I promise I'll nae hurt ye... as long as ye dinnae try tae run. Ye're tae stay with me, so I can keep an eye on ye. D'ye understand?"

"Aye, I-I understand, I s-swear I'll nae tae try tae run," she replied, nodding.

"All right." Slowly, he lifted himself away from her and stood up. Automatically, he reached out to help her up. She put her small hand in his and climbed to her feet. She was wobbly at first and held onto him until she had steadied herself.

"Thank ye," she said politely as she adjusted her clothing. While Ewan picked up the dropped knife and tucked it in his belt, he watched her closely, wondering why anyone would pay this slightly built, well-spoken young woman to kill him. The unlikelihood of it left him convinced she was lying to him. But at the same time, she had tried to murder him. Clearly, she had been prepared to commit cold-blooded murder. The whole thing was as intriguing as it was alarming and he had to get to the bottom of it.

"Right, this is what's gonnae happen," he commanded her sternly. "I'll keep ye safe, as long as ye obey me without question. From this moment forward, ye can give up

any idea of bein' free. Ye're mine now, and ye'll remain here in the camp fer as long as this war lasts. Ye're nae tae leave me sight, and ye'll sleep here in this tent every night with me, so I can keep an eye on ye. All right?"

She looked shocked. "That's nae necessary," she protested. "I already promised nae tae run."

"I dinnae trust ye, so 'tis necessary tae me. And in case ye have any ideas of disobeying me orders and sneakin' off tae tell everything tae the one who's payin' ye, just remember, if any of me men find out ye're woman and a spy, I'll be forced tae execute ye. Or worse."

He saw her swallow hard before she nodded and said, "A-alright."

"Aye. And ye willnae mind if I tie yer hands and feet. That way, I can sleep easy, kennin' ye cannae try tae stab me again."

"Ye have me dirk," she pointed out.

"Thanks fer remindin' me. Now, put yer arms above yer head," he instructed.

"What? What fer?"

"So I can check fer any concealed weapons."

"But I havenae?—"

"Dae it."

She sighed and raised her arms. He noticed how she trembled, and her cheeks reddened as he patted her down from head to toe, running his palms over her inner

thighs, her behind, and over her chest. He found nothing, only a slight yet shapely body beneath her disguise. “Take off yer boots and stockings.”

“What?”

“Yer boots and stockings. Take them off. Ye could have a blade hidden in there.”

She shook her head disbelievingly but did as he instructed. As he examined her footwear, feet, and ankles, he noticed how clean her feet were for a village lass. Along with her cultured accent, it seemed yet another reason to be suspicious of her.

“Satisfied?” she asked with an edge of sarcasm to her voice when he had finished searching her.

She has guts, I’ll give her that!

“Fer now, aye. Ye can put yer stockings back on,” he replied. Silently, she complied.

“Good. Now, get on the cot.” He jerked his chin at the camp bed.

“All right, but where are ye gonnae sleep?”

“Well, that’s me bed. Where d’ye think I’m gonnae sleep?”

Her eyes flew wide, and her cheeks turned bright pink. “Ye want me tae sleep in there with ye?”

“What’s the problem? Ye were sent tae seduce me, remember? Ye must have been keen enough tae get in me bed then, so why are ye suddenly actin’ like an outraged virgin?” He pointed at his chest. “I’m the one takin’ the risk here—I’ve nae tried tae kill ye, which is more than can be said of ye.”

She stared at him, her mouth opening and closing like a fish's a few times, clearly searching for words. But none emerged. Eventually, she gave up any attempt at protest and climbed onto the cot. The horrified expression on her face prompted him to add, "I told ye I'm nae lettin' ye out of me sight, and this is how I can be sure ye willnae run or try tae stick me again."

She said nothing and lay down on the far side of the cot, taking up surprisingly little room. Ewan stepped over to the table and grabbed the length of rope that was looped over a chair back. She watched warily while he used his own dirk to cut two lengths from it. Then, he approached her with the bindings.

"Ye dinnae need tae tie me," she said, a small frown appearing on her smooth brow.

"Quit yer complainin', will ye? Ye seem tae keep fergettin' ye just tried tae murder me," he pointed out, trying her wrists firmly with one of the lengths of rope and her ankles with the other. "Trust me, if I'm tae have any sleep at all, I need tae make sure ye stay right here next tae me all night, with all the weapons out of reach." She looked dismayed when he secured one end of the rope binding her hands around his own wrist before lying down next to her on the cot.

Their bodies pressed against each other, hers as tense as a plank of wood. Ewan did not mind, she was warm, and her hair smelled of rosemary. But he could sense she minded a lot because she tried to shrink away. Unfortunately for her, there was nowhere to shrink to. He pulled the blankets over them. "Sleep well," he said and blew out the candle.

For some reason he did not understand, the sound of her annoyed huff had him smiling into the darkness, and a small flame of excitement flickered low in his belly as he closed his eyes and invited sleep to take him.

CHAPTER FOUR

How did I make such a mess of things? Me mission tae keep Gregory safe has turned out a complete failure so far. I was supposed tae kill him, nae sleep with him!

Unable to lie on her back because of the narrow cot, Isla passed the long hours of the night in a state of sleepless mortification, listening to Ewan Ballentine's deep, even breathing as he slumbered next to her. She lay on her left side, with the hard wooden edge of the cot digging into her uncomfortably, facing away from her mortal enemy, the man who should have been dead by then. The alternative was to lie on her right side, with her nose jammed against his chest.

I suppose I should be grateful tae be alive. And at least he's warm, and daesnae snore, she told herself, staring into the darkness, as if searching for any faint glimmer of silver in the cloud that had enveloped her. But despite the farcical yet dangerous situation she found herself in, and the promises she had made to Ballentine, she refused to abandon her mission.

Already, she had tried to reach over and surreptitiously unpick the knot of the rope tethering her to his wrist. But in the darkness, it proved impossible without risking waking him and incurring his wrath. So, with his earlier threats to execute her or give her to his men to use still ringing in her ears, she eventually gave up the attempt.

She thought about Gregory, knowing he would be worried sick about her by now, wondering where she was. She hated the thought of being the cause of any distress, especially as he had so much weighing on his shoulders just then. But for Isla, the need to save him from being hurt or killed in the coming conflict overtook all other

considerations, however painful they might be.

I saved his life once before, and I'll dae it again, she vowed silently. All I need tae dae is bide me time and dae as Ewan says. I'll blend in with the camp, try tae win the men's trust and learn as much as I can about his plans. Another chance tae kill him will come along sooner or later. It has tae.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Ewan suddenly heaved himself over onto his left side and pressed his entire length against her body, his lap curving against her behind, his thighs against hers, just as though they were two spoons in a cutlery drawer. Isla went rigid, her only relief due to the knowledge she still had her trousers on, and he was sleeping in his trews.

Then, a beefy arm wound around her waist, and a large hand snaked under her body, pulling her tighter against Ewan's chest, so she was caught in a vice. Moments later, a long, muscular leg as heavy as a log was flung over her legs. And that was not even the worst of it. Pinned to the bed as she was, unable to move an inch, she felt his lips resting against her neck. His warm, moist breath tickled her skin as he breathed in and out and murmured softly in his sleep.

It would have been a terrible ordeal at the best of times, for Isla had never shared a bed with a man before. She was a maid who had led a sheltered life. Naturally, one day she expected to share a bed with her husband, but she was certainly not prepared for anything like this!

And the fact that the enemy laird was undeniably the brawest man she had ever laid eyes on, and his proximity was making her body tingle all over, made it all feel so much worse.

How can I betray Gregory and the entire clan like this? Thank God they cannae see me like this, literally sleeping with the enemy!

She silently burned with shame at the way her body was responding to Ewan's embrace.

The dawn chorus of the birds found her still wide awake, still enmeshed within her captor's coils, still feeling utterly shamed by her own body. Release only came when Ewan awoke, yawned loudly, stretched luxuriously until his bones cracked, and then swung himself out of the cot. He sat on the side of it for several minutes, first raking his hands through his tousled dark hair, then rubbing his face all over and yawning again.

At last, he got to his feet. For the first time in what had seemed like an eternity, Isla felt she could finally breathe freely. Yet she was still bound at her wrists and ankles, and found herself a captive audience as Ewan strode across to the makeshift washstand, stripped off his shirt as if she were not there and proceed to vigorously wash his naked upper torso with soap and cold water.

The lingering sting of shame at her body's betrayal during the long night suddenly vanished as Isla's attention was drawn to the shocking, yet at the same time fascinating, sight before her. Never had she seen a man half naked like this, at least, not so close up! Involuntary thrills shook her as she watched him covertly, through half-closed eyes.

His entire body, so tall and well-proportioned, was packed with ridges of hard muscle. She became transfixed by the way it rippled and flexed beneath his skin with each tiny movement. The whiteness of his skin surprised her. There was a touching vulnerability to it, though belied by the many old battle scars he wore on his body, which showed him to be a hardened warrior. These silvery, serpentine shadows of old injuries occasionally snaked through the beautiful, swirling patterns wrought in deep blue ink across his broad shoulders and brawny arms. To Isla, he was a revelation, unexpectedly beautiful, while yet formidable and deadly.

As she continued to watch, she could not help recalling the illustrations of great sculptures from antiquity which she had secretly admired in books in the castle library when alone. In physical form, Ewan seemed to equal the exquisite masculine beauty of, say, an Apollo, or an Adonis, like those skillfully rendered in marble in ancient times. He's a living, breathing work of art, she thought, a hot flush running all over her body. She was so lost in the moment, she forgot they were enemies and that she was there on a mission to destroy him.

But when he took her by surprise by suddenly shucking off his trews, giving her a flash of a pair of high, round, powerful-looking buttocks, modesty overcame her along with harsh reality. She looked away. Feeling strangely feverish, she made sure to focus her gaze on anything in the tent that was not the naked Laird Ballentine.

“Eat,” Ewan commanded gruffly thirty minutes later, now sitting opposite her at the table, fully dressed. This was her first time seeing his face in daylight, and it proved to be as disturbingly braw as the rest of him.

His strong, tan, chiseled features, darkly stubbled chin, and piercing, deep-set, dark-brown eyes were framed by equally thick, slightly unruly, shoulder-length curls so dark as to be almost black. His lips were firm, their contours finely cut, with laughter lines at each side and at the corners of his eyes. Isla shifted in her seat, finding it harder to face him head-on like this than when she had spied on him naked.

“Eat, damn ye!” he repeated more forcefully, about to dig into the bowl of steaming oatmeal in front of him. He shoved the other bowl across the table in Isla’s direction. She held up her wrists and showed him the bindings still around her wrists. He had untied her feet earlier to allow her to walk to the table.

“How shall I eat?” she asked simply, scarcely daring to meet his eyes out of a mixture of fear and the peculiar sensations coursing through her

He sighed heavily. "All right. I'll untie yer hands, but just until ye've finished eatin'." He leaned over and, with annoying speed, undid the knots she had found so impossible to get out of during the night. "Just dinnae try anythin' stupid," he added darkly, shooting her a warning look as he sat back in his chair and began eating.

"What d'ye think I'm gonnae dae? Stab ye with me spoon?" she asked defiantly, picking it up and hungrily shoveling spoonfuls of the hot, salty porridge into her mouth.

"I wouldnae put it past ye. Are ye plannin' on eatin' the bowl too?" he said, clearly taken aback by how enthusiastically she was polishing off the oatmeal. He sounded vaguely amused, and it annoyed her.

Though she knew she should fear him, she was unable to curb her sharp tongue. Swallowing her mouthful, she retorted, "Go ahead and laugh. Ye'd be hungry too if ye'd nae eaten a morsel since yesterday afternoon. Believe me, this is the best oatmeal I've ever tasted."

To her surprise, he laughed, which eased the lines of strain from his face and made him appear almost boyishly handsome. "Well, it seems like ye're easily pleased at least. Most of the lads think camp porridge is more suited tae plastering cottage walls than eatin'," he said.

Isla's irritation with him transferred to herself when she found herself smiling around her spoon.

What, are ye laughin' at his jokes now?

"But it sticks tae yer ribs and fills ye up when ye've got a long day ahead of ye," he added, finishing his porridge and throwing the spoon in the bowl before pushing it aside.

Isla's curiosity rose once more. "Oh, have we got a long day ahead of us?" she asked, determined to learn everything possible about his intended strategies for attacking her home.

"Aye, we're packing up and moving out today," he told her, picking up a billy can of hot tea that had been brought in with the oatmeal and pouring the contents into two metal mugs, one of which he pushed her way.

"Thank ye," she murmured, scraping up the last of her porridge, her curiosity piqued. "Where are we goin'?"

He paused before answering. Isla could feel his eyes burning into her as she waited, feeling certain he was going to say, "Castle Galbraith." But he surprised her when he finally replied in a low tone, "Tae right a grave wrong."

"Oh," was all she could think of to say in response to the cryptic answer, regrettably no wiser than before.

"Obviously, 'tis vital that ye hide the fact ye're a lassie from the men and try tae look like a proper soldier," he told her. "So, make sure yer disguise is a good one. Have ye thought about what name ye're gonnae go by in the camp?"

"Aye, I thought I could go by the name of Harris," she replied.

Ewan nodded his approval while he sipped his tea. "Harris it is then."

A silence fell between them, of the kind that could be cut with a blunt knife. Isla was almost painfully aware of the tension crackling in the space between them as she perched on the edge of her seat and drank her tea.

She was thankful when Ewan rose to his feet, which were now shod in black, high-

top boots. Holding the length of rope in his hand, he stood looking down at her for a moment, his tall, powerful figure looming above her menacingly. “Are ye done?”

Eyeing the rope, Isla quickly swallowed the last of the tea, which almost burned her tongue as it went down. She coughed and spluttered, not expecting it when Ewan suddenly reached over and thumped her on the back. The air rushed from her lungs, making the coughing worse. When she got her breath back, she looked up at him and exclaimed indignantly, “What the hell did ye dae that fer?”

“I thought ye were chokin’,” he replied, a hint of amusement playing about his lips.

“Ye almost killed me!” she burst out in irritation, sure he was laughing at her and, in the heat of the moment, not realizing what she was saying.

“Well, I figure that makes us about even then,” he replied with an air of calm satisfaction before adding, “And dinnae act like such a weaklin’. Ye’re one of the lads now, so ye’d best toughen up and start actin’ like one.”

Though embarrassed by her slip-up and knowing he was right, Isla could not help scowling at him.

“So, are ye done?” he repeated, still looming over her.

“Aye, but I need tae wash and get dressed as well.”

His handsome features creased with impatience. “Get a move on then. I need tae tie yer hands again. I’m nae takin’ any chances. And make sure tae do as I said and stay within me sight all the time. Understood?”

Something important occurred to Isla then, something that would make all the difference in terms of her freedom to move about. “Aye, I havenae forgotten,” she

said, suddenly reasonable. “But if ye want me tae blend in with the men, will they not think it strange if I go about with me hands tied all the time? Besides, ye say we’re leavin’ today. How am I supposed tae ride like this?”

He stared at her hard, then nodded with obvious reluctance. “All right, but ye’d better do everything I say without question. Remember, ye’re life’s in me hands.” He threw the rope down onto the table.

“I will,” Isla said, suppressing her smile of triumph.

“D’ye have a horse?” he suddenly asked.

“Er, aye. I left her just outside the camp, tethered tae a tree.”

“That’ll be our first job then, tae go and fetch her. Then ye can start with helpin’ tae pack up the camp. I wantae be on our way within the next couple of hours. I’ll give ye ten minutes tae dae whatever it is ye havetae dae.”

“Ten minutes?” she exclaimed. “That’s nae enough time fer me tae get ready!”

“Ten minutes is what ye’ve got,” he repeated sternly.

CHAPTER FIVE

“D amn ye!” Isla muttered under her breath as she rushed to do the impossible. In her hurry to reach the makeshift washstand, she managed to trip over her own feet and almost went flying headlong into it. Somehow, she righted herself, only to find there was hardly any water left in the jug for her to wash in.

With only the bare means of washing available and hardly any time to do it in, she grumbled to herself quietly about his unreasonableness as she grabbed the sliver of soap—it slipped from her hand, and she had to chase it before she could get hold of it—hurriedly scrubbing her face, ears, neck, and hands as best she could. There was no time to clean her teeth, she decided.

Still rubbing herself with a drying cloth, she ran over to the cot to get her footwear and jacket on. By the time she made a plate and pushed her hair beneath her cap and tugged on her uniform jacket, she felt like the living embodiment of her grandmother’s oft quoted adage, “More haste, less speed.”

While she was rushing to do all this in the time stipulated, Ewan strode over to the threshold of the tent and stood, back turned and arms folded, looking out over the bustle of preparations Isla could hear going on outside as the camp disbanded.

That was when Ewan was joined by another soldier by the entrance to the tent. She saw he was dressed as a captain and was shorter than Ewan but just as powerful looking. He had sandy hair pulled atop his head in a bun, tattoos that wound up his neck, and a fierce, weatherbeaten face.

He looked at Isla with curious intensity as he and Ewan greeted each other with the familiarity of close friends. She made out his name was Colin. Not wanting him to have too close a look at her in case he saw through her masculine disguise, she turned away and fiddled with her cap. She strained her ears to hear what they were saying. Frustratingly, they kept their voices too low for her to make anything out.

A couple of hours later, the camp was fully packed up, and Ewan rode out at the head of his force. To his right rode Colin. To his left rode Isla, in her new persona as the young soldier Harris.

“I dinnae recognize ye, Harris,” the captain yelled over to her. “Where have ye come from?”

Isla glanced at Ewan with alarm, struggling to come up with an answer.

“Ach, the young whipper-snapper turned up in me tent last night,” the laird answered for her. “He’s one of the farm lads whose family was displaced from their home when Allan stole me lands,” he lied smoothly, leaving Isla relieved as well as impressed by his powers of invention. Obviously, he had it all figured out.

“He’s a bit young, is he nae?” Colin said dubiously, staring over at Isla with suspicious eyes, sending her anxiety soaring.

“Aye, he’s too young tae join up really, but the wee blighter wants his revenge on Allan and fairly begged me tae let him stay and fight,” Ewan explained. “He’s enthusiastic, and I couldnae see the point of sending him all the way back home. I told him can stay and make himself useful tae me. He made a bloody good job of polishin’ me boots this mornin’.”

“Did he now?” Colin replied, still looking doubtful. “Can he fight?”

“Och, aye. I’ll nae be puttin’ him in the front line, but we had a wee tussle in the tent last night, and the lad proved himsel’ handy enough with a dirk,” Ewan replied casually, glancing sideways at Isla.

His look seemed to say, “See how I’m lyin’ tae me friend tae keep ye safe?” Though it stuck in her craw to have to be grateful to her enemy, she found she was all the same.

“So, ye want revenge on that cheatin’ dog Allan, d’ye, Harris?” the captain asked.

Isla cleared her throat and adjusted her voice to sound more masculine as she replied, “Aye, Captain, Sir.” Though she had kept the words to a minimum, they had nevertheless come out sounding squeakily discordant, like those of an adolescent poised midway between boyhood and manhood.

“Christ, Ewan, are ye sure about this?” Colin asked, his forehead creasing with concern. “Nay offence, Harris, but ye sound like yer balls havenae even dropped yet.”

“I’m fourteen, Sir,” Isla ventured.

“Ach, leave the lad alone, Colin. He cannae help his age, and if he’s keen tae be here, then he cannae dae any harm,” the laird said with an air of finality.

“Well, all right, if that’s what ye want,” the captain relented with a shrug. However, as they continued the journey through her homelands towards Gregory and Castle Galbraith, Colin continued to throw curious glances at Isla, making her feel even more uncomfortable and fearful than she already was.

When the captain decided to ride a short way back to check on something, she drew nearer to Ewan and said in a low voice, “Thank ye fer lyin’ fer me, but I dinnae think he’s quite convinced.”

“Ach, Colin’s just naturally suspicious. That’s his job after all, tae make sure there are nae spies in the camp,” he replied, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

“I’m nae a spy,” she pointed out.

“Nay, ye’re an assassin,” he reminded her. “And nae a very good one at that. And by the way, I’m still waitin’ for ye tae tell me the truth about who sent ye tae kill me.”

“I already told ye. A stranger?—”

“In the village inn, aye, I ken,” he broke in irritably. “I forgot tae ask ye how much I’m worth dead.”

Flustered by the unexpected question, Isla snatched the first figure which came to her from the air. “Thirty English pounds.”

He made a disgusted noise. “Thirty bloody pounds?! Is that all. Christ Almighty. Am I so cheap? I thought at least a hundred.”

“Ye think that’s cheap, but thirty pounds would set me up for life,” Isla said, feeling unaccountably bad for having undervalued him, which she knew was ridiculous since it was a complete fiction anyway.

“I suppose so,” he said with a shrug. “If what’s about tae come turns out badly fer me, ye’ll be lucky tae get a couple of groats fer me head,” he added with a bitter laugh.

For some unfathomable reason, his words plucked at Isla’s heartstrings. But she immediately chided herself for sympathizing with the enemy, whom she had already tried to murder. Instead, she focused on the first part of his statement.

“Why? What’s about tae come? Ye still havenae told me where we’re headin’,” she said. It was now afternoon, and they were getting awfully close to the castle. The land they were now riding through was as familiar to her as the back of her hand. She was hoping that at this stage, he might let slip some useful nugget of information she could somehow get to her brother to use against him.

“We’re on our way tae the stronghold of Laird Galbraith, the main ally of me mortal enemy, Laird Calumn Allan.” He said the name with obvious distaste, completely unaware he was telling her what she already knew.

“And what d’ye intend tae dae when we get there?” Isla pressed, gripped by fear and anxiety and desperate for answers. Time was running out, for she knew that once they cleared the next rocky ridge, the towers of her home would be clearly visible above the surrounding trees.

“That all depends on Laird Galbraith,” he replied enigmatically.

“Are ye gonnae wage war on the castle?”

He turned his head and gave her a strange look. “For someone with a lot of secrets, ye ask an awful lot of questions.”

Isla tried to tamp down her fear. “Sorry. I’m just curious, ’tis all. I’ve never been a soldier before.”

“Well, that’s just about the one thing ye’ve said that I can believe,” he replied laconically.

At that moment, Colin came riding up and fell in next to his Laird. “The castle’s just over the next hill, Ewan,” he informed him.

“Grand,” the laird said with an icy calm that only served to deepen Isla’s fears. She fought down the urge to take off and ride straight to Gregory, to tell him what was happening. But since that would likely end in her immediate death, which would render her useless, she decided she could be far more helpful to him by remaining with the enemy commander.

“Did ye send the scouts ahead tae see the lay of the land like I said?” Ewan asked his captain.

“Aye,” Colin replied. “They’ll report back as soon as they can.”

“Very well,” said the laird, his handsome face a cold mask. “Now all we havetae dae is wait.”

The wait for the scouts to return seemed interminable to Isla, and it was like torture. Ewan had ordered quiet to be maintained in the camp while they waited. She was sure Gregory would have armed units patrolling the area too, and she was itching to sneak off and find one of them, to tell them of the imminent attack. She thought about running and getting back into the castle via the tunnels, to tell Gregory herself. But she dared not move.

Ewan was suspicious of her. Though he had no idea of her true identity, he was always watching her closely, insisting she stayed within his sight at all times. While they waited, she was forced to swallow her mounting fears and go with him, Colin, and a few of the serjeants as they rode slowly up to the crest of the ridge and stopped to survey what Isla feared would soon become the killing ground.

Isla was shocked to see the fields surrounding her home, which were usually full of livestock and activity, now lay empty and quiet. The castle, which stood upon a steep rocky promontory, presented its grey granite face to the enemy, as forbidding as a sleeping monster. She imagined Gregory and his men standing behind the

battlements, and all the frightened people crammed inside the walls, all waiting, watching for the enemy to approach.

“The place looks all but impenetrable. Ye’re right, Ewan, a frontal attack would be a bloodbath,” Colin said.

His words made Isla feel sick, and she prayed they would deter Ewan from attacking. But it was impossible to tell from his expression what he was thinking, and her sense of foreboding grew as they rode back to the waiting men.

Eventually, the sound of thundering hooves was heard, and two scouts came riding up behind them, having clearly circled around to confuse anyone who might be following them. The men reigned in the horses at a skid close to Ewan, slid from their saddles and ran to him, their faces red and dusty from exertion. They removed their caps as they stood before him and Colin. Standing a few feet away, Isla struggled to hear above the sound of her heart thudding in her ears.

“Well?” their leader said, looking at his scouts with an air of calm expectancy.

“It looks like Galbraith’s had advance warning of us comin’ and is well prepared, m’laird,” said the older man, still slightly out of breath. “He seems tae have taken every man and beast within the castle environs inside the castle walls. The village is deserted. There’s nae so much as a sheep or chicken tae be found anywhere within a mile or two.”

“Aye, and the fields and barns have been stripped of all the grain and crops too, m’laird,” the younger, bearded scout added.

“Any sign of any troops anywhere about lyin’ in wait fer us?” Ewan asked.

The men both shook their heads. “We saw naethin’ like that. But the castle’s fairly

bristling with defenses. Ye can see he has an army of musket men up on the roof. Most likely he has some small artillery up there too. The place is locked up tight as a drum, m'laird."

Isla's silent prayers that Ewan would give up proved in vain, for he did not seem perturbed by the intelligence at all. "I think 'tis time I paid Galbraith a wee visit," he said. "Get a party together, Colin. We're goin' down tae speak tae him."

"Aye," the captain replied, gesturing to the sergeants. Wearing grave expressions, they all gathered and mounted up. When they were ready, with the Ballentine standard held high and the pennant bearing the clan's arms flapping in the breeze, the laird took his position at their head. He jerked his chin at Isla to indicate that she should accompany them. Her heart in her throat, she got on her horse and guided it over to his side.

They set off at a stately pace, riding up over the ridge and down the other side, heading steadily for the road that led through the trees to the castle. By the time they pulled up before the mighty gates, Isla was shaking almost uncontrollably. She could see the soldiers of her clan rushing about on the battlements and the barrels of many muskets protruding from the slitted gun loops interspersing the walls.

While she was glad the place was so well defended, she realized it was only mere honor between the two lairds that was preventing the enemy party from being annihilated where they stood, with her among the dead.

Ewan looked up to the battlements. She almost jumped out of her skin when he stood up in his stirrups and suddenly bellowed, "Galbraith! Where are ye man? Show yer face!"

Isla's heart clenched with terror as Gregory's head appeared between the battlements. She could see he was in full battle dress, his polished helmet gleaming in the sunlight.

She wanted to scream at him to do something to avoid the slaughter, but in her disguise as an enemy soldier, how would he recognize her?

“I’m here, Ballentine, ye cowardly dog!” her brother shouted down in reply, in a hard, sneering voice she had never heard him use before. “If ye dinnae wantae see yer men die, then ye’d best turn around and go home. There’s naethin’ fer ye here but death and defeat.”

Ewan sat back in his saddle and appeared to shrug off the insult. “Brave words, man, but pride comes before a fall, eh?” He paused, turning his head deliberately from left to right as though searching for something before looking back up at Gregory. “Where’s yer friend Allan with his reinforcements? He’s a slippery one. Always out for himself. Maybe he’s on his way. Or maybe he’s nae comin’ at all. Some ally, eh?”

“Dinnae fash yersel’ about reinforcements,” Gregory replied. “We dinnae need them. We have all we need behind these walls tae keep ye out.”

Ewan laughed heartily. “Aye, of course, ye would say that. But dinnae try tae fool me. I ken ye’re short on men, and we both ken ye sent a messenger days ago fer Allan, askin’ him tae send troops tae help ye. That poor fella told me so himself before I cut his throat.”

Isla started at his claim, her heart dropping like a stone. The messenger was dead? Murdered by Ewan? The news would be a calamitous blow to her brother and his men. She had learned when eavesdropping on the council meeting that Gregory was all but counting on Allan bringing troops to aid him in repelling Ewan’s attack.

Without them, Gregory could not match Ewan’s force in numbers. A successful outcome of an outright battle between his men and the enemy commander’s was far from guaranteed. He needed those extra fighters to tip the balance in his favor. Now it seemed that by intercepting and killing the messenger, Ewan had removed that

possibility from the table.

But Gregory did not react to the news as she thought he would. His mocking laugh rang through the air. “Aye, I sent a messenger all right, tae invite Laird Allan tae join me and me men in crushin’ ye fer good and all,” he shouted in tones of unconcern. “I ken he’d enjoy the sport of destroyin’ ye. Mind ye, I’ve seen auld grannies that could dae better in a fight than that shower of shit ye call an army!”

“I’m glad fer ye that me army cannae hear yer insults from over yonder hill. Those fine lads dinnae take kindly tae such abuse. But I promise nae tae tell them if ye’ll agree tae talk peace with me,” Ewan shouted back.

Isla started in surprise and looked over at him. Talk peace? She had not expected that at all. A small flame of hope flickered in her breast.

CHAPTER SIX

But that hope soon died. For in response to the offer, Gregory shouted an obscene phrase, urging Ewan and his men to go forth and multiply, before he hawked and spat over the wall. The slimy gobbet landed a few feet from the hooves of Ewan's horse. Isla stared at it, her fear for her brother's life starting to turn to anger at his stubborn refusal to see sense, with the enemy standing at the gates.

This was a version of Gregory she had not known existed. She was appalled that he would risk his own life and those of the entire clan in this show of bravado and brinkmanship. She clenched her fists around the reins tightly, fighting down the urge to yell up at him to stop being a stubborn fool, that this was his chance to ditch Allan, make an agreement with Ewan, and prevent further bloodshed.

Just talk with Ewan, she silently willed her brother, put an end to this bloody war that Allan started!

Now she also feared that the gross insult that lay glistening on the ground in front of him would be too much for Ewan to bear. She waited, holding her breath, expecting a furious response. But once again, Ewan surprised her.

"Ach come on, man, use yer head. Ye ken this war we've been fightin' and dyin' fer is all fer the sake of a mad man, a man hungry fer gold and power. The man's a liar through and through, nae more than a brigand. Those lands he stole from me, I have the deeds tae them here, passed down from faither tae son, provin' they belong tae me, written in King David's own hand." He patted his breast, just above his heart.

I'm a reasonable man. An honest man. I dinnae wantae see anyone die, nae fer the sake of that cheatin' snake. If I give me name tae a peace treaty with ye and call off this attack, ye can trust I'd die rather than break it. But Allan, well... ye're puttin' yer faith in the wrong place with him. Now, come down and open yer gates. Let's talk about it over a dram like two rational men."

Isla stared at him in amazement, finding his arguments not only convincing but also moving. She had always been given to believe Ewan Ballentine was a hard man, a man bent on destruction, as she had been bent on his. But just as she was seeing another side to her brother, so she was also seeing another to their sworn enemy. This dogged attempt on his part to win peace despite all the insults was a revelation.

Respect for him burgeoned in her breast, and she was astonished to find her loyalties wavering. But once more her fragile hope that Gregory would agree to Ewan's offer was quickly dashed. From the battlements, he yelled a stream of foul invective. Then he shouted defiantly, "Ye're the liar, Ballentine, with yer weasel words. Take yer peace and shove it where the sun dinnae shine! Dae yer worst. This place is impenetrable. Nay army alive can breach our defenses. Me advice is tae crawl back intae the hole ye came from and take yer rag-tag bunch of cut-throats with ye, before I give the order tae cut ye down where ye stand."

A silence full of tension fell. Even the birdsong had ceased. Isla put a hand to her chest, finding it hard to draw breath, she was so frightened by the harsh response. She looked at Ewan and knew Gregory had missed the chance for peace. The enemy laird sat quite still in the saddle, his face unreadable but for an almost imperceptible tightening of his jaw. But it was his eyes that told her all hope was lost. Already dark, they had darkened even further. They appeared as hard as marble and devoid of life.

Finally, he raised his head to the battlements and shouted up, "I gave ye a chance, Galbraith, but I can see ye've been taken in by Allan's lies. Ye'll live tae regret refusin' me offer. Ye see, I dinnae need tae lift a sword tae defeat ye. I can simply

starve ye and yer people out like rats. See how they thank ye fer that.”

Calmly, he turned his horse, and the others followed suit, including Isla.

A siege ... He never meant tae attack the castle at all. That’s what he intended when he said his plans depended on Gregory. And now Gregory has refused tae make peace, he’s gonnae lay siege tae the castle and starve them out! Unless Allan sends men, Gregory is as good as dead!

The mood among the rest of the party was as somber as her own as they rode back to where Ewan’s army was waiting beyond the ridge. When they got there, Ewan and Colin conversed in low tones for several minutes. Then, the laird barked out a few orders, Colin made sure they were carried out, and within a very short time, the entire army rode down to the castle and spread out, making camp on the meadow before the gates, well out of musket range.

For Isla, the whole thing passed in a sort of dream. Her outer silence concealed a tumult of confusing emotions warring inside her. It was painful to be forced to question Gregory’s judgement. It felt like betrayal. And it came all the harder because she knew she shared Ewan’s desire for peace. But despite that, he was still the enemy.

Fer Gregory’ sake and the sake of me clan, ’tis more important than ever that I kill him.

Night settled over the camp. Smoke from many cooking fires and the smell of food hung in the air, and the mood among the men was quiet as things began winding down. In his tent, Ewan sat down at the table sharing a simple supper of roasted fish—freshly caught in the nearby Loch Galbraith—with his captive Annie Dean. Or rather, Harris, as the would-be assassin was now known to his men.

They had hardly spoken since making camp, and Ewan found himself grateful for her

silence. He had enough to think about, for he was sorely disappointed Galbraith had refused to make peace. He had really held out a lot of hope that the man would see sense. But once again, Allan had done his evil work.

The only thing he could feel glad about was that no one had died that day from fighting. A siege situation was not ideal, he knew, but it was better than more senseless bloodshed. Defeat and death seemed inevitable for Galbraith—that was as long as Allan did not turn up with reinforcements. He wished the lie he had told Galbraith about killing the messenger had been true.

But he was fairly confident that his assessment of Allan's motives was correct. He had no doubt the corrupt laird would arrive at some point, but it would be when it suited him and his plans.

I just need long enough tae either persuade Galbraith tae agree tae a peace treaty with me or starve him out. And then, I'll go after Allan.

However, intent on his thoughts and plans as he was, he could not help noticing how serious Annie seemed. Her expression had remained downcast since the army had moved down to the castle grounds. And though he knew she must be as hungry as he was, she showed little enthusiasm for eating her fish. It struck him as sharp contrast to the way she had polished off her the porridge that morning at breakfast.

But though he was curious about her subdued mood, he was too tired to ask about it. After he had eaten and she had pushed morsels of fish about her plate for a while and they had drunk their tea, he stood up.

“Time tae turn in,” he told her, picking up the ropes he had used to bind her the night before.

“Please, nay, dinnae tie me again. I cannae stand it,” she protested.

It was hard to resist the pleading look in her luminous eyes, but he knew he had to do it. He shook his head. “I cannae take the risk.”

“I’ve done everything ye asked of me today, have I nae?”

“Aye, ye have, but it was only last night ye tried tae stick me with yer knife.”

“I promised I wouldnae try that again.”

“And I promise tae keep ye safe as long as ye obey me.”

She nodded and meekly let him tie her wrists before going over to the cot. She sighed as she heeled off her boots and lay down. Following her, Ewan stripped down to his shirt and trews, tied her ankles—once more securing the rope binding her hands to his wrist—and lay down next to her.

With the candle snuffed out, the darkness enclosed them. She lay on her side facing away from him, unmoving. He wondered what she was thinking about. She had promised not to try to kill him again, and she had obeyed his every command that day.

Yet she still hasnae told me the truth about who sent her tae murder me. Whether it was Allan, or anyone else, I’d be a bloody fool tae trust her an inch.

For a while he stared sightlessly into the blackness, listening to her breathing. Only when he heard it become slow and regular, and he was sure she was asleep, did he allow himself to relax and do the same.

For the next two days and nights, he kept her tied up, only releasing her to eat, wash, answer the calls of nature, or perform the occasional menial task like brush his coat or polish his boots or make tea. She remained subdued the entire time, and when she

was not doing something, she lay on the cot, sleeping or staring up at the canvas ceiling, hardly speaking a word.

With the siege in progress, nothing moved inside the castle. Apart from making sure camp discipline was followed, Ewan occupied himself by reading, sleeping, maintaining his weapons, and working silently on his plans. Alongside the siege, these involved waiting for the scouts he had sent north to track down Allan's whereabouts and return with that vital intelligence. Mostly, he forgot Annie was even there, she was so quiet. But from time to time, he would look over at her and wonder when she would relent and tell him the truth about herself.

Two more days passed without much incident. During the late evening of the second day, he and Annie were alone in the tent, sharing a meal of roasted carp, once again caught fresh that day in Loch Galbraith. He was used to Annie being quiet, but he could not help noticing on this occasion that she seemed truly downcast.

Her expression was sad, she kept her eyes on her plate, and he saw she had hardly touched her fish. In fact, she was pushing it about her plate as if she had no appetite.

Perhaps she daesnae like fish.

But he sensed there was more to it than that.

He observed her covertly as he ate, trying to work out what was bothering her, apart from being his captive, that was. His attention was drawn to her left forearm, which was lying on the table as she ate with her right hand. A slight movement made the cuff of her shirtsleeve ride up an inch or two. He was shocked to see the red, raised welts circling her wrist, clearly the result of him binding her with ropes each night. It stood to reason that her other wrist and her ankles must be in a similar poor state.

He was immediately awash with guilt for treating a woman so roughly, without

regard for the tenderness of her skin, never mind she had tried to murder him. That must have been hurtin' her a lot. Nay wonder she was down. How could he not have noticed it before? Silently berating himself for his inattention, he resolved to do something about it at once.

Reaching across, he gently took hold of her forearm above the wrist.

“What are ye doin’?” she asked, trying to pull her arm away. But he held it firmly and drew it towards him, closer to the candlelight, so he could examine the wounds more closely.

“Let me see,” he told her, turning her wrist about, being careful not to hurt her further. She realized then what he was doing and allowed him to inspect the wounds. He was shocked to see the welts were starting to ooze thick yellow liquid. That meant it would not be long before infection set in. If he did not act immediately, the consequences could be very serious for her.

“Show me the other one,” he ordered, releasing her arm. She put down her knife and showed him her other wrist. As he feared, it was in exactly the same condition. “And yer ankles.” She did as he instructed, pulling up the cuffs of her trousers and rolling down her woolen stockings, displaying the same raw, raised welts around her ankles.

“All right,” he said with a sigh. “I’ve seen enough.”

“Does that mean ye’ll nae tie me up any more?” she asked, her beautiful eyes luminous in the candlelight as she looked across at him pleadingly.

He thought for a moment, trying to decide what to do. Clearly, he could not allow the situation to continue. But by the same token, she could not be trusted not to try to attack him again if he dispensed with her bonds completely. Since he had no idea of her intentions towards him despite her promises, the ropes were the only insurance he

had of remaining safe unless he stayed awake all night, which was out of the question.

He sighed again and met her eyes. “I’m sorry ye’ve had tae put up with that. I had nay idea they were so bad. But look, ye ken why I cannae let ye go free at nights?—”

She made a sound that was halfway between a sob and a curse.

“—but I will dae something tae help ease yer wounds. Stay there.”

He got up from the table, fetched a bowl of cold water and some clean cloths and brought them back. After adding a little salt to the water and stirring it about, he knelt by her at the table and proceeded to gently bathe her wounds. As he worked, he silently marveled at her fine-boned wrists and ankles and the tender white softness of her skin. Fleetinglly, he wished they could have met under better circumstances.

When he had finished, he looked up at her, about to ask if it felt better. But when he did so, he saw she was studying him intently with those big eyes of hers. She looked away at once, her cheeks darkening in the candlelight. It took his breath away, for in truth, she looked... stunning.

Yet at the same time, there had been something steely in her gaze which disturbed him. Nay, I cannae trust her, he thought again, not without some regret this time.

“Is that better?” he asked, pushing the bowl and the cloth aside.

“Aye, I suppose so. Thank ye. It still hurts though and keeps me awake. And it’ll just be worse again in the mornin’,” she replied rather mournfully.

With her sad eyes and some stray golden curls peeping out from under her cap, she looked positively angelic. But despite his guilt for inflicting such discomfort upon

her, Ewan had a suspicion he was being manipulated. Instantly, he was on guard again.

“Well, I’m sorry about that, but I’ll nae be made tae feel bad fer what’s yer own fault. If the boot was on the other foot, ye’d dae the same. In fact, ye’d probably have killed me by now. Ye’re gettin’ off lightly.”

She exhaled sharply and shook her head as though in disbelief.

“But I have an idea that will help,” he went on, seeking a compromise that would not end up with him getting his throat cut while he slept. He tore some of the cloths into strips and bound them carefully around the wounds, to protect them from the rough chafing of the ropes. He hated himself for doing it, but could see no other way but to tie her again in order to secure her for the night when they went to bed.

“Look,” Annie said the next morning after Ewan untied the ropes and she peeled back the cloths. “’Tis gettin’ worse. And ’tis the same on me ankles.”

Ewan inspected her wrists and ankles and had to admit she was right. If she got an infection, he was not sure he would be able to forgive himself. He was temporarily at a loss as to what to do.

Once again, she tried all her arguments to persuade him to let her go without being tied. “I swear I’ll nae run away.”

“Aye, but how can ye expect me tae believe ye when ye say ye willnae try tae kill me again?”

“How would I kill ye? Ye’ve taken me knife, and ye’ve hidden all the weapons,” she countered.

“Ye could brain me with the kettle,” he suggested.

“Ach! With a skull as thick as yers, it would be the kettle that came off worse!”

The notion was so preposterous, he found himself smiling. She smiled too. As they gazed at each other, he thought how beautiful she was when she smiled. Her whole face lit up.

He felt something melt inside his chest, a piece of ice falling away from something frozen. It was a sensation that was new to him, and it scared him that this woman, a stranger who had tried to end his life, could do that to him.

He looked at the wounds on her wrists again, wondering whether to trust her. “Dae ye swear on yer life nae tae leave me sight?”

“I already promised that, and I’ve stuck tae it too,” she pointed out. “But if it pleases ye, aye, I swear it on me life.”

“Ye also need tae consider what will happen if ye try tae attack me again. Yen ken me men will be quick to kill ye if ye try anythin’. And dinnae forget that any soldier who finds a woman wandering around a military camp like this will assume ye’re fer hire.” He gave her his sternest warning look.

“I’ve nae forgotten. I’m sorry I tried tae kill ye before. It was naethin’ personal, just fer the money. I give ye me word nae tae try tae hurt ye again.”

“Yer word means little when I still dinnae ken who ye really are,” he pointed out, his resolve weakening, nevertheless.

“Ye dae ken who I am,” she replied, all innocence. “I’m Annie Dean. Or Harris, a soldier in yer army. I can help ye in yer fight.”

He smiled again, not taking her claim seriously, but he came to a decision. “All right, I’m prepared tae trust ye enough tae leave off with the ropes. But the second ye step out of line...”

“I’ll nae step out of line, ye’ll see,” she cried, her face lighting up. “I’ll prove tae ye that I’m trustworthy. Just give me a chance.”

“I just said I would, did I nae?” he told her, hoping he was making the right choice and it would not cost him his life. “Now, sit there. I’m gonnae get some stuff tae clean yer wounds. I have some salve that’ll make sure they dinnae get infected. It’ll help with the bruising and the scarring too.” He rose and went to get water, cloths, and the salve and brought them back to the table.

“Och, thank ye, ye dinnae ken how grateful I am!” she said, her face wreathed in smiles as he proceeded to gently bathe her wrists and ankles, strangely moved by the softness of her skin and the delicacy of her bones. For all she dressed like a youth and hid her femininity, underneath, he could tell she was all woman.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The siege wore on, the days passing by slowly, until Isla realized that she and Ballentine's army had been camped outside her front door for a week. For much of that week, she had been free of the ropes which had confined her and caused her such discomfort. Her wounds were already starting to heal, and she had even gotten used to sharing the cot with Ewan.

In fact, she had gotten used to being in his company all the time, watching his face from across the table while they ate together, touring the camp with him, scouting on horseback, always at his side as she listened to him speak to his men. Even against her will, he continued to impress her with his natural warmth, his capabilities, and his firm but fair approach to leadership. Not to mention the small matter of his incredible good looks, which despite herself, grew on her daily.

However, throughout everything, she felt she was living a double life. It was a terrible strain on her nerves, for she could never relax, never be herself. On the one hand, she was embedded in camp life, and apart from Colin, the men seemed to have accepted the story explaining her presence.

On the other, her mission to destroy Ewan before he could destroy Gregory and everything she held dear was always near the forefront of her mind. How could it not be with her own brother and their entire clan under siege in her home only a few hundred yards away?

In quiet moments, she worried about Gregory and the toll the siege must be having on him, and Kelvin and Domhnall and Connor too, lifelong friends and protectors to a

man. She also wondered what he made of her disappearance and how that might be affecting him. She prayed for two things: for Gregory to change his mind and sue for peace with Ewan, or for Laird Allen and his troops to arrive and save the day.

But she had no intention of simply sitting back and waiting for either of those things to occur. She had her self-imposed mission, and so she spent a lot of time trying to figure out a way to assassinate Ewan, successfully this time. But since he had taken all lethal weapons out of her reach and was much stronger than her, she could see no way of besting him, certainly not if it came to a fight—she had no wish to die at his hands. If that happened, she would no longer be able to protect Gregory. No, she had to find another way.

There was another problem too, one she could never have foreseen, which had come upon her slowly and took a lot of swallowing. It put her under pressure to act quickly because it threatened to undermine her resolve to carry out her mission. She had already admitted to herself from day one that Ewan was powerfully attractive, purely on the basis of his rugged, masculine good looks. It affected her, especially while lying next to him in the narrow cot at night or watching him wash in the mornings. Watching him do anything really.

However, by constantly reasoning that his braw looks were skin deep, that character was what counted, and however attractive he was, he was still the enemy and deserved to die, she had been able to manage that aspect so far. Or so she told herself.

And even though she thought his offer of peace far more reasonable than Gregory's refusal of it, and she respected his wisdom and abilities as leader. And although she was grateful he had protected her and spared her life, Gregory's safety came first, even if Ballentine had to die to ensure it. Or so she told herself.

But there lay the crux of this new problem—she was starting to like Ewan. If she were being totally honest with herself, she already liked him. A lot. Certainly more

than she should, and she felt very guilty about it. She tried not to like him, she tried her hardest to continue hating him. But in her secret heart, living night and day in such intimate circumstance with the man was getting to her. She was starting to fear that if the siege went on much longer, she would be unable to bring herself to kill him, and all would be lost.

Then, a few days later, something happened that seriously brought the threat home to her in way that could not be ignored. They had just entered the second week of the siege, and as she toured the camp at Ewan's side one morning, she noticed the men seemed to be in unusually high spirits. It soon became clear why.

It turned out that over the days of the siege, carts loaded with various supplies bound for delivery to the castle had been periodically turning up, only to be intercepted by Ewan's men, who had been confiscating and stockpiling the contents. Among these deliveries were quantities of wine, ale, whisky, preserved meats, imported fruits, and many other expensive delicacies.

"I think we should put all this to good use and have a wee feast tonight," Ewan told Isla as they inspected the booty. It was being stored in a large wagon, which had also been confiscated. "The lads need some distraction, and they deserve some fun," he added with a grin, looking happier than she had seen him.

"I wouldnae be averse tae havin' some fun mesel'," Isla confessed truthfully. "I never realized how boring sieges were fer those on the outside." In admitting this, she felt a terrible pang of guilt for looking forward to enjoying what had been taken from her brother and her clan.

"Me neither," Ewan agreed as they covered the piles of goods back up and walked away from the wagon. "'Tis a first fer me too. Aye, a wee celebration would be just the thing tae break the monotony and cheer everybody up."

Isla's hopes rose that she might find a chance to sneak back to the castle under cover of the party. She decided she had to play it by ear. As they continued on their way, Ballentine gave orders for the celebration to go ahead, although supplies of alcohol were to be severely limited.

"Why is that?" Isla asked him, confused. "I always thought soldiers drank like fish."

"I never allow drunkenness in me camp. It creates a lack of discipline, and if there's an emergency, I need every man tae be alert, includin' ye," he told her.

She nodded, understanding the wisdom behind his insistence, and finding herself admiring the way he always seemed to put his men and his duty first. "I dinnae hardly drink," she replied, forgetting she was supposed to have met the man who hired her to kill him in inn. "But I'm sure I'll enjoy the party anyway."

That evening, instead of eating supper in the tent, they went with everyone else to the rallying point. Isla was amazed to see how the cooks had laid out trestles loaded with all the confiscated supplies. In addition, someone had killed a boar, and it was turning on a spit, filling the air with the mouthwatering aromas of roasting meat.

"That's quite a feast!" she exclaimed in wonder before her thoughts turned to those inside the castle. There would be no such feasting for them, and she could not help wondering how long the supplies she had so recently inventoried would last. With so many people needing to be fed, even with the supplies the farmers had brought with them, she was sure it could only be a few weeks.

But when the boar was carved and the meat piled onto plates and passed around, she gave herself over to savoring the juicy meat, enjoying the brief respite from the strain she was under. As she was eating, she noticed that Ewan was almost like another person. He transformed into a jovial host, joking, laughing, full of bonhomie for his men, the life and soul of the party. However, she also noticed he drank only a little

ale. She watched him, wondering if this was what he was like when he was not commanding his army.

He kept her close to his side at all times, and though she was essentially his captive and under his control, she realized she felt safe being with him, able to share in the carefree celebration. Thus, when he came to her and said, “I think we should leave the men tae enjoy themselves now. We should go back tae the tent,” she was a little disappointed. However, she knew there was no point arguing with him.

“All right, but can we take some of the food back with us? I’m still hungry, and there are still a few things I havenae tried yet.”

“Good idea,” he agreed. They selected the food they wanted and, after bidding the cheery company a good night, strolled back to the tent in good spirits.

Once back inside, they took off their boots and made themselves comfortable, setting out the little feast on the table and eating whatever they fancied with their fingers.

“I must say I was glad of that roasted boar,” Isla remarked after a while, savoring the sweet taste of juicy preserved cherries on her lips.

“Oh, why’s that?” Ewan asked, popping salted almonds into his mouth and crushing them loudly between his teeth.

“The smell of it cookin’ almost wiped out the stink of a hundred-odd men who’ve been stuck in a confined space fer far too long without a proper wash,” she said, grinning.

He laughed. “Ah, aye, that stink! I ken it well, unfortunately.”

“Mmm, ’tis a very distinctive aroma. I think I prefer the smell of a stable.”

“Are ye sayin’ horse dung daesnae stink as bad as me brave lads?”

“That’s exactly what I’m sayin’. Tae be fair, I’ve nae personal experience, but I’m sure it must apply to all soldiers stuck in military camps like this, nae just yer men.”

“That makes me feel a whole lot better.” He chuckled. “I havetae admit ye’re right. But ’tis nae always easy tae keep clean when ye’re out in the field. There’s nay nice bathhouse, nay laundry, and the enemy usually stinks just as bad, so he daesnae mind.”

“Och, please dinnae tease me with such words as “bathhouse.” It makes me think of hot water and laying in a lovely steamin’ hot bath in front of the fire. I cannae tell ye how much I crave that.” Ewan looked at her curiously as she popped another preserved cherry into her mouth and regarded her rumpled, grubby outfit. She wrinkled her nose. “Come tae think of it, I’ve been wearing these same clothes fer days and days. I cannae smell too good mesel’.”

“Aye, I was wonderin’ when ye’d notice. We’ll make a proper soldier of ye yet!” he joked, and they both laughed, sharing a momentary reprieve from their situation.

“Maybe I could go down and bathe in the loch,” she suddenly said. “Honestly, I’ve never felt so filthy in me life. I’m nae sure I can stand being like this much longer without goin’ mad. It would be wonderful tae be clean again.”

“Hmm, that wouldnae be such a good idea,” he replied, shaking his head before throwing some more nuts into his mouth. “It would be very risky tae leave the camp just now, and especially nae durin’ the day. And there’d be hell tae pay if any of the men saw ye without yer clothes on.”

“Ach, I suppose ye’re right,” she had to agree, bitterly disappointed. But then an idea came to her. “Hold on, I think someone mentioned a pond, over there in the trees.”

She knew very well where the pond was. She had swum in it many times, just as she had the loch. But she could not tell him that, of course. “Could we go there perhaps? There’d nae be anyone there at this time of night. We’d have it all tae ourselves.”

Ewan was examining a small lemon tart. Apparently satisfied with it, he ate it with obvious relish.

“Could we?” Isla asked again, loathe to give up on the idea of bathing.

He chewed the tart, his eyes on hers. He swallowed and said, “I dinnae ken. It may be dangerous.”

“How? There’s nae one around tae see us. Please, m’laird.”

He snorted with laughter. “Stop yer wheedlin’, I’m thinkin’ about it. And stop callin’ me “m’laird. It sounds like ye’re bein’ sarcastic. Me name’s Ewan, as well ye ken, so ye might as well use it, Annie Dean .” He spoke the name mockingly, telling her he did not believe it was hers.

She ignored the barb and gazed at him, doing her best to persuade him with her eyes. “Very well, pretty please, Ewan .”

They laughed together. “Och, all right,” he said eventually. “I suppose if I’m with ye, ye can come tae nae harm. I quite fancy a dip mesel’.”

Isla jumped from her seat and clapped her hands, full of excitement. “Och, thank ye, thank ye, Ewan. If ye’ll lend me a clean shirt and stockings, I’ll be forever grateful.”

“Aye, ye ken where they are. I suppose ye might as well bring some fer me as well.”

She hurried to his storage chest, extracted two sets of clean things, and bundled them

under her arm. She was thrilled she had managed to get him to agree to her plan. She was even more excited at the prospect of bathing than she had been about the party.

“Come on then,” he told her, heading for the exit. “Keep yer head low and stick by me.”

“But I’m the one who kens the way,” she pointed out as they slipped out into the night.

“Well, in that case, I’ll stick by ye,” he said.

They stifled their giggles as they set off for the perimeter of the camp. “Sounds like the party’s still in full swing,” Ewan added as the sound of a fiddle and men singing along to a jaunty tune floated to them on the otherwise still air.

“It’ll keep them distracted while we’re at the pond,” Isla said as they left the camp, her feet moving surely along the path even in the moonlit darkness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“ N ow, that is a beautiful sight, tae be sure,” Ewan said as they emerged from the trees. He found himself standing in a clearing, where the pond lay shimmering beneath the sliver of moon hanging above them in the dark, star-studded sky. On instinct, he paused and looked around, listening carefully, checking to make sure no one was there.

Once he was sure they were alone but for an owl hooting in a nearby tree and the odd rustling of some small nocturnal creature in the undergrowth, he allowed himself to relax. “What a tranquil spot. It must be lovely durin’ the day,” he observed, breathing in lungfuls of fresh, cool air.

“Mmm, I’m sure it must be,” Annie agreed, even in her man’s disguise, looking radiant under the silvery light cast from above. She was smiling too, which was nice. He felt a strange sort of companionship with her, even though she had tried to kill him and he still had no idea who she really was. He could not recall experiencing it with any other woman. Not knowing what to make of it, he dismissed it, putting it down to them sharing a confined space for over a week now.

I suppose sleepin’ in the same bed will dae that tae ye.

Side by side, they walked slowly down to the water’s gravelly edge and stood looking out over the water. “’Tis lovely at night though,” Annie murmured. “I think I prefer it like this, so quiet. I cannae wait tae get in the water. Will ye turn yer back while I undress? And nay peekin’.”

He raised his brows and grinned, more at ease than he had been even at the party. The brief respite from the strains of war and the siege was very welcome. What harm could it do to embrace the moment? “Well, I wasnae even thinkin’ about it, but now ye mention it...” he said, allowing his voice to trail off suggestively.

“I mean it!” There was a warning edge to her voice as she began taking off her boots.

“Aye, I ken it,” he replied. “But the same goes fer ye,” he added, smiling as he turned away and began stripping off his coat and waistcoat.

“‘Tis far too late fer that,” Annie informed him.

“Oh? How’s that?” He pulled his shirt off over his head and threw it on the ground.

“Because I get an eyeful of ye with naethin’ on every mornin’.”

“Ach! And ye have the cheek tae tell me nae tae peek!”

He heard her snort with laughter and could not resist glancing over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of her. What he saw was... exhilarating! A torrent of golden hair cascaded down a slim, white back, all the way down to a neatly nipped waist, curving hips, and... as she stepped out of her trousers... a pair of peach-like buttocks and slim thighs. Instantly, his manhood stirred. Better get in the water quick before she notices, he thought, shocked by his own response.

She caught him looking, gasped, and clutched her hair around her. “I said nay peekin’!” she chided, her eyes glinting in the moonlight.

“Sorry, but fair’s fair,” he retorted, turning around again. A second later, he cried, “Ow!” and ducked as a shower of gravel lightly peppered his back. “I though ye promised nae tae hurt me again,” he pretended to grumble.

“I’ll drown ye if ye’re nae careful,” she threatened, but he could hear laughter in her voice. It seemed she too was being affected by the feeling of freedom.

He had just shucked his trews when he heard splashing as she entered the water. Suddenly, she squealed, “Sweet Jesus, that’s freezin’!”

“That’s Scotland,” he joked. Naked now, he cupped his hands over his private parts for modesty’s sake—hers, not his—turned and ran down into the water to join her. She was already swimming sedately in small circles when he plunged straight in. “Christ Almighty!” he exclaimed, gasping with shock and laughing at the same time as the chilly waters engulfed him. He ducked under and came up again, shaking his head like a dog. “My, that’s invigoratin’!”

The feeling of liberation as the cold water caressed and cleansed his body was thrilling. He found he could not stop grinning, and he felt grateful to Annie insisting they come to bathe. He could not remember feeling so alive for a very long time.

She too ducked under the water, to wash her hair. It floated out gracefully around her head like a golden halo. Her smile flashed white as she dived under again, then resurfaced moments later, water cascading over her white skin. Ewan could not take his eyes off the graceful movement of her slim body through the dark waters. It was entrancing, like a beautiful dream he never wanted to end.

“‘Tis glorious,” she breathed, resuming her circular swimming. He joined her, and they swam around for a while like that, not speaking, with nothing but the soft hoo-hoo of the owl, the rippling of the water, and the gentle sougling of the breeze in the trees to break the silence. “‘Tis like we’re in a magical place. D’ye feel it?”

“Aye, I dae. I’m awful glad ye nagged me intae bringin’ ye here,” he told her as they drew closer and circled each other, neither of them seemingly able to stop smiling.

“Nagged, me foot. Persuaded, I think ye mean,” she said, giggling. “’Tis so good tae escape from the cares of the world just fer a short time.”

“Aye, I havenae felt this good fer ages. We’ll come again, shall we?”

“If ye want tae. Let’s come again at night, when ’tis—” He jumped when she let out a sudden shriek of terror, and was taken completely by surprise to find her in his arms, clinging to him, her arms clasped around his neck tightly and looking out at the water with panic in her eyes.

“What is it? Are ye hurt?” he asked, feeling a little panicked himself but nevertheless enjoying the sensation of having her cool, slick, nakedness pressed against his chest. Instinctively, he wrapped his arms around her and cradled her above the surface, marveling at her shapely limbs and how light she was. He imagined it was like holding a real live fairy or a kelpie, a wild, magical creature of the water that would vanish if he breathed or moved too suddenly.

“S-something touched me leg,” she said nervously, continuing to cling to him as she scanned the waters around them. Their faces were mere inches apart, her ethereal, womanly beauty casting a spell on him, and he loved it.

“’T’was just a fish swimmin’ by, I expect,” he said, wanting to comfort her, but not too much, because part of him was enjoying the situation and did not want to let her go.

“It didnae feel like a fish. It felt like... somethin’ bigger, longer.”

“An eel maybe,” he suggested. “They can get quite big, but they’re harmless. They cannae hurt ye.”

“Aye, I ken, but whatever it was, it took me by surprise, I suppose. ‘Tis unnervin’

when ye cannae see what it is in the dark.” She shuddered against him, and he could not help but notice the soft trembling of her breasts. He found himself staring at the small, rosy nipples and wondering how they would feel if he touched them, kissed them.

He shook himself out of the spell and directed his eyes to her face. Her luminous aquamarine eyes were looking straight into his, from about two inches away, and her lips were slightly open. Droplets of water adorned her skin like tiny diamond stars. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life.

They stayed like that, simply looking into each other’s eyes, for several long moments, moments Ewan felt were outside time, removed somehow from the real world, with all its strife and struggle. But then his body began to stir as desire rose within him, breaking the spell between them. Embarrassment suddenly gripped him, and he silently thanked God that the cold water was keeping his arousal at bay.

She too must have sensed the change in the atmosphere, for he felt her body stiffen just before she let him go and slipped out of his arms, back into the water, striking out at once for the shore. He put his feet on the sandy bottom of the pond and watched her pale body slicing rapidly yet gracefully through the water, sending illuminated ripples circling outward in its wake.

She reached the shore and grabbed her clothing and the bundle of clean things before disappearing behind a bush to dress.

Ewan felt flustered but at the same time strangely bereft as he followed her, swimming slowly back to shore. He walked out of the pond, his body still tingling all over from its immersion in the refreshing waters—or maybe from the moment of intimacy they had just shared as man and woman.

He found his clothes, to see she had dropped a clean shirt and stockings next to them

for him. He marveled at her presence of mind as he dried himself off with his old shirt as best he could and began the laborious process of dressing while still damp.

He was putting on his coat when she reappeared from behind the bush, transformed once more into Harris, the boy soldier. Her golden tresses had disappeared, banished beneath her woolen cap again, and she clutched her soiled clothes beneath her arm. He felt he had lost her, Annie Dean, or whoever she was. The magical creature he had held in his arms had been snatched back to cold reality, just as he had.

He tugged on his boots and ran his hands through his hair. “We should get back to the camp before anyone notices we’re missing,” he said, surprised his voice sounded so normal. Because he felt far from normal inside.

“Aye,” she replied, her tone subdued. She would not meet his eyes, so he did not try to force it. She waited for him without speaking, and they went back through the trees, following the same path as before, back to the camp. This time, Ewan noticed he could smell it before he saw it. Before the incident in the water, he knew he would have cracked a joke about it, and she would have laughed. But not now. The atmosphere between them had completely changed.

To Ewan, it seemed they had been gone a lifetime, but when they crossed the perimeter, he could hear the party was still going on. Silence hung heavy between them as they entered the tent, to see the remains of their feast still on the table. Neither of them moved to clean it up. Both simply threw down their dirty clothes, and within ten minutes, they were lying once more in the darkness, side by side, in the narrow cot.

Isla awoke the following morning surprised that she had slept at all. She put it down to tiredness and the effects of the midnight swim. Whatever the cause was, she was grateful for it because the tension between her and Ewan had returned with a vengeance. But this time, there was a new awkward, worrying quality to it.

The weight of words unspoken hovered between them like a cloud. What words they were exactly, Isla was unsure of, but it was a relief when Ewan did not have his usual naked wash but got dressed straight away when he got up. Isla did the same, as unobtrusively as she could. She suddenly felt very prudish, having the fervent wish to keep her flesh covered, to be irrevocably Harris.

For Annie Dean was in disgrace. Annie who had flaunted herself naked like some wanton woman of the night. For Isla, the memory of the way she had screamed like a baby and leapt into his arms with not a stitch on still burned, as did her cheeks whenever she thought of their wet, naked bodies pressed together. Which was all the time.

In fact, the only good thing that had come out of it was that she felt clean and smelled fresh for the first time in days.

Seeking distraction from the weight of the tension, she found small domestic tasks to occupy herself, clearing away the remains of last night's feast, making the bed, tidying the tent, and a host of other needless things. And all the while, she felt his presence as though it were a blazing fire from which she could not move away. Worse, in her heart of hearts, she felt she was betraying Gregory, because she was no longer sure she wanted to.

It was worse when tea and oatmeal were brought in as always for breakfast. Usually, they would chat as they ate. Today, when they sat in their accustomed seats a foot or so away from each other, an awkward silence reigned between them. When she dared to glance at him, she would find him doing the same to her. Flustered, she would quickly look down at her porridge, her cheeks burning with fresh embarrassment at being caught out.

After breakfast was done and she had cleared the things away, Ewan remained at the table, drinking more tea, shuffling papers, poring over maps, sketching diagrams of

goodness knew what, but which appeared to be all absorbing.

Isla was grateful when Colin came in for the day's orders and joined Ewan at the table. It gave her breathing space to shift her thoughts away from her guilt at what part of her admitted was a growing attraction to the enemy and back to her original aim to help her brother defeat Ballentine.

As she pretended to be fully occupied with polishing Ewan's boots to a high shine, she set herself to listening carefully to the two men's conversation, seeking any morsel of information that might aid her brother. But once again, she was frustrated when they showed their lingering distrust of her by speaking in hushed voices, their heads close together, so she could not make out a word.

She'd done naethin' so far tae help Gregory, she silently chided herself after a while, giving up trying to listen and feeling a complete failure. Finally, she came to one conclusion. Only killin' Ewan would justify her presence there.

But deep down, just as she had feared it would, she was painfully aware that her growing attraction to the enemy laird, though she fought against it, was slowly making the thought of actually carrying out her resolution to assassinate him seem increasingly impossible.

Anxious not to dwell on that disturbing thought, she instead turned her attention to what she could do to relieve the privations she was sure Gregory and their clansfolk were now experiencing under the siege. They had been incarcerated within the castle walls with no food supplies going in for the best part of two weeks. She prayed the arrangements she had put in place for the domestic side of things before leaving the castle were working efficiently. But she was eager to do more, and after giving the question a lot of thought, she had an idea.

That night, she lay next to Ewan, her body tense with expectation as she stared into

the darkness, listening to his breathing. It felt like an eternity before it slowed and deepened, finally telling her he had fallen asleep. Still, she forced herself to wait a little longer before she dared to move, sliding her body by slow increments off the side of the cot, inch by inch, until her feet were resting on the floor.

He stirred. Isla froze in position, holding her breath. Though she already had an excuse for leaving the bed—answering an urgent call of nature—fear of the possible consequences if he caught her and did not believe her explanation chilled her blood.

She only breathed out again when he settled back into sleep. Then, she picked up her boots and outer clothes, which she had earlier carefully placed within easy reach, and stole out of the tent.

CHAPTER NINE

O utside, all seemed quiet within the camp. Not wanting to waste a moment, she rapidly donned her boots and clothes, making sure to pull her cap low to hide her hair, as she always did in her guise of Harris. Keeping low and within the shadows as far as possible, she set off across the camp on tiptoe, weaving her way between the tents as quietly as she could, fearful of the possible consequences should anyone hear her and come to investigate.

It would only take one soldier to think she was an enemy spy and treat her a bit too roughly for her disguise to be stripped away, revealing her to be a woman! Ewan's horrible threat to give her to his men if she did not comply with his demands still scared her and could easily become reality. But despite her fear, she stiffened her resolve and forced herself onwards.

'Tis me duty tae dae all I can, however small and whatever the risks, tae help Gregory and all those trapped on the inside. Just get on with it! The sooner 'tis done, the sooner I can creep back tae me bed!

So on she went. Eventually, she arrived at her destination, the wagon where the confiscated food deliveries were stored. She checked her surroundings, satisfying herself she was alone. Then, with her heart in her mouth and her hands shaking, she undid the back doors and pulled away the tarpaulin covering the stockpile.

It had grown since the party, she noticed at once, having been replenished with freshly commandeered goods. The sight made her angry. '

‘Tis nae right! That food belongs tae Gregory and the rest of our people!

Aware she must work quickly to lessen the chances of discovery, as well as get back to the tent undetected and then into bed without waking Ewan, she determinedly rolled up her sleeves. But when she leaned forward to grab a sack of flour, every tiny creak of the wagon boards sounded as loud to her ears as the crack of musket fire.

She held her breath, fearful she had been heard, that any moment now soldiers would begin emerging from their tents and catch her in the act. She waited a minute or two, and nothing happened. Breathing a sigh of profound relief, she carefully hefted another sack of flour. Her knees sagged for a moment under the weight until she balanced her load. She had planned to steal—no, not steal but reclaim—three sacks at a time. Flour would be urgently needed inside the castle, for bread. Carrying only two would take a lot longer than she had planned.

But now I’ve come this far, I havetae keep goin’ and carry what I can in the little time I have. I’m sure anythin’ will be of help, and I can always come back fer more.

She was just about to sneak out of the camp to the castle and leave the sacks by the front gates when she was violently seized from behind around the waist, and a large hand clamped over her mouth, stifling her scream of fear and shock. Taken completely by surprise, Isla suddenly found herself being dragged backwards into the deep shadows behind the wagon, her back pressed up against a long, muscular, warm body.

She knew immediately who it was even before his deep, gravelly voice growled in her ear, sending shivers up her spine. “And what d’ye think ye’re up tae, eh? Stealin’ supplies, are ye? Now, why would ye be doin’ that, I wonder?”

“Let me go this instant!,” she demanded in an angry whisper, kicking and wriggling, trying to free herself from his grip. But he held her with ease, tightening his hold

around her waist.

“‘Tis nae good fightin’. Ye may as well save yer strength tae tell me the truth about what ye’re up tae.”

She gave up fighting, but she seemed more angry than scared of him. He blamed himself for having trusted her too much and treated her too kindly. I should have kept her tied up at nights!

“How did ye—” she began.

“Catch ye in the act of stealin’ food out of me men’s mouths?” he filled in for her angrily, his mouth close to her ear. “Did ye think I wouldnae feel ye creepin’ out of bed like that? I followed ye. Now, explain what ye think ye’re doin’ before I really lose me temper and dae what I should have done at the beginning—execute ye fer an enemy spy.” He hated terrifying her, but he figured it was the only way to get her to be honest with him. “I’ll nae ask ye again. What are ye doin here?”

“All right, I-I was, er, I admit it, I was gonnae steal some flour,” she said in a low voice, obviously as keen as he was not to attract attention.

“What fer?” he growled in her ear.

“Tae... tae sell tae the baker in me village.”

That took him aback. “What?”

“Aye, since I couldnae get the money fer killin’ ye, I need tae get some another way.”

It was so plausible, he was tempted to believe it. In truth, he wanted to believe it. After all, she had only been holding two sacks of flour. It was not as though that

small amount would help feed those trapped in the castle under siege, would it? Without realizing it, he must have loosened his grip around her waist, because she suddenly twisted and pulled away from him.

“And what business is it of yers what I dae?” she blustered defiantly, turning to confront him. “I dinnae owe ye any explanations, I owe ye naethin’.”

Infuriated by her attitude, he caught hold of her arm, lest she try to run, and shook her. “That’s what ye think, is it? That ye owe me naethin’?”

“Aye, it is!” She tried to tug her arm away from him, but he just increased the pressure of his hold. “Ow, ye’re hurtin’ me, ye brute,” she hissed, grimacing with pain.

Ewan let her go at once. Though he was infuriated by her betrayal of his trust, it went against the grain to hurt a woman, however many lies she had spun him. “What if I dinnae believe yer story?” he shot back through gritted teeth, his desire to believe her warring with all the old doubts that had rushed back in.

“Ach, I dinnae care if ye dae or nae,” she retorted, rubbing her arm where he had gripped her. “I didnae mean any harm tae ye or yer men. Now. I mean, I was only gonnae take two measly sacks of flour!”

She appeared so aggrieved, he started to think it might be the truth. Maybe she really was Annie Dean from the nearby village. Maybe she really did need money. It seemed plausible. He did not know what to believe, for she did not look to him like a humble village girl. He certainly did not want her to think he trusted her, because he did not.

“Just shut yer mouth, eh? Dinnae dig the hole ye’re already in any deeper with more lies. Just get back tae the tent. And be quick about it,” he instructed her brusquely,

picking up the sacks of flour and replacing them in the wagon before closing it up.

She remained silent as he marched her briskly back to the tent. When they lay down on the cot, he thought he would give her another warning. “Dinnae bother thinkin’ of tryin’ tae sneak off again like that because I’ll ken. And if ye dae try anythin’, I’ll just tie ye again.” The threat seemed to work, for she lay quietly, the picture of despondency.

Ewan stayed awake until he thought he could tell by her breathing that she was really asleep and not faking it. He chastised himself for being so lax, he should not have trusted her. He was more shaken than he liked to admit by her underhand attempt to steal food. Yet at the same time, part of him was deeply disappointed, almost hurt by her behavior, which he knew was ridiculous.

But being unable to find any other reason for the hurt he was feeling, he tried to be honest with himself and admit that it was likely due to the painful realization that the growing connection he had started to feel with her—their lighthearted talk, the smiles, the laughter, but most of all the trust—had all been an illusion.

She’s been makin’ a fool of me all this time, lullin’ me intae a false sense of security as the days have passed, makin’ me start tae trust her, makin’ me doubts about her intentions start tae fade. How could I have I forgotten so soon that she tried tae kill me only a short while ago?

He listened to her breathing softly next to him, all his doubts about her trustworthiness resurfacing with a vengeance, with two questions constantly revolving in his mind. Who the hell is she really? And what are her true motives for comin’ here?

Isla startled, awoken by loud, urgent shouting coming from outside the tent. She sat up, half expecting to find her hands and wrists tied to the cot, figuring that the chafing

ropes on her still healing skin could not burn half so much as the failure resulting from her ill-fated venture the night before. It was a pleasant surprise, therefore, to find herself able to move about as freely as she had come to expect.

She looked around the tent and frowned in puzzlement. Ewan was not there. Where was he? He never usually let her out of his sight, she thought, slipping from the cot and quickly pulling on her clothes, boots and her trusty woolen cap to complete the persona of Harris.

Her thoughts about Ewan's whereabouts were interrupted by a volley of urgent shouts and the sound of armed men moving about in numbers that was coming from outside. What the hell is goin' on out there? She hurried to the entrance and opened the tent flap to look.

The sight that met her eyes had her heart beating like a drum. Ewan and Colin were barking rapid orders to a cohort of about thirty heavily armed warriors. She watched as the men obeyed the laird's commands and rushed en masse to leap into their saddles as their mounts were brought to them by running grooms. Once mounted, with a sergeant riding at their head, the group kicked up their horses and thundered at a gallop out of the camp, heading for the castle.

Alarmed about what it could mean, Isla ran over to Ewan and Colin. She pulled at Ewan's sleeve to attract his attention. His hard expression frightened her. "What's happenin'?" "Where are they goin'?" "Are ye attackin' the castle?"

He regarded her stonily for a few moments before looking away, disdaining to reply. Growing frantic now, she tried Colin. "Colin, what's goin' on? Where are the men goin'?"

He did not even look at her as he said, "They opened the castle gates long enough for a band of warriors tae leave. They're headin' for the forest in what seems tae be a

desperate attempt tae escape. The men are gonnae intercept them and stop them from gettin' away."

Isla's stomach dropped to her boots. Without thinking, she took off, running as fast as she could towards the front of the camp, finding a spot where she could watch what happened. There she halted, praying silently, fervently, that the Galbraith warriors would be fast enough to get away from Ewan's pursuing men.

But her prayer was thrown back in her face, for she was forced to watch in horror as the enemy cohort easily intercepted the fleeing group and began the bloody work of mercilessly dealing out death. Though Gregory's men fought bravely, they were outnumbered and were swiftly cut down. Screams of agony from men and horses rang in her ears, and the smell of blood and spilled entrails filled her nostrils as the slaughter continued.

With bile rising in her throat from sheer horror and revulsion, Isla fell to her knees, her hands to her mouth to prevent herself from screaming. She could only watch the carnage in stunned silence. It seemed like an eternity before the victors finally ceased their efforts and began the brutal work of slowly picking their way between the fallen, ruthlessly finishing any still living off with thrusts of their swords.

When they were done, all that was left were the lifeless, broken bodies of Gregory's men, which lay strewn across the ground around them, staining the grass bright red with their lifeblood.

She could not stop the tears that came, which wracked her entire being. Painful memories from the past washed over her as she experienced the agony of loss with fresh intensity. A vivid picture of the last time she had seen dead bodies appeared behind her eyes, and she clearly saw her parents lying next to each other in their bed, drowned in what seemed a welter of their own blood.

The horror that had just played out before her had brought it all rushing back. Now, she found herself weeping uncontrollably, floundering in a flood of sorrow that was shaking her to her core.

Suddenly, a large warm hand came down on her shoulder. “Harris, are ye all right?” Ewan asked, his deep voice low.

“I-I,” she stuttered through her tears, wiping her face with the back of her sleeve, not wishing any of the men to see her so upset.

“Ye’ve never seen real battle before, I’m guessin’,” he said, his voice laced with sympathy. “’Tis always a shock the first time. But ye get used tae it after a while. Come on, I can see ye’re upset. Come back tae the tent with me. Ye can hide yer tears from pryin’ eyes there.” Numb with shock, Isla allowed him to pull her gently to her feet and lead her away.

CHAPTER TEN

Once inside the tent, when a bout of fresh sobbing overtook her, she was surprised to find herself folded into Ewan's strong arms and pressed against the broad expanse of his chest, wetting his waistcoat with her tears. At that moment, she forgot he was the enemy, the man who had given the order for the slaughter she had just witnessed. She trusted him and clung to him, grateful for the comfort his strong, warm body offered.

"There, there, let the tears come," he told her soothingly, rubbing gentle circles on her back. "Once they're all out, then ye'll feel better about it all."

After she had stopped weeping, he made her sit at the table and took off her boots for her. Then he gave her a dram of whisky and stood over her while she drank it. The golden liquor crept through her veins, warming her and giving her enough strength to compose herself somewhat.

"Seein' men killed is never easy, but that's what war is," he told her as he made tea and set it before her. "What was it that upset ye so much? Was it the blood?"

She wondered how to answer without giving herself away. Deciding not to mention her parents' murder, she finally nodded and said, "Aye, there was so much blood! And the screamin', ugh, it was terrible tae hear. I'll never forget those sounds, and the smells either. Seein' it like that was a shock. I didnae expect tae feel this way."

That was the truth at least, and she was still shaking from seeing death meted out to Gregory's men so ruthlessly before her very eyes. But she suspected she would have felt the same if it had been Ewan's men being killed. Killing, war, it was all the same,

bringing suffering, misery, and death.

“Aye, such things linger in the minds of even the most hardened warriors, those that have a heart at any rate. Others enjoy the spillin’ of blood. Them, I’ll never understand.”

“Me neither,” she agreed sadly, thinking of Laird Allan, whom she suspected was one of those men. Why has he nae sent reinforcements already? she wondered angrily. Without an answer she turned her thoughts instead to Gregory’s unfortunate slain men and what their bid for freedom could mean. “Why d’ye think they tried tae escape?” she asked, looking up at Ewan over the rim of her metal mug.

“The siege is beginnin’ tae bite, and they’re runnin’ low on supplies, I’m guessin’,” he replied. “Galbraith’s been waitin’ tae hear back from Allan about those reinforcements since before the siege began, but they still havenae arrived. Things must be gettin’ pretty uncomfortable behind those walls by now. Galbraith believes I killed the first messenger he sent tae Allan, so he thinks the reason why the reinforcements have nae come yet is because of that. Nay doubt his plan was fer those warriors tae get through, or some of them at least.”

Isla was suddenly curious at his choice of words. “Why d’ye say Galbraith “believes” ye killed the first messenger?”

“Well, ye were there at the castle gates. Ye heard me tell him so,” he replied, now seated opposite her, sipping his mug of tea.

“But is it true?” she asked.

“Nay. That was just a useful lie. His man got though all right. As far as I ken, he’s still lookin’ fer Allan tae ask fer help. And findin’ the man when ye want him is nay easy task.”

“So, Laird Allan’s reinforcements could be on their way here even as we speak?” Isla asked, working to conceal her excitement. There is hope!

However, Ewan’s small laugh challenged her new optimism. “Aye, they could be. But I’d take an educated guess and say they aren’t.”

“What makes ye so sure of that?”

“Och, I’m nae sure of anythin’ in this situation. But I ken what sort of man Allan is, I ken how he thinks. He’s predictable tae a certain degree. He daes what suits him, and that’s what I’m wagerin’ on.”

“What? Are ye sayin’ that even if Galbraith’s messenger finds him, he’ll nae send any troops?”

“Aye, that’s exactly what I’m sayin’. In fact, I’d bet me granny’s teeth that Galbraith’s messenger is lyin’ dead face down in a ditch somewhere by now. Or soon will be.”

Isla could not prevent the gasp that burst from her lips. Ewan looked at her with sympathy in his dark brown eyes, clearly misunderstanding her shock at his suggestion that Allan would murder Gregory’s messenger and ignore the plea for urgent assistance. His next words, earnestly spoken, confirmed it. “There’s naethin’ tae fear. Ye dinnae need tae worry about havin’ tae fight in the battle if Allan’s men dae come before the siege ends. Whatever happens, I’ll make sure ye’re safe.”

“Thank ye,” she replied, touched by his reassurance, while her mind raced with thoughts of Allan’s possible betrayal. It was something she had not considered before, and she was certain Gregory had not either. If he had, he might have given more consideration Ewan’s invitation to talk peace.

However, she recalled the shouted conversation between the two lairds outside the castle gates. Ewan had made his distrust of Allan very clear to Gregory when trying to coax him into peace talks. Gregory had responded by calling him a liar and a thief, rejecting his claims that Allan was criminal who had stolen part of Ballentine lands and would betray Gregory's faith in him as a reliable ally.

"Ye think Laird Allan will betray Galbraith, is that it?" she asked.

"I'm bankin' on it."

The notion chilled her through and through. During her days spent with Ewan walking about the camp, talking strategy with Colin and his serjeants, she had come to respect his abilities as a commander. Enemy or not, she always found his judgment sound.

Besides that, she had seen his disappointment when Gregory had rebuffed his invitation to make peace. He had made it plain he preferred to avoid bloodshed, hence his choice of a siege instead of a battle. It chimed so completely with her own views, she had to admire the trait. If he seriously believed Allan would betray Gregory's trust, then she was inclined to believe him.

"Why? What d'ye think he's plannin' tae dae?" she asked.

"I think he's plannin' tae wait until his spies tell him both of our sides are weakened, and then he'll bring his men. He'll try tae kill me and me and me men, so he can take over me clan, of course." His face was impassive as he spoke.

That's what Gregory hopes fer. That's what I should be hopin' fer too.

Yet the thought of Ewan lying dead in his own blood on the field, like Gregory's warriors, was unexpectedly painful to her. And though she was secretly plotting his

assassination by her own hand, she suddenly found she did not want him to die.

“But I dinnae think he’s gonnae stop there,” Ewan continued mysteriously.

“What d’ye mean?” Isla asked, startled from her bleak train of thought.

“I think that once he’s gotten rid of me and routed me remaining army, he’ll attack Galbraith, kill him and his family, and then take over his clan too.”

Isla was dumbstruck with horror at his prediction, coming as it did on top of the carnage she had just witnessed and the terrible memories it had reawakened. Tears pressed at the back of her eyes again, and though she tried to brush them aside with the back of her hand, Ewan noticed at once that something was wrong.

“What is it, Annie? Ye look upset again,” he said, his handsome brow creasing with obvious concern as he studied her expression. He reached over and placed his large hand over hers. Despite the fear and sorrow gripping her, she found his touch comforting and was grateful for his kindness. After last night’s fiasco with the stolen food, she had expected harsh treatment. But here he was, with the weight of the world on his, admittedly broad, shoulders, being so gentle and trying his best to soothe and comfort her. It was impossible not to warm to him even further.

“All this death and dyin’, ’tis all wrong!” she burst out with unexpected passion, meaning every word.

“Aye, I agree, but there are times in life when, even if ye dinnae wantae, ye have nae choice but tae fight, against injustice, for freedom, or both,” he said, keeping his hand where it was and looking deeply into her eyes.

“I suppose ye mean the land ye say Allan stole from ye.”

He nodded. “Aye, that’s one injustice I couldnae let go. Those lands have been in me family fer centuries. I cannae just let Allan take them from me like that. Me ancestors are spinnin’ in their graves over it is as it is.” His tone changed slightly, acquiring a stony edge as he continued, “I havetae get them back, even if it costs me me life.”

Something about the way he spoke made her certain he was being truthful. Which meant that Allan was likely as corrupt as Ewan claimed he was and suggested Gregory’s so-called ally would have no scruples about double-crossing him.

I need tae tell Gregory all this, but how?

Ewan broke into her thoughts once more, taking her aback by saying, “I think it would be best if I bunk in with Colin tonight so ye can have the tent tae yersel’. I’m sorry ye had tae see what happened just now. I think ye’d probably like some time alone with yer thoughts. Besides, ye’ll be more comfortable without me takin’ up room in the bed.” He gave her a crooked smile that made her heart flutter in her chest.

She considered his offer. Did she want to be alone? Had she not felt alone since her parents had been so cruelly snatched away from her? And much as she loved Gregory, had not his responsibilities as laird had taken him away from her at a young age, amplifying that inner loneliness? Making up her mind, she managed a shaky smile and replied, “That’s very thoughtful of ye, Ewan, but I’d rather ye stayed. I dinnae feel like bein’ alone right now.”

The smile he sent her way set her heart fluttering again. “All right, I’ll stay and keep ye company if that’s what ye’d like.”

“Aye, it is.”

“In that case, I’ll make us some more tea and slip a wee dram intae it. That should

soothe yer nerves and help ye sleep.”

“Thank ye, Ewan, fer bein’ so kind.” She was genuinely touched by this gentle side to him, which she had only glimpsed before when they were at the pond.

Ewan made a step and then turned to her again. “I have nae idea how ye thought ye would be able tae kill me when ye cannae stand the horror of takin’ one’s life.” And then he went to make the tea, so thankfully she didn’t have to answer.

I dinnae have any idea what I was thinkin’ either.

He proved to be correct, for once they had drunk their tea and whisky and retired to the cot, Isla felt better, and was soon overtaken by tiredness. When Ewan lay on his back and raised his arm to invite her in, she simply accepted the gesture for what it was and snuggled into the crook of his shoulder. He put his strong arm around her, and it felt wonderful to be held so. In fact, she had never felt so safe in her life. She did not even feel a whit of guilt about fraternizing with the enemy. She simply accepted the immense amount of comfort his warmth and strength and closeness offered, with gratitude and growing affection.

The siege went on, and during the following week, Ewan allowed her more and more freedom to move about the camp by herself. As the days passed, the men increasingly accepted Harris as one of them. The boy soldier was often invited to eat, drink, play jacks, or a hand of cards around the firepits with the various groups. At other times, Harris made himself useful helping tending to the horses or assisting the camp cooks, turning the spit when someone brought in a deer or something else that would make a tasty supper.

In quiet moments, as she strolled about, Isla privately marveled at the way she had so quickly settled into camp life. She had grown to like these tough men who thought nothing of running their enemies through with their swords, but could equally be

found a few hours later, sitting around a campfire with their brothers-in-arms, wringing a tear from their mates eyes as they coaxed a tune from a battered squeezebox and crooned a sad, old ballad of lost love.

Among them, she found a sense of camaraderie she could hardly recall experiencing. She had even grown used to the soldiers' bawdy, irreverent jokes, laughing along with them behind her hand. Castle Galbraith was where she had grown up as the laird's sister, to be sure. Yet strange as it seemed, and in spite of her stalwart love for and loyalty to Gregory, she had seldom felt quite so at home as she did as part of Ewan Ballentine's military camp.

At the end of that week, the third week of the siege, after eating a supper of roast duck with Ewan at the table, she refused his offer of tea and began clearing the dishes away. Clearly surprised by her refusal, he looked at her quizzically. "What are ye up to?"

"If 'tis all right with ye, after I've washed these dishes and taken them back tae the kitchen tent, I'm goin' out tae play horseshoes with some of the men for an hour or two," she told him, placing the dishes by the door while she put on her coat and boots.

"Well, I may well come and join ye fer a few rounds later," he said, which for some reason, pleased her immensely. She found herself beaming at him.

"Aye, all right, if ye dinnae mind gettin' beaten," she replied cheekily.

He laughed, a happy, full-throated sound of pure merriment which she could not help joining. "Now, that's a challenge I cannae turn down." He paused for a moment, regarding her with one of his crooked smiles. "Ye ken, Harris, I like seein' the way ye've settled in around here."

“The men have made me feel very welcome.”

“‘Tis very satisfyin’ as their commander tae hear ye say that. Of course, in me opinion, ye couldnae find a better bunch of lads anywhere. I’m awful glad ye feel welcomed. Off ye go then tae play, I’ll see ye shortly.” He waved her out of the tent. However, when she turned to give him a final wave as she went out, she caught in his expression a hint of doubt.

There’s nay good reason why he should trust me. I did try tae kill him after all, and I’ve been spyin’ on him all this time as well. I’m lucky he’s let me live as it is . But trust has tae be earned, and I dinnae deserve it. I am an enemy spy, and I’ve told him naethin’ but lies.

Torn as she was between loyalty to Gregory and her growing affection for the enigmatic enemy leader, she felt as guilty about lying to Ewan as she did about her failure to aid her brother and the others trapped by the siege. Rightly or wrongly, it made her sad to think he was still suspicious of her. For deep down, had circumstances allowed it, she would have given her eye-teeth to be considered trustworthy by such an honorable man as Ewan Ballentine.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

If Isla had imagined she could not feel worse about her failure to assist her beleaguered brother, two days later—day twenty-three of the siege—she found out she was very wrong.

She and Ewan were at the table, sharing a breakfast of oatmeal, toasted bannocks, and strong tea, when Colin came in to give Ewan his morning report. After greeting them both, at Ewan's invitation, the captain took off his cap, sat at the table, and accepted the mug of tea Isla poured for him.

“So, anythin’ tae report?” Ewan asked as he finished eating and pushed his dish aside, leaning his elbows on the table.

In reply, Colin reached into his coat and drew out a folded paper. “All quiet and in order, except for this,” he said, placing what Isla could now see was a letter on the table in front of Ewan. Ewan picked it up and examined it curiously.

“What is this?” he asked. “How did it get here? I’ve nae seen that handwritin’ before.”

But Isla had, and she felt the blood drain from her face in shock. As Ewan carefully slit the letter open with his dirk, she raised her mug to her lips and hid behind the rim, hoping to conceal her alarm. For the handwriting belonged unmistakably to Gregory, and the only possible reason she could think of for him writing to Ewan was—she felt queasy just thinking of it—to surrender.

Colin shrugged. “Unfortunately, I have nay idea who brought it. Someone left it stuck in the gatepost at the main checkpoint overnight. The guards say they saw naethin’, so I put them both on kitchen duty for the rest of the week, the useless buggers.”

“Well, well, well, a letter from the enemy, eh?” Ewan said, smiling. “Looks like we’ve succeeded in persuadin’ Galbraith tae give up the fight and make peace with us.”

Isla’s stomach plummeted to the floor as she watched him unfolding the single sheet of paper and starting tae read. Sure he was about to announce Gregory’s capitulation, she was confused when instead of doing so, her remained silent. As he continued reading, his smile faded, his forehead creased into a frown, and his lips pursed.

Finally, he tossed the letter over to Colin, saying, “What the hell is this? Is it some kind of ruse, d’ye think? A trick of some sort? What can he mean by it?”

Poised in a state of painful expectation, Isla took firm hold of her own wrist, to stop herself from ripping the letter from Colin’s hand, so galvanized by fear and curiosity was she to know the contents.

This must be it. This is the end. What else can Gregory be writin’ about but surrender?

Colin finished reading, lowered the letter, and looked over at his commander, his puzzled expression matching Ewan’s. “Well, if ’tis a ruse, I dinnae ken how Galbraith figures he’ll benefit from it,” he said. “’Tis very off indeed.”

“I wasnae even aware the man had a sister,” Ewan replied. Isla’s mouth went suddenly dry, and the hair stood up on the nape of her neck as she struggled to hold her tongue and remain in her seat. Gregory was not writing about surrendering at all—he was writing about her disappearance! She had forgotten all about that!

Ach, he must be worried sick by now , what with me vanishin' just when Ewan's army arrived in Waverley Forest, and now, havin' the enemy camped on his doorstep and nay sign of me. What must he be thinkin'?

She was stabbed by guilt for adding to his woes.

She was soon to find out what her brother was thinking, for Ewan picked up the letter and scanned the lines once more. "He demands tae ken if I've breached the castle somehow and kidnapped her, the cheeky bastard. What sort of a man does he think I am? I dinnae go about kidnappin' innocent lassies," he said with obvious disdain. But then his eyes darkened as he added, "Unlike some of the others he associates with."

That caught Isla's attention. She wondered, scrutinizing his face for clues, what he meant. Who could he be referrin' to? She was at a loss, and so she brushed the question aside for the moment, to be quickly subsumed by guilt once more at the worry she was inflicting on Gregory.

"He clearly believes I'm holdin' her captive, though why he imagines I'd waste time sittin' out here if I could use her tae get him tae surrender is beyond me. He must be so worried about her, he's nae thinkin' straight."

Isla noticed that he spoke the last sentence with a peculiar note of sympathy in his gruff voice. It suggested he felt sorry for Gregory, but she knew that could not be right. Should he not be pleased that the matter of his sister's mysterious disappearance was weighing on his foe as well as the siege? The worry was a sign of weakness, was it not?

"Well, I dinnae have her, and I have nay idea where she could be," Ewan said at last, setting the letter down and swallowing the last of his tea.

"So, what d'ye want tae dae about it," his captain asked.

“Colin, I cannae just ignore this. The lassie could be in real trouble. She could be dead even. What if brigands have captured her, or Allan’s holdin’ her? I wouldnae put it past the connivin’ dog. She’d be a useful bargainin’ chip tae coerce Galbraith intae doin’ what he wants. But the man seems tae genuinely care about his sister.”

“Aye, and like ye said before, Allan will have spies out, watchin’ what’s happenin’ with the siege and all. Maybe one of them has got hold of her,” Colin suggested.

“Aye, maybe so,” Ewan said, getting up, his expression dark. Much to Isla’s frustration, he picked up the letter from Gregory and stowed it inside his coat, preventing her from reading it herself. Colin rose too and donned his cap. What Ewan said next took Isla completely by surprise. “I wantae set up a couple of search parties tae look fer the lassie.”

She was surprised when Colin simply nodded. However, he did add, “If ye’re sure, but ye ken we need every man we have here I case anythin’ happens, eh?”

Isla noticed the strange look Ewan cast his captain and was even more taken aback when he replied, “There’s a moral element tae this, Colin. The lass is innocent. ’Tis the right thing tae dae, tae try tae find her and return her tae her braither unharmed.”

“Aye, I understand,” Colin agreed with what Isla thought was unusual compliance as the pair strode to the entrance of the tent.

But before they could leave, Isla, eaten up with curiosity, found she could hold her tongue no longer. “But why would ye search fer this sister of Galbraith, and if ye find her, send her home tae him? Why would ye want tae aid the enemy like that?” she asked.

Ewan paused by the entrance and looked over his shoulder at her. “Because if it were me own sister who was missin’, then I would hope someone would dae the same fer

her,” he answered. “And he is me enemy fer only as long as he decides tae be. Allan is me only true enemy.” Then, he opened the tent flap and disappeared outside, followed closely by Colin.

Isla did not move but continued drinking her tea, turning his final words and the manner of his speaking over in her mind. She thought she had glimpsed a certain furtiveness in his eyes just then, as though he were keeping something to himself. It was clear that the matter of her disappearance held greater importance for him than seemed warranted, considering the situation.

She pondered for some time what it could be and what it could have to do with his apparent determination to assist Gregory by searching for her—Laird Galbraith’s missing sister. She could not forget the last thing he said about Gregory. But the only thing she could come up with that made any sense, was that if he found the missing sister alive, he intended to use her as bargaining chip to get Gregory to surrender, just as he had suggested Allan might do.

But if that were the case, then would he nae be pleased about it? It would be a great opportunity fer him tae use me tae manipulate Gregory and get the outcome tae the siege he wants. So, why would he nae have just come out and said so?

Recalling his shifty look, she could not help feeling convinced there was more to it, that by sending out a search party to find her, he was serving some hidden agenda of his own. But what it could be, she had no idea. And she was not about to ask Ewan about it.

She drummed her fingers on the table in distraction, realizing she was in greater peril of discovery than ever. Ewan was intelligent. Surely, it would not take long for him to put the pieces of the puzzle together. A strange woman turns up in his camp and tries to kill him just as Galbraith’s sister goes missing? It was too coincidental to be coincidence.

In fact, the truly surprising thing about it was that on reading the letter, he had not immediately realized the missing woman was sitting right in front of him, in the guise of the trusty Harris.

After issuing his orders to the search parties, Ewan waited until they had left the camp, his mind turning on the unexpected events of the morning. The letter from Galbraith had been a shock, and it had immediately brought back painful memories of when Allan had kidnapped Deidra the previous year. The same, tormenting questions immediately raced through his mind, stirring up his emotions: Who has her? Where is she? Is she safe and well? Is she even alive?

It was puzzling because, though Galbraith was his enemy, and he strongly suspected him of involvement in Deidra's kidnapping, he found himself feeling a little sorry for the man.

As he started off back to the tent, he was aware that others might believe he wanted the girl to use her in manipulating Galbraith into surrendering. But he would never stoop so low, unlike Allan. However, apart from his personal sympathy for Galbraith and real concern for the girl herself, he had quickly identified other beneficial strategic reasons for trying to find her, reasons he knew Galbraith must be aware of.

He realized it must have taken Galbraith a lot of soul-searching to risk sending him that letter, and that he must have sent it without Allan's knowledge. The maniac would never have allowed his ally to show such a sign of vulnerability, and he began to wonder if he had misjudged Galbraith according to the wicked company he kept.

Galbraith must love his sister very much . He kens I could use her tae force him tae surrender tae me, as Allan would undoubtedly dae. But I'm nae gonnae dae that. Instead, if I find her, I'll return her safe tae her braither, as a gesture of good will. That would satisfy me and show Galbraith I'm a man of honor, who would rather have peace with him than war. It might just persuade him tae trust me instead of

Allan. There's everythin' tae be gained by helpin' him.

But in the meantime, he had to consider if and how he was going to reply to Galbraith's letter, which he intended to do when he got back to the tent. As he passed the open-air stable, he spotted Harris busy shifting horse muck with a shovel. He stopped for a moment to watch, impressed by the effort the fake boy soldier was putting into the job. Harris, or Annie, was swapping good-natured banter with the other grooms, another sign that she was well embedded in camp life. Ewan felt a warm glow of satisfaction in his chest to see it.

As it often did, his mind went back to the gloriously intimate moment which he and Annie—or whatever her name was—had shared at the pond that night. That brief connection had been tantalizing and confusing and embarrassing all at the same time. He recalled the sudden wave of desire that had washed over him as he held her naked body close to his and looked deeply into her eyes. He had almost lost control and kissed her. Oh, he had wanted to kiss her, and if she had not sensed his arousal and broken away, he suspected things might have gone a lot further than that!

The memory troubled him like a stone in his boot, causing him to question himself repeatedly. Why should he have felt that way for a lassie who had tried tae kill him and was almost certainly lying to him about who she was? He couldn't fathom it. It made no sense. In truth, his own reaction had scared him more than battling Laird Allan's army did. For a while, he had been forced to take refuge in cold silence, put distance between them, just as she had. It was a relief that they seemed to have gradually regained their previous camaraderie. But the fact remained, that as much as he yearned to trust her, he still had no good reason to do so any further than he could throw her.

Kiss her, aye. Explore those temptin' curves I ken are hidin' under that lad's clothin', aye. Protect her with me life? Aye, all of that. But trust her? Nay.

When his initial anger had waned after catching her stealing food, despite more of her lies, he had decided to take a different track. Rather than tie her up and restrict her movements, he thought he might have more luck finding out her true identity and purpose in the camp by giving her more freedom. He figured that if she was up to something underhand, she would soon slip up, and he would catch her.

However, if she turned out to be an enemy spy, he had no idea what he would do. Because the thought of harming a hair on her head was out of the question.

All this was going through his mind as he continued to observe her and saw Colin go up and speak to her. The pair immediately became engrossed in conversation. They seemed as thick as thieves, perfectly relaxed in one another's company. He was pleased to see them getting on so well... until a hint of jealousy suddenly crept into his thoughts and made his heart clench in his chest. He immediately brushed it aside and strode away, telling himself it was completely unwarranted.

There's nay reason tae be possessive of her . Colin has nay idea that Harris is a woman. He kens naethin' about her identity. As far as he's concerned, he's just sharin' a laugh and a joke with a young lad.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Once back in the tent, Ewan tried to put all that out of his mind. He sat down at the table and wrote a brief note to Galbraith.

I ken naething about yer missing sister's whereabouts. I dinnae have her captive and have never seen her. But I wish her nay harm, and so I've sent out search parties tae look fer her. If I find her, I'll return her tae ye. In the meantime, I would ask ye tae reconsider me offer tae make peace with ye. The offer still stands and will have a far better outcome fer ye and yer people than if ye continue tae try tae hold out against the siege.

He signed off and sealed the letter, then he went outside to call a messenger to deliver the note to the castle gates. Before he could do so, one of his men came racing into the camp on foot from the direction of the castle.

"M'laird, m'laird, urgent news!" the man hailed him and ran towards him. Ewan recognized him as Tam Fielding, who was currently deployed along with several others in keeping close watch of any movement in or around the castle.

"What is it, Tam?" Ewan asked as he met Tam half way.

"A lone rider, m'laird, in Galbraith colors has managed tae slip out of the castle without the gates openin'!" the soldier panted. "We dinnae ken how he got past us. We only just spotted him makin' off through the forest like the hounds of hell were on his tail."

Ewan was instantly on alert. “Without the gates openin’, ye say?”

“Aye, m’laird. I’m sorry, but we just cannae figure out how he did it. There must be another exit that’s hidden from us.”

“Maybe. Ye’re certain he didnae come out of one of the gates and ye missed him?” Ewan asked, hiding his growing excitement.

“Aye, I’m certain. Me and the lads have got the whole pace covered. There’s nay way any one can get out of the place without us seein’ them. There’s got tae be a secret entrance somewhere,” Tam asserted.

“Aye, mayhap ye’re right about that, Tam. Take some extra men and step up yer watch all around the castle perimeter. If anythin’ moves again, let me ken at once, eh?”

“Aye, m’laird, will dae.” Tam hurried off to do as he was bidden.

Excited by the possibility of the existence of a secret entrance to the castle, Ewan instructed a messenger to deliver the letter to Galbraith before going to find Colin. His captain was no longer with the horses talking to Harris, who was still there shoveling muck. He found him a few minutes later at the main checkpoint, relieved his former bout of jealousy now a thing of the past. His thoughts were entirely taken over by Tam’s intriguing news. He quickly pulled Colin aside.

“I have some interestin’ news fer ye that could turn out tae our advantage,” he told his second-in-command.

“That sounds intriguin’,” Colin replied as they began walking side by side. He listened intently while Ewan filled him in on what Tam had said.

“A hidden entrance, eh? Now if that turns out tae be true, that would just about make me day,” the Captain said, grinning ear to ear.

“Aye, it could be the answer tae our prayers, all right, if it exists. Galbraith could have saved his warriors from gettin’ slaughtered if he’d used it before, but I suppose he wanted tae keep it from us until he was desperate. Now, he’s maybe just given us a helpin’ hand in getting’ intae the castle.”

“Why, I feel like he’s just sent us an open invitation tae dine with him tonight,” Colin replied with a chuckle.

“Aye, and we’ll accept if we can find the way in,” Ewan assured him with a grin.

They were almost at the most forward edge of the camp, just to the rear of where Tam and his fellows were stationed, keeping the stronghold under observation, when there was a shout from behind them. “Hey, wait fer me!”

Ewan halted and turned to see Harris running after them. “Where are ye goin’?” the boy soldier asked, one half of his face obscured by his woolen cap, the other smeared with what Ewan thought could be horse dung. No one would ever think for a moment Harris was a woman.

Ewan found himself unaccountably pleased to have Harris tag along with them and slapped him jovially on the back. After Harris had finished coughing, Ewan quickly explained what he and Colin were discussing.

“‘Tis a good thing ye caught us up,” he told Harris. “It might be useful to have someone small in case we find a wee entrance that none of us tae can squeeze intae.”

“Och, ye’re wastin’ yer time, surely?” Harris responded quickly. Ewan put the boy-soldier’s flushed cheeks down to the coughing fit. “If there was a hidden way in, why

did Laird Galbraith send his warriors out the front gates tae be cut down like that? Nay, it diaenae make sense at all.”

“Ye think so?” Ewan countered. “Then how did this lone rider get out when the gates didnae open a crack?”

“Ach, I bet they did, but the guards werenae payin’ attention. Likely , they were sleepin’ on the job and only spied the rider at the last minute,” Harris babbled heatedly, clearly unconvinced.

“Me guards ken well enough what they’ll get if they sleep on the job,” Colin protested. “They ken what’s at stake here.”

“Aye, if Tam says the gates didnae open then, as far as I’m concerned, he’s tellin’ the truth. That rider must have come from elsewhere.”

“’Tis a waste of time, if ye ask me,” Harris continued to argue, until Ewan began to get a little annoyed with him.

“Maybe ye’re right, but there’s nay harm in lookin’, so haud yer wheesht and come along.” He took firm hold of Harris’s upper arm and pulled him along after them. When they reached the front of the camp, which was situated just out of range of musket fore and small artillery, Ewan gave his men orders for that night. He split them into four groups of two. “As soon as ’tis dark, I want half of ye tae sneak up as close as ye can tae the castle walls and examine everything ye find. Every waste outlet, every pipe, every drain. Check for concealed catches, hinges, stones ye can lift or move, anythin’ that diaenae look quite right, got that?”

“Aye, m’laird.”

“And I want the other half tae scour everythin’ along the tree line and a few hundred

yards intae the forest. Look fer anythin' that looks like it could be a concealed entrance. Understood?"

"Aye, m'laird."

"And report back tae me immediately if ye find anythin'."

"Aye, m'laird!"

On the way back into the camp, Ewan told Colin the rest of his plan and gave him his orders. "Select a few good men and split them up intae smaller groups. Each should take a different village, splash some silver about, try tae find out any information they can about a possible secret way intae the castle. But I want ye tae stay here and take over command while I'm gone tonight."

"Gone? Where are ye goin'?" Colin wanted to know.

"Me and Harris here are gonnæ go and dae a bit of scouting about fer information oursel's," Ewan explained, glancing down at Harris and finding the surprise on the boy soldier's face quite amusing. "I'm nae sure how long we'll be gone, but if we're nae back by noon tomorrow, send out a search party."

"Aye, will dae. But watch yer back out there, Ewan. This is still Galbraith territory, and there's many out there that would like tae end ye if they recognize ye. I advise ye tae go in disguise, and dinnae take any unnecessary risks," Colin told him, his expression serious.

The possibility of finding a way into the castle had raised Ewan's spirits considerably, and he laughed. "Ach, dinnae fash yersel', man," he told Colin. "I'll be safe as houses with Harris tae protect me. Eh, lad?" He slapped Harris playfully on the back again, knocking the wind from the boy soldier's lungs.

Colin laughed along with him while they watched Harris trying to catch his breath. Then the captain said in tones of mock warning, “Ye’d best take care, Ewan. Ye dinnae ken yer own strength. There’ll be naethin’ left of the poor lad if ye keep on whackin’ him like that.”

“Ach, he’s a tough wee lad, he can take it,” Ewan replied, chuckling as he raised his hand to strike Harris on the back once more.

The boy soldier dodged nimbly aside this time and glared at the grinning Ewan. Now able to speak again, Harris said sarcastically, “Thank ye, Colin. ’Tis nice tae ken that someone’s lookin’ out fer me and nae tryin’ tae kill me.”

But that just made Ewan laugh all the harder. The trio split up then, and as he and Harris returned to the tent, he found he was looking forward to their little scouting excursion later that night.

Back in the tent, they dined on bread and cheese and small ale. While they were eating, Annie surprised him when she suddenly said out of nowhere, “Ewan, I need yer help.”

“Oh, what with?” he replied, eyeing her with some suspicion. He had noticed how hard she had argued against there being a possible secret entrance into the castle, though he had no idea why, other than she believed it. Was this an attempt to redirect his intentions?

“I want ye tae teach me how tae fight with a sword.”

Ewan almost choked on his ale. “Ye must be jestin’,” he replied, chuckling in disbelief as he brushed the drops of ale from his waistcoat. “Why would I wantae teach me would-be assassin how tae use a sword? I’d have tae have a death wish. Nay, ye can forget that!”

“But I can fight fer ye properly then! Now, I only ken how tae fight with double daggers, but the weight of the armor and the sword makes it so hard. They’re too heavy and slow me down. But if I could learn tae fight with the sword, I’d be much more useful in battle.” He face below the woolen cap was alight with enthusiasm.

“I told ye, forget it.” He shook his head vehemently. Her answer was to get up from the table and walk out of the tent. Ewan sat there, thinking she had gone off in a huff. He was taken aback when she reappeared a few minutes later with two roughly sword-length tree branches that had been stripped of their leaves, one in each hand.

She tried to hand him one. “We can use these tae train with.”

“Nay,” he said, shaking his head again, shoving the branch away.

“Aye,” she insisted brightly, pushing it at him again. Still, he refused. “Ach, come on! D’ye nae want me tae be a better fighter fer ye?” she cried.

“I dinnae fancy ye skewerin’ me with that sword while I’m sleepin’,” he told her, meaning every word.

She huffed impatiently. “I’ve sworn tae ye that I’ll nae try tae kill ye again, and I havenae. D’ye nae believe me?”

“Nay.”

“Spoil sport,” she mumbled. “Ye ken ye really wantae.”

“I assure ye, I have nae intention of teaching ye how tae fight with a sword. Now, let that be the end of it,” Ewan insisted, unable to help smiling at her antics.

“In that case, I’ll havetae make ye.” She struck a fighting pose and began to fence

with him, striking him lightly about his chest and shoulders with the stick, trying to provoke him into picking up the other branch and engaging with her.

When he did not respond, the strikes came harder and faster.

“That’s enough now,” he told her warningly.

“I’m nae gonnae stop until ye pick that stick up and fight back,” she declared, poking him in the chest with the point of her stick. Her face was glowing, and she seemed as excited a child with a new toy.

“Well, dinnae hold yer breath,” he replied, deciding to put a stop to her provocation. In one fluid movement, he got to his feet, grabbed the branch from her hand and tossed it aside, then picked her up and threw her over his shoulder.

“What are ye doin’? That’s nae fair! Let me down, let me go, ye beast!” she cried, beating her small fists on his back furiously, her feet flailing in the air as she tried in vain to kick him. Her attempts were so feeble, Ewan shook with laughter as he whirled her around a few times to make her dizzy.

Intrigued by her less than subtle attempt to redirect his intentions, he said, “I’ll let ye down when I’m good and ready. Ye think ye can fool me, eh? I ken exactly what ye’re tryin’ tae dae. Fer some reason, ye dinnae want me tae look fer a hidden entrance tae the castle.”

“That’s nae true!” she protested, finally giving up her struggle to free herself.

“Aye, it is, though I have nay idea why. At any rate, I’m nae changin’ me plans fer ye or anyone. Ye’re comin’ with me tae the village taenight, tae see what we can find out, so ye might as well stop yer mitherin’. Now, are ye gonnae behave?”

To his added amusement, she actually hissed like an angry cat before she grudgingly muttered, “Aye.”

“Good.” He put her down. She glared at him as she rearranged her clothing.

“Right, we have some time before we ride out. Like Colin says, we need disguises. I think we should pose as a married couple who were supposed tae visit their family in the castle and found it under siege. We can drop intae the conversation that a rider came out of some sort of secret entrance and see if that gets anyone talkin’.”

“All right,” she agreed, pursing her lips, her unwilling attitude only making him question her motives even more.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Ye need a dress.”

“What? But I dinnae have a dress!”

“Look in the chest over there. There’s a few bits of clothin’ that the lads have gathered over the years fer times like this.”

“But why have ye got a dress in there? D’ye like tae dress as a lassie when ye go out scoutin’?”

“Aye, what’s it tae ye if I dae?” he riposted, pretending to take umbrage, stifling his laughter. “’Tis a blue gown as well—me best color.”

He spied her lips curving up at the corners as she said, “Ach, ye great lummo! Why really have ye got a dress in yer collection?”

“I dinnae ken how it got there! By mistake, I suppose. The lads pick these things up now and then in case they come in handy. Anyway, who cares where it came from. The important thing is it looks about yer size. Get it out and try it on.”

“But I can hardly leave the camp dressed as a woman,” she pointed out, nevertheless crossing the tent and kneeling next to the chest.

“Ye’re nae gonnae. Ye can take the dress with ye and change in the woods afore we get tae the village, then change back again when we return.”

“Ach, all right,” she replied, rummaging through the contents of the chest and eventually pulling out the blue gown. Standing up, she held it against herself. “’Tis quite nice if a bit rumpled.”

“Nay need tae worry about that. There’s a big cloak in there ye can wear over the top.”

She returned to the chest and eventually tugged out an enormous piece of thick woolen material which, when she held it up, proved to be a cloak. Immediately, she turned up her nose. “Ugh! I cannae wear that,” she declared.

“Why nae?”

“Because it stinks like someone died in it.”

“They likely did,” Ewan told her, chuckling when she promptly dropped the cloak to the floor, letting out a squeal of disgust. “I’m jestin’,” he added. “If I remember rightly, one of the lads stole it off a feller at an inn one night.”

“That daesnae make it stink any the less,” she protested, getting up and poking the offending garment with her foot.

“Well, ye’re wearin’ it whatever ye say. Hang it up fer a wee while, give it a good airin’, and it’ll be as good as new.”

“D’ye ken how much I dislike ye, Ewan Ballentine?” she asked him with a rebellious look, nevertheless doing as he suggested with both the cloak and the gown.

Tickled, he said good-naturedly, “Aye. Now, shut yer hole and put that dress on. I wantae see if the disguise is any good and ye can pass as a woman.”

He guffawed loudly when she picked up the cloak and threw it at his head.

Later that night, they left the camp on Ewan's stallion. Isla rode behind him, her front pressed against his back, her arms linked around his waist. "Why can we nae take two horses?" she had complained when she realized he meant them to share the saddle.

"If we're meant tae be man and wife, it'll be more convincin' this way," he had insisted, reaching down to give her a hand up.

"That daesnae make sense. Can married people nae have a horse each?" she asked, squeezing in behind him and wriggling annoyingly as she tried to get comfortable. He grinned to himself, liking the sensation of being between her thighs, of having her breasts pressed against his back, and her arms encircling him.

"If anyone asks what we're doin' there, we can say one of the beasts went lame and that's why we havetae stop at the inn. Anyway, 'tis nae different tae sharin' the bed, so shut up and quit complainin'. And will ye sit still?" he pretended to grumble, pressing his heels against the stallion's flanks, clicking his tongue, and slowly guiding the huge beast out of the camp.

They were heading for the village of Killicragie, about three miles or so from the castle, still on Galbraith lands. The moon was almost full, lighting their way ahead brightly as they rode side by side down a leafy lane. The silvery brilliance mirrored Ewan's mood. Not only was he optimistic about the success of their mission and the possibility of discovering a hidden way into the castle, but he had also enjoyed sparring with Annie that afternoon as they made their preparations. Most of all, he had found the sight of her in a dress wildly exciting.

"D'ye think I'm gonnae take me clothes off in front of ye?" she had demanded, one hand on her hip, the other clutching the pale-blue gown.

“Well, I’ve always been the hopeful sort,” he had replied jokingly, really looking forward to seeing her transformation.

“I mean, will ye have the decency tae turn around while I change?”

“Och, all right.” Grinning, he had done as she had asked.

“And definitely nay peepin’ his time!”

Though surprised she would allude so directly to their time at the pond, he could not resist teasing her. “Och, why so bashful? ’Tis naethin’ I havenae seen before.”

“Ye-ye...!”

“Just get on with it, will ye? We havenae got all day,” he commanded her in his sternest voice, hiding his smile. With growing excitement, he listened to the sounds of rustling, imagining the clothes coming off and the dress going on.

“All right. Ye can look now.”

“At last! I could feel me beard growin’, ye took so bloody—” he was saying as he turned in his chair to look. But the final words fell by the wayside as he took in the vision standing just a few feet away from him. Judging by the rich fabric, he guessed the gown must have been expensive, and it could have been made for her.

It highlighted every curve of her slender, lithe body, from the nipped in waist and flaring hips to the pearly half-moons of her breasts, which the gown’s pretty front lacing pushed up enticingly. Her bright golden hair was loose, and it flowed down her back to her waist in a cascade of tiny curls.

“Will it dae?” she asked, twirling on the spot so the skirt flowed gracefully around

her legs and brushed the floor. Ewan, transfixed by her radiant beauty once more, swallowed hard and nodded.

“Aye,” he managed to croak, crossing his legs to hide any hint of his sudden embarrassing arousal. “It’ll dae.”

“It feels so strange wearing a dress again. It’s been quite a while. ’Tis a shame I have nay stays or petticoats tae go with it though,” she mused, smoothing the skirt gently. “Ye’ll havetae turn around again, so I can take it off.”

Dinnae take it off, a part of him wanted to shout. Let me dae that! The other part, however, told him to pull himself together and focus on the mission in hand. Torn, he sighed and turned away again, as she had bade him to. He could only listen to the tantalizing rustle of silk taffeta, picturing her in his mind’s eye as she disrobed, while he fought down his arousal and wished to God he knew who the devil this woman was, for she was slowly turning him inside out.

A mile or so from Killicragie, they halted so Annie could change from Harris’ clothes into her feminine garb. Ewan waited patiently, not allowing himself to get too excited this time. He knew the full-length, hooded cloak would just about cover her from her neck to her feet, pretty much obscuring the gown beneath. He thought it just as well, for he wanted to keep his wits about him and not get distracted.

Eventually, she reappeared from the trees, her shape completely hidden by the voluminous cloak. They clasped hands as he helped her to remount. “Why, ye couldnae even tell there’s a woman under that thing,” he remarked when she was back in her spot behind him and he gently urged their horses onwards.

“Well, it was yer idea fer me tae wear it,” she pointed out. “And it still stinks. I hope nay one comes too near and thinks ’tis me.”

He felt a flash of possessiveness at the thought. “That’s nae gonnae happen. Ye’ll stay by me the whole time and nae wander off on yer own, understood?”

“Aye, m’laird,” she muttered. “Och, look, lights up ahead. I think that might be the inn.”

She was soon proven right when they rode into the surprisingly busy cobbled courtyard of The Thatcher’s Arms. The inn was a two-story, sprawling, whitewashed cluster of buildings, with leaded windows that gleamed in the moonlight, and a bowed thatch roof . Lamps shone a welcoming glow from inside the windows. The big, worn door swung to and fro with a squeak as a variety of people passed in and out, releasing infrequent bursts of animated chatter, laughter, and fiddle music in to the night air, as well as the smell of stale beer, roasted meats, and unwashed humanity.

“It seems quite a lively place,” Annie remarked as Ewan handed the horse over to a stable lad. Ewan ruffled the boy’s hair and tipped him a few groats. The youngster led the horse away, grinning as he pocketed the coins.

“Aye, it does. Seems like the type of pace where ye get all sorts comin’ fer a drink or a meal. ’Tis ideal fer our purposes.” He held the door open for her, and they entered a long, L-shaped room with a low ceiling. A massive hearth was blazing against one wall, and a bar festooned with pewter tankards, ceramic pint mugs, and crude glasses ran the whole length of the place. It was quite crowded with people waiting to be served their drinks. Others sat at tables or stood about, intent on their talk, hardly sparing them a glance as they entered. A thick pall of tobacco smoke hung in the air along with the smell of cooking.

“Lord, ’tis so noisy in here!” Annie said, having to raise her voice for Ewan to hear her.

“Aye, let’s go tae the bar and get somethin’ tae drink. Now, remember, we’re husband and wife, eh?” He offered her his arm, and she took it as they went over to the bar.

She nodded. “Aye, I remember. Mr. and Mrs. Mackintosh from Oban.”

“That’s right. Now, look cheerful, as if ye’re the talkative type.”

“Och, I’ll make sure tae laugh uproariously at all yer jokes, Husband.”

“Is that nae part of yer wifely duties?” he asked and burst into peel of false laughter that drew glances for the other punters.

“Wheesht, ye fool!” she said, laughing herself and batting at his arm.

They reached the bar, and people politely moved out of Ewan’s way to let him through to order. He leaned a massive elbow on the counter and smiled down at Annie, enjoying her company in her feminine guise in this new setting. “Now, Mrs. Mackintosh, what’ll ye have?”

“What dae ladies drink in such establishments?” she asked, eyeing the bottles and flasks ranged behind the bar with curiosity from beneath her hood.

“Anythin’ they like, I should think. Wine?”

“Aye, I’ll have some wine, please,” she agreed with a nod. Ewan ordered a pint of ale for himself and wine for Annie. “Aye ye nae gonnae take yer hood down?” he asked as they waited for the barman to fetch their drinks.

“Nay, I’m still a wee bit cold. I’ll keep it up fer now,” she replied.

He shrugged, not thinking much of it. “All right, if that’s what ye want.” When the barman placed their drinks on the counter, Ewan took some time finding his change to pay the man. As he did so, he asked him, “What’s tae dae up at the castle?”

“Ach, the place has been under siege by an enemy laird fer three weeks now,” the barman, a small, wiry man with a thin beard, replied, holding out his hand for the payment.

“Is that so?” Ewan replied, counting out his coins slowly and placing them in the man’s palm one by one. “That’s a shock tae discover, indeed. Me and the wife here, we’ve come all the way from Oban tae visit her sister who works there as a maid. But when we got there today, ye can imagine how surprised we were tae find an army camped outside the gates. Some of the soldiers turned us away.”

“Aye, that’s Laird Ewan Ballentine’s army. But I doubt it’ll be there fer long,” the barman said, closing his palm over the coins.

“Oh, why’s that?”

“Rumor has it that reinforcements are comin’ any day now, sent by Laird Allen, the ally of our Laird Galbraith. Ballentine hasnae enough men tae defeat Laird Allen and Laird Galbraith’s forces together. Folks say the whole thing will blow over in a few weeks.”

“I see. Well, that’s unfortunate. We cannae wait about that long, can we, Wife?” he looked down at Annie.

“Nay, and ’tis very upsettin’, comin’ all this way for naethin’. I dae hope me poor sister’s all right in there. Three weeks is a long time tae be shut up like that,” she said, doing a very convincing job of sounding worried.

“Aye, it is. I dinnae wantae worry ye, Missus, but nae a morsel of food has gone in or out the place the whole time,” the barman answered, taking two empty tankards from the man waiting next to Ewan and starting to refill them with ale as he carried on chatting.

“I wouldnae be too sure of that,” Ewan said, pausing to take a deep draught of ale before he went on. “While we were there, we heard two of the soldiers talkin’ of a secret entrance tae the castle.”

“Did ye now?” The man flicked a glance at him and gave a small smile. “Ach, that’s just stories,” he said dismissively, handing the other customer his refilled tankards. He looked back at Ewan and added, “Ye must excuse me, I’ve other customers tae serve.”

“Aye, nice talkin’ tae ye,” Ewan said as the man moved off down the bar.

He and Annie stood at the bar for a little while until two seats at a table occupied by another couple became vacant. “Come on,” Ewan said, taking Annie’s arm once more and moving rapidly towards the table before anyone else could nab the seats.

“Are these seats taken?” he asked the couple politely.

The man shook his head. “Nay, help yersel’s,” he replied, raising his tankard in a half salute. He was a plump, clean-shaven fellow of about forty in a well-made coat. His double chin bulged over the collar of his neckcloth, giving him the air of an overweight otter. A prosperous farmer maybe, Ewan guessed.

“Thank ye kindly, Sir,” he replied with a slight bow. “A good evenin’ tae ye both.” He bestowed his most charming smile on the man’s wife, a thin woman with small, piercing gray eyes, a mass of red hair, and the red nose of a drinker. She smiled up at Ewan with thin, chapped lips, revealing two missing front teeth. He maintained his

smile while shuddering inwardly at the frank admiration in her look.

He turned to Annie. “Annie, will ye sit down and take a rest, dear?” he asked, every inch the concerned husband as he pulled out a chair.

“Aye, sit yersel’s down and get comfy,” the woman said in a scratchy voice, her beady eyes resting unsettlingly on him.

“Thank ye, Husband, I will.” Annie smiled shyly at their new companions as she slipped into her seat and arranged her cloak around her. He noticed she still had not lowered her hood. He thought it a little odd since it was by no means cold in the bar. He was pleased when she addressed their companions in a friendly manner. “Good evenin’. Thank ye fer lettin’ us sit down. We’ve done so much travelin’ these last few days, I feel quite worn out.”

Good lass , Ewan thought, for it was a brilliant opener to introducing themselves and relate their fabricated story, in order to elicit the information he sought.

“There’s always been rumors of secret passages and such like under the castle, but that’s true of all those sorts of places,” said the man presently, now drinking the ale Ewan had supplied. His name was Bob Shilling, and he owned and ran a chandlery store in the next town with his wife Joyce. The couple were in Killicraigie visiting Joyce’s ailing mother.

“Aye, that’s very true, Bob,” Joyce piped up in her scratchy voice, her mass of hair bobbing as if it might fall off her head as she nodded. “But I grew up around here, and before I met Bob and married him, I used tae work at the castle as a laundry maid.”

Ewan’s ears perked up at that. He leaned his elbow on the table and gave her his best smile. “Is that so, Joyce? So, ye have firsthand knowledge of the place. How

interestin’.”

Joyce’s small eyes gleamed as she returned his smile and leaned forward, giving him a good view of the tops of a pair of scrawny, freckled breasts. He tried not to look. “Aye, I dae. And I can tell ye for sure, there’s a whole nest of—oh!”

“Och, I’m so sorry,” Annie cried apologetically, having accidentally knocked her glass of wine over Joyce’s skirt. “How clumsy of me! Here, come tae the bar with me, and I’ll sponge that off fer ye before it stains.”

“Aye, let’s go. This is a new dress, and I dinnae want it ruined,” Joyce said, clearly annoyed. The two women hurried away to the bar.

Damn! We were just gettin’ somewhere then, Ewan thought, disappointed. He chatted idly to Bob as they waited for the women to return. He was anxious to hear what Joyce had to say. But when they came back, he was disappointed again. For as Joyce took her seat, with a big damp patch on the front of her skirt, Annie looked at him beseechingly and said, “Husband, I dinnae feel so good in here. D’ye think we could go? I need some fresh air.” She looked pale, and there was a fine sheen of perspiration on her forehead.

With his disappointment overtaken by real concern for her, he immediately stood up. They hurriedly bid the Shillings good night and wished them well for their stay. Then Ewan took Annie’s arm and escorted her out of the inn.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Unfortunately, as he held the door open for her and she stepped out into the courtyard, she bumped into a fellow coming in. They collided forcefully, and the man's hat fell to the floor.

“Hey, watch where ye're goin', ye clumsy wench,” the man snarled at her, clearly deep in his cups. “Ye'll pick that up fer me,” he added, jutting his unshaven, prominent chin at the hat.

Fury gripped Ewan as Annie, her hand to her head, shrank away from the man. He stepped between them. “It was an accident, ye fool. Are ye nae man enough tae pick yer hat up yersel' and apologize tae the lady?” he growled menacingly at the fellow.

The man, clearly so drunk he took no account of the fact that Ewan towered over him, glared up malevolently from beneath unruly eyebrows. “She's a clumsy drab. She should be more careful of where she's a bloody goin',” he sneered.

Ewan loomed over him., his ire rising. “Ye'll apologize tae me wife this instant,” he said through clenched teeth, his fists flexing at his sides, “or I'll ram that hat down yer throat until ye choke on it.”

“Hah! I'd like tae see ye try, ye great lanky poltroon. That wife of yers, she's a naught but a drunken who?—”

He did not finish his sentence because Ewan's fist landed square in the middle of his face. The man flew backwards several yards before landing on his back and skidding

across the cobbles. He moaned horribly, clutching his nose as blood gushed from between his fingers. Disgusted, Ewan bent down and picked up the hat. He threw it at the man. “Here, ye can soak up the blood with that, ye surly bastard. Let that be a lesson tae ye.”

He turned to Annie, worried for her. “Are ye all right, Annie?” He asked solicitously. Pushing back her hood he was shocked to see how pale she was. She seemed dazed and was holding one hand pressed to her forehead. He took hold of her hand and gently removed it. When he saw the large, bloody gash beneath, which was already going back and blue as it swelled into an egg-shaped bump near her hairline, he gasped in shock.

“I bumped me head on the door,” she mumbled, her eyes tearing up and her mouth turning down. All Ewan’s protective instincts rose up inside him.

“Och, ye poor thing! I’m takin’ ye tae see a healer right away,” he declared, pulling off his neckcloth and pressing it to the wound, which was dripping blood.

“Nay, there’s nae need fer that,” she protested mildly, holding the neckcloth to the wound and wincing as she shook her head. “Let’s just go back tae the camp.”

“Dinnae argue with me,” he told her with gentle firmness. “That wound needs cleanin’ up before it gets infected, and ye could have a concussion. We’re goin’ tae find a healer this minute.”

“Ye’re makin’ a fuss over naethin’,” she murmured. “I’ll be all right in a minute or two.” But then she swayed on her feet and leaned against him, clearly more shaken than she was willing to admit. He put his arm around her to steady her and then cast around the courtyard for help.

He spotted the young groom from before loitering by the corner of the building and

called him over. "Where's the nearest healer, lad?" he asked. The boy thought for a moment and then reeled off some directions to the nearby house of a healer named Ella Moore. Ewan thanked him and said, "Now, bring me horse around in a hurry, will ye?"

The boy ran off and returned after a few minutes leading the stallion. "Good lad," Ewan told him, giving him a silver sixpence.

The boy's face lit up. "Thanks, Mister!" he shouted, pocketing the coin before running off to help some new arrivals. Without further ado, Ewan picked Annie up.

"What are ye doin'?" she asked, clearly taken by surprise, her arms going around his neck.

"Hold on tight," he answered before he swung himself up into the saddle with his free arm and then settled her in front of him, between his thighs. "Are ye comfortable?" he asked her.

"Hmm, though me head's achin' somethin' awful," she replied, her soft warm weight resting pleasantly against his chest.

"Aye, I'm nae surprised. That's a nasty bump," he replied, truly worried for her. He could not bear the thought of anything bad happening to her. "The quicker we get tae the healer's house the better. She'll give ye somethin' tae help with the pain."

Taking up the reins, he pressed his heels into the horse's flanks and clicked his tongue. Ewan made sure his arms enclosed Annie on both sides, anxious she should be in no danger of falling as he set off down the lanes, following the directions the boy had given him to the house of the healer Ella Moore.

Isla nestled against Ewan's chest, holding his neckcloth to her wound, her head

splitting. Aside from the pain, she could hardly believe how badly the evening was turning out for her. The first ordeal had been having to go into the inn with him. She was well known in the outlying villages within a few miles of the castle, and the whole time they had been in there she had been terrified someone would recognize her as the sister of Laird Galbraith. She had been grateful for the smelly old cloak then and had made sure to keep the hood up all the time despite the heat inside the bar, to hide her face and particularly her hair.

It had been somewhat of a relief when they sat down and discovered the Shillings were not local. However, while they were talking to the couple, she still had not dared to let down her hood, even though the pair had looked at her strangely. But panic had set in when Joyce announced she had worked at the castle. There had been no doubt in Isla's mind that Joyce had been about to tell Ewan of the underground tunnels below the stronghold, confirming his belief there was a secret entrance.

She had done the only thing she could think of to prevent it, causing a distraction by "accidentally" upsetting her drink all over the woman's dress at the crucial moment. Joyce had been very annoyed with her, she knew, and had been quite sharp with her at the bar. Isla had repeatedly apologized and done her best to clean the wine stains from Joyce's skirt. But she had taken no real notice, being preoccupied with what would happen when they returned to the table.

Ewan was not going to give up, and he was bound to ask Joyce to resume what she had been saying before the little accident that had interrupted her. In moments, Ewan would have had the confirmation he was searching for, that the underground tunnels existed. It would have been a disaster for Gregory and everyone else imprisoned in the castle! Isla could not allow it to happen. The only recourse was to feign illness and hope she could persuade him to give up their mission, at least for the time being, and leave the inn.

So, that was what she had done, and it had worked. But then the idiotic drunken man

had barged into her in the doorway and caused her to injure herself. All she had wished for was to get back to the camp. Now, at Ewan's insistence, she was on her way to the healer's house. Ella Moore, whom Isla had known since childhood and just happened to be one of her best friends.

As a result, fresh disaster loomed, one that threatened to expose her and have God-only-knew what dreadful consequences for Gregory and their entire clan. As they drew nearer to Ella's cottage, cold dread settled in her belly like a lead weight. It would only take one word from Ella to reveal to Ewan who she really was. Her mind was working overtime, trying to figure out a way to warn Ella so she would not give her away.

They arrived at the cottage all too soon, and Isla was further dismayed to see light spilling out through the windows, showing that her friend was at home. Her head was throbbing as Ewan carefully lifted her down from the saddle, and she still had no idea how she was going to navigate the situation. Ewan kept his arm around her as he helped her to the door. He hammered on it, with Isla's heart pounding to match every echoing thud. "Open up! There's an emergency out here," he shouted urgently.

Isla heard movement inside and prepared herself for catastrophe, hurriedly pulling her hood lower over her face and holding Ewan's neckcloth in place over her wound—her only protection from exposure. She dared only peep out from under when the door opened, and her friend's short, curvaceous figure appeared in the brightly lit doorway.

"An emergency, ye say?" Ella's familiar soft, lilting voice said, full of concern. She had clearly been busy because the sleeves of her dark green gown were rolled up, her russet hair was tied up with a checkered kerchief, and there was a smudge of something dark on her chin.

"Aye, this lady's been injured in an accident, and she needs yer help at once," Ewan

explained.

Ella opened the door wider and stood aside. “Och, the poor thing! Bring her in right away and let me see what I can dae tae help her.”

Ewan helped Isla over the threshold into the warm, cozy main room of the cottage which was so familiar to her. She had often spent hours there with her friend, sharing tea and cakes along with confidences before the fireside. “Will ye take a seat by the fire, sir, while I examine the patient?” Ella invited Ewan, gently taking hold of Isla’s hand and leading her to the other side of the room, to the couch where she carried out her examinations and treatments.

“Aye, thank ye, I will. She has a nasty wound on her head,” he replied, going to sit in the same armchair by the hearth which Isla usually occupied during her visits. He briefly explained what had happened at the inn.

“Och, that sounds nasty. Are ye in a lot of pain, m’dear?” Ella inquired solicitously, gesturing for Isla to sit on the couch.

“Mmm,” Isla replied, perching on the edge, terrified what was going to happen when Ella recognized her.

“Will ye take down yer hood fer me, so I can see the wound?” the healer asked, peering under the hood.

Isla nodded, knowing the next few seconds would be crucial. She slowly folded back the hood, and as she did so, she put a finger to her lips. “Ye dinnae ken me,” she murmured as quietly as she could, praying Ewan would not hear her.

“What was that, dearie? I couldnae hear ye properly,” Ella said, bending forward. Isla seized her friend by the wrist and pulled her closer, so she could whisper in her ear.

“Ella, ye must pretend ye dinnae ken me, that ye’ve never met me.”

Ella jumped and pulled back a little way, her eyes round as she stared at Isla, who now took down her hood, keeping her finger on her lips and trying to warn Ella with her eyes. It seemed to work, for Ella did not cry out a cheery greeting, as Isla feared she would. In fact, much to Isla’s relief, her friend seemed to catch on quickly. She glanced over at Ewan, then shot Isla a questioning look. Isla shrugged helplessly.

Then, Ella said, “Well, now, let me have a look at this wound of yers, eh? By the sound of things ye must have a nasty bump.” She leaned close and whispered, “What the hell is goin’ on? I thought ye were in the castle?” Then she said more loudly, “That’s it, dearie, just remove the cloth so I can have a good look at it.” She took the blood-soaked neckcloth from Isla’s hand and placed it on the nearby table, keeping her eyes on Isla all the time.

“Och, good grief, that’s deep, and ye have a lump the size of a hen’s egg! I need tae clean that up right away before infection sets in. Wait there, dear, I’ll get some hot water. After that, I’ll give ye somethin’ fer the pain.”

“Thank ye,” Isla said, her heart rate returning to something approaching normal as her fear of exposure subsided. She squeezed Ella’s hand gratefully and gave her a small smile of gratitude.

Ella took a clean bowl from one of the many shelves lining the cottage walls and went to the fireplace. She filled it from a steaming kettle that was suspended over the fire. Isla almost laughed to see the way she deliberately fussed about, making Ewan move his legs, then his chair, until finally, he stood up and said, “I think I’ll go fer a wee walk outside while ye tend tae her.”

“Aye, that would likely be best,” Ella told him sweetly as he made for the door. “I’ll call ye as soon as we’re done.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Once he shut the door behind him, Ella hurried over to Isla and set the bowl of hot water down on the table. The two friends embraced warmly. When they parted, Ella stood back and put her hands gently on her friend's shoulders, scrutinizing her face. "I've been worried sick about ye, Isla," she said. "I thought ye were locked up in the siege with everyone else. I almost lost me mind when I saw it was ye under that hood. What the hell are ye up tae? And who's that braw fella who brought ye here?"

"'Tis Laird Ballentine," Isla answered.

"Ewan Ballentine? The very same enemy laird who's layin' siege tae the castle right now?" Ella whispered, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"Aye, that's him," Isla replied, supposing it must sound mad to her friend. So, to make things clearer, while Ella tended to her injury, she quickly explained everything that had happened since she decided to leave the castle in order to assassinate him.

Ella's eyebrows rose higher with every word. "What! Are ye mad? Ye mean tae say ye've been livin' in the enemy army camp and sharin' a tent with Ewan bloody Ballentine this whole time?"

"That wasnae me original plan, but aye. After I tried tae kill him, Ewan gave me a choice. He could execute me then and there as a spy, give me tae his men, or stay as his captive so that I could not threaten his life again."

"Nae much of a choice," Ella replied as she finished cleaning Isla's wound. "But I

havetae say, Isla, ye dinnae seem much of a captive. And Ballentine seems genuinely worried about ye, enough tae bring ye here anyway. I was always told he's a cold, ruthless man."

"Aye, I thought that too. And he can be like that. I mean, he's a laird." She struggled to find a way to articulate for her friend her relationship with Ewan. "'Tis a strange situation, tae be sure. But now I've spent so much time with him, I've seen other sides tae him." She could not quite keep her affection for him out of her voice. "He's nae a bad man, Ella."

Ella, who was gently applying salve to Isla's wound, picked up on it immediately. "Isla, ye sound like ye're soft on the man."

"I'm nae soft on him!" Isla protested, and she was about to continue with her denial when she suddenly stopped. "I'm so confused. I dinnae ken what I feel any more. I'm loyal tae Gregory, tae our clan, of course, I am. That was why I left the castle and set out tae kill Ewan in the first place. I wanted tae prevent Gregory from havin' tae fight in this war anymore. I wanted tae keep him safe, and I thought I could do that by killing Ewan."

"But now I see Ewan wasnae the cause of this war at all, it was Laird Allan. He stole Ewan's land and then made out it was Ewan who stole it from him. He's the criminal, but somehow, he convinced Gregory tae side with him. Gregory's been expectin' Allan tae send troops to help him fight off Ewan's army, but he's nae sent a single one, and the siege has been goin' on fer over three weeks now! Ewan says Allan's just bidin' his time, waitin' 'til both our armies are weak from fighting each other, and then he's gonnae take over both clans."

"What?!" Ella cried, pausing in her work, staring round-eyed at Isla.

Isla nodded. "Aye, and I believe him. He's a good man, Ella, an honorable man. He

could have killed me, but he let me live instead because his honor wouldnae let him murder a woman. He's lied tae his men fer me, protected me, let me become part of his army. He's been kind tae me. He tried tae get Gregory tae make peace with him, but me braither refused tae listen tae the truth about Allan. Ewan was very disappointed. But he still wanted tae avoid bloodshed, and that's why he thought of the siege, as a way of savin' lives," Isla said with a passion that surprised her.

"All right, calm down, I believe ye. He does seem like a good man and he's awful braw," Ella replied, putting the lid carefully back on the pot of salve and setting it aside.

Despite her throbbing head, Isla smiled and said musingly, "Aye, he is, isnae he? Very braw. And so clever too. He sees the way ahead so clearly. That's the trouble. He's dangerous. He thinks of things I never would."

Ella chuckled. "Hmm, like I said, sounds like yer soft on him."

"Is it so obvious? I cannae help it, Ella! I didnae mean tae, but I've grown so fond of him. But me loyalties are torn in two the whole time. I feel like I'm betrayin' Gregory and me clan by sympathizing with Ewan's cause. But Ewan's cause is just! He's nae the warmonger or thief everyone's been led tae think he is. Ach, 'tis all so wrong!" She threw up her hands, half in despair, half in confusion.

"I dinnae blame ye fer bein' confused. This is a very difficult situation ye find yersel' in, I understand that. 'Tis a unique situation that ye've made the best of so far. Ewan clearly thinks a lot of ye."

"D'ye think so?" Isla's heart warmed at the notion.

"Aye, I dae. But there's nae book of instructions tellin' ye what tae dae," Ella pointed out.

“So, what should I dae, Ella? Tell me, please. I’ve had nay one tae confide in, and I really need yer advice,” Isla replied earnestly.

“Ye’ve a good heart, Isla. As yer friend, all I can tell ye tae dae is tae trust it.” Ella inspected her handiwork and brushed Isla hair back into place with gentle fingers. “Right, that’s all good. I’ll give ye some salve, some willow-bark tea fer the pain, and some extra dressin’s tae take back with ye. Keep the wound nice and clean, and with luck, ye’ll only have a small scar. It’ll add tae yer mystique,” she added with a playful wink.

Isla batted at Ella’s arm. “Ye goose! What mystique? Och, I suppose I dae have a wee bit when I’m disguised as Harris and everyone in the camp thinks I’m a lad.” They chuckled over that for a few moments but then grew serious again. “Ye should hear me pretend tae speak like a lad.”

Ella made up some willow-bark tea and had Isla drink a cup immediately to help ease her headache. While they were talking quietly, there was a gentle tap on the door. It opened a crack, and Ewan’s head appeared around the edge. “Are ye done yet?” he asked, unusually hesitant.

“Come in, come in. Aye, she’s done. She’ll be good as new after a week or so,” Ella declared, smiling warmly at him as he stepped inside.

“D’ye think there’s a chance she could have a concussion?” he asked, going over to them and peering at Isla. Her heart melted when she saw the worry in his eyes.

“‘Tis impossible tae say. I advise ye tae keep her awake fer as long as ye can tonight. And when she falls asleep, try wakin’ her up every couple of hours, just tae make sure. If she seems feverish, or gets sick and dizzy, or her eyes seem dull, send fer me at once.”

The broad smile of relief that broke out on Ewan's face had Isla's heart fluttering in her chest. She felt a great wave of affection flow from her heart towards him. "Thank ye, thank ye so much. I was very worried about her," he said, looking into Isla's eyes and squeezing her hand. She found herself squeezing it back and beaming at him.

Soon after that, they took their leave of Ella, with Isla bidding her friend a polite, grateful goodbye fitting for two people who had only just met. "I'll come back and see ye as soon as I can," she whispered to her friend when Ewan stepped away to untie the horse and helped her up into the saddle once more.

Her headache was starting to recede, so she simply gave in to the tiredness that overcame her, letting herself loll against his warm, broad chest as they rode back. She forgot all their troubles and dozed off, lulled by the steady beating of his heart beneath his coat and the rhythmic clopping of the horse's hooves.

"Annie, Annie, wake up." The deep, gentle voice broke into her sleep.

"Hmm, what is it? Is it mornin'?" she murmured, disoriented.

A slow, rumbling chuckle resonated in her ear. "Nay."

She opened her eyes, surprised to find it was still nighttime and the moon was shining high above. She looked up at Ewan and realized where she was.

"We're halfway back tae the camp," he said, his eyes soft as he gazed down on her. "Ye need tae change out of yer dress and back intae Harris's clothes."

"Och, aye, I remember," she murmured, stirring in his arms, trying to sit up between the hard, muscular thighs enclosing her. He slid from the saddle and lifted her down, his hands easily spanning her waist. She put her hands on his forearms to steady herself, saying, "Thank ye. And thank ye for takin' me tae see the healer too. I'm glad

ye did. Me headache's almost gone now."

"I'm pleased tae hear it. She was very kind, and I'm glad ye're feelin' better. Now, can ye remember where ye hid yer clothes?"

She scrunched up her face, trying to think. "I'm nae sure."

"Shall I come with ye?"

"Would ye mind? I think I put them at the base of a big old oak, among the roots."

"Well, this is the wee path ye took intae the trees. Did ye go far in?"

She shook her head and instantly regretted it. "Nay, about ten feet maybe, straight ahead on the path."

"Come on, then. Let's go look for them." He started off down the narrow track. Acting on instinct, Isla caught hold of his hand as she followed him into the trees. It felt good when his large, warm palm closed around hers. They followed the track for a short way and soon came to a small clearing, in the middle of which was the oak tree.

"Here it is," Isla said, going to gather the bundle of clothing she had concealed there earlier. However, she felt so weary she could hardly get out of the gown and into Harris' garb.

"D'ye need some help with that?" Ewan asked after watching her fumble with the front lacing for a few moments.

"Aye, I think that willow-bark tea has made me sleepy," she replied, yawning and going to stand in front of him. She waited docilely while he undid the fastenings for

her. When they were undone, she held his hand again while he helped her step out of the gown. Feeling faintly ridiculous in nothing but her shift, woolen stockings, and boots, she laughed.

“What’s funny?” he asked, patiently holding her trousers out for her to put her legs in, like a parent dressing a child. She leaned a hand on his shoulder for balance, enjoying the tingling sensation his gentle touches left in their wake.

“I feel a bit ridiculous, standing here in me shift and naethin’ else but me stockin’s and boots.”

“Ye dinnae look at all ridiculous,” he told her, giving her one of the crooked smiles she had grown so used to and which always made her feel funny inside. He pulled up the trousers and fastened them at her waist. “Ye look... sweet, with yer plait and that wee bandage on yer head.”

She giggled. “Sweet?!” He held up her waistcoat, and she turned around to shrug into it.

“Aye, sweet little Annie, me would-be assassin. What would I dae without ye, eh?”

Before she could stop herself she said, “Luckily, ye dinnae havetae find out.”

There was a strange silence as Ewan assisted her into her uniform coat, tied her kerchief around her neck, and placed her old woolen cap on her head. Taking care not to hurt her, he pulled it down low and carefully tucked her thick golden plait out of sight.

“There. That’ll dae,” he said, patting her gently on the head.

Isla was genuinely touched by his tender ministrations. “Thank ye, Ewan. Ye’ve

taken care of me so well tonight, I'm grateful. I'm sorry I've been such a nuisance, and ye didnae get the information ye wanted."

"Who said I didnae?" he asked as he led her back along the track to the lane, to where the horse was nibbling on the grassy verge.

The closeness Isla had felt with him seconds ago evaporated, and she was instantly alert. "But I was with ye the whole time." Frowning with worry, her head starting to ache again, she let him pull her up into the saddle front of him.

"Sometimes 'tis the things folks dinnae say that tell ye what ye wantae ken," he said enigmatically.

All the way back to the camp, she was silent, wondering what on earth he meant by that, and whatever it was, what the consequences might be for Gregory and everyone else who was being held captive in the castle.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was not very late when they reached the camp. The men were sitting around their firepits, talking, honing their weapons, playing cards, jacks, and knuckle bones. Music from a fiddle drifted to them on the gentle night breeze, along with the smell of cooking and the distinctive aroma of one-hundred-and-fifty men who were reluctant bathers.

Annie seemed to have woken up a bit as they walked back to the tent, though her face was still drawn and pale. She had been very quiet since changing back in the woods, but he put it down to the blow to her head and the effects of the willow bark tea. He was surprised by how frightened he had been for her when she was hurt, and how relieved he had been when the healer said she would be fine. When he had cradled her between his thighs on the way to the healer's cottage, it was the first time he had admitted to himself how much he was starting to care for her.

Which he knew was crazy, because he still did not know who she really was, or even if she was secretly planning to try to kill him again. However, that seemed to matter less and less with each moment they spent together. Helping her to change in the woods had been a strangely tender moment for him. Her absolute trust in him not to hurt her was like a drug to him that he seemed to thrive on and craved more of. It was completely different to the lust he had felt for her at the pond. That was centered in his groin, while the tenderness, the urge to care for her and protect her came directly from his heart.

"Get some rest," he told her as they entered the tent. "If ye think ye'll be all right alone fer a wee while, I'd like tae go and have a word with Colin. But I'll be back in

an hour or so tae check on ye. Will that be all right?”

“Aye, I feel all right, but I’m awful hungry. I think I’ll have somethin’ tae eat and then rest until ye come back,” she said.

“I’ll see ye in a wee while then,” he said, leaving the tent to go see Colin. He was eager to find out from his captain if any information had come in to confirm the existence of a secret way into the castle, though he was now pretty much convinced there was. He had noticed the way the barman in the inn had clammed up when he asked about it, which made him suspicious that the man was hiding something.

Then there was Joyce Shilling, who had worked at the castle. He was sure she had been about to confirm there was another way in when Annie had spilled the wine on her dress. That had been very unfortunate. But even without her confirmation, his sixth sense told him the hidden entrance was there somewhere, and he intended to find it.

There was also the matter of the whereabouts of Galbraith’s missing sister. He wanted to know if the scouts sent to search for her had found her. As all those thoughts were buzzing in his mind, he made his way to Colin’s tent.

“Ah, ye’re back,” the captain said when Ewan looked inside. Colin was sitting at the flimsy table and, judging by the jug of ale and flask of whisky before him, was enjoying a relaxing drink. “Before ye say anythin’, I’m off duty,” the captain informed Ewan, raising a dram in mock salute before downing it in one swallow.

“Me too, man. Pour me a dram, will ye? I could dae with a drink,” Ewan said, taking the vacant chair opposite his friend. Colin obliged, and also poured them a foaming beaker of ale each.

“So, what’s been happenin’ while I’ve been gone? Any news?” he asked his second

in command.

“Nay, naethin’ tae write home about, and nae a squeak about Galbraith’s sister. But the men will be settin’ off soon in search of this supposed secret entrance tae the castle, so that might prove worthwhile’.”

“Aye, I’m lookin’ forward tae seein’ if they find anythin’,” Ewan said, swallowing his dram and pouring himself another.

“How did ye get on in the village? Did ye find out anythin’?” Colin asked.

Ewan began to tell him what had happened that evening. As the pair discussed things, they continued drinking steadily. Ewan found himself enjoying the brief respite from his responsibilities. However, even though he felt quite drunk, when he imagined roughly an hour and a half might have passed, he remembered he had to go and check on Annie.

He hauled himself to his feet. “I must get back tae see if she’s all right,” he muttered.

“What?” Colin said. “Who’s she ?” He suddenly grinned. “Ye havenae brought a wee bedmate back from the village fer the night, have ye, Ewan?”

“Ach, bloody hell! Damn that whisky,” Ewan exclaimed, not so drunk as to not realize he had made a serious slip up.

“Ye have, haven’t ye?” Colin asked, laughing.

Ewan raked his hands through his hair as he looked at his friend, the man he trusted with his life and felt terrible about lying to. He made a decision. “Ach, I might as well tell ye. But ye must swear nae tae tell a soul,” he said.

“Why? What is it?” the captain asked, his brow wrinkling with curiosity.

“Swear on yer life.”

“Fer God’s sake man, I swear!”

“All right. ’Tis Harris,” Ewan began and stopped, not quite knowing how to go on.

“What about Harris?”

“Ye all think he’s a lad.”

Colin’s face creased up even further, in obvious bewilderment. “What are ye goin’ on about, man?.”

Ewan leaned his palms on the table and shook his head. “Nay, ye’re wrong. He’s nae a lad. He’s a lassie, and her name is Annie Dean.”

After a moment’s pause, Colin burst in to laughter. “That’s a good, one, Ewan. Harris, a lassie! Pull the other one, man. Ye’ve had too much of that whisky, I reckon, Ye’re ravin’.” He slapped his thigh in merry disbelief.

“’Tis true, I tell ye. Harris is just a disguise. Underneath that uniform, he’s a... she,” Ewan said more urgently, having enough wherewithal to keep his voice low lest they be overheard.

“Ye cannae be serious, Ewan,” Colin protested, his expression turning from mirth to alarmed incomprehension.

“I am bein’ bloody serious. D’ye think I’d make up somethin’ like that?” He sat down again and proceeded to tell his friend everything he had been keeping from him. He

told him about how he had been sleeping in his cot and been awoken by a noise and found himself about to be stabbed by an assassin, who, after a struggle, he had managed to overcome.

“And when I pulled off the assassin’s cap, ye can imagine me surprise when I discovered it was a woman!”

“Jaysus God Almighty!” Colin exclaimed under his breath, rubbing his face in disbelief. “D’ye nae understand the risk ye’ve been takin’, keepin’ her here in the camp?”

“Of course, I dae! I’m nae a complete fool,” Ewan hissed. “But what choice did I have?”

“Ye could have told me fer one! She tried tae kill ye. Who’s tae say she’s nae gonnae try it again?” He was so obviously shocked, Ewan felt guiltier than ever and doubted his own wisdom, not for the first time. But he was not about to put Annie in harm’s way.

“She hasnae so far. I threatened tae execute her or give her tae the men if she tried anythin’ again,” he hastened to explain as best he could despite his inebriation, conscious that Annie was back at the tent alone, and possibly with a concussion. “I’ve nae let her out of me sight, and I’ve kept her tied tae me at night, Colin. Ye’ve seen how she’s settled intae the camp. Naebody suspects. The men like her... I mean, Harris.”

“Well, have ye at least found out who sent her tae kill ye?”

“Nay, nae yet. She’ll nae tell me anythin’ more than that she’s a lass from a nearby village and her name is Annie Dean,” Ewan admitted.

“But we should be takin’ measures tae find out! She’s far too dangerous tae have runnin’ around the camp unchecked like this, Ewan, ye must see that,” Colin protested in a low voice.

“I’m handlin’ things, Colin, so dinnae fash yersel’. Trust me, will ye?”

“Seems like ye give me nay choice. I just cannae believe ye would keep somethin’ like this from me.”

“I had tae, I’m sorry. I kent what ye would dae if ye found out. Ye’d have killed her.”

“Aye, because she’s likely an enemy spy!”

“Ach, she’s nay spy.” Ewan wished he was as confident of that as he sounded.

“She’s likely been reportin’ back every move we make,” Colin whispered accusingly.

Ewan shook his head vehemently. “I told ye, she’s nae been out of me sight since she got here. She’s had nay chance tae go anywhere alone. And she daesnae seem interested in tryin’.”

Colin stared at him. “Ye’re foolin’ yersel’, Ewan. She arrives in the dead of night and tries tae murder ye in yer bed, and ye dinnae think she’s a spy? Have ye gone mad?”

Ewan was losing patience. He was drunk, and he was worried about Annie and wanted to get back to her. “I’m nae sayin’ I trust her, and I’m nae even certain that Annie is her name. But she’s willin’ tae fight fer us, and she’s done everythin’ I’ve told her tae dae. Are those the actions of a spy?”

“Besides, I’ve sworn tae protect her, and that’s what I’m gonnae keep on doin’ until this siege is over and matters between me and Allan and Galbraith are settled. That’s

all I've got tae say about it fer now."

"This is madness," Colin moaned, shaking his head. "Ye'll regret this, Ewan, I'm certain of it."

"That's me own affair. I'm keepin' a close eye on her, and I take responsibility fer anythin' that happens. Look, I've got tae go now, Colin. Ye swear ye'll keep this tae yersel'?"

"Ach, get out of me tent, ye madman," his captain told him, with an air of weary despair.

"Good man," Ewan replied, reassured, making for the exit.

"But if ye wind up dead, dinnae come runnin' tae me," the captain hissed after him as he left. The warning was so ridiculous, Ewan could not help laughing to himself. The cold air hit him as he stepped outside, and he suddenly felt the drink catch up with him. He felt well and truly hammered. The world began to spin as he made his way unsteadily back to the tent, his head full of Annie.

Isla's head had cleared thanks to the willow bark tea Ella had given her, and her injury was little more than a dull ache on her brow for the moment. In fact, it was her heart that was aching rather than her head.

Weary from the night's activities, she had undressed to her shirt and stockings and gotten into bed, keeping her cap on just for the moment in case anyone other than Ewan came in. She propped herself up against the pillow and, bathed in the warm glow of several candles, gave herself over to worrying about what would happen if Ewan and his men discovered the tunnels leading into the castle. If they succeeded, then once they got inside, those trapped in the castle would be like lambs to the slaughter, most of all Gregory!

Desperate to protect her brother, when Ewan left the tent to see Colin, she had toyed with the idea of sneaking out of the camp and into the castle before he returned, to warn Gregory of the imminent threat. But after a lot of thought, she had decided it would be too risky. She had no idea if Ewan would be gone five minutes or an hour or two. If he returned and she was gone, he would know she had been lying to him all along, that she was a spy, and she would never be able to return. For some reason she could not fathom, she was reluctant for that to happen.

Besides that, she knew she could easily get caught sneaking out of the camp and raise suspicions of her being an enemy spy. If that happened and she was revealed to be a woman, she did not think Ewan would be able to protect her from the consequences, even if he wished to.

She decided it would be better to try to get a message to Gregory somehow, to try to persuade him to avoid bloodshed by suing for peace with Ewan. She was pondering this when she was interrupted by Ewan stumbling into the tent.

“Annie, I’m back. I’m shorry I was sho long. I got tae talkin’. Are ye feelin’ all right?” he said, slurring his words, swaying unsteadily as he grinned at her.

“Ach, ye’re drunk,” she replied, surprised to see him in such a state.

“I’m nae drunk, I jusht had a few drinks,” he said, trying to pull off his boots off and almost falling over himself in the process. Isla had never seen him like that before—he was always so in control—and she could not help laughing. Her worries receded as she watched him struggling comically with his boots for a few moments before getting up and going to help him. She had no idea what she was in for.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Come on, sit down over her and let me take those off for ye,” she offered, stumbling a little herself when he put his arm around her shoulders and leaned heavily on her. Somehow, she got him into a chair, knelt in front of him, and managed to pull off his boots. “Ye stink of whisky,” she told him, turning up her nose as she placed the boots to one side and then looked up at him.

“D’ye nae like it?” he slurred, giving her one of his heart-melting, crooked smiles as he gazed at her. The intense look in his dark eyes sent little tingles of excitement racing through her veins. She felt her cheeks heating up and looked away.

“Hmm, I suppose it makes a change from the usual smell of horse,” she replied jokingly, doing her best to hide how he was making her feel. He guffawed loudly, and she could not help but join in with his laughter. She made to rise, but he stopped her.

“Nay, dinnae go, lass,” he said softly, laying one hand on her shoulder and slowly easing off her cap with the other. Her plait fell down over her shoulder, and to Isla’s surprise, he began gently stroking her hair.

“What are ye up tae, ye fool?” she asked a little nervously as tiny flames, invisible flames danced across her skin, tingling where he touched it.

“Ye have beautiful hair, Annie, the mosht beautiful hair I’ve ever sheen. Ye dinnae ken how much I’ve wanted tae touch it like this. ’Tis so shoft, like shilk,” he murmured.

Half kneeling at his feet, Isla found she could not move, she did not wish to move. Waves of pleasure coursed through her body, and she entered a trance-like state as he began unraveling her plait, loosening her hair from its bonds, and then combing his fingers through the golden lengths as he spread it over her shoulders until it flowed freely, almost touching the floor.

It was when he leaned forward a little and gazed at her so hungrily, she knew he was about to kiss her, that she snapped back to reality. While acknowledging her own growing desire for him, she knew it would be a bad mistake to give into it. So, half-reluctantly, she forced herself to push past his restraining hand and get to her feet.

She stood before him, arms akimbo. “Ye’re sweatin’. I’ll fetch a damp cloth tae wipe yer forehead, and then ye must get tae bed,” she said, eager to do something to distract him from his lascivious antics.

“Och, now she wants me in her bed, demands it even!”

“Wheesht, ye dummart,” she chided him, excited by his words yet unable to stop laughing.

“Ach, Annie, come back here. I was only gonnae give ye a wee kish,” he complained mildly, laughing too as he tried playfully to catch her arm. “D’ye nae want a wee kish?” He blew her a smacking one. “There’s one tae be goin’ on with.”

She smiled as she nimbly eluded him and went to fetch the cloth. “I dinnae want one that reeks of whisky,” she replied briskly, wondering if there was, as the old adage said, “truth in wine.”

“Oh? So, if I wasnae drunk, would ye kish me then?” he asked, wriggling his brows at her comically.

“But ye are drunk. Ye cannae even speak properly. Ye would nae ask me if ye were sober,” she replied over her shoulder from the washstand, drenching a clean cloth in cold water and wringing it out. She brought it back and stood by him, laying the folded cloth on his damp brow and holding it there for a few moments to cool him down.

“Maybe I wouldnae, but I might be thinkin’ about it,” he told her with a playful chuckle, gazing at her, his eyes dark, liquid pools in the flickering candlelight. “I think about it quite a lot.”

“That’s the whisky talkin’. Ye ken, ye’re gonnae regret sayin’ all this in the mornin’, and ye’ll have a hell of a sore head to boot,” she warned him, excitement nevertheless tightening her belly.

“I dinnae care about that. I only want tae tell ye how beautiful ye are and kish ye. Kiss ye, I mean. Is that so wrong?” Despite herself, she giggled when he snatched the cloth from her hand and threw it aside. Then, his arms went around her waist, and he pulled her in, hugging her tightly and laying his head on her belly. “Mmm, so soft and warm. ’Tis better than any pillow. I think I’ll go tae sleep right here.”

Isla laughed, and before she knew what she was doing, she found herself ruffling his hair, running her fingers gently through the dark locks, and stroking his head. He murmured softly, sounds of contentment, his breath coming hot through the homespun of her shirt on her belly, sending tremors through her.

His arms tightened about her, and she closed her eyes, her heart pounding as she cradled his head against her belly, overwhelmed by powerful feelings of affection and tenderness for him. Nothing she had ever felt before had prepared her for the way he made her feel. Wars and sieges and death and destruction seemed a world away. She suddenly knew she only wanted to hold him close like this always, to be at his side forever, this beautiful, clever, funny man... who was her mortal enemy.

When he started to snore softly, she shook herself from her daze and released herself gently from his hold. She patted his cheek. “Ewan wake up, come on, I’ll help ye tae bed.”

“Mmm? Och, there ye are, Annie. Where did ye go?” He ruffled his hair, looking adorably confused as he grinned up at her.

She had to smile as she brushed a stray lock from his clammy forehead. “Come on, ye fool, ye’re nearly asleep on yer feet. Ye need tae come and lie down properly.” She put her arms about him and tried to lift him out of the chair and onto his feet. She may as well have tried to lift his horse.

“Oof! Ach, ye’re heavy as lead,” she exclaimed, straining. “Help me, Ewan. Dinnae go tae sleep again, or I’ll havetae leave ye in the chair.” She patted his face again, her fingertips straying over his dark stubbly chin. Fleetinglly, she marveled at how it could be so soft and prickly at the same time.

“What?” He came round a little again and gazed up at her, his handsome face relaxed and boyish. It made her heart skip just to look at him. “I’m nae ashleep, I tell ye, I’m just restin’ me eyes,” he insisted.

She snorted with laughter. “Come on, I’ll help ye tae the bed.”

“Aye, all right woman. Hold yer horshes. Why, ye’re fairly draggin’ me tae the bed. Can ye nae keep yer hands off o’ me?” He heaved himself up and draped himself over her shoulders again. Isla supported him as best she could as they tottered over to the cot.

“Annie, Annie, lishen tae me now, I have sumfin’ very important tae tell ye,” he slurred.

Isla's ears pricked up. Could this be the piece of vital information she had been waiting for? Something vital that would save Gregory and the rest of their clan?

They got to the bed, and Ewan collapsed full-length upon it with a great sigh. "What is it ye have tae tell me that's so important?" Isla asked, holding her breath in anticipation as she helped him arrange his long limbs comfortably and plumped the pillow for him. She did not expect him to reach up and grab her and pull her down on top of him, pinning her whole body against his with his arms, their faces a hairbreadth apart.

"Ewan, what are ye doin'?" she cried, struggling to get loose. But her efforts were in vain because he merely hugged her closer.

"I'm givin' ye a cuddle. I've wanted tae give ye a cuddle fer ages, but, well, ye ken..." he replied sleepily, his deep voice resonating all through her.

"Well, now ye are. What was it that ye wanted tae tell me?" She still had hopes of hearing something useful before she persuaded him to release her.

"Hmm?"

"Ach, never mind!" She gave up asking, realizing she would get no sense out of him. A little exasperated, she wriggled and tried to free herself again, but it was no good. Drunk he may be, but he clearly had no intention of letting her go, and now he was nuzzling at her neck and stroking hair again, running his fingers through it, sending thrills chasing all over her.

"Ewan! Will ye stop that!" she protested, trying to get away from his questing lips for fear of what might happen if she did not.

He stopped and let his head fall back on the pillow, regarding her with dazed eyes.

She could smell the whisky sweet on his breath. “I’m sorry. I cannae help it, Annie. Ye smell so good,” he tightened his hold, “I’m gonnae hold ye next tae me like this all night long while I’m sleepin’.”

“But I can hardly breathe!” Suddenly, there was an infinitesimal decrease in the pressure of his hold, and she could breathe more easily. “Thank ye,” she said, taking in a lungful of air gratefully.

Just then, he opened his eyes and looked deeply into hers. “I havetae tell ye how beautiful ye are, Annie. Ye’re the most beautiful lassie I’ve ever laid eyes on. Ye have beautiful hair, and ye have beautiful eyes. Sometimes they’re the color of the sea, and when ye’re angry, they’re the color of a storm. And yer skin, aye, yer skin... I dinnae have words for that...” He trailed off, his dark eyes glittering in the candlelight, intent upon her.

“Annie, d’ye remember what happened at the pond?” he suddenly whispered close to her ear again. Isla stiffened, caught completely off-guard. A hot flush ran over her entire body as the embarrassing, yet tantalizing memory popped into her mind with shocking clarity.

“What about it?” she muttered, squirming inwardly, still deeply ashamed of her behavior that night. She trembled to think of why he had brought it up.

“D’ye ever think of it?” His voice was deep and thick in her ear, his warm breath tickling her, teasing her.

“Are ye nae tired? I’m tired,” she replied, flustered. She was afraid to admit she thought about it at least once, maybe two, and sometimes three times during the day, but especially during the nights spent crammed in the one-man cot next to him.

“I think of it, Annie. I think of it...often.”

She held her breath, unable to move or speak, lest the truth come bursting out. She felt once more the same strange tendrils of heat that had snaked between her legs and wound through her belly that night when he had held her naked body next to his in the moonlit waters of the pond. The same powerful urge to kiss him, to give into overwhelming physical desire gripped her. But this time, there was nowhere to escape to. Choking back a helpless sob, she fought it down, finally succeeding in getting control of herself again.

When she saw his eyes close and his head loll to one side, she slowly let out the breath she had been holding. When he started snoring softly again, she let relief flow through her like a cooling breeze. But though he appeared to be asleep, when she tried once more to extricate herself from his arms, there was no slackening in his grip on her.

She had to lift her head—practically the only part of her she could move—to look at him. She was about to try to rouse him and beg him to let her go or at least loosen his hold a little more. But when she saw his expression, her heart melted, and she stayed quiet, watching him. His eyes were closed, and he had a beatific smile on his face. In the shadow play of the candlelight, he was so heartbreakingly handsome, Isla could have wept.

With a sigh of surrender, she laid her head on his brawny shoulder, carefully avoiding putting pressure on her wound. She wound her arms around his neck, accustoming herself to the pleasing sensation of being pinned against his warm, powerful body while she waited for him to eventually fall more deeply asleep and relinquish his hold. After a time, lulled by his breathing and the steady beat of his heart against her ear, she fell into a doze.

The birds woke her at dawn with their choral twittering. Feeling wonderfully comfortable and secure, her former headache reduced to a bearable ache above her brow, she opened her eyes... and saw Ewan's face right next to hers. He appeared to

be fast asleep, his long, dark lashes fanned out below his eyes. She was amazed to find that she must have fallen asleep on top of him and lain like that all night, caught fast in his embrace.

For a while, she did not move except to lift her head and study him. With her eyes, she traced his strong, chiseled features one by one, admiring the way they came together in such a harmonious whole. Every aspect of his face was endlessly pleasing to her. She could not imagine she would ever get tired of looking at him.

The warm rush of affection... love? ... she had felt for him the night before, when he had been drunk and so vulnerable, declaring her beautiful and talking of their intimate encounter at the pond, seemed to have lodged in her heart. It manifested in concern for him. Although she had never been drunk herself, she had witnessed it in others many times, Gregory for one. She knew that when Ewan finally awoke, his head would be splitting, and he would feel like death. Unfathomably, she did not want him to suffer like that, and she immediately thought of Ella.

Aware that he usually woke up if she moved an inch, she relied upon the after effects of the whisky to keep him unconscious as she began stealthily extracting herself from his arms. It took some time, but she eventually managed it. When she at last stood on the floor, she had a scare when he stirred. Afraid to breathe—she wanted what she was about to do to be a surprise—she waited, motionless, until he turned over on his side and carried on sleeping.

With a small sigh, she quietly slid into Harris's guise, pulling on her trusty cap to hide her hair. Carrying her boots in her hand, she slipped silently from the tent. Outside, she paused to put them on, listening to the birdsong and looking at the sky as she shoved her stockinged feet into them. The sun was yet a hard line of lemon on the horizon, slowly expanding, its light tinting with gold the blazing banners of pink, peach, and blue painted across the heavens, sending the night fleeing. A beautiful day.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

W armed by that realization and her desire to save Ewan from unnecessary suffering, Isla set off across the camp to the open-air stables, noticing only a very few other early risers on her way. Even the small pack of dogs that had gradually made itself at home among the soldiers was still sleeping peacefully, it seemed. There was not a single bark to be heard.

But as she neared the open-air stables, she could hear the horses snuffling and snorting softly. She petted the beasts, rubbing their velvety noses as she passed by to fetch her mare. There was another reason for her early morning excursion which slotted neatly into her plans. She intended to ride to Ella's cottage and ask her friend for something to ease a bad hangover as well as speak with her again.

It had been wonderful to see Ella and confide in her all that had been happening since the siege started. It was almost a month now since she had seen or spoken to anyone familiar. To be able to see her dear friend, by pure chance, had made her injury worthwhile. She was just tightening the girth strap on her mare when a familiar voice came from behind her.

“And where d’ye think ye’re sneakin’ off tae at this hour?”

Colin. She noticed with curiosity that his voice had an unusually hard edge to it. She swung around to greet him with a smile. Over the last few weeks, they had formed a friendship, for they both loved horses. They often discussed their care and welfare when Harris helped out at the stables.

“Good mornin’ tae ye, Captain,” she said brightly, pleased to see him. But when she saw his expression, she realized he was perhaps not quite so pleased to see her. “Is anythin’ wrong?” she asked, puzzled by his frown. He came closer. She smelled whisky on him, and some things became suddenly clearer. It was obvious it was Colin with whom Ewan had been drinking the night before. “What’s up? D’ye have a headache?” she asked teasingly.

He did not smile as she expected him too. “I asked ye where ye’re goin’,” he repeated, his shrewd gaze sweeping over her face as if searching for something.

“Tae see the healer,” she replied, frowning in puzzlement, supposing he had gotten out of the wrong side of the bed with a bad hangover. She could not think of any way she could have offended him. “She lives in a village nae far from here. I want her tae give me somethin’ fer Ewan. He’s gonnae feel awful when he wakes up. He must have drunk quite a lot of whisky last night.”

He did not respond to that. He only said, “Ye cannae be trusted tae go alone. I’ll come with ye,” he said, still scrutinizing her face.

Canna be trusted? But why? Not knowing the answer, she shrugged. “Aye, please dae. I’ll be glad of the company,” she told him honestly and turned away to continue securing the saddle. A short while later, they rode out of the camp together, heading for Ella’s cottage.

It was pleasant ride in the daylight and one that was very familiar to Isla. She attempted to talk to Colin as normal, but he was not very forthcoming. “Ye seem very sure of where we’re goin’,” he said at one point, sounding suspicious again.

“I-er-I remember the way from last night,” she lied. She had already told him what had happened at the inn when she was injured, and that Ewan had taken her to the healer to be treated. Thankfully, he had not asked too many questions. They ended up

riding all the way to Ella's mostly in silence, which made Isla feel tense. She could not account for his change in demeanor from the day before. She was glad when they reined in their horses outside Ella's cottage.

Gray smoke was curling up from the chimney, so she was sure her friend was inside. "Will ye come in?" she asked, dismounting and slinging the reins around a fence post before going to knock at the door.

Colin slid from his saddle and stood looking around the neat vegetable garden with interest. "Nay, I'll wait out here. But dinnae be too long. I'm needed back at the camp."

"Aye, all right. I willnae be long." She knocked, and within a few moments, Ella came to the door. She looked surprised but pleased to see Isla again so soon. She was about to open her mouth when Isla shot her a warning look and said, "Good mornin' tae ye, Miss Moore. I'm sure ye didnae expect tae see me here again so soon, but I need yer help with somethin'."

Taking the hint, Ella looked over Isla's shoulder and took in Colin standing a short distance away. She nodded a silent greeting to him, which he returned, then looked at Isla with raised eyebrows.

"Where's the one from last night?" she whispered, holding the door wide and gesturing for Isla to enter.

"It's him I've come about," she explained. They stepped inside the cottage, and Ella shut the door behind them.

"What are ye doin' back here? Is yer head all right?" Ella asked as the pair hugged.

"Aye, 'tis fine, really. 'Tis just a bit achy and sore, but that tea ye gave me has eased

it.”

“Well, just make sure tae keep it nice and clean.”

“I will, Ella.” She eyed the half-eaten bowl of oatmeal on the table. “I’m sorry tae call so early. Did I interrupt yer breakfast?” she asked, feeling a little guilty.

“Dinnae fash yersel’, I’ll finish it later,” her friend told her with a smile. “I’m just glad tae see ye’re all right. My, it was certainly a surprise tae see ye last night. Now, will ye have some tea? I’ve just made some.”

Isla shook her head. “I’d love tae stay, but Colin out there insists he’s needed back at the camp, so I havenae got much time. I really only came tae ask ye fer somethin’ tae cure a bad hangover.”

“A bad hangover?” Ella laughed and said jokingly, “Who’s sufferin’ then? That braw fella who brought ye here last night?” She crossed to the crammed shelves on the opposite wall. They were lined with carefully labelled jars, flasks, and other containers full of dried herbs and potions. She reached for a particular jar.

“Aye, Ewan. When we got back to the camp last night, he went to see Colin and they must have got drunk together.” While Ella put up a mixture for her, she explained all about Ewan’s drunken antics and how he had told her she was beautiful.

Ella found it all hilarious. She giggled as she opened the jar and began measuring out a generous amount of an herbal mixture into a small square of paper. “So, he wanted tae kiss ye, kept tellin’ ye ye’re beautiful, and made ye sleep on top of him like that all night without lettin’ ye go?”

“Aye. It sounds funny now but it wasnae funny at the time,” Isla said and found herself joining in her friend’s laughter. “But I got used tae it after a while.”

“Mmm, I’m sure ye did. I bet he’s nice and warm. I wouldnae mind sleepin’ on top of him mesel’. Are ye sure naethin’ else happened?” Ella asked teasingly, deftly wrapping the herbal cure into a square of paper and making a neat parcel of it.

“Nay, it did nae!” Isla exclaimed, finding she was not as shocked as she thought she should be.

“I believe ye.” Ella handed her the package. “Steep a couple of good spoonsful in boiling water fer ten minutes and have him drink it. I put extra in there fer him outside. He must be feelin’ rotten this mornin’.

“Aye, I expect he is.” Isla giggled, having not thought about Colin. Of course, it made sense that he would have a hangover. “Maybe that’s why he’s in such a funny mood.” She stashed the package in the inside pocket of her coat and squeezed Ella’s hands in gratitude. “Thank ye so much, Ella. I really appreciate yer help. I wish I could stay and talk tae ye some more, but I suppose I’d better go.”

“Aye, I wouldnae want ye tae get intae trouble with that braw man of yers, especially if he’s got a sore head.”

“He’s nae me man, he’s the enemy,” Isla declared without conviction, unable to stop herself from smiling as she thought of Ewan’s sleeping face on the pillow. “Ach, I hope he’s nae awake yet,” she murmured a little anxiously, loath to leave her friend but at the same time eager to get back to him. “He’ll be angry and worried if he finds me gone. I want tae get back before he wakes and surprise him with the cure.”

They walked over to the door. But before she could leave, Ella put her hands on Isla’s shoulders and said, “Ye say he’s the enemy, but from what ye’ve just told me about last night, it sounds tae me like he’s rather sweet on ye, Isla. When men are in their cups, they often speak truths they wouldnae dare tae say when they’re sober.”

Isla shrugged, rather disturbed by how much she wanted to believe it. “Maybe, but then again, they also talk a lot of nonsense.” They both laughed at that, but then she grew serious. “The thing is, Ella, I’m even more confused about how I’m supposed tae feel about him now. Last night, the lovely things he was sayin’ tae me, well, I wanted tae believe they were true. I think.... I think I might be... fallin’ fer him.”

Speaking it aloud to her trusted confidante felt like shedding a weight that had been pressing on her. However, at the same time, she was aware of the dreadful situation she was in because of her own actions. “But that’s so wrong. It would be terrible, impossible,” she added in a small voice, shaking her head and looking into Ella’s eyes, her heart aching.

“It would be the worst betrayal of all, fallin’ fer the man who’ll kill Gregory the first chance he gets. If that happened, I couldnae live with mesel’... But I dinnae want Ewan tae be hurt either. Ach, I never bargained fer any of this. I had nae idea I’d feel this way about him.”

Ella looked at her with sympathy in her eyes and folded her into a comforting embrace. “I ken ye feel bad about it, Isla, and I understand how confused ye must be. But the heart wants what the heart wants. I told ye much the same last night. Maybe all this is happenin’ fer a reason,” she told her.

“What d’ye mean?” Isla asked as they broke apart, puzzled by her friend’s suggestion.

“I mean that ye started all this because ye wanted tae stop the war and save Gregory from gettin’ hurt or killed. Maybe fate has played a hand here by lettin’ ye get so close tae Ewan. It could turn out tae be a good thing rather than a bad thing. If he cares fer ye, it’ll nae be easy fer him tae kill yer braither, will it? And ye said he told ye he’d prefer tae make peace with Gregory and avoid bloodshed. That’s why he laid siege tae the castle instead of attackin’ it. Is that nae true?”

“Aye, it is,” Isla had to agree, trying to comprehend what Ella was driving at.

“And it’ll be just the same fer Gregory. If ye are in love with Ewan and Gregory finds out about it, then it’ll nae be as easy fer him tae kill him either.”

“I suppose so,” Isla replied softly, weighing her friend’s words in her mind.

“Ye’re in a unique position here, Isla. Ye can affect how things turn out between yer clans. If ye care about them both, then ye must dae all ye can tae bring peace.”

Excitement surged through Isla’s veins as the notion sank in. “I hadnae thought of it like that before, but ye’re right. Maybe I can do somethin’ tae keep the both of them safe and end this war after all.” She hugged Ella tightly, filled with gratitude. “Thank ye fer everythin’, Ella. I must go now, but I’ll try tae come and see ye again as soon as I can. Keep yersel’ safe until we meet again.”

“I will, and ye dae the same, eh? Think on what I’ve said.” They kissed each other’s cheeks, and Isla hurried from the cottage.

“Ye took yer time,” Colin grumbled when he saw her.

“I’m sorry. She wanted tae check me wound again,” she fibbed. “Shall we go? I wantae get back before Ewan wakes up.”

Colin grunted his assent, and they mounted their horses. Within a few minutes, they were cantering back the way they had come and arrived at the camp in a surprisingly short time. After they had left their horses at the stables to be rubbed down and fed their breakfast, Isla turned to Colin and said, “I need tae go tae the kitchen wagon and heat some water. Come with me, I have somethin’ fer ye.”

“Aye, all right. What is it?” They walked over to the kitchen area, where the cooks’

assistants were already busy making breakfast for the men.

“I ken ye and Ewan were drinkin’ together last night, and if ye drank the same as he obviously did, then I ken ye must be feelin’ terrible this mornin’.” She pulled out the packet of herbs from her coat pocket and showed it to him.

Colin looked at it and frowned. “What’s it tae ye?”

“Naethin’. But I got these herbs from the healer tae help Ewan with his hangover, and she gave me some fer ye too.”

“Oh, did she?” His expression softened slightly. “That was kind of her.”

“Aye, she’s very kind. If ye dinnae mind waitin’ while I heat up some water, I’ll give ye some of the tea fer yersel’.”

He sat down heavily on a nearby barrel and folded his arms. She noticed how terribly weary he seemed. Under his ruddy complexion, he was pale, and there were dark rings beneath his slightly bloodshot eyes. “All right. I’ll wait.”

“Good.” She smiled at him and then set about asking one of the kitchen assistants for help in heating a kettle of water. When it was ready, she added some of the herbal cure and let it steep for a few minutes. Finally, she poured Colin a beakerful and handed it to him. “There, try that and see if it helps at all,” she told him. “I’ll havetae leave ye tae it. I need tae get back tae the tent and see if Ewan’s all right.”

Colin nodded as he blew on the hot tea. Isla said goodbye, then picked up the kettle and made her way back to the tent, hoping Ewan was still asleep and would be none the wiser about her having left at all.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ewan awoke feeling like the proverbial bear with the sore head. As he sat up and rubbed his eyes blearily, a horrible pain shot through his head. “Ach, bloody hangover,” he growled, ruing having drunk so much the night before. He looked about and was immediately annoyed to find Annie was not in the tent.

Where the hell is she?

Determined to find her, he forced himself to his feet and, pushing down the nausea washing to and fro in his belly, got into his clothes. He avoided making any sudden movements because of the agony it set off in his head. He splashed some cold water on his face and, feeling marginally more awake, prepared to leave the tent to look for her. But just as he lifted the tent flap, she appeared in front of him, beaming at him, and carrying a billycan.

“I was just comin’ tae look fer ye,” he told her, the relief of seeing her safe softening his frustration. He relaxed as she went to the table, set down the billycan on the table, and beckoned him over. Needing to sit down anyway, he joined her and slumped into a seat.

“I went out tae see the healer again before ye woke up. I kent ye’d be feelin’ terrible after last night, so I thought I’d ask her fer some herbs tae help with yer hangover,” she explained, pouring the brew from the can into a metal mug and handing it to him. “Drink this, and ye’ll feel better.” She sat down, smiling brightly at him.

“Thank ye. That was very thoughtful,” he replied, inhaling the fragrant steam from

the mug. “Smells like boiled hay,” he observed, eyeing the greenish liquid with suspicion. He shot her a serious look. “But ye shouldnae have left without tellin’ me, Annie. Never dae that again. ’Tis very dangerous tae go wanderin’ about around here on yer own like that. Ye could have been mistaken fer a spy and gotten hurt by one of the guards.”

He did not mention that he knew full well he should have been the one to be up early, to take care of her. “Ye were attacked by a drunkard just last night, remember? Ye should be the one restin’.”

“I didnae go on me own. Colin escorted me. He said somethin’ about nae trustin’ me tae leave the camp alone,” she explained.

“Oh? Well, that’s somethin’, I suppose,” he replied, feeling a flash of jealousy towards his old friend.

“Anyway, I dinnae feel like restin’. I’m fine. Me bump’s gone down a lot, and I dinnae have a headache anymore. And the healer checked it tae make sure I was fine.”

“That’s good but dae as I say... dinnae go anywhere without me like that again. All right?”

“Aye, all right. Now, drink yer tea.”

He drank it quickly and then rose from the table. “Right, ye stay here and put yer feet up fer a while. I’ll go and get some food, as we both skipped breakfast. I can have a word with the men at the same time. Stay here!” he commanded her.

“I’m nae plannin’ on goin’ anywhere,” she assured him. “Are ye sure ye’ll be all right, getting’ breakfast?” she asked, a teasing note in her voice.

He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin as he strode over to the exit, mentally preparing himself to face the day. “I think I can manage,” he said and stepped outside. He blinked and shaded his eyes with his hand as the bright light lanced painfully through his brain. Last night’s whisky was still beating a tattoo in his head, and as he walked away towards the kitchen wagon, he thought he heard a giggle coming from inside the tent.

A short while later, he and Annie were sitting at the table sharing their meal quietly. The herbal tea Annie had given him—he was now on his second mugful—was slowly banishing his headache. The food was helping too, soaking up the excess alcohol from last night that was still lurking in his system. He was feeling almost back to normal. The fog that had earlier filled his head had mostly cleared, and his mind slowly began working again.

“Ye’re very quiet, Ewan. Is the tea workin’? Are ye feelin’ any better?” Annie asked, scrutinizing him solicitously in between mouthfuls of porridge.

“Aye, I’m feelin’ almost human again. I’m just disappointed that the men I sent out last night didnae find this secret entrance tae the castle that I’m now almost certain exists. It was a shame ye were taken ill last night and we had tae leave the inn early. I was sure Joyce was on the verge of confirmin’ me suspicions about it, what with her havin’ worked there before.”

He noticed she went a little pale before she replied, “Aye, I’m sorry about that. I wasnae really ill, it was so stuffy in there and I just had tae get a breath of fresh air. And then, that man collided with me like that...” She shook her head and gave him a contrite look.

“Ach, it wasnae yer fault. ’Tis frustratin’ though. None of the others found out anything useful either. Folks around here are close-mouthed when it comes tae the Galbraiths,” he said a little morosely.

“’Tis hardly surprisin’, seein’ as this is Laird Galbraith’s land. Of course, they’re gonnae be loyal tae him,” she pointed out, secretly thankful for the villagers’ loyalty to Gregory.

“Aye, but there’s usually a few people who dinnae care as much fer loyalty as fer a few crowns in their pockets. Then there’s the matter of Galbraith’s sister, the one he claims is missin’. I dinnae ken what that’s all about. Apparently, he does have a sister, but if ’tis some sort of ruse or strategy on his part, then I cannae make out the purpose of it.”

“Me neither,” she said, paying close attention to scraping the last bit of soup from the bottom of her bowl. When she looked up, she said, “And as tae this supposed secret entrance tae the castle, I think that’s a load of nonsense cooked up by fanciful folks who love a mystery. I reckon that Joyce is one of them. I could tell she fancied ye, and she was gonnae tell ye what she thought ye wanted tae ken, that is all. I told ye before ye were wastin’ yer time on a fool’s errand.”

“She didnae fancy me!” he retorted, ignoring her skepticism.

“Aye, she did.”

He suddenly grinned, seeing an opportunity to turn the tables on her attempt to provoke him. “Were ye jealous, is that it? Is that why ye wanted tae leave all of a sudden?”

She shot him a sarcastic smile. “If it pleases ye tae think so, then go on foolin’ yersel’.”

He could not help laughing. “Well, even if she did fancy me, she was out of luck. She’s nae me type.”

“Oh? And what is yer type then?” Annie asked teasingly as she pushed away her empty bowl and picked up her mug of tea.

“The unmarried type,” he replied with a chuckle.

“Very funny,” she said, clearly trying not to smile. “Well, I feel better fer havin’ eaten. I didnae realize how hungry I was.” She leaned her elbows on the table, cradling her mug in her hands.

“Is yer head feelin’ all right?” he asked, still concerned for her.

“Aye, nay more than a wee bit of soreness there now,” she told him. “The healer cleaned it again, so I’m nae worried about it gettin’ infected now. She did a good job.” She sent up a silent prayer for Ella’s skill. “Thank ye fer takin’ me tae see her, Ewan.”

“It was necessary,” he told her bluntly. He too dispatched the last of the oatmeal and took up his cup of herbal tea. They sat in companionable silence for a while. Ewan realized he was enjoying the cozy little domestic scene. He had gotten used to Annie always being there.

’Tis as if we’ve been together for ages. Like old friends, or an old married couple.

“This reminds me of when I was a lad,” he suddenly remarked, happy memories returning from the past. “Me maither and faither used tae sit like this at mealtimes. They didnae talk much, but they always seemed content in each other’s company. I miss those carefree days.”

Something he could not name flashed across Annie’s eyes as she looked across at him. He put it down to curiosity when she said, “’Tis the first time ye’ve mentioned yer family tae me. Dae ye have any siblings?”

“Aye, I have a sister, Deidra,” he told her.

“Are ye close?” Isla asked.

“Yes, very. Me parents are both dead and she is the only family I have left. She was kidnapped by Allan, nae that long ago... possibly with the help of Laird Galbraith. I immediately went after her and was lucky to find her in Allan’s dungeons and bring her home safely. I saw Galbraith leavin’ the castle when I went tae get her. Those were some of the worst days of me life and ‘tis why I cannae ignore the fact that Galbraith’s sister has been kidnapped. Nay matter that he is me enemy, he must be crazy with worry and nay one deserves that.”

Isla had listened to his confession with utter shock and disbelief, so when he looked at her, she lowered her head abruptly, feeling a great pang of guilt followed by a wave of affection for Ewan. She could not let him see her expression.

“I’m so sorry, Ewan,” she said sympathetically. “And I am sorry both yer parents have left this earth.”

“Nay need tae be. It was a long time ago. I still miss me maither, of course, but I suppose I miss me faither the most because he only died a few months before Allan stole me lands and started this bloody war.”

“Were ye very close tae yer faither then?”

“Aye, I was,” he replied, feeling the familiar pang of heartache over losing the loving father who had taught him everything he knew. “He taught me how tae be a good man and a good laird, like he was. D’ye ken, when we were at the village last night, it took me back tae when him and me often used tae visit a particular village on the western border of our lands.

“There was a huge loch there, and he would take me down tae the waterside and teach me how tae fight. He’d make me train fer hours, but it was always fun. I loved bein’ with him, just us two.” The wound of losing his father was still as raw as ever when he pictured those precious times in his mind. Which was why he tried not to think about it too much. He sighed, and when he looked at Annie, he saw she was watching him with rapt attention, her gray-green eyes shining.

“Ye really miss him, I can see,” she said softly.

“Aye, I miss him. Nae a day goes by that I dinnae wish he was still with us. It hurts tae think about him, but I dinnae suppose I’ll ever stop feelin’ that way.”

“Aye, I doubt ye will. And even though such memories bring pain, ye wouldnae wish tae lose them altogether, would ye? I can understand how ye feel, though. I lost both me parents when I was five. I still remember things about them though, the memories are like pictures in me head. I see them in me dreams sometimes. I can remember Maither singin’ tae me and Faither laughin’, carryin’ me about on his shoulders, things like that.”

Ewan stared at her, shocked by her admission, especially since she never spoke about her past. He remained silent for a moment, watching her face. Her expression had become faraway, a mixture of sorrow and affection. “Why, that’s terrible, Annie,” he said at last, his heart going out to her. “It seems like we both ken what it is tae lose those we love, eh?” he added, feeling the connection between them deepening.

“Aye, it would seem so.” She came out of her reminiscence and smiled at him, her eyes luminous. He guessed she was holding back tears. But he was now even more curious about her past and what she was hiding.

“So, who brought ye up, if ye’re parents were gone?” he asked.

“Me grandmaither. She was a wonderful woman, but she was also quite strict. It was because of her that I’ve never traveled much. She was always fearful of the dangers of the outside world, so I was never allowed tae go very far from our home,” she explained a little wistfully.

“And where was that exactly, yer home? Ye described yersel’ as a village lass. Where did ye grow up?” he asked, growing increasingly curious about her background, hoping she might tell him the truth about herself at last. But he realized he had hit a nerve when her expression turned slightly wary, and his heart sank a little. He knew she was about to lie to him again.

“I-I grew up in a village near a town about ten miles or so from here called... Dunham,” she finally told him.

Inwardly, Ewan smiled. “Dunham? Och, I’ve been there a few times. I ken it quite well,” he said, thinking that if she was going to keep lying to him, he might as well have some fun. “I remember takin’ a wee walk by the lake. D’ye ken the one I mean? Near the monastery?”

“Mmm, I ken it.” She tried to sound convincing, but there was something shifty in her eyes.

He continued to test her, wishing she would give up and be honest with him. “And then there’s that pretty stone bridge that goes over the river in the middle of town. What’s the name of that river? Ach, ye must ken it well, Annie, what’s it called?”

When she did not answer, he decided to call her out on it. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a word, she suddenly stood up and did something he never would have expected and certainly was not prepared for. She leaned across the table and kissed him, smack on the lips.

A shockwave ran through him at the touch of her lips on his, and he only just had time to realize what was happening and start to return the kiss when she broke it off and abruptly withdrew. Her cheeks flared crimson, and she looked horrified as they stared at each other across the table for a few long, silent moments. Ewan felt stupefied, stunned even.

“I must go,” she murmured, her voice shaking. Clearly flustered, she grabbed her jacket from the back of the chair and fled from the tent.

Ewan stared after her, his fingers going to his lips, which were still tingling where hers had touched them.

Did that really just happen? Am I dreamin’, or did she just actually kiss me?

He waited for a few minutes to see if she would return, and when she did not, he grew worried about her, concerned she would try to leave the camp and run away. He could not let that happen, so he put on his boots and went outside to find her. After walking a few hundred yards he spotted her sitting with his men. He watched unseen for a while, but she seemed happy enough, talking and laughing with the others.

She seems safe enough, and she hasnae tried tae leave the camp, so I suppose I can trust her tae stay where she is for the time bein’.

With a storm of emotions raging inside him, he turned away and returned to the tent.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ewan awoke during the night and felt the loss of Annie's comforting warmth next to him. His heart clenched painfully in his chest. Feeling panic setting in, he sat up and lit a single candle. He held it aloft, his eyes scanning the dark corners of the tent for her. He breathed a sigh of relief to see she was sleeping on the floor next to the stove, huddled in a blanket. When he had retired for an early night to recover from his hangover, she had not yet returned.

He thought of going to fetch her and making her get into the cot with him. But after watching her for a few moments more and remembering how flustered she had been by the kiss, how she had run out of the tent, red with embarrassment, he decided against it. If she was so embarrassed by what she had done, he did not want to make things worse.

Instead, he got silently out of the cot and fetched a spare blanket from the wooden chest. Creeping across to where she was sleeping he gently laid it over her, being careful not to wake her as he tucked in the edges. Then, feeling a little sad and confused, he got back into bed, blew out the flame and lay down again, only to find he could not go back to sleep. He stared into the darkness.

The kiss lingered in his mind and upon his lips as he pondered the growing complexity of their relationship. He thought that because she had initiated the kiss—he had wanted to kiss her many times but had always held back—she must feel something for him. The realization sent thrills chasing through his veins. His own feelings for her seemed to have entered a new, unknown dimension. He had already known for some time that he cared for her more than perhaps he should, more than

was wise, all things considered. But now, he wondered for the first time if he could be falling in love with her.

Eventually, his tired mind fell back into slumber. He awoke at dawn the next morning, to find Annie still rolled up in her blankets by the stove. Deciding to let her sleep, he grabbed his things and stole from the tent, hastily dressing outside. He felt weary from his broken sleep, yet being out in the fresh air among his men brought renewed focus to his mind.

Colin saw him and went over to him. “New orders, Colin,” he told his captain briskly. “Gather the men. I wantae talk tae them.”

“Aye.” Without further ado, Colin began directing the men to the rallying point in the middle of the camp.

“Now, lads, listen well. I dinnae need tae tell ye that things are gettin’ serious around here. We’ve been here a month, and there’s nae a breath of Galbraith surrenderin’. The longer we stay here, the more likely it is that we’re gonnae clash with Allan and his army, so time’s runnin’ out. Ye’ve all heard about this supposed hidden entrance tae the castle. Some of ye have been tryin’ tae find it, without success so far. Maybe that’s because it daesnae exist, or maybe ye just didnae look hard enough.” There were muted protests from some of the men, but he waved them down and continued, his deep voice ringing out over the campground.

“But I can tell ye now that it daes exist. It’s here somewhere. I want ye tae search again, turn over every inch of these woods and fields around the castle until ’tis found. Because every second that we lose by failin’ tae find it cuts our chances of overcomin’ Allan and Galbraith’s forces.”

Having given his command, Ewan turned to Colin and said, “I’m goin’ out fer a scout about, but in the meantime, I want ye tae send out some riders, as many as ye can

spare, fer the search. Tell them tae find someone, anyone, with knowledge of a secret passageway into the castle. Tell them tae offer them gold in exchange for the information and bring them back here tae me at once.”

“Will dae,” Colin replied, striding away to carry out his laird’s orders. With the day’s commands given and a determination in his heart that they would bear the desired fruit, Ewan decided to pick up breakfast and go back to the tent. He planned to eat and then ride out. But he also wanted to try to talk to Annie about what had happened the night before. He had found the tension between them after the “incident” at the pond almost unbearable. Hating the thought of being on bad terms with her again, he wanted to try to reach some sort of understanding with her before things got out of hand.

He fetched breakfast and headed back to the tent, to find her up and dressed. “Good mornin’,” he said evenly, thinking she looked pale and on edge as he carried the tray to the table and set it down. She nodded silently as he sat in his usual chair and poured them both mugs of tea from the billycan as he always did. Then, he sprinkled some salt on his oatmeal, picked up his spoon, and began eating. He was trying to formulate his opening conversational gambit when she suddenly plonked herself down in the chair opposite, leaned on her elbows towards him, and as if the kiss had not happened, declared firmly, “I’m comin’ with ye.”

“Comin’ where?” he asked, though he knew the answer.

“I heard what ye said tae Colin about goin’ out scoutin’ this mornin’. Well, I’m comin’ with ye.” She sat back and folded her arms, her expression adorably serious.

Well, with danger lurking without the camp, he had had no intention of leaving her there without him to protect her. “I suppose ye can come, but only if ye swear tae dae exactly what I say, and stay next tae me,” he told her, trying to sound stern.

“I swear,” she said at once, her face relaxing. It was the faint mixture of relief and triumph which flickered across her features that made him wonder what he had just agreed to.

An hour later, they rode out side by side at the head of a larger scouting party, in search of the information Ewan was determined to find.

They followed the main road to the castle, through the forest, and out the other side into moorland, heading for the various outlying villages. They were suddenly confronted by an armed party of about ten soldiers wearing black and gold jackets coming in the other direction.

“Jaysus, that’s Allan’s uniform those men are wearin’,” Ewan hissed to Annie as both parties reined in a hundred feet away from each other and glared across the divide.

“When we attack, ride as fast as ye can back tae the camp, Annie, and tell them what’s happenin’. I dinnae want ye in any danger,” Ewan instructed her urgently, unsheathing his sword, fearful for her safety. It was the signal for the others to do the same, on both sides.

“I’m nae leavin’ ye,” she declared determinedly, pulling out her own weapon.

“Annie! This is nae the time tae argue. Dae as I say!” He flashed her an angry look, but there was no time to wait to make sure she had complied. He looked ahead and saw the enemy starting to charge, blades raised for attack. He thrust his own sword aloft and bellowed, “That’s the enemy, lads. Let’s give them a taste of our metal!”

Both parties let out an almighty roar as they raced forward, weapons glinting in the sun as they rode like the wind towards each other. They clashed with a sound like thunder, and a fierce battle ensued. Ewan saw men on both sides fall from their horses in the first hectic collision and then be mercilessly cut down by those still on

horseback. Others who fell got up and slashed at the legs of the passing enemy riders, aiming to unsettle them, or engaged in close combat, the sound of metal on metal ringing out across the field along with rough shouts and the screams of men and horses in agony.

Roaring curses at their foes, Ewan carved a savage swathe through the melee, slashing left and right with his blade, leaving blood and mayhem in his wake as he forced his stallion forward, heading straight for the commander of the small enemy force. The man, whose face was partially concealed beneath a helmet, bared his teeth as he rushed to meet him, blade held aloft.

When they met, they both wielded their reins and swords skillfully, trading deadly blows on horseback, taking pass after pass, each trying to mortally wound the other and send them crashing to the ground, to be finished off with a single thrust. Ewan fought ferociously, knowing what was at stake, but he was also worried for Annie's safety. He dared not take his eyes off his opponent for one second, so he just had to trust that she had obeyed his command and gone back to the camp.

Maybe it was that moment of distraction that enabled his assailant to wound his shoulder, not badly enough to slow him down, but uncomfortable just the same. Furious at his slip, he redoubled his attack and finally succeeded in ousting the enemy captain from his saddle. His stallion reared as Ewan doubled back, slashing at the unprotected man's neck as he staggered to his feet. Ewan did not bother to wait and watch after he fell, screaming and clutching the spurting wound—he was already on to his next victim.

Ewan found that in a fight, time both sped up and slowed down. Thus, it seemed like an eternity and at the same time mere seconds passed before he understood they were winning the battle against Allan's men. The remaining soldiers were starting to scatter in all directions, on horseback or on foot, fleeing from their pursuers.

That was how he managed to have the time to turn his horse and spot one of them heading straight for Annie. On seeing her still there, he felt a rush of anger to find she had disobeyed him and put herself in danger. Nevertheless, he thanked the Lord she'd had enough sense not to join the charge and had instead hung back from the main conflict.

That had been safe for a while, but now the enemy soldier wanted her horse to try and get away. He was trying to grab the reins and attacking her, and she was struggling to control the horse and stop him from pulling her down by slashing at him with her sword!

With terror in his heart, Ewan kicked up the stallion and thundered towards them, his bloody sword out held at his side. By the time he got there, the man had Annie halfway out of her saddle, and although she was putting up a spirited fight, Ewan could see she was in great danger. Driven by a deep need to protect her, he slipped from the saddle, immediately yanking the man off her by the collar of his uniform coat.

The man shouted and staggered a little but soon righted himself. Ewan raised his blade to cut the fellow down and only glimpsed the dirk glinting in his fist when it made contact with his chest, a long horizontal slash that tore through his leather jerkin and into his flesh. Hardly realizing he had been cut, Ewan knocked the dirk from his assailant's hand and forced him to the ground, gripping his throat tightly.

"Where's yer maister's army? How many days from here?" he demanded, shaking the man violently.

"I'll tell ye naethin', ye bastard," the man spat.

Ewan put the point of his sword to the fellow's throat. The man shrank back, but Ewan held him tightly in place. "Tell me what I wantae ken and maybe I'll spare yer

life.”

“He’s two days away at least,” the soldier admitted, his face turning red, then blue. He choked out curses as he struggled in vain to loosen the grip on his throat.

“Thank ye, that’s very helpful,” Ewan growled before running the man through the chest. He flung the still twitching body to the ground at Annie’s feet. She ran to him, but when he tried to put his arms around her, he felt a terrible pain in his chest that made him double over.

“Ach, Ewan, ye’re hurt!” she cried, shoving herself beneath his shoulder in an attempt to hold him up.

“’Tis naethin, just a scratch,” he told her, nausea sweeping through him. He leaned on her as he looked around and saw his remaining men gathering themselves, dusting themselves off, retrieving their horses and those of the enemy that were running loose.

“Bring their weapons,” he shouted, “and pile the corpses in the wood over there before ye come back tae the camp.” The men started to do as he commanded.

“Ewan, ye’re badly hurt. Ye havetae come with me tae see the healer right away,” Annie said urgently, her face white. She ripped off her kerchief and placed it over the wound, trying to staunch the blood.

“Later. We need tae get back tae the camp and report this. Somehow, some of Allan’s men, an advance scouting party nay doubt, got intae the area without me knowledge. I must get back and tell Colin what’s happened.”

“All right, we’ll go back,” she agreed, “but as soon as ye’ve told Colin, we’re goin’ tae see the healer.”

“All right,” he said grudgingly, in agony from his injury and worried about the appearance of Allan’s men. Yet a part of him was deeply touched by the concern she was showing for him.

Once his men had concealed the enemy corpses, they gathered around their laird. They had lost four men and another five were injured, some seriously. What was left of the scouting party limped back to the camp.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

B ack in their tent, Colin stood listening to Ewan's report of the fight, whilst Isla tried to tend to his wound as best she could. The gash seemed worryingly deep to her and would not stop bleeding, even though she laid many strips of clean cloth over it and bandaged them in place. The men's voices went over her head as she worked, for she was terrified the wound would become infected and Ewan might die. She wanted desperately to get him to Ella's, thinking her friend's expertise was urgently needed.

After she had finished cleaning and dressing his wound, she made him some of the herbal tea Ella had given her for her headache, knowing it would help a little with the pain until she could get him to Ella's place. She made him drink it and waited impatiently for him to finish his conversation with Colin. But before that happened, there was a commotion outside the tent that attracted their attention.

Colin broke off talking and said, "I'll go and see what goin' on." He went outside to look. There was murmured talk outside, and Colin returned a few minutes later. He grinned at Ewan. "Good news," he said, rubbing his hands together. "One of the scouting parties has found an old fellow who claims tae ken the secret way intae the castle, and he's willin' tae part with the information for the right amount of gold."

Ewan rose without a word and made for the exit at once, following Colin outside. Isla crept over to the tent flap and listened to the conversation with mounting fear as the old man, whose voice she did not recognize, negotiated his price. She heard the chink of coins, and then her heart sank with dread as the old man told Ewan exactly how to get into the tunnel system that ran beneath the castle.

“I need the layout as well, fer when we get inside,” Ewan said. Isla kept on eavesdropping, listening in angry, terrified silence when the man offered to draw a map of how to get from the tunnels into the main part of the castle without being seen and details of the floor plan.

When the man had gone, Ewan and Colin remained talking outside for a while. Isla continued listening, her alarm growing by the minute as they began formulating a plan to send soldiers to penetrate the castle and, once inside, open the gates to admit the rest of the army.

I havetae get away long enough tae warn Gregory before Ewan attacks. But how?!

She wracked her brains, and after a few minutes, she had an idea of how she might be able to do it. It was risky, and she would need Ella’s help to make it work. But if it saved Gregory’s life and Ewan’s and prevented needless bloodshed, she knew she had to try.

“We must ride tae the healer’s house right this minute,” she told Ewan when he came back into the tent. He looked pleased with the agreement he had struck with the informant, but his face was as white as milk, so she knew his injury was paining him.

“Can ye ride?” she asked him, secretly determined to visit Ella as soon as possible, but now with more than one aim in mind.

“Aye, all right, as long as it daesnae take too long,” he agreed.

She brought the horses right up to the tent and helped Ewan into his saddle before levering herself up in front of him and taking hold of the reins. “Hold on tae me,” she instructed him, holding down her anxiety as she waited for him to drape himself across her shoulders and lean against her back, hissing occasionally at the pain it caused him.

“All right?” She felt him nod. “Here we go. I’ll try tae avoid the bumps as much as I can.” She clicked her tongue, the horse moved off, and they set off out of the camp at a brisk trot, heading for Ella’s place. As she guided the horse onward and Ewan tried to suppress his groans, it really brought home to her how desperately she wanted him alive and not dead. In fact, she never wanted to leave his side.

But she knew the situation was closing in on them. Laird Allan’s men were already here. Who knew if the soldier Ewan had killed after attacking her during the fight had been truthful. Allan’s army could be two days away, or ten minutes away. And when it arrived and joined forces with Gregory’s, the combined force would attack Ewan and his men. Ewan had told her himself he did not rate their chances of winning in an all-out battle, which was what Allan wanted. Allan wanted to destroy him, and there was every likelihood Ewan would be killed. And then, if he was right about Allan’s secret motives, so would Gregory.

The thought made Isla feel sick with dread. If anything happened to either of them she knew she would not be able to bear it. She would be more than heartbroken. Somehow, she knew she had to find a way to stop the clash from happening. But though she needed it now more than ever, that peaceful solution Ella had hinted at seemed further away than ever.

Just over half an hour later, they were standing at Ella’s door.

“Again? This is gettin’ tae be quite a habit,” her friend said with obvious surprise when she first opened the door and found them there, Isla dressed like a soldier. But when she saw how Ewan was leaning heavily on Isla’s shoulder and realized he was badly injured, she immediately got under his other shoulder and helped Isla get him inside the cottage.

“How did this happen?” she asked as they peeled away Ewan’s top clothing.

“‘Tis a long story, but we were attacked by some enemy soldiers. We are Ballentine’s soldiers,” Isla explained as best she could to justify their appearance and the fact that was dressed as a man for Ewan’s sake. Ella, of course, knew the whole truth but played along. She began removing her hastily applied dressing from earlier.

“We won,” Ewan muttered, grimacing as Ella pulled away the blood-soaked dressing and bent down to examine the wound closely. It was a long, bloody slit with a swollen lip on either side.

“Well, that’s makes this worthwhile, I suppose, eh?” She gestured at the nasty gash and shook her head. “Ye ken, ye’re very lucky the cut didnae go any deeper, and that ye’ve still got yer chest intact. Half an inch lower and things would have been much worse. The bad news is, ye’re gonnae need some stitches,” she told him as she straightened up.

“Grand,” Ewan replied with a resigned sigh, his shoulders sagging.

“He’s lost an awful lot of blood, Ella. D’ye think he’ll be all right?” Isla asked anxiously, wincing as she looked at the seeping wound.

“Aye, he’s fit and strong. So long as its kept clean and he daesnae pull the stitches out by movin’ about too much, and with the right salve, I think it’ll heal nicely. Get me some hot water in a bowl, will ye?” she asked Isla.

“Aye, right away,” Isla said, grabbing a bowl from one of the shelves and hurrying to fetch the water from the kettle hanging over the fire. While she did that, Ella turned to her shelves and began gathering the things she needed to clean and dress the wound properly. These included a curved needle and some strong thread. When Isla returned with the bowl of water and saw them on the table, she felt queasy.

She acted as Ella’s assistant as the healer set to work. When it was time to put in the

stitches—which she thought Ewan bore with amazing fortitude, gritting his teeth and only swearing a few times—she wielded the shears for Ella, snipping off the ends of the thread neatly each time.

“Another scar tae add tae me collection,” Ewan put in drily when the stitches were done, and Ella was painting the entirety of the wound with some strong-smelling salve. “This is much stronger than the one I gave ye fer yer head,” she told Isla, “so make sure tae use it when ye change the dressing. He’ll havetae come back tae have the stitches out once it’s healed enough.”

“I hope I’ll still be around fer that,” Ewan said.

“Ach, dinnae speak like that, Ewan,” Isla burst out, her nerves already terribly on edge because of the danger he was in. “Of course, ye’ll be here. I’ll bring ye back mesel’,” she added.

He caught one of her wrists gently in his large hand and made her look at him. His dark eyes were soft as he said, “Hey, hey, dinnae get upset, lass, I was only jokin’.”

“Well, dinnae joke about such things!”

“All right, all right, I’m sorry,” he agreed, releasing her wrist, a smile ghosting across his lips. Ella stood with her hands on her hips, watching them with obvious fascination. When Isla noticed, her friend winked at her. As always, Ella could read her like a book. To her chagrin, Isla found herself blushing.

Ella gave Ewan a concoction to help ease the pain, which he drank down obediently. He swallowed it and made a grimace of disgust.

Ella laughed. “The worse it tastes, the more effective it is, think of it like that.”

“Ugh! I’ll try,” he replied, and then added, “Can I have some water tae wash away the taste, please?”

The two women helped Ewan back into his clothes. He was anxious to get back to the camp. “I’m worried about the men,” he told them, frowning. “Allan’s army could be there right now.” His concern for his troops moved Isla deeply.

“We’re almost done,” Ella told him. “I’ll just give Annie some supplies tae take back with ye.” Ella grasped Isla’s arm and pulled her over to the shelves. Isla was grateful, for she desperately needed to speak to her friend without Ewan overhearing.

“D’ye still have some of the willow bark tea left that I gave ye fer yer head?” the healer asked in a normal voice. “Which I see has healed up very nicely, by the way,” she added, eyeing the yellowing bruise.

“Aye, and there’s still some of the stuff ye gave me fer a hangover cure left over,” Isla told her.

“Hmm, I think he’ll need something a bit stronger fer the first few days. But as soon as he starts tae feel more comfortable, ye can give him some of the other. I’ll give ye a stronger salve as well.”

“All right, thank ye so much, Ella,” Isla told her with gratitude.

Ella reached for a jar and began measuring out the dried mixture inside into a paper spill. “I can see ye’re in love with him,” she suddenly whispered to Isla.

“Is it that obvious?” Isla whispered back, annoyed at herself for being so transparent. “I-I kissed him last night,” she confessed, glancing over at Ewan to see if he was listening. But he had gone over to the hearth and was standing in front of the fire, tentatively moving his arms back and forth to gauge his pain threshold.

She looked back to see Ella's eyes were wide and full of curiosity. "And what happened? Did he kiss ye back?" she asked as she folded the paper packet neatly, then took a small pot of salve down from a higher shelf. She gave them to Isla, who put them in her trouser pocket.

"I'm nae sure. I lost me nerve and ran away," she replied. Ella snorted and turned it hastily into cough. "I had tae dae somethin' tae stop him from askin' me questions," Isla tried to explain.

"Och, of course, it was nae because ye can hardly keep yer hands off him," Ella whispered, shooting her a skeptical look full of mirth. "Seein' him with his shirt off, I cannae say I blame ye. I just dinnae understand why ye ran away."

Isla huffed and, hearing Ewan starting to grow restless with waiting, changed the subject to her more immediate need. "Ella, somethin's happened, somethin really bad. I need ye tae give me somethin' I can use tae put the whole camp tae sleep."

Ella's brows shot up. "The whole camp?"

"Aye." Isla quickly explained about Ewan's plan to use the secret tunnels to launch an attack on the castle. "Puttin' them all tae sleep is the only way I can think of tae give me enough time tae warn Gregory."

"All right, but I need some time tae prepare a potion. Could ye comeback tomorrow?" Ella whispered.

Isla frowned, wondering how she would be able to manage to slip out without Ewan knowing.

What choice dae I have? I must find a way .

She nodded. "Thank ye, Ella, I'll dae me best."

With her plan in motion, she was ready to leave. "How much dae I owe ye?" Ewan asked Ella as they prepared to go.

"There's nay charge," Ella told him. "But if one of the men at the camp should happen tae pass by and drop off a load of firewood in the yard, it would be much appreciated."

Ewan smiled. "I'm sure I can arrange that," he said. "Thank ye fer everythin'. I'm very grateful fer yer help."

"It's been a pleasure," the healer replied as he crossed the threshold. "Good luck," she whispered to Isla as she followed Ewan out. The pair briefly pressed hands in farewell. Ewan declared he felt well enough to take charge of the horse, so Isla got up behind him and put her arms around his waist. She waved at Ella, who stood at the door, waving back as she watched them ride away.

As they journeyed, Isla was preoccupied with Ewan's condition, but at the back of her mind, the problem of finding a way to warn Gregory of the imminent attack was nagging at her. So she did not immediately notice they were not heading back to the camp at all. In fact, they were going in the opposite direction, towards Killicraigie, the village they had visited the other night. "Um, Ewan, where are we goin'?" she asked him, puzzled.

"Tae the inn," he said simply.

"The inn? This is nae the time tae be drinkin', nae after that potion Ella just made ye swallow," she replied, surprised. "I thought ye said ye wanted tae get back tae the camp in case Allan's army arrives."

“I did, but then I got tae thinkin’ about it. I’ve got men out all over the place watchin’ out fer his army, and so far, they’ve seen naethin’. Besides, that soldier this mornin’ said his army’s still two days away.”

“What if that man was lyin’? And how does that account fer those men this mornin’? How did they get through if ye’ve men watchin’ all the time?” she asked.

“Doubtful, and I reckon that was a very small advance party, so small it managed tae slip through the net. I think there’s still time fer me tae carry out me plans before Allan arrives. And since I’m wounded and need tae rest, I thought it would be nice tae stay at the inn fer the night and sleep in a proper bed.”

Isla was very surprised, but she saw no reason to argue if it was what he wanted. “All right. I agree, a nice comfy bed sounds very appealin’.”

“It certainly daes,” he replied, and although she could not see his face, Isla had the strange feeling he was smiling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ewan was terribly weary, and the whole of his upper chest hurt when he moved, especially his arms and shoulders. He found that out when he insisted on taking the reins. The painkilling potion Ella had made him drink had not yet started working, and the wound still throbbed every time the horse took a step. He really did fancy the idea of spending the night on a feather mattress instead of the hard cot. But that was not the main reason he had decided to stay at the Thatcher's Arms Inn that night.

Before he carried out his plan to penetrate Galbraith castle and attack from within, he wanted to savor spending a little more time alone with Annie, in a place where she did not need her masculine disguise.

He was relieved when they reached the inn at last and left their horses with the same young lad as they had the time before. When they went inside to the bar, Ewan did his best to hide the fact that he was injured by doing up his coat and standing tall, so as not to attract attention. When the landlord went to speak to them, he confirmed there was a selection of rooms available for travelers to rent by the night.

"I want the best one," Ewan said and duly paid for a "very comfortable" double for him and his mate. He ordered ale and wine and some supper to be sent up to them as soon as possible and paid for that too. "Let's go upstairs, so we can rest," he said to Annie, who nodded.

A maid appeared and showed them up the stairs to the first floor. They followed her up the wooden staircase and into a large, well-appointed chamber. Lanterns had been lit and a crackling fire was picking up in the grate, their light casting a warm glow

over the room. Ewan looked around, nodding his approval at the lush Turkey carpet beneath their feet, the velvet drapes, the chairs with plump cushions set before the fireplace and the large, four-poster bed that dominated the room.

“This is luxury, eh, Annie? After what we’ve been used tae these last few weeks,” he said after the maid had gone and the door was shut.

“Aye, ’tis like a dream,” Annie agreed, shedding her boots and jacket and going over to test the bed. “Och, a goose feather mattress! It feels like sittin’ on a cloud. Ye should come and lie down and rest yersel’,” she told him, patting the coverlet.

He took off his weapon belt and coat and hung them next to her jacket, then went and sat down next to her on the bed. “Aye, I will if ye’ll help me off with me boots. I havenae even got the strength fer that.”

“Aye, of course. Let me help ye.” She got up and pulled the high-top boots off one by one, then set them neatly aside.

“Ach, that feels better,” Ewan sighed happily, getting onto the bed properly. “Would ye mind plumping the pillows for me?” he asked Annie. “I think I’ll be more comfortable that way. Mind ye, I think that potion the healer gave me is startin’ tae work. The pain’s really startin’ tae ease off now.”

“That’s grand news,” Annie said brightly as she hastened to do as he asked and then helped him to ease himself back against the pillows until he felt comfortable. He settled back and looked at her as she continued to fuss with the pillows, moved by her seemingly genuine concern for him.

Surely, she must care fer me a wee bit.

With everything that had happened since the night before, he had almost forgotten the

kiss. But now the memory came flooding back to him full force. His heart yearned to take her in his arms and kiss her until they were both dizzy, but his instincts told him to go slowly. She had bolted after she had kissed him. She might do it again if he tried anything, so he held himself back.

And then there was the small matter of his stitches. No sudden movements, Ella had said, lest they rip. That was slightly worrying, but the pain and discomfort were slowly receding, thanks to the foul-tasting potion she had given him. He was doing so much better and being locked away from reality with Annie, alone in this luxurious setting, was lending everything a dreamlike quality. Something in the potion, he supposed, was making him feel incredibly relaxed.

“Annie, I wantae thank ye fer all ye’ve done tae help me today. Ye’ve really been takin’ good care of me, and I want ye tae ken how much I appreciate it.”

She was sitting on the edge of the bed sideways, leaning on her arm, looking straight at him—dressed as Harris. Her cheeks turned slightly pink, as though his words embarrassed her. Unsmiling, she looked down at her hands, her twisting fingers betraying her nervousness. “When I saw ye hurt like that...” Her voice trailed off, but when she met his eyes, hers showed him she had feared for his life. “I tried tae kill ye once, Ewan. But now, now I want ye tae live.”

Earnestness shone from her. She was telling him the truth. She wanted him to live, she cared for him! His heart soared as he felt the connection between them tighten. He put his hand on hers and squeezed it, feeling incredibly close to her, forgetting he did not know her real name.

“Thank ye, that means a lot.” He smiled at her, and she smiled back at him. “Ye dinnae have tae be Harris here. Ye can take off the disguise and be yersel’ fer a while.”

She looked surprised. Then she said, “Aye, I hadnae thought of it, but now ye mention it, it’ll be a relief tae get out of these clothes fer a wee while. But ye ordered dinner and ale. They should be here soon. I’ll turn intae the real me after they’ve arrived.”

“Sensible,” he had to agree. “We can lock the door and have some peace. ’Twill be very nice tae put our troubles aside fer a few hours, eh?”

She sighed and smiled at the same time. “Aye, ‘twill.”

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. Dinner and drinks had arrived, brought up by two maids on trays. Annie let them in and had them put the trays on a small table near the bed before thanking them and seeing them out. Ewan smiled when he heard the key turn in the lock.

She went to the table and poured him a tankard of ale and a glass of red wine for herself, then carried them to the bed. She placed hers on the nightstand and handed the ale to Ewan.

“Yer ale, m’laird,” she said teasingly. He grinned as he took it from her and drank deeply of the refreshing amber liquid.

“By God that’s good,” he said appreciatively, wiping his lips with the back of his shirt sleeve. “I feel like a king.”

“I think ye mean a laird,” Annie said, bringing over Ewan’s dinner on a tray, a meat pie served with turnips, greens, and lashings of thick gravy. “Och, it smells so good, me mouth’s waterin’ already, and I havenae even taken a bite.”

She rested the tray on the nightstand while she helped him sit up a little. When he was comfortable, she laid the tray across his lap so he could eat. Fetching her own tray,

she placed it on a flat part of the coverlet and then stepped back.

Ewan stared with his knife poised in midair as she proceeded to perform a strip-tease in front of him. The cap came off first, and she tossed it away, saying with a sigh, “Och, what a relief to have that off!” As always, he was entranced by the sight of her golden curls springing free and the long, thick plait falling down over her shoulder. She undid the plait and let the shining river tumble down to her waist, shaking it out and running her fingers through it.

Next, off came the padded jerkin he had given her, then the boots and stockings and trousers. She folded each item and placed it on a chair, the boots paired off neatly beneath. Off came the oversized homespun shirt.

“Well, goodbye, Harris, hello, Annie,” he murmured, his groin twitching to see her in nothing but her shift as she came to sit on the bed. She sat cross-legged, the candlelight behind her outlining every curve of her body through the filmy material in a very distracting way. Thankfully, she put the tray across her knees.

“This looks so good,” she remarked, sipping at her wine before she tucked into her food. “I’m hungry. What about ye? Ye must eat even if ye dinnae feel like it, tae keep yer strength up,” she told him, cutting into the pie.

“I think that potion must be quite strong because the pain is wearin’ off. I feel surprisingly good, and I can definitely eat. Though I’m a bit tired,” he told her. In fact, he felt incredibly weary, but he was enjoying her company so much, he did not want to fall asleep. However, he found that the more he ate and drank, the more tired he felt. He ate most of his dinner, but by the time he could eat no more his eyelids had grown so heavy, he could hardly keep them open at times.

I dinnae wantae fall asleep, I wantae stay awake with Annie!

“Ewan, Ewan, are ye awake?” Isla laid a gentle hand on his shoulder and leaned over to look into his face. He appeared to be fast asleep, and when he began snoring gently, she was certain of it. She stood up, looking down on him, her mind whirring. She did not know whether to be disappointed—it had been turning out to be such a wonderful evening—or grateful for the opportunity.

He could sleep fer hours, enough time fer me tae get back tae the castle and warn Gregory about what Ewan’s plannin’, and about Allan too. I may nae even need the flask.

Even while the thought was running through her head, she was picking up her clothes and slipping them on. She gave Ewan one last look, satisfying herself that he would sleep peacefully for a few hours yet, then took her jacket and her boots and opened the door as quietly as she could. She took one step over the threshold.

“Stop right there! Where d’ye think ye’re goin’?”

She froze at the growl which had come from behind her. Her heart sank.

“Get back in here. Ye’re goin’ nowhere unless I say so.” The voice was right in her ear. She jumped out of her skin. He was behind her! She could feel the heat of his body on her skin, his warm breath in her ear when he spoke. Her body began thrumming with a combination of fear and excitement.

She pasted a smile on her face, fighting to keep her composure. “Och, ye’re awake,” she said, turning on her heels to face him, frantically trying to think of a plausible excuse for leaving.

“Where were ye goin’?” He was standing right in front of her now, his bandaged chest inches from her face. She frowned at the bandage in genuine concern but also seeing a chance to deflect his question.

She looked up at him and said, “Ye shouldnae have moved so fast, creepin’ up behind me like that. D’ye nae remember what the healer said? Nay sudden movements or ye could tear yer stitches.”

“Me chest’s fine,” he replied dismissively. “Answer me question. Where were ye goin’?”

“I was, er, I was thirsty, so I thought I’d go down and get some ale.”

The firelight threw dancing shadows across his features, making it a harsh mask of mistrust as he eyed her. “There’s ale over there, on the tray.” He jerked his thumb at it.

“Aye, I ken, but ’tis stale and warm. I wanted some fresh ale.”

“I’m sure ye can make dae until mornin’. Now, come back in here and shut the door.”

Seeing no alternative, she did as he said, but she was frustrated at being robbed of her chance to warn her brother and could not help but let her irritation show. “Ye ken, ye havenae right tae dictate me every move.”

He stared at her, then said sardonically, “I’m sorry, I dinnae think I heard that right. I absolutely have the right tae ken where ye’re goin’ and who yere seein’. Technically, ye’re still me captive.”

“But can ye nae just give me a wee bit of freedom? Dae I havetae ask yer permission every time I wantae dae some simple thing, like fetch some ale or visit the privy, fer goodness’ sake?” They were standing toe to toe now, with Isla’s head tilted up to Ewan’s face as he towered above her.

Unexpectedly, his expression suddenly softened. “Annie, ye misunderstand me. I

dinnae wish tae control ye, but things bein' as they are, I wish tae keep ye safe.” Gently, he reached down and cupped her face in his palms, looking deep into her eyes, setting her body tingling. “I care about ye.”

Her breath hitched in her throat at his words. “I care about ye too, Ewan,” she whispered, gazing up at him, meaning every word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The kiss began tentatively, a hesitant exploration of each other's lips. Isla's doubts and worries immediately melted away at the touch of Ewan's warm, firm mouth on hers. As if in wonder at what they had started, they briefly pulled back, their faces barely an inch apart, and stared into each other's eyes for a few intense moments. The song her body was singing drove all else away. She forgot the war, Gregory, Allan, the siege, everything. Everything except him.

Her fingertips trailed down the strong column of his throat where his shirt lay open, careful to avoid his bandages. She felt her insides turning to water at the feel of his skin, and the naked hunger in his dark eyes. Her heart was pounding, her chest rising and falling rapidly as the breath fled her lungs beneath the intensity of his gaze.

When their mouths met again, his covering hers, a fire inside her belly sprang to life. She was suddenly consumed by the same hunger she saw reflected in his eyes, the hunger of wanting, which she had been holding back for so long.

Unleashing it from the depths of her being, she threw herself into the kiss with luxurious abandon, meeting his desire with her own, reveling in the taste and touch feel of him as they explored each other's mouths, bringing forth a fiery passion she never had never known she possessed.

"Ye make me want ye so much, I never kent I could feel like this," she breathed against his lips, greedy for more of him. She held back a little as he pressed against her, mindful of hurting him, but he seemed oblivious of any pain from his wound, for he grasped her around her waist and pinned her to his chest, one hand cradling her

head as his mouth explored hers.

The kiss grew in intensity, making her so dizzy, she felt almost drunk with pleasure. She melted into his arms, wanting it never to stop. She weaved her arms around his muscular neck and tangled her fingers in the dark tresses of his hair, entwining her tongue with his in a frantic dance of pent-up desire.

As though sensing her heightened need, Ewan's arms tightened around her, his lips plundering her mouth with redoubled passion. Isla moaned into his mouth as heat swept over her, giving herself up to the intoxicating sensation of his large, warm hands moving surely over every part of her.

Without breaking the kiss, she pushed aside his shirt and allowed her hands to roam across his broad, muscular shoulders. Her breathing quickened as her curious fingers traced the blue patterns etched there amid the battle scars, and she reveled in the power that seemed to ooze from his very bones.

"Ewan, what about yer wound? Ye must be careful," Isla warned him gently.

"Let me worry about that," he told her. "Annie, yer lips are so soft," he added, his voice low and hoarse as he leaned forward and closed the gap between them, his lips seeking hers once more.

The flames of the fire he had ignited within her rose higher. She needed more of him. She hardly knew what possessed her, but she suddenly wanted them naked, their bodies pressed together, skin on skin.

"Ewan, let's take off our clothes. I want tae feel ye against me," she murmured against his lips. "I ken I've seen ye without yer clothes on already, but I wantae ken ye... every inch of ye."

He chuckled deep in his throat. The vibration rumbled through Isla, a sensation so provocatively sensual, she gasped to feel heat pooling between her thighs.

“I couldnae agree more,” he murmured, grinning as he pulled away from her lips long enough to reach down and, taking hold of the hem of his shirt, pulled it off over his head with her help and a small grimace. The bandage over the wound glowed stark white against his skin.

“Och, me God, Ewan, ye’re... gorgeous,” she whispered, her nipples hardening into stiff points at the sight of his huge, muscle-packed body in front of her, a mere hairsbreadth away. She licked her lips as her eyes ran over him, her gaze devouring him.

Then, his eyes hot upon hers, he gripped the hem of her shift, and she raised her arms for him to rip it from her body and toss it aside. Pleasure shot through her to hear his gasp of delight and see the greedy way he grinned at her naked breasts as they swung free. They paused as though to savor the moment, staring at each other with expressions of wonder, smiling intently into each other’s eyes.

His eyes never leaving hers, snatching kisses all the while, he deftly unfastened his trews and pushed them down over his hips. Excited beyond reason, Isla helped to slide them down over his thick, powerful thighs and down his legs until he kicked them off and to the floor. Now, both completely naked, they knelt upon the bed, face to face, each in thrall to the other.

Ewan spread her long tresses out over her shoulders, running his fingers through the golden lengths with a look of awe, while Isla’s belly tightened with excitement as she stared in curious amazement at his erect manhood. “Ye’re so big, I... I never imagined anything like it.”

Ewan chuckled and wiggled his hips playfully, making her laugh delightedly. “Och,

he's mighty glad tae see ye. Ye have nae idea how much he's been dreamin' of this." He lowered his voice and added thickly, "This is what ye dae tae me, Annie. Ye've got me wantin' ye so bad."

"Me? I did that?" She was filled with happy wonder at the thought of having such power.

"Och, aye, did ye nae ken that?"

"How would I? I'm still a maid. I've never seen a man without his clothes afore ye. Ye must think me very ignorant." She felt suddenly shy at her inexperience.

He shook his head and smiled into her eyes. "Nay, nay, ye have it all wrong, 'Tis the other way around. 'Tis better this way, fer I can teach ye everythin' I ken about givin' each other pleasure. And I have an awful lot tae teach ye." He grinned at her wickedly, wiggling his eyebrows.

She giggled, coming out of her attack of bashfulness, grateful for him trying to put her at her ease. "Is that so? Well, I'm lookin' forward tae me lessons then," she replied, thrusting her breasts at him wantonly.

"Why waste any more time?" he asked, giving her a smile that twisted her insides and sent a wave of heat washing over her skin. He sighed and gazed at her, his eyes traveling slowly across her body. "D'ye have any idea how beautiful ye are?" he whispered, gazing at her with awe.

"Nay, I've never thought about it until I met ye, Ewan. Nay one's ever told me that before, except ye when ye were drunk that time. D'ye remember?" She did not expect he would. But, as he had a habit of doing, he surprised her.

He reached over and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, sending thrills

racing through her. She pressed her cheek into his hand, nuzzling it. “Of course, I remember. Maybe I wasnae as drunk as I seemed, eh?” he replied, his tone teasing. “And every word I said then, I meant.”

“Did ye? What did ye say then?” she asked, touched by his admission but feeling the urge to tease him back and prolong the delicious moment.

“Well, let me see.” His fingers travelled down her cheek, to her ears, her neck, her throat, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. “I believe I said I wanted tae kiss ye, but ye refused me. I was very hurt.” He stuck out his bottom lip, pretending to look wounded.

Enjoying the game, Isla said, “Wheesht! That was just the whisky talkin’.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Was it? How can ye be so sure?”

She had no answer, so she asked, “And what else did ye say tae me that night, if ye claim tae remember so much?”

“I said ‘Annie, ye’re so beautiful, ye smell beautiful, and ye taste exquisite’...” His fingertips traced her skin, until she closed her eyes and sighed, caught in a pleasurable trance.

“And?” she breathed.

“I said ye have the most beautiful hair I’ve ever laid eyes on.” He stroked it admiringly to emphasize his point.

She opened her eyes and smiled at him, delighted. “Ye dae remember.”

“Aye, and then I asked ye if ye ever thought about what happened at the pond. D’ye

remember that?"

"Aye." She smiled, her bashfulness returning a little.

"I told ye I thought about it often, but ye didnae answer me. Will ye answer me now?" His voice was deep and low, beguiling.

Her heart overflowing with emotion, she leaned forward and rested her forehead against his. "Aye, I will. I thought about it all the time, every day, but mostly at night, when I was pressed up so close tae ye in that wee cot," she confessed in a whisper.

He chuckled. "That's what I hoped ye'd say."

Slowly, he leaned back a little way and reached out for her. With an expression of deep concentration on his handsome face, he ran both hands over her belly, the indent of her waist, the rounded curves of her hips, then cupped her behind, squeezing her buttocks.

"Beautiful, just beautiful," he exclaimed softly.

"Och, dear Lord!" Isla breathed, swaying slightly as pleasure rippled through her from head to toe at his lustful explorations. She shivered in anticipation as his hands moved upwards, his fingertips tracing a path to her breasts. The hunger in his gaze as he cupped them fanned the flames of her desire even higher.

"They fit just right, like they were made fer me, just like I kent they would," he murmured, his voice hoarse. "Mmmm, so soft and warm." She watched him through slitted eyes, her own passion heightened by his grinning enjoyment as he filled his hands with her flesh, rolling and squeezing her breasts, his thumbs flicking teasingly across her already rock-hard nipples. Fresh waves of desire shot through her like quicksilver, and she felt herself growing moist and hot between her legs.

“Och, Ewan, aye, that’s so good, I never kent it could feel this way between a woman and a man,” Isla whispered, resting her hands on his brawny shoulders and arching her back, yearning for more of his magical touch. “Ah! Ah!” Small moans slipped from lips, and shivers of delight shot through her body when he bent his head and, squeezing her breasts close together, took one nipple and then the other in his mouth.

Unable to help herself, filled with curiosity and desire, Isla gently took his length gently in one hand. “Och, it grows in me hand!” she gasped in wonder.

“Aye, and it’ll grow even more if ye keep doin’ that,” Ewan said hoarsely, putting his hand over hers and guiding caresses.

“So, ye like it if I dae this?” she asked, watching his face. His eyes turned to liquid slits, and he groaned in reply as she became more practiced in her movements and increased the rhythm of her hand. The fever inside her rose higher to see him so completely in her power. “And what happens if I dae this?” She bent and softly peppered his shaft with kisses, tracing her tongue along its length.

To her great satisfaction, Ewan groaned deep in his throat and buried his hands in her hair. Excited by seeing him throw his head back and close his eyes at her touch, she dared to experiment, tasting him, teasing him ever more daringly with her lips and tongue.

“Annie, och, Annie,” he groaned, gently pulling himself from her grasp with obvious reluctance.

Immediately worried, she looked up at him, her palms on his chest. “What is it, Ewan? Are ye hurtin’? Did I dae somethin’ wrong? D’ye nae like it?”

“Nay, nay, I just havetae stop ye there fer the moment, nae because I wantae, but because I like it too much,” he confessed, his dark eyes twinkling with humor as he

pressed a tender kiss to her lips. “And if ye keep on like that, lookin’ like ye dae, I’ll get too excited too quickly, and it’ll end too quickly.”

“Och, I see!” Isla was instantly relieved, marveling at her ability to excite him.

“I’ve waited a long time for this moment, and I’m nae gonnae waste it by rushin’ ahead. I wantae explore ye, tae touch ye,” he told her. Isla gasped to feel him prizing her legs apart and slipping his large fingers between her legs, gently stroking the secret folds that were burning for his touch. “I wantae tae give ye pleasure.”

She soon forgot everything as Ewan caressed her breasts with his hands, whilst trailing tiny kisses down her face, her throat, breasts, and down across her belly with tantalizing slowness, until he reached the hinge of her thighs.

Caught in a daze of pleasure, Isla was not sure what was happening when he shifted his position, lifting her legs and resting them on his shoulders before kneeling between them, using his muscular legs to open them wider.

“Och, Ewan,” Isla moaned, realizing what was about to happen as he grinned wickedly at her whilst running his hands slowly up and down the whole length of her legs. He kissed and nibbled at the soft insides and backs of her thighs, sending thrills racing through her. She let out a little shriek when he suddenly gripped her by the hips and pulled her towards him.

“Naethin’ would give me greater pleasure,” he whispered back huskily. The fever in his eyes drove Isla to open herself wider to him, like a wanton.

The look on his face as he gazed down on her so utterly exposed made Isla shiver almost uncontrollably as she lay back. A series of small moans fell from her lips as, breathing raggedly now, Ewan used his thumbs to divide her hidden folds, and then explored them slowly with his tongue and fingers, delving into every part of her as if

he would eat her up.

“Ewan, what are ye doin’ tae me,” she moaned, opening her legs wider and raising her hips to him.

“Och, this is only the start,” he promised huskily, lowering his dark head between her legs once more. “There’s much more than this.”

“Och, me God!” she cried, her back arching when his lips closed around the stiffened nub at the head of her sex. Pleasure shook her as he sucked on it luxuriously, grazing it with his teeth, his tongue swirling and toying with her until she was in such a frenzy, her hand reflexively caught in his hair, and pressed him into her. His hot tongue trailed tantalizingly close to her entrance.

“Ewan,” she cried out as he thrust his tongue deep inside her again and again, his thumb toying rhythmically with her stiffened rosebud all the while, until she was writhing helplessly beneath him, weak with desire.

“I want tae touch ye too,” she begged him, reaching for his swollen manhood, which was bobbing close to her face. Needing no further encouragement, Ewan positioned himself so that he could continue devouring Isla’s exposed sex, while she grasped his shaft in her hands and began stroking it in time to his caresses, kissing and licking his length again in the way she had quickly learned he liked.

He hardened further in her hand, adding to her sense of blissful abandon when she felt his fingers entering her, one, gently probing at first, then two, then three, pushing into her more urgently, widening their exploration, opening her up in ways she had never dreamed of. It spurred her to speed up her own quest to take him to the same heights as he was taking her.

Together, they gave themselves up to their mutual exploration, greedily drinking each

other in, until Isla was swept away by intoxicating waves of an ecstasy she had never known existed. The waves traveled inexorably up her body as Ewan buried his fingers and tongue inside her.

“Harder, Ewan, harder, please,” she moaned, her excitement reaching an uncharted peak of ecstasy as she frantically rode his hand.

“Mmm, ye taste so sweet,” he gasped, his voice muffled by her hot flesh as he plunged his fingers rhythmically into her. Just as the waves threatened to crash over her, she felt his body stiffen too, his member like steel in her hand. His rapid movements echoed hers as the rising energy became impossible to resist and sent them both tumbling over the edge in a shattering, shared climax.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I sla was floating on a golden cloud, her mind full of wonder, her body still quivering with the blissful aftermath of all the incredible things Ewan had shown her.

If this is what it can be like between a man and a woman, I want more! Never have I felt so alive! And 'tis all because of him.

Feeling a great outpouring of affection for him, she turned on her side and, careful to avoid his wound, threw an arm over his belly, nestling under his arm, reveling in the novel sensation of their sweat-slick skins sliding against each other, her inner thighs sticky with their juices.

“Och, Ewan, I never could have dreamed of feelin’ so.... wonderful!” she murmured, tilting her face to look into his dreamy, dark eyes.

He chuckled softly, tightening his arm around her as smiled down at her, lifting his head and kissing the tip of her nose. “Aye, it was beautiful, like ye, Annie. Ye’re special, ye ken that? Very special.”

“Am I?” She loved hearing him say it. To be told by Ewan Ballentine she was special somehow meant the world to her in that moment. Yet, not hearing her true name from his lips still hurt.

“Aye, very. And now ye ken me secret, how much I’ve been wantin’ ye all this time,” he sighed, stroking her hair from her face and peppering her with kisses. “Ye’re delicious, Annie, and the things ye were doin’ tae me, well, I dinnae have words...”

He smiled and shook his long dark locks in delighted wonder, looking at her with soft eyes.

Seeing her own feelings reflected there, she reached up and stroked his cheek with her fingertips. "I can still feel ye touchin' me, feel ye inside me," she whispered, gazing at him wonderingly. "I've wanted ye too, Ewan, so badly. Lyin' with ye next tae me night after night... it was so hard sometimes, I thought I'd lose me mind."

He hugged her close, chuckling deep in his throat. "Aye, me too. I tried tae resist me own urges, I really did. But ye dae somethin' tae me I've nae felt before in me life." He leaned forward and kissed her tenderly. "And I want more," he said into her mouth.

"But d'ye nae wantae go all the way?" she asked hesitantly, idly trailing her fingers down the line of fine dark hair leading from his belly to his groin.

He shook his head. "Nay, nae yet. Much as I want ye, we should wait. With things as they are, there's nae tellin' how things are gonnae turn out. I could be dead tomorrow."

"Dinnae talk like that!" she chided gently, saddened by his words yet at the same time knowing they were true. He added, "Besides, ye're still a maid. 'Tis better if ye stay that way until all this is over."

"Ye dinnae mind waitin'?" Isla asked, secretly rather shocked by how disappointed she was. Her body was still buzzing with the afterglow of their recent passionate interlude. Ewan had given her her first taste of ecstasy, and now she wanted more.

"Good things are always worth waitin' fer," he said, pressing his lips to her hair. Isla smiled, content to be with him. She laid her head on his shoulder and breathed in his pleasing musky scent as she listened to his heartbeat.

But as they lay quietly, their limbs tangled together, cold reality—in the shape of the conflict they were both enmeshed in—gradually chipped its way into her consciousness. She could not forget the threat Allan posed to all their futures, hers, Gregory's, and Ewan's. It hovered above them like some bloody specter from a nightmare, wearing the warmongering, corrupt laird's features.

She heard Ella's voice in her head, telling her that she was in a unique position that she could affect how things would turn out. That if she cared about Ewan and Gregory, she would have to do all she could to bring peace between them.

The challenge had always been how to turn events towards a peaceful resolution. With the potion she would pick up the day after she would be able to actually buy herself enough time to get into the castle and warn Gregory without Ewan's knowledge before he launched his attack through the tunnels.

It would provide her with the means to steer Gregory and Ewan towards a peace that would unite their forces against Allan.

Isla decided that waking up in the morning in a feather bed with her naked limbs entangled with Ewan's was the best way to ever wake up. She came awake slowly, emerging from the most restful sleep she could remember having, with Ewan's hips pressed against her behind, one of his legs thrown over hers, and his arms encircling her waist. Her hands were entwined with his, and she kissed his fingers softly, full of love for him. She smiled to herself for his nose was resting against the nape of her neck, and every time he exhaled, the feathery warmth of his breath made her skin tingle.

Snuggling beneath the covers, she sighed with deep contentment and flexed her limbs slightly, savoring the feel of his naked body against hers and luxuriating in the memory of all that had passed between them the night before. There was a pleasurable soreness between her legs, and her breasts, her entire body actually, felt

slightly tender, but it was a wonderful feeling. A womanly feeling, she decided happily.

If this is how it feels tae be ravished by the man I love, then I want more. And I love him, I dae. I want him tae make love tae me, I want tae ken how it feels tae have him inside me, tae be his completely. Why should we wait? What if we both die tomorrow?

She was startled out of her thoughts by Ewan nuzzling and nibbling her neck. His embrace tightened around her as he pressed his body into hers. “Mmm, good mornin’, beautiful,” he murmured, his breath tickling her skin, making joy bubble up inside her. Wanting to look at him, she wiggled around to face him, careful not to hurt him. He was adorably tousled, and one look into his sleepy, dark eyes had her melting again.

“Good mornin’, handsome,” she replied and kissed him leisurely on the lips. He kissed her back with enthusiasm.

“Well, this is how I’d like tae wake up every mornin’,” he told her, his deep voice still hoarse from sleep.

“Aye, ’tis lovely,” she agreed. She looked at his bandage. Somehow, it was still in place, but she was still worried about the wound. “How are ye feelin’?” she asked. “I hope we didnae pull yer stiches last night.”

He touched the bandage tentatively. “I think I’d ken it if we had. It feels very sore, but better than ye might think. I’ve had worse, but maybe ye’d best make me some of that tea Ella gave ye afore we go back tae the camp this mornin’. But dinnae make it too strong else I’ll be droppin’ off tae sleep again.”

“Aye, I will,” she promised, stroking his face with her fingertips lovingly. “I wish we

didnae havetae go back. I wish we could stay here like this all day.”

Forever.

“So dae I, me bonny lassie,” he said ruefully. “Can ye nae tell?” he pressed his hardening manhood against her.

“Oooh! He’s awake again,” she cried, delighted and amazed, going to take hold of him. But he laughed and pulled away, kissing her nose and gently brushing her hair from her forehead. “Dinnae tempt me, Annie. We must get back. Ye ken how much is ridin’ on me plans fer today. Much as I’d rather stay here with ye and ravish ye all over again, we must get up and get dressed. We’ll have breakfast back at the camp with the rest of the men. I want tae get an early start, and Colin will be wonderin’ where we’ve got tae.”

“All right,” she agreed. They kissed once more, then got out of bed and got dressed. Within a very short time, Isla assumed the disguise of Harris once more and then helped Ewan into his coat and boots.

“It feels like we’re leavin’ our safe little bubble,” she remarked sadly as they left the room and started down the stairs.

“Aye, it does,” Ewan agreed, giving her behind an affectionate squeeze, “but mayhap we’ll have another time like this, eh?”

“D’ye think so, Ewan?” she asked, thrilled at the suggestion they might have a future together.

“Of course!” he assured her cheerfully, adding with a wry chuckle, “that is, if I’m nae dead before the week’s out.”

“Ach, shut up! I’ve told ye, dinnae say such things, nae even in jest,” she scolded him, batting at his arm with her hand.

He clutched his arm melodramatically. “Ow! Lay off hittin’ me, will ye, woman? I’m a wounded man, ye ken!”

“Ach, ye great fool!” she muttered, unable to help laughing at his playfulness while fear for his safety stabbed at her heart like a dagger.

They rode home together through the bright misty morning. Isla leaned against Ewan’s back, her arms about his waist, reflecting that the day seemed too perfect to be poisoned by the evil shadow of war and death that loomed over them all. It was an outrage, and it made her even more determined to succeed in her plan to save the two people she loved most in the world.

They crossed the perimeter of the camp and were greeted with respectful yet curious nods by the few soldiers present. At the open-air stable, Colin strode up to them and stood, arms akimbo, looking up at them both questioningly. “I see ye’re well enough tae ride then,” he remarked to Ewan.

“Aye, the healer stitched me up and dressed the wound properly. ’Tis sore, all right, but nae too deep. She says I’ll mend, but I havetae be careful of me stitches,” Ewan told him, waiting for Isla to slide from her perch to the ground before carefully dismounting himself. Not quite convinced by his claim to feel little pain, especially after what had happened last night at the inn, Isla almost reached out to help him. But she held back, conscious it would look odd coming from Harris.

“That’s good tae hear, but what took ye so long?” Colin asked with a frown. “I was expectin’ ye back last night. I was gettin’ worried about ye, what with Allan’s men in the area. I was about tae send a search party out fer ye.”

“The healer gave me a potion tae drink fer the pain, and it almost knocked me out. I thought it best tae stay at the inn last night so I could rest and sleep it off,” Ewan explained as they made their way to the tent. He gave no hint of the passionate intimacy that had taken place between him and Isla, but memories flickered through her mind, forcing her to lower her head to hide her flushed cheeks.

They stopped outside the tent. Ewan looked out over the camp and the few men going about their business. “Have ye got the men out trainin’ as I ordered?” he asked, pulling off his gloves.

“Aye, the majority of them. The displaced villagers are comin’ along quite well considerin’ most of them havenae picked up a sword before. Some of them are provin’ tae be valuable fighters,” Colin replied.

Ewan nodded approvingly. “Good, We need all the hands we can get. Any other news while I’ve been gone?”

Colin shook his head. “The bulk of Allan’s army daesnae seem tae be in the area yet, accordin’ tae the scouts’ latest reports anyway. That advance party ye ran intae yesterday was obviously gatherin’ information ahead of the arrival of the main force. A few stragglers got away, but we’re out lookin’ fer them now. Hopefully, we’ll get somethin’ useful out of them if we can capture them.”

“All right, good. If ye find any of them, I’ll question them mesel’. What about Galbraith’s missing sister?”

“Naethin’ so far,” Colin answered with a shrug.

“That’s disappointin’,” Ewan remarked, an edge of worry to his voice. Isla felt a surge of fresh guilt for deceiving him about her true identity when she knew the woman he was searching was standing right in front of him. She had been deeply

moved when he had confided in her about the torment he had endured the previous year when Allan had kidnapped his sister Deidra. In the circumstances, she found his attempts to help Gregory, his bitter enemy, to recover his own missing sister a sign of a noble and generous spirit that belied his stern exterior. It was yet another reason to love him.

“By tonight, if the old man is as good as his word and shows us the secret route intae the castle, we can plan our attack for the morrow. I’m gonnae answer a call of nature, but I’ll nae be long. Then I’ll rest fer a while. Call me when the old feller gets here,” Ewan told Colin, leaving him with Isla as he walked away.

Isla felt stab of hatred for the traitorous old man who had given up the castle’s secret in in exchange for gold, thereby putting so many lives in jeopardy. Since she had Colin alone, she decided it was worth making a last-ditch attempt to convince Colin that Ewan’s plan to attack the castle was far too risky.

Ewan trusts him, and if I can sow a seed of caution in his mind, mayhap he’ll be able tae persuade Ewan tae call it off. ’Tis a long-shot, but it might work.

“I’m worried, Colin,” she began, doing her best to appear earnest. “I dinnae think this plan of Ewan’s is gonnae work. ’Tis far too risky. Laird Galbraith is gonnae be expectin’ an attack, and his men are gonnae be ready fer anyone who shows up.”

Colin looked at her searchingly. “Is that so? Ye have experience in the strategies of war, dae ye?”

She blushed but forged ahead anyway. “Nay, but I can sense when somethin’s a bad idea and will likely end in our men bein’ slaughtered,” she replied. Hoping to appeal to his love for Ewan, she added more truthfully, “I dinnae want Ewan tae get hurt. He is already badly wounded.”

He gave her a strange look before he answered firmly but not unkindly, “There’s nae need fer ye tae worry. He’s an experienced strategist and a formidable fighter. I’m fully confident in his ability tae manage the risks involved.”

“I ken all that, but I just dinnae think he’s taken all the dangers intae account.” She felt she was fighting a losing battle but was loath to give up for obvious reasons.

“I told ye, ye have naethin’ tae worry about,” he repeated. Then, to her consternation, he folded his arms, looked her straight in the eyes, and said, “Ye seem awful concerned fer Ewan’s safety.”

Flustered, Isla retorted, “I am concerned fer his safety. Why should I nae be? He’s been good tae me, lettin’ me stay in the camp and givin’ me the chance tae get me revenge against Laird Allan. I dinnae want anythin’ bad tae happen tae him. But I’m worried fer all of the men’s safety, even yers, Colin.”

“Ye should have more faith in him, as I dae. He kens what he’s daen’.” He raised his sandy brows and continued to regard her curiously.

Disturbed by his scrutiny as well as disappointed by her failure to plant doubt in his mind, she got up and walked over to the stove. Keeping her back turned, she busied herself with fixing some tea. The skin between her shoulder blades prickled where she was sure his eyes were boring into her back, and she had the distinct feeling he knew something she did not.

She was relieved when Ewan returned shortly after that. While the tea brewed, she listened to the men discussing plans for the attack on the castle once again. Before long, they went outside to talk to the men, leaving her alone.

Seeing her chance to return to Ella’s and collect the potion, she left the tea to stew, grabbed her jacket, and stole from the tent. She could hear Ewan addressing the men

at the rallying point, so she easily reached the open air stable without being noticed. Quietly, she walked her mare out of the camp and into the woods before mounting her and cantering swiftly along the familiar route leading to Ella's cottage.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:00 am

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Walk the perimeter with me,” Colin said when Ewan dismissed them men. “I need tae talk tae ye about somethin’.”

“Aye, all right. I can inspect the defenses at the same time. What is it ye want tae talk tae me about?” he asked as they set off across the camp, thinking little of his friend’s request, assuming it was something to do with the upcoming attack.

“I want ye tae be honest with me about what’s goin on with ye and... Harris,” Colin said.

Ewan frowned, disconcerted by the question. He wondered if Colin could read his mind and had somehow divined that something significant had occurred between him and Isla at the inn. “What d’ye mean?” he replied cagily.

“Well, fer starters, I just had a very interestin’ conversation with her, and it seems she is so worried about ye gettin’ hurt in the attack that she tried tae persuade me tae get ye tae call it off.”

“Will ye be careful what ye say?” Ewan hissed, checking around to make sure no one had heard Colin’s slip of the tongue. While it warmed his heart to know Annie was afraid for him, he had not forgotten her attempts to convince him that searching for a secret entrance to the castle was naught but a fool’s errand that would end in bloodshed. “Tell me, what exactly did he say?” he asked Colin.

After Ewan’s reprimand, Colin recounted the conversation as if he were really

speaking of Harris. “It was obvious he was trying tae persuade me tae advise ye tae call off the attack. That’s very suspicious,” he finished. They reached the main entrance to the camp and nodded at the guards as they walked by.

“Maybe,” Ewan replied, putting his hands behind his back, his thoughts racing. He trusted Colin as his closest friend and knew he was only doing his job properly. Much as he wished he could simply take Annie’s apparent concern for him at face value, especially after what had happened between them at the inn, he knew he could not simply dismiss Colin’s remarks.

“Apart from that, I’m also troubled by this closeness ye and Harris seem tae have formed between yersel’s. There’s somethin’ different about ye lately, Ewan.”

“Eh? What are ye talkin’ about, man?” Ewan protested, glancing at Colin with surprise while inwardly flinching as his friend’s accusation touched a raw nerve.

“Dinnae bother tae deny it, Ewan. I’ve kent ye so long, ye cannae hide it from me. Somethin’s changed in ye, somethin’ significant. Ye might think ye can keep on hidin’ it from me. But I assure ye, I’m the man who kens ye better than any other, and sooner or later, whatever’s goin’ on will come tae light.”

Ewan did not respond to that. He knew Colin was right, something profound had changed within him, but he did not even understand it himself, and if he was confused by it, he doubted very much doubted Colin could either. With all that was on his mind, he did not care to discuss it further. “I dinnae ken what ye’re talkin’ about,” he hedged, adding briskly, “Now, let’s put an end tae such idle talk and focus on the business in hand, all right?”

Colin pursed his lips, but he nodded. “Aye,” he said.

They continued with the inspection of the camp’s defenses. However, when it was

finished and he parted from Colin, Ewan walked back to the tent with his friend's assertion about the change in him ringing in his mind. It left him with a lot to think about, and it always came back to one thing—Annie and the true nature of his feelings towards her.

Determined to talk to her about it right away he stepped inside the tent, her name already on his lips. He looked around, confused to find her nowhere in sight. Supposing she had slipped out for some reason, he went out again to look for her. But after searching for some time and still not finding her, he realized she must have sneaked out of the camp—against his specific orders.

Bloody hell! Where has she run off tae this time? Why can she never stay where I tell her to?

Filled with a mixture of anger, urgency, and apprehension, he strode to the stable to fetch his horse, determined to find her and bring her back. While he waited impatiently for the stallion to be saddled, he suddenly had an idea of where she might have gone. Once he was astride the beast, he quickly rode out of the camp and headed towards the healer's cottage at a gallop.

When he arrived, he was relieved to see Annie's mare grazing on the grass in the garden. He slid from the saddle, let his horse join her mare, and immediately went to hammer on the cottage door with his clenched fist. When Annie opened the door and looked out at him with a strangely fearful expression on her face, he let fly.

“Aye, ye should look afraid! What the bloody hell d’ye mean by disobeyin’ me orders like that? Have I nae told ye many times nae tae leave the camp without me permission? Can ye nae get in intae yer head that ’tis dangerous?!” he found himself shouting.

Her fearful look was quickly replaced by a flash of the old defiance “Sorry,” she

replied pertly, “there’s nay need tae tear yer hair out over it. As ye can see, I’m perfectly fine. Ye were busy, and I didnae wantae disturb ye over somethin’ so trivial as fetchin’ some more tea from Ella. I planned on bein’ back before ye even noticed I was gone.”

“Well, ye were nae back, and I damned will did notice. Now, if ye’re done, we’ll be gettin’ back tae the camp right away,” he replied, his anxiety and annoyance draining away rapidly. He refused to feel foolish for his outburst though. It was dangerous for her to go gallivanting about by herself. He did not know what he would do if any harm came to her.

Ella appeared in the doorway behind Annie, and he could see she was stifling her laughter. Ewan summoned a smile and nodded at her. She waved at him mirthfully. “Hello, Ewan. How’s yer chest? Is the wound healin’?” she called.

“Aye, thank ye, ’tis doin’ very well,” he replied. “I’m grateful for yer help.”

“Och, ye’re welcome. Now, dinnae forget tae have Annie here change the dressin’ eh?”

“I willnae.”

“Thank ye fer the firewood,” she added. He had given the order immediately upon his return to camp. “That’ll keep me goin’ fer a while.”

“Grand. We’re even then,” he told her. Then, he looked at Annie expectantly and jerked his chin at the horses. “Are ye comin’?”

She nodded. “Aye, give me a minute tae get the tea and I’ll be with ye.” She vanished inside, and he could hear them whispering together and the rustle of paper before she appeared a few moments later. Ella followed and stood in the doorway while they

mounted up and prepared to leave. Ewan saluted Ella over his shoulder, whilst Annie waved at her and called, “Good bye, Ella. Thank ye fer everythin’. Take care of yersel’. I hope I see ye again soon.”

“Likewise!” Ella called after them, returning the wave as she watched them ride off down the lane before finally shutting the door.

However, now Ewan had calmed down and Annie was safe at his side once more, he decided he was not going to put off the conversation he wanted to have with her any longer. But he was not yet ready to return to the tense atmosphere of the camp and thought it would be better to find a quiet place where they could talk in private. So, when he heard the distant sound of rushing water, he followed it, leading Annie beneath the trees into the lush forest.

“Where are we goin’?” she asked.

“I’m nae sure yet, but I’ll ken it when we get there,” he told her, forging onward between the trunks until, as he had suspected, they arrived at a secluded waterfall. The waters tumbled down from above before tracing a glittering path over large rocks and a gravelly bed that wound between steep banks. The gentle splashing and gurgling created an atmosphere that was both peaceful and intimate. “This is it,” he said, thinking it the perfect spot to confide his feelings for her at last.

“‘Tis very pretty and tranquil,” she murmured as they dismounted and walked slowly the edge of the waters and stood side by side looking out over the lovely scene.

“I havenae told ye this before,” he began, “but this reminds me of home.”

“Oh? Is it by a waterfall?” Annie asked.

“Nay, but me castle is on the coast and it overlooks the sea. For as long as I can

remember, the sight and sound of water has been the only thing that truly calmed me soul.”

“Aye, I love the water too. ’Tis very soothin’,” she agreed. “But ye said ’tis the only thing that calmed ye. Daes that mean somethin’ has changed?”

He turned to face her and nodded. “Aye. Somethin’ has. Bein’ around ye, Annie, also brings me a deep sense of calm. When ye’re nae givin’ me a heart attack by doin’ one of yer disappearin’ acts that is.”

She laughed as she looked up at him. “I ken ye’re jokin’ because ye must feel the opposite of calm around someone who once tried tae kill ye.”

Ewan had to smile at that. “Och, I’m certain that I’ll eventually uncover yer reasons fer that and whoever was behind yer attempt tae assassinate me. But I dinnae wantae think about that now.”

“Oh?” she replied, smiling at him a little uncertainly as he moved closer to her and looked deeply into her eyes. They seemed to have taken on the green of the canopy above.

“Annie?” he said softly.

“Hmm?” She took a small step backwards and must have misjudged her footing, for before either of them knew what was happening, the edge of the gravel bank gave way beneath her foot. She let out a little scream as one leg buckled beneath her and she teetered on the edge of the steep bank, her arms windmilling frantically in an attempt to regain her balance. But it was not enough to stop the momentum of the fall, and she looked at him in horror as she began to go over the edge. Her arms reached out to him in desperation, and she screamed, “Ewan! Help me!”

Acting on pure instinct, Ewan's arm shot out, and in one movement, he grasped her hand, yanked her back from the brink and then wrapped his free arm around her waist, pulling her to safety and away from the edge. She fell into his arms and hugged him tightly, sobbing with relief. "I could have died if ye hadnae caught me, Ewan. Thank ye, thank ye fer savin' me," she gasped, her voice breaking.

Ewan was more shaken than he cared to let on, and he could feel her heart pounding against his chest as he held her tightly. "That was close. Thank God. Are ye all right, Annie?" he asked, looking down at her face worriedly. She looked so young and scared it tugged at his heartstrings.

"Aye, I-I am now," she stuttered, still hugging him as if she would never let go, a sensation he found himself enjoying now she was safe. The look on her face as she had fallen, the way she had reached out to him, trusting him to save her was affecting him profoundly. Overwhelmed by relief and tenderness, he cradled her head in his hands, bent his head and kissed her lips.

The warmth with which she immediately responded to him lit a fire inside him, and the intensity of their kiss and the intimacy of their embrace flared rapidly into a passion he could not have stopped even if he had wanted to. Lifting her off her feet, he carried her over to a grassy spot far enough away from the steep bank to be safe from further danger. There, he laid her gently down and lowered himself beside her, leaning on his forearm.

"Be careful of yer stitches," she whispered, reaching up to stroke his face, her eyes shining like gems as they looked deeply into his. He felt he could happily drown in them.

"Dinnae fash yersel'," he told her with a smile, his voice low and thick, "I'll scream if they start tae hurt. Right now, I have other things on me mind." He pulled off her cap and let down her golden plait while she lay looking up at him, her chest rising

and falling rapidly, her lips slightly open. The sight inflamed him further, and he groaned as he buried his hand in her hair, cradling her head, and kissed her again, more forcefully this time, taking full possession of the lips he already thought of as belonging to him.

“Och, Ewan, yer kisses taste so sweet, I never want ye tae stop,” she begged him, slipping her arms about his neck and tangling her fingers in his hair, her body writhing against his provocatively.

“Unless ye tell me tae, I’m nae gonnae stop, Annie, because I cannae have enough of ye,” he told her hoarsely, his manhood already rock hard and pressing urgently against the front of his trews and her belly. “I wantae make love tae ye so badly, so tell me tae stop now if ye dinnae want me tae go any further,” he said, his breath coming raggedly as his arousal grew.

“I told ye, I dinnae what ye tae stop,” she panted, her eyes alight with excitement, her small hands gliding over his shoulders beneath his shirt.

“Thank God fer that!” he exclaimed happily, leaning up and tearing off his coat, then his jerkin and shirt. He watched hungrily as she hurriedly wriggled out of her clothing, revealing her deliciously lithe, curvaceous body, and her smooth, white skin, a sight which fanned the flames of his desire ever higher. He hastily pulled off his boots and stockings and shucked off his trews. Naked now, his manhood throbbing like a club between his legs, he gazed down at her perfection, hungry to devour her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“I ’m gonnae eat ye all up,” he promised, falling to his knees and pushing hers apart, to reveal the delicious secret folds of her sex. “Mmm, I cannae wait tae taste ye,” he growled, parting her with his thumbs before he fell on her gaping core with his lips and tongue, spurred on by her moans of pleasure and the thrusting of her hips as he opened her wider, worrying her stiffening rosebud with his mouth until she screamed, “Ah! Ah! Ewan, aye, aye!”

Thrilled at the way she screamed his name, he chuckled to himself as he worked his tongue into every corner of her hot, slick flesh, darting it in and out of her entrance until she was soaking.

“Aye, ye like that, eh?”

“Och, ’tis wonderful, Ewan, ’tis heavenly,” she moaned, her head thrashing from side to side, her hips coming up to meet his questing mouth.

“And d’ye like this too?” he asked, full of lascivious mischief, sliding his fingers inside her one by one, working them rhythmically in and out, deeper and deeper each time, excited to feel her walls closing tightly around him. All the while he teased her rosebud with his tongue and lips and teeth, reveling in her little screams and mewls of pleasure. When she gripped his hair tightly and screamed, he redoubled his efforts, bringing her to a shuddering climax, relishing the taste of her juices.

“I need more of ye, Ewan,” she panted, still gripping his hair tightly, “all of ye, inside me now!”

“Are ye sure?” he panted, wanting to be certain it was what she wanted as she was still a maid.

“I’ve never been surer of anythin’ in me life,” she assured him, winding her legs around his waist, and tightening them, pressing her burning flesh against his belly. “And ye’re nae goin’ anywhere ’til I get what I want!”

“If ye insist, madam,” he replied, laughing with lustful joy, feeling more alive than he ever had, anticipating what he knew was going to be the most wonderful experience. “It might hurt a little at first, but I’ll be gentle and it’ll soon pass, and then, it’ll feel good,” he reassured her, wanting to make her first time as pleasurable as he could. “But if it hurts too much, tell me and I’ll stop.”

“Ewan, will ye stop talkin’, please,” she murmured, tightening her thighs around his waist even more and tugging gently on his locks. She smiled up at him, her eyes slits, inflaming his senses.

“I’m nae gonnae argue with ye,” he replied hoarsely, positioning the head of his throbbing length against her entrance and pushing slowly to her slick tightness, letting out a deep groan of pleasure as he pushed deep inside her.

“Och me God, Ewan that’s... that’s... ah!” she breathed, her eyes fixed on his as he slid his entire length in and then out of her, taking his time so as not to hurt her.

“Am I hurtin’ ye?” he asked, just to be sure.

She shook her head. “Ye could nae hurt me if ye tried. I want more of ye!”

He grinned as she thrust her hips upward to meet his downstroke, and he concentrated hard to keep his pace steady, reveling in the tightness of her walls as they squeezed him tightly, sending waves of intense pleasure shooting throughout his entire body.

The sensations she was making him feel were so exquisite, so intoxicating, he wanted to make them last as long as possible.

But after a few minutes, his body compelled him to speed up the pace of his rhythmic thrusts, his hips pounding against hers as she cried out in her passion, clutching frantically at his shoulders. He could hear his heavy ragged breaths as his hips met hers and he went deep inside her, shaking her body, making her writhe and moan as she drew ever closer to her climax.

When she screamed, “Ewan! Aye, oh, aye!” and came in a quivering, liquid rush, he let himself go.

“Annie, Annie, me bonny lassie!” he grunted, cradling her sweat-slick body tightly against his with his last few, hard thrusts inside her before, a few seconds later, he tumbled headlong after her into indescribable ecstasy.

Isla lay in Ewan’s strong arms, skin to skin, spent and content, her heart overflowing with love for him. “I’m happier at this moment than I’ve ever been in me life. I ken paradise truly exists now,” she told him, tracing the line of his lips with her fingertips. “Right here on earth with ye, Ewan.”

He laughed and kissed her hair, holding her closer against him as if he would never let her go. It was wonderful! “Aye, I think ye must be right, me beautiful Annie. I’m very happy as well. Ye make me feel so alive! I kent ye were special that night when I caught ye in me tent and I looked intae yer eyes in the candlelight. I dinnae ken why it’s taken me so long tae realize it.”

“I think I felt it too,” she admitted, remembering the jolt that had gone through her when she had seen his face for the first time. “I’d never seen such a braw man before! Ye turned me world on its head,” she added teasingly, taking his bottom lip between her teeth and gently biting it. It was true, though, she knew it. After that, all her plans

to murder him had gone awry. And now, she was his body and soul, forever as far as she was concerned.

She kissed him lazily as she reflected on how he had not hesitated to save her from almost certain death by the waterfall. The realization had changed something deep within her. She already trusted him, but after that, she knew she could never leave him, that she would do just about anything to save him from harm. It made her even more determined about her plan to buy herself enough time to warn Gregory of the intended attack should succeed.

After a while of lying there together in perfect harmony, Ewan ruffled her hair and said, "We'd better get back."

"Aye," she reluctantly agreed as he got to his feet and put out his hand to help her up. They embraced and kissed once more before getting dressed and setting off back to the camp. She cast a backward glance over her shoulder as they left the secluded spot where Ewan had made her from a girl to a woman. She knew it well, of course, but now it took on an unforgettable significance in her mind. Whatever happened, from this day forward, it would always be a special place.

On their journey back, her body still tingling pleurably from Ewan's loving, she knew she still had her mission ahead of her. The tightly stoppered flask of potion she had obtained from Ella was stashed safely in her inside jacket pocket, ready for use later that night. Ella had warned her that the mixture was so potent, only two or three drops in, say, a tankard of ale or kettle of water would send the biggest man to sleep within half an hour.

That was ideal for her purposes, but making sure everyone in the camp got a sufficient dose and fell asleep at the right time presented a logistical problem. Besides that, she was uncertain when the old man was due to arrive to show Ewan the way into the tunnel system. Having not quite figured it all out yet, with so much riding on

her success, it was with trepidation in her heart that they reached the camp a short while later.

It was the hour when the cooks were already busy preparing supper, meaning the camp would likely be eating within the next hour or so. Isla was feeling a little guilty, knowing she was about to practice a major deception on him. She reminded herself that she was acting for a good cause strolled around the camp, wending her way by degrees to the kitchen wagon.

She decided that adding the sleeping potion to the ale barrel was the best way to ensure that everyone, save perhaps the odd few, would get a good dose. Fortunately, the cooks and their assistants were busy, so no one took any notice of her when she casually sidled up to the barrel and jostled against it. The liquid inside sloshed about, but she could tell it was close to the bottom. Surreptitiously she turned on the little tap and stood in front of the barrel as the remaining ale dripped out onto the ground.

Once she was sure it was empty, making certain she was not being observed, she went around the back of the wagon, where the other barrels were stacked up. Choosing the nearest one, she took out the flask from her pocket, removed the stopper, and set the precious flask down carefully atop the neighboring barrel, not wanting to risk spilling a drop. Then, she took out her dagger and prized the lid of the chosen barrel up just enough for her to pour the whole contents of the flask inside.

That done, she returned to the front of the wagon, to the now empty barrel, and grabbed an empty beaker from a nearby stand before approaching one of the assistants. "The barrel's empty, and I'm parched," she told him, holding up the empty beaker. "Will ye open a fresh one so I can get a drink?"

"Aye, of course," he agreed with a nod, leaving what he was doing to oblige her. He lifted down the empty one and replaced it with the full one she had prepared, to her relief, just as she had planned. He set it up and tapped into it. "There ye go, fill yer

boots,” he said with a smile and walked away to return to his task. She did not fill her boots for obvious reasons but instead returned to the tent to await developments with nervous anticipation.

Ewan eventually returned and supper, stewed rabbit, was duly delivered to the tent, along with the usual large jug of ale. They chatted over the meal, and though she was nervous and had little appetite, Isla forced herself to eat heartily so as not to arouse his suspicions. She watched Ewan as he drank deeply of the doctored ale throughout the meal.

“Well, that was a tough old rabbit but I needed that. I’d worked up quite an appetite,” he remarked with a cheeky smile when he had finished eating, refilling his mug with fresh ale from the jug. “Are ye nae drinkin?” He asked her, holding the jug poised, giving her a questioning look.

She put her hand over her mug and shook her head. “Nay, I think I’ll stick with tea.”

“All right,” he replied, setting down the jug and beaming at her as he leaned his elbows on the table. “We had a lovely time today by the waterfall, eh?”

Touched by his soft expression and the exciting memories of their few hours together, she could not help but smile back, despite her anxiety. “Aye, it was wonderful, Ewan. I’ll never forget it as long as I live.”

“Aye, it’s engraved in me heart, fer certain,” he assured her, then suddenly shook his head and frowned. “I suddenly feel awful tired. D’ye feel tired too?”

“Aye, I dae,” she lied, nodding.

“It must have been all that exercise in the fresh air this afternoon,” he said, giving her a lascivious grin before he rubbed his eyes and yawned. “I think I’ll have a wee lie

down afore we prepare fer the attack on the castle. Come on, come and lay down with me.” He rose from the table and staggered against it. “Whoa!”

“Too much of that strong ale,” she told him, guiding him over to the cot.

“Aye, maybe so, but it daesnae usually affect me like this,” he replied, his expression puzzled as he stretched out on the cot and pulled her down at his side, his arms around her.

“Dinnae forget ye are taking medicine and still healing as well,” she reminded him, then added, “Ewan, when ye ride out tae attack the castle, ye are gonnae let me come with ye, are ye nae?” she asked, hiding how important it was that he agreed. She absolutely had to be there.

“Aye, ye can come, as long as ye do exactly as I say and stay close tae me at all times,” he told her sleepily. “I dinnae want ye tae get intae any danger.”

“Good, thank ye,” she told him, relieved he had agreed so readily. She lay next to him, stroking his cheek, watching as he succumbed to the powerful drug and soon entered a half-dazed state. He hugged her tightly.

“Ye ken, Annie,” he murmured into her ear, “this afternoon was the best of me life. I dinnae think I ever really understood what it means tae make love tae a woman before, but with ye... well, ’tis somethin’ altogether different. I think I’m fallin’ in love with ye.”

Isla’s heart melted at his confession, and she hated herself for what she was doing to him. When his lips sought hers once more, she put everything she felt for him into the slow, tender kiss they shared. But before anything more could happen, the sleeping potion took full possession of him, and he drifted off to sleep.

As he lay there, looking so peaceful and vulnerable, she brushed a stray lock of dark hair from his forehead and whispered softly, “And I’m fallin’ I love with ye too, Ewan.”

Hoping that by now everybody in the camp would be in a similar state, she waited patiently for a while before she began extricating herself from his arms, eager to be about her urgent business. But, to her distress, every time she moved, he tightened his grip on her, preventing her from leaving his side. Over and over she tried, growing increasingly frantic, seeing her last chance to speak to Gregory before the attack slipping away after she had worked so hard for it.

In the end, she was almost crying with frustration, but it made no difference. He seemed to have some kind of sixth sense and simply blocked any move she made to leave the cot. She was forced to lay like that all night until, exhausted by anxiety and fear, she fell asleep herself. And when she awoke with a start the next morning, Ewan was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A larmed, she sat bolt upright, instantly alert to the sounds of preparation going on outside, shouted orders, loud voices, the rattle of weaponry, men and horses moving about in numbers.

Is he goin' without me? He cannae dae that! He promised tae take me with him!

She got up, pulled on her cap, shirt, and trousers and ran outside.

She spotted Ewan immediately. He was standing over a small table with Colin and his sergeants gathered around him. A broad, powerful figure, he stood a head taller than the tallest of them and was talking and stabbing a finger at a map on the table, clearly engrossed in going over the plans for the attack. He looked every inch the fearsome, seasoned warrior, clad in full battle gear.

He wore his leather trews and long boots, and a long mail shirt that reached almost to his knees showed below the hem of his studded leather jerkin. Thick leather pads protected his shoulders and laced leather vambraces his wrists and hands. His gloves were stuck in his belt, his helmet rested by his feet along with his shield. His weapon's belt held his sword and two, foot-long dirks. With his dark, determined features and look of intent, he was a sight to instill fear in the bravest of fighters.

Nevertheless, she feared for his safety, and she was not about to let him go without her. She was terrified that if it came down to it and Gregory got the better of him in the fray, she had to be there to plead for his life, and vice versa. So, she did not hesitate to run over to him and confront him. She pushed herself between him and

Colin and said loudly, “What are ye doin’? Were ye plannin’ on goin’ without me when ye promised tae take me with ye? Why have ye nae called me tae get ready?!”

With Colin and the other men looking on with surprise, and some amusement, Ewan proceeded to tell her gently but firmly, “I changed me mind. ’Tis too dangerous, Harris, and ye’re too young and inexperienced. So, I’ve decided ye’ll nae be comin’ with us after all.”

Frustrated and angry, Isla grabbed his arm. “But ye promised! I havetae come with ye!” she cried.

Ewan looked at Colin and his men and said calmly, “Ye’ll havetae excuse me fer a minute. Carry on.” Then she grasped Isla firmly by her arm and steered her into the tent.

“Ye havetae take me with ye, Ewan, ye gave me yer word last night,” she repeated, toe to toe with him, desperate to change his mind.

“Annie, what’s all this about? Look, I told ye, I’ve made me decision. ’Tis best if ye stay here out of harm’s way,” he told her in a low voice.

“Nay! I’m nae lettin’ ye leave me here. I havetae come with ye,” she exclaimed, unwilling to give in.

“Can ye nae understand why I changed me mind? I cannae bear the idea of ye gettin’ hurt, especially nae now,” he argued. “Ye must stay here, Annie, where ye’ll be safe and can get away if things go bad.”

“But d’ye nae see that’s why I havetae come with ye?! I cannae bear the thought of somethin’ bad happenin’ tae ye either. I need tae be there tae protect ye!”

He looked taken aback and almost smiled. “What? How the hell are ye gonnae protect me? What d’ye think ye’re gonnae dae if I get injured or someone tries tae kill me? Are ye gonnae fight them off with yer dirk?” he asked, clearly exasperated by her insistence.

“Ach, why will ye nae listen tae me?” she cried, bunching her fists at her sides. “I can protect ye!”

He shook his head, obviously bewildered. “Have ye gone mad? Ye are gonnae protect me?”

“Aye!”

He folded his arms and stared down at her, clearly humoring her. “All right, explain tae me exactly how ye mean tae dae that.”

She lost her temper completely then, and before she knew what she was saying, she blurted out, “Because Gregory Galbraith is me braither, and I might just be able tae stop ye from killin’ each other!”

A deafening silence fell between them. Ewan’s mouth had fallen open, and he was staring at her, looking as though he had been poleaxed. Eventually he said, “Say that again.”

Isla sighed, knowing there was no going back now. Taking a deep breath, she explained as calmly as she could, “Me name is Isla Galbraith, and I’m the sister of Laird Gregory Galbraith. I care deeply about the both of ye, and I dinnae want either of ye tae get hurt. But without me there today, ye’ll try tae kill each other. That’s why ye must take me with ye.”

He was so stunned by the revelation, he had to grip the back of the chair tightly to

stop himself from staggering and falling on his knees. For a moment or two he could only stare at her in dumb shock. Eventually, he found his voice. “Ye-ye’re Galbraith’s sister, the one that’s supposed tae be missin’?” he said, hating the way his voice shook.

Annie, no, Isla Galbraith, lifted her chin, looked him in the eye, and nodded. “Aye. I’m sorry I had tae lie tae ye about me true identity, Ewan, but I couldnae think of any other way of protectin’ mesel’ and gettin’ ye tae let me stay in the camp and learn more,” she explained with an almost calm voice.

He turned aside, raking his fingers through his hair as the truth came crashing in on him from all sides. “That’s why ye came here in the first place, tae kill me, because ye’re his sister! And ye stayed because ye’ve been spyin’ on me all this time, lyin’ tae me about who ye are.” He shook his head in disbelief. “I’ve been a fool. Colin was right all along. Nay wonder ye’ve been sneakin’ off every chance ye get. I suppose ye’ve been reportin’ back tae yer braither every word I’ve said.”

“If I had, then why has the siege lasted so long? And why are ye now plannin’ tae attack the castle, the castle full of people I’ve kent all me life? Besides, how could I when ye’ve hardly let me out of yer sight? And of course, I wanted tae kill ye at first because ye threatened me braither and clan, the only family I have left. I had tae try tae dae somethin’ tae protect him. Ye were me enemy!” she cried passionately. “I was afraid that if ye kent who I was, ye’d hold me fer ransom, use me tae force Gregory intae givin’ way tae ye. I couldnae let that happen.”

Ewan rounded on her angrily. “That’s a dammed lie! I’m nae like Allan. I would never stoop so low as tae use a woman that way. I ken what it is tae lose a sister. I meant tae find ye and send ye back safe tae yer braither,” he declared, breathing hard with emotion.

“All right, I ken that now, but that was what I believed at first,” she replied. “That

was afore I got tae ken ye, Ewan,” she went on in a gentler tone, trying to approach him. But he turned away from her, unable to look at her. The betrayal hurt so much, he could hardly stand it.

“Ye lied tae me, ye made me care about ye, ye laid with me fer God’s sake! And all the time ye were the sister of the very man I seek tae defeat, the woman I sent me men out huntin fer, who I was so worried about.” Pain stabbed at his heart like a dagger.

“Ewan, please, listen tae me—” she began, but he held up his hand to cut her off.

“Dinnae say anymore. I’ve heard enough.” Shocked and heartbroken, he realized that their relationship was fraught with impossible obstacles. He quickly came to a decision. “I cannae trust ye, I’ll never be able tae trust ye. What we have had can only lead only tae ruin. Leave now and go back tae yer braither. ’Tis best if we dinnae speak again.”

“But, Ewan, I dinnae wantae leave ye,” she said pleadingly, starting to sob. “Let me help ye win yer peace. I can help ye. I can talk tae Gregory.”

He shook his head, hardening his heart. “Go, I said. Now.” He turned his back on her. She waited for a few moments in silence and then did as he said, stifling her sobs as she left the tent. He was shaking, so he spent a few minutes taking deep breaths, assembling a mask of composure before he pulled himself up, straightened his shoulders, and marched out of the tent to join his men.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Hardly able to see because of the tears she was holding back and uncaring of the stares she drew from Colin and the waiting soldiers outside the tent, a distraught Isla ran as fast as she could to the open-air stables and saddled her mare with shaking hands. Then, her heart breaking with the pain of Ewan's, she let the tears flow as she turned her mount into the woods and rode quickly through the trees until she came to the entrance of the secret tunnels into the castle.

Once there, she hitched the horse to a nearby tree and opened the secret entrance that was concealed in a thicket. Once inside, with the door firmly shut behind her, dashing tears from her cheeks, she groped in the darkness for the old tinderbox she knew was kept in a small alcove by the entrance. Finding it with relief, she struck a light, protecting the wavering flame of the half-candle with her hand as she hurried along the passages, heading for the main floor in search of Gregory.

She choked back more tears, gasping for breath as she moved rapidly up the castle's many levels via spiraling stone stairways, driven by the urgency of the situation.

There's nae time tae dwell on me heartbreak . I havetae find Gregory and warn him straightaway of Ewan's plan. The attack could begin at any moment!

By the secret route, she made straight for Gregory's study and burst out through the concealed door, to be confronted by her brother, Kelvin, and Domnhall. They had obviously been talking, and when she suddenly appeared, their heads turned as one, jaws dropping in shock. Clearly taking her for an intruder, they each stepped back and, quick as lightening, snatched their dirks from their belts, assuming a fighting

stance, while Isla stood there panting, out of breath.

“Get back, damn ye! How did ye get in here? Who the devil are ye?!” Kelvin demanded fiercely, coming forward in defense of his laird and waving his blade at her with a menacing snarl.

She pulled off her cap and her plait fell down. “’Tis me,” she puffed, hurrying towards her stunned brother. “Gregory, I havetae speak tae ye right away, ’tis very urgent!”

“Isla? Is... is it really ye?” Kelvin gasped, staggering back against his cousin in obvious amazement.

“Jaysus, ’tis her, she’s alive!” Domnhall exclaimed, staring at her open-mouthed.

Gregory too was looking at her, his face pale with shock. “Isla, thank God ye’re safe!” he exclaimed at first.

“Are ye all right, Gregory?” she asked rushing to embrace him. They hugged each other tight.

“Aye! Thank the Lord above that ye are alive and well! Ye dinnae ken how worried we have been, on top of everyhtin’ else!”

“I’ve missed ye so much, and I’ve been so worried about ye as well,” she told him, her heart filled with love and relief to see him and hear his voice.

Finally, he drew back and looked at her closely, resting his hands on her shoulders. “Where have ye been? Did Ballentine capture ye? Has he been keepin’ ye prisoner all this time? Did ye escape?” he asked.

“Nae exactly,” she replied, knowing he was going to be even more shocked when he found out the truth. “I’m sorry tae have caused ye so much worry. I wanted tae get a message tae ye tae tell ye I was all right, but I didnae get the chance. And I couldnae tell ye why I left the castle in the first place because ye would have stopped me.”

He started back. “Ye left the castle? With the enemy outside the gates, out of yer own choice? Have ye lost yer wits?!” he erupted. “How ye’re still alive is a bloody miracle.” With an expression of furious disbelief, he looked her up and down, his brow creased into a deep frown. “And why in God’s name are ye dressed like an enemy soldier?”

“’Tis a long story, and there’s nae time tae tell it twice, so listen well tae what I have tae say.” She quickly explained how she had gone to assassinate Ewan, failed, and ended up joining his camp, posing as Harris but intending to spy for Gregory. At various points in the story, Gregory put his head in his hands and let out expletives and blasphemous curses to express.

“Ewan is a good man,” she declared finally, “he daesnae want any more bloodshed, he wants peace. Allan is an evil man, Gregory. He stole Ewan’s lands, and he kidnapped Ewan’s sister. When he found out I was missin’, he sent his men out tae search for me. He said he knew the pain of losing a sister, and he wanted tae find me and send me back tae ye safe despite the war.”

Gregory looked deeply skeptical. “A likely story,” he said. “It seems ye’ve fallen for his lies.”

“He didnae ken who I was. He made me dress like a man while being his captive to protect me from his men, while keeping me close to protect himself without imprisoning me. He thought I was a village girl who had been paid tae kill him. ’Tis ye who’ve fallen fer Allan’s lies,” she corrected him, trying to keep calm and use all her powers of persuasion. “The man’s corrupt, a murderin’ menace. He’s usin’ ye tae

help him destroy Ewan and take all he owns! That's why he started this war. Ye're on the wrong side, Gregory. Ye have tae change yer allegiance now and join with Ewan tae defeat him."

"That's nonsense. Allan speaks the truth. 'Tis Ballentine who's the liar. Besides, I'm a man of me word, and I dinnae change sides when it suits me." Gregory said resolutely, shaking his head. "Allan's army is already on its way, and once the reinforcements get here, I'll be in a much stronger position tae defeat Ballentine once and fer all. Then ye'll see I'm right."

"Allan has put ye against each other and waited tae send his men until he knew ye would weaken each other. And what d'ye think Allan will dae then, when ye've helped him destroy Ewan?" she asked. "Ewan thinks he intends tae turn on ye helped by yer weakened state and kill ye as well, and then he'll take over both clans."

"What?!" Gregory cried, seeming genuinely shocked by the idea, as if it had never occurred to him. Isla noticed how Kelvin and Domnhall both looked at him with concern on their faces, as if seeking his reassurance. He tried to shrug it off. "Ach, that's more of Ballentine's stories. I dinnae believe that fer a minute. Allan's a good man. He'd never dae somethin' like that tae me, his staunchest ally."

Isla shook her head. "Ye're foolin' yersel' if ye go on believin' that, Gregory. Ewan Ballentine is a man of honor. I tried tae kill him, and he could have had me killed as an assassin and a spy. But he chose tae protect me instead. He daesnae trade in lies and corruption, he's the victim of Allan's connivin' greed, his people have been displaced from their homes. He's been forced intae a war he never wanted. All he wants is his land back, and peace. Allan is a thief, a liar, a kidnapper, and a murderer. Where has he been all these weeks? Why has he nae come tae yer aid, braither? He's gonnae take over both our clans if ye dinnae stop him by joinin' with Ewan against him," she insisted calmly.

Gregory's expression darkened, revealing his growing unease. Isla knew her words were starting to hit home, but his next words told her she still had a long way to go in convincing him she was telling the truth.

"I've already told ye, Isla, I dinnae trust Ballentine, and neither should ye. Allan might nae be a saint. I admit I havenae agreed with everything he's done, and I dinnae care fer the brutality he's inflicted on Ballentine's people. But I'd be shocked tae find out he did kidnap Ballentine's sister... where's the proof, Isla? Ye only have Ballentine's word fer that," Gregory argued.

"Allan's done right by me so far, and I'll continue tae support him. I rely on Allan tae supply us with all the grain we need tae feed our people. Ye ken very well how many hardships the clan's faced these last few years due tae poor harvests. The alliance with Allan is the only way I've managed tae ensure our survival. Even if I did wantae change sides, me hands are tied," he explained.

Isla nodded, having listened carefully to what her brother had to say. Nevertheless, she found his continual refusals to believe her deeply frustrating, especially as time was ticking by and the pressure on them was growing every second. She knew she could not give up trying to persuade him. "Aye, I can see ye're caught in a difficult position, Gregory, but if Ewan's lands were restored, he would likely be able tae supply us with the same amount of grain and spare our people from Allan's demands as well," she pointed out reasonably.

"Nay, there's nay way of bein' sure about that. I cannae just let go of a guaranteed supply," he said with an air of finality. Isla looked at him intently, but she saw no sign of his resolution softening. Her hope of persuading him dwindled but she knew she could not just give up hope.

"Is that all ye have tae say?" she asked finally, a new plan forming in her mind.

“Aye, it is,” he replied staunchly.

“Very well. I’ll leave ye tae yer discussion then.” Before any of them could react, she walked calmly out of the study. As soon as she was alone in the hallway outside, she ran to the nearby parlor where there was another secret door leading to the underground passages. She took a lamp from a side table and lit it with a spill from the fire before opening the secret door in the paneling and starting back down the winding stairways as fast as she could.

The only thought in her mind now was to find Ewan and warn him of the imminent arrival of the reinforcements. If he would listen to her.

Laird Calumn Allan’s Army Camp, one mile north of Castle Galbraith

“The men are ready fer ye, m’laird,” said Captain Ruaraigh Conway, poking his head inside the tent of his commander.

“I’ll be there directly,” Laird Allan replied, hardly glancing at his deputy as he spoke. Conway withdrew, and Allan allowed himself a small moment of pleasurable reflection. He was looking forward to the coming battle and the long-awaited opportunity to defeat Ballentine once and for all. “I’ll crush the bastard and have his head on a pike by the end of the day,” he promised himself under his breath, his hard, weatherbeaten features twisting into a malicious grin.

Already in full battle gear save for his helmet, shield, and gloves, he picked up the latter from the table and made his way out of the tent. His army of reinforcements, two-hundred strong of well-trained, battle-hardened fighters, stood ranked before him. Armed to the teeth, they were set to mount up and ride out to at Castle Galbraith, hardly a mile distant, and wage the final chapter of the war on his foe Ewan Ballentine and his army.

Allan nodded approvingly at his men as he strode over to mount his enormous stallion, which was presently being held by the reins by a young soldier. Once in the saddle, another lad handed him his helmet and shield. He put the helmet on and slung the shield over his shoulder with practiced ease. He pulled on his gloves, then took the reins and turned the mighty beast, ready to give a final address to encourage his men.

“Now, lads, this is the last time we’ll havetae battle that scum Ballentine, and we’re gonnae grind him and his excuse fer an army intae the ground. I want ye all tae remember yer orders.” He paused and raised his voice before continuing, “Nae a single one of them should be allowed tae leave here alive, d’ye hear me?” The men roared their approving assent.

“But if ye come across Ballentine, dinnae kill him. Take him prisoner. I want tae finish the dog mesel’, am I clear?!” Again, the men shouted and stamped their boots and clapped, signaling their dedication to carrying out their laird’s wishes. “Good lads. And tonight, after our victory is won, I promise ye the biggest celebration ye could wish fer, with as much ale and whisky as ye can drink, and as many wenches as ye can catch.” That drew an even bigger cheer.

With his speech over, Allan walked his horse over to his team of officers, who were also mounting their horses. With a gesture, he gathered them around him for a final word before they set off.

“This’ll be an easy victory with that fool Galbraith there tae help us,” he told them in a low voice. “The man has nae idea that as soon as we’ve defeated Ballentine, we’ll have the perfect opportunity tae take over his castle and overthrow him as well. If we pull this off, lads, there’s plenty of gold and it fer all of us. Now, come on, let’s get at it!”

Filled with a fresh sense of urgency, Isla emerged into the forest from the hidden

entrance. She retrieved the horse and rode as fast as she could back to the camp. When she arrived near the perimeter, she halted among the trees for a few minutes, recovering her breath. Then, she entered, left the mare at the stable, and walked casually among the men, straight to Ewan's tent.

When she entered, he was alone, his back to her, reading something. "Ewan," she said, stopping a few feet away. He turned sharply at the sound of her voice, his expression immediately darkening.

"What have ye come back here fer?" he questioned abruptly, putting a piece of paper he held in his hand on the table and facing her directly. "Ye should be with yer braither."

She wanted to run to him, to embrace and kiss him, but his whole demeanor told her that such a show of affection would be greeted with coldness. It was painful to accept, but she loved him, and even if he despised her, she was determined to help him. "Ewan, I had tae come back tae warn ye. Allan's reinforcements are very close tae the castle. Gregory expects them tae arrive any moment," she explained hurriedly, not daring to approach any nearer.

His dark brown eyes seemed black as jet as they swept over her, burning her with their cold gaze. After a small eternity, which was agony for Isla, he finally said, "I'm tryin' tae workout why, given the loyalty ye must bear yer braither, ye've come here, against me wishes, tae give his enemy this information."

"I ken what ye must think of me, but I had tae come back, Ewan. I dinnae want ye tae get hurt. I couldnae bear it," she admitted, wondering how to convince him of her sincerity.

"That's why ye've been spyin' on me and lyin' tae me, is it? Because ye care so much about me?" he replied sarcastically.

“Aye, that’s exactly why!” she exclaimed, frustrated. It was as hard trying to get through to him as it had been to Gregory.

“Ye’ll havetae dae better than that.”

She realized there was one thing that might convince him. She could tell him how she felt about him, truthfully. She looked into his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to frame the words. In the end, they came out quite simply. “Because I’m in love with ye, Ewan.”

Ewan’s dark brows lifted slightly as he stared at her in disbelief. He shook his head. “Ye really expect me tae believe that, after ye took me fer a fool fer so long? How can I trust anythin’ ye say?”

“Because ye havetae,” Isla answered.

For a few moments, he said nothing. Then, suddenly, he was in front of her, cupping her face in his palms and looking down at her with soft eyes.

“D’ye mean it?” he breathed, his thumbs stroking her cheeks, his gaze intent.

She reached up and gently took hold of his wrists. “I mean it, every word. I love ye, I never wantae leave ye, and I cannae stand the thought of ye gettin’ hurt.”

“By God, I’ve missed ye,” he told her, folding her in his arms, his lips finding hers. He kissed her with such ferocious longing, the fire of passion flared within her once more.

“I’ve missed ye too, Ewan, so, so much,” she whispered, her arms about his neck, pressing her lips to his again and again, almost delirious with joy to be back in his arms.

He promptly picked her up, cradling her behind. Feeling his hardening manhood pressing against her sex even through their clothing, she shivered with delight, giggling and winding her legs around his waist as he carried her over to the cot, kissing her intently, and threw her down.

“Ewan! What if someone comes in?” she asked a little nervously yet still giggling with excitement as he tore off her cap and spread out her hair all around her. Then, he began methodically stripping her of her clothes and throwing them on the floor of the tent. “That’s better,” he said with an approving grin when she lay before him naked. “That’s as it should be. Now, I can see what’s mine,” he added, his eyes sweeping hungrily over every inch of her.

Smiling hungrily down at her, he threw off his jerkin, deftly undid his trews and pushed them down his hips before pulling out his shirt, stripping that off too and casting it away to join Isla’s things on the floor. She quivered with delight to see his aroused manhood spring free, eager to feel him inside her again. “Now, c’mere, Isla,” he ordered, picking her up bodily, turning her around, and setting her on her feet so that she was standing with her back resting against him.

“Och, me God, Ewan, that’s quite a welcome ye have there,” she joked, tingling all over with desire to feel his enormous, hardened manhood jutting against her spine.

“I told ye I missed ye,” he whispered hotly into her ear, his hands all over her, cupping and squeezing her breasts, tweaking her nipples, making her gasp as they turned as hard as pellets under his touch. One hand roamed her waist and hips and the globes of her behind, his calloused palms gliding over her soft skin and making her shiver with delight, her sex growing hot and moist for him.

Suddenly, he took hold of her thigh and lifted her leg until she was standing with one foot resting on the cot and one on the floor. She lay back against his chest, her arms reaching behind him to clasp his neck as he tantalized her naked body with his hands,

sweeping her up into a haze of intoxicating pleasure. She almost swooned as hot kisses tickled her neck, and he continued toying with her breasts with one hand, while the other dove between her legs and began teasing her sex, one finger rubbing her bud in a rhythmic circular motion, the others spreading her folds and delving inside her slit, making her juices run.

“Och, ye’re so wet fer me, I can tell ye missed me too,” he whispered hotly in her ear, thrusting his fingers inside her, sending flames of fiery desire flickering through her body.

“Aye, I did,” she hissed, greedy for more of his touch.

“And I forgive ye fer lyin’ tae me because I love ye, and ye’re mine,” he added, falling to his knees and holding her tightly by the hips, devouring the moist, heated flesh between her legs with his mouth and tongue, kissing, biting, sucking, delving inside her, and driving her to delirium.

“Aye, I’m yers, Ewan, always,” she managed to moan, her fingers laced on his hair, pressing her sex against his questing mouth wantonly while trying hard to stop herself from crying out with pleasure in case people outside the tent heard them. With the magic he was working so skillfully upon her body, it was not long before she felt herself approaching a shattering climax. She stuffed her knuckles in her mouth to stop herself from screaming his name as he took her up, up, up to the peak of ecstasy.

She had not even caught her breath before, with a hungry growl, he bent her over the bed, spreading her legs, and slid his rock-hard length inside her, filling her to the brim.

“Omigod,” she panted into the blanket, her fingers clutching at its folds convulsively as he shook her with his pounding thrusts, burying himself deep inside her. One arm snaked around to pull her up against his chest, his hand squeezing her breasts, rolling

her stiff nipples between finger and thumb. The other hand slid around to her rosebud, rubbing at it frantically, adding to her delirium as he rammed into her, panting hard against her neck.

She could feel drops of sweat falling on her skin from his forehead, and knowing what she was doing to him only increased her greedy longing for more of him. The waves of pleasure shook her once more, and when Ewan let out a throaty groan, stiffening inside her, they reached a blissful climax at exactly the same moment.

Laughing happily, he turned her about and seized her in his arms, hugging and kissing her, whispering in her ear, “I love ye so much, Ann– Isla, every part of ye, there’s nae woman in the world for me but ye, me beautiful bonny lassie. Say ye’re mine forever.”

Isla, in seventh heaven, clung to him, her legs wrapped around his waist, her arms about his neck. “I love ye body and soul, please never stop calling me that” she whispered back, tears of tenderness in her eyes as she looked into his. “Ye’re me very own strong, braw man, I’ll never get enough of yer lovin’, and I belong tae ye... always.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“S o, are ye still goin’ tae attack the castle tonight?” Isla asked Ewan as they sat at the table eating their supper later that evening.

“I’m nae sure. With all that’s happened between us, I need some time tae think about what is best tae dae. I’ll wait until I find an answer,” he replied.

Isla put a hand to her chest and sighed with relief. “Thank ye Ewan,” she said with feeling, sensing their bond was now sealed by a love so strong, nothing could ever break it, not even death.

That night, they lay in the cot, contentedly wrapped in each other’s arms, telling little secrets, and waking in the wee small hours to make love again, slowly, tenderly this time, lip to lip, skin to skin, until, happily sated, they fell asleep again, limbs tangled, foreheads pressed together like babes in the wood.

The next morning, they reluctantly rose and dressed, eating breakfast together, preparing with few words for the unknown challenges of the day ahead. Isla’s heart ached in her chest as she tucked her hair beneath her old cap, knowing she was going to have to leave Ewan again.

“I havetae go back tae the castle, Ewan,” she told him, her hands resting on his forearms as they shared an embrace.

“What fer?” he asked, his eyes darkening with worry. “I’d rather ye stayed here. I dinnae want ye tae get caught up in the fightin’ durin’ me attack.”

“I want ye tae postpone the attack until I’ve had another chance tae try tae change Gregory’s mind. I cannae give up, I’ll nae give up until the very end, nae with so much at stake,” she replied, looking anxiously into his eyes. “Will ye wait fer me tae come back?”

“Aye, I’ll wait. But be very careful, Isla. I dinnae ken what I’ll dae if anythin’ happens tae ye.”

“Naethin’ will, I promise.” She kissed him and said, “But before I go back, there’s somethin’ I want tae tell ye, just in case.”

“Aye, what is it?”

“I want tae tell ye the way intae the castle by the secret route, so that if anythin’ happens and ye need tae find me, ye’ll ken how tae get tae me chambers without alerting anyone.” She proceeded to draw a little map for him on a piece of paper, explaining about the entrance to the tunnels in the woods and which way to go to come out through the secret passage leading to her rooms. “Ye’ll be quite safe there until I come,” she told him at last, handing him the map.

“Thank ye, Isla, I’ll keep it safe,” he promised tucking it into the inside pocket of his jerkin.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. Wish me luck.”

“I wish ye love,” he said simply, releasing her as she pulled away from him. They exchanged a final, loving glance as she left the tent.

Back at the castle, Isla went immediately to find Gregory, but each time she tracked him down and tried to speak with him, he would find some reason to brush her off and hurry away. It soon became obvious to her that he was trying to avoid her, citing

his preoccupation with the preparations for the arrival of the reinforcements, clearly unwilling to revisit the troubling argument with her about changing his loyalties.

But with the lives of the two people she loved most in the world riding on her ability to convince him to abandon Allan, she stubbornly refused to give up while she still had time. Somehow, she would find the right words tae break through his defenses, she vowed to herself silently as he slipped from her grasp yet again. I havetae.

When Gregory evaded her on her fourth attempt to capture his attention, she decided to return to her chambers for a while and regroup. She had to come up with a new argument, one so convincing, it would finally change his mind and clinch his agreement to ditch Allan and combine his forces against the corrupt laird with Ewan's. What that might be, she was wracking her brains to pin down, when she opened the door to her chambers and stepped inside, completely unprepared for what she found there. Or rather, who.

"Ewan!" Isla exclaimed softly, checking the hallway behind her was empty before entering and locking the door. He was sitting on her bed, propped against her pillows, his arms behind his head, his long legs crossed. As soon as she went in, he sat up.

"Ah, there ye are at last," he said, relief noticeable in his voice as he swung his legs off the bed and went to greet her, casting an admiring glance over her. "And wearin' a gown too! Ye look a proper lady."

Shocked to see him there, Isla hardly took in his remark. She was frozen to the spot, her heart starting to pound with fear, "Why have ye come so soon? Has somethin' happened?" she asked anxiously as he approached her and took her in his arms.

"Nay," he replied, looking down at her, a mixture of tension and yearning on his face. "But I couldnae stop thinkin' about ye. I had tae come and make sure ye're all right."

Isla scrutinized his expression and found a hint of deception there. The truth suddenly dawned on her. “That’s nae it at all,” she said slowly, stepping out of his arms, feeling a surge of defensiveness. “Ye came... because ye dinnae trust me.”

“Nay, Isla, nay, of course I trust ye. It was just that...” His voice trailed off, and she glimpsed a flash of guilt in his eyes.

“Ye still have doubts about me,” she said accusingly, hurt by his distrust after they had shared so much and been so intimate. “There’s nay other reason ye would come like this. Ye came tae see if I was tellin’ ye the truth.”

“Well, all right, but can ye blame me fer still havin’ a few reservations about trustin’ ye after all the lies ye’ve told me?”

She bristled. “I explained tae ye why I had tae lie. I didnae like daein’ it. Ye said ye loved me. That means trustin’ me. And ye’ve shown me now by comin’ here without good reason that ye dinnae.”

“Isla, that’s hardly fair,” he argued gently. “I dae love ye. I just had tae make sure what ye told me was the truth, the lives of all me men depend on it. Ye must understand me responsibility. And I was nae lyin’, I really couldnae stop thinkin’ about ye.”

Perhaps it was the strain she was under, but she could not deny the crushing disappointment she felt. “Maybe ye should leave then if yer doubts are so strong,” she said, feeling she could cry.

“Isla, listen tae me, ye’re makin’ somethin’ out of naethin’. Fergive me like I fergave ye.” He moved towards her and tried to take her hands.

She moved back. “Maybe I’m nae in a fergivin’ mood, maybe?—”

She was interrupted abruptly by the ominous sound of church bells ringing nearby.

“Allan!” Ewan gasped, his expression hardening. “The reinforcements are here!” He crossed rapidly to the window and looked outside. Isla watched him, frozen with fear to the spot, her heart hammering in her chest. “Aye, ’tis him all right.” He returned to her and took her by the shoulders as he looked into her eyes. “This is it, Isla, me love. The time fer the final battle is here. I must return tae the camp and rally me troops.”

With the threat hanging over them so tangible now, Isla snapped into life. She ran to him, grabbing a lighted lamp from the dresser as she followed him to the secret door in the paneling. “Be careful, please, Ewan,” she implored him, handing it to him as the door sprang open and he stepped inside.

“I love ye, Isla, truly I dae. I’ll hope I’ll see ye when ’tis all over,” he said softly, kissing her lips quickly before hurrying away down the passage. When she could see the light no more, she shut the door and leaned against it, finding it hard to breathe as his last words rang in her ears. Then, she ran to the window and looked down, horrified to see mounted soldiers in Allan’s livery pouring into the castle courtyard below.

Will I see him when the battle is over?

With Allan’s troops amassing outside, the notion terrified her more than it ever had. Determined to try one last, desperate time to save everyone from further bloodshed and misery, she rushed from the room in search of her brother, with one final plea in her heart.

She cornered him in the vestibule of the keep and dragged him protesting into the chapel nearby, barring the door, her arms outstretched. “Ye’ll havetae kill yer own sister before ye leave this room without hearin’ me out,” she warned him passionately.

“Isla, stop this madness and get out of me way! The reinforcements are here at last, the siege is over, and I’ve men out there waitin’ fer me tae command them in battle,” he exclaimed, already dressed for the fray. “Ye’ve caused me enough trouble as it is. Get out of me way!”

She shook her head vehemently. “I’m nae movin’ until ye promise tae listen tae me.”

He threw up his hands in exasperation. “All right, say what ye’ve got tae say, and then let me out of here tae dae me duty by our clan!”

“Gregory, d’ye remember when ye and I were small, and I saved yer life?”

He looked puzzled. “Aye, of course I dae. What’s that got tae dae with anythin’?” he asked impatiently.

“When those men came intae the castle and murdered Ma and Da, and I took ye and hid with ye in the wardrobe, tae keep ye safe, ye remember that, eh?”

“Aye, I remember, I tell ye. How could I forget? But I still dinnae see what ye’re gettin’ at.”

“I saved yer life then. De ye trust me when I tell ye that I can save it again?”

“Jaysus, Isla, have ye gone mad? What’s all this about?”

“I asked ye if ye’d trust me tae save yer life again? Nae just yer life, but many lives?”

“Aye. I’m a grown man now, Isla, and I can take care of mesel’, but aye, I trust ye would try,” he reluctantly agreed. “Can I go now?”

She took him roughly by the arms, looking deeply into his eyes, summoning all her

powers of persuasion. “Good. Now, listen well, Gregory. A choice lies before ye now, and if ye make the wrong choice, ye’ll lose everythin’, includin’ yer life. I need tae make ye understand what’s at stake, so ye make the right choice.” She checked to make sure he was listening before continuing. He was frowning but seemed to be paying attention.

Satisfied, she went on, “This alliance with Allan has brought only the cruelty and hardship of war upon our people and Ewan’s people. But so far, only Ewan has had the courage tae stand up tae this evil man, even though he kens well he’s outnumbered and likely tae be defeated and killed today. I’m tellin’ ye now, I love him.”

Gregory’s eyes flew wide and his jaw dropped. “What?!”

“Aye, I’m in love with Ewan Ballentine. And I just want ye tae ken that whatever decision ye make today about who ye’re gonnae fight with, win or lose, I’ll be at his side. ‘Tis nae only because of him but because he fights fer the right cause and kens that the true enemy isnae ye and our clan, Gregory, it’s Allan.”

“Isla, ye cannae... ’tis nae...” He trailed off, staring at her with an expression of shocked amazement.

“That’s all I havetae say tae ye. And now, I must leave ye and return tae Ewan’s camp, so I can be with him durin’ the battle.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “I love ye, braither. Whatever happens today, never forget that.” With that, praying she had gotten through him at last, she moved away from the door.

She opened it and stepped out into the vestibule, sensing Gregory following her out. The vestibule was filled with armed men, including Kelvin and Domnhall, who stared at her as she passed. She hurriedly fetched a cloak from the nearby coat cupboard and swung it about her shoulders as she headed down the hallway towards the tunnels

once more.

As she went, she heard Gregory's voice behind her. "Kelvin, Domnhall, order the men tae make ready for battle immediately," he commanded.

Isla prayed silently as she passed through the secret doorway into the passage, possibly for the last time.

Please, Lord, let him make the right decision.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Ewan skewered the man in front of him with a thrust to the chest, then put his boot on the fellow's belly and pushed him backwards. The man screamed as he toppled over onto his back, freeing Ewan's blade, which arched into the air, spraying blood over him and those fighting nearby. In fact, the very air seemed red with blood—he could smell it as he breathed in and tasted its metallic tang on his tongue.

He swung his sword in his right hand expertly, tightening his grip, and flexed his left arm within the stout leather loop on the backside of his shield. In that same hand, he gripped his dirk, its blade protruding beneath the wooden rim of the shield, ready to slash and tear the flesh of his enemies as he rammed them.

He hardly had time to breathe when his next victim came charging at him. Ewan went to meet him, greeting him with a smashing body blow with his shield, which threw the man to the ground, his sword flying from his hand. Without hesitation, Ewan put his boot on the fallen soldier's chest and stabbed downward into the exposed part of his neck. The man let out of horrible gurgling sound, clutching helplessly at his throat as Ewan pulled his blade free and a scarlet fountain shot into the air, coating them both.

The dying man already forgotten, Ewan stood panting, finding a moment of calm amid the turbulent sea of destruction raging around him, time enough to wipe the blood from his sweating brow with his forearm and get his bearings. He was looking for Allan. And when he found him, he was determined to vanquish him, cut him to pieces, and feed his corpse to the crows.

He was standing thus when he happened to glance over the heads of the fighting men, towards the tree line of the nearby woods, and glimpsed something that made him think he must be seeing things. He shook his head and looked again. No, he was not seeing things, unless it was a ghost. A woman was frantically running along the edge of the battlefield, stopping now and then to look out over the sea of men, as though searching for someone.

Blood dripped into his eyes once more, and he dashed it away impatiently with his wrist, squinting, trying to get a better look at her. There was a glimpse of an emerald-green gown beneath a black cloak. When the sunlight glinted on the long hair flying out behind her, the golden tresses flashing brightly, he realized who it was. His heart stopped beating. He could not breathe. Isla!

What the hell is she daeing out here?! And she's wearin' a gown, nae her disguise. Daes she nae realize she's in grave danger? She could be hurt or killed at any moment! I havetae get tae her, I must protect her at all costs!

Without thinking, he began running towards her, viciously pushing all in his path aside with his shield, wielding his sword in his right hand and cutting a deadly swathe before him in his desperation to reach her. She finally caught sight of him, and he could see her shouting and waving at him as he tried to get to her, but the sound of the battle was deafening.

Frustrated, terrified for her safety, he shook his head and gestured to his ears, trying to tell her he could not make out a thing. He waved her back, signaling that she should withdraw into the woods and keep away from the battle. But before he could tell if she had understood, the enemy engulfed him, Colin, and the other men fighting at their side like a tidal wave. As he clashed ferociously with yet another enemy warrior, he could but hope Isla had heard him.

Time passed in an endless nightmare of clashing metal on metal, severed limbs piling

up, the crunching of bones as shields smashed into faces, the screaming of men and horses, exhausted soldiers wading in the blood of their comrades. Ewan and his men fought on valiantly, but after a couple of hours of relentless battling against the enemy, Ewan knew the tide was turning against him and his army.

And he also knew that when Galbraith came out into the field with his men, there would be a rout. Allan would have given orders for his men to hunt down every Ballentine man and kill them as they scattered. But if he was captured, a special death awaited him. Allan would want to make a show of it, so Ewan had decided at the start of all this that he would die honorably with his sword in his hand, preferably sticking it in Allan's throat.

And now there was Isla to consider. He would likely never see her again. Stricken with sorrow, he cursed as he viciously stabbed an enemy soldier in the belly with his sword and knocked him senseless with his shield, wishing it was Allan, angry at fate for dealing him such a cruel hand in life.

Blaring trumpets suddenly pierced the bloody mist hanging over the battlefield. Ewan barely glanced over at the castle gates, though he knew they were opening, and Galbraith would be riding out at the head of his men, his standard flying high.

This is the end .

Nevertheless, he fought on, leading his brave but dwindling forces with determination, Colin at his side, as Galbraith's troops began to appear on the field. From now on, it would be slaughter as he and his men were overrun.

'Tis over. All is lost.

He was so intent on fighting on to the end, he did not notice for some minutes that Galbraith's soldiers were attacking Allan's men, not his. With a jolt of shock and

relief, he realized that Galbraith had changed sides, and he was leading his men in support of his army.

This is because of Isla, she must have succeeded in changin' her braithers mind!

The tide of the battle shifted completely then. With Galbraith's reinforcements fighting on his side, Ewan's remaining forces began to regain their footing, pushing back against Allan's formidable army. With victory snatched from the jaws of defeat, Ewan fought on with renewed vigor, emboldened by his new ally's supporting presence on the field and by the knowledge that Isla was somewhere nearby.

Amid the intense clash of steel and cries of war, Ewan pushed his way through the fray, looking for Allan. Suddenly, he glimpsed him, locked in combat with one of Galbraith's captains. Afraid the clearly skillful warrior would finish Allan before he could kill him himself, Ewan charged towards them, determined to intervene.

But Allan was an experienced fighter too, his muscular body hardened by many a battle, and just as Ewan reached them, the corrupt laird landed a slashing blow to the other man's upper arm, rendering it almost useless. Allan laughed and raised his sword to finish the captain off, but Ewan threw himself between them, blocking the deadly arc with his own blade and ramming Allan with his shield so that he staggered backwards, giving the wounded man time to get away.

Allan, dripping with gore, quickly bounced back, and he and Ewan circled each other, blades poised to attack. Allan grinned at Ewan and roared, "I've been lookin' fer ye, Ballentine. Ye've been hidin' from me."

Ewan's lips curled in derision.

"I was busy, but I smelled yer stink on the wind and came right over tae find ye," Ewan replied, hawking and spitting on the ground at Allan's feet.

The man laughed, “Well, now ye’ve found me, ye’d best start sayin’ yer prayers. Neither ye nor yer men are gettin’ off this field alive.”

“Ye must be loosin’ yer wits, old man,” Ewan shouted back at him. “Have ye nae noticed yer ally’s found out what a piece of shit ye are and has turned on ye? ’Tis ye who’s facin’ defeat and death.”

“Ach! Believe that if ye like, but ye and I ken that neither Galbraith’s men nor yers are a match fer me lads.”

“I dae believe it because I’ve just seen a big pile of corpses wearin’ yer livery, and I put most of them there mesel’. Ach, ye’re a waste of me time. I’ve had enough of yer boastin, ye evil bastard. Now, I’m gonnae enjoy rippin’ yer head from yer neck,” Ewan bellowed through clenched teeth.

Allan was ready for him, and they clashed with a mighty roar, their blades ringing as they met in a deadly dance across the blood-soaked grass, thrusting with their swords, expertly parrying each other’s blows. The corrupt laird was a tough and seasoned fighter, fueled by hatred and greed, but Ewan let his love for his sister, for Isla, and for his clan flow through him, to give him the strength and determination he needed to bring his foe down once and for all.

With renewed energy, he fought ferociously on, deflecting his enemy’s sword’s blows deftly with his own, raining down blows upon the older man, making him work, tiring him out, seeking that fatal lapse in concentration he was watching for. When Allan slipped in the wash of blood under their feet, he saw his chance. He rammed into Allan with his shield and, putting all his body weight into it, toppled the man to the ground, falling on top of him so he could not get up, his weapons useless.

Ewan tore off Allan’s helmet, yanked his head up by the hair, and rammed the point of his sword into Allan’s neck, and then plunged it back down, slicing into the man’s

throat. Allan convulsed, and a fountain of blood erupted from the gaping hole when Ewan pulled his blade free.

But Allan was not quite dead yet. Ewan leaned over him, to see his mouth working like a fish's, gasping for air that did not come. But no words came out, only a horrible choking gurgle. He spat on Alan and growled, "I swore tae kill ye, ye cowardly dog, and now ye ken I'm man of me word. May yer soul burn in hell fer eternity!"

He saw the light in Allan's eyes go out and turned away, suddenly feeling exhausted but with a sense the world was a better place without the corrupt laird in it. With Galbraith on his side, he had prevailed. Allan was dead, victory was his. And now, all he wanted was to find Isla.

But first, he found her brother. Surrounded by their triumphant troops, dripping with the blood of their vanquished enemies, Laird Ballentine and Laird Galbraith finally stood face to face. Both men sheathed their blades and pulled off their helmets, tossing them to the ground before closing the gap between them.

"I can never thank ye enough fer comin' out in me support instead of Allan's. I've never been so surprised in me life. I truly thought it was the end," he looked him straight in the eye. "Thank ye with all me heart," Ewan told Gregory sincerely as the pair of them clasped bloody hands and grinned at each other.

"I admit, it was a close-run thing, but ye have Isla tae thank fer it," Gregory told him as they pumped hands vigorously. "She says she's in love with ye. I could hardly fight alongside Allan after that."

"Is that what she told ye?" Ewan replied, laughing delightedly. "By God, she's a hell of a woman that sister of yers, Galbraith."

"Aye, she is. She looks like an angel, but she has the heart of the bravest warrior,"

Gregory told him, joining in his laughter.

“Well, I suppose this might be a good time tae tell ye that I’m in love with her as well,” Ewan replied. Then, thinking he might as well go the whole hog, he added boldly, “In fact, I ken this is nae the time or the place, yet... I’d like tae ask ye fer her hand in marriage. That is, if she’ll agree tae have me.”

“Och, I’ll have ye all right, Ewan Ballentine!” came a familiar voice at his side, and seconds later Isla landed in his arms, hugging him and kissing his face, heedless of the blood and brains of the enemy covering him. Speechless with joy, he held her tightly to him, over the moon to see her safe.

Gregory shook his head and laughed. “It looks like ye have yer answer there, lad. And as I’m nae arguin’ with her, ye have me permission tae wed, and me blessin’ too, a hundred times over. A marriage is the ideal basis fer a profitable partnership between our two clans as well, so the future looks bright fer all of us. Och, and call me Gregory, by the way. If we’re gonnae be brother’s-in-law, we might as well start off as we mean tae go on, eh, Ewan?”

“Aye, indeed, and thank ye again, Gregory, fer everythin’.” Ewan said. “But especially fer this!” He suddenly threw Isla up in the air, making her shriek with laughter before catching her again, while the men surrounding them, exhausted and bloody as they were, clapped and cheered to show their approval of the new state of affairs.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:00 am

Castle Ballentine, one month later

“Try again,” Isla told Ewan as they walked hand in hand along the sea shore below the looming towers of Castle Ballentine, enjoying a little late afternoon sunshine.

“All right. Isla, Katrina, Maria, Annie ,” Ewan replied, pretending to concentrate hard and giving special emphasis to the final name.

She giggled and batted at his arm. “Nay! There’s nay Annie!”

“But I like Annie. What’s wrong with it? I’m used tae callin’ ye that. Annie Ballentine. Aye, it has a ring tae it,” he teased.

She sighed laughingly. “I can see I’m just gonnae havetae trust ye tae say me name properly when we stand before the priest tae say our vows. If I hear a breath of Annie, I warn ye, I’ll brain ye with one of the candelabra from the altar.”

“Ye mean ye’ll try, but ye’d need a stool tae stand on tae reach me head,” he pointed out.

“Ye havenae seen me dress yet,” she told him with a chuckle. “The skirts are quite big enough tae hide a stool under there.”

He grinned down at her, his eyes dancing. “Really? Now, that’s interestin’. Och, I might creep under there mesel’ durin’ the ceremony. Just think of what I could get up tae. In fact, I’m gettin’ excited just thinkin’ of it. It’ll give the Faither a shock when I pop up from underneath yer petticoats tae say me piece.” He grabbed her playfully

around the waist and swung her about before stopping her laughter with a kiss.

“Mmm, I love ye so much, Ewan,” she murmured when their lips parted and they stood on the sand with their arms wrapped around each other, looking out over the sparkling ocean. “I dinnae think I’ll sleep a wink tonight, I’m so excited about tomorrow. I cannae wait tae be married tae ye.”

“Likewise, bonny lassie, likewise,” he said into her hair. “I can always sneak intae yer room tonight if ye cannae sleep and keep ye entertained.”

“Och, nay, ye cheeky devil! Ye ken well ’tis bad luck fer the bride and groom tae see each other on the night before the weddin’,” she pretended to scold him.

He shrugged. “Well, that’s easy tae remedy. Douse the fire and dinnae light any lamps. I dinnae need light fer what I want tae dae tae ye.” He nuzzled her neck and pinched her bottom.

“Ewan!” she shrieked, breaking out into fits of giggles, enjoying every second.

“Wheesht, woman. That bum will be officially mine tomorrow, so quit yer complainin’,” he told her before his look of feigned innocence turned to lustful glee.

“And this will be mine,” she told him, pinching him back.

They walked along a little further. “’Tis so nice and peaceful out here,” he said. “The whole castle’s gone mad over the weddin’. Ye cannae move fer the maids turnin’ out the bedrooms and carrying about piles of linen. Yesterday, comin’ out of the great hall, I nearly collided with a servant carrying a load of glasses. We just managed tae save them from smashin’ all over the floor! I’ve never seen the place so busy.”

“Aye, I ken. I think they’re lookin’ forward tae it though. They all seem very

excited,” Isla replied. “Almost as excited as we are.”

Ewan nodded. “’Tis been a long while since we’ve hosted a big celebration like this, I suppose. Me weddin’ was bound tae cause a furor. Especially as they have such a beautiful bride tae admire.”

“Och that’s sweet of ye, Ewan,” she told him, touched by the compliment, not that she was short on them with him around. She felt as though her life was really starting in earnest at last. She was going to be Lady Ballentine, and she could not have been happier.

They came to the stone jetty where boats were unloading baskets of fresh fish, oysters, and other tasty delicacies ferried from the mainland, destined to grace the tables of their wedding feast the following day for their guests’ enjoyment. They stood and watched for a while.

“’Tis funny tae think that only a few months ago it seemed like all was lost,” Ewan suddenly remarked. “And now, I feel like the luckiest fella alive. I’ll likely shed a tear or two when I see ye walking up the aisle with me sister as yer bridesmaid... ’Tis like a dream come true.”

“Aye, I ken how much it means tae ye,” Isla replied fondly. “Deidra’s a wonderful girl. She’s made me feel so welcome. I’m so happy tae have her tae help me with all the weddin’ arrangements. And wait until ye see her in her bridesmaid’s dress,” Isla replied sincerely.

“Aye, she’s lovin’ every second of it, and she has some roses in her cheeks at last,” he said, hugging Isla to his side. “Havin’ ye here tae talk tae and the weddin’ tae take her mind off the bad memories has helped he an awful lot, Isla. ’Tis easier fer another woman tae understand what she’s been through.”

“Aye, maybe so. She’s a brave wee lass though. When it comes tae courage, she takes after her braither.”

Ewan kissed her hair. “Thank ye, Isla. Now, talkin’ of braithers, look out tae sea.” He pointed to the horizon, where the white sails of a birlinn could just be seen approaching the shore.

Isla followed where he was pointing, suddenly gripped by excitement. “Is it Gregory, d’ye reckon?” She had not seen her brother for a couple of weeks and could hardly wait for him to arrive, see her new home, and have him give her away at the wedding.

“Aye, I think it very likely is. Shall we go down and be there tae greet him when he docks?”

“Och, yes, please, I’d love that.”

So, arm in arm, they walked further down the beach towards the nearby village, so they could be waiting on the dockside for Gregory to disembark. It meant the world to Isla to have her beloved brother there.

Just before eleven o’clock the following morning, dressed in his finest full kilt and laird’s regalia, complete with ruffled white lace at his throat and cuffs, Ewan took his place before the altar in the castle chapel, feeling as if he might burst with nervous anticipation.

Before him stood the smiling priest, all in black, his bible under his arm. Behind him sat the congregation, a selection of family, friends, and representatives of neighbouring lands, all dressed in their finest attire and bathed in the varicoloured sunlight that filtered through the stained-glass windows. A low buzz of conversation arose from the gathering as, along with the groom, they all awaited the arrival of the bride.

At last, Ewan heard the chapel doors creaking open. His heart racing, he glanced over his shoulder. Like a vision from a dream, Isla appeared in the doorway on Gregory's arm, smiling radiantly. Gregory also looking splendid, beaming with pride in his kilt, escorting his sister down the aisle at a stately pace.

Ewan's breath caught in his throat at the sight of her, as she looked more beautiful than ever in her lovely wedding dress of pale cream silk. It showed off her lithe curves to perfection. A lump formed in his throat when he glimpsed Deidra following behind her, holding her train. She did indeed look beautiful in her flowing bridesmaid's dress, her face wreathed in smiles.

As Isla drew closer, her eyes locked with his. She smiled at him and he smiled back, feeling a silent promise passing between them. When she reached the altar, Gregory grinned at Ewan as he placed her hand in his. The congregation fell silent, and Ewan and Isla exchanged a loving glance as they turned to face the priest. He opened his bible, cleared his throat, and the ceremony began.

The Father's words washed over them, for Ewan and Isla were lost in their own private world, their hearts beating in perfect harmony as they said their sacred vows to love one another forever. When it was time for the handfasting, it was Colin who handed Ewan the ceremonial dagger. Ewan quickly made a cut in Isla's palm, then his own before he pressed them together, the mingling of their blood a symbol of their union, as well as that of the two clans.

Colin bound the hands of the bride and groom together with the ribbons each wore around their wrists, the binding that tied them together as man and wife in the ancient Highland tradition. After the solemn words had been spoken in the old way, Colin slowly pulled the bindings so that they formed a perfect knot. That knot, another symbol of their joining, Colin carefully slipped from their hands and carried back to Deidra, who waited by the front row of seats. She would guard it until it could be safely displayed for posterity.

Colin then returned to the altar with the velvet cushion bearing two gold rings. Ewan felt a rush of pride and joy as he slipped the golden band onto Isla slender finger. She was almost his! Isla smiled at him lovingly as she placed the matching band on his finger, completing the most important part of the ceremony. His happiness was almost complete, and he could see joy shining in Isla's eyes, assuring him that she felt the same way.

When the minister finally pronounced them husband and wife, and said, "ye may now kiss the bride," Ewan did not hesitate to take Isla in his arms, and their lips met in a tender kiss, sealing their union for all eternity.

The congregation erupted in joyous applause and cheers as the newlyweds turned to face their gathered friends and loved ones, their faces aglow with the radiance of true love.

And then, it was time for the wedding breakfast.

Isla's heart was full of happiness as she clung to Ewan's arm, looking out over all the people who had come to watch them celebrate their wedding. Truly, she could not imagine it was possible to be happier than she was at that moment.

As the happy couple led the procession to the great hall, the atmosphere quickly grew merry, then raucous. Arm in arm, they entered the beautifully decorated hall, which was laid out for a splendid feast, with plenty of room for dancing in the center. Ewan escorted her up the center, to the top of the room and the laird's table.

There, Isla and Ewan were surrounded by family and well-wishers from all sides as they laughingly drank the traditional dram of whisky each from the ceremonial quaich, the two-handed cup that signified the bonding of their two clans. When bride and groom had drunk their fill, the quaich was passed around for all to take a drink. Then Ewan paid the piper his traditional dram, upon which the man began to play,

and the party began in earnest.

“Ye look amazing, wife,” Ewan whispered in Isla’s ear, holding her tightly in his arms as, fueled by copious amounts of ale and whisky, he whirled her once again up the column of whooping, clapping couples in a traditional country reel.

“How many times have ye said that tae me since we were wed?” she asked in a teasing voice as they danced along.

“I was nae counting, but whatever it is, it’ll nae be enough,” he told her in a low, husky voice, his hands squeezing her waist and making her quiver with excitement. “‘Tis a grand party, to be sure, but I have to admit I can hardly wait to get ye alone.” They reached the top of the column, parting at the top to run down to the start and meet again.

“I have to admit I feel the same, husband,” she whispered back, panting with exertion as she planted a kiss on his lips. It was simply impossible to look at him and not want him. “When can we decently take our leave, d’ye think,” she added with a mischievous giggle.

“Well, I think because everyone’s gone to such trouble tae make this a happy day fer us, we owe it to them stay at least another five minutes,” he said with a suggestive quirk of an eyebrow.

“Wisht, husband!” she cried, bursting with happiness at his eagerness but nevertheless thinking of propriety. “Ye ken very well it would be rude nae to stay a wee while longer.”

“Ten minutes it is, then,” he shot back, flinging them back into the fray, his laughter vibrating against her cheek as she clung to him giggling. She looked at the other dancers and caught Ella’s eye.

“Is it nae wonderful how everybody seems tae be getting’ on so well and enjoying our weddin’ celebration so much?” she said in his ear as they spun about in time to the music.

“Have ye seen Colin and Deidra over there? Ach, she looks so happy, and I’ve never seen him grin so much. And look at Gregory. He’s found himself a beauty in red.” She pointed with her eyes.

Ewan looked and laughed. “He’s certainly enthusiastic, the way he’s throwing the lassie about like that,” he said.

“That’s the pot callin’ the kettle black, Ewan Ballentine,” she teased, out of breath as they once more tripped up the center aisle of the noisy column of dancers. She glanced around as they skipped past, feeling part of one great big happy family, a feeling she had always craved. Ella was dancing with Kelvin and Domnhall and Connor, Gregory’s secretary, had teamed up with a pair of red-headed twins, who seemed to be leading them in a merry dance. Both men looked extremely happy about it. Isla could not help but smile.

Night had fallen when they finally announced their departure and were serenaded to their chambers with a raucous and vulgar roistering from the company, most of whom were now deep in their cups.

“Finally, I thought the buggers would never leave,” Ewan exclaimed with relief as he shut the door firmly on the rowdy crowd. “Are ye happy, bonny lass?” he asked, grabbing Isla around the waist and dancing her unsteadily around the room to a tuneless hum.

Also quite tipsy, she giggled at his antics, throwing her arms around his neck. “Aye, I’m very happy, me darlin’ husband. Are ye?”

“Aye, I couldnae be any happier than I am at this moment.” He twirled her about, grinning at her hungrily before giving her a smacking, whisky-flavored kiss.

Isla returned his kiss with enthusiasm, the heat of desire slowly igniting in her belly at the lascivious intensity of his look. “So, ye could nae be any happier, ye say?”

“Nay, I am perfectly content,” Ewan assured her. “Should we dance some more?” he asked.

“Aye, that would be nice,” Isla hummed dreamily and let him spin her around the carpet, occasionally knocking into the furniture and setting them off into fits of laughter. “But there’s one thing that would make me even happier,” she said after a while.

Ewan hummed in response as he rested his cheek on the crown of her head. “What’s that, me angel, just say the word and whatever it is, I’ll get it fer ye.”

“Why, tae consummate our weddin’ night, of course,” she purred with a smile, pressing her body against his teasingly and batting her lashes up at him.

He grinned at her, his eyes dancing. “Aye, ye look good enough tae eat, and I’m right famished after lookin’ at ye in that dress all night. Let’s dae that right away,” he replied, dancing her unsteadily over to great four-poster bed. “Why, wifey, yer smile is lightin’ a veritable fire in me loins.”

She burst out laughing. “Loins?”

“Aye, what’s so funny?” he asked, pretending to be offended. Then he grabbed her hand and pressed it to the front of his kilt. “Take a hold of that.”

“Och, I think that’s a ragin’ inferno goin’ on under there,” she cried in delight,

squeezing a handful and enjoying his groan of pleasure. “And there’s only one way tae put it out.” She looked up into his eyes and nibbled on her bottom lip provocatively.

Ewan’s eyes darkened, and he tightened his grip on her waist. “Aye, there’s only one way tae cool me ardor, and only one lassie tae dae it,” he told her as he tumbled them into the coverlet.

Isla’s giggles turned to sighs of pleasure as his hands ran down her legs and slipped beneath her skirts, pushing them up around her waist. “Och, ye’re a sight fer sore eyes, Isla Ballentine. I’ll never get enough of lookin’ at ye. By God, I’m the luckiest man on earth,” he told her, gazing at her stockinged legs and exposed sex hungrily.

“Are ye nae supposed tae take me garters off with yer teeth?” she asked, holding one leg high and pointing her toes, looking at him coquettishly.

“With pleasure,” he told her, and proceeded to do exactly that, trailing ever hotter kisses up and down each leg as he did so, reducing her to a helplessly giggling wreck as he bit softly into her flesh and tore off each of her garters, growling and shaking his head like a dog with a bone before tossing them aside.

She could feel herself growing hot, mostly between her legs, craving the feel of his mouth on her, but instead he moved up her body to unlaced the front of her bodice and let her breasts tumble free, squeezing them together and rubbing his face against them. He groaned appreciatively as he set about sucking and nibbling on them, toying with her nipples until they grew hard, eliciting blissful moans from Isla as she arched her back and entwined her fingers in his hair in near ecstasy.

She wriggled and squirmed beneath him, her breath catching in her throat when he slid one hand down between her legs and began tantalizing her there too, his thick fingers delving between her folds and then inside her, his thumb strumming her

rosebud until she could no longer hold back the climax that shook her whole body.

Then, he lifted his kilt, revealing his huge erection. "Look at me, Isla. I wantae see ye," he told her, looking deeply into her eyes as he slid his entire length slowly into her.

"Oh, God, Ewan," she gasped, smiling up at him ecstatically, "ye fill me right up tae the brim! I'll never have enough of ye."

"That's right, ye willnae, and that's a promise. Ach, ye're so tight!" he groaned, gripping her hips tightly and lifting her onto him so he could go deeper. "'Tis like heaven on earth when I'm inside ye, Isla, like ye were made fer me," he sighed happily, smiling down at her, his eyes dazed with a lusty pleasure she found utterly thrilling.

"We were made for each other," she breathed, twining her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck as he shuddered and took a steadying breath before he started thrusting into her slowly.

"Och, Ewan..." she mewled, pushing against him.

"Aye, lass, it's me all right," he grunted, planting hot, open-mouthed kisses on her neck and lips with each thrust.

"Omigod, have mercy!" Isla cried out and threw her head back in almost total ecstasy.

Ewan slowed down to growl in her ear, "Dae ye want me tae go faster, lass?"

Isla's eyes flashed open and met his. "Aye, faster, please!"

“Ach! Lass,” he groaned and rammed into her fiercely, wringing cries of pleasure from her lips and threatening to push her over the edge.

“Ewan,” she moaned and gripped his arms tightly.

“Ready, lass?” he asked as he drove into her again and again.

“Och, I’m ready!” she moaned, bucking as her inner walls tightened, and she climaxed around him.

“Isla, me love,” he grunted into her hair as he found his release inside her.

They collapsed against each other, panting, spent and happy, skins slippery with the sweat of their lovemaking.

“We’ll dae that again in a minute, but without the dress,” he murmured, his breathing ragged as he peppered kisses lazily all over her face and throat.

“And the kilt,” she said.

He chuckled. “Aye, and the kilt. I just need a wee nap tae get me second wind. Och, I love ye so much, Isla Ballentine, me beautiful wife.”

“And I love ye, Ewan Ballentine, me darlin’ husband,” Isla returned with a smile and kissed him lightly on the forehead when he finally settled into her embrace. At that moment, she truly could not have been happier.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:00 am

Castle Ballentine, two months after the wedding

Isla was lying in bed, feeling terribly nauseous again when there was a light tapping at the door.

CHAPTER ONE

Castle MacKinnon, November 1298

“Ava, dae ye really think a woman who claims tae be able to see intae the future will help ye seduce a man?”

Ava halted in the middle of the castle corridor. She turned abruptly to face her little sister, swinging the burning torch around with her as she moved. Lyla, startled, jumped away from her.

“Careful, sister! I ken ye are a warrior but dae me the favor of nae giving me the wounds yer other opponents bear.”

“I’m sorry,” Ava muttered hurriedly, “but ye ken we dinnae have time fer this argument now. Me mind is made up. Ye can either stay here or come with me, but I am going, Lyla.”

Lyla sighed, her dark blonde hair becoming a curtain as it fell across her face. Ava pushed back the wisps of her own blonde hair, that had fallen out of the customary braid she wore. Tonight, she would not be distracted by fear or the serious nature of her sister’s conversation.

I have a mission tae accomplish.

“I am going,” Ava whispered. She turned, carrying the burning torch high as she slipped down a narrow spiral staircase with Lyla hurrying behind her. More than once

her little sister nearly slipped on the stones. The cold air was so strong that night that even inside the castle there was moisture and growing frost on the stone steps. When they reached the bottom, Ava tiptoed toward the kitchens and the servants' stairwell, knowing it was the best way out of the castle when they didn't want to be glimpsed by the guards. By the doorway, she latched the burning torch onto an iron hook in the wall, knowing she couldn't take it with them.

A guard would spot the burning fire from a mile away and come to investigate.

"I dinnae ken about this," Lyla muttered seriously again.

Ava gave her no answer. Halting by the door for a second, she checked beneath her thick woolen cloak. She carried a dirk at her right hip, her customary basildar at her left hip, all latched into a belt. Ordinarily, she would have liked to have taken her crossbow with her when walking the clan lands alone, but tonight, she had to travel fast, and the crossbow with the bolts would have only weighed her down.

"This castle holds shadows fer us now, I ken that," Lyla whispered hurriedly as Ava checked her weapons. "But dae ye honestly think ye will find answers by talking tae a mad woman?"

"And ye think a seer is a mad woman, dae ye? Sister, I dinnae pretend tae understand all the secrets of this world. I dinnae ken how it works, what magic and mystery lies beneath the veil of what I can see. Maybe she does," Ava added, fiercely, but quietly. "If she can help me at all, then I need tae take this chance."

"Aye, aye, I ken." Lyla sighed once again as Ava reached for the door.

"Now come, before we are seen." Ava slipped the key into the door that she had stolen from the castle steward's chamber earlier that day and slipped it into the lock. It clunked rather heavily, making the two of them halt and look around. When no

sound followed, Ava opened the door.

The moment they both stepped outside, they shivered. The wind was bitterly cold, the clouds heavy with snow, threatening to open their icy treasure any second now, adding to the already rich covering of white snow on the ground. The moon, a mere crescent in the sky, was only just visible peeking through those heavy clouds.

“Lovely night, isnae it?” Lyla whispered to Ava with irony in her tone.

“Charming,” Ava agreed. She pressed her lips into the fur lining of her cloak and walked forward through the grounds, with the shorter Lyla racing to keep up with her.

As they crossed through the snowy courtyard toward the curtain wall, Lyla hopped between clumps of snow as Ava walked purposefully, her hand constantly gripping the hilt of her basildard beneath her cloak.

“Dae ye think –”

“Shh,” Ava pleaded. “We dinnae want a guard tae hear us now.”

As if he had been summoned by her words, Ava saw movement atop the nearest curtain wall. She reached for Lyla’s shoulder and pushed her down beneath the well in the middle of the courtyard, out of use thanks to the thick layer of ice which had formed at the bottom. Lyla yelped in surprise, forcing Ava to dart down too.

She held her finger to her lips, warning Lyla not to make another sound. If we’re discovered Faither will be fumin’.”

The guard’s loud footsteps on the curtain wall had stopped, suggesting he had heard Lyla’s noise and had whipped around, staring into the courtyard to investigate. Ava didn’t dare sneak a peek, but waited, holding her breath, until she heard his footsteps

again. Peering around the edge of the well, she looked to his place atop the wall. He had returned to his patrol, no longer looking their way.

Ava grabbed Lyla's hand and ran with her. Her younger sister, much slenderer and not so athletic in build, struggled to keep up as Ava ran to the nearest door. They pressed themselves against the stone wall as Ava pressed a second key, she had taken into a door hidden in the stone wall.

It was a secret door, barely used by any. If the rumors were to be believed, the guards had this door installed years ago to bring in their mistresses and wives at night when no one was looking. Ava wasn't sure if she believed the tales, though she knew men's appetites would warrant it.

She shuddered at the thought of men's appetites when it came to the bedchamber and opened the door, inching it carefully across the snow on the ground to stay as quiet as possible.

As they slipped through, the snow was now thick on the ground thanks to the skeletal branches of the trees above, though their journey became suddenly darker.

Ava followed a path through the forest she knew all too well, for it had been her training ground for years for hunting and fighting. Lyla, on the other hand, gripped to the back of her cloak, following every step she took.

"If I dinnae dae this, ye would be forced tae marry that man," Ava shuddered.

She had seen him. The very man that their father also feared giving Lyla too.

A warrior, a soldier, and a brutal leader, he had fixated his desires on Lyla. Known for his cruel and insatiable appetites, Ava could not countenance the thought of handing her little sweet sister to a man like him.

“Ye ken I cannae let that happen.”

“But then that means...”

“I ken. I ken what it means.” Ava and her father had talked for hours about the alternatives. Her father, Laird Finley MacKinnon, had drank himself into a stupor with enough whisky to drown a horse.

Lyla’s suitor was adamant in his pursuit of her. Finley’s greatest fear was that he wouldn’t be able to turn the man down. The MacKinnon clan was in debt. For so long they had fought for the Scottish cause against the English. They had lost men, had poor harvests due to bad winters, and now, Finley was running out of options as to how to protect his clan. Lyla’s suitor offered him money. This would ruin Ava, as she was the older sister, and having Lyla marry first was unthinkable. Yet, it would save their clan at the expense of them both.

“Then we must find another way tae get money,” Ava had said in the early hours of the morning.

Her father had looked up from his whisky, staring at her, eyes wide.

“There’s another laird. One so rich that if ye were tae marry him, all our troubles would be gone. Lyla would be safe.”

“Who?” Ava had asked sharply.

“Laird Blair Grant,” Ava now murmured aloud, remembering the way her father had said it sharply that night. He was not known for being a man of soft heart, but he did not have the same reputation of cruelty as Lyla’s suitor.

“Ye dinnae have tae dae this,” Lyla pleaded again behind her, repeatedly slipping in

the snow.

“I must.” Ava had at first been dismayed to see that her father hadn’t given up on the idea come morning when he was sober and nursing a bad head. He had urged her to seduce Laird Blair Grant. If she could catch such a wealthy laird’s eye and secure a proposal, Lyla would indeed be safe.

As time had gone on, and as Lyla’s suitor kept reappearing, Ava had become more determined.

He is right. Aye, I must dae this.

Ever since they had lost their mother many years before, Ava had felt it was her responsibility to care for Lyla, to look after her, to teach her how to fare in the world, and above all, to protect her. More than once, she had run headlong into danger in order to keep her sister safe, and now was no different.

Without their mother there to protect her, Ava would happily take her place and do what she could. She certainly wasn’t going to feed Lyla to a cruel man, the way a fox would be fed to the wolves.

A memory flickered across Ava’s mind. It was of a night she always tried to forget, when a man had grabbed her wrist, pinned her down. She remembered his breath on her neck, the way he stank, the fear coiling in her stomach like a viper –

“Where dae we go now?” Lyla’s question broke through the memory.

Ava came to a stop at a fork in the path, then led Lyla down a snowy track. She knew where she was going. How many times had she come across the seer’s hut in this wood? She been told never to go there, yet she had always been curious. Today, she had a need of this woman.

“I’m nay temptress,” Ava muttered as they made their way toward the hut, fighting through the snow as the bitter wind whipped their hair and their cloaks. “If I am going tae dae this, and I will, then I need direction. The seer will help me.”

Ava could feel from the way Lyla’s hands gripped the back of her cloak that she was ready to argue again, but her sister said nothing. Instead, she gasped. The sound brought Ava to a halt, she gripped the hilt of the basildard hard, ready to use it, only to see it was no man or creature that had frightened her. They had found the seer’s cabin.

Now they were here, the air felt different, somehow even icier than before, as if the snow hung in the air, invisible around them. The hut itself was almost completely swamped by snow, the roof sagging under its weight, the old croft windows mere circles of pebbles.

Ava took a small step forward, the snow crunching beneath her boots. In the windows, she saw something glitter. A string of shiny stones and beads had been hung there, which now swayed in the wind, rather ominously clicking against the stones around it. She supposed it was some charm to ward off demons.

“They say she doesnae let people in anymore,” Lyla hissed as Ava moved forward, with her sister staying close behind her.

“Then I pray she changes her mind tonight.” As Ava neared the croft, her boot crunched icy snow loudly. It was so noisy that a light was struck inside the croft.

Ava and Lyla froze, staring at the window. Was it a candle? Maybe a fire light? It burned a deep amber hue.

Ava raised her hand from her basildard, ready to knock when she hesitated. Her first doubts crept in. She wondered if the seer would tell her anything useful at all?

What if the seer only confirmed that Lyla would have to marry her cruel suitor in the end, that anything Ava could do wouldn't avoid it? What if –

“Dinnae stand there dithering on me doorstep all night.” A sharp voice called from within the croft.

Lyla covered her mouth and jumped back three paces as Ava stood stock still, staring at the door with its carved witch symbols in the wood in amazement.

“Come, lass. Leave yer poor sister outside. Me fire would warm her, but she'll be happier out there.”

Ava looked at Lyla, who was already nodding eagerly, clearly in no hurry to be inside the seer's croft, for confirmation.

Ava turned the door handle and pushed it open. The door creaked ominously and loudly as she moved into the room.

“Close that door. Ye want an old woman tae die from the cold? Aye, aye, old bones decay quickly ye ken. I kenned a lass once who died from her bones turning tae ice. They didnae believe me. They never believe me, but I ken what I see.”

Ava closed the door sharply, turning to face the woman who was speaking so fast, she had to strain to listen to the individual words.

Sat before the fire was the seer, dressed in a thick woolen gown, a heavy wolf's fur on her shoulders and dark hair around her face that was streaked with grey. She was chewing something, some sort of root, though she only chewed with one side of her jaw. One eye was wider than the other, as if the other caused her pain, and she didn't once blink those eyes, giving her the impression of being a gargoyle that had sprung to life.

Jerkily, the woman gestured to the stool opposite her.

“Come, come. Nay time. Ye think guards dinnae ken when the daughter of a laird sneaks out of the castle?”

“They’ve never spotted it before,” Ava murmured as she sat on the stool, listening to it creak and whine behind her. She had snuck out many times in the night, just for the challenge of it... and the freedom.

“Hmm,” the seer grunted. “Speak. Why did ye come? Tell me.” The woman waved impatiently as she reached for a bundle of burning herbs and inhaled the rich scent of dried lavender and lemon thyme sharply, her nostrils flaring.

Ava spoke fast, obeying, though as she spoke, she couldn’t help staring at all the dried herbs hanging from the ceiling. Rather oddly, there was a rabbit’s foot dangling from between the herbs too, and more witches’ symbols carved across the wooden beams that held up the thatched roof.

“I... I have come fer direction,” Ava forced herself on. “I am trying tae protect me sister. A cruel suitor wants her, and tae avoid it, me faither wishes me tae seduce a laird. He’s a wealthy man, so wealthy it could solve all our clan’s problems, but I am nay temptress. Nay seductress.” She gestured at her gown, the cloak, and the weapons she carried. “How does a woman like me go about this task? And if I dae it... will it work? Can I save Lyla?”

The seer’s wider eye seemed to widen impossibly further, gazing at Ava.

Yet Ava had not come to be messed with. She was here for a task, and she would not fidget and be made uncomfortable by the seer’s spooky ways. She sat taller on the stool, her spine becoming rigid.

“I have asked ye questions. Please, answer me,” she said with strength.

“Hmm. Aye, aye, got a heart, got a conscience, got fire in ye too.” The seer grunted with a chuckle. “Yet all ken that already.” She reached into the fire suddenly.

Ava leaped back in amazement, only to see that the seer took hold of another bundle of herbs and dropped them into a bowl on a small, crooked table beside her. The blackened leaves and flower heads fell off the stems and the woman picked up the bowl, spinning it round and round for a moment before she set it down, gazing at the flower heads as if they held the answers of the world. Eventually, she looked up, staring straight at Ava with that eerie stare once again.

“Yer future will depend on a choice ye make. That choice will be whether tae follow yer duty. Or yer heart.” It was spoken without passion. In fact, it was said without much interest, almost impassively.

“Me heart?” Ava shifted.

I am doing this because I have a heart. I love me sister and will dae anything tae protect her. Arenae me duty and me heart aligned?

“Either path ye choose will have consequences. Nay way tae ken the right one.”

“How helpful,” Ava muttered under her breath.

The seer leaned forward sharply. It was clear she was not yet done.

“And on either path ye take, there’ll be one there with ye. A man. A man tae steer ye intae yer future. Maybe show ye what seduction is.”

“I dinnae need –”

“As ye say, ye are nae a temptress.” The seer gestured to her with one of the burning bundles that now smelled strongly of lavender and acrid burning wood. “Look at the border between the MacKinnons and the MacLeods. Ye have close ties with their clan. In three days, in a tavern called The Stag’s Rest, there will be a man. He’s a rake. A man who could read emotions with one look and can seduce any lass he likes intae his bed. He’s a man of careless elegance, a man whose confidence is his second skin, and has eyes like a storm over a sea.”

Ava started to fidget uncomfortably. How could the seer possibly see this man in her mind?

“He is dangerous and mischievous, and he commands eyes even without trying. He’ll be wearing a heavy hat. Ungainly thing. Quite ugly. That is how ye’ll ken it’s him. Find him.” She leaned back sharply. “The student will need a master if she is tae learn and change her future.”

“And ye think that is possible?” Ava asked keenly. “Ye think that if I choose this path, I can change the future?”

“I see possible futures, lass. I dinnae see which one will come.” With a flick of her wrist, the seer dismissed her.

CHAPTER TWO

Three Days Later, The Stag's Rest, Torrin

"Och, bloody thing," Kai muttered beneath his breath as he adjusted the large hat on his head. It was a ridiculous thing, necessary, but made no less ridiculous because of it. So large and heavy, it repeatedly slipped down his brow, hiding half his face from the rest of the world.

Necessary, remember that, ye fool, he reminded himself.

As scout for his elder brother, Laird of the MacLeod's, it was Kai's position to occasionally act the ridiculous fool in order to get the information they needed. It kept their clan and the Scottish safe, and countless times had saved them when it came to their battles against the English.

Adjusting the hat once more on his head, he shifted against the tavern wall, staring out across the room.

The Stag's Rest was hardly a reputable place. There were ladies who sold themselves here, thieves gathering at every table, bandits masking their faces with scarves, and even an innkeeper who served up beer which had most likely been watered down to fleece his customers. Kai dared to try another sip of it, but it tasted so foul, he pushed it away, drumming his fingers idly against the tankard as he looked at the door, waiting for the entrance of the man he was to meet.

Two lasses walked in, with dresses so low cut that Kai inhaled sharply. Their

cleavages were deep, their curves obvious, but Kai forced himself to look away.

He had a healthy appetite in that regard. He had shared his bed with many a lass, sometimes they didn't even make it to a bed. It helped. It made him thrum with excitement and thrill, gave him confidence, even if none of the women came close to the one woman whom he wished he could share his bed with.

She'll never be that. Remember that.

He pushed thoughts of her away, not even allowing her name to surface in his mind. Tonight, he had to be serious. His elder brother, Domhnall, had sent him here for a reason.

“Ye are the only one who can dae this.” Domhnall had spoken commandingly as they trained together out on the lawns behind the MacLeod castle. “This man is nae related tae our clan. He will have information from other clans, inside knowledge we cannae find any other way.”

“I ken all that. I said I'm happy tae go, didnae I?” Kai had laughed and tried to drive the sword toward his brother again, but Domhnall had deflected it.

Kai was athletic in build, but also lithe. It made him ideal for being a scout – he was a fast rider and quick fighter, but Domhnall was broad of muscle and a brutal warrior. Kai once saw his brother flatten a man out cold with nothing but his bare fist. Kai frequently thanked his lucky stars he was born Domhnall's family and not his enemy.

“I need ye tae dae more than just listen tae what he says,” Domhnall had gone on, walking around him, ready to fight again.

“Aye, aye, I ken.” Kai had held his arms out wide, like a performer on stage. “Ye wish me tae use me usual tricks, dinnae ye? Tae see his emotions, see what he's

hiding from us. Sense when he's lying, aye?"

Domhnall had nodded his head sharply.

Kai may have been the joker of the group, the one who seemed confident and at ease, but they all knew it gave him an advantage. No one expected him to be the one who was always watching, always astute, always sensing things that people were trying to hide.

Aye, it's me magic.

He chuckled at the mere thought and adjusted himself on the bench again, daring another sip of the watered-down beer before he spat it back into the tankard and gagged at the taste.

The door opened and the drunken men shouted for it to be closed fast as a flurry of snow came in and the icy wind made them all fidget. The innkeeper's wife added more logs to the fire as the door was kicked shut and the man who had just entered looked around.

Kai only needed to glance at him to know this was the man he had been waiting for.

Like him, this scout was dressed demurely, trying to hide in plain sight. He rubbed his hands uneasily, blowing on them to summon some warmth, his thick black curly hair hanging down from the hat on his head. The eager way he looked around, showing he was searching for someone, just confirmed what Kai already knew. His weapons were hidden beneath his cloak, including a dirk pressed into the ankle of his boot. It was where Kai often hid a weapon of his own, though his was a little more discreet.

The scout looked toward him, pulling down the thick woolen scarf that covered the

lower half of his face. When he saw Kai's hat, he recognized the symbol. It had been in Kai's letter to the man, that if he wanted to talk, come to this tavern and talk to the guy wearing the large hat.

Kai flicked his fingers to the nearest bar maid as the scout approached. Affecting an easy smile, Kai ordered two more beers.

"I'm glad ye made it," Kai put on a cheerful attitude and nodded for the man to take his seat. "A drink, aye? Ye need tae warm yer bones from all that snow."

"Aye. Thank ye." The scout sat down on the bench opposite Kai, clearly a little startled by Kai's easy manner. He looked around his shoulders, nervous of being overheard.

This is a good start.

It was what Kai had wanted to see. A scout delivering secret information shouldn't be at ease and confident, but nervous – even terrified about being overheard.

They waited for the beers to be brought then Kai offered a toast.

"Tae warmth and summer. Aye, I pray it is here soon." As he pretended to sip the beer, having no intention of drinking any more of it, the scout gulped heavily.

Aye, he's definitely nervous.

"We may be waiting a while fer that." The man scoffed then coughed, clearly finding the beer as unappetizing as Kai did.

"Ye ken why we are here then." Kai leaned forward, determined to get to the crux of their meeting. "What can ye tell me?"

The man wiped his mouth uneasily, looked about his shoulders, then leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

“The English. They’re encroaching more and more onto the Highlanders’ territory.” For the first time, Kai noticed there was something more to the Scottish lilt in the man’s voice. There was an English note too.

“Ye have English blood?”

“English maither, Scottish faither.” The man shifted, his face turning pink. Clearly, he had hoped this wouldn’t be noticed. “I fight fer Scotland.”

“Then why are ye nervous? Why worry about telling me these things?”

Once more, the man shifted uncomfortably.

“Because the clan I report tae is considering an alliance with the English. It’s what the English are doing. They’re working their way into our land by diplomacy. Or buying allegiance, call it what ye like.”

“Dae ye think there will be a battle?”

“Nay. Nae yet.” The man shook his head sharply. “They’re too busy having political discussions. I come tae offer yer laird a warning. That is all. Be wary of the riches the English offer ye and beware of clans ye think are yer friends. They may yet be bought.” He spoke with earnestness, not looking away from Kai’s gaze now.

Aye, he is telling the truth.

Kai knew it without having to doubt himself.

“Then I thank ye fer yer information.” Kai nodded. “What did ye risk tae come and tell me this?”

“Me position.” The man shifted. “I’m already nae trusted by some in me own clan because of me English maither, but I willnae let the English wipe out Scotland inch by inch without doing something about it.” The passion was evident. “It is right someone kens, even if me clan intends tae dae naething about it.”

He stood sharply as the door opened. Kai didn’t even look who had walked in this time, for his eyes were set on the man before him. The scout’s hand had gone to the weapons in his belt.

He fears fer his life.

“Then ye best get out of here fast.” Kai put some coins on the table. “Take this. Get yerself a fresh horse and ride home. Thank ye, again.”

The man nodded, jerkily took the coins, and left, sweeping out of the door as quickly as he arrived, with people cursing as the door was opened and more snow came in across the floor.

Kai sat forward after the man had gone. Now this meeting was done, he felt a calm washing over him.

“Aye, it was the truth,” he muttered, staring down into the tankard, knowing in his gut it was. In a way, it was reassuring. No impending battle meant they could protect their forces, rebuild themselves, take care of their clan, yet it was still a cause for concern. Maybe the English intended to make the Scottish their own by buying everyone.

I need tae tell Domhnall.

It was a heavy burden of responsibility. As one of the lairds' brothers, he knew each of them had a responsibility and a task to attend to in order to keep the clan safe. Kai's place had come naturally. He was built for quick riding, and his astuteness made him a good judge of character and a man's honesty.

He pushed the tankard away, not intending to drink anymore as he sat back and debated what to do next. He could go back to Dunvegan castle, report to Domhnall tonight, yet there was an allure to the idea of finding company for the night and going back in the morning. He also didn't particularly want to drink alone.

He looked around the tavern, seeing many women. Some clearly sold themselves, but there were others who wouldn't charge. They were here to look for a good night themselves.

There was one particular lass who caught his eye. She was blonde. He had to force himself to look away. His taste for blonde hair in particular stemmed from thinking too much of one woman. It would do no good to sleep with that lass and constantly imagine she was another.

He pushed the tankard aside and stood. Maybe he could share one drink with a lass in this tavern, see what happened. There was always the chance that drink and a night together, full of pleasure, could wash away that part of him which was broken, the part he always tried to mask and stuff down, so he never had to look it in the face.

As he stood, he felt someone at his shoulder. His hand went to the broadsword at his hip. He was ready. If a man was going to pick his pocket, he wouldn't get far.

"I have been looking for ye. I have an offer tae make ye." The lass' voice intrigued him, but what piqued his interest even more were her words.

An offer? What offer, lass?

“I am willing tae pay whatever it takes.”

Wait... that voice.

Kai whipped around fast, turning so quickly that the lass standing at his shoulder stepped back to avoid colliding with him.

This is nae possible!

The woman before him shouldn't have been here. The blonde hair shouldn't be there, those hazel eyes, the full cheeks, the wide mouth that was so kissable and yet out of reach.

“Ava?” he hissed in alarm as her perfect lips fell apart in an ‘o’ shape of shock. It was the woman he had loved hopelessly for years, the one he could never have, the one he had to love quietly from a distance and be nothing more to her than her closest friend. “What in God’s name are ye doing here?”

“Och, damn me life...”

CHAPTER THREE

Ava struggled for any more words. The curse hung in the air between her and Kai as she stared at him in disbelief.

The seer never said it would be Kai!

Yet Kai was before her. The seer's words came back to her, he's a man of careless elegance, a man whose confidence is his second skin, and has eyes like a storm over a sea.

Ava couldn't look away from those eyes now. It was the bane of her life that Kai, her dearest friend in the world, had grown up to be so handsome. He had a lightheartedness to his body his brothers didn't have. He was toned, as was evidenced by the shirt and tartan pulled tight across his shoulder. The dark chestnut hair visible just beneath the ugly hat was tousled around his ears, as if a lass had just been playing with it. The stubble was as endearing as ever. More than once in her life had Ava caught sight of a woman peppering his jaw with feather-light kisses.

She stepped back.

"It cannae be ye," she muttered.

"What are ye doing here, Ava?" he said sharply again, reaching for her arm and pulling her toward him. She had to plant a hand to the center of his chest to stop him from tugging her any closer.

“Kai!” she hissed, looking around. “I dinnae want everyone in this tavern tae think I’m yer courtesan for the night.”

“Ye should have thought of that afore ye just whispered in me ear about making me an offer.” His dark eyebrows raised, nearly disappearing up beyond the hat.

“That’s nae what I meant!” She threw the words back at him, trying to disentangle her arm from his grasp, but he had a tight hold of it. “Why are ye holding on so tight, Kai?”

“Because this isnae a safe place tae be.” He nodded his head around the tavern, at the thieves and bandits who were doing little to hide the wide they were eyeing up one another’s sacks and purses. “Now, tell me why ye are here and what offer ye are going tae make me, and then I’m taking ye out of here. Somewhere safe.” His voice had deepened on the latter words.

Ava tried to shift the feeling of warmth that Kai always brought with him. He only ever seemed to use this deep tone with her. It was always the way.

He looks at me as if I am his sisters, doesnae he? He always tries tae protect me.

“Offer? There was nay offer.” She pulled her arm out of his. “I... I’ve made a mistake... that’s all... I thought ye were someone else.”

He raised a solitary eyebrow this time as he folded his arms. She could feel the penetrating gaze of those blue eyes. It was always the way. Kai had a knack for reading anyone’s emotions, especially when they were trying desperately to hide them. The thought that he could read her as if she was anyone else in this world infuriated her.

I cannae tell him the truth.

She could just picture Kai's protectiveness if she did. He would probably yell and shout that she was not to bind herself to a man for the sake of her sister. She was not going to give him the choice to argue with her.

"I... I have tae go," she said, fidgeting constantly, though she was aware her feet weren't moving to take her away.

"Ye going tae tell me why ye are feeling so anxious?"

"I didnae say I was anxious."

"Ye never dae, fierce and steady as ever, Ava." He winked at her, then leaned an inch forward, lowering his voice in a conspiratorial whisper. "Yet I ken ye. I ken ye are anxious right now. Or do ye always fidget this much?"

She clamped her hands together and stood as still as a statue.

"Oh, much more natural," he said with full sarcasm.

"I'm leaving," she said swiftly, turning on her heel and marching for the door.

"What? Ava!" He ran after her, though she didn't turn to acknowledge him.

Making a quick dash for the door, she stepped out as quickly as she could, her pace halting as she stepped into the snow. The wind whipped against her hair, making her tartan gown ripple. She grabbed her cloak, trying to stop it from flying away as it buffeted around her shoulders.

The door was shut loudly behind her, just as a pair of hands rested on her shoulders, planting the cloak in place so it could not move.

Ava felt something in her stomach that she did her best to ignore. She had learned years ago that touches from Kai were unimportant. He touched women regularly, for he was a known rake. She was just one of the few he would touch no more than this.

“Stay warm out here,” he whispered in her ear, his lips so close that her eyes involuntarily closed.

Dinnae think about how close his lips are right now.

Her eyes shot open again and she stepped forward, marching through the snow and wrapping the cloak as tightly around her body as you could.

“Have ye been riding without an escort?” he asked, traipsing after her with ease.

“I dinnae need an escort. I can defend meself, remember?” She hardly needed to gesture to the weapons she kept beneath her cloak. He had seen her fight many times.

“Aye, aye, so ye can, Ava. It doesnae mean ye should ride alone. Unless... the reason ye are here tonight ye wanted tae keep secret from everyone.”

“Stop reading me emotions, Kai,” she said sharply as she turned into the stable out the back of the tavern. Pulling on the bridle, she steered her white horse forward, but Kai was once again in the way, his tall figure overbearing and dominating in the stable.

“Ye ken I cannae dae that.”

“Dae me this favor.” She held up a finger to him. “Dinnae ask about what I said. Dinnae ask anymore about why I am here. It is me secret, me bur...” She broke off, fearing she had said too much.

Kai's face hardened. Gone was the playful curiosity. In its place there was steady concern.

"Burden."

"I didnae think ye could read minds," Ava murmured, her stomach tightening all the more.

"Nae minds, lass, ye ken that." He took a step toward her, and she tightened her hold on the bridle, intent on riding as far away through the snow as fast as she possibly could once the opportunity presented itself. "Hearts..." He paused and raised a finger, pointing at her chest. "Aye, maybe them."

"Stop it." She swiped his hand away.

"Ah, fierce as ever."

"Always," she spat in his direction. "Now let me leave, Kai, and dae me a favor, never mention this meeting tae anyone." She put her foot in the stirrup and was about to lift her leg over when his arm came up around her waist. "Kai!" He pulled her back, until she could no longer touch the horse.

"It's the only language ye understand, isnae it?" he whispered in her ear. "A fight..."

"Ye and I always fight," she reminded him.

"And ye love it." His lips were practically against her neck. Something spiraled in her gut, a type of excitement that she had learned long ago to stamp down on when she was around Kai.

Get out of his grasp!

Acting on instinct, she reached for the basilard in her belt and lashed out with her foot. Kai was clearly prepared for it. He spread his legs wide in time, managing to avoid her kicking a particularly sensitive area, though he relaxed his hold in the effort to do so. She spun around, backed up from him, basilard outstretched to warn him not to come any closer.

“See?” he said with a rumbling chuckle. “Ye love a good fight, Ava.”

“Hmm.” She backed up toward the horse again as his laughter faded into sudden seriousness.

“Nay more messing around.” Kai held up his hands in the position of surrender. “As tempted as I am tae play rough and tumble with ye all night.”

“Kai!” she spat angrily. There was the briefest of smiles that faded fast.

“I can read ye better than any other, Ava.” His words made her hand on the basilard drop an inch. What did he mean by that? “I can see ye’re anxious, and most of all, I can see ye are scared.” Those stormy eyes looked more intense than ever, only just visible thanks to the one lonely candle that was lit in the stable. “What kind of friend would I be tae ye if I let ye ride off into the night, in the middle of the snow, scared about something?” He stepped toward her. “I am nae that kind of man. Ye ken that. So, tell me now.”

He took her wrist holding the basilard, his fingers surprisingly soft, then removed the blade from her fingers. Even slower still, he flicked her cloak to the side and put the basilard back in her scabbard. The movement brought him so close she held her breath.

“What are ye scared of?” he whispered, his voice deadly serious as he faced her.

“I’m nae scared.” Her words made him raise his eyebrows once again. “I’m determined.”

“Oh, I can see ye are that.” He nodded slowly, tilting his head to the side. It was hardly the first time in her life that Ava felt as if Kai was looking into her very soul. It was one of the reasons they had become such good friends from a young age. He knew her feelings without her even having to confide, and she also knew she could trust him with her life. “Ava,” he whispered, his voice deepening once again. “Dae ye think there’s a secret in this world ye couldnae trust me with?”

She looked down at the minimal space between them as he was now standing so close. He was right. He had always kept any secret she had told him.

“I came fer help,” she whispered.

“Who’s help?”

“Nae yers!” She snapped her head up again.

“Then who’s?” He waited patiently.

“A seer told me I’d find a man here who could help me, a man wearing an ugly hat.” She nodded at the ungainly thing on his head. As if angered by it, he snapped it off and tossed it away. It landed somewhere amongst the straw, as he ruffled his dark chestnut hair with his long fingers. Ava had to snap her gaze back to his eyes fast.

“And what was this man supposed tae help ye with?”

“He was supposed tae teach me things.” She chose to now stare into the middle of his chest, at the tartan and the clan brooch that he had reversed in order to hide his allegiance, the pin only just visible to her in the amber candlelight. “Ye ken me

sister's woes. Ye must have seen the man who wants her, the man who..."

"I've heard the stories." Kai nodded fast. "Me braithers and I have talked about it, how he covets yer sister. He willnae get her, Ava. Yer sister is too good of heart –"

"Me faither may nae be in a position tae refuse his offer of marriage," she cut him off, watching as his jaw dropped. "We need money, Kai. We dinnae have it. And this man is offering a large sum fer Lyla's hand. So, me faither has another solution." Suddenly feeling sick at the thought of telling Kai this secret, she placed her hands on her hips, finding comfort in her fingers being so near to her weapons, as if they gave her unseen strength. "If I can marry a man like Blair Grant –"

"Laird Grant!?" Kai suddenly spluttered, taking a step back.

"His fortunes are so vast, me faither could refuse Lyla's suitor in an instant. It is a good plan, Kai."

"Is it?" There was something abruptly wild in Kai's character. He turned on the spot, maddeningly pulling at his hair, then turning back to face her again. "Ye're going tae marry Laird Grant?"

"If I can." She fidgeted, well aware that her nerves were palpable in the air between them, without needing the penetrating glance he shot her way as he marched up and down the stable. "The problem is, catching the eye of a laird like Blair Grant isnae something that I..." She trailed off. Her sudden silence made Kai pause in his pacing. He turned to look at her again, just waiting for her to go on. When she didn't, he held his arms out wide.

"Shall I point out that ye nae only look terrified but look frankly murderous?" His words made him sigh. "Go on, Ava," he pleaded, his voice so deep that she fidgeted once more.

“I dinnae ken how tae seduce a man,” the words fell from her so quietly, he clearly didn’t hear it.

“What?” He marched back toward her. “Ava, what did ye say?”

“I said...” She cleared her throat, lifting her chin to look him in the eye. “I dinnae ken how tae seduce a man. If I am tae marry Blair Grant, then it’s something I must learn tae dae.” She was down the rabbit warren now, and suddenly the whole truth came out of her. “I went tae see the seer in the forest outside me faither’s castle, and she told me that tae seduce Blair Grant, I should come and meet a man who kenned the art of seduction. He would be in The Stag’s Rest tonight, sitting alone, wearing an ugly hat. I had nay idea she meant ye.”

She abruptly stopped, aware that Kai was looking at her in a way that she found completely unreadable. His lips were parted, his stubbled jaw dropped, his hands loose at his sides.

Silence extended between them. It became awkward in its length, with Ava wondering if Kai would ever speak to her again. She shifted her weight between her feet, and in the end the mare behind her whinnied, clearly sensing the awkward air too.

“Ye came tae find me, tae coach ye on seducing a man, Ava? Is that what ye are telling me?” He took another step toward her. “I’ll dae it only when hell is covered in snow as thick as is outside tonight.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Kai!”

Yet Kai couldn't listen to Ava anymore. He turned away from her, moving in a wild circle as he thought over everything she had just said. It was like a rain of crossbow bolts had struck him all at once.

Ava wanted to get married? She wished to marry a man like Laird Blair Grant, and worst of all, he was to be her teacher in seduction?

“Have ye lost all yer good sense?” He whipped back to face her, marching toward her. She was so alarmed that she backed up, in danger of colliding with her mare. He reached out sharply, looping an arm across her waist and pulling her forward into safety. “Ye're going tae marry a man fer yer family's fortune? Ye're going tae sell yer soul, bind it to a man, bind yer body tae him—”

“Kai!” She shoved into his chest, but he didn't let go.

“That's what marriage is, Ava. Husbands and wives share their bodies. Dinnae tell me ye need me tae go through the mechanics of what happens between men and women.”

“I dinnae bloody need ye tae dae that,” she said venomously, planting both of her palms against his chest.

That touch did something to him. Kai looked down at what she was doing.

He'd made a decision long ago that he would never try to get Ava into his bed, out of fear of losing her. The more he resisted her, the more his attraction had turned into something far deeper. These days, he knew what to call it.

Aye, it's love.

The thought of seeing the woman he loved marry another, even if he knew she was far beyond his own reach, was like being gutted by a blunted dirk.

"I ken what happens in a marriage," she insisted swiftly. "I am nae doing this just fer fortune. I am doing this tae protect me sister. Laird Blair Grant's reputation is nae as bad as Lyla's suitor. Out of the two, which marriage is preferable?"

Ava pushed away from him, and he suddenly felt the coldness of the wind bristling in through the open doorway of the stable. He wanted Ava back in his arms, where she was warm and safe. "Ye and I both ken it's a good plan. Better I'm married tae Blair Grant than Lyla is married tae that demon."

Kai ran a hand over his face for a second, trying to buy some time before he had to answer her.

"Ye ken his reputation," she pushed on, clearly not intending to give him much time to think. "How dae ye think he would treat Lyla? At least with Blair Grant, there is nay inkling he would be so cruel to his wife."

Kai didn't want to agree with her, though the wise voice somewhere in the back of his mind did indeed agree. Lyla's suitor was known for his sadistic nature. If the rumors were true, he'd taken more than one woman by force. The mere thought made Kai not only physically sick but tempted to rip out the man's throat with his bare hands.

“Laird Grant may be a good husband,” Ava whispered, her voice much closer than Kai had been prepared for. He lowered his hand from his face, angling his neck around so he could catch a glimpse of her at his side. She was deadly serious now, looking up at him with those hazel eyes, those perfect lips parted a little.

Blair Grant will be the man who gets tae kiss those lips. He’ll be the man she smiles at. He’ll be the one she loves.

Kai hadn’t known this feeling before. For a second, he thought he might fall over with dizziness, then he thought such an idea was foolish, and he was much more likely to ride out into the snow until the cold made his whole body numb. Then, he had a better idea.

“I need a drink,” he muttered, marching for the door.

“What?” She must have abandoned the mare and followed him, for the next thing Kai knew, as he marched through the falling snow back toward the tavern, she was on his tail again. “Ye need a drink now?”

“Me dearest friend has just told me she’s going tae sacrifice herself tae help her sister. Aye, I need a drink.” He jerked open the door, hearing the usual chorus of curses from the drinkers inside who hated the sudden draught. He and Ava scuttled inside.

Ava looked tempted to run again, rethinking her actions to follow him, but he didn’t let her. He caught her hand instead and dragged her back toward his earlier table, urging her next to him.

“Ye’re going tae have tae stop touching me so much,” she hissed under her breath. “Men here really will think I’m selling meself.”

“They’d have tae kill me tae get tae ye,” he said with sudden fierceness. She looked

at him, wide eyed, and her emotions rolled off her in apparent waves.

Shock.

He was a little disappointed that after all this time, the fact he was so protective of her would be a shock at all.

The barmaid came past the two of them, asking for their order with nothing more than a jerk of her chin.

“Two whiskies. None of that watered down beer ye’re passing around,” he added, to which she colored pink before she ran off.

Kai said nothing for a minute. His foot bobbed up and down restlessly as he stared at Ava, who was now doing her best to busy herself adjusting the weapons in her belt to be comfortable. As soon as the whiskies came, Kai downed his and ordered another. Ava stared at him, open mouthed.

“Are ye certain of this?” Kai asked her, speaking at last as he got his mind organized.

Ava had always been beyond his reach. He knew that. She was too perfect, too beautiful, too good and loyal in heart, not to mention a talented and admirable warrior. In contrast, he was broken, haunted by the past, and he had little to offer the daughter of a laird when he was just the younger brother of another laird, spending his time as a scout. She was always going to marry someone else someday, he had just kept hoping that day wouldn’t come yet.

“I am certain.” She spoke with unrestrained determination now. She even sidled a little closer to him on the bench, prompting him to lay one hand across the back of it. If he shifted his arm a little, he could have wrapped that arm around her shoulders, but he restrained himself. “Ye ken Lyla and me. Which of us is better able to defend

themselves? If Lyla was bound tae such a man...”

He nodded in agreement at once. Ava was the warrior. She could fight to protect herself if needed, but Lyla was smaller in build, and she was shy. She sometimes found it hard to fight her corner. Bound to a vicious man, she would crumple like snow.

“Ye’re desperate, arenae ye?” Kai read the emotions rolling off her. She reset herself on the bench, leaning toward him. Those hazel eyes were so close now, pleading, open and honest.

Kai often had to use persuasion to make others open up to him with his air of charm and confidence, and his ability to read their emotions made him an even better persuader. Sometimes, he was even a manipulator, but never with Ava. He had never once conned her or persuaded her into talking about something she did not want to. Her openness now, meant everything.

He couldn’t deny her anything, not when she was so in need of his help.

His whisky was put down in front of him. He picked it up and knocked half of it back, distracting himself with the burn in his throat for a minute before he allowed himself to talk again.

He had to come to peace with what he was about to do.

If I help her dae this, Ava will truly never be mine.

That feeling of being gutted by a blade grew worse, but his mind was made up all the same. She had always been beyond his reach.

“I’ll dae it.”

“Dae what?” she murmured, nearly dropping her own cup of whisky.

“I’ll give ye the coaching ye need tae seduce a man, Ava.”

“Ye will?” Ava leaned forward sharply, such a smile of relief spreading across her face that the waves of emotions rolling off her now hurt him a little.

It pained him that Ava had never considered the thought that their friendship could have been something deeper. Clearly from her smile, it had never even been an inkling in her mind.

He downed the whisky, needing more of that distracting burn.

“First lesson.”

“What? Here? Now?” Ava said in disbelief.

“Have ye got a better idea?”

“I hadnae thought about it. Time is important, I suppose.”

“Perfect, then we’ll start now.” He had no intention of letting their seduction lessons drag on any longer than they had to. “Besides, yer first lesson is an easy one.”

“Oh good.” She put down her tankard, setting her spine straight as she turned to face him fully on the bench.

“Eye contact.”

“I ken how tae look a man in the eye, Kai.”

“Dae ye?” He wasn’t so sure. He’d seen Ava get flustered more than once. She was confident on the battlefield, and she often put up a wall of ferocity to protect herself, but holding a man’s eye? No, he hadn’t ever seen that unless she was calculating how to beat one in battle.

“Of course I bloody dae.”

“Hmm, then show me.”

“What?” She pinkened. It was a delectable shade of pink. It made Kai think of other ways to make Ava blush, ways that would have her shifting in that tartan skirt of hers, rubbing her thighs together. He had to push away such sexual thoughts.

“Show me.” Kai looked around the tavern. He caught sight of a young man who kept looking Ava’s way, clearly taken by her fine looks and blonde hair. “With him. Hold his gaze. Just fer a few beats. It’s even easier than raising a sword. Trust me.”

Ava sighed, clearly frustrated with him. She sat taller and tried to hold the man’s gaze, but she looked away fast, turning her chin down. The young man turned away as well, clearly disappointed.

“Well, at least ye are nay longer blushing pink in embarrassment. Ye’re bright red now.”

“Kai!” She elbowed him, making him chuckle at her frustration.

“Ye can hold me gaze though, cannae ye? Look.” He shifted his arm from the back of the bench, brushing his fingers along the back of her neck to get her attention. She whirled her head around so fast, her braid flicked past her shoulder. She looked at him in shock, those hazel eyes wide. “See?” he whispered. “Ye are nae looking away.”

“Ye dinnae count.”

“Why nae?”

“Ye’re nae really a man, are ye?”

“I beg yer pardon?” His jaw dropped as she blushed even redder.

“Ye ken what I mean.”

“Truly, I dinnae. I can find ye many women who can testify tae ye that I truly am a man, Ava.”

“Oh, I ken ye could.”

“Or would ye prefer me tae undae these trews and prove it tae ye meself?”

“Stop playing around.” She elbowed him again, a little harder this time. He had to rub the sore spot on his chest, trying not to laugh at how much she was fidgeting. Her emotions had changed now. She was growing increasingly nervous.

“Very well, if I dinnae count, then practice on me. It may make it easier. Look me in the eye.” He leaned toward her, prompting her to jerk her chin upwards. She stared at him with something more like suspicion. “Come, Ava, softly. Ye think ye are going tae charm a man intae yer bed by glowering at him?”

“I’m trying tae charm a man up the aisle, nae intae me bed.”

“Same thing.”

“It really isnae.”

“Ava, it really is.” He hardened his voice. “Only yer task is harder. Ye want Blair Grant tae desire yer bed fer life.” He tried to keep the anger out of his voice. After tonight, he had a feeling he would detest Blair Grant’s guts forever. “Now, look at me softly.”

She raised her chin and looked at him, though it was more impassive.

“Maybe smile at me,” he whispered, sidling along the bench closer to her. His arm was now so close to her shoulders, he was barely a hair’s breadth from her. She had inhaled sharply, the surprise wafting off her. “Lift an eyebrow, something tae show ye are interested by what ye see.”

Yet she didn’t. She just turned redder in the face.

“Like this,” he whispered, smiling at her with ease. Her stare now deepened to a thorough frown. “Ava, ye’re supposed tae be trying tae charm me. Ye look more battle-ready right now.”

“Oh, this is hopeless.” She broke her gaze and looked around the tavern. When she stared at one man in particular, Kai had to fight not to laugh.

“Ye look as if ye want tae take his head off with a sword.”

“Maybe this was a bad idea.” She looked down at her tankard and slumped into the bench, her shoulders now brushing his arm. Kai was tempted to pull her into his side, nestle her there, where he could keep her safe from harm.

“Dinnae lose yer courage,” he urged. “Ye’re the bravest woman I ken.”

“I am?” She looked up at him in surprise.

“Course ye are.” He smiled at her. “If ye can master the sword, ye can master seduction, trust me. Ye just need some confidence, and ye need tae see that any man would be gasping tae be in yer bed.”

“Is... is that really what ye think?”

Kai was the one who was now tongue tied. They were both staring at each other, and for the first time, Ava did not look ready to take his head off with a sword. She looked soft, inviting, those hazel eyes rather sweet in the way they gazed at him.

They kept staring at one another in silence, until two drunks arguing nearby made Kai look away fast.

“Aye, I dae think that.” Kai thought it best to move on fast, without Ava paying too much attention to what he had said. “Well, ye’re getting the idea of holding me gaze, so let’s move on tae the next lesson.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“W hat’s the next lesson?” Ava muttered nervously.

Kai’s confidence wasn’t helping her believe she had done the right thing. He was now moving from one lesson to the next so swiftly, that she was beginning to wonder just how many things he had to teach her. Was he so adept at seduction that it would take days, maybe weeks, to get through all his lessons?

“A soft look,” Kai whispered.

“Soft?” She raised her eyebrows in suspicion. “I’m nae a damsel in distress if that’s what ye want me tae be.”

“That’s nae what I said, Ava.” The corner of his lips lifted in amusement. There was something endearing about that smile, there always had been. It was as though when Kai smiled like that, she knew everything would be all right. “But looking at a man with a touch more vulnerability, even demureness on occasion –”

“Demureness?” she spluttered, horrified at the thought.

“It might just encourage a man nae tae think ye are out tae murder him.”

“I’m nae that bad.” She folded her arms, feeling rather irked that he thought this about her.

“Ava.” His voice deepened as his hand loosened from the tankard and moved to take

her arm. Gently, he unfurled her arms and shifted her hand into his grasp. She stared down at what he was doing, confused by it. “Desist with all this nervousness. It’s coming off ye strongly.”

“Oh aye, let me just get rid of it with a flick of me fingers.” Her irony made him smile as he shifted their grasp, holding her hand beneath the table. She stared down at that touch, uncertain if he was doing this as an act of comfort, of friendship, or if he was maintaining a feeling of intimacy between them for the sake of this lesson. Either way, his hand was comforting. It was larger than hers, warm too, so that her palm felt safe encased in his own.

“Now, look me in the eye, not at me hand, Ava.” Following the deeply spoken instruction, she raised her chin and looked at him. “It’s a good start.” He was smiling at her, completely at ease and confident. It was a sharp contrast to the way her stomach was somersaulting, as if a thousand butterflies had lodged themselves deep in her gut and were fluttering madly in an attempt to escape. “Look at me softly.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“That’s nae soft.”

“Och, I dinnae ken how tae be soft. I’ve been trained in battle.”

“Well, now ye’re being trained in seduction.” His hand suddenly entwined with her own, their fingers lacing together. She was so stunned, she fidgeted on the bench a little. “Lower yer chin a little, so ye’re nae raising a challenging look tae me.”

Slowly, she did as he said.

“Aye, that’s a little better.” He smiled again. “Now when ye look at me, imagine ye dinnae wish ye were sparring with me. Imagine that, fer a change, all ye want tae dae is be in me arms. Safe in me arms, Ava.”

How can he talk so well?

She felt her whole face soften. There was something so endearing about the thought of just being held by Kai, her spine lost its rigidity. She could easily imagine just how safe she would feel embraced by him.

Something happened across the tavern, it seemed. The bright orange candlelight dimmed to something softer, more like a burnt orange effect across the room. Something about that light made Ava lean ever so slightly nearer to Kai.

“See? That’s the look,” he whispered. His head tilted to the side. Her eyes couldn’t stop taking in the structure of his face, the storminess of those eyes, or the movement of his thin lips. “Look at a man like that, Ava, and they’ll be a pup at yer heels.” He looked away.

As if some sort of spell had been broken, Ava sat up straight again. She reset herself on the bench and tried to disentangle her hand from Kai. He slowly let her, then nodded across the tavern.

“Now, try it on another man. That young man ye were looking at earlier is clearly eager fer yer attention again.”

With a huff, Ava looked away. She didn’t like the idea of practicing on other men much. She was startled to see that Kai was indeed right. The auburn-haired young man who had been looking at her earlier from another stable was indeed still sneaking glances her way.

She looked at him, trying to soften her expression, but the thought of being in that man’s arms only discomfited her. She started to feel quite sick at the thought.

“Ye look like ye are plotting his execution.”

“Oh, in the name of the wee man.” She broke the connection of her gaze with the man and turned to face Kai. Determined to get it right, she went back to picturing being in Kai’s arms. She felt her face shift at once. Everything changed in her demeanor. She didn’t even blink as she gazed up at him, wishing he really would hold her.

Why dae I want him tae?

She reasoned that Kai always made her feel safe, that he was the only man she had ever had that feeling with after what she’d been through. Of all the men she had ever met, he was the only one she would trust putting his arms around her.

“Well...” He abruptly cleared his throat and looked away. “Ye can manage it with me at least, but nae with others.”

“It’s nae easy, ye ken.”

“Oh, it is.”

“Ye dae it then.” She felt sharp, tired of his lessons already.

“Very well, I’ll show ye how it’s done.” He stood from the table without another word. Ava was all too aware of the way his arm had disappeared from the back of the bench as he walked away.

She felt rather cold and pulled the cloak up over her shoulders, looking longingly at the fire in the corner of the room that had burned down to its embers. She looked away when she heard the easy laugh of a woman.

At the serving hatch, Kai was leaning against the wall. That air of charm and confidence was back, as if he had donned it as easily as he did a hat. He was smiling rather boldly at a young barmaid with long dark hair and eyes that were misty gray.

She was truly beautiful, with strong cheekbones and a slight figure. She was very different compared to Ava's athletic build.

Ava slumped in her seat as she watched. She tried to focus on how Kai smiled at the lass, the way he clearly made the barmaid feel special by devoting all of his attention to her.

Yet her mind kept slipping away. Far from studying Kai's behavior, she stared at the woman instead. The barmaid's responsiveness to him, the way she touched Kai's arm, made Ava's gut writhe.

Ava pushed her whisky away, not wanting anymore to drink as she stared at the pair in wonder. Kai seemed utterly intoxicated by the woman's presence. He even leaned toward her, whispering something playfully in her ear. The barmaid giggled, all bashful, pinkening, and then gazing up at Kai with eyes that were sparkling in excitement.

An ugly feeling shot through Ava. All at once, she longed for Kai to be back there with her. She wished that barmaid didn't exist, or that Kai hadn't noticed her at all.

She refused to acknowledge it, but the more she tried to push it away, the stronger it came through, until she found it impossible to sit still on the bench at all. She kept writhing and fidgeting, adjusting her gown and her cloak. She was dressed very differently to the barmaid. Where Ava was dressed for battle, her tartan gown pulled tight, a little high on her neckline too, the barmaid's gown was open in places. The laces of her kirtle were obvious, a slit in the skirt revealing a flash of pale calf, and the neckline so low that her bosom was practically being served up on the trencher she carried with her.

Why would a man like Kai ever notice me when there is a woman as beautiful tae capture his attention?

The sudden thought made Ava realize exactly what emotion she was tussling with.

Och, I'm jealous!

Knowing the way Kai could read her emotions so easily, she panicked when she saw him walking back toward her, only sparing a few seconds to drop another whisper in the barmaid's ear before he left.

Trying her best to mask what she was feeling, Ava downed her whisky. She figured her best bet was to show anger and frustration. They were emotions he would be very familiar with reading on her by now.

"What made ye so angry?" Kai asked as he sat down beside her. "Did ye nae like what ye saw? I demonstrated what ye wanted tae see."

"I ken ye did." She was clipped in her response. She whirled around to face him, determined not to offer him a glimpse of her jealousy. "I cannae believe ye can seduce as easily as ye can breathe and I struggle tae hold a man's gaze. It's insufferable."

He chuckled softly and just shrugged, as if it was an innate part of his being.

Dinnae be jealous. She shouted the thought in her head. She knew Kai was a rake, everyone knew. It was hardly a secret that he had bedded many women. Should I nae be glad that I am the woman he wouldnae bed? That I'm the woman he wishes tae be friends with instead?

Yet she couldn't be glad. A morose feeling took up residence in her gut, one that made her wonder what was so wrong with her that Kai had never even considered her bed. Not that she wanted to sleep with him, of course, that would be madness. But still, she was a woman, right?

“That’s nae all, is it?” Kai abruptly leaned toward her. Matching his movements, Ava leaned away, trying to move along the bench. “Ava, what is it ye are nae telling me?”

“Nothing.” She sidled away, coming increasingly closer to a corner where she would be trapped between Kai and the wall. He followed her.

“Kai, I’ll be trapped against the wall.”

“Good, then ye cannae escape.”

She elbowed him again, but he continued, halting mere inches away from her.

“What has made ye so angry?”

“Maybe yer gift tae read emotions isnae always a trustworthy one,” she said tartly. “It infuriates me ye can dae this so easily and I cannae. That is all.”

“Is it?”

“Aye!”

“Nay, there’s something more here.”

“Oh, enough of this.” She tried to stand, to somehow walk past him and out of her trapped corner, but the table was in the way. She was simply forced to sit back down again, only this time, they ended up even closer to one another, with Kai planting one hand on the table and one on the back of the bench, so she was blocked truly by his body.

Her eyes flitted over the strong shoulders. When she gazed a little bit too long, she had to force her gaze back toward his face. He had stilled completely. For one awful minute, she thought he had seen the way she had looked at him, seen the weakness,

but he stayed silent, just staring.

“Are ye going tae let me out or nae?”

“Where will ye go?”

“I...” She halted. In truth, she didn’t know. She could ride home, though at this time of night and in this snow, she would be susceptible to injury and being attacked by bandits. She also knew that she needed more lessons from Kai. Even if she mastered the knack of holding Blair Grant’s gaze and softening her expression, it would not be enough to make him offer marriage.

“Stay the night here.”

“What?”

“Stay the night here in the tavern. In the early morning, we’ll go tae yer home and ye’ll sneak back in. Then I will show up and pretend I came tae escort ye tae see me sister. Yer faither willnae say nay,” he reminded her with ease. “There, we’ll have more privacy fer our lessons.”

“Ye will continue with these lessons then?”

“Of course. Even if ye are angry at me fer flirting with a barmaid –”

“I didnae say I was angry at ye,” she protested, but Kai was already on his feet, a mischievous smile in place.

“I’ll get us two rooms fer the night.” As he walked away, Ava seriously considered defying him and refusing his request. She could go home again, damn all the lessons, and try to seduce Blair Grant alone, but then she reasoned how bad a job she would do if she had to.

Standing to her feet, she determinedly avoided looking at the dark-haired barmaid as she crossed the room to talk to another lass.

Kai was waiting for her at the bottom of the tavern staircase, two room keys in his hand. The dark-haired barmaid was trying to get his attention, but oddly, Kai didn't seem to have noticed, he was only looking at Ava as she walked through the crowds of drinkers toward him.

"One room each," he said, handing her the key.

"Is this so yer new friend can keep ye company in the night?" Ava nodded in the direction of the dark-haired beauty. The moment the words were out of her mouth, she regretted it. She felt both petulant and jealous.

What has gotten into me?

Kai led her up the staircase, tossing the words casually over his shoulder.

"I may enjoy fighting with ye, Ava, but I have never liked making ye angry. The only one in me bed tonight, will be me."

Ava wasn't sure whether to smile at the thought or not.