



Trapped by the Wicked Highlander (Lairds of the Loch Alliance #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Ye're trapped with a beast now, lass."

With his daughter on her deathbed, Laird Hunter is desperate. Desperate enough to kidnap a healer and force her to help him.

After being betrayed by her betrothed, healer Cassandra vows to only focus on her patients. But with Hunter looming over her, her resolve waivers...

Hunter knows he must not corrupt the innocent Cassandra. But how can he resist the monster in him roaring to claim her?

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CHAPTER ONE

“Fetch the healer!” he barked, his voice carrying through the halls like a command of war. “And bring fresh water and linens—now!” Hunter shouted.

He strode through the dimly lit corridors, his boots echoing sharply against the stone. In his arms, his young daughter, Elena lay limp. Her face pale as death and her body burning with fever.

Hunter carried Elena into the great hall, his gaze sweeping over the rows of sick and dying people. The air was thick with the scent of sweat and sickness, the low groans of the fevered echoing off the stone walls. Most lay still, their bodies wracked with heat, while others moaned in delirium or vomited into buckets at their bedsides. His jaw tightened as he spotted the healer among them, his face pale and glistening with sweat, struck down before he could find the cause of the illness.

The maids rushed forward, guiding Hunter to an empty cot near the hearth. They worked quickly, stripping Elena of her damp clothes and dressing her in a clean linen shift. She barely stirred, her breathing shallow, her skin far too warm beneath his touch.

Daniel approached in a rush, his face dark with worry as he watched the scene unfold.

“This is bad, Hunter,” Daniel muttered, his voice low. “We cannae let anythin’ happen to little Elena. We must find a way out of this, for her sake. Me niece cannae die. The healer’s down, and we’ve lost three just this morn.”

Hunter exhaled sharply, his hands curling into fists at his sides. “Aye, I see it,” he replied, his tone clipped, his mind already racing for a solution.

A maid wrung out a cool cloth and pressed it to Elena’s forehead, her lips pressed in a grim line. “She’s burnin’ up like the rest. The sweat beads down her head like the others. She seems to be in a deep delirium.” the woman murmured, shaking her head.

Hunter clenched his jaw, helplessness clawing at him like a beast.

Daniel moved closer, lowering his voice. “We need answers, and fast. If this spreads further, we’ll lose half the clan.”

Hunter nodded, his eyes locked on Elena’s fragile form. He had already lost his parents—he would not lose his only child, too.

Another violent coughing fit erupted from a man across the hall, his body shuddering with the force of it. A maid rushed to his side, pressing a cloth to his lips, only to recoil in horror at the sight of blood.

Hunter’s stomach twisted, dread settling in his bones. Whatever this sickness was, it was only getting worse.

The healer let out a weak groan, shifting slightly on his cot.

Hunter strode over, crouching beside the old man, gripping his shoulder. “Ye need to tell me what ye ken,” he demanded, his voice edged with urgency.

The healer’s eyes fluttered open, glassy with fever, his breath rasping as he struggled to speak. “Water...” the old man croaked, his fingers twitching.

Hunter turned to Daniel, his expression dark with resolve. “Ye must stay and guard

the castle,” he said, his voice firm.

Daniel frowned, arms crossed over his chest. “Where are ye goin’, then?” he asked, suspicion lacing his tone.

Hunter’s gaze flicked to Elena’s pale face before locking back onto Daniel. “The lass needs a healer – and I will bring one to her,” he said, his voice like steel. “Nay matter the cost.”

Daniel exhaled sharply, his jaw tightening. “It’s dangerous, Hunter,” he warned.

“Aye, and lettin’ her waste away is worse,” Hunter shot back, his patience thin. He grabbed his sword belt and fastened it, his movements sharp and decisive. Every moment spent talking was a moment wasted. Daniel clenched his fists but gave a curt nod.

"I'll send for the guards to escort ye," Daniel said.

"Nay. I plan to be swift and go unnoticed in cloak of a peasant. There's nay time for ceremony. I'm goin' to clan McAllister for their healer. Tell nay one. The less that ken then the less there's room for treachery," Hunter said.

“I’ll keep the castle safe,” Daniel said, his voice low. “But ye’d best return, Hunter. If ye fall, the clan falls.” Hunter gave him a hard look, then strode toward the door without another word.

The cold wind bit at his skin as he stepped into the courtyard. He grabbed a peasant cloak, saddled his horse, horse all under the darkness. The sky was dark with storm clouds, but he paid them no mind. Elena had little time left, and he would not let her die.

He swung into the saddle and gripped the reins. He moved to the side gate and ordered the guard. "Tell nay one ye saw me leave, understood?"

"Aye, me laird," the guard said.

As the heavy door groaned open, Hunter spurred his horse forward, disappearing into the night with stealth.

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CHAPTER TWO

Cassandra carefully ground herbs into a fine paste. The scent of lavender and yarrow filled the air, mixing with the faint smoke from the fire burning in the hearth. She was nearly finished with a batch of poultices when the door to her healing room burst open. A tall, broad-shouldered man strode in without so much as a knock, his piercing gaze locking onto her.

“I need yer services,” he said gruffly, his deep voice cutting through the quiet.

Cassandra froze, the mortar and pestle still in her hands. She turned slowly, her eyes narrowing at the audacity of this stranger.

“Do ye now?” she said, setting her tools down with deliberate care.

Her temper flared as she crossed her arms over her chest. “And who do ye think ye are, marchin’ in here and barkin’ orders at me?” she demanded. The man remained unfazed, his expression unreadable.

“I’ve already gotten permission from Elias,” he said, his tone as firm as stone. “Ye are coming with me.”

Cassandra stiffened, rage simmering beneath her skin.

“I am nae Elias’ property,” she snapped. “He cannae tell me what to do.”

The stranger’s gaze darkened, his stance unyielding. “Aye, he can. Ye are in his

service. Ye daenae have a choice. Ye're comin' with me, lass." he said, his voice low and unrelenting.

She clenched her fists, struggling to keep her fury in check. Every fiber of her being wanted to fight back, to refuse just to spite him. Yet, beneath her anger, another feeling stirred—one she did not welcome.

He was undeniably handsome, with rugged features, a strong jaw, and those stormy eyes that held both power and something deeper she couldn't quite name. Even the scar on his cheek was tantalizing.

Cassandra tore her gaze away, scolding herself for even noticing.

Attractive or nae, he's a brute.

Still, there was something about him that unsettled her, something that made her pulse quicken in a way she didn't like. She took a slow breath, forcing her voice to remain steady, though she was panicked underneath.

"Who are ye? Where do ye want to take me?" she asked, her tone clipped.

"Laird McDougal. To me keep," he answered. "Ye have a choice, ye can come with me willingly or I will throw ye over me shoulder and take ye. What is it goin' to be, lass?"

Cassandra planted her feet firmly, crossing her arms as she glared up at the brute before her. "I told ye, I am nae Elias' property, nor am I yers to command, and I'm nae goin' anywhere," she snapped. "Ye come stormin' into me healing room, throwin' yer weight around like some great oaf, and expect me to obey like a trained hound?" Her voice rose in frustration, her temper flaring hotter with every word.

Hunter exhaled sharply, his patience wearing thin. “I gave ye a choice, lass,” he said. “And ye chose the hard way.”

Before she could react, he lunged forward, gripping her firmly around the waist and hoisting her over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

Cassandra gasped, furious and humiliated. “Put me down, ye great lumberin’ beast!” she shrieked, pounding her fists against his back. “I will come with ye—if ye swear to nae touch me again!” Her face burned with rage, her breath coming in short, angry bursts.

“Careful, lass—I daenae take well to orders,” he said. He didn’t set her down right away. Cassandra ground her teeth, seething, until finally, with an exaggerated sigh, he lowered her to her feet.

She stumbled slightly before regaining her balance, fists still clenched at her sides. “Ye’re an insufferable man,” she muttered.

“And ye’re a stubborn woman,” he shot back. “Now, are ye comin’ quietly, or will I be forced to throw ye over me saddle as well?”

Cassandra huffed, straightening her skirts as she glared at him. “What in the devil’s name do ye even need me for?” she demanded.

Hunter’s expression grew grim. “Me clan has been struck by an illness,” he said. “Even me healer has fallen to it—there’s none left to tend to the sick.”

She faltered, her anger cooling just slightly. An illness with no cure, spreading fast enough to take down the very person meant to stop it? That was no small matter. Her fingers curled at her sides as she forced herself to breathe, her duty as a healer rising above her wounded pride. Silence stretched between them, heavy and uncertain.

Then, she lifted her chin, her decision made. “Then I will help,” she said. “Nae because ye forced me, but because it is me duty.”

Hunter studied her for a long moment, something unreadable in his gaze. “Good,” he finally said, his voice quieter now. “Then let’s be on our way. Nay time to lose.”

Cassandra nodded, still fuming but unwilling to waste another moment. Whatever this illness was, it had already claimed too many. And despite her hatred for this brute of a man, she would not let innocent people suffer.

CHAPTER THREE

“S ince ye insist on takin’ me against me will, ye can at least make yerself useful,” Cassandra turned on her heel and thrust one of the heavier satchels toward him.

Hunter arched a brow but took the bag without complaint, slinging it over his broad shoulder. Cassandra gathered her supplies with swift, practiced movements, forcing herself to focus on the task at hand rather than the infuriating man looming nearby.

She packed bundles of dried herbs, small vials of tinctures, and clean bandages into her satchel. Hunter stood by the door, arms crossed, watching her with a look of impatience.

Together, they made their way out of the healing room and toward the courtyard, their footsteps echoing in the quiet corridor.

Stepping outside, Cassandra squinted against the sunlight and immediately noticed the problem. Only one horse stood saddled and waiting—a large, dark beast with a proud stance.

She turned to Hunter with a scowl. “Where’s me mount?” she asked.

Hunter tightened the strap on the saddle before glancing at her. “Ye daenae have one,” he said simply. “Ye’ll ride with me.”

Cassandra let out an incredulous scoff, hands flying to her hips. “I’ll borrow one from the horse master, then—I’ll nae be ridin’ with ye .”

Hunter shook his head. "Nay time for that, lass," he said. "We ride together." His tone left no room for argument, but Cassandra was not one to be ordered about so easily. Her eyes flashed with defiance as she took a step forward.

"I willnae cling to ye like some helpless maid," she hissed. "I can ride well enough on me own."

"Aye, I daenaе doubt ye can, but I need ye close in case the need arises to ride fast," Hunter said. Then he mumbled, "I daenaе trust that ye willnae escape."

Cassandra gritted her teeth, knowing she was fighting a losing battle. The man was as immovable as a mountain. "Fine," she bit out. "But if ye think I'll be holdin' on to ye, ye're mistaken."

Hunter mounted the horse with ease before reaching down for her. "Suit yerself, lass," he said. "But when the beast takes off, ye might change yer mind."

Cassandra muttered a string of curses under her breath before placing her hand in his, allowing him to pull her up.

Settling behind him, she kept her hands firmly at her sides, determined not to touch him. The heat of his body radiated through his cloak, irritating her further. Hunter nudged the horse forward, and the great beast started into a steady trot. Cassandra braced herself, silently cursing that this man had walked into her life.

As they crested a hill down the road, the saddle shifted and Cassandra found herself sliding.

Cassandra huffed, shifting uncomfortably behind Hunter on the horse. "This is ridiculous," she snapped. "I told ye I could ride on me own." Her fingers twitched at her sides, refusing to grab onto him for balance.

Hunter kept his eyes on the road ahead. “Aye, I heard ye well enough,” he said. “But I’ve enemies, lass, and I willnae risk anyone takin’ a shot at ye while we ride.” His voice was calm, but there was steel beneath it. “Ye might nae like it, but ye’ll do as I say.”

Cassandra scoffed, narrowing her eyes. “Oh, aye? And what makes ye the authority over me?” she challenged. “Ye barge into me healin’ rooms, demand me help, and now I’m supposed to trust ye with me safety?” She shook her head. “Ye’ve got another thing comin’, Laird McDougal.”

“Lass, ye’re sittin’ behind me on me horse already,” he pointed out. “Seems to me ye’ve got little choice but to trust me. Unless ye’d rather I tie ye to the saddle to keep ye still?”

Cassandra sucked in a sharp breath, her face heating. “Ye wouldnae dare,” she ground out.

Hunter turned his head slightly. “Try me, lass.”

Her hands clenched into fists, frustration warring with the undeniable pull between them. “I swear, if ye so much as think about it, I’ll make ye regret it,” she warned. “I’ll slip nettle into yer boots, or worse—yer bed.”

“Fiery, lass,” he murmured. “Good. You’ll need that mettle for what ye are about to see.”

Cassandra growled under her breath, knowing she had just lost this battle—but she’d be damned if she lost the war.

Cassandra let out a frustrated sigh but finally relented. “Fine,” she muttered. “But if ye think ridin’ together means ye can take liberties, I’ll remind ye I ken a hundred

ways to make a man suffer.”

“Aye, I daenae doubt it,” he said. “But ye’d do well to hold on, lass. I willnae have ye tumblin’ off and breakin’ yer neck before ye even set foot in me keep.”

Cassandra hesitated before gripping his belt lightly. “Tell me about the illness,” she said, eager to distract herself from the heat radiating off him. “What symptoms have ye seen so far?” She needed to prepare herself before they arrived.

Hunter’s expression darkened. “Fever, shakin’, terrible weakness,” he listed. “Some of them cannae keep water down, and others slip into a deep sleep they daenae wake from.” His voice was grim. “Me healer fell to it before he could find the cause.”

Cassandra frowned, her mind already turning over the possibilities. “How fast does it spread?” she asked. “Has anyone survived it yet?” The unknown sickness intrigued her, though the danger it posed was evident.

“It spreads fast,” Hunter admitted. “Too fast. First, it was one or two, then within days, half the keep was ill.” He exhaled sharply. “A few have lasted longer than others, but none have fully recovered.”

Cassandra bit her lip, considering his words. “Has anyone outside the keep taken ill?”

Hunter shook his head. “Nay, just those livin’ under me roof.” His jaw tensed. “If it were the water, the whole village would be sufferin’, but they’re fine.” His voice dropped. “Which makes me think someone did this on purpose.”

Cassandra’s stomach twisted at the thought. “Ye think someone poisoned yer people?” she asked.

“Aye,” Hunter said firmly. “And I’ll see the bastard pay for it.”

A heavy silence settled between them. Cassandra knew well enough that a laird had enemies, but to attack his people like this was cruel. “I’ll find the cause,” she vowed. “If someone did this, I’ll uncover it. But first, I’ll need to see the sick for meself.” She exhaled. “A healer’s job is to save lives—nae to seek vengeance.”

Hunter smirked, though there was no humor in it. “Aye, well, I’ll handle the vengeance.” He turned his focus back to the road. “Ye just make sure ye live long enough to cure them.”

Cassandra stiffened at his words. “I plan to,” she said firmly. “And I daenae need ye hoverin’ over me like a bloody guard dog.” She shot him a glare. “I ken how to take care of meself.”

“Aye, I gathered that much.” He spurred the horse faster. “But whether ye like it or nae, ye’re under me protection now.” His tone left no room for argument.

Cassandra rolled her eyes but chose to let it go. There were more pressing matters to worry about. “Tell me about the healer,” she said, shifting the conversation. “Did he say anythin’ before he took ill?”

Hunter thought for a moment. “He was lookin’ into the food stores,” he admitted. “Said he had a bad feelin’ about somethin’.” His voice hardened. “Then the next day, he collapsed.”

Cassandra’s fingers tightened on his belt. “Then that’s where I’ll start,” she said. “The food and drink.” She met his gaze when he turned his head slightly. “If someone’s tainted it, I’ll find out.”

Hunter nodded. “Good.” He urged the horse forward at a faster pace. “Then let’s get ye there before more die.”

Cassandra sat behind Hunter, her arms loosely wrapped around his waist as they rode through the rugged terrain. She still fumed at the way he had taken her from Elias' keep, but as much as she hated to admit it, the man was not entirely without merit.

A brute he certainly was, but he was a brute who cared for his people. She had seen the worry in his eyes when he spoke of the sick, the determination in his voice when he vowed to find a cure—he was a laird who took his responsibilities seriously.

Without warning, Hunter pulled the horse to a sudden stop.

Cassandra nearly lost her balance and tightened her grip on him to steady herself. “Why are we stoppin’?” she asked, frowning. She glanced around, but there was nothing ahead that warranted a pause.

Hunter tilted his head back, gazing at the sky. His nostrils flared slightly as he took a deep breath. “A storm’s comin’,” he said, his voice certain. “A bad one.”

Cassandra scoffed, rolling her eyes. “It rains all the time,” she said. “Ye stopped for that?” She gestured to the sky, where thick clouds had begun to gather. “This is Scotland—we’re always under a storm.”

Hunter turned his head slightly, giving her a look of irritation. “Nay, this is nae an ordinary rain,” he said. “This is a storm fit to tear the sky apart.” His jaw tightened. “We will have to stop.”

Cassandra huffed in frustration. “Stop?” she repeated. “We cannae afford to stop. The longer we delay, the worse yer people will fare.”

Hunter exhaled sharply. “And if ye catch yer death out here, then what good will ye be?” he countered. “Ye’ll be of nay use to me or anyone else if ye fall ill before ye even set foot in me keep.”

Cassandra crossed her arms over her chest. "I daenae fall ill easily," she said stubbornly. "And I certainly daenae need ye worryin' over me like some nursemaid."

"Ye think I enjoy this?" he muttered. "I've nae the time nor the patience to deal with a sickly healer." He turned his gaze back to the road ahead. "We'll find shelter—now."

Cassandra clenched her jaw but knew there was no point arguing. The wind had picked up, and there was a sharpness to the air that sent a shiver down her spine. Perhaps he was right, much as she hated to admit it.

"Fine," she said grudgingly. "But if ye think this means I'll start takin' orders from ye without question, think again."

Hunter nudged the horse forward. "Lass, ye've done nothin' but question me since the moment we met. I daenae expect that to change now."

Cassandra pursed her lips but said nothing. She couldn't deny it, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of agreeing.

As they rode on, the sky darkened, and the first drops of rain began to fall. The wind howled through the trees, bending them to its will. Cassandra sighed but didn't argue. The cold rain seeped through her cloak, and she had to admit stopping wasn't the worst idea. They needed to reach the sick in time, but not if she arrived too weak to help.

"There, we'll shelter there," Hunter pointed toward an inn.

Cassandra held her breath as Hunter steered the horse toward the small inn, its warm glow flickering against the stormy night. The rain poured in heavy sheets, drenching them both before they even reached the stables.

Hunter dismounted with ease, his movements fluid despite the slick mud beneath his boots. He turned to her, reaching up to help her down before she could protest. His large hands gripped her waist firmly, lifting her effortlessly from the saddle.

The heat of his touch burned through the wet fabric of her dress, sending an unexpected shiver through her. When he set her on her feet, she realized how close they were—so close she could smell the mixture of rain, leather, and something undeniably masculine. Her breath hitched as her knees wobbled slightly beneath her.

“Somethin’ the matter, lass?” he drawled.

Cassandra straightened her spine, tilting her chin up in defiance. “Nay,” she said quickly. “I just slipped in the mud.”

Before Hunter could reply, a loud crack of thunder split the sky, followed by a blinding flash of lightning. The storm was relentless now, howling wind rattling the wooden beams of the stable. Hunter handed the reins of his horse to a waiting stable boy, giving the lad a curt nod of thanks. Then, without another word, he turned and strode toward the inn.

Cassandra followed, her skirts heavy with rain, her heart still pounding from the close contact. The inn’s warmth was a welcome relief, though the air inside smelled of damp wood and ale. Hunter approached the counter, raking a hand through his wet hair as he addressed the innkeeper.

“We need two rooms for the night,” he said, his deep voice carrying over the low murmur of the few patrons scattered about.

The innkeeper, a round-bellied man with a weathered face, shook his head. “Only got one left, sir,” he said. “Storm’s got travelers stoppin’ for shelter.”

Cassandra stiffened, her stomach knotting at the implication. She shot Hunter a sharp look, ready to argue.

“Ye’re trapped with a beast now, lass,” he murmured.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hunter shut the door behind them, running a hand through his damp hair. He never knew a healer to be so stubborn as this one. His gaze swept over the room before landing on the bed. "Ye take the bed," he said gruffly, pulling off his belt and setting it beside the hearth. "I'll sleep on the floor."

Cassandra turned to him. "That's kind of ye," she said softly.

The softness of her voice made Hunter stop his movement for a moment. Suddenly he was more aware of her as a woman than a healer. He took in the room.

It was small but cozy, with wooden beams running along the low ceiling and a fire crackling in the hearth. A thick, handwoven rug covered most of the wooden floor, and a single bed sat against the far wall, layered with warm woolen blankets.

A washbasin stood on a small table near the window, its glass fogged from the heat inside meeting the storm's chill.

"I dinnae think ye were the type for chivalry," she said.

Hunter huffed, unbuckling his boots. "I may be a brute, lass, but I'm nae a savage."

Silence settled between them as they both began preparing for sleep. Hunter watched Cassandra moved to the washbasin, wetting a cloth to wipe away the remnants of the storm from her face and arms.

He sat on the floor, unlacing his boots with slow, deliberate movements, his ears tuned to every soft rustle of fabric from her direction.

Hunter leaned back on his elbows, stealing a glance in her direction. She stood near the bed, fingers working at the laces of her corset, loosening it just enough to breathe easier. The candlelight cast a golden glow over her skin, highlighting the graceful curve of her neck and the delicate line of her shoulders. His mouth went dry, and something primal stirred deep in his chest, a need he had no business feeling.

He clenched his jaw and forced himself to look away, turning onto his side to face the hearth. It had been years since a woman had tested his control like this, and he wouldnae let himself falter now. Cassandra was there to save his people, not tempt him into something foolish. Letting out a slow breath, he shut his eyes, willing himself to think of anything but the fiery woman mere feet away.

A few hours passed, and the storm raged outside, rain pelting against the windowpane. Hunter lay on his back on the hard wooden floor, staring at the ceiling, sleep eluding him. He shifted, turning onto his side, then onto his back again, scowling at his own restlessness. With a sigh, he glanced toward the bed and noticed Cassandra's eyes glinting in the dim candlelight.

He grunted. "Why are ye still awake, lass?"

Cassandra turned her head slightly, meeting his gaze. "Because I daenae trust ye nae to take advantage of me while I sleep."

"Lassie, I daenae bed unwillin' women. Ye are at nay risk from me."

Cassandra's face heated, color rising to her cheeks. She cleared her throat and shifted against the pillows, looking away. "I dinnae mean—" She exhaled sharply, irritated. "Forget I said anythin'."

Hunter smirked, enjoying her flustered state. “I willnae let ye forget it so easily.” His voice dropped into a teasing drawl. “Am I really so irresistible that ye fear ye might fall into me arms in the middle of the night?”

Cassandra shot him a glare, her lips pressing into a thin line. “Ye are insufferable.” There was a small pause. “Why are ye still awake?” she asked.

“I am on the lookout for attacks—I cannae risk me people’s healer.” He turned his gaze to the door as if expecting a threat to burst through at any moment. “Me enemies would see an opportunity in a night like this.”

Cassandra studied him for a moment, her brows drawing together. “Ye truly never let yer guard down, do ye?”

Hunter exhaled through his nose. “I cannae afford to.”

She propped herself up on one elbow, curiosity flickering in her gaze. “Is it always like this for ye? Always watchin’, always waitin’ for danger?”

Hunter hesitated, then gave a small nod. “Aye. A man in me position makes enemies whether he wants them or nae.” He glanced back at her. “But I willnae let any harm come to ye.”

Cassandra searched his face, her expression unreadable. “I can protect meself, ye ken.”

Hunter arched a brow. “Aye? And how do ye plan to do that, healer? Toss yer herbs at an attacker and hope they choke?”

Cassandra scowled. “I have a dirk.”

“Och, a wee blade against a sword. I’d like to see that fight.”

She crossed her arms. “Ye laugh now, but I’ve cut a man before.”

Hunter’s amusement faded as he studied her. “Aye?”

Her expression darkened. “Aye. A man who thought he could take what wasnae his.”

Hunter’s jaw tightened, anger stirring in his gut at the thought. “Did he live?”

Cassandra met his gaze without hesitation. “Nay.”

Hunter let that sink in before giving her a small nod of approval. “Good.”

Silence stretched between them, the only sound the steady patter of rain and the distant rumble of thunder.

Cassandra exhaled, breaking the quiet. “I suppose if ye mean to protect me, then I should trust that ye willnae harm me.”

Hunter smirked. “Took ye long enough to figure that out.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll try to get some sleep, then.”

He nodded, watching as she lay back down, her face turned toward the firelight. As her breathing steadied, he found himself staring at her, the flickering glow casting soft shadows across her features. She was stubborn, sharp-tongued, and entirely too intriguing for his own good.

With a sigh, he turned onto his back, closing his eyes, though he knew sleep would not come easy.

Cassandra lay in the bed, her back pressed against the cool, crisp sheets, staring up at the wooden beams overhead. The room felt stifling in its stillness, the fire in the hearth flickering softly, casting shadows on the stone walls. Her mind wandered, the warmth of the bed a stark contrast to the chill in the air, but still, she couldn't shake the strange tension that had settled between her and Hunter. He'd joined her in the room with no hesitation, but it didn't feel quite as simple as it should have.

She shifted uncomfortably, the soft rustle of the blankets betraying her unease. She wasn't accustomed to having a man so near, let alone one like Hunter, whose presence filled the room in a way that made her pulse quicken. Yet there was something about him that made her wonder if, perhaps, he was different than other men. A part of her knew that, in his heart, he had a loyalty and responsibility to his people that she could respect.

Hunter's voice broke the quiet. "Ye've nae slept yet, lass? The bed's soft enough for ye, but yer mind seems far away."

"Ye are nae asleep either and we have a journey ahead tomorrow." Cassandra blinked, pulling herself out of her thoughts and turning to face him.

She hesitated, her heart beating faster as she shifted under the covers. "Ye could... join me in bed if ye need rest," she said, the words tumbling from her lips before she could think.

Her face flushed instantly, and she felt heat rise to her cheeks. It wasn't an invitation, not in the way he might think—merely an offer of warmth, given the coldness of the room and the hardness of the floor.

"Aye, lass, I've nae been invited to a bed this fast before," he teased, his voice rich with amusement. He leaned forward slightly, his eyes twinkling as he looked at her, clearly enjoying her flustered reaction. "Ye daenae waste time, do ye?"

Flustered, Cassandra quickly tried to explain herself. “Nay, that’s nae what I meant!” she stammered, her face growing hotter by the second. “I mean... if ye share the bed, ye’ll have a softer place to rest. The floor’s cold and hard, and ye’ll be stiff in the morn,” she added quickly, hoping to diffuse the awkwardness. It was a simple suggestion—nothing more—but her words didn’t seem to come out the way she intended.

“Aye, ye’ve a point,” he said, rising from and crossing the room toward the bed. “I’ve nay wish to sleep on the floor, especially with such a warm bed nearby.” With that, he carefully lowered himself beside her, settling in without another word. “I’ll take ye up on yer offer, lass,” he murmured, his voice quieter now, as though the earlier jest had melted away.

The bed seemed to shrink with his presence beside her, yet somehow, Cassandra didn’t mind. His warmth radiated through the blankets, and though they lay so close, there was a strange comfort in it. She stared at the ceiling, trying to will her racing thoughts to slow, but sleep came easily despite her best efforts to stay awake. The steady rhythm of Hunter’s breathing beside her was strangely calming, a quiet reassurance that wrapped around her like the blankets themselves.

Before long, her eyelids grew heavy, and she gave in to the pull of sleep. She didn’t question it—why should she? In the presence of Hunter, her usual wariness seemed to dissolve, replaced with an unexpected ease. As her mind drifted into slumber, she marveled at how easily she had let her guard down, a feeling she hadn’t experienced in years. Something about Hunter made her feel safe, and for the first time in a long while, that comfort was enough to carry her into dreams.

Cassandra awoke with the soft light of morning filtering through the narrow window of the inn room. The bed beside her was empty, and for a moment, she wondered if she had dreamed the comfort of Hunter’s presence. The fire in the hearth was crackling, its warmth filling the room, and the smell of wood smoke lingered in the

air. It was clear that Hunter had been up before her, having tended to the fire while she slept soundly, something she hadn't expected from him.

She sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes and taking in the quiet of the room. Hunter's absence left a strange emptiness that she couldn't quite shake, though she told herself it didn't matter. At least he had thought to start the fire, which was more than most men would've done. She found herself momentarily grateful, but then quickly scolded herself for it—after all, she couldn't let one good deed cloud her judgment.

"Most men are rakes," Cassandra muttered under her breath, shaking her head as she pushed the blankets aside.

She quickly stood, pacing the small room, trying to banish the thoughts of Hunter from her mind.

I shouldnae let this laird confuse me thoughts.

The words repeated like a mantra to remind herself to stay cautious. She had always been wary of men, and the last thing she needed was to let one act of consideration lead her astray.

Cassandra glanced toward the door, half-expecting him to walk back in, but the silence remained. She scolded herself again, mentally shaking her head at how easily she had become distracted. Hunter had been kind enough to start the fire, but that didn't change the fact that he was a laird—a man of status, someone who was used to getting what he wanted. She had no time for any more distractions.

Nay matter how much of a brute... or charmin' or considerate he might seem.

CHAPTER FIVE

The door creaked open, and Hunter stepped into the room, the scent of the morning dew still clinging to his cloak. He had been out early checking the sky and the horse. As he closed the door behind him, his eyes fell on Cassandra, sitting up in the bed, her brow furrowed in a mix of frustration and curiosity.

The sight of her, looking so wound up, made a small smile tug at his lips, though he quickly masked it with a more serious expression.

Cassandra's gaze was sharp, her eyes narrowing as she met his.

"Where've ye gone, Laird McDougal? I demand to ken where ye are before ye disappear," her voice holding an edge of annoyance that he couldn't help but find intriguing. Her fiery spirit was one thing that set her apart from other women, but at times, it seemed to get her into trouble. He had learned early on that Cassandra didn't mince words, even when they were cutting a bit too close for comfort.

Hunter leaned against the doorframe, crossing his arms over his chest, his posture relaxed but his gaze steady.

"Be careful, lass," he warned, his voice low and serious. "Daenae demand things from me unless ye want to face the consequences."

He could see the way her face flushed with indignation, and though he knew she'd bristle at the words, he couldn't help himself—she needed to learn that some things were best left unsaid.

He watched Cassandra's cheeks redden, her eyes flashing with defiance as she pushed herself to her feet.

"Ye think ye can just disappear and leave me to wonder where ye've gone?" she retorted, her voice filled with a mix of anger and something else—was it concern?

Hunter didn't know, but he found the blend of emotions in her voice stirring, even though he wasn't one for complications. He had no intention of explaining himself to her, not when she had such a way of making everything seem like an accusation.

"I dinnae disappear, lass," he replied, his tone softening just enough to convey he wasn't truly angry. "I had things to see to, and ye cannae expect me to be at yer beck and call all the time."

He could see that she was about to snap back at him, but he held up a hand, cutting her off. "I promised ye me protection, nae me constant company," he added, his eyes never leaving hers, challenging her to accept it.

Her expression shifted slightly, the defiance in her gaze wavering, but the stubbornness was still there.

"I dinnae ask ye to stay by me side all the time," she said, her voice lowering. "But I'll be damned if I stand around here waitin' for yer return, like some fool." Her words, though sharp, carried an undercurrent of vulnerability that didn't go unnoticed by Hunter, and it made him feel a way he hadn't expected.

Hunter straightened, pushing off the doorframe, and took a few steps toward her. His movements were deliberate, slow, but with a sense of purpose. He wasn't one to back down from a challenge, especially when it came to a lass who could so easily stir his emotions.

“Ye may nae be a fool, but ye are reckless with yer words, lass,” he said, his voice a low rumble, filled with a dangerous calm. “I am yer superior, remember that. Though ye may nae be of me clan.”

Cassandra opened her mouth to argue, but Hunter raised a finger to silence her. “I warned ye,” he continued, his gaze never leaving hers. “The next time ye demand somethin’ from me, think long and hard about the consequences ye’re willin’ to face.” He stepped closer, until there was barely a breath between them, his presence engulfing her like the warmth of the fire in the hearth.

For a moment, neither of them spoke, the tension between them thickening with every passing second. Cassandra stood her ground, her back straight and her chin lifted, as though daring him to push her further. Hunter’s eyes softened for just a moment, his usual teasing demeanor replaced with something more serious, more protective.

He wanted to make it clear that he wouldn’t tolerate her pushing him around, but part of him admired the fire in her—she wasn’t like the other women who cowered at his presence.

“I just... I daenae like nae knowin’ where ye’ve gone, when I’m alone in a place I daenae ken.” Her shoulders slumped slightly, the walls she had built around herself beginning to show cracks. Hunter found himself oddly moved by the vulnerability she showed, even if she was still too proud to admit it fully.

Hunter took another step closer, his voice now gentler.

“Ye daenae have to like it, lass,” he said, his tone softening. “But ye’ll need to trust me when I say I’m doin’ what’s best for ye—and for everyone.” He placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze, his gaze locking with hers in a way that made his heart race. Despite everything, despite the walls she’d built around herself,

he could see the flicker of trust beginning to burn, and it made him want to protect her more than ever.

Hunter watched as Cassandra's cheeks flushed, her gaze dropping to the floor, clearly embarrassed by her words. It wasn't often he saw her flustered.

She straightened herself up, clearing her throat before she quickly changed the subject. "I'm hungry, perhaps a quick bite before we return to the road," she said, her voice steady again, but Hunter could hear the slight tremor beneath it.

He gave a small nod, sensing her desire to move past the awkwardness. "Aye, we should go downstairs, then," he replied, his tone soft but steady. He grabbed his cloak from the back of a chair, moving toward the door while Cassandra quickly straightened the bed and gathered her things.

It was a small gesture, but it told him she was ready to move forward, putting aside the tension that had briefly built between them.

Once they were ready, they made their way downstairs to the inn's tavern, the low murmur of voices and the smell of cooking food greeting them as they descended. The hearth fire was crackling, casting a warm glow over the room, while the smell of fresh bread, sizzling bacon, and eggs filled the air. Hunter couldn't help but notice how her shoulders relaxed as they approached the long wooden table. The smell of the food seemed to ease her discomfort, and he was glad to see her in better spirits.

The innkeeper greeted them with a warm smile, directing them to a corner of the table where a hearty breakfast was already laid out. A steaming pot of porridge sat at the center, along with a basket of freshly baked bread and a small bowl of butter.

Crispy bacon, sausages, and fried eggs made the spread even more inviting, and Hunter could feel his stomach growling in response. He pulled out a chair for

Cassandra, then took a seat across from her, his gaze briefly meeting hers before he reached for the bread.

“Aye, this looks like a proper breakfast,” Hunter commented, grabbing a slice of bread and slathering it with butter before taking a bite.

The warmth of the bread and the rich taste of the butter made him feel more at ease, and he could see Cassandra do the same, her movements slower, more deliberate now. She picked up a piece of bacon, her hands slightly trembling as she began to eat, and Hunter couldn’t help but notice the subtle way she tried to avoid meeting his eyes. Still, he could tell that the food was doing its job, and the tension that had lingered between them began to fade.

They ate in relative silence, the occasional clink of silverware the only sound between them. Hunter had just finished the last bite of his bacon when the peace of the inn was shattered. The sudden sound of shouting and the scraping of chairs against the wooden floor cut through the air like a knife.

His eyes flicked to a group of men had gotten to their feet, and before he could react, a brawl erupted. Tables were overturned, mugs of ale splashed across the floor, and one of the men, losing his footing, crashed right into Cassandra, knocking her out of her seat with a loud thud.

The man, groaning as he tried to push himself off her, looked down and blinked for a moment, dazed. His eyes quickly fixed on Cassandra, his gaze roving over her with a leer that made Hunter’s blood run cold.

“Ah, ye look fine enough, lass,” the man slurred, his tone thick with drunkenness as he reached out to touch her arm. Cassandra flinched, her face twisting in discomfort as she pulled away, but the man wasn’t deterred.

“Come on, now,” the man coaxed, his breath smelling of whiskey as he leaned closer, a smirk curling on his lips. “Daenae be shy, lass. Give me a kiss.” His words were accompanied by a crude chuckle, and Cassandra recoiled even further, clearly unsettled by his unwanted attention.

Hunter’s muscles tensed, his anger rising. With a growl that echoed across the inn, he rose from his seat and moved toward them, his boots heavy on the floor.

“Enough,” he snarled, his voice carrying an edge that silenced the room. “If ye continue touchin’ her, ye will lose yer arm.” The men froze, the loud chatter of the tavern fading into a tense stillness as all eyes turned to Hunter.

The man who had been bothering Cassandra quickly backed off, his face going pale as he muttered a hasty apology.

"Sorry, this lass belongs to ye?" the man said.

"Aye, she does," Hunter growled. “And if ye touch her, ye will lose the hand ye use.”

The innkeeper, a burly man with a nervous look, quickly moved to calm the remaining rowdy patrons. But Hunter’s attention was solely on Cassandra now.

He moved beside her, his gaze softening as he looked into her eyes, searching for any signs of distress.

“Are ye alright, lass?” he asked, his voice gentler than it had been moments before.

Cassandra nodded quickly, but her hands were trembling, and her eyes didn’t quite meet his.

“Aye... I’m fine,” she said, but her voice was shaky, and Hunter could see the

lingering fear in her expression.

It took everything in him not to reach out and hold her close, but he knew now wasn't the time. Instead, he placed a firm hand on her shoulder, his voice steady.

"We're leavin' now."

Without waiting for any more words, Hunter grabbed her arm gently but firmly, leading her toward the door. The quiet of the inn seemed to press in around them as they left, the tension still thick in the air.

As they stepped outside into the brisk morning air, the sun shining down on the dusty streets, Hunter could feel the weight of what had just happened. He wanted to make sure she was all right, to reassure her, but he could see she was still shaken.

It is simply my duty to care for her, she is vital.

The horse was tethered just outside the inn, and Hunter quickly helped Cassandra mount, his hands steady but still strong as he guided her up. Once she was seated, he swung up behind her, his arms wrapping around her waist with a possessiveness that he couldn't quite explain.

"We'll be ridin' hard from here on out," he said, his voice calm, though the anger still simmered beneath the surface. He should have cut the hands off that peasant, but there was no time for such things.

As they rode away from the inn, the landscape stretched out before them—open fields and hills that seemed to go on forever. Hunter could feel the tension between them, the unspoken words hanging in the air, but he didn't push her by asking.

He knew she was shaken, despite her stubborn nature to say she could take care of

herself. She was soft like any other lass, and he knew it.

Instead, he focused on the road ahead, the steady rhythm of the horse's hooves keeping time as they made their way toward Castle McDougal. The ride was long, and though the air was cool, it was a welcome change from the chaos of the inn.

"We will reach Castle McDougal with as much haste as me steed can muster," he said.

"Aye, that is best, for now," she replied.

Cassandra remained silent, but Hunter could feel her body stiffening against his, as if she were still trying to process everything that had just happened. He wasn't sure how to ease her mind, but he would find a way, eventually.

For now, they were on the road, together, and that was enough. He made a silent vow to keep her safe.

Nay matter the cost, she is me salvation... and Elena's.

CHAPTER SIX

The journey to Castle McDougal had been long and quiet, with only the sound of hooves on the hard-packed earth to break the silence. She could not stop thinking about how he claimed that she was his to that peasant.

Partly, she was frustrated that he would claim her as his property, and the other part set her ablaze with a heat she had never known.

Why did I enjoy hearin' those words of his?

As they approached the massive stone structure, Cassandra's thoughts drifted from the discomfort of the ride to the task at hand. Hunter had been distant for most of the journey, his focus solely on getting them to the castle.

When they finally arrived at the gates, she noticed the tension in his posture, the sharpness in his movements as he dismounted.

"Nay time to waste lass. Follow me," he said.

"Aye, lead the way, McDougal," she replied.

Hunter led her through the grand hall of the castle, his brow furrowed, and his gaze never wavering from the path ahead. He stopped before a maid, a young woman with a nervous look, and Cassandra could hear his voice, low and commanding as he addressed her.

"How is Lady Elena?" he asked, his words clipped with urgency.

The maid curtsied quickly and spoke, her voice trembling slightly, "Lady Elena is still unconscious, Laird McDougal. We are still attendin' to her."

A sudden rush of confusion flooded Cassandra's chest, and she stiffened at the mention of Lady Elena's name. She assumed that Elena must be Hunter's wife, especially with the way he had acted earlier, his protectiveness and concern so evident.

That must be why he had been so demanding, why he had acted the way he did. The thought brought a sharp pang of disappointment to Cassandra's heart, though she quickly tried to suppress it.

She scolded herself inwardly for allowing herself to feel anything about Hunter Gilmour.

What was I thinkin'? I swore off gettin' involved with another man after me last failed relationship, and yet here I am, feelin' foolish.

No matter how handsome or commanding Hunter was, he was unavailable. She had no place for these feelings, and she needed to focus on the task at hand.

"Cassandra, you will see to Lady Elena first. She is everythin' to me," he said.

"Is she?" she muttered without thought. Then corrected herself, "Of course, sir. Show me the way."

She saw that he didn't seem to notice her discomfort, or perhaps he was too focused on the news he'd just received.

He thanked the maid and turned away, motioning for Cassandra to follow. She quickly fell into step behind him, trying to shake the disheartening thoughts from her mind.

Her focus needed to remain on the patients and Lady Elena, not on the Laird, not on the stirrings of unwanted emotions that were already complicating things.

Cassandra's thoughts lingered on Lady Elena's condition. She couldn't help but wonder who this woman was, and why Hunter was so concerned.

Laird McDougal had never shown her any interest beyond the immediate need for a healer, and yet there was something deeper between him and Lady Elena.

They reached a door at the end of the hall, where Hunter paused and looked over at Cassandra, his gaze unreadable.

"Ye can go in," he said gruffly, his hand resting on the door handle. "Elena's condition is still uncertain, and we need all the help we can get."

Cassandra's eyes widened as Hunter led her into the great hall of Castle McDougal. The room was packed with people—men, women, and children—many of them lying on pallets, some with fevered brows and pale faces.

The sight struck her like a blow to the chest; she had not expected to find so many ailing souls in one place. Her mind raced as she took in the scene, the sheer volume of the suffering, and the overwhelming responsibility now resting on her shoulders.

"With the castle's healer fallin' ill," he said, his tone grim. "I sent word to others, but the rest of the healers refused to come. They dinnae want to risk catchin' whatever illness is spreadin'."

Cassandra's eyes narrowed, her hands curling into fists as anger flared within her.

"They should nae be called healers if they refuse to tend the sick," Cassandra snapped, her voice heated with disbelief. "A healer's oath is to help, nay matter the risk. If they turn their backs on those in need, they dishonor their vows, and they shouldnae call themselves healers any longer."

She could feel her pulse quickening, the blood rushing in her ears, but she knew there was no time to dwell on her outrage.

She took a deep breath and pushed her emotions aside, focusing on the task at hand. Hunter remained silent, his expression unreadable as she turned toward the patients scattered across the hall.

She followed Hunter through the rows of the sick. As she approached, she was surprised to see him stop beside a little girl, no older than eight, who looked up at him with wide, frightened eyes. Her small hand was gripped tightly in Hunter's, and she appeared to be too weak to sit up on her own.

Cassandra's heart ached as she observed the scene, but she didn't let herself become distracted. She moved toward the girl, her healer's instincts taking charge once more.

"Her ailments?" she asked, her voice soft but filled with concern as she crouched down beside Hunter.

"She's been feverish for a while now," Hunter replied quietly, his voice unusually gentle. "But she hasnae been able to keep any food down, and her strength is failin' her. I'm nae sure what else to do for her."

He looked up at Cassandra, his face marked with the same frustration she had seen earlier. She could tell he was trying to remain calm, trying to be strong for the people

under his care, but the weariness in his eyes spoke volumes.

Cassandra's hands moved over the little girl, checking her fever and pulse with the precision of someone who had spent years tending to the ill. The child's tiny body was burning with fever, but her eyes were wide with fear, clearly frightened by the unfamiliar faces around her.

"She's very heated," she said.

"Aye, she's been like this for days now," he replied.

Cassandra knew that the situation was dire—this child needed care quickly, and there was no time to waste. She looked up at Hunter, her voice soft but firm.

"We need to get her cooled down, quickly," Cassandra said, already moving to gather the necessary herbs and supplies. "Her fever is too high, and she could fall into delirium if we daenae act fast."

Hunter nodded sharply, his face grim as he gently lifted the girl into his arms, holding her close as Cassandra prepared what was needed to bring the fever down.

The room, filled with the sound of whispers and restless movements, seemed to fall away as Cassandra focused solely on the task at hand. She could hear the soft, labored breathing of the little girl as she worked, her heart heavy with the weight of what needed to be done. There was no time for hesitation, no time for doubts; she was a healer, and she had sworn to do whatever it took to save lives.

As she worked, Cassandra watched as Hunter sat beside the little girl, his large hands gently stroking her damp hair. She found herself intrigued by his tenderness, a side of him she had not expected. The way he cared for the child, his concern etched deeply into his features, made her wonder if there was more to the laird than the fierce

exterior he usually wore.

But she quickly dismissed the thought, reminding herself that he was still a man with his own burdens, and she had no business pondering his personal life.

Stay with the work. That's yer focus now.

As she continued tending to the sick, Hunter looked up at her with an intensity that almost made her forget her duties.

“Have ye thoughts on what this is, lass?” he asked, his voice low but urgent. She could tell that he was desperately seeking some good news, but Cassandra wasn’t ready to offer it just yet. She took a deep breath and turned to face him, ready to explain what she had discovered.

“Aye, there’s a chance this is a case of a disease,” Cassandra began, her voice calm but firm.

"Nae a poison?" he asked.

"Nay, it doesnae look to be that way, but I need more time to tell. I believe it is an illness like any other, but much worse."

"I daenae ken if I should be relieved or angry to hear such news," he said.

"The problem is that the healer who fell ill likely dinnae have enough information to diagnose it properly, as there werenae many patients to begin with." She met Hunter’s gaze, watching his expression shift from concern to cautious hope. “It’ll take time, though—this treatment needs several stages before we can safely say they’re fully healed.”

Hunter let out a long sigh, the tension leaving his broad shoulders as he absorbed her words. Relief flickered across his face, though he quickly masked it, as if not wanting to appear too hopeful in front of her.

“I trust ye ken what ye’re doin’,” he murmured, his voice gravelly with the weight of the situation.

Cassandra nodded, a flicker of pride moving through her; despite her earlier doubts, she was confident she could help these people.

Her thoughts shifted as she approached the little girl once more, but curiosity still gnawed at her.

“Who is the wee lass?” she asked, trying to keep her voice casual despite the undercurrent of surprise she felt.

She had already guessed the child’s connection to Hunter, but the question still burned at the back of her mind. The moment she asked it, she found herself holding her breath, waiting for his answer.

Hunter’s expression softened as he looked down at the child in his arms, and there was a tenderness in his eyes that Cassandra couldn’t ignore.

“This is me daughter, Elena,” he said simply, his voice barely above a whisper.

Cassandra froze, the words sinking in slowly, her heart suddenly racing. Even though she had already guessed this was his daughter, hearing him say it aloud hit her harder than she could have imagined, because it verified that he indeed had a wife.

She shook her head slightly, trying to dismiss the ache that threatened to grow within her.

“Ye seem surprised,” Hunter said.

Cassandra quickly masked her thoughts, forcing a neutral expression as she answered.

“Aye,” she said, her tone as steady as she could manage. “I dinnae expect that ye had a daughter.” She hoped he couldn’t detect the subtle hint of disappointment in her voice, but she didn’t dwell on it long.

Instead, she focused back on the little girl, her heart heavy with the weight of the situation. Elena’s pale face and weak body reminded Cassandra of the countless other children she had treated in her years as a healer. She couldn’t afford to be distracted by thoughts of Hunter’s personal life, no matter how complicated it seemed. The little girl needed her, and that was all that mattered.

Cassandra knelt beside Elena, taking in the little girl’s delicate features. “A beautiful, lass,” she murmured, brushing a strand of hair away from Elena’s face as she inspected her condition. Her voice was gentle, though her mind was already working through the necessary steps for treatment.

She leaned forward, her fingers lightly tracing the girl’s skin as she examined the symptoms. The fever, the rash, the shallow breathing—everything pointed to the same illness that had spread through the castle.

“What do ye make of it?” he asked.

“Aye, the symptoms are the same as the others,” Cassandra muttered to herself, her brow furrowed in concentration. She sighed softly, then looked up at Hunter, meeting his concerned gaze.

“I’ll do me best to start the treatment immediately, but I’ll need some ingredients.”

Hunter didn't hesitate. "I'll take ye to the village straight away," he said, his voice firm with determination. There was no question in his tone, and Cassandra could tell that he was ready to do whatever was necessary to help his daughter.

His commitment to Elena warmed something in her heart, but that warmth quickly faltered as the realization struck her:

The laird has a family.

She quickly turned her focus back to Elena, making mental notes of what she would need once they reached the village.

"I'll need to make a tincture of elderberry, some honey, and thyme," Cassandra continued, her mind already working through the list of ingredients she would need. "If there's any chamomile, that would help calm her stomach, too." She didn't wait for Hunter's response, knowing he would take care of it.

Hunter's eyes didn't leave her as she spoke, and Cassandra could feel the weight of his gaze on her. She wondered if he noticed the way her words were clipped, her movements more purposeful. She couldn't help but feel that, despite the professionalism she tried to maintain, something within her had shifted.

"Aye, I'll make sure ye get everythin' ye need," Hunter said, his voice steady. "We'll leave at once. I'll have a guard accompany us, in case there's trouble along the way."

He stood, his hand resting briefly on Elena's head.

"I'll return soon, me wee bairn," he whispered.

Then he turned to Cassandra. "Let's make haste, lass."

Cassandra nodded quickly, trying to suppress the flicker of something that felt far too personal. She stood, brushing the dust from her skirts, and glanced around the hall. It was a flurry of activity, the sick being tended to by various servants and guards, but there was still a sense of calmness in the way they all moved, a sense of purpose.

Hunter moved, commanding order even in chaos. She followed him out of the hall, her mind racing with a thousand thoughts, each one more difficult to suppress than the last. As they reached the courtyard, the air felt cooler, and Cassandra shivered despite herself.

Cassandra's heart raced as she sat with Hunter, once again on the same horse. Hunter, seemingly unaware of the storm of emotions brewing inside her, spoke of the state of the land and the difficulties the village had been facing due to the illness.

She had one goal: to help Elena. Hunter's presence, his family life, all of it would have to be ignored for now.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"How much farther?" she asked.

"Just over that ridge," Hunter replied.

The rhythm of the horse's movements beneath her was comforting, but the proximity of Hunter's solid presence was anything but.

She couldn't help but notice the warmth of his body against hers, the way his broad frame seemed to fit so perfectly beside her. There was a strange tension in the air, one that made her pulse quicken every time their gazes met, though she quickly dismissed it as unimportant.

"I've never seen so many sick before. The hall, filled with them," she said.

"Aye, neither have I. It is unsettling seeing me daughter and me people with such illness as this," he said.

"Aye, I will do all I can for her," she said. "She is a wee thing."

"She is me everythin'," he said.

As they neared the village, the sight of the small, clustered homes made Cassandra realize how small the village was. The place was quiet, too quiet, with a sense of apprehension hanging in the air. She noticed the way the villagers glanced up at them, their faces filled with a quiet fear as they caught sight of Hunter.

"They seem frightened," she said.

"Aye, 'tis how it should be," he said.

For a brief moment, Cassandra felt a wave of confusion—why were they so frightened of the laird? She couldn't fathom why they would be afraid of him.

Cassandra didn't find him intimidating. His demeanor was calm, and though there was authority in his movements, there was no sign of cruelty. To her, he seemed nothing like the figure of terror the villagers appeared to see.

"The apothecary is close. I will see that ye get all ye need from him. He's an old crow but has many herbs," he said.

"Good, then I can get on with the work," she said.

As they passed the first row of houses, she noticed more faces peeking out from behind doors and windows, their eyes wide with a mixture of curiosity and fear. There was no hiding her presence now, riding alongside Hunter seemed to cause ripples in the stillness of the village.

The murmurs grew louder as they continued on, and Cassandra had to suppress the urge to tell them all to calm down. But she knew it would be pointless; they would only see the laird as a force of power, not as the man she had come to know in their short time together.

"Has the village seen battle?" she asked, trying to piece together the reason for the fear.

"Aye, as have all the villages in me lands," he said.

Hunter, for his part, didn't seem to mind the attention. He sat tall in the saddle, unbothered by the hushed whispers and wary looks from the villagers. His face remained unreadable, a mask of stoicism as they rode through the village square.

Cassandra couldn't help but wonder how he dealt with this—how he could stand being the subject of so much fear, especially when he didn't deserve it in her eyes.

"We're here," he said.

"That hut?" she said.

"Aye, 'tis the apothecary," he replied.

Cassandra dismounted first, trying to shake off the disorienting thoughts swirling in her mind. Hunter followed her, his movements smooth and assured. She turned to him, finding his gaze on her again, and the intensity of his stare made her stomach flutter once more.

"Ye ready, lass?" he asked, his voice low, almost comforting despite the unease around them.

Cassandra hesitated for a moment before nodding, brushing her hair back out of her face.

"Aye, let's get to work," she replied, trying to sound more confident than she felt. But inside, her heart was racing—not from fear, but from something else entirely, something she wasn't sure she was ready to acknowledge.

Cassandra couldn't shake the strange sense of curiosity that had started to grow inside her about Hunter and his family.

She had tried to bury it, to dismiss it as a fleeting attraction, but it wouldn't go away. The way Hunter had looked at her, the way he had treated her with such respect—it was starting to crack the walls she had so carefully built around herself. But she pushed those thoughts aside, focusing instead on the task ahead. There would be no time for distractions.

Keep yer head on straight, girl.

Cassandra walked into the small hut, the musty scent of dried herbs hanging in the air. The room was dimly lit by a flickering candle on the counter, and she could hear the sound of rustling as someone rummaged through the shelves. Her eyes adjusted to the low light as she scanned the various bottles and bundles of dried plants hanging from the walls. Her task was clear—she needed specific ingredients to begin the treatment, and time was running out.

A gruff man with a scruffy beard appeared from behind a shelf, his eyes narrowing as he took in Cassandra's presence.

“Ye lookin’ for somethin’, lass?” he asked in a thick accent, his tone flat and uninterested.

Cassandra nodded, listing the herbs she required for the treatment, all of which were crucial for curing the disease that had taken hold. She had seen the shelves full of various plants, and there was no reason why this man shouldn't have the items she needed.

The man's response was dismissive, almost rude. “Nay, I daenae have any of that,” he said, waving a hand dismissively. “Ye best go elsewhere, lass. I'm sure ye'll find what ye need.”

Cassandra frowned, her instincts telling her that something was off. She could see the

way the man avoided her gaze, and it was clear that he was lying. The way he spoke, dismissing her without a thought, only confirmed her suspicion—he simply didn't want to serve a woman.

Her temper flared, and she couldn't hold back. "Ye think ye can lie to me, do ye?" she snapped, taking a step forward. "Ye've got the herbs here, and ye ken it. I've seen them with me own eyes. So stop treatin' me like I'm some fool!"

"I daenae serve healers of yer kind," he said.

"And what kind would that be?" She huffed.

"Women folk shouldnae be healers. They daenae have the stomach for it!" he shouted.

"How dare ye say such nonsense! Women folk have the stomach to give birth, ye blabberin' idiot!" She shouted back.

The man shuffled nervously, his discomfort palpable, but he didn't reply. Cassandra could feel her anger rising, her fingers tightening into fists as she stood there, challenging him to refute her words.

At that moment, the door swung open, and Cassandra's gaze snapped toward Hunter. His broad frame filled the doorway, and his piercing blue eyes locked onto the man behind the counter. There was a dangerous air about him, and his presence seemed to command the very room.

"Is there a problem, Cassandra?" Hunter asked, his voice low but filled with authority. Cassandra bit back her frustration, but before she could speak, Hunter's gaze never left the man, and his voice hardened.

“Ye will bring her every herb she asked for, and ye will do it now.” His tone was commanding, no room for argument.

The man froze, his face paling as he stammered, trying to backtrack. “Aye, aye, I’ll fetch them right away,” he muttered, though his voice betrayed his reluctance.

Cassandra watched, stunned by the way Hunter effortlessly took control of the situation, his mere presence intimidating the man into submission.

The man scrambled to gather the ingredients from the shelves, fumbling with jars and bundles. Cassandra could tell he was far from prepared for this task and felt a sharp pang of frustration at his incompetence. She had no patience for someone who couldn’t be bothered to properly stock his stores, especially when lives were at stake. But before she could voice her thoughts, she heard Hunter’s voice once more, cutting through the air with an edge of warning.

“I daenae have the last herb on this list, Laird,” the man said.

“Ye better find the last one, and ye better bring it to the castle by tonight. Or I’ll have ye thrown in the dungeons, ye hear me?” His words were cold, and the threat was clear.

The man’s eyes widened in shock, and his hands trembled as he searched frantically through the shelves, desperately looking for the missing herb.

Cassandra couldn’t help but marvel at the authority in Hunter’s voice; it was impossible to doubt his words. He didn’t just speak with power—he had the means to back it up.

The man muttered under his breath, more to himself than to anyone else.

“It’s nae here...I’ll have to send someone to fetch it,” he said, his voice unsteady.

Cassandra’s patience was wearing thin, and she was about to speak again when Hunter moved forward, his towering presence casting a shadow over the man.

“I daenae care who ye send. If it’s nae here by nightfall, ye’ll be the one makin’ the trip.” His voice brooked no argument, and Cassandra could see the man shrinking under Hunter’s glare.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the man nodded shakily. “Aye, I’ll get it, Laird. I’ll make sure it’s delivered to the castle by tonight.” His voice quivered with fear, and it was clear that Hunter’s words had left a lasting impression.

Hunter turned to Cassandra, his stern demeanor softening slightly as he addressed her. “Ye’re nae to worry, lass. We’ll have what we need.”

Cassandra blinked in surprise, her mind racing. She had never seen such dominance in a man before, and the way Hunter commanded the situation left her feeling both unsettled and oddly reassured. She had her answers, for now, but as they turned to leave, she couldn’t shake the thought that there was more to Hunter than she had originally realized.

His presence was overwhelming, and though she didn’t know what to make of it, she couldn’t deny that it stirred something deep inside her.

Cassandra and Hunter mounted the horse once again, the familiar rhythm of the animal’s gait soothing her nerves as they rode back toward the castle. The wind ruffled her hair, and she couldn’t help but glance at Hunter, his tall figure silhouetted against the clear sky. The quiet between them was comfortable for the most part, but as they rode, she found herself wondering how to bridge the silence between them.

Finally, Hunter spoke, his deep voice breaking the stillness.

“How long ye reckon this treatment will take, Cassandra?” His question was casual, but the intensity of his gaze as he looked ahead told her that he was serious.

Cassandra thought for a moment, calculating the course of the disease in her mind.

“It could take anywhere from days to a month,” she replied, her voice steady. “The patients will need time to heal, especially since they’ve been sufferin’ for so long without proper care.”

She hoped her answer would ease any impatience Hunter might have, knowing that healing wasn’t something that could be rushed. The silence stretched again as she looked ahead, focusing on the path.

Hunter let out a low breath, his gaze never wavering from the horizon. “A month...” he murmured, more to himself than to her. “I’ll see to it ye have anythin’ ye need. Food, herbs, or anythin’ else. Just focus on gettin’ them back to health.”

His tone was firm, but there was a softness in the way he offered to help, a tenderness that surprised her. She nodded, appreciating his gesture, though part of her remained wary of accepting too much from him.

“I’ll nae need much,” Cassandra said, glancing at him quickly. “I just need time and patience from the people here. And I’ll need to work without interruptions. If there are distractions...” She trailed off, unsure of how to explain her need for solitude while tending to the sick. “It could slow down the healin’ process,” she added after a beat, hoping he would understand.

Hunter turned his head to glance at her, “I’ll make sure there’s nay interruptions,” he said simply, his confidence unwavering. “The people here’ll know their place, and

they'll keep out of yer way. I trust ye to get the job done."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Let us have one more stop. There's a farmer that grows herbs just down the road. We shall check with him," Hunter said.

"Aye, that is best," she agreed.

His words were a quiet promise, and she found herself strangely comforted by his confidence in his abilities to make sure she got what she needed.

A quick stop at the farmer's hut was no help as he did not have the herbs needed and they were off again.

As they neared the castle, he felt a knot of tension slowly beginning to form in his chest. The castle loomed ahead, and he knew the real work was only just beginning. He had been focused on the immediate task at hand—helping Cassandra heal the sick—but there were so many unknowns that lay beyond that. Could she truly heal this community? Or would her efforts fall short?

Just as they reached the entrance of the castle, a figure stepped forward from the shadows.

"Jessica, what is it?" Hunter asked.

"The man from the healer's hut has brought every ingredient ye asked for." Her words came out in a rush, as if she were eager to deliver good news.

"Oh good," Cassandra said. "I was worried about the missing herb, and the thought of nae having all the necessary ingredients aids in me ability to help."

"He has?" Hunter asked, raising an eyebrow. "All of them?"

"Aye," Jessica confirmed with a nod. "He's made sure it's all here and ready for ye." She gestured toward the stacks of herbs and jars, neatly arranged inside the castle entrance. "The last herb ye needed arrived just half an hour ago."

Hunter gave Cassandra a quick, approving glance. "Ye hear that, lass?" he said. "Looks like the last herb was delivered just in time. Nay more delays."

Cassandra smiled faintly, "I'm grateful that we are one step closer to beginnin' the treatment. I'll make use of it straight away," she said,

"Ye could begin right now, and perhaps the recovery of the villagers could begin faster than we had hoped," he said.

"Thank ye for makin' sure everythin' was brought here," she said.

"Aye, lass," Hunter replied, his voice warm. "We'll make sure ye have what ye need. Now, let's get ye started. "

With that, they made their way into the castle, and Hunter's heart steadied. He knew she had the tools she needed, and with his help, she could focus on what mattered most—saving his people here. The journey was far from over, but he felt ready to face the challenges ahead, knowing he had support.

Moments later Hunter stood beside Elena. There was a quiet stillness in the room, broken only by the soft sounds of breathing and the occasional creak of the floorboards.

As Cassandra took in the sight of Elena, a thought struck her—Elena's features were so similar to Jessica's, and the bond between Jessica and Hunter was undeniable. The way Hunter looked at her, with such tenderness, only reinforced the idea that Jessica must be his wife.

Her suspicions were confirmed when Jessica, who had been standing near the door, rushed forward to give Hunter a tight embrace. Cassandra's heart sank as she watched the two of them share a brief, but intimate moment. Hunter didn't pull away; he welcomed the hug, wrapping his arms around Jessica with a protective ease. The sight left a bitter taste in Cassandra's mouth as the realization settled in that Hunter was clearly not available.

"Oh Hunter, what will we do if we lose our wee Elena?" Jessica said.

"It willnae happen. I willnae allow it," he said.

Cassandra quickly pushed down the pang of disappointment that surfaced at the thought of Hunter's relationship with Jessica. She scolded herself inwardly, reminding herself that she had no business being attracted to a man who was already taken.

She had no intention of entangling herself in any more complicated relationships, especially not with someone like Hunter. It was foolish to even entertain the idea that someone as strong and capable as him would ever be interested in a healer like her.

Jessica pulled away from Hunter, her voice full of concern as she spoke.

"I was so worried when I heard Elena had fallen ill," she said, her eyes searching Hunter's face for reassurance. "But the way she is now... will she be all right?"

Her words were filled with a genuine sense of care, and Cassandra couldn't help but

feel a stir of jealousy in her chest. She had seen this before—the way women expressed concern for the men they loved, a tenderness that always seemed to surpass the words they said.

"Aye, lass," he said, his voice firm but gentle. "She'll soon be all right. I'm sure of it. I'll see to it."

His confidence, the way he spoke as though he could control everything around him, made Cassandra feel both comforted and frustrated. Elena would recover, but it was clear that Hunter's concern wasn't just for the wellbeing of a villager; it was the affection he held for his wife that drove his every word.

Cassandra shifted uncomfortably, her gaze turning toward the door. She was beginning to feel like an outsider in the room, a third wheel to their intimate exchange.

It wasn't their fault, of course, but she couldn't help but feel that pang of jealousy as she stood there, silently watching the connection between Hunter and Jessica. The more she witnessed, the more she realized how foolish she was for allowing herself to feel any kind of attraction to Hunter.

Clearing her throat, Cassandra decided it was time to get to work. She couldn't afford to stand there any longer, wallowing in feelings she had no right to have.

"I must go make the medicine now," she interrupted, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her. "If ye could lead me to a work room, I'd appreciate it," she added, her tone polite but firm.

Jessica nodded quickly, her concern still apparent as she gave Hunter one last glance. "Of course, Cassandra," she said, stepping back to allow Cassandra to pass.

"I'll show ye to a room where ye can prepare everythin'," Hunter said.

Cassandra didn't miss the subtle glance Jessica shot Hunter, as though seeking confirmation from him, and once again, she felt that pang of jealousy. It was ridiculous, she knew, but she couldn't shake the feeling.

She watched as Hunter squeezed Jessica's arm as he passed. Then he led Cassandra down the long corridor, his steps measured and confident. Cassandra followed closely behind, her mind focused on the task at hand. As they reached a small, quiet room at the end of the hall, Hunter turned to her, his expression serious.

"This is where ye'll be, lass," he said, pushing open the door, "I've had it set up for ye."

The room was simple, yet comfortable, with a large wooden table at the center and a window that allowed the faint glow of the evening light to filter in. A large hearth with pots and cauldrons made available as well.

Cassandra set her bag down on the table and looked around, taking in the space she'd be working in for the time being.

"Aye, this'll do," she said.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said.

She appreciated the effort Hunter had put into making sure she had a place to work, though it was hard to ignore the knot of frustration that still lingered in her chest. She needed to focus on her work, not her emotions.

"I'll be startin' right away. If ye want to return when-" but he stopped her before she could finish.

"Nay, I will stay right here," he said.

She quickly got to work, her hands moving with practiced ease as she unpacked her supplies. Her mind went over the ingredients she'd gathered earlier, mentally organizing the poultice she needed to prepare. It would require a careful balance of herbs and careful preparation, and she couldn't afford to make any mistakes. The thought of the patients waiting for her treatment pushed all other thoughts aside as she concentrated on her task.

As she ground the herbs in the mortar, Cassandra's thoughts briefly drifted to Hunter. His presence had been commanding, yet there was a quiet protectiveness in his actions that she couldn't quite ignore. She could see why the villagers trusted him—there was something about him that made people feel safe. But she also reminded herself that she couldn't afford to get distracted by him, not when there was so much at stake with the illness spreading through the castle.

"Ye have everythin'? I shall send for a maid if ye need more water, or anythin' else," he said.

"Nay, I have everythin' for now. Thank ye," she said.

She carefully mixed the ingredients, making sure each one was prepared properly before adding the next. The poultice would take time to create, but she was confident that it would help ease the patients' suffering.

She lost herself in the rhythm of her work, the task a welcome distraction from the confusion and tension that had been building inside her. It wasn't the first time she'd found solace in the simple act of preparing medicine, but it was the first time in a long while that it had been accompanied by such a sense of urgency.

"I'll leave ye to it, lass, and return in an hour," he said, his tone softer now, though

there was still a hint of concern in his eyes. "Ye've all ye need, aye?"

Cassandra nodded without looking up, focusing on the final steps of the poultice. "Aye, I'm settled," she replied, her voice steady, though her thoughts were elsewhere.

Hunter gave a short nod before turning to leave, the sound of his boots fading down the hall. Cassandra breathed a small sigh of relief once she was alone again. The quiet of the room allowed her to focus entirely on the task in front of her. She could feel the weight of the responsibility on her shoulders, but it was a weight she was familiar with, one she had carried many times before.

Her hands worked with precision, and soon enough, the poultice was ready. It wasn't perfect, but it would do. Cassandra couldn't afford to waste time second-guessing herself. She had patients waiting, and she wouldn't let them down.

CHAPTER NINE

Hunter checked on Elena once more. Then after an hour, returned to check on Cassandra. He stood by the open door, his arms folded across his chest as he watched Cassandra work. She moved with precision, her brow furrowed in concentration as she carefully prepared the poultice.

"All well in here, lass?" he asked.

She jumped. "For God's sake. Ye frightened me," she said.

"Apologies, lass."

"Aye, all is well. I just need more time," she said as her gaze returned to the work.

There was something captivating about the way she threw herself into the task, the way her hands seemed to dance with the rhythm of the work. It wasn't just her skills as a healer that caught his attention, but the way she seemed so at ease in her element, her focus unwavering.

I must confess, I admire the lass.

As he observed her, Hunter found himself struck by how beautiful she looked in that moment. The intensity on her face, the slight furrow of her brow, and the way her hands worked so deftly—all of it made her seem more than just a healer. He told himself it was foolish to think such things, that he was seeing her through the lens of his own desires, which were better left unacknowledged.

She's a healer, nothin' more, and me focus should remain on the immediate task at hand.

Hunter felt a pang of unease in his chest as memories of those he had lost over the years flashed before his eyes. The thought of getting too close to someone again was a dangerous one—one that had cost him dearly in the past.

Anyone who grew close to him, who learned to trust him, ended up gone in one way or another. The faces of his past—his parents, his wife, his comrades—haunted him, each one a painful reminder of the consequences of allowing someone into his life.

He shook his head, trying to banish the thoughts that threatened to consume him. He had been living with this burden for years, and it had made him cold, distant, and unwilling to let anyone get too close.

Cassandra, with her fiery spirit and her calm professionalism, was no exception. He couldn't afford to let himself be distracted by her—no matter how captivating she was.

"I'll just take a seat," he said as he moved to a chair in the corner of the room.

"Aye, do as ye please. 'Tis yer castle," she said.

He cleared his throat, pushing the thoughts aside as Cassandra finished preparing the poultice. She moved with the same calm precision that had drawn his attention in the first place. Hunter watched her for a moment longer, admiring the way she worked without hesitation, and then reminded himself of why he was here.

It wasn't to admire her or think about her in ways he shouldn't. It was to ensure that his people, including his daughter, were taken care of.

Hunter sat back in the chair, his eyes heavy with exhaustion, yet his mind wouldn't quiet. The day had been long, and the responsibility of caring for his people weighed heavily on his shoulders. He'd been on edge since the illness first struck, but now, with Cassandra working to heal his people, he allowed himself a rare moment of rest. His eyes drifted shut, and the rhythmic sounds of Cassandra moving about the room lulled him into a light sleep.

Hours passed, and Hunter stirred at the feel of a soft nudge against his arm. He blinked and lifted his head, finding Cassandra standing beside him, a small smile playing on her lips.

"The mixture's ready," she said, her voice soft yet steady. Hunter rubbed his face, shaking off the drowsiness, and stood up, straightening his tunic as he nodded.

"We should give it to the patients at once," he said, his voice gruff from sleep.

Cassandra agreed with a small nod of her own, her expression focused and serious as she gathered the bowl of medicine. Hunter led the way, his thoughts momentarily distracted as he wondered how long it would take before they saw results. He hoped it would be soon, as the castle was filled with too many sick, helpless people for his liking.

They first made their way to Elena's side, the soft sound of Cassandra's footsteps following closely behind. The sight of Elena lying there, pale and still, caused a sharp pang in Hunter's chest, but he quickly pushed the feeling aside.

"She'll recover, aye?" Hunter asked, his voice barely above a whisper as Cassandra approached.

Cassandra nodded, her hands steady as she began administering the medicine to the unconscious woman.

“She’ll be fine soon enough, I believe but I daenae want to give false hope, there's always a chance this may nae work,” Cassandra told him.

"Aye, I understand. Deliver me the news whether ‘tis bad or good. I simply must ken all," he said.

Hunter watched intently, taking note of the way she moved with such care, even in the face of this illness that had taken so many. There was something so compelling about her, the way she commanded attention without even trying. He told himself again that he couldn’t afford to let his thoughts wander, but it didn’t stop the way he looked at her with admiration.

Once Elena had taken the medicine, they moved about the room, and Hunter followed Cassandra. The place was still crowded with patients, their faces gaunt from the fever, their bodies weak from the strain of the illness.

Hunter could see the weight of responsibility in Cassandra’s eyes, but she didn’t hesitate. She went to each person with quiet determination, carefully administering the medicine to each one, as if their well-being rested solely in her hands.

"I'm here, lass. Daenae hesitate to use me," he said.

"Aye, I will indeed," she said. "Hold this."

Hunter grabbed a satchel from her carrying the medicine and moved with her from patient to patient.

He stayed close behind, his gaze fixed on her every movement. He couldn’t help but watch the way she worked, her concentration evident in every step she took. She was meticulous, precise, and even in the midst of the chaos around them, she remained calm. The air between them was thick with unspoken tension, though neither of them

acknowledged it.

Hunter shook his head, frustrated with himself. He needed to focus on the illness, on the safety of his people, and nothing else. But every time Cassandra glanced back at him, every time their eyes met, it was like his resolve weakened. He could feel the pull of her, and for the first time in years, he found himself struggling to resist it.

“That’s it. All the medicine’s been administered. Now, all we can do is wait.” As she finished the last of the patients, Cassandra turned to him, her voice soft but sure.

Hunter felt a rush of relief but also an aching tension in his chest. He knew that it wasn’t over yet, but Cassandra’s calm reassurance gave him some comfort, even if just for a moment.

“Ye’ve done a good job, lass,” Hunter said, his voice gruff with gratitude. “But ye need a break. Ye’ve been workin’ all day. Ye’ll go for a walk with me—fresh air will do ye good.”

His tone left no room for argument, and he watched Cassandra meet his gaze, considering his request for a moment.

After a beat, Cassandra nodded. “Aye, I suppose a walk wouldnae hurt.”

She followed him as he led her out of the castle and into the meadow beyond, the wide expanse of green offering a sense of peace that the castle’s walls couldn’t provide. The sky was clear, the morning sun shining down in a gentle embrace, and for a moment, everything felt still.

The meadow stretched before them, a sea of wildflowers swaying in the breeze. As they walked side by side, Cassandra spoke first, her voice soft against the hum of nature.

“It feels strange, bein’ away from the castle for a while,” she said, her gaze on the distant horizon. “The air’s different out here.”

Hunter glanced at her, his thoughts briefly drifting from the illness and back to her.

“Aye, it’s peaceful here. Much better than bein’ cooped up in there, nay doubt.” He paused, his eyes scanning the horizon before he added, “The clan’s strong, though. They’ll pull through. We’ve seen worse.”

“Aye, they are a strong bunch. I’ve noticed it. The way they support each other, even when they’re all sick. It’s somethin’ I admire.” She paused for a moment, her words weighing in the air before she continued, “I think it’s what makes them who they are—the McDougal clan, I mean.”

Hunter felt a swell of pride at her words. He had always known his people were resilient, but hearing it from someone outside the clan made it feel more real.

“They’ve been through much in their time,” he said, his voice softening. “We’ve faced enemies, lost kin, but still, we stand. I’m proud of them.”

Cassandra nodded, her eyes thoughtful. “It’s clear, Hunter. Ye care about them deeply. It’s more than just a duty for ye, isn’t it? It’s family.”

Her words, though simple, carried a weight of understanding that caught him off guard. He wasn’t used to people seeing him like that, seeing past the walls he had built over the years.

Hunter’s throat tightened slightly, but he forced a smile. “Aye, they’re family. And I’ll do whatever it takes to protect them.” His gaze shifted toward the castle, where he knew his people were still recovering. “I couldnae imagine lettin’ them down.”

“They’re lucky to have ye,” Cassandra said, her tone sincere. “I daenae ken if I’ve ever met someone who carries the weight of their clan the way ye do. It’s nay small task.” She paused and added, almost as if to herself, “But I reckon they’d follow ye anywhere.”

Hunter felt a strange warmth spread through him at her words, though he couldn’t quite place why. He didn’t seek praise, but hearing her say it, hearing her see him in a way that few did, made him feel something deep inside.

“I do it because I have to,” he replied, though the words felt hollow in the face of what she had said. “But it’s nae about me. It’s about them.”

The two of them walked in comfortable silence for a few moments, their footsteps in sync with each other. The meadow felt endless, the wide sky above them offering a sense of freedom neither had known in recent days. For a brief moment, the weight of the illness, the responsibilities, and the tensions between them seemed to vanish into the fresh air.

“Ye were right,” Cassandra said after a while, breaking the silence. “The fresh air does help. I feel a bit lighter.” She smiled at him, the expression soft and unguarded. “Thank ye, Hunter.”

Hunter gave a small nod, his eyes meeting hers. “It’s the least I could do, lass.” The air between them was quiet but charged, as if something unsaid hung in the space between their words. And for a fleeting moment, Hunter allowed himself to imagine a life where he didn’t have to carry the burden alone.

CHAPTER TEN

"Let us see how the patients fair," Cassandra told a maid that aided her.

"Aye, Mistress. Anythin' ye need," the maid said.

It was the following day, and Cassandra moved from patient to patient, tending to their needs with practiced hands. Her mind remained focused on the work, but her thoughts wandered, constantly circling back to the nagging discomfort she had felt the day before.

"And how's me fair lady, today?" Cassandra whispered as she sat beside Elena.

As she checked, she noticed a small movement—a twitch of her fingers, followed by a faint groan. Cassandra leaned closer, her heart leaping as she realized the girl was waking.

"Elena's wakin'," Cassandra murmured to herself, a sense of relief flooding through her.

She quickly turned to the maid. "Go and fetch Jessica and Hunter. Tell them Lady Elena is respondin'."

As the maid rushed off, Cassandra's chest tightened with an odd mix of emotions she couldn't quite place.

Cassandra tried to push the turmoil down, but it lingered like a shadow at the edge of

her thoughts. She had to face the fact that Hunter had a family—a wife, a daughter. It made her stomach churn with discomfort, knowing that she, a mere healer, was feeling drawn to a man who was already taken.

She quickly shook the thought away, telling herself that her feelings were foolish and immoral.

Ye have nay right to feel this way.

He was not hers, yet he had claimed that she was his at the inn. And yet, every time she found herself near him, something in her heart stirred. It was a bitter pill to swallow—being attracted to a married man, someone she could never have. It was wrong, and she knew it.

Hunter, Jessica, and Daniel burst into the hall, their footsteps heavy with urgency. Hunter's eyes immediately locked onto Cassandra, his voice low and rough with concern.

“What’s happenin’, Cassandra? Is she—?” His words trailed off as he stepped closer to the bed.

Cassandra straightened and met his gaze, trying to keep her voice steady despite the emotions bubbling beneath the surface.

“She’s stirrin’. I think she’s respondin’ to the medicine.”

Hunter's eyes went wide, disbelief and hope crashing together in an instant. “She is?” Without waiting for confirmation, he walked to Elena's side, lowering himself into the chair beside the bed.

“Elena, lass,” Hunter murmured softly, brushing a stray curl from his daughter's

forehead. “It’s yer faither, I’m here now. Come on, me wee one, open yer eyes for me. Ye’re safe.”

Jessica hovered behind him, wringing her hands nervously, while Daniel placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Cassandra watched silently, her heart clenched tight in her chest. The tenderness in Hunter’s voice struck deeper than she expected.

Elena’s eyelids fluttered, and a weak voice broke through the tense air. “Faither...?”

Hunter’s breath hitched as his hand gently clasped hers. “Aye, I’m here, me sweet. I’m right here.”

The girl stirred again, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Aunty Jessica... Uncle Daniel...?”

Cassandra blinked, surprise flickering across her face. “Aunty?”

The group fell into a brief, stunned silence as all eyes turned toward Cassandra. Her cheeks colored slightly, while Daniel looked at Hunter with confusion.

Jessica was the first to speak, her voice warm but edged with awkwardness. “Aye, I’ve always been an aunty to the lass. Helped raise her since she was a bairn.”

Hunter didn’t look away from Elena, his focus entirely on his daughter. “They’re family, Cassandra. Me cousins, Jessica and Daniel have been there since the beginnin’.”

Cassandra forced a small smile, though her heart ached. “I see... That’s... good for her.”

Relief rushed through her.

Hunter finally looked up, his gaze steady and unreadable. “It means a lot to all of us. Elena’s lucky to be surrounded by folk who love her.”

Cassandra nodded, swallowing down the lump in her throat. “She’s strong. The medicine’s workin’, but she’ll need rest... and plenty of care.”

Hunter’s voice softened again as he turned back to Elena. “I’ll nae leave her side. She’ll get everythin’ she needs, I swear it.”

Cassandra took a step back, feeling suddenly like an intruder in a moment too tender for her presence. “I’ll... give ye all some time. Call for me if she worsens.”

Jessica reached out and gently touched Cassandra’s arm. “Thank ye for what ye’ve done so far. Truly.”

Cassandra managed another weak smile, her voice soft. “It’s me duty.”

Without another word, she turned and moved to the other patients, her heart lighter than before, but still confused. If Jessica was not his wife, then who was? Who was Elena's mother?

Cassandra moved steadily through the great hall, her hands light but sure as she checked each patient. To her relief, many had begun to stir, their breathing stronger and color returning to their cheeks. A quiet sense of accomplishment settled over her, though she knew the fight wasn’t over yet. The worst had passed, but their recovery still needed careful tending.

“Fetch clean cloths and fresh water,” Cassandra instructed the maids, her voice calm but firm. “And ye, make sure the broth is warm—feed only small sips to those who can swallow.”

She turned to another, her eyes sharp. “Change the linens for those who’ve sweated through them, but mind ye daenae wake them if they’re restin’ easy.”

The maids bustled around her, following her orders without hesitation. Cassandra’s focus remained sharp, but her eyes betrayed her heart’s distraction. Every few moments, her gaze drifted toward the corner of the room where Hunter sat at Elena’s side. His broad shoulders were hunched forward, and his hand remained clasped around his daughter’s delicate fingers.

Why does it pain me so to see him there? He’s a faither worried for his child, nothin’ more...

But the softness in his eyes, the fierce protectiveness in every gesture—those were not things she could ignore so easily. Cassandra straightened a blanket around an elderly patient, willing her thoughts back to the task at hand.

Ye’re here to heal, nae to pine after a man who’s already tied to a life ye cannae be part of.

Yet the ache in her chest lingered, stubborn and unwelcome. She gave another order, her voice steady despite the turmoil within.

“Keep the fires burnin’. The chill’ll do nay favors for those still weak.”

As the maids nodded and moved swiftly, Cassandra allowed herself one last glance toward Hunter. His devotion was evident in every line of his body, and it stirred something deep within her.

An hour later, Hunter approached Cassandra with steady steps, Jessica following closely behind. His face was drawn with exhaustion, but there was warmth in his eyes as he addressed her.

“How’re the other patients farin’, Cassandra?” His voice was low, but the concern beneath it was clear.

Cassandra straightened her shoulders and offered a small nod. “Most are stirrin’ now. Fevers are breakin’, though a few’ll need more time before they’re truly out of danger. I’ve got the maids changin’ linens and feedin’ those strong enough to take broth.”

Hunter let out a breath, his shoulders relaxing slightly. “I cannae thank ye enough for what ye’ve done. Truly, Cassandra, ye might’ve saved half the clan.. and me daughter's life.”

Cassandra dipped her head, feeling heat rise to her cheeks despite herself. “I’m only doin’ what I was trained for, Laird. But I’m glad to see them mendin’.”

Jessica, who had been quiet until now, tilted her head and studied Cassandra thoughtfully. “Ye seemed shocked earlier when Elena called me ‘aunty.’ Why was that?”

Cassandra blinked, suddenly flustered, her words tripping over themselves. “Ach, well... I, uh, thought ye an’ Hunter were married, ye see. The way ye hugged him when we first met, I just assumed?—”

Jessica burst out laughing, shaking her head with genuine amusement. “Married? Me and Hunter? Nay, lass, we’re cousins! I’ve nay intention of ever marryin’. I’m quite happy bein’ the head chef here—nay man’s goin’ to tie me down.”

Cassandra stared at her, surprised by the ease of her response. “Funny that,” she muttered, a wry smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “I’ve nay plans to marry, either.”

Jessica's eyes lit up with sudden fondness, and without warning, she looped her arm through Cassandra's. "Well then, ye're comin' with me, lass. A woman after me own heart deserves a proper break! Ye've worked yerself to the bone."

"Wait—I've...?" Cassandra blinked as Jessica began dragging her away.

Hunter smirked behind them. "Go easy on her, Jess."

"Aye, aye," Jessica called over her shoulder. "I'm just takin' her for a wee break!"

Before Cassandra could protest, she found herself whisked into the castle's warm kitchens, the comforting aroma of baked bread and spices wrapping around her like a blanket. Jessica released her arm and went straight for a small platter tucked away on a shelf.

"Here," Jessica said with a grin, handing over a delicate tart topped with sugared berries. "Ye've more than earned somethin' sweet."

Cassandra took the dessert hesitantly and, after the first bite, her eyes widened with delight.

"Saints above, Jessica... ye're a woman after me own heart." She let out a small laugh. "I'm a bit obsessed with sweets, if I'm honest. Back at me home, I'd sneak down to the kitchens in the dead of night just to swipe a wee pastry or two."

Jessica's laughter echoed through the room, full of genuine delight. "Oh, I like ye already. Tell ye what—while ye're here, I'll set aside somethin' sweet for ye every day. If ye ever need more, ye're welcome to sneak in any time."

Cassandra's heart lightened, the heaviness of the past days easing just a little. "Ye've nay idea how dangerous an offer that is," she teased, taking another bite of the tart.

Jessica smirked, leaning against the counter with arms crossed. “Och, I’ll risk it. A healer who loves sweets? Ye’re already the best kind of trouble.”

Cassandra stood near the hearth, her body aching from exhaustion yet her mind still alert. Cassandra offered a tired but genuine smile.

“Thank ye,” Cassandra murmured, her voice soft but steady. “I’m glad to see the patients mendin’. It gives me hope.”

Jessica’s gaze softened. “Ye’ve done more than any of us could’ve hoped for, lass. But ye look like ye’ll drop where ye stand.”

Cassandra stifled a yawn, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. “Aye, mayhap I could use a bit of rest.”

Without hesitation, Jessica turned to a nearby maid. “Take Mistress Cassandra to her quarters. She needs a proper sleep.”

The maid nodded and gestured for Cassandra to follow. As she walked through the stone corridors, Cassandra barely registered the path they took. The room was warm, simple, and comfortable, but what she didn’t realize was that it sat just next to Hunter’s own chambers.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The following morning, Cassandra woke with a dull ache in her chest—an ache that had nothing to do with fatigue. Thoughts of Hunter weighed heavy on her mind, the memory of his warm gaze and gentle voice stirring feelings she didn't want to name.

I cannae fall into this trap again . Men like him bring naught but heartache.

Needing air, she wandered outside into the garden, the fresh scent of dew-kissed leaves filling her senses. As she walked along the stone path, she spotted Hunter ahead, crouched low beside a large hound. The beast's coat shimmered in the morning sun, its amber eyes sharp yet calm.

Hunter looked up, noticing her hesitation. "Ah, Cassandra," he greeted with a soft smile. "This here's Leonora—ye've nothin' to fear. She doesnae bite."

Cassandra's breath caught as the hound turned its gaze toward her. "I... I daenae like dogs," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Hunter's brow furrowed with gentle understanding. "She's gentle as a lamb, I swear it. Would ye like to try and pet her?"

Cassandra took a small step back, her fingers clenching at her sides. "Nay... I— I cannae," she said, the fear in her voice unmistakable.

Hunter straightened, his expression softening with concern. "It's alright, lass. I dinnae mean to frighten ye." His voice dropped low, steady and reassuring. "I'll keep her

back.”

Cassandra swallowed hard, feeling foolish for her fear. “Thank ye... I daenae ken why I react this way. Bad memories, mayhap.”

Hunter nodded, his gaze never leaving her face. “Bad memories have a way of lingerin’. But ye’re safe here, Cassandra—nothin’ will harm ye under me watch.”

Cassandra’s throat tightened as she took a hesitant step closer to the hound. Leonora’s amber eyes watched her calmly, offering no sign of aggression.

It’s just a beast, nothin’ more. A beast and a brute.

She reminded herself, inching forward until she stood within reach. Slowly, she stretched out her trembling hand and let her fingers graze the hound’s soft fur.

“There now, good lass,” Hunter said, his voice low and warm with approval. His smile deepened as he watched her hand rest gently on the hound’s head.

“See? She’s gentle as a lamb, just like I said.”

Cassandra let out a shaky breath and withdrew her hand, though a spark of pride flickered in her chest.

“Aye... she’s nae as frightenin’ as I first thought.”

Hunter’s smirk grew wider. “That’s the spirit. Now, since Leonora’s taken a likin’ to ye, why daenae we walk a bit? Fresh air will do ye good.”

Cassandra shook her head, her focus snapping back to her responsibilities. “I cannae, Hunter. I need to check on the patients—there’s still much to do.”

Hunter's expression softened with understanding. "Ye'll be glad to hear most of them have stirred, and some are sittin' up now. Elena's stronger than she was yesterday—Jessica said she even asked for broth this mornin'."

Relief flooded Cassandra's heart, but the weight of duty still lingered.

"That's good news... but I must still see them with me own eyes."

Hunter stepped closer, his tone gentle but insistent. "Just fifteen minutes, lass. If ye keep runnin' yerself ragged, ye'll fall ill yerself. A healer needs rest as much as her patients."

Cassandra hesitated, chewing her lower lip. He's right, she admitted silently, exhaustion tugging at her bones.

"Aye, ye make a fair point. Overwork breeds sickness, I ken that better than most."

"Good," Hunter said, offering his arm with a boyish charm. "Come, then. Just a wee walk through the garden—nay more, nay less."

Cassandra hesitated then walked beside him. The warmth of his presence sent a ripple of unease through her, though she forced herself to ignore it.

"Fine," she murmured. "But if I lose track of time, I'll be blamin' ye."

They began their slow stroll down the winding garden path, Leonora padding quietly at his side.

"I'll take the blame gladly if it means ye're breathin' easier."

They walked in companionable silence for a moment, the sun casting dappled light

across the cobblestone. Birds chirped softly from the hedgerows, and the sweet scent of lavender filled the air. Cassandra found herself relaxing despite the tension that lingered in her chest.

“How long have ye served as a healer?” Hunter asked after a pause, his voice thoughtful.

“Since I was a lass,” Cassandra replied, her fingers brushing the soft petals of a rose as they passed. “Learned from me maither, though... I suppose I never imagined it’d become me whole life.”

Hunter glanced at her, curiosity in his eyes. “Did ye nae have dreams beyond the sickbeds and tinctures?”

Cassandra’s lips twitched with the ghost of a smile. “I did, once. Foolish dreams of family and love. But life has a way of settin’ its own course, aye?”

Hunter’s gaze lingered on her face. “Mayhap those dreams arenae so foolish. There’s still time for them, lass.”

She looked away, focusing on the sky’s endless blue. “Some paths, once taken, cannae be left behind so easily.”

They wandered past the ivy-clad stone walls, the peacefulness of the moment offering a rare sense of calm. Cassandra felt the weight of her exhaustion lighten with every step.

“Ye’re a stubborn woman,” Hunter said finally, breaking the quiet with a note of admiration.

Cassandra raised a brow, though her lips curled into a small smile. “And ye’re only

just now noticin'?"

"Aye, but I admire stubbornness."

Their eyes met for a heartbeat too long, and Cassandra's pulse quickened. She looked away. "I should return to the hall," she said, though her voice lacked conviction.

Hunter nodded, though his eyes still lingered on her face. "Aye. But promise me ye'll rest again later."

"I'll try," Cassandra replied, already feeling the pull of duty settle over her once more.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"W hat is the stubborn lass doin' now?" Hunter growled as he looked down from his window.

The chill of the night air seeping through the stone walls. His jaw tightened when he saw her: Cassandra, clad in nothing more than a thin chemise and a robe, her hair glinting under the moonlight. Fury surged through him—not just at her foolishness for braving the cold, but because his guards could easily see her like this.

What in God's name is she thinkin'?

Without a second thought, he stormed out of his chambers and down the stone steps, the anger burning through his chest stronger with every stride. The night wind bit at his skin, but he hardly noticed as he crossed into the gardens. He found her standing near the rose bushes, lost in thought, completely unaware of his approach.

"Have ye lost yer senses, woman?" His voice cut through the stillness like a blade.

Cassandra jumped, spinning around with wide eyes. "Hunter! What in the devil are ye doin' sneakin' up on me?"

"I should be askin' ye the same!" He yanked off his heavy cloak and threw it around her shoulders, his hands lingering just a moment too long.

"Ye're out here in the dead of night, wearin' nothin' fit for this cold. Do ye want to fall ill?"

Cassandra pulled the cloak tighter around her, her eyes flashing with irritation. “I’m a healer, Hunter. I ken well enough how to care for meself.”

He stepped closer, his voice low and simmering. “Aye, and ye’ll nae be able to care for anyone if ye’re laid up with a fever. Have ye any idea how foolish this looks? The guards could see ye—dressed like this.”

Her cheeks flushed, though whether from anger or embarrassment, he couldn’t tell.

“I dinnae think anyone would be watchin’. I just needed air, nae a lecture.”

“Air?” His frustration boiled over as he raked a hand through his hair. “At this hour? Dressed like that? Ye’re nae some reckless lass who’s unaware of danger.”

“I’m nae a child, Hunter!” Cassandra snapped, her voice sharp as the wind. “I’ve faced worse than a cold night’s breeze.”

He took another step, close enough now that her breath hitched. “That’s nae the point, and ye ken it. Ye cannae risk yerself, nae while others depend on ye.”

Her eyes locked with his, fierce and unyielding. “And who, exactly, depends on me? Ye? Yer guards? Or is it just yer pride that’s been wounded by what they might’ve seen?”

For a moment, the tension hung thick between them, too charged to ignore. His anger shifted—morphed—into something deeper, hotter.

Why in God’s name does she make me feel like this?

Hunter’s thoughts tangled as he realized how close they stood, how her lips parted with every breath, how the moonlight danced across her skin. Every instinct in him

screamed to pull her closer, to taste the fire that burned behind those sharp words. But instead, he clenched his fists at his sides and forced himself to step back.

“Ye drive me mad, Cassandra,” he muttered, his voice low with frustration and something far more dangerous. “One moment, ye’re defyin’ me, the next, ye’re riskin’ yer health. Do ye never think of the consequences?”

Her breath trembled, though her defiance never wavered. “And what of ye? Barkin’ orders like ye’ve every right to control me.”

“I’m tryin’ to protect ye, damn it!” His voice cracked under the weight of his emotion. “Why cannae ye see that?”

For a heartbeat, silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken feelings. Cassandra’s gaze softened, though her jaw remained set.

“I never asked for yer protection,” she whispered, voice like silk in the cold night air.

Hunter swallowed hard, fighting the desire clawing at his chest.

God help me, I want her more than I should.

“Aye,” he said finally, his voice rough. “But ye have it, whether ye want it or nae.”

Hunter’s temper snapped like a taut rope. In one swift motion, he grabbed Cassandra around the waist, her light frame easily swept off the ground. She yelped, squirming in his grasp, fists beating weakly against his chest.

“Put me down this instant, Hunter!” she hissed, her voice low but fierce.

“Oh, I’ll put ye down, lass,” he growled, carrying her with determined strides through

the dim hallways. Reaching her chambers, he kicked the door shut behind them and set her on her feet—only to press her firmly against the cold stone wall. His arms caged her in, his breath hot against her ear.

“But nae before ye listen to me proper.”

Her breath came quick, cheeks flushed with both fury and something far more dangerous. “Ye’ve lost yer mind,” she spat, trying to turn away, but his hand on her waist held firm.

“Lost it, have I?” His voice dipped low, thick with desire. “Ye shouldnae be dressed like this, lass. Daenae ye ken how temptin’ ye look?” His gaze raked over her chemise and robe, heat pooling in his dark eyes. “Ye shouldnae be testin’ me limits...”

Cassandra’s flush deepened, crimson blooming across her cheeks. “Ye’re delusional,” she snapped, though her voice wavered just enough to betray her uncertainty. “There’s nothin’ temptin’ about me, and ye’ve nay right to speak to me so.”

Hunter leaned in, close enough that she could feel the heat radiating off him. “Delusional, am I?” His breath ghosted across her lips, sending a shiver down her spine. “Let me prove ye wrong, then.”

Her eyes fluttered closed against her will, body betraying her mind as she leaned in ever so slightly.

A dark chuckle rumbled from his chest, deep and low. “Ah, look at ye now, Cassandra,” he murmured, his voice like velvet and smoke. “Ye say one thing, but yer body speaks the truth.”

Before she could utter a single word of protest, his mouth was on hers—hot,

possessive, and demanding. Her initial resistance was weak, hands pressing against his chest in a futile attempt to push him away. But the fire of his kiss burned through her defenses, melting her resolve like snow under a fierce sun. Her fingers curled into his shirt instead, pulling him closer with a need that shocked them both.

Hunter deepened the kiss, one hand tangling in her hair while the other remained firmly on her waist.

God above, she tastes better than I ever imagined.

Her lips were soft and yielding, but she kissed him back with a fire that nearly undid him. Every inch of restraint he had was hanging by a thread, and with every second, that thread frayed dangerously thin.

When she finally tore her mouth away, her chest heaved, eyes glassy with a mix of anger and want. “This... this is madness,” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

“Aye,” Hunter murmured, brushing a strand of hair from her flushed cheek. “Madness it may be, but it’s real, Cassandra. Every bloody second of it.”

She swallowed hard, her fingers still clutching his shirt. “I... I shouldnae want this,” she said, though her trembling voice betrayed her heart.

“Wantin’ what ye shouldnae is often the hardest battle,” he replied, his forehead resting gently against hers. “But maybe, just this once... ye should stop fightin’ it.”

For a long, breathless moment, neither of them moved. Then, slowly, almost reluctantly, Cassandra’s hands loosened their grip, falling back to her sides. Hunter stepped away first, the distance between them crackling with tension that neither dared to break.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cassandra sat at her worktable, grinding dried thyme and chamomile into a fine powder. The rhythmic motion of the mortar and pestle should have soothed her, but her thoughts kept drifting elsewhere—back to the kiss. It had been days, and yet she could still feel the warmth of Hunter's lips on hers, the strength of his hands as he held her close. She was furious with herself.

Why did I let it happen? Why do I want it again?

She bit her lip, pressing harder against the herbs, as if she could crush the memory along with them.

"Hunter, stay away from him lass. He will do ye nae good," she said to herself.

She had come here to heal, to work, not to let herself get caught in another web of desire that would just lead to heartache again.

"Cannae trust any of the men folk, remember that," she said as she carried a bucket of water to the hearth and set it to boil.

And yet, no matter how much she scolded herself, she couldn't stop thinking about him as she moved back to her table to work.

A sharp knock at the door made her freeze, her breath catching in her throat. She clenched her hands, half-expecting the door to swing open and reveal Hunter standing there, ready to unravel her again.

When Jessica stepped inside instead, Cassandra exhaled, relief and disappointment warring within her. She quickly composed herself and mustered a smile, pushing aside her reckless thoughts.

Jessica grinned as she strode in. "Och, ye look like a lass who's been lost in her thoughts."

Cassandra chuckled, setting the pestle down. "Aye, just busy with the herbs. The patients still need tendin'."

Jessica tilted her head, eyes gleaming with curiosity. "Is that so? Then why'd ye look like ye expected someone else at the door?"

Cassandra's smile faltered for half a second before she smoothed her features. "I dinnae expect anyone, really. But I'm glad it's ye, Jessica. Shall I make us some tea, then?"

Cassandra averted her gaze to the kettle, realizing that Jessica could see right through her.

Jessica smirked, folding her arms. "Aye, I'm sure ye are. Tea would be good, thank ye," she said.

"Good, I make me own mix," Cassandra said as she started to spoon herbs into a tea pot. "This is a very good tea for-"

"Tell me, Cassandra, why do I get the feelin' there's somethin' ye're nae sayin'? Maskin' it with talk of tea?" Jessica said cutting her off.

Cassandra waved a hand dismissively keeping focus on the tea. "Ye imagine things, dear friend." Cassandra moved to the kettle and poured hot water into the tea pot. She

gathered two cups setting one down in front of Jessica trying to not make eye contact as she knew the woman would see right through her.

"Now, what brings ye here? Is there news of a patient?" Cassandra asked.

Jessica leaned against the table, clearly not fooled. "I was wonderin' if ye'd like a break. I just finished bakin' somethin' sweet, and I thought ye might want to sneak a bite before the kitchen folk snatch it all up. Get out of this musty workshop for a bit."

Cassandra's lips twitched at the temptation. "A sweet, ye say? Now that is an offer I might nae refuse."

Jessica laughed. "Aye, I thought that might work."

Cassandra looked at Jessica, knowing very well the woman had an ulterior motive to offering her a sweet and became hesitant.

"But I do have much work to do. Maybe ye can stow away a sweet for me later," she said.

"Come, let's go before the laird's men get their hands on it."

Cassandra hesitated, glancing at the herbs she still had to prepare.

"I'm nae leavin' until ye come with me," Jessica said.

After a moment, she gave a small sigh and stood. Perhaps a distraction was exactly what she needed.

"Alright, just for a while. I could use a break from the pestle and mortar," she said. Then she removed the bucket of boiling water from the hearth and set it down on the

stone floor. She tossed a few used cloths inside of it and left it to sit.

"I'm ready then, what magic have ye conjured up with those bakin' hands?" she asked.

"Ye will love it. A berry and grain bread that is some of me best work," Jessica said as they walked out of the workshop together.

Cassandra walked beside Jessica down the dimly lit corridor, the scent of fresh bread and roasted meat growing stronger with each step. The castle was more alive now, the groans of the ill replaced by murmurs of conversation and the clatter of dishes.

The worst of the sickness had passed, and some of the patients were now sitting up, eating, and even walking with assistance.

"I am glad that the castle hums with people. It is a good sign of progress," she said.

Jessica sighed with relief, clasping her hands together. "Och, Cassandra, I cannae thank ye enough. Without ye, I daenae ken what would've happened. Ye've saved so many lives. Ye are the miracle, me dear."

Cassandra offered a small smile, though she did not feel entirely at ease. "I only did what needed doin'. I'm just glad to see them recoverin'. A healer is only as good as the strength of her patients."

Jessica shook her head. "Ye're too humble, lass. I'll be forever grateful for what ye've done here, especially for Lady Elena. It would have been dark days if she grew worse."

A silence settled between them as they walked, their footsteps echoing softly against the stone floor. Jessica stole a sideways glance at Cassandra, her sharp eyes catching

something unspoken in her expression.

After a moment, she tilted her head and asked, “Is there somethin’ else troublin’ ye?”

Cassandra’s grip tightened slightly on the folds of her skirt, her heart lurching at the question. She did not want to admit the truth—that she had been avoiding Hunter, that every time she saw him, a war waged inside her between the undeniable pull of desire and the deeply ingrained distrust she had for men.

She hated how easily Hunter unsettled her, how the mere thought of him sent a warmth curling through her that she did not want to feel. But she would never confess such a thing, especially not to Jessica.

She forced an even tone. “Nay, I’ve just been focusin’ on me work. There’s still much to do.”

Jessica studied her for a long moment, as if deciding whether or not to press further. Then, with a knowing smirk, she simply nodded. “Aye, work does keep the mind busy. But daenae forget, lass—ye’re allowed to take a breath now and then.”

Cassandra gave a small chuckle, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Aye, perhaps.”

But in truth, she feared that if she stopped, even for a moment, she would no longer be able to control the storm raging inside her.

Jessica tilted her head, her sharp gaze never leaving Cassandra’s face. “Tell me true—do ye have a man back at yer home in McAllister Castle?”

Cassandra stiffened, her eyes dropping to the stone floor, unable to meet Jessica’s probing stare.

Jessica sighed, crossing her arms. "Och, ye can confide in me, Cassandra. Whatever it is, I'll nae go runnin' me mouth about it." Her voice softened, a gentle invitation rather than a demand. "I ken heartache when I see it."

Cassandra inhaled deeply, her fingers tightening at her sides. "I was engaged once," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "His name was William. I found him in the arms of another woman before we wed."

Jessica's expression darkened with sympathy. "Och, I'm so sorry, lass."

Cassandra forced a tight smile, but there was no warmth behind it. "I ended the betrothal that very moment, but the damage was done. I nay longer believe in true love, nor do I trust any man."

Her words were sharp, final, as if saying them aloud would make them more real, more unshakable.

Jessica reached out and gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. "Then we need a strong drink, aye? A good whisky will dull the sting of bad memories."

Cassandra shook her head quickly. "I cannae, Jessica. I've too much work to do." She hoped that would be the end of it, that her friend would simply let the subject drop.

Jessica, however, arched a brow, her eyes narrowing. "Or is there another reason ye've buried yerself in work all day beside past heartache?"

Cassandra gulped, the heat creeping up her neck. "Nay, nonsense," she said, though the slight waver in her voice betrayed her.

Jessica folded her arms, her smirk returning. "Is it, now? Seems to me ye've been hidin' from someone."

Cassandra swallowed hard, her thoughts immediately drifting to Hunter. She did not want to see him, because she feared what she might do if she did.

"I think I'll have that drink after all," Cassandra said.

Jessica grinned triumphantly. "That's the spirit, lass!" she declared, linking her arm with Cassandra's.

Before Cassandra could protest further, Jessica was already leading her down the corridor with determined steps. Cassandra sighed, resigning herself to whatever mischief Jessica had in mind.

"I thought we were goin' to the kitchens?" Cassandra asked, arching a brow as they turned down a different corridor.

Jessica laughed, shaking her head. "Och, nay, I keep the good whisky in me rooms. The swill they serve in the kitchens is fit for old men with nay taste left in their tongues."

Cassandra smirked despite herself as they entered Jessica's chambers. The room was warm and inviting, with a roaring fire crackling in the hearth. A plush settee sat near the window, and a sturdy wooden table bore a decanter and two glasses.

Jessica strode confidently to the table, pouring them both a generous measure of amber liquid.

Jessica handed Cassandra a glass and grinned. "To leavin' behind faithless men and drinkin' good whisky."

Cassandra chuckled, clinking her glass against Jessica's before taking a sip. The whisky burned on the way down, but warmth spread through her chest, loosening the

tension she hadn't realized she was holding. She sighed, settling into the chair across from Jessica, allowing herself a rare moment of ease.

Jessica leaned back, swirling the whisky in her glass. "Tell me true, Cassandra. Do ye miss him at all?"

Cassandra scoffed, shaking her head. "Nae in the slightest. I only regret that I ever trusted him in the first place."

Jessica nodded knowingly. "Aye, men can be faithless creatures. But nae all of them, ye ken. There are some good ones out there."

Cassandra raised a brow. "Ye sound like a woman who speaks from experience. Do ye have a lad tucked away somewhere, then?"

Jessica laughed, taking another sip of her drink. "Och, I've had me fair share of suitors. But none who've made me want to tie meself to one man forever."

Cassandra tilted her head, intrigued. "So ye daenae trust men either, then?"

Jessica smirked. "Nay, I trust them to be what they are—trouble. But that doesnae mean I cannae enjoy their company while it lasts."

Cassandra chuckled, feeling the whisky warming her from the inside out. "Aye, well, I think I'll keep me distance from them altogether."

Jessica eyed her over the rim of her glass. "Even from a certain broodin' laird?"

Cassandra nearly choked on her whisky, coughing as Jessica burst into laughter. "Och, daenae look at me like that," Jessica teased. "I've seen the way he watches ye. And the way ye avoid lookin' at him."

Cassandra groaned, rubbing a hand over her face. "It's nae like that."

Jessica leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with amusement. "Then what is it like, hmm? Because from where I stand, it seems like ye've been runnin' scared."

Cassandra hesitated, staring down into her glass. The truth was, Jessica wasn't entirely wrong. Hunter was unlike any man she'd ever met—strong, fierce, and infuriatingly impossible to ignore.

Jessica grinned as if she'd already won the argument. "Aye, I thought as much."

Cassandra scowled at her, finishing the last of her drink in one quick swallow. "I daenae want to talk about him."

Jessica snorted. "Then why are yer cheeks pink, lass?"

Cassandra widened her eyes, but she couldn't stop the heat rising to her face. The whisky was surely to blame for that. She stood, swaying slightly, and pointed a finger at Jessica.

"I think ye just enjoy teasin' me."

Jessica grinned wickedly. "Aye, I do. And ye make it so easy."

Cassandra shook her head, laughing despite herself. "Maybe another drink is a good idea."

"Aye, agree," Jessica said as both women annoyed another round of talking and drinking.

Jessica, still grinning at Cassandra's flustered state, rose from her chair and moved

toward the door. "If we're to keep drinkin', we best have somethin' to eat. I'll have the kitchen send up a proper supper for us."

"Thank ye," Cassandra said.

Jessica left the room to find a maid to deliver the message. In those brief moments Cassandra closed her eyes, and instantly regretted it.

"Lass..." a breathy deep voice said.

Cassandra quickly opened her eyes and realized that her mind was replaying the heated moment with Hunter. His voice was on her mind. She moved about the room trying to keep him from her thoughts.

A moment later Jessica entered.

"Good, all done. How about a game of cards while we wait," she asked.

"That would be very good," Cassandra replied knowing the game would take her mind off Hunter.

Fifteen minutes later, the supper arrived. Jessica lifted the lid from a tray, revealing an array of food that made Cassandra's stomach rumble despite the whisky warming her belly.

Cassandra leaned forward, inhaling the delicious scent. "This is delightful and needed after me drinkin'" she said, amusement tugging at her lips.

Jessica winked as she cut into a thick slice of roasted lamb, its juices glistening in the firelight. "I ken how to treat me guests," she said, piling Cassandra's plate with tender meat, golden-brown oatcakes, and mashed neeps.

Cassandra took a bite, savoring the rich, seasoned flavor of the lamb. The oatcakes were crisp on the outside but soft within, perfect for soaking up the thick gravy.

The neeps had been mashed with butter and a hint of honey, their sweetness balancing the savory meal. It was a feast fit for warriors, and she hadn't realized how hungry she was until now.

Jessica poured them both another measure of whisky, though Cassandra hesitated before taking it. "I may regret this by morn," Cassandra muttered.

Jessica smirked. "Aye, but regret is for tomorrow. Tonight, we eat, drink, and forget the troubles of faithless men and broodin' lairds."

Cassandra chuckled, clinking her glass against Jessica's before taking another sip. The warmth in her belly deepened, the tension in her shoulders easing as they shared stories and laughter.

For the first time in days, she allowed herself to simply be—without worry, without thoughts of healing, or the past, and the men who haunted her every waking moment.

By the time the meal was done, Cassandra felt comfortably full and more than a little lightheaded. Jessica stretched lazily, yawning. "I'll sleep well tonight, that's for certain," she said.

Cassandra stood carefully, her legs feeling unsteady beneath her. "I should go before I fall asleep in yer chair," she said with a soft laugh.

Jessica smirked but waved her off. "Aye, off with ye then. But I expect ye to join me for another night like this soon."

Cassandra smiled, then made her way toward the door. The cool air of the corridor

sobered her slightly, but the whisky still hummed in her veins. She walked slowly down the dark hallway, hoping the movement would clear her head. Then she saw him.

Nay, I cannae see him now.

Hunter stood at the far end of the hallway, his broad frame unmistakable even in the dim candlelight. Her breath hitched, panic sparking through her chest. Without thinking, she turned sharply and hurried in the opposite direction, her heart thudding wildly.

She didn't know if he had seen her. She didn't dare look back to check. Every step felt too loud, her pulse roaring in her ears. Heat flooded her body—not from the whisky this time, but from something deeper, something more dangerous.

She cursed under her breath as she finally reached her chambers, slipping inside and pressing her back against the door. Her breath came in short, uneven bursts.

What is wrong with me?

Cassandra squeezed her eyes shut, trying to will away the heat crawling up her spine. She was far too drunk to be anywhere near that man. He already had a hold on her senses when she was sober—what fool would she make of herself in this state?

Hunter was temptation wrapped in danger, and she had no intention of giving in to either.

Still, she could not shake the image of him standing in the corridor, dark and unreadable. Had he seen her scurry away like a frightened rabbit? Did he know the effect he had on her?

Cassandra groaned, pressing her fingers to her temples. She needed sleep. And distance. And perhaps, if she was lucky, she'd wake up in the morning with no memory of the way her body had betrayed her tonight.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Y e goin' to check on the little lass?" Daniel asked Hunter as he stepped into the healing hall.

"Aye," Hunter replied. "I daenae want to disturb her rest, just a wee peek."

"I pray for her healin' every night. I'll be at the trainin' grounds should ye need me," Daniel patted him on the back and left.

Hunter stepped down the rows of beds and cots in healing hall, his sharp gaze sweeping over the rows of resting patients. The scent of herbs lingered in the air, mingling with the faint traces of sickness that still clung to the room.

Yet, there was a change—one he could not deny. Men and women who had once been too weak to lift their heads were now sitting up, eating, and even speaking in hushed voices.

His steps slowed as he approached the cot where his daughter, Elena, lay nestled beneath thick wool blankets. Her color had returned, no longer the pale, ghostly shade that had plagued her for weeks. Relief settled in his chest as she turned to him, bright-eyed and alert. He had spent too many nights fearing he would lose her, but now, thanks to Cassandra, she was stronger.

"Da," Elena said softly, her small fingers curling around the edge of her blanket. "I feel better."

Hunter lowered himself to sit beside her, brushing a stray lock of hair from her forehead. “Aye, lass, ye do look better,” he murmured. “That pleases me more than ye ken.”

She smiled sleepily but then tilted her head, curiosity dancing in her eyes. “Da... the healer, what is her name?”

Hunter exhaled, leaning back slightly. He knew this question would come sooner or later. “Her name is Cassandra. She’s from McAllister castle. Laird McAllister allowed me to bring her here to us when the sickness spread.”

Elena’s brows furrowed. “So, she doesnae belong here?”

Hunter hesitated. The word belong caught him off guard, striking a chord deep within him. “Nay, lass. She came to help, but her home is elsewhere.”

Elena frowned, her small fingers twisting in the blanket. “Will she leave when everyone is well again?”

Something tightened in Hunter’s chest, an ache he did not expect. He had been so focused on the present, on making sure his people recovered, that he had not truly considered what came after.

Cassandra would leave eventually—back to McAllister, back to the life she had before steppin’ into his.

“Da?” Elena’s voice was quieter now, as if she could sense the change in his mood.

He cleared his throat, shaking off the strange weight pressing down on him. “Daenae think on that now, little one,” he said firmly. “Ye just focus on getting’ stronger.”

Elena still looked troubled, but she nodded slowly. “She’s kind,” she whispered. “She always talks to me when she checks me fever. And she tells me stories.”

Hunter wasn’t surprised. Cassandra had a way of making people feel safe, even when she tried to keep herself at a distance. He had seen it in the way the other patients looked at her, in the quiet respect she commanded without ever demanding it.

“She’s a good woman,” Hunter admitted, his voice low.

Elena yawned, her eyes growing heavy. “I hope she stays,” she murmured sleepily.

Hunter watched as she drifted off, her small hand resting on top of his. He stayed beside her, unmoving, listening to the steady sound of her breathing. His daughter’s words echoed in his mind, stirring something unsteady inside him.

Did he want Cassandra to stay?

The thought unsettled him. He had spent years keeping his heart guarded, unwilling to let another woman hold any power over him. And yet, Cassandra was already burrowing into his thoughts, into his life, without even trying.

Hunter exhaled slowly, brushing his fingers lightly over Elena’s hand before standing. He needed to clear his head, to focus on what mattered. Cassandra was here to heal, nothing more.

And yet, as he turned to leave the hall, he found himself wondering what it would take to make her stay.

Hunter left the healing hall, the weight of Cassandra’s inevitable departure pressing heavily on his mind.

As he stepped into the corridor, his sharp gaze landed on a familiar figure at a distance. Cassandra. Their eyes met for the briefest moment before she turned abruptly, her skirts swishing as she hurried down the hall.

Without thinking, he followed, his long strides closing the distance quickly. But as he rounded the corner, she was gone. The corridor was empty, silent except for the faint crackling of a torch on the wall. His jaw tightened as he called out, “Cassandra.”

There was no answer. His fingers curled into fists at his sides as a memory from the night before crept into his mind. He had seen her then, too, lingering in the corridor before slipping away the moment she noticed him. At first, he thought it was coincidence, but now the truth was clear—she was avoiding him.

Hunter's boots thudded heavily against the dirt as he walked toward the training grounds. His mood was dark. His mind churned with the thoughts he couldn't shake, and he felt the weight of his anger pressing down on him.

As he reached the training grounds, his eyes locked onto his cousin, Daniel, who was practicing his sword work in the middle of the field. Without a word, Hunter grabbed a nearby sword, the metal feeling cold against his palm.

He strode toward Daniel with grim determination, his mind still tangled with frustration. The clang of steel rang out as their swords met, the force of the strike sharp and clear in the quiet of the evening. Daniel grunted under the impact but immediately blocked the next swing, raising an eyebrow as he met his cousin's furious gaze.

“Och, take it easy, cousin,” Daniel said. He parried another blow before stepping back, his brow furrowing in concern. “What ails ye, Hunter? Ye fight like a man possessed.”

Hunter's breath came in ragged gasps as his grip tightened around the hilt of his sword, but his gaze never left Daniel.

"I'm in frustrations," he muttered, his voice low and rough, "because Cassandra's avoidin' me, and I cannae stand it." He swung his sword again, pushing his cousin back with the force of his strike. "She's been distant, and I'm nae sure why."

"Well, if ye're so worried, just go to her," Daniel suggested, a mischievous glint flashing in his eyes. "Tell her what ye feel, man, and stop beatin' the life out of me with that sword."

Hunter's grip loosened for a moment, but his scowl deepened as the doubt gnawed at him, and he took a slow step back, gathering his thoughts.

"I shouldnae get closer to her," he muttered, more to himself than to Daniel. "She'll be leavin', and I cannae bear the thought of gettin' tangled up in somethin' that's doomed."

"Ach, that's nae set in stone, ye ken," Daniel countered, shaking his head as he adjusted his stance. "She might nae be leavin' after all."

Hunter grunted, unwilling to admit that Daniel might be right, and he exhaled sharply, the tension in his chest only deepening. Daniel's voice softened, but there was a firmness in his words, as if trying to push through Hunter's stubbornness.

Hunter closed his eyes for a moment, a deep breath filling his lungs before he lowered his sword entirely. He straightened, meeting his cousin's gaze with a rawness he hadn't intended to show.

"I daenae want to get close to her, Daniel," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "I care for the lass, and I cannae watch her die, like everyone else I've cared for."

Daniel's expression hardened, and he took a step toward Hunter, his tone becoming more serious. "Ye're actin' like a fool, Hunter," he said, voice laced with a protective edge. "Ye cannae live in fear, aye? Jessica and I—" He broke off, locking eyes with Hunter, his meaning clear. "We're close to ye, and we're still alive. What happened in the past doesnae mean ye'll lose Cassandra if ye let yer heart guide ye."

Hunter stood still for a long moment, the weight of his cousin's words sinking in. His mind raced as he processed Daniel's challenge, and he felt an ache deep in his chest.

It was true—he had lost so many people he had loved, yet the idea of shutting himself off from Cassandra, of pushing her away, felt like an unbearable cost. He slowly raised his sword again, but this time, it felt heavier, as if the burden of his fears was now tied to every movement he made.

They resumed their practice, the clang of metal ringing out as Hunter and Daniel continued to spar. Hunter's strikes were slower now, his mind wrestling with Daniel's words, but the frustration still simmered beneath his skin.

"Focus on yer skills," Daniel pressed him harder, urging him to think less of his fears and more of the moment, but Hunter's mind was elsewhere, tangled with thoughts of Cassandra.

Every swing of his sword seemed to echo with her absence, her distance, and the ache that only seemed to grow the longer she avoided him.

Finally, after what felt like hours, they both stopped, the swords falling to the dirt as their heavy breaths filled the silence. Daniel wiped the sweat from his brow and tossed Hunter a sideways glance.

"Ye're wearin' yerself down," he said, though there was no mocking tone in his voice, just a quiet observation. "Perhaps it's time ye took a break, Hunter?"

Hunter nodded, though his mind was still racing. “Aye, perhaps it is,” he muttered, stepping away from the field. The cool evening air did little to calm the fire in his chest as he walked back toward the castle, the weight of his thoughts bearing down on him.

When they reached the supper hall, the long wooden table was already filled with the clan members, the smell of roasted meat and fresh bread thick in the air. Hunter’s stomach growled, but it was the lack of someone’s presence that caught his attention.

His eyes flicked over the room, searching, but Cassandra was nowhere to be seen. His frustration surged once again, his brow furrowing deeply.

“Where is she?” he muttered to himself, his hands clenching into fists. He felt his jaw tighten as the thought that she might be avoiding him entirely took root, the fear growing like a dark shadow in his chest. He turned to Daniel, his eyes sharp. “She’s nae here. She’s still avoidin’ me.”

Daniel, who had taken a seat and was now stuffing his face with bread, glanced up at Hunter with a raised brow. “Och, ye sound like a man ready to throw his sword at the sky,” he remarked, though his tone held a note of amusement. “Maybe she’s takin’ time for herself. As the healer she works hard.”

Hunter felt his frustration boil over, and he clenched his fists tighter. “It’s nae that simple. She’s been distant, and I cannae stand it,” he growled. “She doesnae even want to eat with me, the Laird that has her here.” His voice lowered, heavy with the frustration he couldn’t hold back.

Daniel sighed and looked at him, his expression softening. “Maybe ye shouldnae be so quick to assume the worst, aye? Ye’re both headstrong, and ye daenae communicate like ye should.” He paused for a moment, then added with a hint of teasing, “She’s nae gone yet, Hunter, and she might be thinkin’ the same things ye

are. Ye cannae live in silence forever.”

Hunter shook his head, his chest tight with the weight of his thoughts. He turned away from Daniel and walked to the side of the hall, seeking a moment of solitude. It wasn't long before his cousin, Jessica, caught sight of him standing apart from the group, looking more disheartened than he cared to admit. She walked over to him, her face soft with concern.

“Ye've been quieter than usual, Hunter,” she said gently, her voice filled with a warm Scottish lilt. “What's eatin' at ye?”

Hunter met her gaze, and for a moment, he hesitated. He didn't want to burden her with his thoughts, but the frustration had built too much. “It's Cassandra,” he said, his voice strained. “She's avoidin' me. I daenae ken what I've done wrong.”

Jessica's brow furrowed, and she looked around the hall, her eyes scanning the faces of those gathered. “Ach, maybe ye're readin' too much into it. Cassandra's been through a lot, and ye ken that. She may need time to think, or maybe she's worried about the same things ye are.” Her voice softened. “Ye cannae expect her to work to the bone and be available.”

Hunter sighed, rubbing the back of his neck as he glanced around the room.

Jessica took a deep breath and placed a hand on his arm, her touch firm but comforting. “Ye're a stubborn fool if ye let her slip away without tryin'.”

Hunter's heart tightened as her words sank in. Jessica was right, of course. He had always been too proud, too afraid, but his heart wouldn't let him stay silent forever.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Cassandra lay in bed, tossing and turning beneath the heavy woolen blankets, the cool night air doing little to ease her restless thoughts. She had been in bed for what seemed like hours, the silence of the castle pressing in on her, yet sleep refused to claim her.

Her mind replayed the scene from earlier in the corridor—Hunter's gaze locking onto her. Then she remembered the warmth of his arms around her, the kiss that had left her breathless.

Embarrassment burned through her as she remembered how she had fled from him, unable to meet his eyes.

She let out a frustrated sigh, pushing the blankets off her and swinging her legs over the side of the bed. The cool stone floor of the castle sent a shiver up her spine as she stood, still in her night shift chemise, and padded softly across the room.

She couldn't stay in bed any longer; the thoughts of Hunter and their kiss were too overwhelming. With a muttered curse under her breath, she put on her day dress and made her way to the castle kitchen, hoping some sweets Jessica made would distract her from the whirlwind of desire that had taken hold of her.

"Oh, Mistress Cassandra, I'm... I dinnae ken that..." Heather a young servant girl said with a mouthful.

Cassandra saw that the girl was panicked. Her shoulders went rigid and she stopped

chewing with her eyes wide.

Cassandra restrained a smile. "It's alright, lass. I willnae tell on ye. Ye work hard and deserve a good treat now and then."

"Thank ye, Mistress. I am sorry. I got caught in me work and missed supper ye see and -"

Cassandra put up her hand. "Nay need to explain." Then Cassandra went about scouring the kitchen for leftover food from supper and made the girl a tray.

"Here, eat and be calm," she said.

"Oh, thank ye, Mistress," Heather said.

Cassandra watched the young girl and realized she couldn't be more than fifteen years of age, yet the weariness of being a castle servant weighed on the girl already.

Once Heather was finished, she stood. "Thank ye so much. If ye need any help in the healin' hall or yer workshop please call upon me."

"I shall do that. Now daenae tell the others of this, 'tis our secret," Cassandra said.

"Understood, Mistress," Heather said. With a curtsy she left the kitchen.

Cassandra stayed behind and got rid of the evidence by washing the bowls and plates used.

Then she rummaged through the shelves, her fingers brushing over jars of preserves and biscuits, until she found what she was looking for—a small tin of honeyed cakes that Jessica told her she had put aside for her sweet tooth.

She grabbed one, breaking off a piece and popping it into her mouth, savoring the sweet, rich taste. As she chewed, her mind wandered back to Hunter—how he had held her, how his kiss had shaken her to her core. She flushed red just thinking about it, the warmth of his touch still fresh on her skin.

Just as she was about to take another bite, the kitchen door creaked open, and Cassandra froze, the sweet stuck halfway to her lips. She turned slowly, her heart skipping a beat as she saw Hunter standing in the doorway, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

He leaned against the doorframe, his eyes twinkling with amusement. Cassandra felt a rush of heat flood her cheeks as she lowered the cake, suddenly self-conscious of how she must look—standing in the kitchen, caught red-handed eating sweets in the middle of the night.

“Well, now, what’s this?” Hunter’s voice was low and teasing, his brogue thick with amusement. “Caught ye in the act, did I? Ye look like a deer frozen in the woods.” He pushed off the doorframe and stepped into the kitchen, his presence filling the space.

Cassandra blinked, still caught in the rush of emotions that surged through her at the sight of him. Her heart thudded in her chest, and her tongue felt thick in her mouth.

“Ye startled me,” she muttered, trying to recover some semblance of composure, though she could feel the heat of her blush spreading from her neck to her cheeks. She cleared her throat and wiped her hands on her dress, avoiding his gaze. “I simply needed a treat.”

“I can see that. So did I,” he said. Though the way he said it with his eyes roving over her made her think that his treat was not a honey cake.

“What are ye doin’ here, Hunter?” she asked.

“I could ask ye the same thing, cause I daenae believe this is just about a honey cake” Hunter replied, his voice smooth with that playful edge that sent a shiver down her spine. He stepped closer, his eyes never leaving hers, and she could feel the weight of his gaze as he took in the sight of her with her hair down. “Couldnae sleep, could ye?”

“Could say the same for ye,” Cassandra replied, though it came out more as a question than a statement. She glanced down at the cake in her hand, suddenly feeling self-conscious again. “I was... lookin’ for somethin’ sweet to occupy me mind. And now, it seems, ye’ve caught me.”

Hunter’s smirk widened, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “Aye, well, I cannae say I’m surprised. Ye seem like a lass with a sweet tooth.” He leaned in a little closer, his breath warm against her skin, and Cassandra’s breath hitched, her heart racing. “But I’ll admit, I’m more amused by the way ye froze with that cake in yer hand.”

Cassandra’s flush deepened, and she forced herself to meet his gaze, trying to steady her breathing. “Aye, well, it’s nae every day a man walks into the kitchen in the middle of the night and catches me mid-bite.”

She paused, glancing down at the half-eaten cake in her hand before meeting his eyes again. “What do ye think? Should I just finish it before ye say somethin’ else to make me even more embarrassed?”

“Aye, ye should, lass. But I’d much rather ye share it with me.” His smirk softened into something more genuine, and he reached for her hand holding the cake. “I’ve a bit of a sweet tooth meself, ye ken.”

Then he slowly led her hand to feeding him the cake. He took a small bite. She gulped down the lump in her throat as he did this in the most sensual manner she could imagine.

"Ye always seemed too serious for sweets," she said.

"Nay, I have a taste for anythin' sweet," he said, his voice low and filled with lust. "Besides, ye were clearly enjoyin' it. I thought I'd join ye."

Cassandra couldn't stop the pink that flushed her face as she sat down, putting distance between them.

"Aye, well, I suppose I did enjoy it a little." She leaned back in her chair, her gaze meeting his. "And now I'm satisfied."

Hunter raised an eyebrow, leaning forward slightly, his gaze intense. "And are ye truly satisfied, lass?" he asked, his voice low, laced with an unspoken challenge.

Cassandra bit her lip, a teasing glint in her eyes as she picked up another cake. "Perhaps one more bite," she said, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

She watched as his expression shifted, a mixture of surprise and pleasure crossing his face.

Hunter sat in a chair across from her, a thoughtful expression on his face, and then his smirk returned. "Well then, I suppose I should join ye?" he said with a wink, his voice smooth and full of promise.

Cassandra's heart fluttered in her chest, and for the first time in days, she felt at ease—at least for a moment.

"Ye're still wearin' the same dress," he remarked, his tone both bemused and slightly reproachful.

Cassandra froze, the directness of his gaze made her stomach flip, and she quickly

turned her attention to the table, hoping to hide the flush creeping up her neck.

"Aye, well," Cassandra began, trying to keep her voice steady, "I dinnae think I'd be gone this long from McAllister Castle. I packed a few dresses, and I've worn them all." Her words felt rushed, almost defensive, as if she could explain her situation away with a simple excuse. She felt his eyes on her, and the heat of his scrutiny made her even more uncomfortable, making the soft fabric of her dress feel even more suffocating.

Hunter, ever the stubborn one, crossed his arms and let out a low grunt. "Ye daenae need to explain yerself, lass," he muttered, eyeing the dress again. "I'll take ye to the seamstress in the village for new dresses tomorrow, then."

His voice was firm, as if the matter was settled already, and Cassandra was left with no room for argument. His words had an edge to them that she couldn't ignore, but they also carried an unexpected weight—a weight she wasn't sure she was ready for.

Cassandra felt her pulse quicken at the offer, her thoughts racing. She opened her mouth to protest, but the words caught in her throat. "I—I daenae need new dresses," she said quickly, trying to downplay the situation. "I'm fine with what I have," she added, even though she wasn't sure that was true.

The thought of spending an entire day with him, picking out dresses, made her feel strangely vulnerable. The idea of being that close to him, with no escape, made her chest tighten.

But Hunter didn't seem to care for her protests. He looked at her with that same determined expression, as if his mind was already made up. "Aye, ye do," he grumbled, waving a hand dismissively. "Ye'll be ready early tomorrow mornin'. We leave tomorrow" he said, his voice brokering no argument.

Before she could muster another word, Hunter turned on his heel and made his way toward the door, leaving her standing there in the kitchen, her heart pounding in her chest. The sudden silence that followed his departure felt oppressive. She stood still for a moment, trying to steady her breathing. His words echoed in her mind—"ready early midmornin'." The thought of spending the entire day with him, trapped in the close confines of a village trip, made her stomach flutter with a strange mix of excitement and dread.

Cassandra took a deep breath and pressed a hand to her forehead. What was it about him that made her feel so unnerved?

She couldn't deny it anymore; she desired him. And that desire, that need to be near him, was something she couldn't ignore, but also something that terrified her.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:00 pm

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Take care of Elena, daenae take yer eyes off her," Hunter said to Jessica.

"Aye. I plan to sit by her side. Daenae worry, take yer time on this very important village trip," Jessica teased.

"She is a guest of Clan McDougal and should be treated well, after all she's done," Hunter said.

"Are ye tryin' to convince me or yerself?" Jessica winked and walked out of the courtyard.

Hunter groaned in annoyance. The morning air was crisp as he waited in the castle courtyard, his boots scraping the stone as he shifted his weight from foot to foot.

A few moments later, Cassandra appeared, her figure framed by the grand entrance of the castle. She was dressed in a simple green riding dress, her hair braided neatly down her back. When she spotted Hunter, she gave him a wary smile, but he couldn't help noticing the slight flush on her cheeks.

"Good mornin', Gilmour," she greeted him, her voice laced with a hint of tension. "I will ride on me own horse, so ye need nae trouble yerself."

Hunter raised an eyebrow, the reins of a sturdy saddle horse firmly in his grasp. He moved toward her, his boots thudding softly on the ground.

“Aye, ye do, lass, this one’s for ye,” he said, his voice steady. "That horse over there is mine."

Cassandra’s eyes widened in surprise, and her cheeks turned an even deeper shade of red. She crossed her arms, clearly frustrated. “Ye’ve done that on purpose, haven’t ye?” she accused, her voice slightly breathless with indignation. “Trickery cause ye ken I’d fall for yer playin’”

Hunter smirked, an amused glint dancing in his eyes. “Maybe I did, lass,” he said with a teasing shrug. “But it’s me castle, me clan, and me right to do so. Now, daenae make a fuss.”

She muttered something under her breath, but he caught the slightest curve of her lips as she tried to hide a smile. Hunter couldn’t help but feel a rush of warmth at the sight of her trying to hide her amusement. He handed her the reins with a flourish and offered her a hand to help her mount. “Come on now, lass. Daenae be shy.”

His gaze met hers, and for a second, the world around them seemed to fall away. He took her hand, his grip warm and firm as she climbed into the saddle.

“Ye always make things so difficult, Hunter,” she muttered, though her words lacked any real bite. “I can hardly believe ye sometimes.”

Hunter smirked, watching her settle onto the saddle. He mounted his own horse, giving her a sideways glance.

“Aye, I make things difficult, but ye’ll thank me in the end. I’ve got a knack for what’s best for ye, lass.”

She rolled her eyes, but there was a spark of something in her gaze that Hunter couldn’t quite place.

“If yer thinkin’ ye can boss me around like ye do yer clan, ye’ve another thing comin’.” Her voice was playful but laced with challenge. “I’ve got a mind of me own.”

“I ken, lass,” Hunter replied, his voice low and filled with an unspoken promise and a memory of what she was like when they first met. He was amused that she was playing on that memory now.

“But sometimes, yer mind needs guidin’. Ye’ll see.” He gave a small nod, urging his horse forward. “Now, let’s be off. We’ve a village to visit, and I’ve nay intention of lettin’ ye miss a thing.”

As they rode out of the castle grounds, the air seemed to hum with the unspoken tension between them. He watched as Cassandra rode beside him, her posture stiff at first, but gradually relaxing as the horse’s gait grew steady.

The distance between them was still too close for comfort, yet it felt like a long stretch of untapped possibilities. Every time she glanced over at him, Hunter caught the faintest flicker of curiosity in her eyes, as if she was trying to figure him out—and he found he liked it.

“I’ll admit,” Cassandra said after a few moments, breaking the silence, “the castle is grand, but I do enjoy a proper village. What do ye plan to do with me once we’re there, then?”

Hunter smiled to himself, his eyes focused ahead. “Well, first, we’ll find ye some dresses,” he teased, watching as she huffed and swatted at the air in mock protest. “Then, we’ll have some food, and if ye’re lucky, I might show ye a few of me favorite places.”

Cassandra tilted her head, a wry smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “And what

places might those be? Ye're nae takin' me to any taverns, are ye?" Her voice was light, but there was a glint of amusement in her eyes. "I've nay interest in drinkin' with rowdy folk."

"Aye, ye need nae worry, lass. Nay taverns. But ye may find a few surprises along the way," he said, his voice dropping to a low, teasing murmur. He stole a glance at her, watching the way her eyes flicked toward him in curiosity. "Now, what do ye say? Shall we make a day of it?"

She didn't reply immediately, but her lips curved upwards, her cheeks still flushed from their earlier exchange. "I'll hold ye to that promise, Hunter," she said, her tone light but with a hint of challenge. "Just daenae expect me to make things easy for ye."

"I wouldnae dream of it, lass," Hunter replied, his smirk widening as they continued their ride toward the village.

There was no mistaking the chemistry between them now, a steady undercurrent that both excited and unnerved him. But for the moment, all he could do was enjoy the ride—and the company.

The village lay nestled between rolling hills, its thatched-roof cottages and stone buildings standing firm against the winds that swept down from the Highlands. Smoke curled from chimneys, filling the crisp air with the scent of peat and fresh-baked bread.

Children ran barefoot through the narrow dirt paths, while merchants called out their wares from wooden stalls set up along the main road. The hum of daily life was steady yet peaceful.

Hunter pulled his horse to a stop near a modest stone seamstress shop, its wooden sign swinging gently in the breeze. He dismounted first, turning to offer Cassandra

his hand, but she ignored it and slid off her saddle herself. He smirked, watching her straighten her skirts with a stubborn flick of her wrist, her chin lifted high.

"Always so determined to do things yer own way, eh, lass?" Hunter teased as she brushed past him toward the shop.

Cassandra shot him a pointed look, her eyes flashing. "I daenae need help dismountin' a horse, Hunter," she retorted. "I've been ridin' since I was a wee lass."

"Aye, but ye could stand to let someone take care of ye every now and then, since ye take care of others with nay thought to yerself" he said.

He watched as she stopped in her tracks at his words, then averted her gaze to the ground as she entered the shop.

The seamstress, a plump woman with gray-streaked hair, looked up from her work with a warm smile. She wiped her hands on her apron before stepping forward, her gaze sweeping over Cassandra with an appraising eye.

"Och, now this is a fine lass ye've brought me, Laird McDougal," she said. "What can I do for ye?"

Hunter gestured toward Cassandra. "She needs new dresses," he said simply.

Cassandra stiffened beside him. "I daenae need much, just one or two will do," she said quickly. "I dinnae expect to be away from home so long."

The seamstress hummed in thought before pulling out her measuring ribbon. "Well, best get yer measurements, lass," she said, waving Cassandra toward a small wooden stool. "Stand still now."

Cassandra sighed but obeyed, holding her arms out as the seamstress wrapped the ribbon around her waist.

Hunter watched, arms crossed, as the woman rattled off numbers and jotted them down. His gaze lingered longer than necessary on the curve of Cassandra's waist, and when she glanced at him, her cheeks flushed deep pink.

When the seamstress finished, Hunter stepped forward. "I'll need several dresses made," he said. "Sturdy ones for everyday wear—and one elegant enough for occasions at the castle."

Cassandra's head snapped toward him. "Hunter, I daenae need?—"

He silenced her with a look. "Ye'll have them, lass. Nay arguments."

She turned to the seamstress instead. "How much will it cost?"

The seamstress opened her mouth, but Hunter cut her off before she could respond. "Charge it to the castle credit," he said smoothly.

Cassandra spun to face him fully, hands planted on her hips. "I can pay for me own dresses," she insisted, her voice tinged with frustration. "Ye've nay need to be spendin' yer coin on me."

Hunter's jaw tightened as he stepped closer, his voice lowering. "Ye are under me clan's protection, Cassandra," he said firmly. "As long as ye serve as our healer, ye'll want for nothin'. I take care of me own."

Cassandra opened her mouth as if to argue, after a long pause, she exhaled in defeat. "Fine," she muttered.

Hunter smirked, satisfied. "That's more like it, lass."

The seamstress clapped her hands together. "I'll send them to the castle when they're ready, Laird," she said cheerfully. "I'll make sure they fit her like a dream."

Cassandra shot him one last glare before turning back to the seamstress. "Thank ye," she said with a small nod, though her voice still carried a hint of reluctance.

Hunter leaned in slightly, lowering his voice just for her. "See, that wasnae so hard, was it?"

She huffed, crossing her arms. "Ye are impossible, Gilmour."

He chuckled, leading her back toward the door. "Aye, but ye like me anyway, daenae ye?"

She scoffed but said nothing, her blush giving her away. Hunter grinned as they stepped out into the village once more, pleased with himself—and with the way Cassandra was slowly, unwillingly, dropping her guard.

Hunter led Cassandra out of the seamstress's cottage, the crisp Highland air brushing against his skin as they stepped onto the dirt path. The village bustled around them, but he remained focused on Cassandra, watching her adjust the folds of her gown.

She still seemed flustered from their conversation inside, her lips pressed into a stubborn line. He smirked to himself, enjoying how she bristled whenever he asserted himself.

Just as he was about to speak, movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention. A man in a hooded cloak approached, his posture tense, his strides purposeful. Instinct stirred in Hunter's gut, sharpening his senses as the man drew

nearer. Before Hunter could react, the stranger lunged, a glint of steel flashing beneath the folds of his cloak.

Cassandra gasped, her scream piercing the air as the man swung his blade toward Hunter's side. Hunter sidestepped with practiced ease, grabbing the attacker's wrist and twisting it sharply. The dagger clattered to the ground, and with a swift movement, Hunter yanked the man forward and slammed him against the wooden post of a nearby stall.

Villagers turned in alarm, whispers rippling through the crowd as Hunter ripped back the hood, revealing the face of his assailant.

Hunter's breath caught as recognition hit him like a hammer. "Michael?" he barked, his grip tightening. "What in God's name are ye doin'?"

Michael Couper, his late wife's father, glared at him with wild, grief-stricken eyes. "Damn ye, Hunter," he spat. "Ye should be dead instead of me precious Margaret!"

Cassandra took a hesitant step forward, her face pale. "Who is he?" she asked, her voice wavering.

Michael's gaze snapped to her, his expression twisted with sorrow and fury. "Lass, ye must run," he said, his voice hoarse. "Get away from this accursed family, lest ye end up like me daughter—buried before her time!"

Cassandra's eyes darted to Hunter, confusion and unease flickering across her face. Hunter felt the sting of Michael's words, but he refused to loosen his grip. "Enough of this madness," he growled. "Attackin' me in broad daylight? What were ye thinkin', old man?"

Michael let out a humorless laugh, his shoulders shaking with barely restrained fury.

"What was I thinkin'?" he echoed. "I was thinkin' how justice has yet to be served for me daughter's death. First yer own parents, and then me daughter—who will be next, Hunter? Is this poor lass yer next victim?"

Hunter's jaw clenched, his temper flaring. "Watch yer tongue, Michael," he warned, his voice low and dangerous. "Ye're close to committin' treason."

Michael sneered. "Aye? And what will ye do, Laird McDougal? Kill me, like ye did the others?"

Hunter's grip nearly crushed the fabric of Michael's cloak. The air between them crackled with tension, the past clawing at Hunter with bitter fingers. He had spent years fighting against the rumors that clung to him like a curse, but Michael's accusations reopened wounds he thought had long scarred over.

Michael turned his sharp gaze back to Cassandra. "Daenae let his charm fool ye, lass," he warned. "He's got blood on his hands, more than ye ken."

Cassandra swallowed hard, her brows knitting together. "I—I daenae understand," she stammered. "Why would ye say such things?"

Michael shook his head, his expression crumbling into sorrow. "Because I lost me daughter to him," he said, his voice raw. "And I cannae bear to see another innocent woman suffer the same fate."

Hunter shoved Michael back, his patience snapping. "Leave," he ordered, his voice steel. "Before I forget that once upon a time, I respected ye."

Michael held Hunter's gaze for a long, tense moment before stepping back. "Ye can try to bury the past, McDougal," he said. "But the dead have long memories."

Then, without another word, he turned and disappeared into the crowd, his cloak billowing behind him.

Hunter stood rigid, his jaw locked, his heart pounding in his chest. The ghosts of his past had returned, and now, Cassandra had been dragged into the storm. He looked at her, Cassandra let out a shaky breath, her hands curled into fists at her sides.

Hunter clenched his fists as he watched Michael Couper disappear down the village road. The weight of Cassandra's gaze pressed on him, and he knew the question before she even spoke it.

"Who was that man?" she asked, her voice steady but laced with unease.

Hunter exhaled sharply and turned to face her. "Michael Couper—me former faither-in-law."

Cassandra's brow furrowed. "Former?"

"Aye," Hunter said, jaw tightening. "He believes I killed his daughter, Margaret. I swear to ye, Cassandra, 'tis nae the truth."

"Then what is the truth, Hunter?" she asked.

Hunter couldn't bear the look of disappointment and mistrust in her eyes as she questioned him. He turned on his heel and walked back toward his horses, but he could hear her steps as she followed.

"Daenae walk away from me Hunter," she said. "Ye owe the truth to me."

"Ye goin' to believe that man's word that I'm a murderer, Cassandra? That I would take the life of me own bairn's maither?" his face turned dark as he looked down at

her.

"Nay, I daenae believe that but somethin' happened and I willnae go another step with ye if ye daenae tell me," she said.

He watched as her chest heaved up and down. The glassy look in her eyes made his guard fall. A sigh left his lips.

"In truth, she was unfaithful, and when the church annulled our marriage, she begged me nae to tell anyone the real reason. She dinnae want her faither to ken. She begged. So after, I pretended she's dead and she lives a life of secret elsewhere."

Cassandra's lips parted slightly, surprise flickering in her eyes. "So, he thinks she's dead?"

Hunter gave a curt nod. "Aye. It was easier that way."

Silence stretched between them for a moment, the hum of village life a distant murmur.

"That is a heavy burden to carry," she said softly. "I ken what it is to be humiliated like that."

Hunter's gaze snapped to hers, curiosity flickering beneath his dark mood. "Ye do?"

Cassandra swallowed and looked away for a brief moment before meeting his eyes again. "Aye. I was once betrothed... until I caught him with another woman."

Hunter's expression darkened. "The bastard."

She let out a small, bitter chuckle. "I left the very next day to tend to Laird Elias

McAllister's men during the war. It was easier to face the battlefield than me own disgrace."

Hunter shook his head. "The man was an idiot, lass."

She forced a small laugh, "Well, I cannae say I was pleased, but in the end, it brought me here."

Hunter's gaze lingered on her for a moment longer before he grunted and turned toward their horses. "Come on, then. Best we head back before I the man returns. I'm sorry I willnae be able to show ye me favorite places. 'Tis too dangerous now."

"I understand. I best be back to the patients as well," she said.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:00 pm

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

She mounted her horse as Hunter did the same, and soon, they were riding side by side, the village fading into the distance.

The road back to Castle McDougal stretched before them, winding through rolling hills and dense patches of trees. The air was crisp, carrying the scent of pine and damp earth, and the rhythmic sound of hooves against the dirt path filled the silence between them.

After a while, Cassandra stole a glance at Hunter. His expression remained unreadable, but there was a tension in his posture that had not yet faded.

“Does it bother ye?” she asked.

He didn’t look at her. “What?”

“That he thinks ye a murderer.”

Hunter scoffed, gripping the reins tighter. “I daenae care what the old fool thinks. He’s blind with grief, and nay amount of truth will change that.”

Cassandra studied him carefully, sensing the bitterness beneath his words. “Still, it must be difficult, to ken someone holds such hatred for ye.”

Hunter let out a rough sigh. “I’ve long since stopped carin’ about what people say, lass. I ken the truth and that’s all that matters.”

Cassandra nodded, though she wasn't sure she believed him. She understood all too well the weight of unjust rumors.

Cassandra rode beside Hunter in silence, the encounter with Michael still haunted her, his words circling in her mind like a storm she could not quiet.

He had spoken of his daughter as though she were gone, yet Cassandra knew the truth—she lived. And if she lived, that meant she had chosen to stay away, to leave behind her child and her past with Hunter.

The thought unsettled her, stirring emotions she did not fully understand.

What kind of woman abandons her own daughter? And what kind of man carries such a burden without speakin' of it?

She dared a glance at Hunter, his strong profile set in a grim line, his gaze fixed on the road ahead.

“What are ye thinkin' about, lass?” Hunter's voice cut through her thoughts, rough yet tinged with something softer.

Cassandra stiffened, not expecting him to notice her distraction. Guilt pricked at her as she quickly searched for an answer that would not lead to more questions.

“The ill back at the castle,” she said, her voice steadier than she felt. “I worry for them, wonder if they're improvin' as they should.”

Hunter turned his head slightly, his sharp eyes studying her. “They are,” he said after a pause. “Because of ye. Ye're a miracle worker, Cassandra. They're gettin' stronger every day.”

She shifted in her saddle, feeling the weight of her dishonesty pressing against her ribs. It was not entirely a lie—she did worry for her patients—but it was not what had been consuming her thoughts.

“I thank ye. That is good to hear,” she said, forcing a small smile.

Hunter scoffed lightly. “Ye daenae need to pretend, ye ken. I can see when somethin’s gnawin’ at ye.”

Cassandra’s grip tightened on the reins. He was too perceptive, too unrelenting. She could not tell him the truth, could not admit that she had been thinking of his past, of the woman who had left him and the child who still had a mother somewhere in the world.

“I suppose I just feel... responsible,” she said finally. “For the people at the castle. If I can help them, I must.”

Hunter gave a slow nod, his gaze returning to the road ahead. “Aye, I ken that feelin’ well. But daenae carry it alone, lass. The clan is stronger because of ye, but even the strongest need rest.”

His words settled in her chest, warm and grounding. She had spent so much of her life tending to others, rarely stopping to consider herself. “I only do what I can,” she murmured.

Hunter glanced at her again, something unreadable in his expression. “And what ye can do is more than most. Daenae doubt that.”

Cassandra felt heat rise to her cheeks, a strange mixture of gratitude and unease twisting inside her. She looked away, focusing on the rolling hills stretching toward the horizon. “Thank ye, Hunter.”

As they arrived at the castle, Cassandra swung her leg over the saddle and dismounted, her boots hitting the ground with a soft thud. Hunter did the same, his movements fluid and effortless. She adjusted her skirts, forcing herself to remember why she was here, why she could not let her thoughts drift toward him.

“I should get back to me work,” she said, though her voice lacked conviction.

Hunter nodded but did not move. “Aye, and I’ve clan matters to tend to,” he said, his voice low.

Yet neither of them stepped away. The space between them felt charged, an invisible force keeping them rooted in place.

Cassandra’s pulse quickened as she met his gaze, dark and unreadable. The memory of his lips on hers days ago sent a shiver down her spine, and she scolded herself for the longing stirring within her.

He had a wife, a woman who still walked this earth, no matter how far she was from him or their separation. And yet, she could not bring herself to step away, to break the moment before it consumed her.

Hunter took a step forward, then another, his presence overwhelming. Cassandra held her breath, unsure if she wanted to flee or close the space between them. Her heart pounded as he reached toward her, his fingers brushing a loose strand of her hair. The world around them seemed to still, and for one foolish moment, she thought he might kiss her again.

Then, with a slight tilt of his head, he plucked something from her hair and held it up.

“Ye must’ve picked this up on the ride,” he said, revealing the tiny bug between his fingers.

Cassandra's face burned as mortification flooded her. She had been standing there, breathless, thinking he was about to kiss her—only for him to remove an insect from her hair.

“Ah... thank ye,” she muttered, her voice small.

Hunter smirked, clearly amused by her reaction. “Daenae look so troubled, lass. The little creature fancied ye, that’s all.”

Cassandra let out an exasperated breath, brushing her hands down her skirts to busy herself.

“Well, I suppose I should go inside,” she said quickly, eager to escape before she embarrassed herself further.

Hunter stepped back, though his gaze lingered on her for a moment longer. “Aye, best get to it then,” he said, his voice softer than before.

Without another word, Cassandra turned and hurried inside, her face still burning. She had been a fool to stand there, to let herself get lost in the pull of him. Whatever she felt for Hunter McDougal, she needed to bury it before it destroyed her.

Hunter sat at the head of the long wooden table, his gaze steady as he listened to the murmurs of the council. The fire crackled in the grand hearth, casting flickering shadows across the stone walls of the great hall.

Around him sat his most trusted men—advisors, warriors, and elders who had stood by his side through countless battles and trials. Their expressions were mostly stern, but there was an unmistakable ease among them tonight, a rare moment of contentment.

“The sick are recoverin’ well,” said one of the elders, his grizzled beard streaked with white. “It seems the healer ye brought in was the very thing we needed. She’s worked miracles, Laird McDougal.”

“Aye,” another man added with a nod. “I’ve seen men near death on their feet again, eatin’ and speakin’ like they were never ill. ‘Tis nay small feat. The lass is skilled, that much is clear.”

Hunter leaned back in his chair, his fingers drumming lightly against the table’s surface.

“She is,” he admitted. “I ken she had talent, but even I dinnae expect such a swift recovery for so many. She’s been tireless in her efforts.”

"A small penchant for her work then. I believe we can part with some coin, furs and the like. We daenae want McAllister to think us ungrateful," the elder said.

"Aye, ‘tis something I agree with. We shall send her back with a bounty when she does depart us," the other elder said.

There were murmurs of agreement around the table, a few of the men exchanging approving glances.

“‘Tis a shame she’s only on loan from Castle McAllister,” one of the younger council members remarked, shaking his head. “Would be a great thing if we could keep her here.”

Hunter’s jaw tightened, though he forced his expression to remain neutral. The thought of Cassandra leaving twisted something deep in his chest, a discomfort he did not care to examine too closely. She had become a part of life at Castle McDougal, her presence as familiar as the stone walls that surrounded them.

“Aye,” said another elder, nodding sagely. “When our own healer recovers, it would be wise to have Cassandra teach him her ways before she departs. Would be a waste to let all that knowledge leave with her.”

Hunter swallowed hard, the lump in his throat making it difficult to respond. The mere mention of Cassandra leaving sent an unexpected wave of unease through him. He had always known she was meant to return to McAllister lands, but the idea of watching her ride away, of losing her presence in the castle, felt more intolerable than he cared to admit.

“She’s made a place for herself here,” Hunter said finally, his voice measured. “I will speak to her about sharin’ her methods with our healer when he recovers.”

“Aye,” the elder said, satisfied. “Tis a good plan. We’d be fools to let such knowledge slip through our fingers.”

Hunter nodded, but his thoughts remained troubled. He had always believed himself to be a man of logic, of duty before all else. But the more time he spent with Cassandra, the more he found himself questioning what he truly wanted.

One of the councilmen, a man named Fergus, gave Hunter a knowing look. “Ye seem troubled, Laird. Is there somethin’ on yer mind?”

Hunter exhaled slowly. “Nothin’ of concern,” he lied. “Only considerin’ the best course of action for the clan.”

Fergus smirked but said nothing more. The meeting continued, with talk shifting to other matters—land disputes, upcoming trade agreements, and the approaching winter preparations. But no matter how many topics were discussed, Hunter’s mind kept drifting back to Cassandra.

The thought of her leaving left an ache in his chest he did not understand, nor did he want to. Yet, every day it became harder to ignore.

Later that night, Hunter sat in his dimly lit bedchamber, his hands clenched into fists on the armrests of his chair. The fire burned low in the hearth, casting flickering light across the stone walls.

His thoughts swirled like a storm, refusing to settle long enough for him to find peace. The attack from Michael had him thinking about his ex-wife, Margaret. He knew he had made a mistake listening to her and granting her wish to be exiled into secrecy.

That grave mistake meant that Elena did not have her mother and he feared what that was doing to the wee lass.

With a frustrated sigh, he pushed himself up and strode toward the whiskey decanter on the table—only to find it empty.

Scowling, he grabbed the crystal bottle and shook it as if willing it to fill itself. When it remained stubbornly dry, he muttered a curse under his breath. The day had been long, filled with more tension than he cared to admit, and now he couldn't even enjoy a drink to ease his mind. Determined, he left his chambers and made his way toward the kitchens, his bare feet silent against the stone floors.

When he entered the kitchen, the scent of warm bread and spices greeted him. Jessica stood near the large hearth, her sleeves rolled up and her hands dusted with flour. She glanced up as he walked in, arching an amused brow at his appearance.

“Och, cousin, ye look as if ye lost a battle. What brings ye creepin’ about at this hour?”

Hunter crossed his arms over his chest, leveling her with a stern look. “I could ask ye the same, lass. Ye should be abed, nae bakin’ in the dead of night.”

Jessica smirked as she kneaded a lump of dough. “And ye should be restin’ in yer fine bedchambers instead of skulkin’ about lookin’ for whiskey.”

Hunter exhaled sharply, rubbing a hand over his face. “Aye, well, seems we both have our reasons for bein’ wakeful.” His voice lost its usual edge, settling into something weary.

Jessica glanced at him, her expression softening. “What troubles ye, then? Ye look as though ye carry the weight of the whole clan on yer shoulders.”

He hesitated, then sighed, leaning against the wooden counter. “It’s me daughter, Elena.”

Jessica wiped her hands on her apron and turned to face him fully. “What about the lass? She seems well enough.”

Hunter ran a hand through his hair, frustration etched into his features.

“She’s growin’ up without a maither. I see it in her eyes, Jess. She watches the other children cling to their maithers, and I can feel her wantin’ the same.”

Jessica folded her arms, her expression unreadable. “And what have ye done about it?”

Hunter tensed at her question. “What can I do? I cannae be a maither to her.”

Jessica huffed, shaking her head. “Ye say that, but have ye even tried? The lass doesnae need a maither—she needs ye. She needs to ken she’s loved, that she’s safe,

that ye are more than just her laird, but her faither.”

Hunter let her words sink in, the weight of them settling uncomfortably in his chest. He had done his duty, made sure Elena had everything she needed, but had he truly been there for her?

He thought back to the times she had reached for his hand, the moments she had looked up at him with hopeful eyes, only for him to push her toward the maids or tutors. Shame prickled at his skin.

Jessica’s voice softened. “Ye can be both maither and faither to her, Hunter. But that choice is yers to make. So far, ye’ve done nothin’ but push her away.”

Hunter swallowed hard, staring at the fire. The truth burned as much as the flames.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Cassandra moved through the healing hall with practiced grace, her hands brushing over linens and feeling foreheads as she checked on her patients. The room smelled of herbs and clean cloth, a welcome contrast to the scent of illness that had lingered only days before. The progress was undeniable—fevered brows were cooler, weary eyes a bit brighter. The worst had passed, and for that, she was grateful.

At a small table near the hearth, Daniel sat across from his cousin Elena, their heads bent over a deck of worn playing cards. Elena's tiny fingers clutched her hand of cards, her expression one of fierce concentration. By her side, Hunter's hound, Leonora, lay curled up, her great body stretched lazily across the floor. The beast's ears twitched as Cassandra passed, though the dog remained perfectly content to doze in the warmth of the fire.

"Good day, Mistress Cassandra," Elena said.

"Good day to you, Lady McDougal," Cassandra curtsied, which brought a smile to Elena.

Cassandra smiled to herself and turned her attention back to her work. She moved from bed to bed, speaking softly with each patient, checking their wounds, and offering words of encouragement. Some still bore the weariness of their illness, but most were improving, their color returning and their strength growing. It was satisfying work, and seeing them heal filled her with purpose.

As she straightened from adjusting a patient's blankets, she caught sight of Elena out

of the corner of her eye. The girl was standing just a few feet behind her, watching in silence.

Cassandra's lips parted in surprise, but she said nothing, only offering a warm smile before moving on to the next patient. When she reached the next bedside, she glanced back to find that Elena had followed her once more.

A quiet joy bloomed in Cassandra's chest. That the girl had enough strength to wander was a wonderful sign. Not too long ago, Elena had been too weak to even lift her head, and now here she was, moving about with quiet determination.

Cassandra's heart ached with tenderness as she continued her work, pretending not to notice the small shadow trailing behind her.

Leonora, ever faithful, had also taken up the role of silent follower. The great hound padded softly alongside Elena, watching her every move with keen, intelligent eyes. Cassandra suspected the dog had appointed herself the child's guardian, just as she had done with Hunter. The sight of them together, both hesitant yet determined, warmed Cassandra in a way she hadn't expected.

She crouched beside an elderly man, adjusting the bandages on his arm while murmuring soothing words. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Elena inch closer, her little hands clasped in front of her. The girl was watching her intently, studying every movement. Cassandra finished her task and turned, meeting Elena's curious gaze.

"Would ye like to help, lass?" Cassandra asked gently.

Elena's eyes widened, and she hesitated for only a moment before nodding. Leonora gave a soft huff, as if approving of this decision. Cassandra handed her small basket of clean cloths, to the girl with a smile.

“Then come,” she said. “Ye can be me little helper.”

Elena stepped forward, her small frame trembling with both excitement and uncertainty. Cassandra reached her hand out to Elena any time she needed a new cloth, and Elena handed it over with eager interest. Leonora kept at their feet, keeping a watchful eye on them both.

As they moved to the next patient, Cassandra’s heart swelled with quiet pride. Elena was healing—not just in body, but in spirit. And for the first time, Cassandra wondered if she, too, was beginning to find her place in Castle McDougal.

Cassandra turned just as Hunter entered the healing hall, his broad frame casting a shadow in the doorway. The moment Elena saw him, she went completely still, her small hands clenching at her sides. Then, without a word, she ran to him, wrapping her thin arms around his waist. Hunter stiffened for only a breath before his arms came around her, holding her close.

For a moment, Cassandra saw something unguarded in his expression—relief, maybe even tenderness. But it was gone just as quickly, replaced by a stern furrow of his brow. He gently pushed Elena back, his hands resting on her small shoulders.

“What are ye doin’ out of bed, lass?” he scolded. “Ye’ve barely got yer strength back.”

Elena looked up at him, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“I daenae want to stay in bed anymore,” she said softly. “I feel better, Faither.” Her voice wavered slightly, but she held her ground, glancing nervously at Cassandra as if hoping for support.

Cassandra’s frown deepened as she stepped forward, unable to hold her tongue.

“She’s doin’ well enough to move about,” she said, folding her arms. “Walkin’ a bit will do her more good than lyin’ in bed all day.” She caught the flicker of hesitation in Hunter’s eyes before his jaw tightened once more.

Hunter glanced between Cassandra and Elena, clearly torn. He exhaled sharply, rubbing a hand over his face.

“If I find her collapsed from exhaustion later, ye’ll regret it,” he muttered to Cassandra.

Cassandra squared her shoulders and stepped closer to Hunter, her voice firm. “It’s good for Elena to walk around if her strength is up to it. She needs to build herself back up, nae waste away in bed.”

Hunter’s eyes darkened, his jaw tightening. “That is none of yer business,” he snapped. “She’s me daughter, and I’ll decide what’s best for her.”

Cassandra lifted her chin, refusing to back down. “It is me business, Hunter, because Elena is me patient,” she shot back. “And as her healer, I’m tellin’ ye she’s better off movin’ about than bein’ confined like some invalid.”

His nostrils flared as he stepped closer, towering over her. “If ye truly cared for her well-bein’, then ye’d be more mindful of her limits instead of encouragin’ recklessness,” he growled. “Get her back into her bed where she belongs!”

Cassandra’s hands balled into fists at her sides. “Recklessness?” she scoffed. “I’d call it healin’—but ye wouldnae ken much about that, would ye? All ye see is yer own fear, and ye’re lettin’ it hold Elena back!”

Hunter’s face darkened further, but before he could retort, he turned his head toward Elena. “Back to bed, now,” he ordered, his voice sharp and final.

Elena hesitated, glancing between them with wide, uncertain eyes. But at last, she obeyed, her shoulders slumping as she turned and made her way back to her cot.

Cassandra exhaled sharply, her patience worn thin. “Fine,” she muttered, shaking her head. “If ye want to smother the lass, do it yerself. I’ve more important things to do.”

Without another word, she spun on her heel and stormed out of the hall, her heart pounding with frustration.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:00 pm

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Daniel leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. “Ye ken she was right, aye?” he said, tilting his head toward Hunter. “Ye’re bein’ a stubborn fool, brother. The lass was only doin’ what’s best for Elena.”

Hunter turned sharply, his eyes narrowing. “I’m cautious,” he growled. “Elena’s been sick for weeks. I willnae have her wakin’ tomorrow feelin’ worse because she’s been wanderin’ about when she should be restin’.”

Hunter paced the length of his chamber, his jaw clenched tight. His encounter with Cassandra still burned in his mind, her sharp words cutting deeper than he cared to admit.

He had only wanted to protect Elena, to keep her from pushing too hard too soon. But now, Daniel’s amused smirk across the room made his temper flare even more.

Daniel scoffed, shaking his head. “Ye should leave that to the healer, then. What good is it to have a woman as skilled as Cassandra here if ye refuse to listen to her?”

Hunter’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “I listen,” he muttered. “But I also ken me daughter. I ken how fragile she’s been.”

Daniel exhaled through his nose, his expression shifting from teasing to serious. “Aye, ye ken her well. But fear is cloudin’ yer judgment. Elena’s nae as fragile as ye think, and Cassandra wouldnae put her in harm’s way. She’s a healer, Hunter. She kens what she’s doin’.”

Hunter ran a hand through his hair, frustration mounting. He knew Daniel had a point, but the idea of letting go, of trusting someone else with Elena's well-being, unsettled him.

Daniel studied him for a moment before a smirk tugged at his lips. "But that's no' what's really got ye in a foul mood, is it?"

Hunter shot him a glare. "And what, pray tell, do ye think is the real issue?"

Daniel chuckled, shaking his head. "Och, ye like the lass. And it's makin' ye mad with anger tryin' to fight it."

Hunter scoffed, but his brother's words struck something deep within him. The thought of Cassandra's fiery eyes, her fierce determination, the way she stood toe-to-toe with him without a hint of fear—he cursed under his breath.

Daniel leaned forward, tapping the arm of his chair. "Go find her," he said, his voice losing its teasing edge. "Apologize. Ye're nae foolin' anyone but yerself. Ye care for the lass, and ye ken it."

Hunter let out a long breath, his fists relaxing at his sides. He hated to admit it, but Daniel was right. Without another word, he turned on his heel and left the room, determined to find Cassandra.

Hunter stood outside Cassandra's chamber door, his fists clenched at his sides. He had never been the type to apologize, but something about her made him feel the need to set things right. He exhaled sharply before knocking, the sound heavy in the quiet corridor. When the door opened, Cassandra's face was unreadable, her gaze cool as she looked at him.

"What do ye want, Hunter?" she asked, her tone clipped.

He shifted his weight, suddenly feeling like a fool. “I came to talk,” he said, his voice rougher than he intended. “I shouldnae have shouted at ye.”

She crossed her arms, unimpressed. “Aye, ye shouldnae have.”

Silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken words. Her coldness unsettled him more than her anger, and he hated how much it mattered. He had come to make peace, but now he felt unsteady, like he was standing at the edge of something dangerous. He ran a hand through his hair, exhaling through his nose.

“I believe I’m cursed,” he admitted, the words heavy as stones.

Cassandra blinked, her brows pulling together. “What?”

“I daenae want me curse to harm Elena,” he said, his voice low. “Everyone I’ve ever loved has died. It’s only a matter of time before I lose her, too.”

She let out a sharp breath, shaking her head. “Och, ye’re a bampot.”

His lips twitched despite himself. “That so?”

“Aye,” she said, stepping closer, her eyes fierce. “If ye were truly cursed, would Daniel still be alive? Would Jessica?”

Hunter clenched his jaw, his chest tightening at how easily she dismissed his fears. He had carried this belief for years, let it carve itself into his bones. But now, with her standing so close, her fire melting through his defenses, he felt something shift inside him. He didn’t know if he could believe her, but he wanted to.

“I’m nae sure if I’ll ever be convinced,” he admitted, his voice quiet.

Cassandra studied him, her gaze softer now. "Then we'll solve it with time," she said, reaching out to brush a loose strand of hair from his forehead. "And I'll help ye."

Her touch was light, but it set fire to his skin. The space between them felt smaller, the air thick with something unspoken. He could see the rise and fall of her breath, feel the warmth of her body just inches from his. If he moved even a fraction closer, he knew he would be lost.

He swallowed hard, his throat tight. "Ye should be careful offerin' help to a cursed man, lass."

Cassandra tilted her head, her lips curving slightly. "Och, I've never been one for caution when it comes to those in need. 'Tis why I'm a healer."

Hunter's breath caught, his control slipping. He wanted to kiss her, to claim her, to lose himself in her entirely. But instead, he stepped back, his heart hammering in his chest.

Hunter stared at Cassandra, his pulse roaring in his ears. Her words had been simple, but they unraveled something inside him, something he had fought to keep locked away. He wasn't sure if it was the way she looked at him, or the quiet certainty in her voice, but his restraint shattered.

Before he could stop himself, he closed the space between them and crushed his lips to hers.

He was relieved when Cassandra stiffened for only a moment before melting into him and her hands gripped the fabric of his tunic as she kissed him back, matching his urgency.

His lips rough and demanding against hers. A soft sound escaped her throat, and it

sent a jolt of fire through his veins.

“Ye kiss me like this lass, and I daenae think I can control meself,” his voice was thick with lust.

“Maybe I daenae want ye to control yerself anymore,” she whispered back.

Hunter deepened the kiss, his hands sliding to her waist, pulling her closer. The feel of her, soft and warm against him, sent his control spiraling further. He had never wanted anyone like this—like a fever that refused to break. He knew he should stop, knew this was dangerous, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Cassandra’s fingers traced up his chest before she suddenly broke the kiss, her breath ragged. She stared at him, her cheeks flushed, her eyes dark with something unspoken. The weight of what they had just done settled between them, thick and heavy.

“Hunter,” she whispered, her voice shaking, but she didn’t step away.

"Aye, lass," he replied.

"I daenae ken what's happenin' to me," she said.

"I do... it's pleasure. I mean to give ye more of it," he said.

With that he picked her up by the waist as he kissed her. Setting her down on the table's edge. His kisses moved down her neck, hungry and filled with desire.

"Ye are a bonnie lass," he groaned as his hands moved over her chest.

She moaned in response. As he kissed her lips, his hand dipped into the neckline of

her dress until his fingers found her taught nipple.

"Oh, Hunter," she whispered.

"Aye, lass?" he growled.

"Yer touch, it sets me aflame" she responded.

"And ye set me to madness," he said. With that he unlaced a few laces down her dress and pushed down her corset, releasing her milky white breasts.

"I've never seen anythin' so beautiful," he said.

He kissed down her chest until his lips rested over her breast, kissing and licking. His tongue teased her rosy nipple, while his hand gave full attention to the other.

He felt her hands move along his shoulders and down his arm, then back up again.

"I feel a need to touch every part of ye," she moaned.

"I have the same need, Cassandra," he growled.

He felt her hands greedily pull at his tunic pulling it up over his body until it rested on the floor. His eyes moved to her hands as she moved them up and down his rigid abs. The slow movement set his skin ablaze under her touch.

"Lass, yer hands are magic," he said.

"A healer's hands indeed ken how to touch," she said softly.

He inhaled a sharp breath of air as her hand moved lower and lower down his chest to

his belly. With soft circular motions she moved further and further until her fingers moved along his belt. He groaned.

Their eyes locked. He watched her bite her lower lip as she allowed her hand to go further down and rest on his hard staff.

“Careful lass, there’s nothing but the cloth of me kilt between yer hand and me,” he said.

“Aye, ‘tis how I want to keep it for now, but I couldnae keep me curiosity concealed,” she said.

He saw the glint in her eye before she gently moved her hand up and down along his thick member. His groan echoed in the room with each movement of her hand.

“That feels good. I will lose me wits,” he whispered. “Ye’ll need to stop.”

“What will ye do to stop me?” she teased.

He bent his head down to take her breast in his mouth, allowing his tongue to move gently over her skin. While his hand moved between her thighs and landed on her sweet center.

“Oh,” Cassandra moaned as she arched her back.

“Now I have yer attention, lass,” he groaned.

Hunter was delighted in her reaction as he moved his finger up and down her slit, on top of the fabric of her dress and she wiggled under him like a banshee.

He felt her fingers press into the bare skin of his shoulders as his kisses pressed

against her nipple, then the other, all while his fingers worked.

"I must taste more of ye," he murmured.

With his strong hands he lifted her skirts, pushing them up her legs until the fabric rested at her waist. He skillfully removed her underthings, layer by layer as he felt her hands on his shoulders, encouraging him.

He moved between her thighs placing soft kisses on her skin, slowly at first, then with a quicker pace. He felt Cassandra's hands move through his hair as he trailed kisses from her thighs toward her warm center.

He listened to her soft moans as his mouth moved to her sweetness and kissed and licked, teasing and pleasuring her.

"Oh, Hunter. I will lose meself," she whispered.

"'Tis what I want to happen, Cassandra," he said, his voice thick with lust.

He pressed his hands into her thighs, opening them wider to him. She followed his encouragement and placed one foot on his shoulder. This drove him to a lustful frenzy.

His tongue moved with purpose over her rosebud. Cassandra's moans grew louder and louder. He felt her fingers twist in his hair.

Under his hands, her body tremored and shook as she released into ecstasy. Hunter drank of her honey juices, relishing in the moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The next day, Cassandra could not stop thinking about what happened the day before. Though she tried to focus on her work as she ground herbs, it was not enough to keep her mind off of it.

Every time she closed her eyes, she felt Hunter's lips on her breast. She felt the memory of the tingle of release and it made her blush.

A knock at the door of her workshop tore her from her thoughts.

"Enter," she said.

Hunter entered the door with a large basket. Cassandra felt the color rise to her cheeks even more than before.

"Hunter... I..." but it was all she could say.

"I've thought about what ye said before," he said.

"And what is that?" she asked.

"About me wee bairn," he said. He opened the door wider and revealed Elena in a day dress, her hair braided, with Leonora the hound at her side.

"Mistress Cassandra, would ye be so good as to have a bit of an afternoon in the meadows with me?" Elena asked.

Cassandra turned to Hunter with wide eyes.

"I thought about what ye said, that Elena should move about. Ye are right. She needs fresh air and sunshine, nae to mend fully. Nae surrounded by the remainin' sick," he said.

Cassandra smiled.

I cannae believe I got through to him.

"It would be me honor, Lady Elena. Thank ye for the offer," Cassandra said.

With that Elena smiled, which made Cassandra's heart warm. She had come to love the little child very much.

The Scottish meadows stretched endlessly before them, a sea of emerald green speckled with wildflowers swaying in the breeze.

Rolling hills embraced the horizon, their peaks crowned with wisps of mist that clung stubbornly to the land. The scent of heather and damp earth filled the air, carried by the gentle wind that rustled through the tall grass. Birds soared overhead, their songs blending with the distant trickle of a brook winding through the valley.

Cassandra spread out a thick woolen blanket beneath a sturdy oak tree, its sprawling branches offering dappled shade from the sun.

Elena sat cross-legged beside her, eyes darting curiously between the wildflowers around them.

"Now daenae feel ashamed to rest and have lay down on the blanket if need be," Cassandra said.

"I understand, Mistress," Elena said.

Hunter, on the other hand, stood stiffly, arms crossed, as though unsure of what to do with himself.

Cassandra bit back a smile at his discomfort—he was a warrior, a laird, a man who faced battle without hesitation, yet a simple picnic with his daughter left him utterly lost.

"Come sit, Hunter," Cassandra said, patting the space beside her. "Ye look like a man who just walked into an ambush."

Hunter exhaled sharply but obeyed, lowering himself onto the blanket with all the ease of a man settling into an unfamiliar world.

He cleared his throat and glanced at Elena, who was watching him with hesitant curiosity.

Cassandra could feel the tension between them, thick and awkward, like two strangers forced into each other's company. Determined to ease the distance, she reached for a handful of flowers and began braiding them together.

"Do either of ye ken how to make a flower crown?" she asked, lifting the delicate chain of blossoms for them to see.

Elena shook her head, her curls bouncing with the motion. "Nay, I've never tried."

Hunter scoffed, folding his arms. "A flower crown? I think nae."

Cassandra gave him a pointed look. "If a laird can wield a sword, surely he can manage a few flowers."

Elena giggled at that, and Hunter huffed, though the corner of his mouth twitched as if suppressing a smile.

With a resigned sigh, he reached for a daisy, his large hands fumbling with the delicate stem. Cassandra watched in amusement as he struggled to braid the flowers together, his large fingers clumsy and unsure.

Elena leaned closer, watching her father's attempts with wide eyes. "Da, ye're terrible at this," she said with a giggle.

Hunter scowled playfully. "Watch yerself, lass, or I'll be puttin' ye to work plaitin' the horse's mane every mornin'."

Elena shrieked with laughter, shaking her head. "Nay, I take me words back! Ye're the best at makin' flower crowns."

Cassandra chuckled as she reached for Hunter's mess of tangled stems, gently guiding his hands.

"Here, let me help," she murmured, her fingers brushing against his.

The warmth of his skin sent a spark through her, but she ignored it, focusing instead on the task at hand.

Together, they wove the flowers into a proper crown, and when it was finished, Cassandra placed it atop Hunter's head with a triumphant grin.

Elena burst into laughter, clapping her hands in delight. "Ye look like a fairy prince, Da!"

Hunter grumbled but made no move to remove the crown, his expression caught

between exasperation and amusement. “Aye, well, if I’m a fairy prince, then what does that make ye?”

Elena grinned. “A warrior princess, of course.”

Cassandra watched the exchange with warmth in her chest. The barriers between father and daughter, so rigid before, were beginning to soften.

“Then it’s only fittin’ that a warrior princess gets a crown too,” Cassandra said, crafting another flower chain and placing it gently on Elena’s head.

Elena beamed, her fingers brushing the petals as if they were made of gold. She turned to Hunter, her usual shyness around him momentarily forgotten. “Do ye think it suits me, Da?”

Hunter smiled, a rare, unguarded expression that made Cassandra’s breath catch. “Aye, lass, it suits ye just fine.”

For a moment, there was silence, the three of them simply existing together in the meadow. The wind whispered through the grass, the sun bathed them in golden light, and the laughter of a child echoed across the hills. It was a fragile thing, this peace, but Cassandra held onto it, knowing how precious it was.

Hunter stretched out on the blanket, finally relaxing. “Perhaps flower crowns are nae so bad after all,” he admitted. “But if ye tell anyone back at the castle about this, I’ll deny it.”

Elena giggled. “I’ll tell everyone!”

Hunter groaned, covering his face with his hands, and Cassandra laughed, shaking her head.

It was a simple moment, but in that laughter, in the lightness between them, something unspoken settled into place.

As they made their way back to Castle McDougal, Cassandra noticed the change. A small crowd had gathered at the castle's entrance, whispers moving through the people like a restless wind.

Hunter's steps quickened, his jaw tight with frustration, and Cassandra followed holding Elena's hand, an uneasy feeling stirring in her chest.

At the center of the commotion stood a woman draped in fine, dark fabrics, her striking beauty untouched by the dust of the road. Her golden hair, neatly pinned, framed a face Cassandra had never seen before but instinctively knew, because the woman looked like Elena. Her heart dropped to her stomach.

The moment Hunter laid eyes on her, his entire body went rigid, his expression darkening like a storm rolling over the hills. The woman's gaze locked onto him, and without hesitation, she flung herself forward.

"Hunter!" she cried, her voice thick with emotion. "Oh, me love, I've returned!"

Cassandra watched as Margaret threw herself against Hunter's chest, clinging to him as if she'd never left. He stiffened, his arms remaining at his sides, his expression unreadable.

Around them, the murmurs of the gathered crowd grew louder, everyone bearing witness to the ghost of a woman they had all believed dead.

Cassandra's stomach twisted as it was clear that this woman was indeed, Margaret, Hunter's ex-wife, the mother of his child.

Margaret pulled back just enough to look up at him, her blue eyes shimmering with well-practiced tears.

“Please, forgive me,” she pleaded. “I cannae bear another day away from ye or our daughter.”

Before Hunter could respond, a small voice cried out in disbelief. “Mama?”

Cassandra turned just in time to see Elena rush forward, her little legs moving faster than Cassandra had seen since the girl was on the mend.

The girl flung herself into Margaret’s arms, her face pressed against her mother’s shoulder as she sobbed with joy.

“I kent ye’d come back,” Elena whispered, her small fingers clutching at Margaret’s dress as if afraid she might vanish again.

Margaret wrapped her arms around Elena with an ease that sent a sharp pang through Cassandra’s chest. “Aye, me sweet girl,” she cooed. “I went on a long, long journey, but I’ve returned to ye.”

Elena pulled back slightly, her bright eyes searching Margaret’s face. “But I thought ye went to heaven,” she said, confusion laced in her innocent voice.

Margaret smiled, smoothing a hand over Elena’s curls. “That’s what everyone thought, but they were wrong,” she said. “I was lost, but now I’m found.”

Cassandra felt the breath leave her lungs as she watched the scene unfold. She had never seen Elena look so joyful, so utterly whole. The girl who had once been timid and uncertain in her father’s presence was now glowing, clinging to the mother she had long thought dead.

It was as if Cassandra had become invisible, as if the moments she had shared with Hunter and Elena earlier that day had never happened.

Hunter finally found his voice, his tone hard and edged with anger.

“What game are ye playin’ at, Margaret?” he demanded.

Margaret let out a shaky breath, her lips trembling. “I made mistakes, Hunter,” she said, her voice breaking in all the right places. “But I’ve come back to make things right. Our daughter deserves her maither.”

Cassandra felt her fists tighten at her sides, jealousy twisting through her like a knife.

Margaret was beautiful, poised, and she knew exactly what to say to make Elena love her and to make Hunter hesitate. Cassandra had been fooling herself, thinking she belonged here, thinking she could ever be part of this family. Margaret had returned.

Elena turned to her father, her expression pleading. “Da, please,” she said. “She’s back! I have me mama again. We can be a family now, cannae we?”

Hunter looked down at his daughter, and for the first time since Cassandra had met him, uncertainty clouded his eyes. He had always been a man who stood firm, who never wavered in his decisions, but now, with his daughter looking up at him, he was lost.

Cassandra could see the battle raging within him—his anger at Margaret, his love for Elena, and the weight of the past pressing down on him.

Margaret seized the moment, reaching out to touch his arm. “Please, Hunter,” she murmured. “I ken I daenae deserve yer kindness, but I’m beggin’ ye. Let me stay.”

Cassandra took a step back, the lump in her throat growing. She felt like an outsider, like a foolish woman who had let herself believe she could be something more. Elena had her mother now, and Hunter... well, perhaps he had never been hers to begin with.

Margaret's gaze finally shifted from Hunter and Elena, landing squarely on Cassandra. Her blue eyes raked over Cassandra's simple garb, the scrutiny clear in her expression.

With a graceful tilt of her head, she asked, "And who might ye be?" Her tone was casual, but there was an underlying sharpness to it, as if she already deemed Cassandra unimportant.

Cassandra straightened her shoulders, forcing herself to remain composed.

"I'm Cassandra, the healer," she said, keeping her voice steady. She expected the woman to at least acknowledge her role, given how much she had cared for Elena, but Margaret's reaction was instant and dismissive.

"Ah," Margaret said with a slight, uninterested nod, already turning her attention back to Hunter.

The dismissal was like a slap to Cassandra's pride, though she kept her face neutral. She had tended to Elena when no one else had, worried over her through sleepless nights, and now she was nothing more than an afterthought.

Hunter, however, frowned at Margaret's response, his expression tightening. His lips parted as if to speak, but Cassandra had no desire to stand there and hear what he might say.

"I've patients to tend to," she said abruptly, not bothering to mask her irritation. She

turned on her heel, her footsteps firm as she strode away from the castle's entrance.

Every muscle in her body was stiff with frustration, but she refused to let it show on her face. If Margaret wanted to pretend she was invisible, then fine—Cassandra had no interest in competing with a ghost from Hunter's past.

The corridors of the castle were quieter than usual, the servants and guards clearly preoccupied with the unexpected arrival outside.

Cassandra moved through the halls with purpose, but her mind was a storm of thoughts. The warmth of the afternoon picnic, the tentative bond she had felt forming between Hunter and Elena, now felt like a distant memory. Margaret had returned, and with her presence came a stark reminder that Cassandra did not belong.

She reached the healing hall and exhaled sharply, trying to shake the tension from her limbs. She had work to do, and she would not let Hunter McDougal or his long-lost wife distract her from it. Moving to her shelves, she began preparing fresh bandages, her fingers working mechanically as she forced her thoughts away from what had just happened. Yet, no matter how she tried, the sting of Margaret's dismissal lingered.

Cassandra had never considered herself a jealous woman, but something about the way Margaret had stepped in and effortlessly reclaimed her place unsettled her. She had spent weeks caring for Elena, watching over the girl, teaching her small things to bring her joy. She had watched Hunter struggle to be a father, had seen the way he tried, the way he softened in the presence of his daughter. And now, in the span of mere moments, Margaret had undone everything, slipping into the role of mother as if she had never left.

A sharp knock on the door pulled her from her thoughts, and she turned to see one of the younger servants named Heather, peeked inside. "Mistress Cassandra," the girl said hesitantly. "Do ye need anythin'?"

Cassandra forced a small smile, shaking her head. "Nay, I'm fine," she replied. "Just busy." The girl nodded and hurried off, leaving Cassandra alone with her thoughts once more.

She hated how much this bothered her. Margaret had every right to be there—she was Elena's mother, after all. But Cassandra could not shake the feeling that something about the woman was off. Her return was too sudden, too perfectly timed, and the way she had dismissed Cassandra so easily set her instincts on edge.

A movement at the doorway made her look up, and for a brief, foolish moment, she thought it might be Hunter. But it was merely another servant, bringing in fresh linens for the patients.

"Some fresh cloths for yer work, Mistress Cassandra," the woman said.

"Thank ye," Cassandra said.

"Have ye heard the news? 'Tis a miracle. The Lady of the castle, she's alive," the servant said.

"Aye, I've heard," Cassandra said.

"Such a good thing for our little Lady Elena to have her maither back, by the grace of God," the servant said.

"Indeed," Cassandra said. "Thank ye for the cloth. Perhaps I can ask ye to bring me a bucket of fresh water?"

"Of course, Mistress," the servant said and left.

Cassandra did not need fresh water, but she needed to not hear about Margaret, so it

was the easiest way to rid herself of that conversation.

As she worked, she told herself she did not care what Hunter thought. She told herself that Margaret's return had nothing to do with her, that it changed nothing. But deep down, she knew that was a lie.

I've been a fool.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“W hat are ye doin’ here, Margaret? We had an agreement.” Hunter stepped closer to Margaret, his face like thunder as he leaned in. His voice was low, sharp as a blade. His scowl deepened, his hands clenched at his sides, barely holding himself back in the courtyard.

Margaret’s lips curled into a sly smile, her eyes gleaming with something that set his teeth on edge.

“Do ye want me to say it in front of our child?” Her voice was smooth, knowing, laced with an edge of amusement.

She tilted her head slightly, watching him like a cat that had just cornered its prey. Hunter’s jaw tightened, and he forced himself to look at Elena, who stood wide-eyed beside her mother.

His heart clenched at the sight of his daughter, her small hands gripping Margaret’s sleeve as if afraid she’d disappear again. He exhaled sharply through his nose, forcing down the fury that threatened to boil over.

“I’ll see ye in me meetin’ room after ye’ve had time with Elena,” he said, his voice cold, measured.

Margaret gave a slow nod, her expression unreadable. “Aye, we’ll talk soon, then.”

She smoothed Elena’s hair, murmuring something soft that Hunter couldn’t hear.

Without another word, he turned on his heel, striding toward the castle like a storm rolling in.

As soon as he stepped inside, his boots echoed sharply against the stone floor. His muscles were taut with frustration, his mind a whirlwind of anger and unease. Margaret's sudden reappearance was an insult, a slap to the life he had tried to rebuild.

For years, he had buried her in words and stories, made peace with the consequences of her choices—and now, like a ghost, she had returned to upend it all.

He shoved open the door to his meeting room and entered, his movements stiff with fury. He needed answers, but more than that, he needed control. The past had clawed its way back into his life, and he wasn't sure if he could force it back into the grave he had made for it. He ran a hand down his face, exhaling sharply, trying to settle the fire burning in his chest.

A sudden knock at the door made his head snap up. Before he could respond, the door flew open, and Daniel burst in like a gust of wind, his face pale as death.

“Hunter—” Daniel's voice was breathless, his chest rising and falling as though he had run the length of the castle. His eyes were wild, his mouth opening and closing as if struggling to form words.

“She's in the courtyard—Margaret—she—she's alive!”

Hunter folded his arms, his expression dark. “Aye, I ken.”

Daniel gawked at him, blinking rapidly as if trying to process what he had just heard. “Ye kent this?” His voice cracked, disbelief plain in his tone. “How in the bloody hell could ye kent that? We all thought she was dead—ye told us she was dead!”

Hunter gestured to a chair. “Sit down, Daniel.” His voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. When Daniel hesitated, still staring at him as if he had lost his mind, Hunter barked, “Now.”

With a wary glance, Daniel sank into the chair, though his hands still clenched at his sides. “Start explainin’,” he demanded. “Because I feel like I’m losin’ me damn mind.”

Hunter took a slow breath, forcing himself to keep his voice level.

“Years ago, when I told everyone she was dead, it was because she asked me to.” His fingers curled into fists at his sides, the memory a bitter taste on his tongue. “She was too ashamed of what she had done—ashamed of bein’ unfaithful—so she begged me to send her away. But she dinnae want anyone to ken the truth, so I told the clan she had perished.”

Daniel’s mouth fell open, his shock turning to something like outrage. “Ye mean to tell me that all this time—?” His voice was thick with disbelief, his brows drawn low over his eyes. “And ye let everyone grieve her, let Elena grow up thinkin’ her maither was dead?”

Hunter’s jaw tightened. “What was I supposed to do, Daniel? Let the clan ken their lady had run off like a coward? Let Elena live with the shame that her maither had abandoned her willfully?” His voice was sharp, the weight of his decision pressing heavy against his chest.

Daniel exhaled, shaking his head as he dragged a hand through his hair. “God above, Hunter,” he muttered. “I dinnae ken whether to call ye a fool or a martyr.” His gaze flicked up, searching Hunter’s face. “But why is she back now? What does she want?”

Hunter's stomach twisted with the same question. "That," he said darkly, "is what I mean to find out."

Hunter poured the whiskey into his glass, the amber liquid sloshing gently with the tilt of his hand. He took a slow sip, the burn spreading through his throat as he leaned back in his chair. His thoughts were a swirl of frustration and confusion. He had never expected Margaret to show up again, and now that she was here, he wasn't sure what to make of her return.

A few moments passed in silence, broken only by the clink of the glass as he set it back on the table. Then, there was a knock—lighter than before, almost tentative. Hunter's gut tightened as he stood, setting his chair aside. With a swift motion, he crossed the room and opened the door, his scowl deepening when he saw Margaret standing there, her eyes softer now than when they had first met.

"Why, Margaret?" Hunter's voice was thick with distrust, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. "I daenae trust ye. Nae after what ye've done." He wasn't sure if it was the whiskey or the anger festering inside him, but he could feel the bitterness creeping into his tone.

Margaret's eyes softened, and she stepped closer, her hand hesitantly reaching out to touch his arm. "Hunter," she said in a voice far too sweet for the storm swirling between them. "Ye're bein' cold to me. I've come back to try and make things right." Her fingers lingered on his arm, but Hunter stepped back, brushing her hand away as if it burned him.

"I cannae trust ye," Hunter repeated, his voice low and hard. "Ye've lied to me, made a fool of me, and now ye show up here as if nothin' happened. What is it ye want, Margaret? Why have ye come back after all this time?"

Margaret took a breath, steadying herself before speaking. "Gossipin' tongues

reached me ears, Hunter,” she said, her voice suddenly more serious. “I heard ye attacked a man in the village. And that man turned out to be me faither, Michael Couper.”

She paused, her expression pleading, a soft desperation creeping into her features. “Once I heard that, I kent that I had to come here. I cannae let ye hurt me faither.”

Hunter’s brow furrowed at her words, frustration bubbling to the surface. “I dinnae attack him, Margaret,” he snapped. “Michael attacked me first. He’s been lookin’ for a reason to blame me ever since ye disappeared. He thinks I killed ye, and he’s been holdin’ that grudge for years. If anyone should be askin’ for forgiveness, it’s him.”

His voice shook with barely contained anger, his fists clenching at his sides.

Margaret’s face paled at his words, and she stepped back slightly, her breath catching in her throat. “Ye’re tellin’ me... me faither thinks... ye killed me?” Her voice trembled, and for a moment, Hunter saw a flicker of vulnerability in her eyes, the same eyes he had once loved, but now did not trust to be real emotions.

“I dinnae ken he thought that, Hunter. I never meant for it to go this far. I—I never wanted anyone to think ye were guilty of somethin’ ye dinnae do.”

Hunter’s frustration flared, and his voice rose, sharp and accusing. “Ye never wanted anyone to think that, but ye left me with no choice, Margaret. I had to carry that burden, and ye left me to take the blame, to suffer the consequences of yer actions.”

His hands gripped the edge of the table, his knuckles white as he tried to hold back the flood of anger that threatened to overtake him.

Margaret was silent for a long moment, as if trying to come to terms with the revelation. “I dinnae—” she started, her voice cracking. “I dinnae mean for ye to

suffer, Hunter. I only wanted to protect meself, to protect Elena from the shame of what I'd done. I thought that if I stayed away, if I let them believe I was dead, it would be better for everyone. But now..." She faltered, looking at him, her face torn with regret. "Now it's all gone wrong, hasn't it?"

"Aye, it's gone wrong," Hunter said, his voice bitter and raw. "Ye thought ye were protectin' me? Protectin' Elena? What did ye think I would do, Margaret? What did ye think I would feel, takin' on the burden of yer lies, of yer disappearance? Ye've destroyed everythin'. All for what? To protect yerself from shame of yer own actions of being unfaithful to yer husband?" His voice cracked, his frustration and hurt spilling out like a river breaking free from its banks.

Margaret's face flushed with a mixture of guilt and anger, her eyes narrowing. "Ye think I wanted this?" she spat, her voice rising now in anger. "Ye think I wanted to hurt Elena? I had nay choice, Hunter. I had to leave. Ye daenae ken the pressure I was under, the way I felt like I was drownin'. I dinnae want to be another burden, another woman who failed at bein' a wife and maither. So I ran. And I regret it now, but ye've never understood that, have ye?"

Hunter's fists clenched tighter, his whole body trembling with the force of his emotions. "I've never understood it? I've never understood the pain of losin' the woman I married to betrayal? I've never understood how it felt to raise our daughter alone? I've spent years trying to make sense of it, Margaret, and all the while, ye've been hidin' away, livin' yer life, and now ye come back as if nothin' happened?" His voice was rising with every word, his fury barely contained.

Margaret stepped forward, her eyes flashing with anger of her own. "Ye daenae get to speak to me like that, Hunter. Ye could've come after me. Ye could've tried to persuade me, but ye dinnae. Daenae act like I'm the only one who failed us."

Hunter's gaze burned with intensity as he stared at her, his chest heaving with each

breath. "I dinnae come after ye because I respected yer wishes, Margaret. I respected the fact that ye wanted to be gone. I dinnae come to ye because I dinnae want a wife that was unfaithful to me. I dinnae love ye, Margaret. But now ye've come back, and everythin's changed. And I'm nae sure I can ever forgive ye for what ye've done."

They stood there, the tension thick between them, the weight of their past crushing down on both of them. The silence was deafening, and neither knew where to go from here.

Hunter stood rigid, his arms crossed over his chest as he stared at Margaret. He had no patience left for this conversation, nor for the woman who had abandoned him years ago.

But for Elena's sake, he had to keep his anger in check. His voice was cold, sharp as a blade.

"Ye can stay, Margaret. For Elena and for now, until I figure out how to deal with this mess. But ye shouldnae expect anythin' more from me." His eyes darkened, the words heavy with finality. "I am nae yer husband and ye are nae Lady McDougal."

Margaret's lips pressed into a thin line before she lifted her chin. "I will prove to ye that I can be a good wife to ye, Hunter. A good maither to Elena. I swear it." Her voice held a desperate determination, but Hunter did not flinch.

He let out a slow, tired breath. "It's nae necessary." His tone was firm, lacking any warmth. "I've enough on me plate explainin' yer reappearance to everyone." He turned away, unwilling to let her see how deeply her words cut.

Margaret took a step forward, her hands curling into fists at her sides. "Then I'll do what I must. If the council questions me, I will lie if need be." Her voice wavered, but her intent was clear.

Hunter let out a bitter laugh, shaking his head. “Aye, ye have such an ease with lyin’, daenae ye?” His voice was laced with scorn, his eyes hard as stone. “Seems it comes natural to ye.”

Margaret’s nostrils flared, her composure slipping. She let out a frustrated huff, turning on her heel. Without another word, she stormed out, the door slamming behind her with enough force to rattle the room. Hunter exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair, already regretting letting her get under his skin.

Just as the door slammed shut behind Margaret, it swung open again. Fergus, one of the council members, stepped inside, his face ashen as if he had seen a ghost. His mouth opened and closed before he found his voice.

“So it’s true, then.” Fergus swallowed hard, his wide eyes fixed on Hunter. “Lady Margaret is alive.”

Hunter clenched his jaw, his patience wearing thin. “Aye, she is,” he said gruffly, rubbing a hand over his face. “Now, go gather the council. I will address this matter once, and only once.”

Fergus did not move. He stood there, arms crossed, his expression unreadable. “I think ye owe me an explanation first, Laird,” he said, his voice carrying an edge. “The council willnae take kindly to hearin’ this.”

Hunter’s temper flared, his grip tightening at his sides. “Ye think I owe ye, do ye?” His voice dropped to a dangerous low, the warning clear in his tone. “I daenae answer to ye, Fergus. Nor to any other man who dares to question me.”

Fergus straightened, his lips pressing together, but he still did not leave. “Folks will ask why this has happened.” His words were careful but bold. “They’ll ask what else ye’ve hidden.”

Hunter took a slow, measured step forward, his presence filling the room. "I'll handle the questions," he said, his voice like thunder rolling through the walls. "But I willnae be questioned like some wayward lad in me own hall." His gaze burned into Fergus, his authority absolute. "Now get out, or I will throw ye out meself."

Fergus hesitated only a moment longer before finally stepping back. Without another word, he turned and strode out, the door closing behind him.

Hunter exhaled sharply, his jaw tight, knowing this was only the beginning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Cassandra moved through the healing hall, checking on the wounded and the sick with steady hands. She paused by a cot near the far wall and felt a spark of surprise.

The old healer, Richard, who had been unconscious for days, now sat upright, blinking at the dim candlelight. She stepped forward and lowered herself onto the stool beside him.

“How are ye feeling?” she asked, studying his face for signs of weakness.

Richard stretched his shoulders with a grunt, then turned his gaze to her.

“Better than I was, lass. Who are ye?”

Cassandra smiled faintly. “Me name is Cassandra. I’m the healer from McAllister Castle. I came to aid the McDougal clan while ye were unwell.”

Richard’s brow furrowed in thought before his eyes brightened with understanding. “Ah, so ye’re the one.” He gave a rough chuckle. “Then I owe ye me thanks, lass. Ye’ve done me a great service.”

Cassandra waved off his gratitude. “I only did what needed doin’.” She studied him carefully. “Do ye think ye can stand?”

Richard nodded, though his movements were slow. “Aye, I’d like to get to me own bedchamber. I’ll rest there, and in a couple of days, I should be right enough to

resume me duties.”

Cassandra helped him swing his legs over the side of the cot. “I’ll aid ye there.” She slipped an arm under his, steadying him as he rose.

As they walked down the corridor, Richard’s weight was heavy against her, but she bore it without complaint. The flickering torchlight cast long shadows across the stone walls, making the castle feel colder than it was. Each step she took felt heavier, not from the old healer’s weight, but from the realization pressing in on her.

With Richard’s recovery, me time at Castle McDougal is drawin’ to an end.

She had come here with the simple task of tending the ill yet she had not anticipated the wounds she would suffer herself. The thought of leaving should have filled her with relief, yet it did not.

Her heart ached at the idea of walking away from Hunter, from Elena, from the tangled mess of feelings she had tried so hard to suppress. She had done her duty, and soon, she would be free to go—but why did the thought of leaving feel like a fresh wound instead of a healing one?

"Here ye are. I'll have some broth sent up to ye to get yer strength back," she said.

"Aye, ye are heaven sent, lass," he said.

Cassandra left the healer in his chambers, ensuring he was comfortable before stepping into the dimly lit corridor. She reached her room, closing the door behind her, and leaned against the cool stone wall, exhaling shakily. The silence wrapped around her, and for the first time, she allowed herself to acknowledge the truth that had been creeping upon her?—

I've fallen in love with Hunter.

The realization struck her like a sudden storm, unexpected and fierce. She had not meant to, had not wanted to, but it had happened nonetheless.

She strode toward the door and pulled it open, needing air, needing movement, needing distraction. As she stepped into the corridor, she nearly collided with Heather, a young servant carrying a stack of folded linens. Heather gasped, stumbling back a step before righting herself with wide eyes.

“Och, Mistress Cassandra! I dinnae see ye there.”

Cassandra managed a small smile, relieved for the interruption. “Heather, I need yer assistance in me workshop, if ye’re available.”

Heather straightened, nodding eagerly. “Of course, Mistress.”

Cassandra glanced down the corridor, eager to keep herself occupied. “Fetch two buckets of water and meet me there, when ye’re done with what ye are doin’ now.”

“Aye, I’ll have them for ye in nay time.” Heather bobbed her head before hurrying off.

Cassandra watched her go before turning on her heel and making her way to the workshop. The scent of dried lavender and rosemary greeted her as she stepped inside, familiar and comforting. She busied herself arranging supplies, her hands moving on their own while her mind wrestled with the turmoil in her heart.

Minutes later, Heather arrived, breathless and pink-cheeked, carrying the heavy buckets of water. She set them down with a grunt, brushing a few loose strands of hair from her forehead. “Where would ye like them, Mistress?”

Cassandra gestured toward the wooden basin at the center of the room. “Pour them in there.”

Heather did as she was told, the sound of splashing water filling the space. When she finished, she turned back to Cassandra, curiosity flickering in her gaze. “Are ye well, Mistress? Ye seem... troubled.”

Cassandra hesitated, then shook her head. “Just tired, is all. There’s much to do.”

Cassandra rolled up the sleeves of her dress as she organized the small vials of tonics and herbs on the wooden table before her.

"Now if ye will fetch two more buckets," Cassandra said.

"Aye, I shall return," Heather said.

A few moments later Heather returned with more water.

“Ye work fast, Heather. Thank ye,” Cassandra said as she reached for a mortar and pestle.

“Aye, well, I ken ye wouldnae ask for help unless it was important,” Heather replied, peering curiously at the array of herbs laid out before them. “What else do ye need me to do?”

“First, I should tell ye that the healer, Richard, is on the mend,” Cassandra said as she began grinding dried willow bark into a fine powder.

Heather’s face brightened at the news. “That’s wonderful! Does that mean ye’ll be goin’ home to McAllister Castle soon?”

Cassandra hesitated for only a moment before nodding. “Aye, it does. That’s why I need yer help. I must prepare to teach Richard how to make the tonics that helped the ill. He will need to ken every step, and I cannae do it alone.”

Heather’s expression softened, and she folded her hands in front of her. “I’ll be sad to see ye go, Mistress, but I’d be honored to help ye.”

Cassandra offered her a grateful smile. “Thank ye, Heather. Now, let’s get to work.”

They moved with purpose, Heather fetching fresh sprigs of mint and chamomile while Cassandra prepared a batch of fever-reducing tonic. The process was meticulous, requiring careful measurements and patience as they mixed the ingredients. Heather listened intently as Cassandra explained each step, repeating the instructions aloud to commit them to memory.

“This tonic is one of the most important,” Cassandra said as she poured the liquid into small glass bottles. “It eases fevers and soothes pain. I will teach Richard to ken how to make it properly, or the sick will suffer needlessly.”

Heather nodded as she worked beside her. Cassandra exhaled softly, appreciating the young woman’s dedication. “Good. Now, let’s move on to the next one.”

For a while, they worked in silence, the only sounds being the scraping of pestles against stone and the gentle sloshing of water as they mixed the remedies. Cassandra found solace in the rhythm of their labor, knowing that this work was important—even if it also meant preparing for her own departure. All the while the same thought repeated...

Can I truly leave him?

For two days, Cassandra managed to avoid Hunter, slipping through the castle halls

like a ghost. She kept herself locked away in her room or buried in her work, her hands busy with grinding herbs and mixing tonics. Every moment she spent alone was a small mercy, sparing her the agony of seeing whether Hunter had reconciled with Margaret. The thought of them together made her chest tighten, so she focused on what she could control—preparing to leave.

She stood at her worktable, carefully measuring dried yarrow into a bowl when the door creaked open. Turning, she found Richard standing there, his frail form looking stronger than it had in weeks. His cheeks were no longer pale, and his once sunken eyes now held a lively gleam. Cassandra smiled at the sight, pleased to see her efforts had not been in vain.

“Ah, ye have the color back in yer cheeks, Richard,” she remarked, setting down her mortar and wiping her hands on her apron.

“Aye, lass, and it’s all yer doin’,” Richard said, stepping inside. “Ye saved me, and I cannae thank ye enough for it.”

“Daenae thank me yet. We still have work to do before I leave,” Cassandra replied, motioning for him to sit.

Richard settled into a chair with a small grunt, watching as Cassandra gathered bottles and dried herbs. “Then teach me, lass. I’m ready to learn.”

Cassandra nodded. “The most important thing ye must ken is how to cure the illness that plagued the clan. It starts with this tonic here.” She gestured to a dark glass bottle filled with the bitter medicine she had spent days perfecting.

Richard leaned forward, listening intently. “And how do ye make it?”

Cassandra explained, measuring out each ingredient. “Crush them finely, then steep

them in hot water before straining it into a bottle. The patient must drink it twice a day until the fever breaks.”

The lesson continued for hours. Every once in a while, Heather stopped in to help, making her an unofficial helper to Richard. Cassandra felt confident that the healer could manage the more she worked with him.

"I've written it all down here on this parchment," Cassandra said.

Richard nodded, absorbing every word. “Aye, I understand. I’ll make certain the clan never suffers like this again.”

Cassandra met his gaze, relief washing over her. “Good. Then me work here will be done.”

Richard smiled and reached out, giving her arm a reassuring squeeze. “Ye’ve done more than enough, lass. If ye wish to leave, ken that I will take care of things here.”

Cassandra exhaled softly, the weight of responsibility slowly lifting from her shoulders. “Thank ye, Richard.”

With that, she turned and left the workroom, her heart heavy as she walked back to her chambers. She knew it was time to pack her belongings and return home. But no matter how much she told herself it was the right thing to do, it did nothing to ease the ache in her chest.

She folded her garments neatly into her satchel, her hands moving with a practiced precision. She wanted to be quick about it, to leave before she had time to second-guess herself. But as she reached for the last of her things, her fingers brushed against the fine fabric of the dresses Hunter had gifted her. The sight of them made her pause, her throat tightening.

With a deep breath, she folded the dresses carefully and set them aside. Keeping them would only bring pain, a reminder of the feelings she needed to bury. She had come to Castle McDougal to heal others, not to leave with a broken heart of her own. If she had any hope of moving forward, she needed to let go, and that meant returning these gifts to the man who had given them.

Steeling herself, she lifted the bundle and held it close for a moment. It was foolish how much it hurt to part with them, as if the fabric itself carried the warmth of his presence. But she was no fool—she knew better than to hold on to things that would never be hers. Straightening her shoulders, she turned toward the door, determined to return them and finally put this chapter behind her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I cannae turn Margaret away and have Elena lose her mother again. But what of... Cassandra?

Hunter sat at his desk, rubbing his temples as he tried to focus on the parchment before him. His thoughts were in turmoil, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to shake the tension that had settled in his chest since Margaret's return. Then came a knock at the door, soft but firm, pulling him from his thoughts. He straightened, setting down his quill.

"Enter," he called, his voice steady despite the storm raging inside him.

The door creaked open, and Cassandra stepped inside, clutching a bundle of dresses to her chest. There was a hesitation in her step, a quiet sadness in her eyes that made his stomach twist. He hadn't seen her in days, and now here she was, standing before him, looking as though she had already made up her mind. He knew what was coming before she even spoke.

"I have to go now," she said softly, lowering her gaze. "The healer Richard is well, and I have shown him the tonics."

Hunter frowned, his fingers tightening on the edge of his desk. He had expected this, but hearing it aloud still cut deep. He wanted to tell her she was safe here, that there was no reason for her to leave. But the truth was, he couldn't promise her safety—not with Margaret lurking in the shadows.

"I understand," he said finally, though the words tasted bitter on his tongue.

Cassandra exhaled, and Hunter wondered if she had been bracing for an argument. She stepped forward and carefully set the dresses on the desk.

A part of him wanted to fight for her, to tell her to stay—but he didn't. He couldn't. Margaret had been dangerous before, lashing out at women she thought had caught his interest. Even Jessica hadn't been spared from her jealousy. He wouldn't put Cassandra through that, he cared too much for her to let her become Margaret's next target.

"Why are ye givin' me those?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

Cassandra met his gaze, her expression unreadable. "I cannae keep them," she said quietly. "They daenae belong to me, and I daenae want anything that is nae rightfully mine."

His jaw clenched, but he exhaled through his nose, forcing himself to keep his emotions in check.

"Leave them in yer chambers," he said, his voice gruff. "Daenae bring them to me as if I asked for them back."

"Aye. I'll do that."

Silence stretched between them, heavy and suffocating. Hunter wanted to say something—anything—to keep her here, but the words tangled in his throat. He knew that if he let himself speak freely, he would say too much, reveal too much, and he couldn't afford that.

"I'll provide ye with a way home," he finally said, his voice lower than before.

Cassandra swallowed hard and gave him a small nod. "Thank ye."

Hunter wanted to tell her to stay, that he didn't want her to leave, but he forced himself to remain still. His fingers curled into a fist beneath the desk, his entire body tense with restraint.

She turned toward the door, pausing for the briefest of moments. It was as if she were waiting for him to say something—something that would make her stay. But Hunter stayed silent, his heart hammering as he watched her walk away, knowing this was for the best—even if it didn't feel like it.

Cassandra took a deep breath. "Then I guess this is goodbye," she said, her voice quiet but firm.

Hunter watched her, his chest tightening with something he didn't want to name.

"Wait," he said, his voice rough as he reached out and grabbed her hand.

He felt her go stiff beneath his touch, her breath catching ever so slightly. For a moment, neither of them spoke. He knew he should let go, but he held on just a second longer, memorizing the warmth of her skin beneath his fingers. Finally, he forced himself to release her, clearing his throat as he looked away.

"I wanted to thank ye," he said, his tone more controlled now. "For yer services. I'll arrange for yer payment to be ready before ye leave." The words felt hollow, nothing close to what he truly wanted to say.

Cassandra blinked, her lips parting slightly before she gave a small nod. "Oh. Thank ye," she murmured, her voice unreadable. Without another word, she turned and walked out, leaving Hunter standing there, fists clenched at his sides, watching her go.

Goodbye, Cassandra. Me love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Cassandra left Hunter's office with hurried steps, her heart pounding against her ribs. She fought to keep her emotions in check, but her vision blurred with unshed tears. The weight of their final conversation sat heavy on her chest, suffocating her. As she walked down the dimly lit corridor, she nearly collided with Jessica, who stopped short and looked at her with concern.

"What's wrong, lass?" Jessica asked, tilting her head.

Cassandra shook her head, her voice tight. "I just want to be alone."

Jessica studied her for a moment, then nodded. "I understand, but I'll walk with ye to yer room. Ye seem unwell."

Cassandra didn't argue, too weary to protest. They walked in silence, Jessica keeping close beside her. The sound of their footsteps echoed through the stone halls, the quiet making Cassandra's heart ache even more.

When they reached Cassandra's room, Jessica turned to her. "Do ye want me to fetch ye a wee nip of whiskey? Might help calm yer nerves."

Cassandra hesitated, then sighed. "Aye. That sounds good."

Jessica nodded and disappeared for a moment, returning with a small flask. She poured a measure into a wooden cup and handed it to Cassandra. Then she sat beside her, waiting patiently.

Cassandra took a slow sip, the burn of the whiskey settling deep in her chest. For a long moment, she said nothing, simply staring at the cup in her hands. Finally, she spoke.

“Richard is well now. It’s time for me to go back to McAllister Castle.”

Jessica exhaled, nodding. “Now I understand.”

Cassandra forced a small, hollow smile. “It’s what I came here to do, after all. The McDougal clan doesnae need me anymore.”

Jessica studied her carefully. “And what about what ye need, Cassandra? Are ye sure this is what ye want?”

Cassandra swallowed hard, looking away. “What I want doesnae matter. What matters is what’s right.”

Jessica sighed, leaning back against the chair. “Ye sound just like Hunter.”

Cassandra’s head snapped up, eyes narrowing slightly. “What do ye mean by that?”

Jessica shrugged. “I mean he pushes away what he wants, too. Always carryin’ the weight of duty, always thinkin’ he must do what’s right instead of followin’ his heart. Thinks he’s cursed and that if he loves, those he loves will fall into danger.”

Cassandra clenched her hands around the cup. “Then perhaps we’re more alike than I realized. But it doesnae change anything.”

Jessica gave her a long, knowing look. “So ye’re just goin’ to leave? Just like that?”

Cassandra inhaled sharply. “Aye. What else is there for me to do?”

Jessica hesitated before speaking again. “Hunter cares for ye, ye ken. Even if he’s too stubborn to say it.”

Cassandra let out a bitter laugh. “Carin’ for someone isnae enough. Nae when his past keeps pullin’ him back. Nae when Margaret is here. She's the maither of Elena. It is right that I go, to give their family a true chance.”

Jessica pursed her lips. “Aye, she’s still here, but that doesnae mean ye must leave.”

Cassandra shook her head. “I cannae stay, Jessica. Every time I look at him, I see what I cannae have. And it hurts.”

Jessica reached over, squeezing her hand. “Then let me at least say this—ye deserve happiness, Cassandra. If ye ever find a reason to come back, like say to visit me than do it for yerself. Ye have friends here that would want to see ye again, like meself. Dinnae stay away simply because ye think ye must stay away.”

Cassandra’s throat tightened, and she nodded. “Thank ye, Jessica. That means more than ye ken.”

Jessica gave her a sad smile. “Then let me pour ye another drink. Seems like we both need it.”

Cassandra let out a small, shaky laugh as Jessica refilled her cup. For now, she would drink, she would sit in the company of a friend, and she would gather the strength to leave. Even if it broke her heart.

The next morning, Cassandra found Daniel and Jessica standing near the courtyard, speaking in hushed tones. Daniel turned when he saw her approaching, his expression unreadable. He held up a small leather coin purse, the weight of it clear in his palm. “Hunter’s put me in charge of seein’ ye home safely,” he said, his voice steady.

Cassandra nodded, her throat tight. "Thank ye, Daniel." She glanced at the coin purse and swallowed hard. "That's all Hunter gave ye to give to me? Payment?"

"Aye, lass. That is all," Daniel said.

Cassandra gulped down the sob that threatened to come out. "Me bag is ready, but I need to find Elena before I go to say goodbye."

Jessica frowned slightly. "Ye've grown quite fond of the wee lass, haven't ye?"

Cassandra exhaled, trying to keep her voice steady. "Aye, I have." Her voice cracked on the words, and she clenched her jaw. "I cannae leave without sayin' goodbye."

Daniel nodded in understanding. "Go on, then. I'll fetch yer things. We'll be waitin' for ye by the stables."

Cassandra turned and made her way toward the nursery, her heart growing heavier with every step. When she reached the door, she paused, listening to the soft sound of a child's laughter.

Pushing it open, she found Elena sitting on the floor, giggling as she played with Leonora, the large hound dog. The sight of them together brought a bittersweet ache to her chest.

Elena's face lit up the moment she saw Cassandra. "Cassandra!" She scrambled to her feet and ran toward her, throwing her arms around her waist. "I'm so glad to see ye!"

Cassandra knelt, wrapping her arms tightly around the child. "And I'm glad to see ye too, wee one." She smoothed Elena's hair back, trying to memorize every detail of her sweet face. "But I came to tell ye that it's time for me to return home to

McAllister Castle.”

Elena pulled back, her face falling into a deep pout. “I daenae like that,” she said stubbornly, crossing her arms. “I want ye to stay!”

Cassandra forced a small smile, though her heart ached. “I wish I could, love. But there are people at McAllister who need me healin’ as well.”

Elena’s lip trembled, and she clung to Cassandra’s arm. “Will ye come back?”

Cassandra hesitated, stroking the child’s cheek. “I daenae ken, lass.” The words were painful to say, but she would not lie. “But I’ll always remember ye.”

Elena sniffled but nodded, throwing her arms around Cassandra once more. Cassandra held her tightly, pressing a kiss to her temple. Then, with great effort, she pulled away and stood, forcing herself to step back.

Leonora whined as Cassandra turned toward the door. She hesitated for only a moment before leaving the nursery, her heart breaking with every step she took.

Cassandra walked the dimly lit corridor when a sharp smack and a yelp broke through the quiet. She froze, her body tensing at the sound of distress. Without a second thought, she ran toward the noise, her footsteps echoing off the stone walls. Rounding the corner, her heart dropped when she saw Margaret standing over Heather, the young servant girl kneeling on the floor, her cheek reddened.

Margaret’s hand was still raised in the air, as if she were ready to strike again, but Cassandra’s presence made her freeze. The tension in the air was thick as Cassandra’s eyes narrowed with barely contained fury.

“What seems to be the problem that would warrant hittin’ the girl?” Cassandra asked,

her voice low but filled with cold authority. Her fists clenched at her sides as she stepped forward, not backing down.

Margaret straightened, a sneer crossing her face as she turned her eyes toward Cassandra. "Mind yer business, healer," she spat, her tone dismissive. "Ye've nay place interferin' with what happens between me and the staff." The venom in her voice was unmistakable, but Cassandra didn't flinch, her anger rising further.

"I beg to differ," Cassandra retorted, her gaze unwavering. "It is me business, as the Laird himself sent me to fetch Heather to help with me departure. We cannae defy the Laird's orders, now can we?" Her words were sharp, as she made it clear that she would not stand idly by while someone, especially Margaret, mistreated one of the castle's people.

Margaret's face flushed with rage, her nostrils flaring as she gritted her teeth. Then she smiled a brilliant smile.

"Departure did ye say? Oh, then by all means take the girl to help ye and good riddance!" Without another word, she stomped off, her heels echoing down the corridor.

Cassandra stood still for a moment, her heart pounding, as the sound of Margaret's retreating footsteps faded into the distance. The calm returned to the hallway, but the anger inside Cassandra still simmered.

Cassandra knelt beside Heather, who was slowly rising to her feet, her face pale and shaken. The young girl winced as she touched her cheek, but she quickly tried to hide the pain, forcing a faint smile at Cassandra.

"Ye shouldnae have interfered," Heather whispered, her voice trembling.

Cassandra shook her head, her expression softening. "Nay one should ever have to endure that, Heather. Nae under any circumstance." She offered her hand, helping the girl up, her touch gentle yet firm. "Come on now, let's get ye to the courtyard where ye'll be safe."

Together, they made their way down the corridor, Cassandra keeping a protective arm around Heather. As they stepped into the bright light of the courtyard, Cassandra scanned the area, her eyes landing on Jessica.

Jessica noticed them approaching, her expression filled with concern. "What happened?" she asked, her voice low but urgent as she stepped forward.

Cassandra glanced over her shoulder, making sure Margaret was nowhere in sight before answering. "Margaret. She struck Heather. The poor girl dinnae deserve it." Her voice was laced with frustration as she guided Heather toward Jessica.

Jessica's eyes widened in disbelief, and she placed a reassuring hand on Heather's shoulder. "The nerve of her," she muttered under her breath. "Come, sit here, lass. Ye're safe now."

Cassandra watched as Jessica led Heather to a bench, her protective instincts kicking in.

"We're ready," Daniel said as he and the guards approached with a horse for Cassandra.

Cassandra mounted her horse with practiced ease, her eyes scanning the castle one last time. The group of guards, led by Daniel, were already mounted and ready to depart.

As they rode out of the grounds, the castle loomed behind them. She gave a final

wave to Jessica and Heather, watching them grow smaller as they stood by the gate, their faces a mixture of sadness and well-wishes.

As the procession moved down the long, winding path away from McDougal Castle, Cassandra couldn't help but glance back once more.

High up in a window, Hunter looked down. Cassandra nearly choked on the gasp of air she inhaled. Then, he was gone.

A tightness gripped her chest, and she pushed the feeling aside, unwilling to dwell on it. Yet, despite her resolve, she realized that a strange ache settled deep inside her—a homesickness she hadn't anticipated.

It wasn't McAllister Castle that she missed, nor the life she'd known there. Instead, it was the home she had just left—the people, the quiet moments she shared with Jessica, and even the very walls of McDougal Castle itself. The warmth of the hearth, the laughter of Elena, the comfort of knowing that she had found a place where she truly belonged—it all rushed back to her in an overwhelming wave.

Cassandra let out a soft sigh, the weight of her emotions almost too much to bear. She had come to love the castle, its people, and the life she had built there over the past weeks. Yet now, it felt like she was leaving behind something she could never replace. Her heart ached with the realization that this, too, was a part of her journey, one she would carry with her, no matter where the road led.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Hunter strode across the castle grounds, his boots crunching against the damp earth. He had hoped for a quiet moment of reflection, to simply breathe and feel the land beneath his feet. But his peace was shattered when Fergus, one of his councilmen, stepped into his path, his expression sharp with purpose.

Fergus wasted no time, his tone laced with expectation. "Laird, we must discuss the matter of Margaret." His eyes narrowed, studying Hunter as though he were a stubborn child refusing to see reason. "What will be done about her? Will ye take her back and do what's right for the clan?"

Hunter's jaw tightened, his patience already wearing thin. "Do what's right?" he repeated, his voice dangerously low. He took a step closer, towering over the older man.

Fergus huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "Aye, she made mistakes, but that doesnae change the fact that the McDougal line needs an heir. A strong son to carry on yer name." His sharp gaze flicked toward the castle. "Ye have one daughter, and while she may be precious, she cannae lead the clan when the time comes."

Hunter's fists clenched at his sides, but he held his temper in check. "Elena is me flesh and blood, and she'll always have me protection," he growled. "As for an heir, that is me concern, nae yers." His gaze darkened. "Ye'd do well to remember that."

Fergus scoffed, unimpressed by Hunter's resistance. "Ye cannae ignore this, Laird. The council willnae sit idle while the future of the clan remains uncertain." He shook

his head, a tinge of frustration in his voice. “If ye willnae reconcile with Margaret, then who will bear ye a son?”

Hunter’s frustration boiled over, and his voice came out like a whip. “Margaret is dead to me, Fergus, and I’ll nae hear her name spoken again.” He stepped closer, his presence imposing. “And I’ll nae be ordered about like a lad who doesnae ken his own duty.” His tone lowered to a growl. “Mind yer own concerns.”

Fergus’ lips pressed into a thin line, but he did not back down. “The future of Clan McDougal is me concern,” he said, voice firm. “Without a male heir, we risk instability. Others will see it as weakness, and it could invite threats ye’d rather nae face.”

Hunter exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. “I have already chosen me path,” he said, his voice quieter but no less firm. He met Fergus’ gaze, steel in his eyes.

Fergus blinked, momentarily taken aback. “The council willnae be pleased,” he muttered. “They expected an heir that would strengthen our?—”

Hunter cut him off with a sharp glare. “The council serves the Laird, nae the other way around,” he reminded him. “And I have made me decision. I willnae sire a child with Margaret.” His voice dropped to a warning growl. “If the council cannae accept that, then they’ll soon learn where their place is.”

Fergus’ mouth tightened, but he said nothing more. With a stiff nod, he turned and walked away, his shoulders tense with lingering frustration. Hunter watched him go, his own anger still simmering beneath the surface. He had no doubts about his choice, but he knew this would not be the last time he had to defend it.

Turning back toward the castle, Hunter took a steadying breath. Let the council

grumble all they wanted—he had won battles before, and he would win this one too.

However, as he entered the castle and his meeting chamber, another lecture seemed to await him.

"Aye, what's this about?" Hunter asked, his voice still carrying the frustration of his encounter with Fergus.

He was surprised to find Daniel and Jessica sitting there, waiting for him. He frowned slightly, unsure of what to expect.

Daniel leaned forward in his chair, crossing his arms. "We noticed ye've been a bit off lately, Hunter," he said, his voice filled with a mix of concern and blunt honesty. "Ye've seemed... different since Cassandra left. Ye two had gotten close, and now that she's gone, well... we can see the shift in ye." His eyes held a quiet understanding, as though he knew exactly what Hunter was going through.

Hunter sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair. "Aye, it's true," he admitted, his voice rough. "But it's nae just about Cassandra. It's Margaret and the mess she's brought. What am I to do? Elena missed her maither. I cannae take her away from Margaret again. I cannae put Cassandra in a position where she could be hurt... nae with Margaret here." He looked at them both, his gaze filled with the conflict that had been weighing on him for days now.

Daniel cursed under his breath, his frustration clear. "I ken ye're tryin' to protect Elena, but ye're refusin' yer own needs," he said, shaking his head. "Cassandra brought somethin' to the castle that we all needed. She lightened up the mood, Hunter—somethin' we've been lackin' for so long." His voice grew more intense, his concern for Cassandra and Hunter both evident. "And Margaret—she's a poison, lad. We all see it."

Hunter clenched his jaw, trying to keep his emotions in check. "I daenae like her either," he muttered. "But Elena's needs have to come first. She wants Margaret here. I cannae let Margaret's darkness threaten anyone under me roof, least of all Cassandra."

His eyes flickered with a painful resolve, his hands resting on his desk, knuckles white with the tension of his thoughts. "I daenae have a choice, Daniel."

Jessica, who had been quietly observing, finally reached out and placed a hand on Hunter's shoulder. Her touch was gentle, but there was a firmness to it that let him know she understood, even if it pained her.

"Hunter, I ken this isnae easy for ye," she said softly, her Scottish brogue thick with sympathy. "We understand yer reasonin', but ye need to make sure that ye've thought this through." Her voice softened as she continued, "If ye feel Margaret poses a threat to Cassandra's safety, then it's best she stays at McAllister Castle and nae return here."

Hunter looked down at the desk, his mind racing. He knew what they said was true. Cassandra had brought light into the castle, something he hadn't realized he'd been missing until she was gone. But Cassandra's safety came first—he couldn't afford to put her in danger. Margaret's cruelty had already caused enough harm, and Hunter would be damned if he allowed it to hurt anyone else.

"I daenae want to lose Cassandra," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. "But I cannae let me priorities slip... Elena is me heart. I've already lost too much."

He looked up at Jessica and Daniel, his eyes filled with a mixture of guilt and determination. "Ye may think me wrong, but this is what I believe is best. I cannae risk it."

Daniel met his gaze, the frustration still lingering, but now tempered with understanding. "I ken, Hunter. I really do," he said, his voice quieter now, but still firm. "Just ken that we're with ye. But daenae forget what Cassandra brought to this place. She was good for us... and for ye."

Hunter took a deep breath, trying to reconcile his feelings. The decision had been made, but the weight of it still pressed heavily on him. "I willnae forget," he whispered.

Jessica nodded, her expression softening with empathy. "Then we stand with ye, Hunter." She gave his shoulder a final reassuring squeeze before standing up with Daniel. "But ye need to make sure that this decision to keep Cassandra away doesnae break ye, aye?"

Hunter nodded slowly, watching them leave. Alone again, he felt the weight of his choices pressing down on him, but he knew, deep down, that he had done what was necessary.

Hunter lay tossing and turning in his bed, restlessly turning over thoughts of Cassandra in his mind. Days had passed since she left, but he could not shake the feeling that something was missing.

He could still feel the warmth of her presence, the way her laughter had filled the hallways, the way she had lightened even the darkest moments. But now, all that remained was a hollow ache in his chest that he couldn't ignore.

A sharp knock at his door cut through the silence of the night. Hunter stiffened, irritation surging through him as he swung his legs off the bed. He grabbed his kilt from the chair beside the bed, quickly draping it over his naked body before heading to the door. With his jaw clenched, he swung the door open, expecting nothing more than a servant or another intrusion, but instead, Margaret stood there, her eyes

lowered in a feigned innocence.

Margaret stepped forward, her voice soft and smooth. “I thought ye might be lonely, Hunter,” she purred, her eyes flicking up to meet his. “Might ye’d want some company.”

Her lips curled into a subtle smile as she batted her lashes, her gaze lingering on his bare chest. Hunter’s stomach turned as he stared back at her, disgusted by the sight.

Hunter’s voice came out low and hard as he clenched his jaw. “I daenae desire ye, Margaret,” he said, his words sharp with anger. “Go back to yer own room. Ye’re nae welcome here.”

His tone left no room for debate, but Margaret only tilted her head, seemingly unbothered by his refusal.

Margaret pouted, a childish gleam in her eyes. “Do ye nae remember, Hunter?” she said, stepping closer, her voice a sickly sweet whisper. “Ye’ve had me before, so why nae once more for old times’ sake?”

She placed a hand on his chest, pressing against him, but her touch only made him more furious. Hunter’s pulse quickened, his anger boiling beneath the surface.

Hunter’s patience snapped. He stepped back, his voice now a shout as he glared at her. “I said, go back to yer room, Margaret!” he growled, his hands trembling with restraint. Without giving her a chance to respond, he slammed the door shut, locking it with force. His chest heaved as he stood there, heart pounding with frustration and fury.

It wasn’t just Margaret that was causing his anger. It was the constant ache for Cassandra, the regret for letting her leave, and the impossible weight of the choices

he had made.

Days passed since Cassandra's departure, and Hunter found himself feeling more irritable and a shell of his former self. That day he wandered the halls of the castle, lost in his thoughts.

His steps led him toward Elena's nursery. When he pushed open the door, Elena's face lit up as she dashed toward him, throwing her arms around him in an embrace.

Hunter knelt down and wrapped his arms around Elena, feeling the warmth of her small frame against his. "How's me wee lass today?" he asked softly, his voice full of concern. Elena pulled back just enough to look him in the eyes and smiled. "I feel good, Da," she replied, her voice filled with innocence. But then her brow furrowed, and she asked, "Will we ever see Mistress Cassandra again?"

"I daenae ken, lass," he said.

"Did she leave because I became better?"

Hunter's heart twisted at the mention of Cassandra. He took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. "Tis nae yer fault she left, lass. Cassandra was nae meant to stay here, Elena," he said gently. "She was just visitin', lass. It was her time to go home." He hoped the answer would satisfy her, but the sadness in her eyes told him it wouldn't.

Elena's small face turned serious as she asked, "Why dinnae she stay? She was kind to me, Da. I liked her."

Hunter fought to keep his composure as he stroked her hair, not wanting to upset her further. "She's needed elsewhere, lass," he said, his voice softer now. "But ye'll nae forget her, will ye?" He hoped Elena would remember Cassandra fondly, even though she couldn't stay.

He quickly changed the subject, his mind working furiously. "Has yer maither been good to ye, Elena?" he asked, trying to keep his tone casual.

Elena looked away, her face briefly clouding over. "She hasnae come to see me."

The words hit Hunter like a blow to the chest. He stiffened, his jaw tightening in anger. He bit down on the urge to shout, to demand why Margaret had been neglecting Elena.

Instead, he closed his eyes for a moment, taking a breath to steady his emotions. The whole reason he'd allowed Margaret to stay was because he feared he couldn't provide Elena with what a mother could—gentleness, understanding, the soft nurturing that only a woman could offer.

But now, knowing that Margaret hadn't been fulfilling her duties, his frustration boiled over. How could he have been so naive?

He knelt beside Elena again, forcing a smile onto his face. "I'm sorry, lass," he said softly, brushing a lock of hair from her forehead. He leaned forward and kissed her gently on the head, trying to calm the growing storm inside him. "But I'll take ye for a walk in the meadows later."

Elena's eyes lit up, and a bright smile spread across her face. "Ye will, Da? A walk in the meadows?" she asked eagerly, her voice filled with excitement. Hunter's heart softened, the love for his daughter shining through the frustration he felt about Margaret's actions.

"Aye, lass. Leonora will come with us," he promised, his voice warm.

He kissed her goodbye and set out to find Margaret and give her some sound words. As Hunter's footsteps echoed through the stone corridors, his thoughts preoccupied

with the Elena's admission that Margaret was neglecting her.

But then, a harsh sound caught his attention—a sharp slap, followed by the sound of a woman's voice raised in anger. He quickened his pace, rounding the corner just in time to see Margaret striking Heather, one of the servants, across the cheek. His blood boiled at the sight, and he stepped forward, his voice low but firm.

"Margaret," Hunter called, his tone sharp, catching her hand in his mid-swing. "Ye may have forgotten how things go here, but ye have nay right to lay a hand on me servants."

Margaret's face twisted in a sneer, and she glared at him, clearly unrepentant. "She dropped a tray, Hunter," she said, her voice dripping with disdain. "She deserves it for her clumsiness. I willnae have incompetence in me household." She raised her chin defiantly, her stance not one of remorse but of arrogance.

Hunter's jaw tightened with restrained fury. He turned his gaze to Heather, who stood trembling, her eyes wide with fear. "Heather," he commanded softly, his voice gentler now, "ye can go."

The young woman didn't hesitate for a moment, fleeing down the hall, eager to escape the tension in the air. Hunter didn't blame her.

Turning his attention back to Margaret, he fixed her with a hard look. "Ye will return to yer rooms," he said coldly, his voice carrying authority. "And I willnae tolerate any more of this behavior." He didn't wait for her response, his words final, demanding obedience.

Margaret, however, wasn't one to be silenced so easily. "Oh, I'll go, will I?" she spat, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "I think ye forget yer place, Hunter. I'm nae one to be ordered around by the likes of ye." Her posture was stiff with anger, her eyes

burning with defiance.

Hunter's temper flared, but he fought to keep his composure. He stepped forward, his voice steady but filled with the weight of his authority. "Ye will go to yer rooms, Margaret," he repeated, his words firm. "Or I'll have ye escorted there by the guards. It's yer choice."

Margaret's eyes flashed with a mix of fury and pride, but she remained silent for a moment, her anger warring with her stubbornness. She turned away abruptly, her skirts swishing with the force of her motion, but not without one last cutting remark. "I willnae be treated like a servant in me own home, Hunter. I am the Lady of the house."

Hunter stood rooted in place as she walked off, her defiance trailing behind her like a shadow. He exhaled slowly, the tension in his shoulders releasing bit by bit, but his anger remained simmering beneath the surface.

He had allowed Margaret to stay in the castle for Elena's sake, but moments like these only reminded him of the mistake he'd made. His grip on control was slipping, and he knew he had to keep a tighter rein on the situation before things got out of hand.

Hunter stood in the doorway of Cassandra's old room, his eyes sweeping over the emptiness that now defined the space. The bed was neatly made, the curtains drawn tight against the morning light, and yet it all felt wrong.

His gaze fell on the trunk at the foot of the bed, its lid slightly ajar. With a sigh, he crossed the room and lifted the lid, revealing the delicate dresses Cassandra had left behind. He ran his fingers over the soft fabric, his mind wandering to the memories of her laughter and the warmth she brought to the castle. A pang of regret hit him, sharper than he expected, and he cursed under his breath, wishing Margaret had never

returned.

As he stood there, holding the dresses in his hands, an overwhelming realization settled over him. His heart thudded painfully in his chest as he admitted the truth to himself?—

I want Cassandra to be me wife.

The thought of her with someone else made him sick to his stomach, and the idea of her never returning to the castle twisted in his gut. He clenched his jaw, a surge of anger coursing through him at the thought of losing her to anyone that caught her heart at McAllister castle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Cassandra sat by the window of her chamber, staring out at the familiar landscape of McAllister Castle. She had been welcomed back with open arms, Elias and Holly making her feel as if she had never left. Yet, despite the warmth of her home, something felt off—something was missing. No matter how hard she tried to push it aside, her thoughts kept drifting back to Hunter.

A knock at the door pulled her from her thoughts. She took a steadying breath, composing herself before speaking.

“Enter,” she called softly.

Holly stepped inside, her sharp gaze immediately settling on Cassandra.

"I can tell somethin' is different with ye, lass," Holly said, folding her arms. "Did somethin' happen at McDougal Castle?"

Cassandra forced a smile, shaking her head. "Nay, I'm just tired is all."

Holly narrowed her eyes and stepped closer, her hands coming up to grip Cassandra's shoulders. "Daenae lie to me, Cassandra. I ken ye better than that."

Cassandra swallowed hard, but before she could say another word, Holly pulled her into a tight embrace.

"Come here, lass," Holly murmured, her voice filled with understanding.

The moment Cassandra felt Holly's arms around her, the walls she had so carefully built crumbled. A sob tore from her throat, her body trembling as she clung to her friend.

"Shh, lass, let it out," Holly soothed, running a hand over Cassandra's back.

Cassandra buried her face against Holly's shoulder, the weight of everything crashing down on her. "I—I dinnae want to leave," she admitted between broken breaths.

Holly pulled back slightly, studying her with knowing eyes. "Ye miss it?"

Cassandra bit her lip, nodding as fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. "Aye... more than I ever thought possible."

Cassandra sat on the edge of her bed, wringing her hands together as Holly sat beside her. The weight of her emotions pressed down on her chest, making it difficult to breathe. She had tried to ignore the ache in her heart, but now, with Holly's comforting presence, she could no longer hold back.

She took a deep breath, bracing herself for the truth that had been gnawing at her since she left McDougal Castle.

"I made a terrible mistake, Holly," Cassandra whispered, her voice shaking.

Holly turned to face her, concern etched across her face. "What kind of mistake, lass?"

Cassandra swallowed hard, forcing the words past the lump in her throat. "I fell in love with the Laird of clan McDougal."

Holly's eyes widened for only a moment. "Och, is that all? That's nay mistake,

Cassandra. Hunter is a good, strong man."

Cassandra shook her head violently, fresh tears brimming in her eyes. "Nay, ye daenae understand. It is a mistake because his wife returned."

Holly's mouth fell open, her brows knitting together in shock. "His wife? I thought Margaret was dead!"

"Aye, so did all," Cassandra said, her voice breaking. "But it turns out she was alive all these years. It's a long story, but none of it matters—she has returned, and Hunter welcomed her back."

Holly exhaled sharply, rubbing Cassandra's back in soothing circles. "Och, lass, I'm so sorry. That must have been awful for ye."

Cassandra let out a trembling breath, her hands gripping the fabric of her gown. "It was worse than I ever imagined. I thought I was just fond of him, but when I left, it felt as if I left a piece of me heart behind."

Holly gave her a sad smile, squeezing her shoulder. "Ye truly care for him, daenae ye?"

Cassandra nodded, wiping at her tears. "Aye, I do. But it doesnae matter now. He has a family, and I was never meant to be part of it."

Holly tilted her head, studying Cassandra with sympathy. "But what if he cares for ye too? What if he let Margaret back only because of his daughter?"

Cassandra shook her head. "Even if that were true, what kind of woman would I be to stand between him and his wife? I cannae do that, Holly. I willnae be the reason his daughter loses her maither again."

Holly sighed, leaning back on the bed with a thoughtful expression. "Ye always put others before yerself, Cassandra. But love doesnae always follow the rules. If Hunter's heart belongs to ye, then Margaret's return changes naught."

Cassandra gave her a weak smile, though her heart still felt heavy. "It changes everythin', Holly. He made his choice, and I must live with it."

Holly pulled her into another hug, holding her close. "Then I'll be here for ye, lass. Nay matter what."

Cassandra pulled away from Holly's embrace, wiping at her damp cheeks with the sleeve of her gown.

"I daenae ken how to move forward, Holly. I thought I'd found a place where I belonged, and now it's all gone."

Holly gave her a gentle smile, tucking a loose strand of hair behind Cassandra's ear. "Och, lass, ye can grieve what ye lost, but ye must also see what ye've gained. Ye opened yer heart again—do ye ken how remarkable that is? After yer betrothed betrayed ye I thought ye had sworn off men forever. Now ye have healed from that."

Cassandra let out a shaky breath, shaking her head. "I was a fool. I let meself believe in somethin' that was never mine to have."

Holly scoffed and folded her arms. "Daenae be daft. Love is never foolish. If ye had kept yer heart locked away, ye'd never have known what it meant to feel this deeply again."

Cassandra frowned, her hands twisting in her lap. "But what good is feelin' deeply if it only brings pain?"

Holly reached out, taking Cassandra's hands in hers. "Because pain means ye lived, lass. It means ye've healed from the past that once held ye prisoner. And now, instead of hidin', ye can walk forward with an open heart."

Cassandra blinked at her, uncertainty flickering in her eyes. "I daenae feel healed. I feel broken."

Holly gave her a reassuring squeeze. "That's because ye're still in the thick of it. But in time, ye'll see—this isnae the end of yer story, Cassandra. It's only the beginnin'."

Cassandra let out a slow breath, her shoulders slumping. "I wish I had yer certainty, Holly. Right now, all I feel is loss."

Holly gave a knowing smile. "Aye, but in time, ye'll feel somethin' else, too—hope. And when that day comes, ye'll be ready for whatever comes next."

Cassandra swallowed hard, nodding slowly. "Maybe ye're right. Maybe one day, this pain will pass."

Holly grinned and nudged her playfully. "Aye, and when it does, ye'll look back on this moment and see just how strong ye really were."

For the first time in days, Cassandra felt the tiniest spark of something that wasn't sorrow. Perhaps, just perhaps, Holly was right.

Cassandra sat at her wooden worktable, grinding dried herbs into a fine powder. Every time she tried to focus, memories of Hunter came rushing back—his touch, his kiss, the way he looked at her when he thought no one was watching. She clenched her jaw and forced herself to concentrate on her work.

She reached for a vial of oil, carefully measuring out drops into the mixture. Her

hands moved with practiced ease, but her thoughts betrayed her. She saw Hunter in her mind, the warmth of his lips against hers, the strength of his arms around her.

Shaking her head, she muttered under her breath, "Enough of this foolishness, Cassandra. Ye have work to do."

She grabbed a mortar and pestle, grinding the herbs with renewed force. She told herself she was being daft—Hunter had let her leave without protest. If he had truly cared, he would have stopped her, would have said something, anything, to make her stay. But he had remained silent, and that silence spoke louder than any words ever could.

Her heart ached as she poured the crushed herbs into a small pouch, tying it closed with a piece of twine.

"If he wanted me, he would've said so," she whispered to herself. The realization stung, but she forced herself to accept it. Hunter had made his choice, and now she had to live with it.

She straightened her back and forced a deep breath into her lungs. There were people in need of her medicines, and she would not allow herself to fall apart over a man who had not fought for her. She was Cassandra McAllister, a healer, a woman of strength, not some lovesick lass waiting for a man to save her. She had survived worse, and she would survive this.

But even as she worked, mixing salves and measuring tinctures, the truth lingered in the back of her mind. No matter how much she willed herself to forget, Hunter McDougal had left a mark on her heart that she could not erase.

I love him .

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:00 pm

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"T is a good way to divide the grazin' lands," Hunter said.

Hunter sat at the long wooden table, a map of the surrounding territories spread before him. Daniel leaned against the table's edge, arms crossed, as they discussed border disputes and patrol routes.

"Aye, the farmers will be given allotments every month. That should satisfy them, for now."

The conversation was routine, but Hunter found his mind drifting. He had little patience for his duties when something far heavier weighed on his heart.

A deep, resonant toll rang through the castle keep, cutting through their conversation like a blade. Both men snapped their heads up, recognizing the alarm. Hunter pushed back his chair and strode to the window, Daniel close behind. Below, in the courtyard, the guards moved swiftly as the portcullis began to rise.

Daniel narrowed his eyes as he peered down. "Who is it?"

Hunter gritted his teeth, his hands tightening into fists at his sides. "Lady Margaret's faither. Michael."

Daniel let out a slow breath. "This cannae be good."

Hunter didn't reply. He turned on his heel and marched toward the door, Daniel

following without question. The heavy thud of their boots echoed through the stone corridors as they made their way down to the courtyard.

Michael had just dismounted when Hunter stepped outside. The older man's face was drawn, his eyes searching frantically as if he still couldn't believe what he had heard. Hunter approached him with a measured stride, his face unreadable.

Hunter spoke first, his voice cold and firm. "What are ye doin' here? Last time I saw ye, ye tried to stick me with a blade."

Michael's breath hitched, and for a moment, he said nothing. Then, his voice cracked as he asked, "Is it true? Is Margaret alive?"

Hunter's jaw tensed. "Aye, she's alive."

Michael's eyes glistened, and he took a shaky breath. "Where is she? I must see her."

Hunter crossed his arms, his expression hard. "She's within the castle. But ye'll nae be seein' her until I ken ye will be safe."

Michael let out a heavy sigh and rubbed a hand down his weathered face. "I thought she was dead. I mourned her, Hunter. I buried an empty grave in her memory. I wasnae in me right mind."

"I heard the whispers. A traveler passed through me land, speakin' of a woman at Castle McDougal claimin' to be Margaret. I couldnae believe it, but I had to see for meself."

Hunter studied him for a long moment, searching his face. "She returned on her own accord. She dinnae send for ye."

Michael straightened, his expression darkening. "She's me daughter. I have a right to see her."

Hunter's eyes narrowed. "Ye had a right to ken she was alive long ago. But she dinnae tell ye. That should tell ye somethin'."

Michael clenched his fists, frustration flashing in his eyes. "I only wish to speak with her."

The castle doors burst open, and Margaret rushed forward, her skirts billowing behind her. Without hesitation, she flung herself into Michael's arms, clutching him tightly.

Hunter crossed his arms, his face unreadable, as he observed the reunion. The older man remained stiff at first, as if unsure this was real, but then his arms slowly wrapped around his daughter.

"Faither, I missed ye so much," Margaret murmured against Michael's shoulder.

Michael pulled back just enough to look at her, his eyes searching her face. "How... how is this possible?" he asked, his voice raw with emotion.

Margaret sniffled, blinking rapidly. "Come inside. I will explain everythin'," she said, grasping his hands tightly.

Michael hesitated, glancing over at Hunter as if expecting some kind of answer from him. But Hunter remained silent, watching with cold detachment. He knew Margaret well enough to suspect she wouldn't tell the whole truth. Instead, she would weave a story that painted her as the victim.

Margaret turned back to Michael, tugging him toward the entrance. "Please, Faither. We have much to discuss."

Michael gave Hunter one last glance before nodding. "Aye, lass. Lead the way."

Hunter clenched his jaw as he watched them disappear into the castle. His gut twisted with unease, knowing Margaret's version of events would be far from honest. He had no doubt she would leave out the part where she had betrayed him and abandoned her own child simply so she would not have shame staining her name.

Daniel stepped up beside him, arms crossed. "Reckon she'll tell him the truth?"

Hunter let out a humorless chuckle. "Nae a chance. She'll spin a tale that puts her in the best light."

Daniel exhaled sharply. "The lass always was a fine liar."

Hunter said nothing, his gaze fixed on the castle doors. He should have felt relief that Margaret was dealing with her own mess now, but instead, frustration boiled within him. She had returned, turned his world upside down, and now her father was here, demanding answers she would never give.

Daniel clapped him on the shoulder. "Ye should let it be, Hunter. Whatever she tells him, it doesnae change what we ken."

Hunter nodded stiffly, but it did little to ease the weight in his chest. His thoughts drifted, unbidden, to Cassandra. She would never have lied like Margaret. She had left with her head high, without deception or manipulation.

Later that evening, Hunter was restless. He had some whiskey as he sat at the table. Before long he fell into a slumber with his head on the table fully clothed.

When a loud banging at his door woke him, he jumped and grabbed his dirk.

"Come quickly, it's Elena," Heather the servant girl said as he opened the door.

Hunter clenched his fists as he stormed through the corridors, his boots echoing against the stone floor. Heather scurried behind him, nervously wringing her hands.

Now, as he neared Cassandra's old room, his fury burned hotter with every step.

The sight before him sent his blood boiling. Margaret stood in the doorway, her face twisted in anger, while Elena sobbed, clutching her reddened cheek. The little girl trembled, her tear-filled eyes darting toward Cassandra's empty room as if it might offer some form of comfort.

Without hesitation, Hunter strode forward and yanked Elena into his arms, shielding her from Margaret's wrath.

Margaret crossed her arms, her lips curling. "She broke me necklace!" she snapped.

Hunter's voice was sharp as a blade. "I'll nae hear excuses, Margaret. Ye will never lay a hand on Elena again!"

Margaret scoffed. "The lass ran from me like a wild beast, screamin' for that healer woman! All the way to this room. She needed to be disciplined!"

Hunter's jaw clenched as he tightened his grip on Elena. "Aye, she ran. Because she feels safer with Cassandra than with her own maither—ye!"

Margaret's nostrils flared. "And why is that, Hunter? Because ye let that woman fill her head with nonsense? How am I supposed to teach me own daughter if ye willnae let me correct her?"

Hunter sneered. "She doesnae need correction, she needs kindness! Elena can learn

without a hand to her cheek!"

Margaret threw up her hands in exasperation. "Och, kindness will make her weak! A proper woman needs discipline, needs structure!"

Hunter's grip on his daughter tightened protectively. "A proper woman needs love. But I suppose ye wouldnae ken that, would ye, Margaret?"

Margaret's eyes flashed with fury. "Do ye mean to insult me in front of me own child?"

Hunter's voice dropped to a deadly calm. "Ye insult yerself, Margaret, with the way ye treat her."

Elena sniffled against Hunter's chest, and he rubbed her back soothingly. Margaret's anger flared hotter. "So, this is how it is, then? Ye'd rather have that healer raisin' our daughter than me?"

Hunter's eyes were like steel. "I'd rather have anyone else raisin' her than ye, if this is how ye plan to maither her."

Margaret gasped, placing a hand on her chest. "Ye dare speak to me this way? After all I've been through?"

Hunter's lips curled into a sneer. "Aye, and ye brought it upon yerself. Now, get out of me sight. I'm sendin' ye away for good."

Margaret's face twisted with rage as she glared at Hunter. "Ye're a bampot if ye think I'll be cast out like some common wench!" she spat.

Elena sniffled against Hunter's chest, her small hands clutching his tunic. "I want

Cassandra!" she cried, her voice cracking with heartbreak. "I want this mean woman gone!"

Margaret's eyes widened in shock. "Och, the lass doesnae mean that," she said quickly, forcing a brittle smile. "She's just upset. Children say things they daenae understand."

Hunter's jaw tightened, his grip on Elena protective and firm. "Nay, she kens exactly what she's sayin'," he said, his voice hard as stone. "And so do I. Ye will prepare to leave the castle immediately."

Margaret's eyes blazed with defiance. "I willnae leave!" she snapped. "This is me home—Elena is me daughter!"

Hunter scoffed. "Aye, and yet ye've done naught but bring her misery since ye returned." His expression darkened as he took a step closer. "I only let ye stay for her sake, but she doesnae need ye here. Ye've lost any right to call this yer home."

Margaret clenched her fists, her nostrils flaring. "Ye cannae force me out, Hunter!"

Hunter's lips curled in a cold sneer. "If ye daenae leave of yer own free will in one hour, I'll have the guards see ye away."

Margaret's breath hitched, fury and disbelief warring on her face. She knew he meant it. She had pushed too far, and there was no winning against him now.

With a huff, she spun on her heel. "Fine," she spat. "I'll collect me things—and me faither—and be on me way."

Hunter didn't respond, only held Elena closer as Margaret stormed down the hall, her footsteps echoing with finality.

Elena's tiny fingers clutched at his tunic, her face buried against his shoulder as she sobbed. He ran a soothing hand over her back, his anger still simmering beneath the surface. The castle had felt heavy with Margaret's presence, but now, with her leaving, it was as if a weight had been lifted.

He kissed Elena's hair and whispered, "Daenae fash, lass. She'll nae trouble ye again." His voice was low but firm, a silent promise to protect her.

Elena hiccupped and sniffled, her small arms tightening around his neck. "I miss Cassandra," she mumbled against his chest.

Hunter exhaled sharply, his jaw clenching at the mention of Cassandra's name. He missed her too, more than he dared to admit.

Elena pulled back slightly, her tear-streaked face peering up at him. "Can we go find her?" she asked hopefully, her big eyes pleading with him.

Hunter's chest ached at her words. He had tried to tell himself that Cassandra had left by her own choice, that she had walked away from him willingly. But seeing Elena's pain only deepened the truth he had been avoiding—he had let Cassandra go without a fight. "I daenae ken if she wants to see us, lass," he admitted softly.

Elena frowned, her small brows furrowing. "She loves us," she insisted. "She wouldnae leave if she dinnae think she had to."

Hunter swallowed hard, guilt pressing against his ribs. "Aye," he murmured. "Mayhap she thought she had nay choice." He had given her no reason to stay, had stood silent when she left instead of asking her to remain.

Elena wiped her nose on his tunic and nodded. "Then we have to tell her she does," she said firmly.

Hunter chuckled despite himself, brushing a stray curl from her forehead. "Ye've got a strong heart, wee one," he said. He could not ignore the truth any longer—Cassandra belonged with them. And this time, he would not let her go so easily.

He turned on his heel and strode down the corridor, Elena still nestled in his arms. Margaret would be gone within the hour, and after that, he had only one thing left to do. He would find Cassandra. And he would bring her home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

L ate that night, after Margaret and Michael left the castle, Hunter stirred from his restless sleep, his ears catching the faintest cry echoing through the corridors. Then Leonora barked loudly with panic. His heart leaped into his throat as he recognized Elena's voice, sharp with fear. Without hesitation, he threw back the covers and bolted from his chamber, his bare feet pounding against the cold floor.

He reached Elena's room in seconds, his instincts screaming that something was terribly wrong. Pushing open the heavy wooden door, his blood ran cold at the sight before him. Margaret stood by the bed, her hands clutching Elena's small frame, dragging her toward the door. Elena kicked and struggled, tears streaming down her face as she fought against her mother's grip. Leonora tore at Margaret's skirt.

"Unhand her this instant!" Hunter bellowed, his voice like thunder in the small chamber.

Margaret froze for a brief moment, then yanked Elena closer, her wild eyes meeting his. "She's me daughter," she spat, her voice filled with venom. "I willnae leave without her!"

Hunter's hands curled into fists, his fury barely contained. "She is nae yers to take!" he roared. "Ye lost that right long ago when ye abandoned her!" Elena sobbed and reached toward him, her small hands trembling.

Margaret's grip on the child tightened. "I willnae let ye poison her against me," she hissed. "She deserves a maither, nae a brute like ye raisin' her alone!"

Hunter stepped closer, his body coiled with rage. "A maither protects her bairn, she doesnae terrify her!"

Elena thrashed in Margaret's hold, her cries growing louder. "Papa!" she wailed, desperation laced in her voice. Hunter had heard enough. In one swift motion, he lunged forward, tearing Elena from Margaret's grasp.

Margaret staggered back, her chest rising and falling with heavy breaths. "Ye will regret this," she seethed. "Mark me words, Hunter, I willnae go quietly!"

His voice was like steel. "Ye tried to steal me daughter in the dead of night. That alone is treason against yer own clan."

Margaret's face twisted with rage, but he did not stop.

"Ye will be imprisoned at dawn and executed for what ye have done."

A cruel smile spread across Margaret's lips. "If I'm to die, I'll nae go alone," she sneered. In a flash, she pulled a hidden dagger from the folds of her cloak. With deadly speed, she lunged toward Elena.

Hunter moved on pure instinct. He threw himself in front of his daughter, catching Margaret's wrist before the blade could reach its mark. With a growl of fury, he twisted her arm, forcing the knife from her grasp. He struck deep with her own blade, sending her crumpling onto the floor.

He grabbed Elena shielding her eyes and ran out of the room with Leonora behind them.

Elena sobbed into his tunic, her tiny body trembling against him. Hunter held her tightly, his heart racing, fury and fear battling within him.

Daniel rushed toward them, sword in hand. His eyes darted between Hunter, the crying child. "What happened?" he demanded.

Hunter exhaled sharply. "Margaret tried to take Elena. And when I stopped her, she tried to kill her. So, I took her life. She's in the room.

Daniel's expression darkened as he sheathed his sword.

"I daenae think she acted alone. Her faither Michael must be in the castle or on the grounds. Find him!"

"I'll have the guards take him to the dungeon when we find him," he said.

"See to it he never gets another chance at this," he ordered.

As Daniel called for the guards, Hunter carried Elena out of the room, away from the darkness and danger. She clung to him, her fingers fisted in his tunic.

"I was scared, Faither," she whispered. He kissed the top of her head.

"I ken, lass. But she'll never hurt ye again."

They reached his chamber, and he tucked her into his own bed, keeping her close. His mind was filled with only one thought—he had almost lost her. And the woman who had truly cared for Elena, the woman he had foolishly let go, was not here.

Elena's sobs broke Hunter's heart as she clung to him, her small hands gripping his tunic like a lifeline. "I want Cassandra," she cried, her voice trembling with fear. "I dinnae want her to go away. Please, bring her back."

Hunter's heart twisted at the raw pain in his daughter's voice. He brushed a lock of

hair from Elena's tear-streaked face, his hand gentle despite the storm raging inside him. He realized that he had been worried Elena needed a mother that he could not be, and all along Cassandra was that woman that Elena herself had chosen to be the one to provide motherly love in her time of need.

"I promise ye, lass," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "I will bring her back. I'll make sure she's here where she belongs, safe and sound."

Elena's eyes, wide with a mix of hope and uncertainty, met his. "Ye promise?" she asked, her voice small, fragile.

Hunter's jaw clenched, but he nodded firmly, squeezing her hand. "Aye, I promise. I'll not let ye lose her." His heart, heavy with guilt and longing, swelled with determination. He would not let Cassandra slip away.

He exhaled heavily, his heart aching.

I cannae make the same mistake twice.

Cassandra was hunched over a small bowl in her workroom, the scent of dried herbs filling the air. Her hands moved with precision as she carefully ground the mixture, her mind occupied by the work, yet a strange restlessness lingered in the back of her mind. The door suddenly burst open, and Cassandra's head shot up in shock. There, standing in the doorway, was Hunter, his face pale with worry and his eyes wide with urgency.

Her heart skipped a beat, a knot tightening in her stomach.

"Hunter?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly. "What's wrong? Is it Elena? Tell me she's alright." She stood up, her hands instinctively reaching for him, dread flooding her chest. She had feared something terrible had happened to her beloved

girl.

Hunter took a few steps into the room, his eyes still sharp with concern but softening at the sight of Cassandra.

"Elena is safe, lass," he said quickly, his voice urgent yet reassuring. "But it does me good to ken yer thoughts are on me daughter."

"Then what has happened?" she asked.

"It's Margaret. She tried to abduct Elena. I caught her in the act, but..." He paused, running a hand through his hair as if still processing the chaos. "She wouldnae go quietly. There was a knife, and she attacked Elena. I... had nay choice but to end it. To end her."

Cassandra's face drained of color as the weight of Hunter's words sank in. "Margaret... she's dead?"

Her voice cracked, her mind racing to understand the enormity of what he had just said.

"Aye."

"And Elena? She's alright?" Her hands trembled as she clutched the edge of the workbench, struggling to steady herself.

Hunter gave a solemn nod, his jaw tight as he spoke the words that brought some measure of relief. "Elena, she's safe. I made sure of it." He paused, his brow furrowing as he continued, "Michael ran off after it all happened. My guards pursued him, but we lost him in the woods. I daenae think he'll be a threat anymore."

Cassandra let out a long, shaky breath, her shoulders slumping as the tension eased from her body. She had feared the worst, and now, despite the tragedy, her heart felt a tiny flicker of relief. "Thank God," she whispered, her mind still reeling from the gravity of the situation.

Hunter took a step closer, his eyes locking onto hers with an intensity that made her heart race. "Cassandra," he said softly, his voice low, "there's somethin' I need to ask ye. I've thought on it long and hard, and I cannae wait any longer."

His eyes searched hers. "Marry me. Be with me. Let me make ye me wife, and we'll build a life, together. I love ye."

Cassandra's breath caught in her throat, her heart pounding in her chest as his words settled into her soul. She had never expected him to ask, not after everything they had been through. She had always feared that their connection might remain unspoken, a deep bond without a name. But now, standing before her, he was asking for more than she ever dreamed of. She looked into his eyes, feeling her heart swell with love, and in that moment, she knew what her answer had to be.

"I will," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "I will marry ye, Hunter. I love ye, and I've never wanted anythin' more than to be by yer side. With ye and Elena."

Her hands reached out to him, trembling slightly, but Hunter's smile softened the fear and uncertainty that had held her back. He took her hands in his, his grip strong and reassuring.

As they stood there, the world outside the walls of the castle seemed to fade away. Cassandra's mind was a whirl of emotions, but beneath it all, there was a steady warmth blooming in her chest. She had spent so many years alone, carrying the weight of her past, but now, in this moment, she realized she wasn't alone anymore. She would be with Hunter, with the man she loved, and they would build a future

together.

Her heart fluttered with joy, and for the first time in years, she allowed herself to dream. She was deliriously happy, and though she knew there would still be challenges ahead, she was ready to face them, so long as Hunter was by her side.

"I never thought I would be this happy," she sobbed.

Hunter pulled her close, his arms wrapping around her with a tenderness that matched the depth of his love for her.

"Ye've made me the happiest man alive, with yer answer" he whispered against her hair, his voice thick with emotion. "This is just the beginnin', lass. Together, we'll make it work."

In that moment, as the sounds of the world outside faded to nothing, Cassandra knew that everything had changed. She had a family now, and her future was no longer a solitary one. She had a life with Hunter ahead of her, a life she had once thought was beyond her reach. But now, with him, anything was possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Hunter entered Elias' meeting chamber. His face unreadable as he glanced up from his papers.

Hunter cleared his throat, his voice low and steady, though there was a nervous edge to it. "Laird McAllister... Elias" he began, "I've asked Cassandra to marry me, and she's accepted." He paused, letting the weight of his words settle between them, his hands tightening into fists at his sides.

Elias remained silent for a long while, his piercing gaze studying Hunter. Hunter's stomach churned, unsure if the silence was a sign of approval or impending disapproval. But no matter what Elias said, Hunter was committed—he would fight for Cassandra with everything he had.

Finally, Elias spoke, his deep voice calm but firm. "Ye've asked me healer to be yer wife," he said, his eyes narrowing just slightly. "Do ye ken the weight of that request? Ye takin' her means takin' someone vital to the clan." His gaze remained steady, his thoughts clearly calculating the impact of Hunter's words.

"I cannae deny ye what ye seek, but ye must ken, the value of Cassandra's skills in the healin' arts is far greater than ye might realize."

Hunter swallowed hard, feeling a pang of guilt twist in his chest. He had known that asking for Cassandra's hand would come with consequences—Elias was a true leader of his people, someone who cared deeply for their welfare, and Cassandra was integral to his clan's wellbeing.

"I ken," Hunter said quietly, his voice thick with emotion. "I dinnae want to take her from ye. Somethin' so important to McAllister." He paused, his eyes meeting Elias' with sincerity. "But I love her. And I'll do whatever it takes to make her me wife, even if it means fightin' every battle necessary."

Elias stared at him for a moment longer, then leaned back in his chair, the lines of his face softening. He let out a long breath, his posture relaxed but his eyes still sharp.

"Ye're a stubborn one, Hunter McDougal," he muttered, shaking his head slowly. "But I see the truth in yer eyes. Ye care for her. Aye, ye love her, and that counts for a great deal." He let out a soft grunt, then added, "And I cannae deny ye that either."

Hunter felt his heart race, unsure whether Elias was about to turn him away or give him permission. Elias continued after a long silence, his voice steady as ever. "Ye've got me blessin', Hunter. But there is one thing I ask in return."

Hunter exhaled sharply, his chest tightening with relief and anticipation. "Anythin'," he said without hesitation, his gaze never leaving Elias. "Name it, and it's done."

Elias sat up straighter, his gaze now turning more calculating. "If ye take Cassandra away, ye'll have to provide for the clan in some way," he said slowly, his voice thoughtful. "I'll allow ye to marry her, but ye must promise me this, I'll send two apprentices to McDougal castle. Cassandra needs to train them. Ye'll be takin' me healer, so it's only fair I send others to her to be trained. And if we have a bout of illness too dire, she must come back to help mend the clan."

Hunter stood silently for a moment, the weight of the request settling into his bones. The thought of Cassandra being so far from him was a bitter one, yet he understood Elias' position. If he were in Elias' shoes, he would feel the same way—protecting the healer who had saved so many in his clan. He thought of Cassandra and how she would excel in teaching the apprentices, and with that, his decision was made.

"Aye," Hunter said with a firm nod, meeting Elias' gaze. "Agreed. I'll make sure she has all the help she needs." His voice carried a sense of finality as he spoke, a promise he would keep no matter the cost. "I willnae take her from ye without givin' somethin' back."

Elias studied him for a moment, his expression softening. A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips, though it was brief and fleeting. "Ye'll make a fine husband for her, Hunter," Elias said, his tone low but genuine. "Ye're willin' to sacrifice, to make sure she's taken care of, and that's what matters. She'll need that strength from ye."

Hunter's chest swelled with a quiet pride at the praise. It had been a long journey, full of struggles and uncertainty, but now that he had Elias' blessing, he could finally begin to build the future he wanted with Cassandra.

"Thank ye, Elias," he said with sincerity.

Elias nodded, his eyes softening as he rose from his chair. "Take care of her, lad. She's a rare one, that healer of mine." His gaze lingered for a moment longer before he gave a final, approving nod. "And may the both of ye find happiness together."

With those words, Hunter left Elias' office, his heart lighter than it had been in days. He had received the blessing he had so desperately sought, but he knew that his journey with Cassandra was only beginning.

The great hall of McAllister Castle was alight with warmth and cheer as candles flickered in their holders along the high stone walls. The massive hearth crackled in the corner, casting a golden glow over the gathered guests, and the long wooden tables groaned beneath the weight of the evening's feast.

Hunter looked around the room, taking in the rustic grandeur—the tapestries hanging from the walls, the polished shields reflecting the firelight, and the banners of the

McAllister clan proudly displayed overhead. The air was filled with the rich aromas of roast meats, fresh bread, and spiced wines, and the sound of laughter echoed throughout the hall as friends and kin celebrated into the night.

As Hunter settled into his seat beside Cassandra, he couldn't help but glance at the array of dishes before him. There was venison, freshly roasted and dripping with juices, bowls of root vegetables and greens, and wedges of creamy cheese alongside hearty loaves of bread.

He watched as Elias, ever the gracious host, made sure that his guests were well-fed, his booming voice calling for more meat to be brought out for those who had eaten the most. The evening was a testament to the McAllister clan's strength and unity.

Hunter's gaze shifted to Cassandra across the table, who was deep in conversation with Holly. Hunter couldn't help but smile as he watched her, the woman he had asked to marry him, glowing with life and joy.

He saw Holly pull her into a tight embrace, whispering something in her ear before turning her gaze to him, offering him a smile and a nod of approval. The warmth of their happiness seemed to fill the hall, and Hunter felt his heart swell, knowing that the woman he loved had found not just a future with him, but also the acceptance of those closest to her.

The noise in the hall died down as Elias, standing at the head of the table, raised his goblet to catch everyone's attention. His deep voice boomed through the hall, steady and commanding.

"Lads, lasses, gather round and listen," he called, his thick Scottish brogue resonating in the stone chamber. "Tonight, we feast and we celebrate the strength of our clans and the bonds that hold us together."

He paused for a moment, looking over the gathered faces of the clan, his gaze settling on Hunter and Cassandra.

"For it is nae just strength of sword that holds us strong," he continued, his tone growing more serious, "but the strength of alliances, the strength of kinship, and the strength of those who stand beside us. And tonight, we stand beside a woman who has brought great healin' to both our clan and to McDougal, and for that, we are forever in her debt."

Elias turned his eyes to Cassandra, a proud smile on his face, before raising his glass higher. "Cassandra, healer of McAllister, ye have saved many of us with yer skill and yer heart. We owe ye a debt that cannae be repaid, but it willnae go forgotten."

Hunter watched as the hall fell silent, every eye on Cassandra. She blushed at the attention, her gaze lowering modestly as Elias spoke her praises. She had been more than just a healer to the McAllister clan—she had become a beacon of hope for all who had suffered.

The strength of her heart, her devotion, and her skills had earned her a place in McAllister history, and Hunter couldn't be prouder of the woman she had become. He had known from the moment they had first met that she was special, but hearing Elias speak those words out loud made the depth of her impact undeniable.

Elias took another step forward, his voice rising with the excitement of the announcement. "But that's nae all, me friends," he said, his eyes gleaming with a mischievous sparkle. "There's news tonight that willnae only bring joy to this hall, but will also strengthen the bonds of two great clans. It's me honor to announce that Laird McDougal, brave and true, has asked Cassandra to marry him, and she has accepted!"

A cheer erupted from the clan as Hunter stood, his hand gripping Cassandra's with

pride. The room rang with laughter, applause, and congratulations as the realization of the announcement set in. The clang of glasses and the stomping of feet echoed through the hall, and Hunter, though overwhelmed by the moment, felt a deep satisfaction in knowing that his love for Cassandra was celebrated. The warmth in the room only grew, and he shared a look with Elias, who gave him a nod of approval.

Cassandra stood beside him, her cheeks flushed with both happiness and surprise. She was clearly overwhelmed, but the joy radiating from her made her beauty shine even brighter in the flickering light of the hall. Hunter took her hand in his, squeezing it gently as he looked around at the faces of the clan.

"Ye've made a fine choice, Hunter," Elias called, his voice carrying over the din of the celebration. "Aye, a woman of great skill and heart, and a fine match for ye. May yer marriage bring both clans strength and prosperity. And may we all raise our glasses tonight in honor of this union that will last far longer than this feast!"

The toast was met with raucous cheers, and goblets were raised high in the air. "To Hunter and Cassandra!" the crowd shouted, their voices blending into one joyous roar.

The musicians, who had been playing lively tunes throughout the evening, struck up a faster rhythm, and the clan began calling for Hunter to take Cassandra for a dance. Hunter could feel the weight of their expectations, but there was no resistance in his heart. He turned to Cassandra, his hand outstretched, and flashed her a grin.

"Come, lass," Hunter said, his voice warm with affection and a hint of mischief. "Ye've captured the attention of this hall. It's only fair ye share yer beauty with us on the dance floor."

Cassandra's eyes met his, a glint of amusement in her gaze as she placed her hand in his, allowing him to lead her toward the center of the great hall.

As they reached the floor, the other dancers stepped aside to give them space. The firelight flickered around them, casting shadows that danced along with their movements. Hunter took Cassandra in his arms, guiding her with ease as the music picked up its pace. His hand settled low on her back, and his breath quickened slightly, though he kept his composure.

Cassandra tilted her head and gave him a sly smile. “I dinnae think ye had such boldness in ye, Hunter,” she teased, her tone playful as she matched his steps. “Nae one to shy away from the crowd, eh? Ye’re nae so bashful after all.”

Hunter chuckled, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Aye, lass,” he replied, his voice low and tinged with flirtation. “I’ve learned that ye cannae be too shy if ye want to hold a woman’s attention. But I’ll tell ye this much—ye’re the only one in this room I want to dance with tonight.”

Cassandra raised an eyebrow, her smile widening. “Oh, aye?” she quipped. “And what makes ye so sure I’m worth yer time, Laird McDougal?” She tilted her chin up in mock defiance, challenging him with her playful question.

Hunter’s grip on her waist tightened just slightly, a subtle move meant to draw her closer. “I’m nae one for guessin’ games, Cassandra,” he said, his tone low and teasing. “But ye’ve already captured me heart, so I’d say ye’re well worth more than me time. Ye’ve got me full attention, and I’m nae about to let anyone else steal it.”

Cassandra’s cheeks flushed at his words, though she maintained her composure. “Flatterer,” she muttered with a small laugh, her fingers lightly grazing his shoulder. “I’ll be expectin’ ye to prove it, then. Let’s see how well ye dance, Hunter.”

Hunter grinned, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “I’ve nay need to prove meself, lass,” he said with a wink, twirling her once before drawing her back in. “But if it makes ye feel better, I’ll do me best to impress ye. I’ve nay doubt ye’re in for a good time.”

The music swelled around them, and Hunter led Cassandra through the intricate steps with ease, his movements confident and sure. He could feel her soft laughter reverberate against his chest as they spun and twirled, their feet keeping time with the rhythm. Each glance between them, each touch of their hands, seemed to deepen their connection, and Hunter found himself lost in the way Cassandra moved, so effortlessly graceful.

“Ye’ve taken me by surprise, Cassandra,” Hunter admitted, his voice barely above a whisper now, just for her ears. “I never thought I’d find someone who could match me step for step, but ye... ye’ve done more than that. And I daenae speak of dancin’.”

Cassandra leaned in closer, her breath warm against his ear as she replied with a teasing smile. “Well, ye should have known, Hunter,” she murmured. “I’m nae one to be outdone. I’ll always keep ye on yer toes.”

Hunter chuckled, feeling the surge of affection for her growing even stronger. “I wouldnae want it any other way, lass,” he said, his voice filled with genuine admiration. “Ye’ve made me the happiest man in this hall.”

As the music began to slow, so did their steps, the dance drawing to an end. But the warmth between them remained, a bond that neither time nor distance could break.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The sun had barely risen, casting a golden light over the hills as Cassandra and Hunter rode together on their journey to McDougal castle. They shared the same horse, the sturdy animal trotting steadily beneath them. Cassandra felt the warmth of Hunter's body at her back, and she couldn't help but remember their first ride together, when Hunter had insisted she share his horse, much to her annoyance.

"Here we are, sharin; a horse again," she said.

"Aye, ye remember that day, daenae ye?" Hunter said with a grin, clearly reading her thoughts. "Ye werenae too pleased to be ridin' with me then. Couldnae wait to get off, I reckon."

Cassandra chuckled, shaking her head as the memory returned.

"Aye, I dinnae think I'd survive that ride with ye so close," she teased, her voice light. "But now, I find I daenae mind so much, though ye've nae given me much choice today."

Hunter's arm tightened around her waist, pulling her just a little closer. "But truth be told, I've nay complaints with ye so close to me now, or then. I've nay intention of lettin' ye go anytime soon."

Cassandra laughed softly, her heart fluttering at his words. "Ye've always been so sure of yerself, Hunter McDougal," she replied, glancing over her shoulder to meet his eyes. "I daenae ken if that's arrogance or confidence, but it's certainly amusin'."

“Confidence, lass,” he replied with a wink. “Confidence, and a wee bit of charm, if I’m being honest.” He gave her a teasing grin. “But I’m nae wrong, am I? Ye like it.”

Cassandra shook her head, a smile tugging at her lips despite her attempt to remain serious. “Aye, ye may be right,” she admitted. “I daenae mind yer confidence, but daenae think ye can use it against me too often.” She nudged his hand that rested on her waist, feigning a little discomfort. “A lass needs her space, ye ken?”

Hunter laughed, a low, rumbling sound that made her smile even wider. “Ye ken, Cassandra, ye always try to act like ye cannae stand me, but ye’re just a wee bit too fond of me to admit it.” He paused for a moment, letting the horse pick up a faster pace, and then leaned in slightly, his breath warm against her ear. “I reckon I’ll win ye over, in time, lass. Ye’ll be beggin’ to ride with me like this forever.”

Cassandra could feel the heat of his body so close to hers, his words striking a chord she couldn’t ignore. “I’ll never be the one beggin’, Hunter,” she replied, her voice a playful challenge. “But ye may just get yer wish, for I do enjoy ridin’ beside ye more than I did the first time. Ye’ve got yer charm, nay denyin’ that.”

Hunter’s smile widened, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “Ach, I told ye. A bit of charm, a bit of confidence, and a whole lot of patience. Ye’ll come around, lass.” He leaned in even closer, his lips brushing against her ear. “Maybe I’ll have ye beggin’ sooner than ye think.”

She let out a soft laugh, trying to push back against the heat spreading through her at his closeness. “I’ve nay doubt ye’ll try,” she said with a teasing edge. “But, ye forget, I’m nae so easily swayed, Laird McDougal. I’ll make ye work for it.”

Hunter gave her a mischievous grin, his voice lowering slightly. “I’ve nay problem workin’ for it, Cassandra. I enjoy the challenge.” He nudged the horse a bit faster, feeling the wind rush past them. “But for now, I’ll take what I can get.”

Cassandra raised an eyebrow, catching the look in his eyes. “Aye, I think ye’re quite taken with me, Hunter,” she replied with a grin. “But ye’d best be careful, ye might be the one beggin’ for me attention next.” She turned her head to look at him, her eyes narrowing playfully. “I’m nae an easy woman to win.”

Hunter’s smile softened at her words, and for a moment, he said nothing. Instead, he simply squeezed her gently, holding her against him with a tenderness that took her by surprise. “Ye never make anythin’ easy, lass,” he said after a beat, his voice warm and affectionate. “And that’s what makes ye so irresistible.”

Cassandra turned her head slightly, meeting his gaze. Her heart swelled in her chest, and she realized just how much she had come to care for him, despite the stubborn resistance she often tried to put up. “I’m nae one to be tamed,” she said softly, her voice almost teasing but with an edge of vulnerability.

Hunter gave her a sincere look, his eyes locking with hers. “I’ve nae intention of tamin’ ye, Cassandra,” he said, his voice deepening with sincerity. “I want ye as ye are—wild, untamed, and full of life. I want to be the one who stands beside ye through it all.”

Cassandra felt a warmth in her chest, and for the first time, she allowed herself to truly feel the depth of her affection for him.

“But for now, let’s just enjoy the ride.” The wind picked up, carrying them forward toward McDougal castle, but neither of them could ignore the spark of something deeper, something true, growing between them.

The rolling hills of the Scottish Highlands stretched out before them, bathed in the soft, golden light of the early afternoon sun. The air was crisp, filled with the scent of wild heather and pine, and the distant sound of a bubbling stream echoed through the valley.

The horse's hooves clopped steadily against the earth, but it was Hunter's voice that broke the peaceful quiet, his words low and filled with a simmering intensity.

"Cassandra, I cannae wait anymore," he murmured, his grip tightening on the reins as he guided the horse off the narrow path and into a secluded meadow.

"What are ye doing?"

He glanced at her over his shoulder and she saw that Hunter's dark eyes were fixed with a fire burning in them that mirrored the fierce desire building within him.

He dismounted the horse first, moving swiftly to her side as she carefully slid from the saddle, her fingers brushing against his strong arm as she did.

"Should we nae be getting back to McDougal castle?" she asked.

With a smirk, Hunter reached down, pulling a thick, warm blanket from his saddlebag and spreading it out on the soft grass beneath them.

The world around them seemed to still, the breeze whispering through the trees, and the meadow bathed in the golden light of the late afternoon. It was as if the very land itself had conspired to give them this moment—a moment where the world fell away, leaving only the two of them.

"Let us take a moment ourselves, lass. We've waited too long," he said.

As Cassandra knelt on the blanket, her heart raced in anticipation, her pulse quickening as Hunter joined her.

His presence was magnetic, his broad shoulders and powerful frame a stark contrast to the softness of the meadow around them.

He reached for her, his strong hands gently cupping her face, tilting her head to meet his lips with an intensity that stole her breath away. The kiss was immediate, deep, and filled with a raw need, his lips pressing against hers with a fervor that left no doubt in her mind of the desire he felt.

Her hands trembled as they reached for him, sliding up his chest to the hard planes of his muscles. The warmth of his skin beneath her fingertips sent a shiver through her, and she couldn't resist the urge to feel more of him. Her fingers traced the taut lines of his six-pack abs, marveling at the strength and power beneath his tunic.

His body, honed through years of hard work and battle, was a map of masculine strength, and she longed to explore every inch of it.

Hunter groaned softly as her hands moved lower, her touch igniting a fire in him that burned hotter with every second. His lips left hers only for a moment, his breathing ragged as he looked into her eyes, his voice a low rasp.

"Cassandra, ye've nae idea what waitin' this long has done to me," he whispered, his hands sliding down her back, pulling her closer to him. The heat between them was unbearable, the air thick with the tension of what was to come.

She gazed up at him, her heart pounding in her chest, feeling the warmth of his body pressed against hers.

"Show me then," she whispered.

The strength of his arms, the power in his chest, and the solidness of his body against hers made her pulse spike with a want that she could no longer ignore.

The desire swirling between them was like a storm, impossible to contain, and she found herself pulling him closer, hungry for more.

"Aye, I'll show ye," he groaned.

His lips found hers again, urgent and demanding, as though he could no longer hold back.

She pressed herself closer to him, her breath coming faster as his hands slid under her dress, caressing the soft skin of her legs, sending sparks of electricity through her body. Every touch, every kiss, every movement was a promise—a promise of the passion that was building between them, unstoppable and undeniable.

His hand cupped her between her thighs. She responded with a moan.

"Tis that showin' ye?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered.

His hand moved back and forth rubbing her. Even though there was a layer of material between his hand and her skin, she could feel the heat gathering between her thighs. The tingling shot through her.

Hunter's lips moved from her mouth to her neck, kissing her softly, before he began to trail a line of fire along her skin.

Cassandra gasped, her fingers tangling in his hair, urging him closer, wanting more. She felt as if she was being pulled into a whirlwind of sensation, each moment intensifying the craving she had for him.

His hand moved from under her skirt to her belly. It roamed up her body, cupping her breasts through the fabric of her dress, his touch both gentle and demanding.

The warmth of his palms against her made her gasp, and she arched into him, her

body responding to him in ways she had never imagined.

“Hunter...” she breathed, her voice a soft, desperate whisper as she leaned back, pulling him on top of her. The feel of his body pressing against hers, his weight comforting and yet electrifying, was all she needed to surrender completely to the passion burning between them.

He kissed her again, deeper this time, his tongue brushing against hers in a slow, deliberate exploration that made her head spin. His hands were everywhere, caressing, gripping, teasing—leaving no part of her untouched.

And when he pulled away, just for a moment, to look down at her with dark, lust-filled eyes, she knew that this was only the beginning of something they both craved.

“Cassandra,” he whispered, his voice hoarse with need, “I want ye. I cannae wait any longer. Do ye surrender to me?”

The words hung in the air, heavy with meaning, and Cassandra’s heart thudded in her chest as she realized that this was it—that moment when they would no longer be able to resist. The desire between them had reached its peak, and there was nothing left to do but to give in to it completely.

"Aye, I do," she whispered.

With a final, desperate kiss, she pulled him back to her, ready to feel everything he had to offer.

Her hands tugged at the fabric of his tunic pulling it up over his head. She let her fingers touch his muscular arms, shoulders, and down his firm chest.

A devious smirk crossed his face as he pushed her skirts up to her waist. He went to

work removing her underthings, untying laces, until she shimmied them off.

"I've longed to look at ye again," Hunter groaned as he moved lower down her body.

She gasped when he kissed her sweet center. Softly brushing his lips against her, teasing and licking.

Cassandra crumpled the fabric of the wool blanket beneath them in her fists as the sensation of his touch sent a shiver through her.

"More... once more," she said.

"Aye, like last time?" he asked.

She blushed. "Aye," she said remembering how it felt the last time he pleased her.

Hunter pressed his tongue on her, playfully tapping her rosebud. The skill he presented in flicking back and forth drove her wild. Cassandra arched her back and opened her thighs wider.

Hunter groaned at her response and in his excitement moved his tongue faster and faster until she moaned like a banshee beneath him, wild and untamed.

"I'm... I'm losin' meself," she whispered. With those words she felt the tremor rock through her, shaking her to her core.

Hunter moved his body until his hips were between her legs and his lips pressed against hers. He whispered between kisses.

"Have I made ye feel good, lass?"

"Aye," she whispered. "I want ye to feel the same."

With this encouragement he pushed the tip of himself inside of her. Cassandra pressed her fingers into his strong back as they locked eyes. She thought that she could never love anyone as much as him.

I want him to take me.

With encouragement from a nod of her head, Hunter pushed deeper inside of her. She moaned softly.

Cassandra felt the satisfaction move through her of finally experiencing this man inside her. She had longed for it and now it felt better than she ever imagined. His manhood sliding in and out of her, created a growing pulse between her thighs.

Sensual delightful sensations built up inside of her ready to explode as Hunter moved his hips. Time stood still as he slowly made love to her. She could feel him deep within.

The weight of his body pressed her into the soft grass under the blanket. Feeling his strength on her, she pressed kisses into his shoulder.

"Lass, I daenae ken how much longer I can hold on," he groaned.

"I want to please ye," she said.

With those words, he released inside of her. Both blissfully tremored with pleasure as they lay under the Scottish sky.

EPILOGUE

The day of Cassandra and Hunter's wedding arrived, the sun shining brightly over the hills of McDougal Castle. The air was fresh with the scent of wildflowers, and the sky was clear, as if the very heavens themselves had blessed this union.

The guests gathered outside, the soft hum of conversation filling the air as they awaited the ceremony. The stone courtyard, decorated with vibrant garlands of heather and ivy, was a sight to behold, with a large fire pit crackling at the center, its warmth providing a comforting glow in the cool autumn air.

Hunter stood at the front of the gathered crowd, his eyes filled with anticipation as he waited for Cassandra to appear. His broad shoulders were squared, and his jaw was set in determination, but there was a softness to his expression that only those who knew him well could see.

The McDougal and McAllister clans, along with their allies, stood in eager silence, all of them awaiting the moment when the two would be joined in matrimony. Among the guests was Laird MacKinnon, Ruben Miller, a tall and imposing figure who had long been an ally to both clans, his dark hair and sharp eyes a testament to his strength and experience.

As the music began to play, Cassandra emerged, her heart racing as she walked toward Hunter. Her gown was simple yet elegant, woven with threads of gold and deep green, the colors of her clan, and a veil of sheer fabric draped over her face. The soft sound of her footsteps was drowned by the gentle whispers of the wind through the trees. As she approached, Hunter's breath caught in his throat, his heart swelling

with love and pride as he gazed upon the woman who would soon be his wife.

The ceremony began with the traditional handfasting, an ancient Scottish custom where the couple's hands were bound together with a ribbon, signifying their union. Hunter's large, calloused hands enveloped Cassandra's delicate ones as the priest spoke the sacred words, a vow of loyalty and devotion.

"With these bonds, unite these two souls together in matrimony."

The crowd stood in hushed reverence as the priest invoked the blessing of the gods and spirits.

"I call for the couple's love to be strong and unyielding. With each knot tied, the bond between Hunter and Cassandra is bound and sealed."

The final knot was tied, and the priest declared them –

"I declare these two husband and wife by the power vested in me."

Hunter leaned down to kiss Cassandra, the crowd erupting in cheers and applause. The kiss was long, filled with a promise of a future built on love, trust, and a shared life together. As they parted, Hunter's hand found Cassandra's, and they turned to face their guests, their hearts beating as one.

After the ceremony, the celebrations began in earnest. The great hall was filled with laughter and music, the long tables laden with roasted meats, fresh bread, cheeses, and the finest wines. The McDougal and McAllister clans mingled, their alliance cemented by the marriage, while Ruben Miller stood nearby, speaking with some of the older members of the clan. The atmosphere was joyous, filled with the warmth of unity and friendship, and Cassandra couldn't help but smile as she looked around at the people who had come together to witness their love.

As the feast continued, Cassandra found herself drawn away from the crowd by a gentle voice calling her name. Turning, she saw Jessica, approaching with a smile on her face. Cassandra had grown to admire her during their time together at McDougal Castle. The two had become close over the months leading up to the wedding, and now, Jessica was offering Cassandra a comforting, sisterly embrace.

"Ye look radiant, Cassandra," Jessica said, her voice filled with genuine warmth. "I cannae believe this day has finally come." She took Cassandra's hand and led her to a quiet corner of the courtyard, away from the noise of the celebration. "I just wanted to say, ye've become like a sister to me. I've never seen Hunter so happy, and I ken he's a lucky man to have ye."

Cassandra's eyes softened, touched by Jessica's words.

"I'm lucky to have him as well," Cassandra replied, her voice thick with emotion. "I've never known a love like this, and I'm grateful for every moment."

Jessica smiled, her eyes glistening with tears. "Ye deserve this happiness, Cassandra. I've seen the way Hunter looks at ye, and I ken he'd do anythin' to protect ye. It's a bond that's unbreakable." She hugged Cassandra tightly, a bond of sisterhood forming between them in that simple gesture.

The words hung in the air, and Cassandra felt a deep sense of belonging in that moment. She had come to this castle as a healer, a woman with a past full of heartache, but now she was part of something much bigger. She was part of Hunter's world, his family, and it was a place where she could finally be herself. The love between her and Hunter was more than just a union of two people; it was the joining of two clans, two hearts, and an unspoken promise of loyalty and devotion.

As they stood there, Cassandra could hear the laughter and music from the hall, the sounds of celebration echoing through the courtyard. The joy of the day wrapped

around her like a warm blanket, and she knew that this was just the beginning of their journey together. She looked up at Jessica, her new cousin by marriage, and smiled. “Thank ye, Jessica. I’ll always be here for ye.”

Jessica squeezed her hand, nodding with a grin. “And I’ll always be here for ye, Cassandra. We’re family now.”

In the distance, Hunter’s voice rang out, calling for Cassandra to join him. The time had come for their first dance as husband and wife, and Cassandra’s heart fluttered at the thought of being in his arms again. With one last hug, Cassandra turned to join him, the weight of the day’s emotions still settling in her chest. As she walked toward him, she knew that this was where she was meant to be—by his side, now and always.

As the evening wore on, Hunter found himself in a quiet corner of the great hall, away from the bustling celebration. The flickering firelight cast shadows on the stone walls, and the noise of laughter and music seemed distant now. He was joined by Daniel, who had been by his side through thick and thin. Daniel watched the revelry around them with a knowing smile.

“Ye ken, Hunter,” Daniel began, his tone light but serious, “I always thought ye’d be a hard man to find love, given how ye carry the weight of this clan. But now, look at ye—ye’ve found someone who can make ye smile like ye’ve never smiled before. See, ye can have love, after all.”

Hunter turned to face him, a faint smile tugging at his lips. He had spent so many years focusing on the responsibility of his clan, the weight of being laird, that he’d never fully allowed himself to entertain the idea of love. But now, standing with Cassandra as his wife, everything had changed.

“Aye, I suppose ye’re right,” Hunter said quietly. “I never thought I’d have a chance

at it, but I cannae imagine me life without her now. She's... she's me everythin'."

Daniel clapped him on the shoulder, his smile widening. "Aye, lad, I thought as much. Ye've finally let yer heart lead ye. It'll make ye a stronger laird, too, I reckon."

Hunter nodded, feeling a shift deep within him. The weight of leadership no longer felt so heavy when shared with Cassandra. The thought of her, of their future together, filled him with a warmth that gave him the strength to face whatever challenges might come.

Meanwhile, across the hall, Cassandra stood with Holly, as the two watched the guests celebrating. As they chatted, Holly smiled at Cassandra, her voice full of affection.

"Ye've settled into this life well, Cassandra. I'm so glad to see ye so happy." Holly's tone was warm and genuine, her eyes sparkling with excitement for her. "Ye've become a part of McDougal. I'm just glad ye'll be around McAllister here and there."

Cassandra smiled. "Thank ye, Holly. I never expected all this... all this warmth. It's more than I ever thought I'd have."

Holly's eyes softened. "Well, they're stuck with ye now, lass, so ye best get used to it," she teased, giving Cassandra a playful wink. "And as for Hunter—ye've made him the happiest man in all of Scotland."

Cassandra chuckled, her heart swelling with joy at the thought of Hunter. "I hope so," she said softly. "I'll do me best to make him happy."

As the conversation continued, Cassandra's gaze shifted across the room, landing on Elena. The little girl skipped toward her with a smile on her face.

Elena's innocent eyes lit up. She hesitated for a moment before running to her, throwing her small arms around Cassandra's waist in a hug that made Cassandra's heart ache with love.

"Cassandra..." Elena's voice was soft and hesitant, "Are ye... are ye me new maither?"

Cassandra knelt down to Elena's level, her heart swelling with affection. She gently took Elena's hands in hers, gazing into the child's big, trusting eyes. "I would like that very much, Elena," Cassandra said quietly. "I'd love to be your maither, if ye'll have me."

Elena's face lit up with a radiant smile, her eyes shining with joy. Without a word, she wrapped her tiny arms around Cassandra once more, holding her tightly. Cassandra returned the embrace, her own heart full as she held the little girl close.

"I'll always be here for ye, Elena," Cassandra whispered, her voice full of love. "And I promise ye, forever."

Elena pulled back just enough to look up at her, her smile wide and full of trust. "I'm glad," she whispered. "I'm so glad."

Cassandra's eyes softened, and she brushed a stray lock of hair from Elena's forehead. "Ye daenae have to worry about anythin', sweetlin'. We're family now. And I'm here to stay."

As the two shared their quiet moment, Cassandra felt a surge of love that only deepened her connection to Hunter and his family. She had found her place here, and it was a place filled with love, laughter, and a future full of promise. She knew, without a doubt, that this was where she was meant to be.

The sounds of the celebration around them seemed distant now, but in that moment, all that mattered was the warmth of Elena's embrace and the love that filled her heart. She stood, taking Elena's small hand in hers, and together, they returned to the heart of the celebration, where Hunter waited, his eyes full of pride and love.

As the wedding feast came to an end, Cassandra felt a mixture of excitement and nervous anticipation settle in her chest. The great hall was still filled with laughter and music, but all she could focus on was Hunter's hand wrapped firmly around hers. When Hunter finally stood and took her hand, a shiver of excitement coursed through her as he swept her into his arms.

The great hall erupted in cheers as Hunter carried her toward his bedchamber, his grip strong and sure. Cassandra clung to him, her breath hitching at the feel of his powerful body beneath her fingertips. The corridors blurred past them, but all she could focus on was the man who now belonged to her entirely.

"Ye look bonnie this night. I love ye, lass," Hunter said.

"Aye, and I love ye, husband."

The heavy wooden door shut behind them, sealing them in the intimate quiet of the candlelit room.

Hunter set her down gently, but his hands never left her, his fingertips grazing the curve of her waist. His eyes burned with an intensity that sent a thrill down her spine.

"Ye're mine now, lass," he murmured, his voice thick with desire. Then he crushed his lips to hers, kissing her with a passion that stole the very air from her lungs.

Cassandra melted against him, her fingers slipping beneath his tunic to explore the hard ridges of his six-pack abs. His muscles tensed under her touch, a low growl

vibrating against her lips. Heat pooled deep in her belly as his strong arms pulled her closer, pressing her against the solid wall of his chest. Every fiber of her being ached for him, for the raw power and tenderness combined in his embrace.

Hunter's hands roamed down her back, tugging at the laces of her gown with eager precision. The fabric loosened, slipping from her shoulders, exposing the heated skin beneath. His lips left hers only to trail down her throat, planting open-mouthed kisses that made her shudder.

"I've waited long enough for this," he rasped, his breath hot against her skin.

Her gown pooled at her feet, and her breath hitched as Hunter stepped back to take her in. The hunger in his gaze sent another rush of desire through her, making her knees weak. He reached for the hem of his tunic, pulling it over his head in one swift motion. Cassandra's fingers trembled as she reached out to trace the defined muscles of his chest, marveling at the strength beneath her hands.

With a sudden movement, Hunter lifted her once more, carrying her to the bed, his body pressing her into the soft furs beneath them. Their mouths met again, tongues tangling in a feverish dance. His weight above her felt like both a comfort and a promise, his touch igniting every inch of her skin. She arched into him, her body surrendering as he claimed her completely.

Time blurred as passion overtook them, their bodies moving in perfect harmony. Cassandra clutched at his shoulders, her nails digging into his skin as pleasure consumed her. Every kiss, every touch, every whispered word bound them tighter, sealing their union in more than just vows.

When the night finally faded into the early hours of morning, she lay curled in Hunter's arms, utterly his.

His fingers brushed lazily over her bare back as he pressed a kiss to her temple.

“I’ll never let ye go, Cassandra,” he murmured, his voice filled with quiet conviction.

She smiled against his chest, her heart full to the brim with love for the fierce, devoted man beside her. In the safety of his arms, she knew she had found not just passion, but a home that would always be hers.

The End?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:00 pm

Five years later...

The warm sun cast a golden glow over the lush green fields where the family had gathered for a picnic. A large blanket was spread over the grass, covered with fresh-baked bread, roasted meats, and sweet tarts Cassandra had helped Jessica prepare that morning.

CHAPTER ONE

Conall dipped his head a little more, the candlelight flickering gently as he squinted at the paper resting on the desk before him. His mind raced as he poured over the tax ledger, ensuring everything was accounted for. Conall would be damned if he allowed anyone to steal from his people.

A knock rang through the room, drawing his attention toward the large oak door across the room.

“Aye,” he grunted.

The door creaked open, revealing one of his maids, Kate. Her bright green eyes were creased with worry, and Conall’s stomach immediately sank.

“The children?” he asked, trying to keep his nerves from seeping into his words.

Kate shook her head in answer, honey-brown hair glinting in the candlelight as she did so.

“They’ve gotten worse,” she answered, her voice alight with the same worry that Conall felt. “I think ye should come.”

He nodded, pushing himself back from his desk and moving to follow her. The pair was quiet as they walked through the manor, nothing but the sounds of their footsteps filling the space around them.

They reached the great hall, and Kate paused outside the large, closed wooden doors.

“Brace yerself,” she said, giving him a concerned glance before pushing open the door.

Conall did his best to heed her warning, but nothing could have prepared him for what he saw when the doors were pushed open.

Within the last week, the children of his clan had begun to fall ill.

It had all begun so rapidly, with the bairns falling ill one after another. And, once one began to show symptoms, they only continued to progress each day no matter what they tried to do to ease their suffering.

It had only affected the bairns. No one else had fallen ill, which had left everyone perplexed. Not knowing what else to do, Conall had opened the great hall of MacKinnon Manor.

He’d had small cots brought in, advising the people of his lands to bring in their sick children. Conall promised them that they would get a healer. He had promised them that he’d find a way to save their precious wee ones.

It was a promise that he had been unable to keep so far.

As he stepped into the cot-filled hall, eyes roving over the tiny, barely moving bodies, he felt the gravity of that promise weighing on him more than ever.

“What is happenin’ to them?” Conall asked, keeping his voice as low as he could so it wouldn’t carry.

“I wish I could tell ye,” Kate answered, her eyes sad as she glanced between him and

the children closest to them. “But they’re gettin’ worse. See for yerself.”

She turned and walked farther into the hall, and Conall followed. He looked down into the wee faces of the children as they passed. They all looked the same. Their skin was pallid, contrasted by the press of dark lashes on cheeks and a sheen of sweat across their brow.

Two rows over, a girl leaned over the edge of her cot, vomiting into the bowl at her bedside. Another let out a wet, rattling cough. But most of them were still, with no sound other than the rasping of their breaths leaving them.

That silence seemed to creep into Conall’s soul as he walked deeper into the hall. Staring down at their small, flushed faces, he realized that many of them were unconscious, lost to the fever almost entirely.

He knew as sure as he knew that the sun would rise in the morning that they did not have much time left.

“I’ve used almost everythin’ I can to help them,” Kate said in a low, hushed voice as they walked. “How is the search for a healer goin’?”

“I’ve tracked down all but two healers that I ken of, and all their answers have been the same,” Conall explained. “They refuse to help the Beast of the MacKinnons’. And they willnae risk spreadin’ the sickness to their own wee ones.”

Kate nodded, her eyes dropping as she turned her gaze back to the children. A rush of gratitude filled Conall, thinking of all the young maid had shouldered in the last few weeks.

She had worked for him for quite some time, and he’d always found her more than capable. When the illness had struck, and he couldn’t find a healer to help them,

Conall knew he'd have to resort to extreme measures to treat the bairns.

Kate had been that extreme measure. A maid stepping forward had not been what he'd envisioned. But as soon as she'd stated she had some experience with healing, he'd known that she was the only option they had.

Of her own admission, the experience hadn't been much. And she'd been honest about that. But the Laird had accepted the offer graciously.

At the time, Conall had prayed that Kate's services would just buy him some time to find a true healer. But as the days passed and every healer had turned him down, he'd begun to wonder if maybe she was the only help he would ever be able to find.

These bairns are the future of our clan .

Anger began to bubble in his belly.

I cannae watch the future of this clan die. I cannae do nothin', nae again.

Conall balled his hand into a fist at his side, noting Kate's eyes flicking down to it and her brow creasing with concern.

"I'll find ye a healer," he growled, the words coming out almost like a threat to God and the heavens above if they tried to stop him.

Kate opened her mouth to speak, but Conall didn't give her the chance to utter whatever it was she was about to say. He turned on his heel, stalking through the cots of dying children and towards the hall's doors.

He made quick work of finding Eliot. As expected, his best friend and man-at-arms was in the game room, pouring over a game of cards.

“Eliot,” Conall barked when he walked through the door, causing his guards to drop the cards in their hands immediately. “We’re headin’ out.”

“I’m sorry,” Clyde said, shaking his head as he sat before Conall. “I cannae help.”

Conall brought himself to his full height, staring daggers at the man. He felt the rush of heat to his face and knew that the jagged, brutal scar that ran down the side of it was standing out white against his flushed skin.

Good , let him see the beast they made me in all its glory.

Clyde’s wizened face blanched as he looked at Conall, and the man took several steps back, increasing the distance between them.

“The wee ones of our clan are dyin’,” Conall hissed, bringing his hulking form closer to the man. “They need a healer. Ye wouldnae be helpin’ me; ye would be helpin’ them. Are ye truly such a spineless, snivelin’ coward that ye would curse bairns to die for the sins of their Laird?”

Conall couldn’t stop the hope that bubbled up inside him as the man cowered before him. But that hope was quickly dashed when Clyde began to shake his head again.

“I’m sorry,” the healer stuttered over his words, face as white as the sparse hairs jutting out of his head. “But I cannae help ye.”

Conall fought the urge to send his fist flying into the man’s face before him. But he knew that that wouldn’t help his cause. Not in the slightest.

He stamped down that urge, that need for violence, as he turned on his heels and stormed out of the house.

There had been two healers left that he hadn't yet spoken to when he'd left Kate that morning. Clyde had been the second, and both men had been adamant in their rejection despite their fear of the Laird of the MacKinnon clan showing with every tremble of their limbs.

Eliot's eyes darted up from where he sat atop his horse, holding the reins of Conall's stallion. The man-at-arms could read the emotions on his friend's face immediately, and Eliot shook his head as he processed the truth of what had happened.

Conall snatched the reins from Eliot's hand, wordless in his rage, as he threw his legs over his horse's back and settled himself in the saddle. A thousand thoughts rushed through his mind, all too quickly for him to fully flesh out.

"What do ye plan to do next?" Eliot asked, his brow creasing with worry as they both spurred their horses into a mild trot.

Conall shook his head, the thoughts slowing until they died down to only one. He hated the idea of it, hated the fact that with Clyde's rejection, he was now down to his last resort.

He turned his attention to Eliot, knowing for sure that the moment he uttered the words, his man-at-arms was going to think his Laird's mind had been addled.

Just get on with it.

Conall took a deep, steeling breath and uttered the words. He didn't miss how his friend blanched as he spoke the words fell from his lips, and Conall truly couldn't blame him.

Not as the words "we're goin' find the witch of the woods" seemed to still flicker in the air around them.

CHAPTER TWO

“W here are we goin’?” Eliot asked, drawing a sigh of exasperation out of Conall.

“Quit askin’, ye wallop,” he answered, rolling his eyes at his friend.

“Will ye just tell me, then?”

Conall glanced at his man-at-arms.

He’ll think I’ve gone mad.

The Laird wasn’t entirely sure he hadn’t gone mad. But he’d accepted that even if he had, even if it was madness that had placed this idea in his mind, he would see it through, anyway.

“We’re goin’ to find the Witch of the Wood.”

Conall’s voice floated on the air between them, a pregnant pause filling the air. The silence was filled only with the clapping of their horse’s hooves and the rustling of the leaves in the trees.

Just as he expected, Eliot threw his head back and laughed. Birds immediately took flight, their startled caws mingling with the sound, all of it coming together to mock him.

“Ye cannae be tellin’ me,” Eliot panted as he got control of himself, “that we’re ridin’

all this way to go chasin' after some fairytale."

"The With of the Wood is real," Conall said resolutely, his jaw ticking in annoyance. "We're on our way to her cabin, now."

"Aye, and we'll find a dragon along the way." Eliot chuckled, focusing once more on the road ahead. "Daenae tell me, then. I'll find out the truth soon enough."

Conall allowed silence to settle over him again, resolved to make it to the cabin. He did not care that Eliot hadn't believed him; he would see soon enough. The Laird knew the tales of the Witch of the Wood were all too true, and his man-at-arms would know the same within the hour.

He'll be eatin' his words soon enough.

There was a well-worn path through the woods, but it was a slender one. One that hinted of being traveled often, but not by many feet. To pass the time, Conall couldn't help but wonder what the woman would look like.

He imagined a crone with hunched shoulders and warts on her nose. Someone who would terrify the children at the very sight of her, even as she was helping to save their lives.

"Conall." Eliot's voice broke through Conall's wandering thoughts, bringing his attention away from the visions dancing in his mind and into the present moment.

His man-at-arms was pointing in front of them, and Conall followed the line of his finger. Even through the waning light, he could make out a widening to the path ahead of them.

He also noticed that the trees had grown thinner, opening into a meadow. A cabin sat

in the center of it, windows aglow with the light of a fire inside.

“Who lives there?” Eliot asked, the man’s voice lit with confusion.

“I told ye,” Conall answered. “The Witch of the Wood.”

More of the clearing came into view as they urged their horses forward. There were large, well-tended gardens overflowing with healthy plants that Conall could not identify. The cabin itself had also been well maintained, even if he could tell it was quite old.

He and Eliot guided their horses into the clearing before dismounting and tying off their horses at a nearby tree. Eliot had stayed behind when Conall spoke to the other two healers, and Conall wondered if that had been a mistake.

It was yer own reputation that made all the other healers refuse to help, after all.

The thought was not a comforting one, even if Conall knew that it was correct.

Eliot was the milder of the two and often filled with a jovial, joking manner that others usually received much better than Conall’s brusque and gruff demeanor.

So he’d lean on his friend as they made their request of the witch.

The grass of the clearing was thick, silencing the sound of their footsteps as they walked toward the cabin. One of the windows was open, the white-painted shutters thrown wide.

A lovely sound floated on the air, and Conall listened intently as they approached the porch that led to the front door. The sound of a song drifted on the breeze, and it was so at odds with everything that Conall had been expecting that he nearly stopped

walking.

The Witch of the Woods was singin’?

When they reached the stairs, their boots clunked onto the wood so loudly that Conall wanted to flinch. It was also loud enough that it must have been heard inside, because the beautiful singing of mere seconds before stopped abruptly.

There was a clanging inside the house, and Conall imagined pots and pans being shuffled about in a washbasin as the witch of the woods dried her hands. He and Eliot continued their trek across the porch. Once they reached the door, he raised his fist to knock, but the door was pulled open quickly before he had the chance.

The vision he had conjured earlier danced in his mind’s eye, the old crone with the warts decorating a large, protruding nose. The light from the fire in the cabin silhouetted the woman standing in the door frame, and it took a moment for Conall’s vision to clear.

But when it did, it was far from what he was expecting.

The woman before him was beautiful, with yellow hair that tumbled down around her shoulders in wispy curls. Soft brown eyes like that narrowed on the two men. Suspicion colored every line of her face as those lovely eyes flicked between Conall and his man-at-arms.

“Witch,” he grunted, trying not to let a bonnie face distract him, “We need yer help.”

Her brow knit together, gaze flickering between the Laird and Eliot.

“Witch?” she asked, eyebrows knitting together as she seemed to consider the word.

The confusion in her tone brought Conall up short. Eliot opened his mouth to speak, but the Laird didn't give him the chance.

"Aye," he said with a nod of his head. "We need the help of the Witch of the Wood."

Conall had been surprised when the woman had first opened the door, even if that surprise had been a pleasant one. He had expected many things as they'd approached the cottage in the wood. But, so far, she had not met a single one of those expectations.

The Laird was also well aware of the effect he often had on people. Fear, suspicion, respect – being branded the Beast of the MacKinnons elicited varied responses, even if the name did chafe against his skin.

But one of the responses that he hadn't yet received, not from a stranger, was when the woman before him threw her head back and laughed.

And that is exactly what happened. The Witch of the Wood laughed, cackling directly in Conall's face.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:00 pm

“Witch?” Eliza snorted, eyes flicking between the two menaces standing on her doorstep. “Ye believe that I am the Witch of the Wood?”

Doubt crossed the faces of the two men, and they spared a moment to glance at each other. One of the fire embers gave a loud pop behind her, the only sound filling the air around them as the trespassers turned their attention back to her.

“Ye’re nae the Witch of the Wood?” One of the men, the more brutish one with a scar running down his face, asked.

His dark eyebrows were pressed firmly together, confusion in every line of his expression. She shook her head.

“Nay,” she answered with a chuckle. “If ye’ve come lookin’ for her, ye’ve found yerself the wrong woman.”

It was the other man who spoke next.

“But ye’re a healer?”

Eliza turned to regard him. He was smaller than the other one, although that was still not saying much, since the brutish man with the scar was so large she was certain he’d tower over most men.

“Why do ye want to ken?” she placed a still soapy hand on her hip, narrowing her eyes at the two men again.

The scarred-faced brute smirked. "I think that's an aye, lassie."

The two men shared a quick glance, but no words passed between them before they pushed past her and into her cottage beyond.

"And what do ye think ye're doin'?" The words poured out of her as she turned and rushed after them.

They didn't turn to look at her, not as both of them began casting wild glances around the cottage Eliza had called home since she was nine years old.

She watched as the scarred man grabbed one of her healer's bags, opening it and prodding at some supplies.

"We think ye're comin' to help us," he grunted. "So we're helpin' ye pack."

He snapped the healer's bag shut, looking around the cottage once more. Immediately, she glanced toward the window. The sun was halfway set, streaks of orange and red filling the sky as it gave way to night.

Marissa will be home soon.

The thought filled her with dread. If these men truly were looking for the Witch of the Woods, the last thing she wanted was for Marissa to come home while they were still here.

"I'll nae be goin' anywhere with the likes of ye," she argued back, desperation filling her as she rushed forward.

She grabbed the healer's bag from the large hand of the scarred man. Her action must have caught him off guard because she wrenched it out of his grip without much difficulty.

His dark eyes flashed with surprise, and she got the feeling that not many people stood up to him.

Serves him right.

He glanced at the other man, the smaller one. A silent conversation passed between the two of them in a split second before the scarred one nodded his head. Immediately, the smaller man stepped forward, his facial features softening into a mask that was almost kind.

The brute is the leader, then.

“Our bairns are sick,” he explained. “They’ve been sick for weeks. Nay healers will help us. So we came here to find the Witch of the Wood. To find ye.”

The man said the last word almost pleadingly, and Eliza’s heart stuttered.

Sick bairns?

The thought wasn’t a comfortable one. Not as images of wee bodies filled her mind, causing her chest to ache. She’d seen enough sick wee ones in her line of work, making the desperation of the two men in front of her make a bit more sense.

People tend not to act rationally when it’s children at stake.

“I already told ye I’m nae the Witch of the Wood,” Eliza said calmly, eyes boring into the men as she stared at them pointedly.

She needed them to believe her, needed them to hear her words and to leave. She did not want to imagine how they would behave if Marissa arrived home in the middle of all this. It wasn’t hard for Eliza to picture the brutishness of these two if they were to actually find the so-called Witch of the Woods.

“The Witch of the Wood is nae here, and I cannae help ye.”

The big one stepped forward. “But ye’re a healer.”

It wasn’t a question, but she responded as if it were one anyway.

“Aye.” Eliza nodded. “But that changes nothin’. I still cannae help ye.”

A growl came from the large man’s chest, and Eliza narrowed her eyes at him. He glared at her, dark eyes narrowing, and her shoulders began to tense.

If it came down to it, she didn’t believe that she could outrun them. But Eliza knew she would try regardless.

I ken this house and these woods better than they do, though. All I need is to get far enough away to lose them and then hide until they leave.

The thought brought her a small bit of comfort as the scarred man continued to glare at her. The smaller, kinder man glanced between the two of them, a nervous expression on his face. He stepped forward, drawing Eliza’s full attention.

“Me name is Eliot,” he said, giving the brutish one a pointed glance. “This is Laird MacKinnon.”

Eliza’s eyebrows ticked up in surprise as she was introduced to the two men before them. She glanced at the large man, eyes widening in recognition.

The Beast of the MacKinnons.

The title fit the man before her. Tales of him ran deep, and she knew that many of them were true. She’d been the one to patch up plenty of men who had come to blows with the man, after all.

Laird MacKinnon glared back at her, not shrinking back behind her scrutiny. Instead, the opposite appeared to happen. As the seconds ticked by and Eliza did not look away, he somehow seemed to make himself even larger.

She watched as his chest expanded, his spine pulling straight. The muscles in his arms bulged, as did the legs that were visible beneath his kilt.

Eliza's eyes flicked to the man's hands, finding them balled into fists at his sides. Even at a distance, she could see that they were pockmarked with scars. One of the knuckles was raised and swollen, and all of them were darkened with bruising.

He's likely been in a fight recently. Beast, indeed.

The thought stirred fear deep in her belly, but she did not give in to it.

"I daenae care who ye are," she said, proud that none of her doubt had leached into her voice. "I still cannae help ye."

"It wouldnae be for us, but for the bairns," the Laird explained. "We've gone to every other healer we could, and they all said they wouldnae help us. Ye're their last shot, lass. Without ye, the wee ones will die."

His gaze held hers. His expression was hard, entirely unreadable. Everything in her wanted to deny him again – wanted to march him straight to the door and kick him out of her cabin onto his arse.

But images of the sick bairns she'd helped in the past filled her mind's eye, softening her heart. They'd have died if she had not helped them, too. Slowly, she felt herself begin to soften.

Do I have it in me to punish wee ones because their Laird is a beast?

The answer that rang out within her was a loud and resounding ‘ nay ’.

Before she could open her mouth to say anything, though, the Laird let out an impatient growl. It was the only warning he gave before bringing his hulking body closer to hers.

She retreated until her back pressed into the wooden wall and she could go no further. But he matched her, step for step. Eliza shrank back further, pressing as hard as she could into the wood at her back and glared up at the man before her.

They were close. Nearly chest to chest. She could feel the oppressive heat of his body rolling off of him.

“Ye’re helpin’ us,” he said, his voice so low it seemed to rumble through her.

Small bumps of fear skittered across Eliza’s flesh, and she turned her gaze upward, looking into the Beast of the MacKinnons' face.

Nothing had changed about him, not in any way she could identify. But his brown eyes had darkened to the point of appearing black. His posture had become rigid. The way his eyes roamed over her, filled with an ice-cold rage that dared her to try to defy him, instilled a fear in her that cut down to her very bones.

I will nae be afraid in me own home.

Eliza snarled, pushing against his massive arms with all her might. She threw her body weight back and forth, wriggling between his arms, but not once did his grip lessen.

A cry of frustration tore itself from her throat as panic started bubbling inside her. She thrashed again, but his grasp on her was so strong that she might as well have been fighting against still.

“Ye’re helpin’ us,” he repeated, “the choice isnae up to ye.”

Laird MacKinnon didn’t say anything else as he hoisted her up, easy as if she was the weight of a feather and tossed her over his shoulder. Eliza fought like mad, yelling and screaming and bringing her fists down on his back. But the Beast of the MacKinnons didn’t stop. He just strode forward, carrying Eliza out of her home and away from the only safety she had ever truly known.