

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Stay
with *Me*
RUBY DUVALL

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Stay With Me

ISBN 9781419923241

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Photography and cover art by Les Byerley

Electronic book Publication August 2009

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STAY WITH ME

Ruby Duvall

Dedication

This genre was a big challenge for me and I'd like to thank Sheila for all her help with editing and enormous amounts of research. Your support keeps me going! Thanks as well to Linda, Shawn and Lindy for their valued insight. My editor Helen is a Godsend and I'm so glad to be working with her. Thanks for everything, Helen!

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The Beatles: Apple Corps Limited

Twilight Zone: CBS Broadcasting Inc.

Chapter One

*A curious legend tells of a fae,
Clothed all in green, with skin ashen gray.
Half girl and half goat, mysterious they say,
How the Glaistig comes and goes ev'ry day.*

It was cold. She shivered and goose bumps rose on her skin. For a few seconds, she felt warmer and then another breeze ran over her, eliciting a full-body shiver.

Her entire body hurt, as if she was the bloodied and bruised hero at the end of an action movie, limping toward a group of cop cars after killing the last bad guy. After faintly moaning, she inhaled more deeply. The musty smell of moss was a surprise. She had expected the dry, sterile air of a hospital.

Another breeze drifted over her and she tried to curl into a tighter ball. She realized then that she was on her side and that something heavy was in her left hand.

Opening her eyes, she saw with blurry vision a long stretch of ground from which a great many thick trees sprung, though they were all at the same odd angle. Blinking, her vision cleared somewhat and she made out a fallen log lying in the far distance. Between it and her the ground was sprinkled with leaves, small brush and a couple of larger rocks. Large shafts of sunlight slanted through the air from the gaps in the canopy above, which highlighted floating white specks.

Many birds chirped to their own tunes, calling to each other or arguing, and the sleepy buzz of insects rose in waves as they all played a tune in unison, like a sort of miniature orchestra. The cool breeze swam through the forest once again, pushing leaves together and gently bowing the trees.

It was a peaceful vision, if a little too cold. She recalled the SUV running the red light and wondered if this was some vivid hallucination. She might have panicked if she weren't so tired. Closing her eyes again, she tried to work up the motivation to move but wasn't very upset when she couldn't. After all, this was a dream, wasn't it?

When she next opened her eyes, the shafts of light had grown brighter. The air was warmer and the breeze had died down. Fewer birds sang than before.

She didn't understand. Was this the same dream? Her left side was aching where she had lain against the cold dirt of the forest floor, so she sat up, using her right hand as leverage.

"What the..." she rasped, looking down at herself.

She was still wearing the fairy costume she had put on for the Halloween party, could even feel the large butterfly wings on her back. Instead of the ballerina slippers she had intended to wear, the black sneakers she had been wearing while driving were

on her feet and her brown leather purse hung from her neck and shoulder. She didn't see any immediate injuries. Even stranger was the steering wheel in her left hand.

Weirded out, she let it go.

She ran her hands over her body to verify what her eyes told her and her fingers brushed the locket around her neck. She merely glanced at it the first time, not really looking at it, but then her eyes shot back to it.

The antique locket she had bought just hours before the party had been tarnished with age, though someone had done their best to shine it up. What now hung from her neck was far from being an antique and it glimmered in the sunlight. Suspended on a gold toggle chain, the locket was in the shape of a small book, in the center of which a mabe pearl sat in the spot that had previously been empty. Red enamel covered the front and back of the miniature book, leaving the gold binding bare. Delicate engravings in the enamel depicted waves flowing in a circle around the pearl in the center. Engraved on the back of the one-inch-tall book was a clock face with no hands.

The caw of a bird overhead startled her and she looked up with a spurt of fright. She blinked in confusion to notice that none of the leaves in the surrounding trees had changed colors yet. After gaining her feet, she turned in a slow circle. She looked in all directions and saw only forest, though one direction was obviously downhill. In fact, she had been lying on a rather steep slope.

Standing still to listen for a moment, she realized how silent the air was. Of course, the natural sounds of a forest were present – chirping birds, humming insects, a sighing breeze. However, she couldn't hear the buzz of air conditioning or a furnace, the distant clanking of a train, the whoosh of cars rushing by on an open highway, the echoing roar of an airplane overhead, or the deep rumble of a large factory.

The air was utterly devoid of manmade sounds. Another breeze pushed against the wings on her back and lifted small strands of her hair from her neck. She stood straighter as a chill skittered up her spine.

The up-do that her mother had helped create had fallen to the side of her head, so she took a moment to pull out the pins and the elastic band, letting her hair drape down to the collar of her low-cut dress. She then brushed off a couple of small dry clumps of dirt from where she had lain on the ground.

Remembering her cell phone, she heaved an enormous sigh of relief and began to dig through her purse to locate it. With a couple of calls, she would have this whole mess sorted out. Pulling the phone from her purse, she looked at it to see if it was damaged but it seemed to be okay. The battery was working and only half-empty.

However, she had absolutely no signal. Her chest tightened with anxiety, making it more difficult to breathe and indeed aggravating her panting.

"No, no, no." She roamed the area, holding the cell phone this way or that. "No, no. Don't do this to me." It was no use. She had zero bars. Even so, she attempted to make a call and selected her home phone number from the address book. Putting the receiver to

her ear, she was surprised to hear absolutely nothing—not even the phone’s beeps as it attempted to make a call.

Giving up, she put the phone back in her purse, taking deep breaths and trying to calm down. She then pawed through her purse to verify its contents—a cell phone, a compact mirror, a foldable hairbrush, a wristwatch, a wallet, a pill case with half a dozen aspirin, a pack of mints, a ballpoint pen and a pink handkerchief. Her watch seemed to be broken though. The hands were still moving but they were reading the wrong time. No way was it six o’clock. Looking back at her cell phone, though, she was surprised to find it reading the same time. Six a.m.? The sun was at its peak!

Chewing on her lower lip, she zipped her purse shut just as her stomach grumbled. Leaning down and picking up her steering wheel, she carefully made her way down the hill.

At the base, she found a thin, fast-moving stream only perhaps knee-deep in some places. It was a small wooded valley, along the floor of which the brook ran. The trees were a little sparser near the stream and she looked up to see a bright sun almost directly overhead. No clouds sat in the sky to keep it company.

The surrealism of her situation hit her then. The sun felt warm. The breeze tickled her bare arms. Her stomach craved a nice hamburger. The water was wet and it tasted good as she drank a couple of handfuls. Was this really happening? Was she caught in a dream she had cooked up to match her stupid fantasies? Why was she wearing her sneakers and lugging around her steering wheel?

What the hell was going on? Her sense of calm was wearing very thin and she was fighting to keep a scream from rising out of her cramping stomach.

Unzipping her purse and withdrawing her phone with shaky hands, she looked at the signal strength again but nothing had changed. Worried that her battery might run out before she could get to a service area, she turned off the phone and slid it back into her purse. She stared at the little brook in front of her, not really looking at it but trying her hardest to make sense of the *Twilight Zone* episode in which she had found herself.

Nothing so strange had ever happened to her before, though this wasn’t exactly what she had meant when wishing for an escape.

Reaching into her purse, she drew out her handkerchief and set it on her knee as she washed her hands in the stream. It gave her something to do, something to distract her from the fear. It also somehow helped to wash the nervous sweat from her hands. After putting everything away and zipping her purse shut, she picked up her steering wheel and walked downstream.

She would worry about the why and how later. First, she wanted to find civilization and go home.

* * * * *

A very long hour later, the stream had grown to a much wider river, having joined up with other creeks from side valleys, and she came upon a broad set of falls. The boulders in and along the river looked like petrified layered cake and the layers were slanted at an angle. Water passed swiftly through the narrow chutes between these giant boulders, making the river look like a kayaker's worst nightmare—or wet dream, if said kayaker had a death wish. It also made her trip slow going, though having sneakers helped. After descending past the falls, she reached a calmer part of the river.

Deciding to take a short break, she set down the steering wheel, drank another couple of handfuls of water and popped a breath mint, having nothing else to eat and growing hungrier as the minutes ticked by. Rings of ripples appeared occasionally on the river's surface every time fish bit at low-flying insects.

Carefully perched on a riverside boulder, which had been warming in the sun, she contemplated what to do if night fell and she had to sleep outside. Finding food would be a problem. She didn't mind gutting and eating a fish but catching it and lighting a fire was difficult without a pole or a net, not to mention matches—or even a piece of old-fashioned flint. The friction method of lighting a fire was quite a lot of work and she wasn't even quite sure how to do it. She could already tell that it would be too cold to sleep without a fire. She sure as hell wasn't going to sleep in the dark either. She didn't want to wake up to find a wolf sniffing her and deciding which part to eat first.

In that moment of silence, the faint sound of shouts floated to her, almost too far away to hear. Her spine snapped straight and she sat motionless, wondering if the wind was playing tricks on her. A few seconds later, the far-off sound of human voices reached her ears again.

Feeling a leap of hope in her chest, she hastily grabbed for her steering wheel, stood up and began jogging downriver. Seeing a break in the tree line up ahead, she was anxious to see a wider panorama of her surroundings but she slowed down nonetheless, not wanting to simply burst out into the open. The river continued out of the forest to join another much larger river running in a long expedient line down and around another rise in the distance but she stopped at the tree line, stunned.

Before her was a valley full of verdure and surrounded by stout mountains. They weren't the Rockies by any stretch but neither could you insult their size by calling them hills. The valley floor sloped up gently to these dwarf mountains and the sides were sprinkled with trees. The valley turned a few minutes' run from where she stood, a turn which the river followed and in the distance, she thought she saw a path or perhaps a narrow road.

A louder and more resounding round of cheerful shouts rang across the valley.

"Yes!" she whispered. "I'm saved, I'm saved!" Breaking into another jog, she continued to follow the river. Of course, whoever she met up with was going to wonder why on God's green earth she was dressed the way she was but she didn't care. All she wanted was to go home and find out what the hell had happened to her.

After a few more minutes, small buildings and the distant figures of people emerged from behind the rise. Wanting to cry with relief, she continued to jog along the riverside, mindful of her footing on the rocky ground.

As she came closer, though, she was able to make out more of the town and its residents and felt a trickle of doubt. Ducking behind one of the many trees near the river, she carefully peered around the trunk. Raising her hand to shield her eyes from the sun, which peeked at her through gaps in the leaves above, she studied the large group of people gathered between a few of the buildings. The heads of two people moved above the rest, like a pair of giants but they moved as if dancing...or fighting.

She snuck closer to find another suitable tree to spy from. Was this a Renaissance fair?

The buildings were all made of stone and thatched roofs. Men, women and children were walking about, all wearing rather unflattering medieval clothing, which didn't vary all that much. She didn't see any pirates or courtiers. The shouting was coming from the spectators gathered around some sort of elevated wrestling ring or platform situated in the center of a square that was halfway blocked by the closer building.

Even stranger, the men cheering them on were wearing skirts. No, scratch that. They were wearing tunics. The colors varied a bit but they were mostly russet brown or checkered. A couple of men wore jerkins as well. Some of the villagers weren't even wearing shoes and others wore very simple leather shoes with laces that wrapped around their calves. An ancestry festival?

She sincerely hoped it was simply a festival but somewhere deep inside, she knew it wasn't. It wasn't a reenactment or a fair or some huge and strange Halloween party. It was a real place full of real people. Her hallucination had either taken a seriously insane new turn or...

"That's not possible. It's not possible," she said to herself, affirming over and over again that she was dreaming. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real. Things like that didn't happen.

Her legs couldn't hold her up anymore and she slumped gracelessly to the grassy ground, alone and scared out of her mind.

"What do I do? What do I do?" She stared at her purse, sitting on her lap. Her cell phone was useless. In fact, she realized that no one should ever find it. Her steering wheel too. Would they think she was a witch and burn her? Or was that a Puritan thing? Thoughts buzzed inside her mind in a frenzied jumble as she tried to figure out her next move. Did she have anything at all that would give her a clue?

"Locket," she gasped. Studying the locket's etchings, she saw nothing that helped. Worriedly chewing the inside of her lip, she opened the locket.

Somewhere inside her head, she thought she heard a great wind rushing toward her, a deep sucking sound almost like the pull of an enormous set of lungs. A tiny square of folded paper was hidden inside the locket and she carefully plucked it out, letting her locket hang open as she laid it to rest against her skin.

Her fingers shook as she cautiously and meticulously opened the folds in the piece of paper, anxious for answers. When the delicate parchment was completely unfolded, it measured six inches by four. She could even see the color of her fingers through the thin material and was wary of ripping it.

Unfortunately, the writing was completely illegible. Her chest tightened with apprehension. She couldn't even recognize the language. It wasn't any writing system with a Latin alphabet. It wasn't Arabic, Cyrillic, or Chinese. It didn't look like hieroglyphics either—at least, not like the hieroglyphics she had seen on the History Channel.

The longer she stared at it, though, the more the slashes and strokes began to blur and swim through and around each other, dragging themselves across the page and leaving trails of ink. Her eyes watered from watching the symbols shift and she blinked a few times but it was difficult to refocus. Eventually, she noticed recognizable letters, a word and then a phrase. The writing sharpened and finally the message settled to become ordinary handwritten words on a page, as if they had always been as such.

The doe doth tread upon a bed of heather,
She and the gray lady oft seen together.
Attached are they by a gold and red tether,
One pulling the other out of the nether.

The stag doth wait in a lush and green meadow,
And all aim for his heart with blackened arrows.
Thrice pierced, he dies, all around him is harrow'd.
What once was light, now buried in sorrow.

She read and reread the note many times, the words making about as much sense as a political speech. A doe and a gray lady were connected to each other in some way, perhaps even inseparable. Was the gold and red tether speaking of her locket? Was she the doe and which was pulling the other out of the nether? What did the nether even mean and who was the stag?

None of it made any sense. How could she have gone from a rain-slick intersection in an ordinary town to the sunny fields of Narnia and reading magical poems about animals? Had she completely lost her mind? Was she actually staring at a wall in an asylum right now?

A painful knot formed just under her left temple and grew larger the longer she contemplated the note. Stress was gathering between her shoulder blades and her stomach was starting to cramp from hunger.

Wherever she was and for whatever reason, one thing seemed clear. She couldn't go back to where it was safe. What did she have now? No family, no friends, no home.

Leaning her shoulder against the tree, she stared at the river next to her, too shocked and confused to cry.

All her life, she had battled a niggling feeling that something awful would happen to her, something dreadful constantly looming on the horizon, something more than the usual paranoia most people suffer. She thought she had already survived it back when she was fourteen but apparently she had been wrong.

The minutes drifted by as she tried to wake up from what she hoped was a dream—or maybe even a coma—but the world around her was solid. She wasn't sure how long she sat there but yet another gust of air incited a shiver. Rubbing away the goose bumps with one hand, she looked down at the bit of paper still caught between her fingers.

Who was the gray lady? Perhaps it wasn't much to go on but she knew she couldn't sit there forever. She folded up the note and returned it to the locket. After checking that the hook and eye clasp on her necklace was still securely fastened, she stood.

The spectacle in the village seemed to be over. Where the combatants were, she didn't know. She was too far away to see exactly who was doing what but it seemed that at least fifty people were milling around. The village extended farther around the turn in the valley walls though, so she had no idea how big or small it was. A couple of men on horseback rode into view from a path that disappeared into another small side valley opposite the turn in the main valley. The men rode at a canter over the small stone bridge straddling the river and then continued into the village. Eventually, they disappeared behind the rise.

She continued to watch the village for several minutes, trying to formulate a plan. Simply walking into the village was not a viable option. She had no idea how the villagers would react. She didn't even know if she could communicate with them. She could barely speak Spanish, let alone Middle English or any other medieval European language. She couldn't imagine a best-case scenario—only visions of being imprisoned, run out of the village or stoned to death.

Then she spotted her.

An old woman approached the small bridge, very slowly making her way toward the path from which the men on horseback had come. She was bent over with age and used a cane to keep her balance. Her brown dress was muddy near the bottom and she wore a linen kerchief on her head. In her other arm, she held a basket.

Could this be the gray lady? She could only guess as to where the woman might be going but it was a safe bet that she was walking home. Every village had farms, right? Maybe the woman had gone into the village for something but was now returning home. After all, her best bet would be approaching one person, preferably an old woman who couldn't harm her and if she followed the curve of the valley wall into the side valley, she would have enough cover to avoid being seen.

Her heart pounded as she hesitated, too nervous to leave her hiding place. The old woman was walking fairly slowly but she realized that she couldn't just impotently stand there until she had lost her target altogether.

Staying low and moving quickly, she began to make her way toward the old woman, who was entering the side valley by the time she caught up to her. The closer she came, though, the more the village was revealed from behind the rise that had been hiding it.

It was larger than she had expected, probably large enough for more than a hundred people. Behind the village was a lake, into which the river flowed. The lake also held a couple of small islands, the largest of which sat just offshore. A castle occupied the island and it was highlighted by a sea of green grass growing around its foundations. The island's water line was clearly visible, indicating that the lake was a little drier than normal. A bridge wider and sturdier than the one straddling the river stretched from the edge of the village to an imposing gatehouse on the island. A few people were crossing the bridge either on their way to or from the castle and she could see the two riders from earlier at the open gatehouse, talking to someone.

Looking back in the direction where the old woman was going, she kept an even pace with the bent figure leisurely making her way up the gentle slope of the path. Not venturing too close, she kept a close eye on both the woman and the path, making sure that no one from either direction would catch her flitting between trees. When the path began to descend again, she could see that they were approaching another small valley through the gaps in the canopy.

The old woman stopped. Thinking that she had made too much noise, she squeezed behind the nearest tree.

"What business do ye have with me?" the old woman yelled. From her hiding spot behind the tree, her eyes widened and she took a swift breath, shocked to hear modern English. Her ears detected a sort of Scottish accent, though it seemed a little off.

Her next reaction, right on the heels of the first, was alarm. Feeling enormously shy, she anxiously peeked out from behind the tree.

The elderly woman, however, was brandishing her cane at some spot opposite where she was hidden. Confused, she continued to watch as the old woman swiped her cane through the air to her right.

"I dinna want any of yer mischief. Get on with ye," she scolded. Eventually, the woman settled, nodded firmly and resumed walking. Bemused, she stood there for a moment, staring at the spot where the old woman had been, hoping to see a cat or a butterfly or something, yet nothing moved. The old woman had been yelling at absolutely nothing.

Wondering if she had made a mistake in choosing to follow the elderly lady, whose cane could certainly make a formidable weapon, she hung farther back than before and the old woman was far along the path into the glen by the time she reached the tree line. The village and its castle had been nothing but shades of brown and gray, depressing

colors only offset by the castle's grassy skirt but the valley before her was the most gorgeous place she had ever seen.

Yet another river, spilling down from a waterfall in the right valley wall, snaked and skipped in a meandering line through the valley and beyond, disappearing into small mountains in the distance. The valley floor was relatively flat and covered with a carpet of green grass. Manmade rock walls separated parts of the land into paddocks, a couple of which held large herds of sheep and just a few long-haired cattle.

A handful of farmsteads, with houses much like the ones in the village, were spaced around the valley. A couple of the farms looked abandoned but the others had signs of life, especially the farmstead in the center of the enclosed areas. Smoke rose from the thatched roof of the house. The door was open and a dog was sleeping near the entrance. Nearby were a couple of other buildings, one of which was quite large, stretching three times the length of the house. It looked like it housed the large flock of animals now grazing in the surrounding fields. The other smaller building seemed to be a storage shed.

"Beautiful," she whispered, breathing in the fresh air tinged with the scent of a meal cooking. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that it was empty and she quickly popped another couple of breath mints. They didn't help.

Suddenly remembering what she was supposed to be doing, she looked to the old woman again, who was halfway to the farmstead. The dirt path that the woman walked ran between the walled-off paddocks and forked in several places, leading to other farmsteads. It then continued alongside the river into the distance, probably the road that the men on horseback had used to arrive at the village.

Though she didn't see any field hands, it didn't mean that there weren't people around the farmstead, so she studied the layout of the rock walls to see where it would be best to creep along and follow the old woman. Gripping the steering wheel tighter in her left hand, she jogged down to the valley floor and stopped at the nearest paddock's rock wall. Crouching low, she made her way toward the path and then paused at the corner. Her back was completely exposed to whoever might be approaching from the village but she had no other cover and therefore no choice.

Tossing her hair over her shoulder and peering around the corner of the wall, she saw that the elderly woman, still moving at the same unhurried pace, had turned left at the nearest fork to the farm in the center of the valley. Carefully easing around the corner, she stayed low and followed the wall. It was at the right angle to hide her from the farmstead's main house but only for so long. Once the path forked, the paddock wall angled left. The minimal cover she now cowered behind would be completely gone and the only thing left would be to walk up to the old woman's house and introduce herself.

She only hoped that she didn't give the woman a heart attack.

Quickly glancing over the top of the rock wall, she saw the old woman enter the house, led inside by a young child with long red hair. A granddaughter? Ducking down again and continuing, she reached the corner of the paddock wall.

Once again, she stalled. She spied upon the house for a moment, hoping to verify that only the old woman and the young girl were home. However, no one came out and she couldn't hear any voices. If anyone was talking, they weren't talking loud enough to carry the hundred or so feet to her ears.

"Come on, Em. What's the worst that can happen?" she whispered to herself. Not letting herself answer that question, she took a deep breath, reached for the top of the rock wall and stood. It took a few seconds but she compelled herself into walking around the corner of the wall and toward the farmstead. It'd be okay. It had to be okay.

A few steps out, she froze, realizing that she had not planned what to say, or even whether or not to lie—a lie would certainly be more believable than the truth. She didn't really even know the truth, anyway. With one hand gripping the steering wheel and the other pressed against her swimming stomach, she wanted very badly to run back and hide behind the wall.

The little girl passed by the door at that exact second. Her heart, already beating fast and hard, nearly exploded. The young girl tilted her head to the side and stared. Then a smile broke out on her face and the girl pointed at her.

"Dada, look! A fairy," the girl loudly squealed. *Dada? Not good.* She faintly heard the deep tones of a male voice. "'Tis nae a bug! Look!" The girl stomped her bare foot, frantically pointing at her. "She has wings too," the girl insisted, coming outside. The old woman was first to follow her out the door, eyes squinting hard in her direction.

"'Tis a person," the woman announced. The little girl was jumping up and down with unbridled glee. A red-haired man exited the house next, obviously the girl's father. His mouth dropped open and he stopped just outside the door.

"My God. Ye dinna see that every day."

"Move, Kenneth," a second man said. She couldn't help backing up a step when a tall, broad-shouldered man shoved aside the red-haired man—Kenneth—and stepped outside. The frown on his face was made only more frightening by his thick, black beard. Both men wore the same sort of loose, belted tunics as the men in the village. The big one, though, was bulging with muscles and his mere presence scared the hell out of her. Those meaty arms could probably heave a boulder.

"Iain, what are we looking at?" the old woman asked, poking the taller man's side with the bulbous head of her cane. Iain didn't answer and his initially distrustful expression was now slack with incomprehension.

"A fairy!" The girl jumped up and down. "Will she give me a wish, Dada?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at Kenneth. The man took one step toward his daughter, putting his hand on her shoulder.

The girl's happy squeal woke the dog sleeping near the entrance. As soon as it spotted her, it got to its feet and loped toward her to investigate the newcomer. It

looked like some sort of Border Collie and barked as it approached. She hastily backed up but the dog stopped ten feet from her, like it had caught a scent. The barking immediately ceased. With a pitiful whine, it wagged its tail.

None of the four people standing outside the house had yet spoken to her and she racked her brain for something to say. The girl was still grinning, the old woman still squinting and the two men still dumbfounded. Hesitantly taking a step forward, she said the only thing that immediately came to mind.

“Hello.”

Chapter Two

Iain checked the pottage simmering near the fire. The two farmhands had already eaten and were working in the barn but he was still waiting on his other three guests. Scratching his chin through his beard, he prepared himself for Auld Aili's arrival. She was more unpredictable than a drunkard but she was the oldest woman in the village and due all proper respect. For washing a set of his clothes every week, he gave her a hearty meal since all her kin had passed on. He would have done so no matter if she worked for it or not but if she wanted to labor rather than accept charity, he had no qualms.

Even so, dealing with her strange behavior was a headache.

"Smells good, Iain," his brother-in-law called. Kenneth's daughter, Elizabeth, ran inside with her cloth doll in hand.

"Uncle Iain, what are we eating?" she asked, wrapping her arms around his leg.

Walking to the door with her still attached, he greeted his brother-in-law, who petted the dog's sleepy head before coming inside. "The boys are still alive, so the soup is edible," he said.

Kenneth grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. "I dinna doubt that. The question is if it tastes better than the oatcakes ye made yesterday," he joked.

Iain frowned. "If ye dinna want it—"

"I'm hungry," Beth interrupted, shaking Iain's leg.

Kenneth laughed. "She likes danger as much as I do."

"We'll eat when Aili comes," Iain said to the little burr clinging to his leg. He ruffled her soft, fine hair and then waddled back toward the cooking pot. Kenneth took a seat on one of the stools.

"If it tastes as good as it smells Aili may have no complaints today." Iain didn't answer and continued hovering near the pot. "I still say ye should marry a girl and have her do the cooking. Ye'll never get it right and we have nae made our own ale for longer than I care to remember."

"I willna marry just to get a cook," Iain sullenly answered. Beth let go of his leg in favor of sitting on her father's lap.

"After waiting so long to fast hands, what will ye marry for?" Kenneth asked. "I was hoping our bairns could grow up playing together, like ye and I did but Beth is almost six now."

"If ye be so keen on having children, why dinna ye make some brothers and sisters for her?" Iain winced the second it came out but he didn't say anything and continued to stare at the gently simmering pottage.

Kenneth was quiet for a few breaths. "I suppose I shouldna meddle so much," he said in a muted voice. "I know I've thought about..." He took a deep breath. "Anyway, I'm nae fond of any particular woman from the village."

"I sometimes see ye talking to Rossalyn," Iain observed. His tone was both chiding and teasing.

"All Rossalyn does is talk. 'Tis no easy thing to be rid of her. That woman's a glutton for attention."

"What are ye talking about? 'Tis simple to end a conversation with her," Iain said, briefly stirring the soup and swinging the pot just a little farther from the fire.

"I canna be so rude so easily," Kenneth said, "and with a face like this, I dinna look as beastly and grumpy as ye." Iain leveled an annoyed stare at his friend. "Aye, just like that." Kenneth pointed at Iain's expression.

"Can ye even grow a beard?" he grumbled, looking back at the soup.

"Ye ken quite well that I shave every morning. Ye should do the same."

He stroked his beard. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Many women dinna appreciate the feel of a beard and Father Patrick would certainly be happy to see ye without it."

"I dinna want to attract Father Patrick," Iain said with a sneer, purposefully misunderstanding.

Kenneth laughed. "It seems ye dinna want to attract anyone."

"Did ye ever conceive that like you, I'm nae fond of any particular woman from the village?"

"Rossalyn is certainly fond of you. When I met her yesterday, she asked when she might come to cook something for ye. I said I dinna know," Kenneth said.

Iain bit back a curse. "She only persists because I dinna fawn upon her as other men do. I doubt she has ever cooked a day in her life."

"None of the unattached women attract ye and ye snub the ones who show interest. Will ye be a stag yer entire life?"

Iain stirred the soup again, not answering. In the silence following Kenneth's question, Iain heard the unmistakable thump of a cane repeatedly hitting the ground.

"Aili!" Beth cheered, sliding off her father's lap to run outside and usher the old woman into Iain's home.

"Aye, the burden is here." Aili let the young girl pull her inside. Iain wordlessly took the basket of clean clothes from Aili's hands and Kenneth pulled up a stool for her to sit on. Beth giggled as the old woman made a fuss about sitting down but then left Aili alone to return to her father.

Iain offered the woman a taste of the pottage. Her already wizened face scrunched up as soon as the soup entered her mouth. "Too much salt," she admonished. "If it is so expensive, use less of it."

Kenneth sat down and pulled Beth back onto his lap. "I never minded a wee more salt in my food."

His expression stiff, Iain wasn't about to let the woman's comment go.

"I'm surprised ye can still taste aught at yer age," he said.

Aili laughed and her raspy voice was just a little creepy but Beth seemed to like it, for the little girl giggled again. The old woman raised one shaky hand and pointed at him. "Ye dinna have taste at all," she shot back. "What a day! Blue skies are good for my hands but they hurt my eyes. My tongue, on the other hand, works just fine any day."

"Aye, 'tis as sharp as ever," he said with a frown as he walked back to the fire.

Aili continued as though she hadn't heard him. "No taste at my age... Pah! Add some water to that soup or I willna eat it." Iain took a deep breath of air but did as she said, stirring in more water from a nearby jug. "Such disrespect lately... Those boys down the way nearly ran me down on their horses, the bastards," she frowned. "Didna even bow their heads to me."

Kenneth's eyebrows went up. "That's right. Duncan and Finian rode by earlier."

"I heard them. Did they say aught to ye?" Iain asked, stirring the soup.

"A few of their herd went missing last night, though I dinna know any more than that. They were going to report it to James," Kenneth explained. Iain bit down on his lip, trying even harder not to curse in front of Beth.

"That dinna mean they can run down an old woman!" Aili squawked.

Iain ignored her. "'Tis likely MacGregors. They'll steal from us as well before they move on," he said. "I'd hoped that not enough had survived."

Kenneth nodded solemnly. "The last couple of years have been hard. They're a tough group though. Stubborn."

"They have pride, like anyone else. Chose the wrong side and paid for it," Iain said. "We'll need to keep a careful watch the next few nights. I'll see if the boys can help." Their two farmhands were not quite old enough to shave but considering that there were no others to replace the other two he had already lost, Iain relied heavily on them.

"'Tis the best we can do," Kenneth agreed.

"Of course they dinna ken!" Aili yelled at the empty air beside her. Everyone in the room went silent for a few seconds.

"Get her something to drink," Kenneth whispered to his daughter. Beth obediently slid off his lap once more and walked to Iain, who poured some ale into a cup. Before she could take the cup he held out to her, the little girl stopped in front of the open door to look outside. Her eyes went wide. A smile lit up her face and she pointed outside. Of all the things children say, Beth's next words were the last thing Iain expected to hear.

"Dada, look! A fairy!"

Kenneth grimaced. "Baby, 'tis just a bug." Aili wheezed as she stood up, leaning heavily on her cane.

“‘Tis nae a bug. Look!” Beth said, angrily stomping her foot. “She has wings too.” The child ran out the door, dropping her doll to the ground. Aili was already following the girl outside.

Kenneth stood up, heaving a long-suffering sigh. Iain knew well enough that his niece was very imaginative lately. She enjoyed making up invisible friends since few other children were near her age.

“‘Tis a person,” Aili said, throwing the words over her shoulder.

Kenneth started for the door as Iain turned to put the cup of ale on the table behind him. “My God. Ye dinna see that every day,” Kenneth said.

Both curious and anxious, he followed his brother-in-law to the door but the shorter man filled the entire doorway.

“Move, Kenneth,” he grumpily said, pushing him aside. Kenneth moved distractedly, clumsily stepping out of the way and Iain ducked under the doorway.

The air rushed out of his lungs. His body tensed and his heart swelled as he stared at the mysterious creature only a stone’s throw away.

The girl’s hair was unbound and pink...*pink!* Her grass-green dress stopped just above her knees, revealing her naked calves, and her black footwear was like nothing he had ever seen. Even stranger was the coloring on her face. Just as Beth had said, she bore large wings. A gold chain suspended a small object from her neck, drawing attention to the low neckline of her dress. She also held an odd, round object. A brown bag with one long strap was looped across her chest.

She was the strangest, most upsetting and most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

“Iain, what are we looking at?” Aili said with frustration, jabbing his side with her cane. Pain spread from where she had poked him but he didn’t react to it. He didn’t even know how he would answer her.

“A fairy!” Beth said, providing her own answer. “Will she give me a wish, Dada?”

One of his sheepdogs raised its head at the sound of Beth’s excitement. The dog ran full-out toward the strange girl, barking. She backed up, her empty hand grasping her throat. He inhaled to command the dog to return to him but Puck skidded to a stop, almost as if he had hit a wall. His frantic barks ceased and he wagged his tail. Iain couldn’t say anything for a moment. Puck never liked unfamiliar people. None of his dogs did and that’s what he preferred. Once it became apparent that the dog wasn’t going to harm her, she relaxed.

Her gaze came back to them. Iain felt as though he couldn’t breathe very well when her eyes were on him. She opened her raspberry-colored mouth and he realized she was going to speak.

“Hello.”

Hel-oh? What did that mean?

Beth giggled, excitedly waving her hand. The pink-haired girl smiled uneasily at his niece and waved back. Her smile didn’t last long.

"This old woman canna see verra well, lass. Come closer." Aili shuffled down the path and beckoned with her hand. Iain wasn't so sure it was a good idea to invite the young woman closer but then mentally shook his head. What could this slip of a girl do? The young woman hesitated but then walked forward. Puck didn't crowd her but he was eager to keep up.

"I know the way I look must be unsettling," she said. Iain heard an odd accent in her words, something else that added to her strangeness. She wasn't English though—of that he was almost certain. "My name is Emma."

Iain bit his tongue to stop himself from saying it out loud, tempted to form her name with his lips.

"Are ye a MacGregor? A MacDougall? Or another clan?" Kenneth asked. She stopped walking, her forehead tightening. Aili was only a few steps away from her.

"C-clan? I don't have a clan," she answered. Aili took hold of Emma's elbow and tugged, bringing their faces closer together. The girl gasped, looking into the old woman's eyes.

"No clan?" Kenneth whispered to him. Iain frowned, his suspicion now overpowering his fascination. Without a doubt, the MacGregors were a clever group. "Do ye think she really is one of the good neighbors? She isna what I imagined. Dinna her kind have the legs of a goat?" Feeling betrayed by Kenneth's gullibility, Iain shot a nasty look at his brother-in-law. "What?" Kenneth whispered defensively.

"Ha-haaa!" Aili rejoiced. "All my life, I heard such stories! Often felt as though my eyes played tricks. I never expected to meet one of the good folk." She continued to cackle and Emma drew her hand from the woman's grasp.

"Aili, ye dinna really—" Iain began but the old hag cut him off.

"Bite yer tongue!" she said, pointing the end of her cane at him. "'Tis bad luck to say such things about the good folk, especially when they have seen our suffering these last couple of years and sent one of their own to us." Iain watched Emma as Aili spoke, noticing the dread on her face that conflicted with the nodding agreement he would have expected from someone seeking to take advantage of them with a convenient lie. She didn't actually seem to want to be there.

"I don't think you understand—" Emma tried to say.

"I understand verra well, dear. Ye've come to live with us. 'Tis why yer skin isna gray and yer legs like that of any other lass. Ye're to be one of us now." Aili patted Emma's arm in a comforting gesture. "Although yer hair isna quite right yet and ye'll have to cut off yer wings." Iain watched as a horrified look came over the winged girl.

"Dinna worry. Ye'll become a real woman in no time at all. I'll help ye," Aili said. Emma took a step away from the old woman. "For now, ye'll live with Iain there," she then said, pointing at him.

Emma looked at him with wide eyes. "N-no, it's probably best if —"

"Iain has no one to help in his home." Realizing that Aili was offering up his hospitality to a complete stranger who was probably mad, Iain cut in as Aili was about to start on a tirade about his burnt and overly salted meals.

"If ye want to offer her a home, ye should offer yer own."

Aili turned to him with a frown. "Iain, yer mother would be spinning in her grave to hear ye refuse hospitality to someone in need."

"I dinna think it a good idea for her to go to the village anyway," Kenneth said. Betrayed again, Iain turned to him with a thunderous expression.

"Then why dinna ye take in the fairy," he ground out in a low voice. Kenneth held up his hands in surrender.

"Please!" Emma shouted. "I can tell I'm unwelcome. Please just tell me where else I can go." Guilt swarmed him, which only fed his anger. Why did everyone think this girl was a real fairy? Looking at her, though, it was easy to tell that she wasn't of their world—not an ordinary Scotswoman, that is. He just didn't want to believe it. He refused to believe it. In fact, he was going to prove them wrong.

Pinning Emma with his eyes, he marched toward her. It would be obvious upon closer inspection that she was merely painted to look like a fairy. He had no idea how she had shaded her hair but the substance would surely rub off into his hand. Her eyes widened as he strode forward and she took a step back.

"Did I say something wrong?" she asked.

At the same time, Kenneth said, "Iain, ye're scaring the girl."

"Ye're too trusting," he rebuked.

The girl held up her free hand palm out, as if that would stop him, and continued to back up. "Wait, please don't—" When he reached out to grab her, she shrieked and ran. He didn't know what came over him but he pursued her.

"Ye foolish—" Aili yelled. Puck launched into frantic barking.

"Iain!" Kenneth called. Even Beth was yelling.

Emma hurdled over the wall, leaping from the top into the paddock, and then tore off across the open grass toward the other boundary of the enclosure. He hadn't been that far behind her when she had first run but he realized with surprise that she was faster than him. He couldn't give up the chase now though. Lengthening his stride and quickening his pace, he regained the ground he had lost. Each stride jarred his right knee and he hissed as pain shot up his leg.

Her butterfly wings were folded back toward him, pushed together by the wind, and they were the first thing he grabbed for when he was close enough. Grasping both, he growled for her to stop but his pace had slowed too suddenly and the wings ripped off into his hands.

Emma tripped, crying out. His feet became caught up with hers and he lost his balance, twisting just in time to avoid landing on her. The bulk of his weight hit hard next to her and his calves landed on the back of her thighs.

For several seconds, he was too winded to move and instead sucked in new air as his body tried to comprehend being flat on the ground. He had dropped her wings nearby and raised his head to look for them. Kenneth, Beth and Aili were just now entering the paddock from the gate. Kenneth was keeping up with his daughter's tiny strides and Aili was upset enough to be walking as fast as Beth was running. Next to him, the fairy girl moaned. Turning himself about and taking his legs off hers, he lay alongside her.

"Don't—hurt me," she panted, shifting to lie on her side. Her mane of pink hair was tangled about her face. The fright in her eyes filled him with even more guilt. Unable to say anything, he reached for her more slowly this time and picked up a lock of her hair. Rubbing it between his fingers, he marveled at its smooth, soft texture. He had never touched hair so fine. Studying his finger pads, he saw nothing there.

Her hair was really pink.

"It'll fade," she said. Despite his better judgment, he looked into her eyes and wondered if she had heard his thoughts. "The pink color will fade in a few days." Her breath held a cool, light, clean fragrance. Watching her painted lips move with that strange accent, he couldn't stop himself when he reached to touch those lips. At first, her eyes tracked his hand but when he gently wiped his fingers across her mouth, she looked up at him. The ripe raspberry color didn't come off though.

"It'll fade too," she explained. Reaching up to her cheeks, he drew his index finger across her sparkly skin. She was so soft. Smooth. So goddamn lovely.

Some of the glittering dust came off onto the pad of his finger, as fine as the multi-colored powder on butterfly wings. Worry gnawed at his gut as he reached behind her to touch the spot where her wings had sat. She hissed softly and he brought his hand up to see blood smeared across his fingertips.

"I am sorry," he whispered.

"Uncle Iain," Beth called, almost upon them. "Dinna hurt the fairy. She's bonny." As if that was the only necessary reason.

"Iain, ye...ye great fool!" Aili gasped out, more winded than either he or Emma.

"He killed her!" Beth wailed, wiping at her eyes. Kenneth patted her back, shushing her tears as he squatted down to her height.

"No, I'm all right," Emma then said, rolling onto her back. "Don't worry. I'm fine." The little girl couldn't stop crying as easily as she could start but she smiled.

Feeling silly lying there on the ground, Iain got to his knees and took Emma's hand to help her sit up. He tried to resist the urge to caress it but he couldn't stop his thumb from stroking the back of her hand...just once.

"Well, I'm...glad ye're...not hurt," Aili wheezed, arriving last. "Iain, I would...turn yer hide red...if I could breathe. Such foolishness."

"See? She's all right. No need to cry, baby," his brother-in-law said, patting Beth's head. Emma grabbed for the ornament dangling from her neck but relaxed upon finding it.

"Will ye keep her, Uncle?" Beth gazed up at Iain with her large, shimmering eyes, deep pools of sad blue. The same eyes as when her father told her that her mother had died. "Will ye?"

Iain clenched his hands and jaw as his walls of resistance crumbled. His niece was always his undoing.

Chapter Three

When she had been lying there, the breath knocked out of her, Emma had never been more frightened in all the time since she had woken up. She had been chased down by a man large enough and strong enough to snap her in half. When he had grabbed her fake wings, one of the safety pins keeping them on her dress had popped open, scratching her skin and then jabbing into her back before being ripped out with the other three. *Safety pin, my ass*, she thought.

The minor pain was enough to trip her. At first, she had only the strength to roll to her side just as he was crawling up to her and she couldn't help begging for mercy. The man had been serious about catching her, after all.

It was therefore a complete shock when he gave in to the little girl's plea to "keep her", as if she were some stray animal. It was even more of a shock to learn the name of his clan.

"I am Iain MacArthur of the Clan Campbell and I offer my home to ye for as long as ye wish."

Campbell? Perhaps the locket did indeed choose her for a reason. She was glad to have figured out where she was—Scotland—but for a brief, insane moment, Emma imagined him saying *I am Connor Macleod of the Clan Macleod*, at which point she would've said, *And I'm the one who can't die*.

The man named Iain practically growled his less-than-tempting offer and Emma was rather inclined to turn him down. Being alone in a room with a man like him was the exact opposite of what she had wanted when she had tailed the old woman. His wide chest, thick arms and obvious strength made her thighs clamp together.

It seemed, though, that her agreement was automatic.

"Lovely," Aili crowed, pounding her cane into the ground a couple of times. "Dinna worry, dear. Iain is a clever man—just dinna have the touch for cooking. I'll teach ye how."

Resigned, she accepted their perception of her. If it was easier for them to think she was a real fairy who had come to live as a human, she couldn't complain. She had no better excuse or story, especially since the truth was crazier than the lie.

Iain stood up, still holding onto her hand. His hands were so much bigger than hers, just like the rest of him. He offered his other one and she took it, letting him pull her to her feet.

"She's going to stay?" the little girl asked. The smile on her face was simply adorable. "With us?"

"With yer uncle," Kenneth explained. He straightened up to his full height. "But we can visit her if ye like." Emma didn't miss the underlying meaning of "we". Kenneth didn't trust her to be alone with his daughter and she couldn't blame him.

For the second time, the rough pad of Iain's thumb slid across the back of her hand. She might have taken it as something innocuous but such a light touch was undoubtedly something more. Feeling uncomfortable, she pulled her hands away from him, avoiding his eyes when his fingers tried to hold onto her. She then looked around for her steering wheel and went to pick it up.

"What's that?" the little girl asked, probably a question the other three wanted the answer to as well.

Emma tried to be as truthful as possible. "It's something from my home that I brought with me but unfortunately it doesn't work now. I should probably destroy it." Kenneth took a step back. "I-I mean, just burn it. Nothing special will happen...I think."

Looking around for her wings, she saw them a couple of feet behind Iain and went to get them. She squatted down with her back to them and pulled out the loose safety pins.

"Dada, her back," the little girl said, likely noticing the tears in her dress.

"Are ye sure ye're all right? Ye were bleeding a little," Iain said. His voice was resonant enough to sound as though he was talking directly into her ear but she knew he hadn't moved.

Even so, her heartbeat picked up.

"It's nothing." She hoped that would be enough of an answer.

After dropping the safety pins into her purse, she picked up the wings and smoothed her hand across them. The frame was intact but the thin material atop it was ripped. The wings had taken a good four hours to make, some of the last hours she had spent with her mother. She stood and turned around.

"I have to get rid of these too." Her throat started to close up as she imagined having to toss them into a fire. Iain was watching her closely, so she averted her eyes.

"We'll take care of that soon," Aili said. "Ye must be hungry. Iain made some pottage. It's too salty but—"

"There's also bread from the village and some cheese from our cattle," Iain interrupted, his face full of annoyance and all of it directed at Aili. They set off for the house. Aili did pretty much all of the talking, though the other three made small comments. Emma kept Iain in her periphery, still uncertain about his temperament.

When his face had been so near to her, she had noticed that he was much younger than his haggard appearance made him out to be. The skin around his eyes was smooth, free of crow's feet and his wide lips were a healthy color. It was obvious that his nose had been broken once or twice but it was still mostly straight. She hadn't been able to tell much about the rest of his face due to his bushy beard but his eyes were a rich shade of brown.

She had also seen a deep intelligence in his eyes, which was probably nagging him right now. He would continue to ask questions about her origin until he had a more acceptable answer. She only hoped that she would either have a better lie prepared or be ready to move on before his unanswered questions frustrated him too much.

The closer they came to Iain's home, the more anxious she became to see the place where she was to live, at least for a little while. She didn't want to overstay her welcome, intending to make use of Iain's hospitality only until she knew her next move. For whatever clothing they might be able to give her, she would gladly repay them with labor.

As she was ushered into the house, she was both hoping for the best and fearing the worst—and she knew from her freshman history course that it could be really bad.

The structure was about thirty feet by fifteen. She first saw the fire, which was just to the left of the door but generally in the center of the house. Dug into the ground and surrounded by a ring of rocks, the fire was burning low and kept warm a pot of delicious-smelling soup. The pot hung from a hook suspended by the arm of a stout crane.

She next noticed the dirt floor, strewn with rushes. More sweet-smelling bundles of herbs hung from the wooden rafters, giving the inside a pleasant scent. She had expected animals inside the house but there were no enclosures for them. It seemed they were kept in the nearby barn since the herd was so large.

To the left of the fire sat a table large enough for six people, perhaps eight. The surface was uneven due to warped wood but atop it sat cups, bowls, dishes and beautifully glazed jugs. A couple of dishes held loaves of bread and a bowl held a large chunk of cheese. Against the left wall was a long, open cabinet, filled with more jars, jugs and bags of foodstuffs. Another cabinet sat against the back wall, filled with various tools. Two large wooden trunks sat against the back wall to the left of the cabinet.

The other end of the house was surprisingly barren. A few sturdy but plain stools sat a few feet from the fire. A bed large enough for two adults and a child sat against the right wall. She was afraid to ask if the mattress was filled with bug-infested straw but that he even had a mattress off the ground was miraculous. Closer to the door but against the right wall sat some sort of overturned wooden tub that hadn't seen much recent use. Various tools and household items either sat against or hung from every wall.

Considering the times, it was surprisingly cozy and tidy. She was ready to compliment Iain on his home when she spotted the sheathed sword hanging from the wall next to the door. Her eyes went wide.

That thing was longer than her arm!

Turning to the four people who were watching her and hoping they didn't notice the lack of blood in her face, she forced a smile. "It's a lovely home."

Both men seemed to relax, as if they had been waiting for some sort of snobbish disapproval but Emma knew very well she had no reason to complain. She actually felt a small wave of relief. She had a roof over her head. That was a pretty big accomplishment.

"Now may be a good time to eat," Iain said. He gestured toward the table and its twin benches.

"Yea!" the little girl cheered, picking up a doll she had evidently dropped to the ground. She then made her way to the table and climbed onto the bench, though her father stood close in case she needed help. Kenneth sat next to his daughter and Aili pushed Emma to sit on the other side with her. Setting her wings and steering wheel against the wall, she then slid onto the seat and scooted down far enough for Aili to sit next to her.

The old woman was simply beaming. "Is fairy food different?" she asked, gesturing toward the bread and cheese waiting to be consumed. Iain began filling a few bowls with soup and was setting them on the table.

At a loss as to how to respond, Emma once again went for as truthful an answer as she could. "No but we make it a little differently."

"My mother told me that if I eat in the land of fairies, I canna leave. Does that mean ye canna go back to yer home if ye eat here?" the little girl asked.

"Your mother?" Emma looked at Kenneth, the question obvious. If they were all sitting down to eat, wasn't the girl's mother going to join them? The red-haired man looked down at the table and took a deep breath. Iain grew still.

"Beth's mother died last summer," Kenneth explained. Instantly flustered, she tried to push past the awkward moment.

"I can't go back, no matter—" She paused. Sadness pooled low in her stomach, cold and heavy. "No matter if I eat here or not," she finished. The girl's eyes went wide and her jaw dropped open.

"Why?" Beth asked in a bare whisper.

"The good folk sent her to us," Aili said, "and to send her back would be rude. She's already becoming a woman anyway."

"Aili, do you live in the village?" Emma asked, hoping to change the subject.

"I do," she nodded. "I've been a laundress most of my life and my husband, God rest his soul, looked after the laird's herb garden. Ye'd think he'd ha' smelled better though, God help him."

Beth giggled. "Dada and I live over that way," the girl volunteered, pointing in the direction of the other house she had noticed earlier.

"So Iain lives alone?" Emma looked at the tall, serious man bringing over the last bowl of soup. He looked at her when she said his name but he didn't answer her question. Instead, he leaned to set a bowl of soup in front of Aili.

"Iain's sweet mother used to live with him but she passed as well," Aili said.

"He has always been a stag though. I married and settled years ago," Kenneth added. Iain glared at the other man. He growled something to the redhead but Emma's eyes bulged as shock slapped her in the face, her attention locking on the word "stag". She couldn't say anything for a few seconds.

The stag doth wait in a lush and green meadow.

The stag doth wait? Waiting for her? Was she supposed to stay in Iain's house? She highly doubted that he would be amenable to a permanent houseguest but perhaps meeting Iain would lead to something else.

A bowl of mystery soup appeared in front of her and she looked up at Iain. He didn't return her gaze though and went to an open barrel next to one of the cabinets. With a ladle, he poured dark liquid into cups that he brought back to the table.

"What's that?" Emma asked of Aili.

"Have ye no' tried a good cup of ale, lass?" Aili reached for one of the cups that Iain set down and set it in front of her. "Rachel's ale is some of the best, I say." Emma swallowed heavily. She didn't have to drink that, did she?

"Oh! But yer kind prefers milk, am I wrong?"

"Milk?" she asked. Emma didn't know how to answer that one. She had thought fairies drank nectar, like bees or hummingbirds or something.

"There isna much milk leftover from this morning," Kenneth said.

"Water is all right then?" Aili asked. Emma nodded, grateful that she didn't have to drink the ale to avoid insulting anyone. Her college friends would've understood but these people didn't know her.

Iain poured a cup of water for her and sat down opposite Emma on Beth's other side. They began to eat and Emma mimicked the others, who dipped bread into the broth and ate the rest with crude utensils. They also sliced off bits of cheese and ate it either with bread or by itself.

She supposed the soup – apparently vegetable soup – was a tad salty but she was so hungry that she didn't care. It was delicious and she only hoped that she ate with enough dignity to avoid the stares that the others tossed at Aili, who talked with large amounts of food in her mouth.

"It's very good, Iain. Thank you." Her comment was halfway lost in the barrage of words coming from Aili, who was telling them about the magical properties of different phases of the moon. Iain looked at Emma with some surprise. He then frowned and looked away again.

Chewing on her lower lip, she stared at the half-empty bowl of pottage and poked a bit of onion with the hunk of bread in her hand. Her cheeks were warm with embarrassment. He certainly didn't take compliments well.

She continued eating in silence and listened to Aili talking about how her neighbors were plotting to kill her.

"I tell ye, ever since that plague, they've been eyeing me as though it were my doing. The ungrateful, ignorant bastards," she spat. Emma nearly choked on the mouthful of broth-laden bread she was attempting to swallow. Iain and Kenneth both sighed. "They lost their darling little boy but this old crone is still around. How could they be so disrespectful to someone older than both of them put together?"

Emma finally swallowed her food. "What plague?" she asked. "It's not still around, is it?"

Iain and Kenneth regarded her with renewed suspicion, though Iain's expression was far more frightening. He looked at her as though she were a wolf stealing one of his sheep.

"Ye didna know why we've suffered these last couple of years?" the old woman asked, patting the back of her hand. "The Black Death has killed so many. It's what took Iain's mother and sister. His sister Gwen was Kenneth's wife."

All the blood in her face drained away. Now that was something from history class she remembered.

"Do fairies get sick?" Beth asked in a near whisper. Still reeling, Emma couldn't even form a single-word answer. The Black Death killed at least a quarter of the population of Europe, if not more. Most likely an epidemic of bubonic plague spread by the fleas on rats, people died within a week of contracting the disease.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," she managed to say. No wonder the other end of the house seemed Spartan. It had once held Iain's mother's personal possessions. Neither of the men said anything but Aili patted her hand again.

"The Church couldna help. Then a man came through peddling a remedy —"

Iain slammed his hand on the table. "We willna talk about that," he bit out. For once, Aili quieted and only made a few infrequent grumbles as she finished her soup.

* * * * *

Though Emma protested, Kenneth gave her one of his wife's best dresses and Iain grudgingly said he would give her another of his mother's to wear when washing the first. Both men then left the house to whatever duties awaited them. Beth wanted to stay awhile longer but her father insisted that she come with him. Aili remained behind to help her dress.

"I have a piece of good linen with me that ye can wrap yer clothes in. Ye'll want to keep that nice bit of silk, I'm sure," the old woman offered, digging through her basket. Emma picked up the clothes that Kenneth had left on the bed.

The off-white linen smock didn't look particularly expensive but she didn't know what was expensive to a farmer. Its sleeves were rather loose, not as fitted as she might have expected. The deep blue-black kirtle was a woolen, square-necked bodice darted at the waist and attached to a woolen skirt with a straight waist seam. The bodice had lacing in front and the back of the sleeves were open. The skirt, undoubtedly made from

the same batch of dyed wool, was constructed of a couple of dozen gores and was hemmed very neatly at the bottom.

"A lovely dress," Aili said, coming up behind her with the square of linen she had mentioned. Emma nodded, once again moved by the generosity of these people. "Iain's mother made that for Gwen. I remember helping her dye the wool."

Shaking her head, Emma gently set the kirtle back on the bed. "It's not right for me to have this. Iain and Kenneth will be unhappy to see someone wearing it."

"Dinna worry, dear. They're nae as foolish as that. Gwen was a touch taller than ye and had black hair like her brother. They willna mistake ye for her ghost. Besides, the dress is just going to waste without a woman to wear it."

As Emma undressed, she took the opportunity to ask the questions she knew she needed the answers to, such as what duties she would have, where and how to answer nature's call and most importantly, how to take baths. If she wanted the pink in her hair to fade, she was going to need to wash it out with soap and water—hot water, if possible.

Aili patiently explained everything, though she often went on strange tangents, especially about her bastard neighbors. Emma thought she might wonder why she wanted to take daily baths but the laundress seemed to understand. Aili also offered to come out every day to help cook and do other household chores. Emma had the feeling that such an arrangement would upset Iain but then again, she needed to learn from someone willing to teach her.

After shaking out the linen smock, Aili helped pull it over her head.

"Iain doesn't like me at all," Emma observed from inside the smock. When her head emerged, she continued, "I don't think it's a good idea to impose on someone who doesn't want guests."

"That fool dinna like anyone, lass. That he agreed to let ye stay should be taken as a miracle. I would've beaten his head in with my cane otherwise."

The kirtle was next. Her waist was a little shorter and smaller than Gwen's must have been but it wasn't too noticeable. Thankfully, the lacing didn't have to be pulled very tightly, unlike a corset, so the kirtle sat quite comfortably. Aili then helped arrange her sleeves properly and they were done after only a couple of minutes.

"That looks good," the old woman nodded, panting just a little. "When it gets colder, I'll have a wrap ready for ye but ye'll be fine for now. I know Iain has pelts for keeping warm in winter." Emma wanted to point out that she wasn't planning to mooch until winter came around but decided to remain quiet.

Aili's eyes went to Emma's head, her thin lips pressed tight. "We'll need to hide yer hair but only married women and ladies cover their heads," she explained, pointing at the cloth on her own head. "No help for it though. Let's see what I have." Aili turned away and went back to her basket, fishing through various articles of clothing. "Ah! Here we are." She pulled out a smaller square of linen. It was frayed on one side but it was enough to cover her hair.

They then made a trip down to the creek that Emma had seen earlier. She brought along her handkerchief and mirror to remove her makeup. Aili let her use some sweet-smelling lye soap from her basket and hummed way off-key while keeping her company. The next five minutes were spent scrubbing her face with cold water but the soap helped. When she had finally washed off the last traces of her fairy makeup, she dried herself off with her handkerchief and then checked her face in her mirror.

"Does the dress fit well?" Iain's unmistakably irritated voice asked from behind her. Jumping with surprise, she hastily closed her compact mirror. Standing and turning around, she presented him with a freshly washed face.

* * * * *

Kenneth held his daughter in his arms as he and Iain walked toward the former man's house. After the excitement of meeting a "fairy", Beth had fallen asleep on her father's chest.

"I still dinna like this," Iain complained, glancing distractedly at the large flock of sheep in the paddock between his and Kenneth's houses. "That girl is a harbinger of ill luck—"

"A harbinger? Iain, really—"

"Aye, a harbinger and we dinna need more trouble, especially with the MacGregors prowling around. Hell, she may even be a MacGregor."

"How else can ye explain where she came from but that she is one of the good people? Her appearance, her strange possessions, her accent. I have to listen closely to understand her at all."

"All signs of how much trouble she'll be," he said grumpily. He couldn't help being stubborn. True, she was out of place but he rejected the idea of fairies. Such creatures and stories were for children.

"She was very kind. She even complimented yer salty soup," Kenneth pointed out. Iain ground his teeth remembering that. She was merely trying to curry favor with false praise. "Perhaps she is a sign of good things to come—not trouble. Still, caution is warranted." Finally, some sense out of him!

Iain nodded in agreement. "I dinna know if I can sleep in the same room as her. She may take a knife and cut out my heart."

Kenneth chuckled. "Be reasonable, Iain. Who are ye that she would wish to kill ye?" Iain glared at his brother-in-law. "I would wager that she is even more frightened that ye might do something similar."

"What is yer meaning?"

"Come now, oh brother of mine. She is a young, beautiful thing. Do ye nae feel any attraction to her?" Iain clenched his jaw tight, unwilling to lie but very willing to punch Kenneth. "Or have I been mistaken this whole time? Do ye fancy yer own sex?" Stopping abruptly, Iain raised his fist. Kenneth laughed and stepped away.

"I'll do my duty and house that girl for a short while but then she's gone," he vowed, lowering his fist. They began walking again.

"I should warn ye of one thing though," Kenneth eventually said as they came close to his home.

"And what's that?" Iain sighed. A headache had taken root in the back of his skull.

"Do ye remember the stories yer uncle used to tell us?"

"Aye and I am ashamed that I was once foolish enough to believe them."

"But Iain, every great story contains a seed of truth. I remember a story about a fairy that ruined the life of a mortal man with just a kiss." Iain rubbed the back of his aching head.

"And yer point?"

"Just be careful, Iain. The fae, or whatever name they're known by, are cunning creatures," his brother-in-law said, not elaborating. They arrived at his house then and Kenneth said he would check on the farmhands once Beth was put to bed. The redhead then entered his home and Iain turned to walk back toward his own house.

From Kenneth's front door, he saw Emma and Aili at the river. Emma was scrubbing her face and wearing Gwen's second-best dress—her best one had been the one she was burned in. Emma's pink hair was hidden under a plain piece of linen. Inappropriate but necessary, he supposed. By the time he arrived, she was looking at something in her hand.

Seeing her in his sister's dress, he couldn't help the anger churning in his gut. Gwen had been a brave and clever woman but the lass who now wore it seemed to be nothing but a mad beggar.

"Does the dress fit well?" he asked, not bothering to hide his vexation. The girl jumped with surprise, stood and then turned around.

Though a wee bit of her pink hair showed under her *kertch*, she looked normal. The glittery powder on her skin was gone, revealing a generous sprinkling of lovely freckles on her forehead, nose and cheeks. Had they been there before? The dark lining around her eyes was also gone and though her lips were still flushed from scrubbing, the dark red stain on her mouth had vanished. She rather looked like she had just been thoroughly kissed.

He was stunned by the transformation. His mind tried to reconcile the first image he had of her with the one now presented to him but couldn't believe that both were the same young woman.

"Let me see ye now, dear," Aili said, grabbing Emma's arm again to pull her face in close. Iain realized as he broke eye contact with her that he had been staring at her slack-jawed. "Good, good. Ye're turning into a lovely lass," she crooned. Emma stood straight once the old woman released her.

"Ye keep that bit of soap. Iain here will help ye draw a bath later," Aili said with a nod. Iain shot an angry look at her, annoyed that she had volunteered him for such a

laborious chore. "I'll be returning to my wee house then. Those bastard neighbors of mine may ransack it if I'm gone too long. Just need to fetch my basket," she said. Without any comment to Iain at all, she turned and waddled toward his house, smacking her cane into the ground as she went.

"I'm sorry about all of this," Emma said. "I promise to be a good guest and I'll work hard. You won't regret it."

Iain couldn't help it when he answered, "I already do."

Chapter Four

His acidic answer smarted and she fought the tightness in her chest with deep breaths. Blinking away the sting in her eyes, she told herself that she had to be stronger than this.

Iain was a shrewd, suspicious man but she had to deal with him. If she wanted answers to the riddle in her locket and some semblance of a life, she had to prove to him that she wasn't the one-woman circus she certainly seemed to be.

"Soap and hot water will make my hair fade faster. I can prepare it myself if you just show me how," she responded, straightening her spine. "A bath wouldn't hurt you either." Striding past him, she made to follow Aili and make sure the woman had a proper send-off. The old woman had been the only adult to genuinely welcome her. She heard him splutter and then the sounds of him walking quickly to catch up. She forced herself not to jump when he appeared at her side and kept pace.

"I wash myself every day," he said.

"By 'wash', do you mean using cold water on your face and hands in the morning, or do you mean using hot water and soap on your entire body?" she asked, looking askance at him.

"Drawing a bath takes too long. I dinna have the time for such a luxury."

"With me around, you'll have a bath every day," she said. Iain's eyebrows slanted. "I insist," she emphasized, leveling her eyes at him. "Just help me this one time." Emma wasn't completely ignorant of how a medieval bath was prepared. Hauling endless buckets of water sounded tiring indeed.

However, she also didn't want to catch the bubonic plague.

"Fair enough," he said. "Ye didna mention yer family name earlier," he then said. Emma grimaced, realizing she couldn't tell him her last name. She had always known that it was a Scottish name but her family had never really been involved in their Scottish ancestry. Now she wished they had.

"My father was Jason and my mother was Danielle." She didn't like using past tense when referring to her parents, especially when it was more correct to say "will be" but she couldn't lead him to believe that she had somewhere to which she could return. It was the best answer she could give him. They neared the house again.

"No brothers or sisters? Do ye have any family name at all?" he persisted.

Choosing to ignore his second question, she answered the first. "My older brother passed away several years ago." Iain stopped walking altogether but she continued into the house, having spotted Aili inside.

The elderly woman stood in the center of the room, her eyes vacant and the hem of her skirt much too close to the fire. Her cane lay on the ground and her basket still sat on one end of the table's nearest bench. Emma darted forward to pull the old woman away from the hearth.

"What's wrong?" she asked, lightly shaking the woman's shoulders. She heard Iain enter the house behind her. "Aili?" Emma had already taken a close look at the old woman twice—both times involuntarily—and had seen the unmistakable fog of cataracts clouding the lenses of her eyes. That and a high degree of myopia had made her legally blind. In a few years, she would probably be completely blind.

Sagging with age, Aili was missing many of her teeth and a small mole sat above her left eye. Her hair was mostly gray but Emma couldn't see much of it from under the *kertch*. However, she could see the younger, more beautiful Aili underneath, one who had lived a long, full life. A very hard life.

A few seconds later, the old woman snapped out of whatever trance she had been in. She looked confused.

"What? What...was I coming here for?" Her hands fidgeted about her head, as if looking for a button that would restore her memory. "Did we already eat?"

"You came to get your basket." Emma guided her to the bench. "See?"

"Well, of course I did," she nervously chuckled. "I must have been daydreaming."

"I daydream a lot myself." She watched as Aili took out a freshly laundered tunic and set it on the table. Next came what looked like a doublet of sorts and then finally a pair of pants, though they weren't exactly pants as she knew them.

Aili gestured vaguely toward the clothes as she picked up her basket and tucked it against her hip. "Thank ye for the meal, Iain. Clean clothing, as promised. I mean to come again tomorrow to help Emma learn a few things." Iain's deeply slanted eyebrows broadcasted his instant annoyance to hear that she would be back so soon. "God knows that she would have an easier time living here if she didna have to eat yer cooking," the old woman clucked.

Emma handed Aili her cane and looked at Iain with worry. He didn't say anything but his frown eased when he glanced at her. Aili then headed to the door and Emma saw her out.

"Thank you again, Aili. I'll see you tomorrow," she called, waving at the woman's back.

Though Emma barely caught it, the elderly woman mumbled to herself, "That went well, dinna ye think?" Tilting her head in confusion, Emma stopped waving and dropped her hand. She felt more than heard it this time when Iain followed her outside.

"She's...strange," she commented.

"Not as strange as ye," he responded. A whining sound drew her attention to the dog from earlier. Restlessly, the dog sat but then immediately stood again, his tail

gently wagging. "His name is Puck. His two sisters are in that paddock over there." The dog wagged his tail faster upon hearing his name. She was tempted to smile.

"I have work to do, so I'll show ye how to draw a bath," Iain said. He turned and reentered the house. Emma followed, watching as he walked to the overturned wooden tub on the right side of the house. The tub was large enough for one person to sit quite comfortably inside it but it looked like she would have to wash out the inside.

After Iain turned it over, he walked to the hearth, removed the empty soup pot and set it on the table. He then walked to the wall behind the table and lifted a couple of buckets from their hooks. Returning to her, he wordlessly held out the buckets. Emma took them off his hands. As he walked to the cabinet in the back, he said, "Fill both and bring them back. While the water is heating up, fill the empty one." He pulled out another pot, this one larger, and set it on the hearth. "When yer bath is finished, dump the water outside the house using the buckets." He then opened one of the trunks and pulled out a long length of rough-looking cloth. Haphazardly folding it, he tossed it into her arms as he walked outside. She turned to look at him and he briefly turned back.

"I'll be keeping an eye on the house. Dinna forget that." Without another word, he walked off in the direction of the barn.

Emma stood there for a moment, wondering again how she had gotten herself into this mess. More importantly, why had this happened to her? Was Iain really the stag from the locket's poem, or was she wasting her time trying to be nice to someone so bad tempered?

He was willing to house and feed her though. That was more than she could have hoped for and therefore, his kindness wasn't a requirement.

Glancing down at the towel and empty buckets in her hands and then looking around the house, she took a deep breath and made a mental list of things she needed to get done.

* * * * *

Iain admitted to himself as he walked back toward the house several hours later that a hot bath did indeed sound good. The temperature was dropping as the sun approached the horizon and the chill was starting to penetrate. He had also been collecting manure all day to take to the village for the crop farmers to use on the second plowing of their fallow fields. It would buy him some extra grain during the August harvest.

He sighed aloud, though, to think of the mess Emma had no doubt made. She had probably spilled great amounts of water everywhere and had created a couple of inches of mud that wouldn't completely dry for a couple of days. He also expected a great deal of complaining about the weight of the buckets and how did he honestly expect her to draw a bath every day all by herself?

A rotten day. He was certain he would get no rest that night. During the few hours he would spend abed, he would worry about a blade across his throat and with MacGregors to worry about, he would be up keeping watch with Kenneth and his farmhands. He felt certain that the MacGregors would try to carry away his few cattle and several of his sheep.

Perhaps worst of all was that Aili would be back tomorrow. His headache grew worse just thinking about the old crone. Slowly approaching the front door of his house, Iain peeked inside.

With one hand on her skirt to keep it back as she leaned over the fire pit, Emma held her other hand over the pot hanging above the flames. Her mysterious, expensive-looking ornament dangled from her neck, glinting in the firelight. Emma wasn't wearing her *kertch*. Her long hair looked heavier—probably still damp. The light was considerably darker, so he couldn't tell if her hair had faded but he allowed himself a few seconds to admire her delicate profile.

Kenneth had guessed correctly when he spoke of an attraction to Emma. Indeed, she was a very strong temptation. From the first second he had set eyes upon her, he knew that her skin was as smooth as butter, had even touched it when he had held her hands and stroked the powder from her face. He didn't want to contemplate what he would give to stroke her cheek once more.

She had a graceful neck and a light way of walking. Her breasts weren't large but he had never cared for a heavy bosom, such as what Rossalyn often pressed against him. Pert flesh, enough to fill his hands, was exactly what Emma had. He could only imagine how soft the rest of her was.

If she were a normal woman, he would have done everything in his power to have her. However, she wasn't normal—far from it—and his brother-in-law's mention of the deceitful fairy in his uncle's story seemed to haunt him, reminding him that she wasn't to be trusted.

Silently stepping into the house, he looked around and was glad to see that the ground was still dry. Both the large ring she had been carrying and her fairy wings were gone, though to where he didn't know. Already burned? The tub to his right was steaming with hot water and he was surprised to see that she had placed several flat rocks in a ring around the edge of the tub. One of his stools was placed nearby, on top of which sat his clean clothing. The small bar of soap Aili had given her lay on a rock within arm's reach of the tub.

"What are those for?" he asked, pointing at the rocks. Emma gasped and leaped back, pressing her hands to her heart.

"You scared me," she sighed, dropping her hands. She then looked to where he pointed. "I thought it might be a little cleaner to stand on the rocks and dry off instead of standing on the ground." He raised one eyebrow. "I can put the rocks back though, if you don't like it," she amended.

"I dinna care," he said with a shrug. Behind her, the table was nearly bare. Her strange bag sat on one end but only the water jug and the dishes with leftover bread and cheese remained. "Where are the other dishes?" he asked cantankerously, nodding toward the table.

"I washed them and put them in the cabinets," she explained with a grimace. "Should I not do that again?"

"Oh." The fire in his anger died away but he refused to feel any remorse. She was taking too many liberties with his possessions—his family's possessions, which now were all he had of them. He rubbed the back of his head again as his headache grew even worse. "Just ask me next time."

"Does your head hurt?" she asked. Iain gritted his teeth, wishing that the stress she represented would just disappear.

"Aye. What of it?" he replied with exasperation. She gave him a wry look and walked to the table without a word. He watched with increasing wariness as she dug through the contents of her sack. After a few seconds of searching, she pulled out a tiny box. The lid flipped open and she plucked out something small and white. After closing the box and dropping it back into her satchel, she picked up the water jug and walked back to him.

He resisted the urge to back away, worried somehow that she would be close enough to smell the day's work on him. She seemed to always smell clean and sweet.

"Swallow this with some water." She held up the small white chunk. "Don't chew it, just swallow."

"What is it?" he asked with one eyebrow high on his forehead.

"It's not poison, if that's what you're worried about. This is medicine. It'll stop your headache."

"Do ye think me an utter fool?"

"Would you like me to take another one to prove that it's safe?" she offered. "I just want to help you. I want to start repaying you somehow." Iain could think of a far more pleasurable way to pay him but he really would be a fool then.

He reluctantly took the jug from her but when he held out his hand for the medicine, he saw that his palms were covered with dirt and sweat.

"Open your mouth," she said, raising her hand. After a second's hesitation, he did. "Wider." Waiting for her to drop the medicine into his mouth, he clenched his hands around the water jug, feeling like a silly child. Her fingers brushed his lips as she laid the pill on his tongue and all he could think about was closing his lips around the tips of her fingers.

"Now take a drink." Bringing the jug to his lips, he took one big gulp and felt the medicine wash down his throat. He then handed the jug back to her waiting hands. She fidgeted with the handle.

"So um, your bath is ready. This last bit of water should be enough." She waved her hand toward the pot suspended over the fire. The peat he had tossed in at midday was now nearly spent and he was grateful for the excuse to walk away from her. Crossing the room to the pile of dried peat in the corner, he pulled one brick off the top and set it atop the flames in the fire pit. Emma still stood in the same place, silently looking at him.

"Will ye watch me undress as well?" he asked. "I dinna mind but I imagine ye'd feel uneasy."

Her eyes widened and she offered an apology. "I'll just go outside for a while and...find something to do. How much time do you need?" She walked around the opposite side of the fire to the table, picked up her bag and set down the jug.

"A few minutes," he guessed. She nodded, looped her bag over her head and shoulder and then disappeared through the door. He walked to the steaming tub of water and grudgingly admitted that perhaps she wasn't the bad omen he had believed her to be. As he unwound and removed his shoes, he tried to understand what strange and rare circumstances had brought such a creature to his door and moreover, what reason she would have to hide her story.

After tugging his tunic over his head and tossing it aside, he stepped into the tub, sighing aloud. His father had said that bathing was unnecessary but Iain had always wondered at that. Something inside him loosened whenever he had the luxury of a hot bath. The only thing more relieving was found with a woman.

Iain groaned as he sank down. Emma had sat in this same tub, as naked as he was now. The soap now in his hand had slid against parts of her that he could only imagine touching. Her breasts, her hips, the insides of her thighs.

The back of his head met the rim of the tub and he spread his knees. His hand slid past his navel, his fingers wrapping around the arousal that Emma had nearly seen. What he wouldn't give to bathe her, to enjoy her sighs and moans as he pleased her in a tub of steaming water, to know for himself how soft she was.

The bar of soap traveled up and down his arms, across his chest and stomach, down his sides. The surface of the water became frothy and his slick hands spread the sweet-smelling bubbles over every inch of his skin.

Emma's skin would be slick as well, her delicate body coated with a layer of suds. He hissed, his pelvis rocking as he imagined her astride his lap, her thighs squeezing his sides while his hands lifted and settled her. Her hands would grip the tub's edge to either side of his head and her breasts would press against his face with every rise of her body, sliding down again with her every shuddering exhalation. He groaned, his fist moving faster.

His hips would buck just as his hands pulled her down, ensuring that he sank into her as deeply as possible. She would moan when he sucked her nipple between his lips and still she would beg for more but he would not give more—not yet. He would slow

the pace, would tease her. She would have the advantage though and take control. The water would spill over the sides and Emma's moans would grow louder.

He surged to his knees, gripping the tub's edge with one hand and thrusting himself into the other. Emma would be suspended above the tub, her feet braced on the rim and her arms wrapped around his shoulders as water sluiced off her body. He would pound himself against her until the tight muscles gripping him began to flutter.

Iain held his breath. His grip on the tub's rim tightened. The tension broke, blooming into pleasure. A harsh sound left his throat as the first wave of relief crashed against him. His head felt hot, his body heavy and his muscles weak. His hips bucked forward and another wave washed over him.

He opened his eyes, swallowing hard. Heart still pounding, he nearly laughed at himself. No water-drenched fairy shared his tub. No mysterious nymph was there to smile at him with satisfaction. He was alone with only a lingering fantasy, and the water was starting to get cold.

* * * * *

Emma started down the path in the direction of the river, a path she had taken a couple of dozen times already while lugging all those buckets of water. Her shoulders ached terribly. She had rather hoped that Iain would challenge her to take one of her aspirins to prove they were safe—it would have been a good excuse so that she didn't feel she was using them up too quickly—but he didn't.

Her cheeks still burned from when Iain said that he didn't mind stripping in front of her. She hadn't been able to tell if he had been making fun of her or making a pass at her, though considering her track record with him so far, she leaned toward the former.

Halfway to the river, a familiar black and white dog bounded toward her from the direction of the barn. Iain had said the dog's name was Puck. She had wanted to ask why but Iain seemed to be the kind of guy who didn't like to talk much. Slowing down, she waited for the dog to come closer and then squatted down.

The dog's tail wagged rapidly. His furry face was smiling and his playful movements looked rather like a boxer bobbing and weaving. She slowly extended her arm and held her hand out. The dog approached hesitantly, his muzzle out as he aimed to put it in contact with her outstretched fingers.

Emma had always loved dogs. Her family had owned a couple of mutts when she was younger but they had both died of old age by the time she had started vet school. She had been looking forward to getting a new puppy when she graduated.

When Puck finally pressed his nose to her hand, she let him sniff her first and then began to stroke his muzzle. His fur was soft and some tension left her aching shoulders. The dog then came closer, inviting her to pet his head. The corners of her mouth turned up a little. After petting him for a moment, she stood and continued on her way to the river. Puck followed, his tail still wagging as he escorted her.

Stopping at the river, she took a seat in the tall grass and pulled her purse into her lap. She still had a few more minutes to wait, so she took out her foldable hairbrush, popped it out to its full length and began pulling it through her hair, hoping to hasten the drying time. Puck nonchalantly sat down next to her, his eyes glancing around as though guarding her—or at least, she liked to think he was. It was more likely that he was looking for something to chase.

With only half an hour until sunset, the air had cooled considerably and she shivered with every strong breeze. Once she became bored with brushing her hair, she dug through her purse again and located her wallet. Though mostly full of useless things like paper money, coins and credit cards, it also contained the most precious thing she had left—family photos.

Her father with his graying brown hair and nerdy glasses smiled at her from where he stood behind his seated wife. His hands were on her shoulders and her mother had placed her left hand over his, their wedding rings sitting next to each other. Her mother, with her strawberry blonde hair and perfect smile, gazed at the camera, her eyes shining with happiness.

The other photo was just as old as the one of her parents, taken less than a month before Jack died. Her older brother had been the quintessential football jock—tall, blond and good-looking. He was doing the typical high school pose reminiscent of the Thinking Man, his wide grin and handsome face giving the camera an overly charismatic pose that also doubled as slightly comedic. It had always made her laugh.

Now it made her cry. She had expected to be comforted by pictures of her family but instead they brought forth the one emotion she had been fighting all day. Once the tears started, they didn't stop, flowing freely down her cheeks and dropping onto her purse with little *plop-plop* noises. She began humming her mother's favorite lullaby, the one her mother always sang to her when she was upset. The melody of the Beatles' *Blackbird* still shook loose the tightly contained memory of her mother's blue nightgown and the gentle strokes of her mother's hand through her hair. Emma's voice warbled and hiccupped, refusing to reach the higher notes. Puck stood up to inspect her, as though looking for an injury.

"Are ye hurt?"

Emma gasped, her next sob catching in her throat. Swallowing it, she twisted around. Kenneth stood ten feet behind her. Beth, who anxiously bit her fingertips, tightly held his hand. Their arrival pulled her out of her self-pity, replacing it with embarrassment so acute that she wished a flash flood would come and wash her away. Emma hastily put her wallet back into her bag.

"No, I...I'm not. Sorry, I'm just...um—" she said haltingly.

"I have supper with me," the redhead interrupted. She wiped at her eyes as she stood up to face him and noticed the field-dressed rabbit he held by its hind legs. "To celebrate our new friend, we're having one of our rabbits. Let's get this on the fire

then?" Nodding and grateful that he hadn't made a big deal out of her tears, she wiped at her eyes again and walked with them to Iain's house.

"Did ye hear of our feud with the MacGregors?" Though his tone wasn't accusatory, Emma wondered if he was testing her. The name was familiar to her, of course but the only Scottish history she knew was inaccurate. *Thank you, Hollywood.*

"MacGregor as in...Rob Roy?"

Kenneth looked at her with confusion. "Who?" Wincing in apology and shaking her head, she said she hadn't heard and he continued. "When Robert the Bruce became king in my father's time, he honored those loyal to his cause with the royal favor and awarded them land from those who had opposed him. Sir Neill Campbell, for his loyalty, received lands from the MacDougalls and the Strathbogies."

"That doesn't seem fair, forcing someone to leave their home." Kenneth shot her a frown and she was certain that he would yell at her for not siding with him.

"I suppose but the disloyal MacDougalls were the ones who killed Sir Neill's father, sheriff of Loch Awe, with an arrow in the back over a petty fratch." Emma meekly looked down at her feet, which kicked her skirt with every step. At least he hadn't yelled, she thought.

"A few years before I was born, Sir Neill's son, Young Colin, was given the barony of Loch Awe and the squatting MacGregors were pushed into Glenstrae. They've been lifting kine and poaching for as long as I've been alive. The laird is thinking to promise them a portion of the tenant fee as a sop."

"A sop?"

Kenneth made vague gestures with his hands as he tried to explain. "The laird promises them some of what they try to steal and they leave us alone." *Ah, a bribe, or would that be extortion?*

"The MacGregors don't kill anyone, do they?" she asked warily.

"They do if they have to but they're content with carrying away cattle. We hadna seen them for over a year and thought that the plague had..." At his silence, Emma looked over at Kenneth but his pause was brief. "Only last night did the crofters in the next glen find some heads missing."

Maybe that was why Iain was in such a bad mood. "What are you going to do?"

"Malcolm and Thomas will stay in the barn and all four of us will take turns keeping watch. The MacGregors would rather steal the few cattle we keep but our sheep are ready to shear and wool catches a high price lately."

"Dada, look!" Beth said. She pointed at a toad hopping along the path and began to chase it, giggling as the toad only hopped faster to escape her. Emma shivered again as the breeze cut through her dress and she rubbed her arms to stay warm.

Kenneth turned to go after his daughter but paused. "Go ahead. I'll be there soon enough," he said.

Nodding gratefully, she took the rabbit from him and walked toward the house and the warmth of its fire. Lunch hadn't been all that long ago, so she wasn't hungry but it seemed like it would take awhile before dinner would be ready. Without anyone to cook, Kenneth and Iain had to start their meals after finishing their other work, so she hoped to earn some points with Iain by taking that chore off his hands.

From behind her, she heard Beth squeal and turned to see that Kenneth had picked her up and was swinging her around. Briefly wondering why Iain had no children despite being near Kenneth's age, she recalled that the redhead had lamented Iain's bachelorhood when they were eating that salty soup. She wasn't surprised that Iain had remained single though. He wasn't a very charming guy.

Arriving at the house, she stepped into the doorway and then promptly froze in place. Her mouth dropped open and she nearly dropped the rabbit as well.

Oh my...

Chapter Five

His naked back to the door, Iain stood on the rocks she had placed around the tub and was in the process of pulling his fresh tunic over his head. It was very loose, so he was having trouble finding the sleeves. His skin was still wet from his bath and the fire lit him perfectly. He glistened as though he had just left the arms of his exhausted lover.

Not a single fold of fat was to be seen on his body. He was well sculpted, his muscles surging under a layer of smooth, healthy skin. The line of his spine jutted out from between a pair of powerful shoulders and ran down his back. His legs were powerfully built and well proportioned to his long, trim torso. His backside was high and tight and despite her current opinion of him, the image of her fingers digging into those muscular buttocks while he thrust between her thighs was instantly at the forefront of her mind.

When he finally pulled down his tunic and covered himself, she couldn't help the small sound of embarrassment she made as she darted back outside to hide herself. She leaned against the outside wall and then squatted down, still clutching the skinned rabbit.

She wasn't cold anymore. Indeed, her heart pounded loudly in her ears and her face was flaming. It took her several breaths to push the image of Iain's naked back and hindquarters from her mind. He was a very virile specimen, she'd grant him that but if she wanted to look him in the face without lighting up like Times Square, she had to block that particular mental picture.

"Emma, what are ye doing?" Kenneth asked as he walked up to the house, his daughter sitting on his hip.

"Are ye playing a game?" Beth wiggled against her father as though she wanted to be put down. Feeling like an idiot, Emma stood up and turned toward the door just as Iain stepped outside. He had hastily donned his belt and his eyes went straight to her.

Despite her best efforts, the memory of his nudity flashed unbidden through her mind's eye and she was grateful that the sun was nearly spent or else they'd have easily seen the rush of blood to her cheeks.

After staring at him for an awkward couple of seconds, Emma held out the rabbit to him and blurted, "Dinner." She then pushed past him into the house and picked up one of the buckets.

"Kenneth, take this," Iain grumbled, passing the rabbit back to him.

Emma filled the bucket with some of Iain's bathwater and lifted it up, though it killed her shoulders to do so. She couldn't help the slight shake in her arms.

Iain was suddenly behind her, reaching around her body to take the bucket. "Let me do it." Her heart jumped to her throat. He radiated heat. His scent engulfed her and his muscular arms looked massive next to her skinny, weak limbs. His rough fingers brushed the back of her hands and then wrapped around the handle.

"I-I'm fine," she protested but Iain didn't listen and easily lifted the bucket. She turned as he backed away from the tub. "I promised I would do that." She reached to take the bucket.

"Ye'll only end up spilling it everywhere." He carried the bucket outside without further conversation. Emma gave up and turned to Kenneth. The redhead still held Beth in one arm and the rabbit in his other hand. He looked a little perplexed.

"So what do I do first?" she asked, nodding toward the rabbit.

He half-smiled. "Ye've already begun."

* * * * *

Kenneth sat back from the table, happily sighing and licking his fingers with relish. It was certainly juicier than the meat they usually cooked but Iain ate his food with more restraint. A couple of feet down the bench from him sat Emma, who placed a sliver of rabbit meat between her lips and regarded his brother-in-law with high eyebrows and amused eyes. She daintily flicked out her tongue to catch a drop of juice on her finger and he clenched his jaw, looking down at his plate.

"Emma, ye do indeed have the touch for cooking," Kenneth complimented, rubbing his stomach for emphasis. Iain couldn't help looking at Emma again, who received the flattery with a small, tight-lipped smile.

"I wouldn't say that. Basting isn't that difficult," she deferred.

Kenneth chuckled. "Then it seems Iain and I dinna ken even the basics." Seeing his friend smiling at the fairy, Iain wanted to throw the remains of the rabbit carcass at the man's face.

Iain turned toward Emma. "Where did ye learn to cook?" Her eyes flew to him and she was silent for a few seconds. He could tell she was scrambling for an answer by the set of her eyebrows, which pinched in the center and created a crease above her nose. The smallest of frowns bracketed her mouth and he waited for something to slip.

"I learned from my mother. We did it a little differently though."

"What ingredients do ye use?" he asked. She began to pick at her nails. With a quick glance at Kenneth, he saw his brother-in-law quietly watching their exchange.

"Well, you know...meat and...vegetables and fruits," she mumbled, looking down at her fidgeting hands.

"Ye seem nervous," he pointed out.

"I'm not nervous," she answered, a little too quickly. He barely saw the brief grimace on her face, for she was still looking down at her fingers.

"What kind of fruits?" The one that immediately came to his mind was raspberries, grown in the east. That had been the color of her lips when he had first seen her.

"Um...well, tomatoes, apples, lemons—"

Kenneth interrupted. "What are tuh-may-toes?"

"I've nae heard of leh-muns either," Iain said. "Apples grow well in England, though." He put special emphasis on the name of their southern "neighbor".

"You've never heard of tomatoes or lemons?" she asked, looking between the two of them with just a hint of panic in her eyes. Iain crossed his arms, wondering if perhaps she was English after all, someone rich enough to eat rare fruits. "But tomatoes come from—" She suddenly stopped.

"Come from?" he pressed. She bit her lip for a second and once again averted her eyes. He barely heard her mumble, "No one has been there yet."

"Been where?" Frustration made his eye twitch, though at least his headache from earlier had indeed disappeared. He wondered if it would return twice as strong as some sort of fairy trick.

"Dada, what's an apple?" Beth asked.

"Been where?" Iain repeated as Kenneth more quietly answered his daughter's question.

"I...can't tell you that," she said softly.

"Why not?"

A long pause preceded her answer. "I need to let my past die."

He set his elbows on the table, leaning toward her. "Will yer past come looking for ye?" She scooted farther away from him.

"I'm dead to them." Everyone at the table was silent for a long moment. Dead to them? What did that mean?

Kenneth heaved a sigh and stood up, helping Beth off the bench when she obediently moved to follow.

"As eventful and strange a day as it has been, it is time for my little lamb to sleep," the redhead announced. Iain leaned back, knowing that Kenneth was granting Emma a reprieve, however brief. Reluctantly, he ceased his questions and saw Kenneth and Beth to the door. Kenneth promised to look in on the farmhands staying the night in the barn and then took his daughter's hand to walk her home.

When Iain stepped back inside his house, Emma was already cleaning up, her back to him as she washed the dishes in a small basin. He closed the door and lowered the crossbar into the open metal hook on the other side of the doorframe. After tending the fire and disposing of the rabbit's remains, he turned back to the woman now staying with him. Her shoulders drooped, her movements sluggish.

Earlier when he had been getting dressed, he knew he had heard something behind him, yet when he had turned around, no one was there. After tying his belt, he went to

investigate and found Emma standing just outside the door. She had looked like a startled doe ready to turn and run.

Strangely, he hadn't been angry to know she had seen him. Hell, he had even volunteered to empty the tub, having felt sorry for her unspoken aches and having been the one doing more than simply bathing.

He wasn't any closer to trusting her though. Her past was still a mystery despite the few things he had learned. Was she the daughter of an English lord who had run away from home? Was she a fugitive? Was she a foreigner from more distant lands, separated from her traveling companions? Were her only guardians taken by the plague? Had someone abandoned her?

That last guess put a sour look on his face to match the disgust churning in his stomach. For anyone to leave another behind with absolutely nothing...

In a circle his thoughts flowed, always returning to her other oddities – her clothes, her hair, her accent, her secretive nature and the strange things she said.

Letting it go for the time being, he turned his thoughts to sleep and that's when he realized that he had not prepared a place for her to sleep. The frame and mattress for the bed he once used were in one of the sheds. The bed he now used had been his parents', a gift to them from his uncle, who had been one of the laird's carpenters.

Emma finished drying the last dish. She stacked them very carefully and carried them to the cabinet.

He waited until she had set them down to speak. "I've no bedding for ye tonight but I'll prepare some tomorrow. Ye may sleep there," he said, pointing to his bed. "I'll sleep by the fire." The fairy's mouth dropped open. Had she expected him to make her sleep on the ground?

"Thank you but I've already inconvenienced you too much. I don't want to take your bed as well." Iain could guess what "in-kuhn-veen-yunsd" meant.

"Ye drew a bath, cleaned and prepared a fine meal," he said, surprised when the words came out. It was a couple of seconds before he continued. "Aili was right to say that my mother would be disappointed were I no' hospitable. Ye'll take the bed. I've spent many nights on the ground."

"But I'd rest easier if you took it," she answered. Iain sighed with impatience, propping his fists on his hips and closing his eyes for a second. He waited until this fresh wave of frustration abated.

"Let us both use the bed." Her eyebrows shot up. "It is large enough." He watched as she contemplated the idea for a short while, her eyes unconsciously drifting to the empty bed to his right, and he saw in her the urge to deny him still. "Dinna worry yerself on that," he softly amended. Indeed, sleeping apart wouldn't have been safer for her even were he thinking of it. He tried not to take offense when relief passed over her face.

"It has been a long day," he tiredly sighed, "and I need some rest." Turning toward the bed and grateful when she followed him with no further protest, he let her enter the

bed first. Without touching her bare feet to the ground, she removed her strange black shoes and began crawling under the woolen blanket, still dressed in her smock and kirtle.

“Ye’re sleeping in all of that?” he asked, watching with one eyebrow raised. He had always slept naked and wasn’t looking forward to wearing his tunic to bed.

Still kneeling in the center of the bed, she looked at him wordlessly. After a moment of indecision, she removed the layer of wool. Watching closely as she loosened the laces and pushed the gown off her shoulders, he couldn’t help fantasizing that she undressed for him, that she did it slowly to tease him. He even unabashedly stared at the points of her nipples just barely discernable under the loose linen smock.

She handed her dress to him so that he could lay it on the trunk and then quickly hid herself under the blanket, shifting as far from his side of the bed and as close to the wall as possible.

He wished she were a normal woman instead of some suspicious outsider. If she were normal, he would have taken her the second she had begun to loosen her laces.

No—the second he had closed the door.

He turned and sat on the edge of the bed to remove his shoes, which was short work. He felt her shift positions and looked over his shoulder to see that she had turned to face the wall. Clenching his jaw and lying down on his back, he pulled the blanket over his legs. Admittedly, he was nervous lying next to a woman for the first time in over a year—and one he wasn’t lying atop, to boot. He told himself that his anxiety lay in the possibility she might kill him in his sleep.

“Are ye warm enough?” he asked. She didn’t jump or gasp this time, as if already aware of him.

“Yes” was her simple answer. Mumbling a good night, he closed his eyes.

He was close to drifting off a few minutes later when tiny sounds pulled him back to shore. Lifting his heavy eyelids, he listened a little longer and realized that Emma was crying. She wasn’t sobbing or blubbering but he could hear her sniffing and pulling in quick breaths.

She had elicited many emotions in him that day—suspicion, fascination, guilt, frustration and now one more. For the first time since he had met her, he felt protective. It was a familiar feeling but he hadn’t had someone under his roof to protect since...

Well, he wasn’t sure he wanted to do it again. He told himself that she was just trying to earn his pity and manipulate him. He would not let her play upon his sympathies. Deliberately closing his eyes, he shut out the sounds of her muffled crying and let sleep take him under.

* * * * *

Something shifted against him. His cock twitched as a leg slid across his thighs. A dainty hand stroked his chest.

"Take me." A pair of breasts pressed against his arm, then a tickling as she dragged her mane across his shoulder. Her lips kissed his chest. They burned. "Take me," she whispered.

"Ah God." He pulled her over him, moaning at the creamy skin sliding up his body. With his hands on her waist, he brought her high on his chest. His mouth searched for a soft peak to suck. He squeezed her waist when she cupped her breast and pushed her nipple between his waiting lips.

"Yes," she sighed. Her legs opened over him and she teased him with her hips, letting him feel her wet warmth. Bracing herself on one hand, she explored him with her other. Her fingers squeezed the muscles at his shoulders and she moaned when he drew her nipple deep into his mouth. She stroked his chest, her thumb circling his own nipple and drawing from him a gasp of surprise at the sensation.

She then shifted down, panting as she kissed the side of his neck. He hissed. Her kisses burned terribly. She licked where she had pressed her lips and the burning was eased but she kissed his shoulder next. He winced, his breath catching in his throat. She followed this pattern, kissing and then licking where her lips had scorched him. He could still feel every spot, which tingled in a meandering chain down his body.

Her mouth hovered over his groin, the head of his cock brushing her soft cheek. "Mm, shall I kiss you here next?" she said in a husky voice. His arousal jumped at the sound of it. He clenched his teeth.

"Aye," he growled. He gripped her arm, somehow afraid she would disappear and leave him like this.

"What was that?" she asked. She blew on the wet, tender head.

"Aye!" he yelled.

Those burning lips kissed the very tip of him. His body arched, heart pounding, his cock swelling impossibly large. He felt hot all over but his fingers were going numb. Her tongue swept around the head of his cock but this time it didn't seem to help.

He opened his eyes, ready to pull her legs over his hips, plant his feet and bury his aching cock between her thighs but the woman who crawled over him was not the one he expected.

Emma's hair was blood red and floated around her head as though she were immersed in water. A pair of black wings rooted in her back shivered and flexed. Her lips matched her hair and he looked down to see multiple kiss marks burned into his skin.

"You're mine, Iain," she said, wetting her lips. She rubbed herself over his groin. "All mine." He shook his head, though he didn't know why. She lifted up. "I'll addict you to me." She sank down. He groaned, loud and long. She seemed just as affected. Her eyebrows pinched and she let out a shuddering breath. She began to move and her wings flexed as she worked herself over him.

He gripped her hips, tried to quicken the pace but she was the one in control. His vision went hazy. She leaned down, moaning along with him. "Kiss me." He looked at

her full red lips, the ones that had marked him a dozen times already. He shook his head.

She stopped. "No," he moaned, gripping her hips and bucking into her. She grabbed his wrists, somehow pinned them down. He couldn't get enough sensation.

"Kiss me," she insisted, bringing her lips even nearer. God, he was so close. So close.

Chapter Six

Iain woke to the sweet smell of fennel. Something soft lay against his face. Though the fire should have nearly burned itself out, he was overly warm. He opened his eyes to check his surroundings.

In the faint light thrown by the weak flames behind him, he could see that he had turned toward Emma in his sleep. Her fragrant hair held the scent of the soap Aili had given her. His knees were tucked against the backs of hers and his arm was loosely draped over her side. His other arm lay between them, numb from the position, and his raging arousal was pressed against the cushion of her backside.

Suppressing a groan, he carefully took his arm off her and slid his hand under his tunic. His fingers brushed the hard shaft. He hissed. Hell, it was near to bursting!

For a split second, he entertained the thought of pushing up Emma's skirt and finding relief in the clamp of her body. It would only take a couple of seconds to push aside the layers of clothing between them, to roll atop her and shove deep inside. From out of his throat came a low, animal-like noise.

Realizing the perilous bent of his thoughts, he left the cave of warmth they had made under the blanket and stood up. Emma didn't stir, still asleep and looking so goddamn vulnerable. He frowned, disgusted at himself and angry that she affected him so much—even enough to affect his dreams—yet the emotion wasn't powerful enough to ease his arousal or distract him from his need for release. His cock boldly jutted out from his pelvis to point straight at what it wanted to penetrate, fill, own.

Snatching up his belt and shoes, he went to the door, lifted the bar and escaped outside to a cool, quiet night. He didn't feel the crispness in the air. He was too overheated with lust. Indeed, he wasn't even steady on his feet. All the blood in his body had gathered in his groin.

Closing the door behind him, he walked barefoot to the side of the house. His shoulders hit the outside wall, bracing him as he took a wide stance. He yanked up his tunic.

"Christ," he groaned. His eyes were drawn downward though he could barely see. He had not woken in such a state since he was Malcolm's age and the heavy limb between his legs seemed to have swollen to the same width as his thick wrist. Palming his erection, he sucked in a harsh breath and then moaned.

He told himself that it wasn't because of her, yet fragments of memory and fantasy had melted together and all he could think about was her—the line of her graceful neck, the faint outline of her nipples through her smock, the fullness of her lips. He wished he could see more of her and stroke his hands over every soft, smooth curve.

With a deep, relieved groan, he came. His belt and shoes fell from his other hand and he cupped himself, felt his sac twitch as his lust was spent upon the ground. Sweat poured down his face and coated his back. Only the cool air gave his feverish skin any relief. When the spasms ebbed away, he released himself and sagged against the wall of his house.

Opening his eyes, he looked up at the black sky, unable to see any stars. It showed no signs of an approaching dawn and he guessed that it would be at least three or four hours before the sun broke the horizon. He would need to stand watch with Malcolm to give Thomas and Kenneth time to sleep.

He pulled his tunic down once he had caught his breath and while he belted his tunic and put on his shoes, he thought of what he had almost done to his admittedly unwanted houseguest. The desire had ambushed him. Had he really been so long without a woman? Or had she done something to him? Had he been experiencing the true effect of the "medicine" she had given him? He would be certain not to take any more of it.

With a sigh, he returned to the front door and eased it open, entering much more quietly than he had exited. Emma hadn't moved at all. After washing his hands and face in a basin of water, he revived the fire and checked the towel he had hung up the night before. It was still damp, so he left it there. His eyes locked onto the towel next to it.

Before he knew what he was doing, he leaned toward the other length of cloth, intending to touch what had rubbed over her buttery skin and breathe in the scent she had left. It would smell like fennel as well, he was sure. Just as his fingers brushed the cloth, he blinked and jerked away. "Damn it," he whispered.

A soft rustling drew his attention and he looked to see that Emma had curled into a tighter ball. He had been hasty to leave the bed and so the blanket no longer covered her upper body. He approached the bed to simply flick the blanket over her but once he leaned down to grab the edge, he found himself gently drawing up the excess. Her sweet scent wafted up to his nose and the glimmer of her locket caught his notice from where it sat against the front of her shoulder. His eyes found the crease of her cleavage, her pert breasts pressed together by the weight of her position.

A familiar heat began to pool in his loins. Dropping the blanket and covering up the smooth, pale perfection of her neck and shoulders, he leaned back, impatient to leave before he became any worse. Beating another hasty retreat, he didn't slow his pace until he was halfway to the barn. Poor Malcolm wouldn't have a kind awakening.

* * * * *

The tiniest of sounds fell through her open lips as Emma came out of the dregs of sleep. The sound was more like a pained exhalation than a moan, for a full moan was too much effort. For a second, she woke with the hope that she would be in her bed at her parents' house but her shoulders were killing her and she all too quickly

remembered why. It felt as though frozen rubber bands were the only things holding her arms to her body and that the slightest movement would snap and shatter them. The smallest of consolations was that she was warm but still, her bag was at the foot of the bed, sitting on the ground and getting to her tiny supply of aspirin seemed like a Herculean task.

She wished that she could slip back into her heady dreams, where she had been cradled in a warm set of arms and sleep away the rest of her life, oblivious to everything.

If only she could.

Slowly and yet much too quickly, she rolled to her back and realized that not only had she been lying in the center of the bed but she was alone. Where was Iain?

"Did ye sleep well, dear?" Aili's familiar voice called. Emma turned her head to look across the house and she saw the old woman sitting at the table, arranging some pans and buckets.

"What time is it?" she asked in a scratchy voice. She carefully stretched. The other woman stood up, grabbed her cane, and shuffled toward her.

"Time? Time to get up. I hardly sleep more than a few hours myself. Young people." It was a complaint Emma had already heard many times and it was somehow comforting to hear it again. She sat up and swung her legs off the bed, pushing the blanket away. Exhaling through the new round of pain, she immediately regretted abandoning the warmth of the bed. It was much colder above the blanket. A full-body shiver stole over her.

"Child, where is yer kirtle? Ye didna lay with the man, did ye?" Aili shoved a cup of milk at Emma. *Lay with him?*

"I slept next to him, if that's what you're asking." She took the cup from Aili and downed a few gulps. It wasn't very cold and tasted a little strange but it felt good to wet her throat.

"No, no. I mean to say, did ye lay under him?" Emma nearly spat out the milk in her mouth. Instead, she half-choked on it and ended up coughing. "A night's sleep and ye still look exhausted. He didna force ye, did he? Ooh, I'll wring his neck when I see him." The old woman slapped her on the back, making her sore muscles twinge and not really helping her coughing fit but a few more swallows of milk extinguished the fire in her throat.

"No, I did not 'lay under' him. I'm just not used to this kind of life." Ugh, how lame. Was she so spoiled that she couldn't handle some farm work?

"Ye'll be used to it soon enough. Get dressed and hide that hair again." Aili turned away and spoke over her shoulder as she walked toward the table. "I'll be teaching ye many things today. We'll start a batch of soap and a batch of ale – though I suppose ye willna be drinking the ale. Oh and I'll also show ye the household chores that ye'll do every day."

Emma wanted to heave a sigh but settled for another swallow of milk. Could they really do all of that in one day? Reaching for her bag and grimacing as she dragged it closer, she dug through its contents to locate her aspirin. She was going to need it.

"Come on, girl, the day is wasting! Iain and Kenneth are already about their work. They'll need something to eat that'll stick to their stomachs." Washing back a pill, Emma set the empty cup on the ground and slipped into her shoes, thankful that the skirt of her dress was long enough to hide them most of the time. She stood up to grab her kirtle and as she pulled it over her head, she couldn't help but admire Aili. The woman was three times her age and yet three times as energetic.

No doubt Iain found her pretty pathetic when, compared to an old woman, she was inept at even the simplest task. He was probably trying to think of a way to get rid of her at that very moment.

* * * * *

"How was it?" Kenneth's voice was directly above him, so the redhead had undoubtedly leaned over the cow to look down at him. Iain frowned, his cheek pressed against the coarse hair of the cow he was milking—far less pleasant than the soft, fragrant hair that had been spilled across his face an hour ago.

"I dinna ken what ye're talking about," he evaded. His friend's light chuckle floated to his ears. Iain's teeth clenched.

"I saw that ye didna prepare a bed for her—not that we have the straw to spare, anyway," Kenneth said. Iain grimaced to realize he was right. They wouldn't have fresh straw for another few days, perhaps even a week. "Did ye sleep on the ground then? She didna let ye, am I right?"

"Would that I could strangle ye."

The redhead laughed again. "Why so shy? Was it so good that ye wept with pleasure?"

"I am none shy," Iain insisted even as his cheeks grew warm. "And I dinna weep."

His brother-in-law ploughed on without really listening. "Or is it shame? Did ye no' please her?"

"Damn it, Kenneth. Nowt like that happened."

"So tell me what did happen." Iain stopped milking the cow and leaned back to look at his brother-in-law's interested expression.

Without hesitation, he answered, "She cried." Kenneth's face fell into disapproval.

"Ye must have scared her. Did ye force her?"

Iain stood, anger bubbling up from his gut. "I did nowt to her. She lay with her back to me and I had to sleep in my clothes."

Iain watched with disbelief as his friend's expression morphed from disapproval to anger. "Ye didna comfort her?" Kenneth said.

"Why should I have?" he responded in kind, his voice rising. "If her tears were real, she wouldna ha' appreciated comfort from me. If they were nae real, the better it was to ignore her."

"She is alone, scared and relying on strangers—one of whom is an ass," Kenneth shot back. "Let us hope she thought ye asleep."

"Why do ye take her side? We ken nowt about her or whence she came. It troubles me that she dinna explain herself. 'Tis even more suspicious that she arrived the verra same morning Duncan and Finian found their herd four heads too few."

Kenneth threw up his hands. "Did ye no' think that she would tell us eventually?" He then pointed a finger at him. "Ye were far from indifferent when Aili was openly discussing our lives with her yestereve."

Iain frowned at that kernel of logic. "If I am to shelter her, I need to know what trouble she might bring with her."

"She told ye last night all ye needed to know. She is dead to anyone who knows her. None will come looking."

Iain clenched his hands, the frustration mounting. "How can we believe that she isna lying? How can we trust her?"

The cow between them anxiously stomped its foot, reacting to the anger in their voices. Both men silently glared at each other.

"Ye think last night's tears were feigned, do ye?" Kenneth said more evenly. "Then think on this. Before supper yestereve, I found her by the river with Puck, sobbing as though her heart had been ripped out. Even the dog was whining in pity. Ye truly have less compassion than an animal."

"Hey—"

"She nearly jumped out of her skin when she knew she was nae alone. She didna use her tears to gain my sympathy and for that, I only felt the sorrier." Iain looked away from Kenneth's scolding expression. Unbidden, the sounds of her muffled weeping filled his head.

"I understand yer distrust after that man came," Kenneth said quietly.

Iain swallowed hard and changed the subject. "She is the strangest thing I have ever seen. Rachel's ale is the best in the village but this girl refused to drink any. There's also that charm 'round her neck, her clothing—"

"Aye, the charm is what interests me," Kenneth said with a nod. "'Tis a finely made piece. She seems worried whenever she touches it."

"Do ye think she stole it?" Iain guessed.

His brother-in-law paused for a pensive moment but then shook his head. "No, I ken that she's afraid to lose it. Perhaps it's something of her people."

Iain sighed. "The lass isna a fairy."

"But she is!" Beth said. Iain turned to his niece but before he could even begin to convince her of the reality, he saw who stood with her. On her left side, Malcolm held a

basket of half a dozen eggs in his skinny arms and on her right side stood a ruddy-faced boy in clothing far finer than anything he had ever worn when he was seven years old. "She had wings and a green dress and a bag of magic –"

"Who is she talking about?" Malcolm asked, voice cracking mid-sentence.

Iain didn't acknowledge Malcolm's question and instead stalked toward the younger boy. "Colin, what are ye doing out here? Does yer mother ken where ye are?" he scolded. "And where's yer guardian?"

The young boy frowned and puffed out his chest, taking a step forward. "I came to see my friend and Mama's asleep and getting fat and her belly is already this big!" He cupped his hands around an invisible stomach that sagged arm's length from his body. "And she dinna let me go anywhere and Donald is boring!"

Iain closed his eyes as the back of his head began to hurt again. He heard Kenneth step forward. "Young master, 'tis dangerous away from the castle, especially without one of yer father's *leuchd-crios* to protect ye. I canna believe Donald is so strict that he wouldna come with ye to visit Beth."

"I could believe it," Iain said.

Beth stepped closer to Colin and fisted her hand in the back of his shirt. "I wanted to show him our fairy," Beth said with a pout. "She's bonny."

"Baby, she isna a puppy," Kenneth said with a shake of his head.

"Can he stay to play, Dada? Please?" the little girl begged.

Kenneth glanced over at Iain and raised his eyebrows. Taking another deep breath, Iain turned and picked up the bucket of fresh milk. "Come on," he said.

Beth's face lit up with a smile and she turned to run with Colin down to the house. Kenneth, never far from her side, upped his pace and got well ahead of Iain and Malcolm. The morning mist had nearly lifted but the day would remain overcast, it seemed.

"Did ye take a wife?" Malcolm asked.

"I didna take a damn wife," Iain answered harshly. Malcolm fell silent and Iain sighed. "I'm doing my Christian duty and being hospitable. Kenneth and my niece have gotten it into their heads that the lass is one of the people of the mounds."

"Kenneth believes that?" the boy asked. Iain wanted to grin as they approached his home, glad that Malcolm was just as confused by Kenneth's opinion.

"Ye can decide for yerself." He waved the boy in.

A delicious scent filled the house. Emma was standing by the table, wiping her hands on her apron and looking at Beth, who was tugging on her skirt. Iain was surprised to see some fatigue under the fairy's eyes. She had covered her hair with the linen again, so he couldn't tell how much the pink color had faded now that the light of day was brighter.

"Colin wants to see some magic. Can ye do any magic?" Beth pleaded.

"Why is she no' wearing her green dress?" Colin asked from where he stood next to Kenneth. "And ye said she had wings."

"Beth and the young master should quiet down," Aili said. She used her cane to point at the boy. "What kind o' manners are those to be talking such to one o' the good folk? Ye didna even introduce yerself, Colin."

Kenneth stepped forward to pull his daughter's fingers away from Emma's skirt. "Colin is the laird's son. We hear his mother has another on the way."

Emma's eyes widened and she turned toward the young boy, hands folded in front of her. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Mama's already this big," he explained, doing the same gesture with his hands. "I want to see some magic." Kenneth loudly cleared his throat. "Please," Colin added.

"Magic?" she asked. A crease appeared between her eyebrows.

"This is Malcolm, one of the farmhands," Iain said. "The other is taking his morning meal with his parents." Emma looked to him but her eyes quickly flicked away. She smiled at Malcolm and introduced herself.

"Young Malcolm may look like a stick but he eats like a wolf," Aili said to Emma. "Ye'll soon see for yerself." Malcolm nervously shifted his weight from foot to foot and Aili cast her shriveling gaze at Iain. "Emma has far more talent than ye, Iain. Ye really were a disaster with food." Kenneth laughed but a glare from Iain made the redhead swallow his mirth. Iain then looked to Malcolm, who was staring at Emma. Jostling the boy with a quick shake, he pointed him toward the table.

"Have ye eaten yet, young master?" Aili said to the laird's son.

Colin shook his head. "I dinna want to get fat like Mama because she says her feet and her back hurt."

"I can promise that ye will never become fat the same way as yer mother, Colin," Iain said. As Kenneth and Aili both chuckled, he watched Emma sidle around everyone. She crouched down near the fire, where some fresh honey oatcakes cooked on a griddle. Beth and Colin both followed her.

"I hope these taste good," she said.

"I'm sure they're as delicious as supper," Kenneth said. Beth took a step closer to the fire, her eyes devouring the oatcakes.

"Be careful. Don't get too close," Emma said. Beth nodded and stepped back again. With a glance at Kenneth, Iain saw a smile steal over his friend's face, which made his teeth grind.

"That's enough then," Aili announced. "Let's eat, dear, before the men start drooling." She cackled good-humoredly as Emma gathered the oatcakes onto a plate and brought them to the table.

The two little ones continued to tail her but Kenneth swung his daughter up into his arms to set her on the bench next to Aili. "I'll take care of the ale," he offered, turning to the small keg sitting in the corner.

"Can ye not do any magic then?" Colin asked. Emma looked down at the young boy, worrying her lower lip.

"I'm...not sure I should show you any magic," she said haltingly.

Colin frowned but not out of anger or sadness. He merely seemed surprised. "Why? Do I answer a riddle first?"

"N-no, it's just that..." Emma began wringing her hands and Iain could see that she was stalling. He might have felt smug at seeing her trapped but instead he felt as though he should do something to help. He opened his mouth to interrupt when she started, as though something had occurred to her. "All right then but just a little."

Colin smiled. "Really? Ye'll show me some magic? What will ye do?" He bombarded her with questions as she walked across the house. Her skirt brushed his leg as she walked by him to fetch her bag from inside the trunk at the end of the bed.

"That's her bag of magic," he heard Beth whisper. Emma brought her bag to the table with Colin close on her heels. Setting the bag on a bare spot, she first pulled the long strap out of the way. The top of the bag had a strange seam, almost like two rows of teeth. Iain frowned with apprehension and his frown only deepened when he realized how foolish he was to be nervous.

"Do ye really keep magic in there? It looks like leather. I've never seen leather that color. Where did ye get it? Is it from a fairy cow?" Colin's questions didn't end until Emma opened the bag, pulling some sort of key across the seam and a strange sound came from within. It sounded almost like the growl of an empty belly.

"Was that me?" Aili asked, pressing her hands to her stomach. Colin's eyes grew large and round. He crowded close to her and Beth leaned toward Emma's end of the table, her small hands grasping the edge as she pulled herself down the bench.

Emma's fingers were poised above the bag as though she were about to conjure something unnatural and then plunged inside. Beth's small gasp accompanied the sounds of rustling and thumping from inside the bag as Emma dug through its contents. Iain could admit, though only to himself, that his heart quickened with anticipation. When her hand stopped, she looked up at everyone with a smile and brought her hand out of the bag.

What came out was a long white stick. One end had a strange silver knob. Iain's eyes didn't look away as she slowly placed her thumb over the knob and pushed it. From the opposite end of the stick, a small point emerged.

"What's that?" Colin asked.

Emma looked down at Colin and held out her hand. "Give me your hand and I'll show you what it does."

"My hand?" he asked. His voice held a touch of anxiety. "What will ye do?"

"It won't hurt. I promise," she said. Kenneth was watching their exchange with amusement but Iain failed to see what exactly was so amusing about Emma's display.

Colin swallowed and set his small hand in Emma's palm. Iain watched her touch the pointed end of the white stick against the back of the boy's hand.

As she pulled the stick across his skin, a black line appeared. Colin's gasp was slow and full of awe. Emma first drew a circle on his skin and then drew a line through it as though cutting a pie in half before drawing two more lines to create two wedges. She finished by blowing gently on the back of his hand.

"Where I come from, this is the symbol for peace," she said. "The mark will keep you safe but it will wash off in a couple of days." Colin brought his hand close to his face, eyes wide. His fingers rubbed at the mark but it didn't smear.

"Colin, can I see?" Beth asked, having pulled herself to the opposite end of the bench from Aili.

"See what?" Aili asked. "Ye ken my weak eyes. What happened?"

"Emma drew a fairy mark on my hand!" Colin said with excitement. He ran around to Emma's other side in order to show it off to Beth.

"Without any ink?" Aili gasped. "Some kind of fairy quill!"

"I would like you to keep it," Emma said, offering the stick to Colin. The young heir turned to her, his jaw on the floor.

"Really? I can have yer fairy quill?" Emma smiled at him and nodded. Colin reverently accepted the gift and held it gently. "If I draw the mark, does it work for me too?"

"I'm not sure," she said and pressed her lips together. "It's also a kind of weapon though. It's hard and can pierce, so you have to be careful with it. Keep it safe."

"Do I have to keep it secret?" the boy asked, holding the quill close to his chest.

"Yes," Emma said. "Don't take your eyes off it."

Colin grinned and nodded vigorously. "I promise."

"Dinna forget to thank her, young master," Aili added. Colin gave Emma the sincerest thanks Iain had ever heard from the boy's mouth, his eyes now glowing with admiration. A small smile threatened to emerge at the heir's jubilation.

"We had better eat before these oatcakes get cold. Rest yourselves, everyone," Aili bade. Iain couldn't keep his eyes off Emma, who made a quick trip across the house to stow her bag in the trunk again. Conversation picked up as the children marveled over Colin's new gift and Kenneth and Aili began eating. He went to join them but when Emma returned to the table, it was only to pick up the water jug.

"I'm going to get some water," she said, walking toward the door.

"I'll come with ye," he decided, the words spoken before he knew what he was saying. She looked back at him but didn't hold his gaze for long, once again pulling her eyes away. They left the house and walked all the way to the river, neither one speaking. He watched as she knelt to refill the water jug.

"Did ye sleep well?" he finally said, attempting to use a kind tone.

"Y-yeah, thanks," she answered.

"Were ye comfortable? Warm enough?"

"Yes, the bed was fine." Iain wryly noted that she still wouldn't look at him. When the jug was full, she slowly stood and he could tell she was barely hiding the strain. Her jaw was stiff and her arms shaking slightly.

"Allow me," he said even as he took the jug from her. "'Tis easy to see that ye're weary, Emma. Dinna lie to me."

"I'm sorry. It's just that I don't want to complain," she said.

Iain nodded. He could understand that. "Show me yer hair." He gestured at the *kertch* on her head with his chin. She reached up, grimacing when she lifted her arms, and pulled off the linen. The pink color had faded greatly. "How many more days?"

"Maybe two or three," she guessed. She covered her head again, her slender fingers tucking her hair back into the *kertch*. She sighed with relief when she put her arms down. Of its own accord, his hand went to the small of her back, turning her gently toward the house.

"Why do ye no' drink ale?" he asked, thinking it an innocent question. She stiffened and stepped away from his hand.

"Alcohol is poison."

Her severe answer surprised him, especially her biting tone. "We drink it at every meal. 'Tis verra filling."

"I'll just drink water." With that, she sped up and walked away from him.

Iain sighed aloud with frustration. What had he said?

He let Emma gain some distance and was nearly halfway to his door when the sound of horse hooves pulled his attention to the east. From the path that led to the village, a single man on horseback emerged. Iain stopped and turned toward the rider, glad that the man had come but wishing that he could do something for Colin. The boy was Archibald's heir, aye, but he was also a child. Beth was one of the few children for twenty miles near his age and she didn't treat him as anything more than a playmate. It was no wonder that Colin snuck out to their croft at least once a week.

"Donald," Iain greeted with a nod. The man dismounted wearing a severe frown, the same expression he always wore when he rode out to fetch Colin.

"He is here?" Donald straightened his clothing and took a second to smooth down his brown, windblown hair. Iain nodded in response. Donald heaved a sigh. "This must stop. I canna protect him if he dinna stay where he's safe."

"I would say that wherever ye are is where he's safe," Iain said as they walked together toward his home, "but I ken that ye're frustrated. I thought that Kenneth might bring Beth to the castle again to see Colin but she didna like the idea. The men-at-arms scare her."

Donald let out a deep breath. "I never should have scolded her." Iain gripped the other man's shoulder.

"Children scrape their elbows and knees. Ye canna protect a child from his own clumsy feet. They throw themselves on the ground with such force that a grown man would break his leg, yet always spring to their feet again." Donald made a sort of amused snort.

They entered a noisy home. Malcolm and Kenneth were discussing the uneventful hours spent keeping watch. Colin had stuffed his mouth with honey oatcake and was showing Beth the mushy remains on his tongue. Aili and Emma were both laughing at his antics.

"Donald has arrived to reclaim his charge," Iain announced. Everyone fell silent except for Colin, who let out an earsplitting wail of rebellion, his mouth still full of food. Beth's smile fell away and she scrambled off the bench to hide by her father's side. Iain looked askance at a tight-mouthed Donald.

"Och, Donald! Could ye no' have waited an hour?" Aili complained. "We've four adults here. Colin would have been safe."

"Malcolm dinna count," Donald said. It was Malcolm's turn to frown. "And I dinna know her." He pointed at Emma, who stepped back as though he had leveled a sword at her rather than his finger.

"Emma is a —" Beth tried to say but her father covered her mouth.

"I want to stay here!" Colin cried. "Why do I have to go back? Why-y-y?"

"Colin, we'll see about what we can do but for now, ye should leave with Donald. Ye did sneak away from him," Kenneth said. Colin's bottom lip still trembled and he wiped at his eyes.

"It isna fair," he said. "It isna fair!"

Donald's voice deepened as his temper grew shorter. "My duty isna to be fair. 'Tis keeping ye safe."

Emma walked to Colin, crouched down to his level and turned him toward her. She leaned to whisper in his ear. Colin continued to sniff but his breaths slowed down. The boy nodded once and then nodded again. Emma leaned back with a smile and patted his shoulders.

"Are you ready?" she asked. Colin wiped at his eyes one last time as he nodded a third time. Emma then stood up and looked at Donald. "He's ready to go home."

Iain's jaw dropped. Colin walked toward the *leuchd-crios* as quiet as a lamb. Donald, with nearly the same expression as Iain, offered his hand and Colin obediently took it.

"Bye, Colin," Beth called. The heir waved at his friend and left the house with his guardian. Once they had both gone, Kenneth looked at Emma and asked the question to which everyone wanted the answer. "How did ye do that?"

She smiled coyly. "Magic."

* * * * *

Emma was incredibly grateful when the day was over. She and Aili had made all three meals, had started a large batch of ale, though it would sit awhile longer overnight, and had made an enormous amount of fennel-scented soap that Aili said would last her many months. Emma hadn't realized how dangerous a process it was, handling all that lye. She had also labored to heat water for a bath while Aili watched the pottage they were to eat for dinner. Her back, arms, shoulders and hands were throbbing with pain from overuse but she reluctantly avoided another aspirin.

She had barely kept her eyes open through the last meal of the day.

By the time everyone had left, it was only an hour past sunset, yet she wanted to sleep more than anything else. Sitting at the table and tiredly pulling her brush through her hair, she watched as Iain added more fuel to the fire. All day, the image of his wet, naked back had been there to haunt her mind's eye whenever she looked at him, but it had made eye contact with him too embarrassing. She had been extra careful to avoid walking in on him that night and didn't return to the house until she saw him carrying out buckets of his bathwater to toss away.

He glanced up from stoking the fire to look at her and she averted her eyes. Her cheeks felt warm. "Ye look as though ye may pass out," he said.

"I might," she admitted. She folded up her hair brush, slid it into her purse and zipped the bag shut.

"I'm sorry I canna set up the other bed yet," he said.

"Well, as you said, you don't have the straw. There's room for both of us. That is," she paused, yawning from behind her hand, "if you're not upset about sharing with me."

"'Tis no trouble," he mumbled.

Emma stood and gratefully made her way to bed, thinking how proud her mother would be to see her making soap and ale from scratch. Her throat was sore from being near the smoky fire all day though. Something was constantly being boiled, grilled, or heated. She made a mental note to wear a kerchief over her face tomorrow.

Taking off her kirtle was a painful few seconds. Once it was folded and lying on the trunk lid, she turned to walk to the side of the bed but jumped with surprise. Standing only a few feet away, Iain watched her with an odd expression.

"S-sorry to make you wait," she stuttered, quickly slipping off her shoes.

She slid to the far side of the bed and then turned onto her left side away from Iain. The mattress, despite being filled with straw and bog myrtle, seemed to her as comfortable as a king-sized bed at an expensive hotel. Once Iain settled behind her, she closed her eyes, waiting for sleep to pull her under but despite her utter exhaustion, her mind was still wide awake and she was unable to dispel the same worries that had kept her on edge the previous night.

How would her parents find out? Would an officer come to their door like last time? Her memories tortured her with images of her mother breaking down, of her father backing up in shock.

Then there were her more immediate problems. She had met people willing to help her, albeit some begrudgingly, but she was a woman with nothing to her name and no one to protect her in a time when women had no rights. Was she safe? What would happen if her locket were stolen or broken? Where would she go once she had overstayed her welcome? Would she ever have a place to call home again?

Why had she ever wanted to leave home so badly?

Her hand went to her mouth as hot tears fell from her eyes. The tears rolled over the bridge of her nose, across her cheekbone and then down to her neck, growing colder as they slid across her skin. Her chest grew tight with pent-up sobs. She tried to breathe slowly, to calm down.

"Dinna cry." Iain's voice rumbled even when he whispered. She sucked in a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut, her cheeks burning with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry I woke you up," she managed to say without blubbering.

"I wasna asleep." She heard Iain turn toward her and his hand touched her shoulder very lightly, almost hesitantly. "Dinna worry about yer troubles. We'll take care of ye." She tried to swallow her tears, to thank him and get some semblance of control over herself. She almost succeeded when he added, "I...will take care of ye."

Coming from him, the sentiment was unexpected. More sincere. More upsetting.

One of the sobs escaped and she shook as the rest clamored to follow. It was mortifying, crying in front of a man as shrewd and serious as Iain. She wanted to be stronger, had tried her best. He probably thought she was pathetic.

She was therefore shocked when he pulled her back against him, sliding his biceps under her head and wrapping his arms around her. He shushed her cries, stroked her arm, held her tightly.

"Ye're just tired. Ye'll feel better in the morning and even better the morning after that," he whispered. He was a furnace and his warmth saturated her body, softened her tense muscles. "Soon ye'll be happy again."

"Thank you...so much," she breathed. Her eyes stung from her tears and the long day in a smoke-filled house but she was glad to be in someone's arms, just like in her dreams. Iain shifted closer and then settled, softly breathing against the back of her neck.

After that, she remembered no more.

* * * * *

"I want you," she whispered. Iain groaned, knowing instantly the vixen to which that voice belonged. "And I know you want me, Iain." She was atop him again, rubbing the hard tips of her breasts across his chest, grinding herself against his swelling loins. He opened his eyes.

They weren't on his bed but on a pile of soft furs in a room lit by candles. Her blood red lips seemed to glisten. She smiled at him and cocked her head to one side.

"But am I what you really want?" she asked. "Maybe you're afraid of me?" Her eyebrow arched.

"I'm no' afraid," he said. She leaned down to kiss his mouth and he turned his head away. She laughed, pressing a searing kiss to his neck instead.

"You are," she affirmed. Iain grasped her shoulders and pushed her aside, pinning her face down on the furs. It was a second while he disentangled their legs but he kept her from moving despite her struggles. Her black wings shuddered with agitation. One hand on the back of her neck kept her from rising but his other hand forced her onto her knees.

"I'm no' afraid of ye," he insisted.

She spoke with her cheek against the floor. "Then why did you turn your head away?" Frowning, he penetrated her with one lunge. She cried out.

He knew she wouldn't move again and grasped her hips with both hands. He pounded in and out of her, reaching as deep as he could go and rolling his pelvis against her soft backside.

"Do you really...think this is who I am?" She sounded out of breath and out of control, as though she would fall apart at any second. "Do you...really think this is...what you want?" His eyebrows slanted down in confusion. "Or do you want her?" Iain looked to his left. The Emma he knew was lying on the bed, asleep.

The one on the furs with him screamed. He felt her muscles shuddering over his length and woke up.

Chapter Seven

The next few days went by in relative peace, for which Iain was grateful. It had been common for Colin to sneak out to the croft once a week but once a week turned into every other day. After the third time, Donald relented and promised to escort Colin out to the croft for a few hours once every few days on the condition that their visits would be unplanned.

The laird sent out a decree asking all his outlying crofters to keep a wary eye open at all times and promising a reward for the capture or death of any thief. Though Iain and Kenneth took turns keeping watch at night with the farmhands, Iain needed to rest before the next day's work and every night he expected to be woken by the frantic barks of his dogs and the shouts of his farmhands calling for help. However, each morning found them as yet unmolested.

Iain didn't want to admit it, even to himself, but Emma was quickly becoming essential to their daily lives. She kept a tidy home, made excellent meals and even her ale was quite good, though she drank none of it. The pink disappeared from her reddish-blond hair after her fourth night, so she chose not to wear her *kertch* from then on. He couldn't deny that her hair was especially beautiful during dinner when it was still damp and well-lit by the firelight. Whenever he saw her out washing clothes or fetching fresh water, he could not help but stop and watch her from a distance.

Neither could his farmhands, both of whom were much more eager to eat at the house than they had been before and Iain knew that it wasn't because of the higher quality of the meals.

After the night he had taken her into his arms, Emma had grown more confident with every new day, smiling more and losing her shyness to speak. He deliberately held her only that one night but continued to wake up in the same position—one arm asleep, the other tossed over her side and stiff loins pressed against her rear. His dreams grew more intense, leaving him increasingly desperate for release every morning. A quick retreat to the side of the house for relief had become a daily necessity, yet he found himself strangely content.

He hadn't realized how lonely he had been.

Emma was confined to the house most of the day, keeping house and learning from Aili, but sooner or later she was bound to be noticed, to become a piece of gossip for those too idle to make better use of their time or their mouths. It was only a matter of time before those who lived in the village learned of his brother-in-law and niece's far-fetched notions of her origin. Colin would surely be the first to let it slip. The laird was known to be rather superstitious and there was no telling what his reaction might be.

Iain was still trying to learn the truth from her but she still resisted and he began to feel guilty for always stifling her levity with his questions. However, he needed some way to explain why she had come to live with him. It wasn't appropriate for a single young man and woman to live together. He thought about suggesting that she stay with Aili in the village but he could never bring himself to speak it.

Sending her to the village would be like sending her to the wolves.

* * * * *

"Aye, just like that." From her seat at the table, Aili supervised as Emma kneaded a hunk of bread dough. Emma couldn't believe how long it had taken to prepare leaven for making a loaf of bread. They had started the recipe a couple of days ago. "Keep at it," the old woman said. "'Tis ready when the dough is smooth and dinna stick to yer fingers." Emma rubbed her palms together to remove the gooey dough from her skin and then plunged her hands down again.

Aili was carefully wrapping the leftover leaven for when Emma would make more bread tomorrow and Beth was quietly playing with her doll at her seat across from the old woman. Kenneth had left early that morning with the farmhands to harvest some hay from an unused meadow in another glen and claim a portion for their own livestock but they would return mid-afternoon. Iain, however, was inspecting the lambs that had been born that spring and then would drive his large herd of sheep to a paddock with fresh grass.

Though the work was hard, Emma felt quite satisfied by her accomplishments every day, especially when the others ate what she had labored to make. Kenneth's enjoyment was by far the loudest but the shy, pleased smiles of the two farmhands and Iain's silent nods of approval were surely a compliment. Aili also heaped praise upon her, usually at Iain's expense.

Perhaps she was more resilient than she had thought.

"Is this all right?" she asked a short while later.

Aili reached across the table to test the dough and nodded. "Roll it into a ball. Then cover it up and let it rise." Emma set the bowl aside just as someone stepped into the doorway. Someone new.

A beautiful blonde woman held a covered basket against one of her generous hips, her free hand resting delicately on the doorframe. Emma couldn't help but notice her dress first because it was blood red and very loud against the browns and greens of the house and landscape beyond. Finally meeting the woman's eyes, she saw that the newcomer had a very clear complexion. Emma wished she had some makeup with her.

The woman looked Emma up and down with undisguised condescension, a tiny sneer curling her lip, and her gaze lingered on Emma's locket for a few seconds. Offended and confused, Emma barely stopped her flour-dusted fingers from grasping protectively at the precious weight hanging from her neck.

"Good day," the woman finally said. Her cheery smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Rossalyn?" Aili said. The old woman squinted in the newcomer's direction. "What in God's name are ye doing here?" Despite all the time she had spent with Aili for the last week, Emma was still shocked at the woman's open dislike of the other.

"Auld Aili," Rossalyn said with a sigh. "I was wondering why I hadna seen ye verra much lately, however *happy* it made me. Ye've been here, it seems," she giggled. Without asking permission, she walked inside to the table wearing a pout that looked rather rehearsed. "I do worry *so* much about Iain, living out here with *no one* to give him good meals or...*care* for him," she said suggestively. "I thought yesterday that I might cook something for him. How *surprised* I was this morning to hear from my good friend Ruth that a *woman*," she said, looking at Emma, "has been living here for the past week."

What the hell was this lady's problem? Was she Iain's girlfriend?

"She heard loveable little Malcolm talking to precious young Thomas about this *woman* when the boys were in the village yesterday afternoon," Rossalyn continued. Emma already hated the way the other woman spoke and noted the frown on Beth's face, whom Rossalyn hadn't yet acknowledged. "Even stranger, they said that this *woman* was some kind of fairy!" Rossalyn giggled again. "How silly!"

Shit! Emma had been hoping to have some other story to spread around once she could make up something to tell Iain, not this fairy crap again. Even worse was that others would look down on an unmarried woman living with an unmarried man to whom she wasn't related. How severely they treated such a situation was an unknown she didn't like to ponder.

"She really is a fairy!" Beth insisted. The little girl stood up on the bench, though she still wasn't as tall as Rossalyn.

"Oh I didna *see* ye there," Rossalyn said nonchalantly, not even looking in the little girl's direction and still staring at Emma with half a smile on her face. "Can she even speak, this *fairy*?"

"Don't talk about me as if I'm not in the room," Emma said.

Rossalyn's eyebrows shot up and she pressed her free hand to her chest. "How *rude*," she breathed. "And she talks so strangely. She isna...*English*, is she?"

"Ye know Iain dinna like ye to invite yerself into his home." Aili slowly stood. Rossalyn used the same rehearsed pout on the old woman as she set her covered basket on the table.

"I *could* say the same of ye. I rather thought I was doing him a *favor*." She settled her gaze on Emma once more. "I'm certain my cooking is *far* better than what an *outsider* would make. Why is he even offering his good hospitality to someone like her? Would it no' be better if she *leeches* from someone else?" The more Rossalyn spoke, the more Emma's body shook with anger, for she couldn't deny any of the other woman's accusations. She indeed was a leech, an outsider who didn't know how to cook or run a home at all—at least, not the way they did. Despite all that, she had never felt better

about her situation than she had that morning but the day was turning sour faster than her bread dough.

Aili flipped back the cloth covering the food Rossalyn had brought. "Ye didna even make this," she accused, picking up some kind of bread. "Rachel sells these once a week."

Rossalyn wore an ugly frown this time as she snatched the bread from Aili's fingers and threw it back into her basket. "I didna bring this out for ye," she snapped. "'Tis for Iain."

Emma clenched her hands into fists, instantly hating Rossalyn for mistreating Aili, admittedly an odd woman but one who had been exceedingly helpful and generous. Beth was also on the verge of tears and Emma wanted to grab Rossalyn's basket of food and toss it all on the fire.

"Where is Iain?" Rossalyn then asked as she flipped her ash blonde hair over her shoulder. "I would like to share a *private* meal with him."

"Here," Iain said with an edge in his voice. Though it wasn't quite relief, the new feeling stirring inside Emma came close. Wearing a deep frown and a glare, Iain stood just inside the doorway. Like someone had flipped a switch, Rossalyn turned to him with a saccharine smile on her face.

"Iain! I'm *so* happy to see ye," she tittered, walking up to him and boldly pulling his arm against her chest. "Ye must be *hungry*, right? I brought a *big* basket of food for us to share."

Iain tried to pull his arm away but she held on tight. "That is...kind of ye but it isna even midday and we ate the morning meal not long ago," he said. "Perhaps ye might share it with the others when they return later."

"But such a *big* man as ye couldna have been satisfied. I heard, after all, that yer *guest* dinna know how to run a home." Rossalyn sent a sly, self-satisfied smile over her shoulder.

Iain's steady eyes stayed on Emma. "Her meals are more than sufficient," he said. His expression seemed to soften a little.

As though she had done it countless times, Rossalyn gently pulled on Iain's arm to regain his attention and gave him her pretty frown—to show her disappointment, Emma supposed. Had she been hoping that Emma couldn't cook at all? Or was she upset that Iain had paid the outsider a compliment, however tenuous?

"Who is she, Iain? Ye know how *jealous* I get," Rossalyn said. Emma suddenly felt sick, her insides clenching into a tight knot. She had been dreading such a question all week, yet she could do nothing but watch and hope.

Without missing a beat, Iain answered calmly, "She is a distant cousin. Her family is gone and I'm all she has—and what do I care if ye are jealous?" Emma forced herself not to show an outward reaction but the tension in her body eased immeasurably. *Thank you, Iain*, she thought.

Rossalyn seemed only slightly appeased. "Dinna be that way, Iain. Ye know how I feel. Should I come again later to eat with ye?"

"With us, aye," he allowed. "Kenneth and the boys will return in a couple of hours."

"I had thought that we'd eat together, Iain...*alone*." Rossalyn none-too-subtly rubbed her ample chest against Iain's arm, which was still trapped in her clutches. The woman's tactics, while certainly not that of a child, were still childish in a way and Emma couldn't help feeling angry — on Iain's behalf, of course.

As if fed up, Iain pulled the woman's hands off him and stepped away. "I'd rather not. As ye can see, the women are busy. Either help them or come again."

Rossalyn's disappointed pout turned to an even prettier one of hurt. "Would ye at least walk me back to the village?"

Aili scoffed. "Ye came alone, girl. The sun is still high in the sky. Go back by yerself." Rossalyn threw a hateful glare at the old woman.

"I'm sorry. I dinna have the time," Iain said, ignoring Aili's outburst, "but we'll see ye again soon." Stepping clear of the doorway, Iain gestured for the woman to leave. She looked like she might cry, breathing hard and maintaining that pretty frown but then she walked to the table, picked up her basket and stormed out the door.

Emma was glad that she wasn't the only one to breathe a sigh of relief the second Rossalyn left. She wiped her hands on her apron, eyes on Iain as he turned away from the open door. "Is she a friend of yours?" she asked.

"Hardly," he muttered.

Beth clambored off the bench and ran to wrap her arms around Emma's leg, her tiny fingers clutching at Emma's skirt. "I dinna like her," the little girl said.

"I believe we're all in accord on that," Aili declared. "Why then is she coming back?" She slapped her hand on the table.

The man sighed, tiredly rubbing his bearded chin. "I dinna know but the other three can woo her and get her off my back...and arm."

"You don't like the way she looks?" Emma asked. Though it was unfair to think that men only cared about a woman's beauty, she had met a fair share of guys who were more interested in intercourse of the physical kind rather than the verbal kind.

Iain's expression was carefully guarded. "She is vain, covetous and cruel. Such traits ruin any beauty she might have."

Aili's chuckle came out raspy. "Ye have good taste in women, Iain, and that's the only compliment I may ever give ye."

It was difficult to tell but Emma thought she saw Iain's lips curl up a little as he turned away. "I have work to do." He was out the door and gone in the space of a single breath. He certainly wasn't one for conversation.

Emma made a thoughtful noise. "Aili, this might not be any of my business —"

"Dear, I'm too old to be polite. What's yer question?"

"Why is Iain unmarried?" she asked.

"We all thought he might marry a couple o' years ago. Beth may not remember but Iain was sweet on a stonemason's daughter from the village. She helped Father James with the sick that came to the church, back when the poor man was alive," Aili said. "She was one of the first to die when the Black Death came."

"He lost her as well as his mother and sister? What about his father?"

"Died at Halidon back when Iain was a young boy. Iain's older brother, only eighteen I remember, went with Iain's father to battle. Neither came back."

Emma pulled Beth closer, her heart heavy with sympathy. She knew already what it felt like to lose a loved one. To lose so many... Pressing her hand to her chest, she had a sudden realization.

"And all aim for his heart with blackened arrows. Thrice pierced, he dies, all around him is harrow'd," she whispered to herself. Black arrows. The Black Death? It had taken three loved ones from him.

"What was that, lass?" Aili asked, cupping one hand around her ear.

Then there was the last line, *What once was light, now buried in sorrow*. Despite his heartache, Iain worked hard every day. He had opened his home to her, had even lied for her.

"I don't know that I could have endured as much as Iain has," Emma admitted.

"The man is still an ass, I say," Aili said.

"Beth, you shouldn't say ass," Emma whispered to the little girl. A wide-eyed Beth nodded. "Aili, I'd like to make something that'll tempt the boys."

The old woman cackled, slapping the table. "That's the spirit!"

* * * * *

An hour later, Emma was sitting at the table, carefully cutting a large omelet into several portions. Only onions and a few cloves of garlic were on hand to flavor it but she was merely glad that it had come out in one piece. She really missed Teflon. She cut the last portion and covered the dish with a clean bowl to keep it warm.

"Is that a fairy song?" Beth asked, her feet playfully swinging. "Will ye sing it for me?" Not even realizing that she had been humming anything, Emma grimaced. She had been trying to get *Blackbird* out of her head for a week but the song was haunting her.

"I don't sing very well," she stalled. Beth's shoulders fell.

"Dinna be shy, child," Aili said. "I have nae heard a song out of anyone for a great long while."

"Well...all right but only one verse."

"Yea!" Beth cheered. Clearing her throat, Emma sat up straighter. She began to sing, taking it slower than the original tempo since the lyrics were a little shaky in her head,

but the words came without any problems. Though she had an audience of only two, her cheeks were burning. However, the song was easy enough that she was able to hit all the notes...well, mostly. She was about to reluctantly begin the second verse when Beth interrupted.

"Dada!" she squealed. Emma's lips snapped shut and her stomach flipped over. The little girl scrambled over the bench and ran toward the door. Peeking over her shoulder, Emma verified that Kenneth had once again managed to sneak up on her. Even worse was that Iain and both farmhands were standing behind him.

Aili's laugh was almost wicked. "Boys, ye're just in time!" she called. Mortified, Emma grabbed the old woman's hand.

"You saw them coming and didn't warn me?" she whispered. Behind her, she heard everyone entering the house.

"I'm half blind, lass! Of course, I didna see them coming." The elderly lady patted her hand and Emma looked over her shoulder again.

"Did ye hear her, Dada?" Beth asked, sitting against her father's hip.

"I did. A very nice voice," he said with a smile. Emma looked away, covering up her burning cheeks. Needing to retreat for a moment, she stood up from the table and grabbed the water jug. It was still half full but refilling it was as good an excuse as any.

"Something smells good," Kenneth commented.

"Emma made an ah-muh-let," his daughter said.

"It's mostly just eggs. I'm going to get more water." Emma made her way toward the door, weaving her way through Kenneth, Malcolm and Thomas but Iain blocked her at the door. He looked at her with a strange kind of intense confusion. "Help yourself...t-to the omelet, I mean. Excuse me."

Pushing past him, she successfully made it outside and hurried down the path toward the river, the jug clutched tightly to her chest. The day's high winds sent her hair and the skirt of her dress flapping wildly but the sun was warm and the air incredibly fresh. She tried to enjoy the short trip, holding her hair away from her face the best she could. Halfway to her destination, she spotted Rossalyn returning from the village with her basket of food.

Great. The day was certainly shaping up well.

* * * * *

"Are ye *enjoying* my food, Iain?" Rossalyn purred. Emma barely suppressed the deep frown that Rossalyn's voice induced. The woman had insisted on sitting next to Iain. Emma sat on his other side, leaving Aili just enough room on the end. Kenneth sat opposite Aili with his daughter on his lap and the farmhands took up the rest of the opposite bench. Rossalyn repeatedly pressed her breasts against Iain's arm and therefore pushed Iain into Emma. Emma had to lean back every time so that she didn't end up shoving Aili off the other end of the bench.

So far, Rossalyn had hardly drawn a breath. She flirted shamelessly with the men and for some reason the farmhands were delighted by her attention. They couldn't stop smiling and staring at her. Emma disdainfully noticed that their eyes were usually aimed either at their plates or at Rossalyn's chest, which the woman was only too happy to show them by leaning over the table. Peeking down at her own diminutive breasts, Emma regretfully realized that no matter the century, men would always prefer a bustier woman.

"The ah-muh-let was interesting and Rachel's sweet bread is as good as ever," Iain answered. Rossalyn huffed overdramatically.

"Ye're so *mean*, Iain," she said. "I brought this food just for *ye*." She quickly added, "For *all* of ye! How hard ye labor every day. It *amazes* me." Emma wanted to roll her eyes as Malcolm and Thomas shyly smiled down at their plates.

"Ye had better eat yer fill, boys. We still need to get that hay into the barn but then ye're free to head home. Ye've earned it," Iain announced.

"But what about the watch tonight?" Malcolm asked.

"'Tis been a week and the MacGregors have nae been seen. We shear the sheep tomorrow, so rest at home with yer parents tonight." Malcolm smiled but said nothing and continued stuffing himself with as much of Rossalyn's food as he could.

Emma was thankful when the meal was over. Surprisingly enough, Rossalyn didn't stay long once the food had been consumed and left with her empty basket, saying that she had work to do. *Yeah right*.

The farmhands went ahead to the barn to start moving the freshly cut hay and Aili left for the day, very agitated about something—or someone, Emma guessed. Kenneth picked up his sleepy daughter to take her home for her afternoon nap, promising Iain he'd meet up with him at the barn.

"I'll see ye soon," the redhead said, nodding to Iain and Emma before turning from the house. She and Iain stood silently outside the door, both enjoying the calm after a meal with Rossalyn. Emma snuck a peek at Iain, hoping to thank him for lying earlier for her benefit, but the look on his face cut her off before she could even open her mouth.

Iain stared at his brother-in-law and niece with sadness. She spotted a small frown on his face, though it was difficult to see behind his bushy beard. His eyes were very still, as if he were looking beyond his farm and beyond the glen, watching something with his mind's eye. He was imagining something.

"You want children, don't you?" she said quietly. He blinked, coming out of his daydream to look at her. "Children of your own." He cleared his throat but said nothing and averted his eyes. "You're...hesitant to bring them into this world." She avoided the word "afraid". She didn't think he would appreciate it.

"One week and ye think ye know me?" he grumbled with an angry undertone. She might have been cowed by his ire but truthfully, Iain was never in a good mood. Emma was becoming used to his caustic personality.

"You want a family but both of your parents and both of your siblings were taken from you. I would be hesitant too." He looked at her with surprise. "You may not believe me but I can understand what you've been through."

"How did ye know about my father and brother?" he asked.

"Aili told me. Sorry."

Iain sighed with frustration, looking out across the glen again.

"If you want children, you need to find a wife first."

She could see him rolling his eyes from where she stood. "I didna expect to grow them out of the ground."

"If talking to women is difficult for you, I could help," she offered. He clenched his jaw, probably losing his temper, but she pressed on. "I'll help you find a kind woman to marry—not Rossalyn," she tacked on. "For starters, women might warm up to you more if you shaved your beard." He turned to her, mouth hanging open.

"What is wrong with my beard? A man is less of a man without one."

"I would think a man doesn't need a beard to feel like a man," she countered. "Besides, you look a little...beastly with that beard. Women will think you're more approachable without one."

"Do ye no' like beards?"

"No, not really," she admitted. He became quiet, his hands clenching and unclenching by his sides. He was fidgeting.

"Where ye came from...is someone waiting for ye?"

Emma found it jarring to suddenly think of her life before she died. To think of her short-lived relationships, only a couple of which ever went to intimacy. After only a week, she was losing touch with her old life. She recalled her crush on the boy who was supposed to have been at the Halloween party. Thinking on it now, she wasn't quite sure what it was she had liked about him. She hadn't even thought of him since her accident.

Realizing that she hadn't answered yet, she looked at Iain, who was watching her carefully. "No. I-I suppose I didn't really know what I wanted."

"Do ye ken now?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I actually haven't given it much thought and it's only been a week. I'm still trying to figure things out." Iain's eyebrows twitched, as if confused or disquieted. He faced the glen once more.

"I'll have the extra bed ready for ye tonight." The sudden change of topic was abrupt and Emma almost couldn't follow. Ah, the extra hay for the mattress.

Oddly enough, the news wasn't very relieving. "Thank you," she said. Nodding, Iain mumbled something about her omelet and then set off for the barn. She watched him for a few seconds, noticing with some surprise that he walked with a slight limp.

He had lived in only one area his entire life but he had experienced so much. For him, just surviving was a challenge. If he knew about her old life, would he think it was any easier? More difficult? More exciting? Scary? As scary as she thought his life was?

She couldn't help but feel impressed by him. Iain was a very strong person. One of the strongest people she had ever met.

* * * * *

Guided by patches of weak moonlight, Rossalyn walked with determination up a wooded slope and pulled her wrap tighter around her shoulders. She wasn't cold though. She was livid. The material clutched within her fists threatened to tear as she recalled her terrible afternoon for the hundredth time. Just like a fairy out of the mounds, this woman had appeared out of nowhere, almost as if to ruin Rossalyn's plans. He had said the woman was some distant relative but she was no Highlander, of that Rossalyn was certain. She had seen the way he looked at the fairy. And what did the fairy have that she didn't? Nothing!

She was skinny, spotted with freckles and had no curves for a man to grasp. As for the woman's breasts, Rossalyn had smugly noted that she herself was far better endowed. What Iain saw in the fairy, Rossalyn didn't know, which was especially vexing when he could have had her anytime during the last year. Her fists began to shake when she remembered trying to get Iain's attention and only succeeding for a second before his eyes returned to the other woman, who wasn't even looking at him!

The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to scream.

A large hand clamped onto Rossalyn's arm. She gasped, pulling away. The hand yanked her into the shadows, shooting pain up her arm that exploded in her shoulder. She cried out even as she tried to keep her footing. When she might have fallen to her knees, she was caught against a wide chest. The man whipped her around and pinned her against the cold, rough bark of a tree. His lips hovered close to her ear.

"What news?"

Rossalyn shuddered against him and pulled him even closer. Her wrap fell to the ground. It was a few seconds before she could speak past the pulse in her throat. "T-the laird is furious. Ye stole Duncan and Finian's best bull." As she spoke, he gathered her skirts in his fists and began pulling them up. "He offered a reward to anyone who catches or kills any thieves."

"How much?" he whispered. His fingers found her thighs and he easily lifted her, pulling her legs around his waist. She didn't know the reason but the rough way he handled her—the way he trapped her between the tree and his body—it sent her heart racing and she clung to his shoulders with wanton greed.

"I dinna ken. His men-at-arms meant to patrol the outlying crofts at random."

"Where will they patrol tonight?" he coaxed, reaching beneath her.

She moaned, wiggling against his probing fingers. "I dinna ken about tonight but tomorrow they willna pass through the glen just west of the village. The croft in the center has several heads." She groaned when he rubbed just the right spot. "Nowt would be there to s-stop ye." His warm breath splashed across her cheek and the fur he wore brushed deliciously against her bare knees.

"What of the laird? When will he be on the roads?" he asked. Rossalyn swallowed hard. The laird's *leuchd-crios* would never give that kind of information to someone like her.

"I-I dinna ken. I'll keep asking," she stalled. "The laird's son is sometimes seen away from the castle. I may be able to find out where he goes." Something besides his fingers began to prod her. She moaned with impatience.

"Ye want this, do ye no'?" he teased. "Ye ken what to say."

"Craig, please," she begged.

"Say it." The head of his cock slipped inside her. She writhed, trying to take more of him.

"I willna." He pulled free of her and she smacked her fist against his shoulder in retaliation. "No."

"Say it or I walk away." She hit him again but he only laughed. *Arrogant bastard!*

She clenched her teeth. "I am a Campbell whore."

He adjusted his stance. Sank into her. Began pounding into her. His hands were tight against the backs of her thighs. He wasn't gentle and she didn't expect it. She moaned loud and long.

"The truth feels good, does it no'?" he asked.

"Ye talk too much, Craig," she hissed. She didn't like the things he said or the way she enjoyed the things he did to her. She didn't want to like the sound of his loins slapping against hers. She hated how she moaned whenever he was rough. Perhaps he was right though. She hated him for saying it, but she let him take her anyway, didn't she?

The cheek brushed hers with every thrust that heaved her upward and she turned her face toward him, thinking she might be able to see his expression in the moonlight. Their lips nearly touched and she realized that they had never kissed. She turned her head away, afraid it might happen.

His hips went faster, beating against her and giving her everything she wanted. She drowned in the feelings, the smell of his skin, the sound of their heaving bodies.

Craig groaned. "I'm close, lass."

"Aye," she gasped. She dug her fingers into his shoulders and closed her eyes. He whispered violent curses and gripped the backs of her thighs so tightly that she knew he was bruising her. Pleasure ripped through her. Her womanly flesh shuddered and for a moment she felt close to Craig, felt as though he shared something with her that no one else could touch.

His hips pinned hers against the tree as he pressed deep and finished inside her, moaning with relief. He didn't linger long and pulled out, setting her on her feet. He then stepped back and straightened his clothing. She leaned on the tree for a few breaths, trying to get the strength back in her legs.

"Same signal then?" he asked. "Ye'll tell me when the laird plans to travel?" She nodded, wondering how long his patience would last. He wanted to kill the laird, but she would never be the one to bring it about.

She took a step away from the tree. "Aye," she lied.

"Ye're a good girl," he said with a smile. He smacked her rear and walked away. When she could no longer hear his footsteps, she sighed.

"Am I?"

* * * * *

Emma wandered through the dark rooms of her parents' house, feeling at home and yet disoriented. The dimensions were right but the rooms looked so much bigger. The ceiling was farther away and the furniture was arranged differently. Entering the living room, she looked around with confusion. Hadn't her parents gotten a new coffee table? Where was the super expensive flat-panel TV that her father had drooled over? The old couch that the dog had tracked mud on was still there too.

Colored light caught her eye and she looked at the end table next to the couch. Inside a rectangular chunk of glass was a laser-etched angel, her outline lit from within by a bulb in the base, which slowly spun the tiny angel in a circle. Blue light was followed by green, then yellow, red and purple.

Seeing it enraged her and she walked over to snatch up the cold chunk of glass. Hurling it across the room, she listened with satisfaction as it shattered on the floor in the adjoining kitchen.

The angel shouldn't have been there. It hadn't been on the table for five years. And why was it so cold in the house?

She went to find the thermostat, her arms getting goose bumps and her toes nearly numb. As she walked from the living room to the front hallway, she stopped abruptly, surprised to see Jack's old freshman MVP plaque from high school back on the wall. It was supposed to be in a box in the attic.

Red and blue lights cut through the peaceful darkness of her parents' house. Running to the front window in the sitting room, she spotted a cop car sitting outside. One officer remained in the car and the other was walking up to the front door.

The frigid air sank deep into her skin, sapping all the warmth left inside her.

She turned back to the hallway just as the doorbell rang. She tried to run to the front door but it was like running through water. Her father, still wrapping his robe around his pajamas, was closely followed by her mother in her blue nightgown as both walked past the sitting room to the front door.

Emma ran harder, faster and finally broke free of the force dragging at her. Skidding into the hallway, she made it just in time to see her father open the door. A grim-looking police officer stared at her parents with dispassionate, dead eyes.

"Mr. and Mrs. Campbell? Do you have a sixteen-year-old son named Jack?"

No, no, no! Not again! She didn't want to hear it again!

She screamed. "Jack!"

* * * * *

Iain jerked upright. Before he knew it, he had tossed the blanket away and was on his feet. His first instinct may have been to run to the door and seize his sword from the wall but instead he looked at Emma in the bed he had set up against the back wall, perpendicular to his own.

She had kicked off her blanket and was panting for air. In the fading firelight, he could see the sheen of a cold sweat on her face. A few locks of her hair were stuck to her cheek. A nightmare. Emma gingerly sat up, her back to him. He heard her sniff and then watched her wipe her hand across her face. She sniffed again as she tried to gather up her blanket.

His hands still shook from his abrupt awakening even as a different kind of tension filled him, a tension that made him want to cross the two steps separating their beds and... He stopped his body from following through with that thought but he knew well the keen anguish that had ripped the shriek from her throat and his ignorance of her former life plagued him yet again as he wondered with an aggravating stab of jealousy just who "Jack" was. He wanted to ask but could already guess that she wouldn't answer.

Emma grew quiet and still. He did his best to smooth away the emotions playing across his face but when she slowly turned her head to glance over her shoulder, he knew he had failed to mask his need and jealousy when she cringed upon seeing him.

She turned her head away but not before he saw tears in her eyes. "Sorry about that," she said softly. Having covered her legs again with the blanket, she rubbed her hands together and hunched her shoulders. Without asking for her permission, his body moved toward her and he reached out his arms. Emma glanced up at him with wide eyes. "I-Iain?"

He first tossed the blanket off her legs and then slid one arm around her back and the other one under her knees. He lifted her slight weight, walked the short distance to the larger bed and set her in the center. She silently stared at him. "Because ye look cold," he haltingly explained. It was the best excuse he could conjure.

With a nod, she relaxed and settled into her usual position, though not as close to the wall as before. Taking a small chance, he crawled in behind her and for the first time in many days, let her use his arm as a pillow. She gave no argument and even snuggled

into the curve of his body. He closed his eyes, breathing in her sweet scent and wishing he could feel the softness of her cheek against his arm.

After tucking them both under the blanket, he told her to go to sleep but all that answered him was a soft exhalation.

* * * * *

Iain stood at the door of his home. Sunlight poured down, its heat stirred by a gusting wind. To the north, paddocks were full of fat, healthy animals grazing on abundant green grass. To the south, fields of barley were growing well and full. His chest swelled with pride.

"Isn't something missing?"

He whipped around, expecting to see the red-haired interloper. She wasn't inside the house. "Or perhaps, someone?" He turned back and spotted her standing on the paddock wall. She wore a green dress long enough to hide her feet. Her wings flapped once and then settled. She smiled at him.

"What are ye talking about?" he asked.

She pointed toward the trees beyond the barley. "That way." Iain looked to the forest. Aye, something was missing. He could feel it now. Something was missing and something else was here that didn't belong. "Goodbye, Iain," she said.

He began to ask her what was missing but she disappeared. He had no time to wonder where she had gone though. He had to find whatever it was that should have been here. A sense of urgency filled him. His hands itched as his feet carried him past the fields and into the trees.

The sunshine slipped off his shoulders. The air around him pressed close, heavy and cold. The sound of dead leaves crunching under his feet was loud and grating. He walked faster.

A woman's voice. It was filled with panic. He ran. The ground was rising quickly and he clambered up the hillside. Blue eyes, he remembered. She had blue eyes and soft hair. Skin as smooth as cream.

He crested the hill and paused, huffing for air as he searched the forest in front of him. There. A bit of light caught his eye and he was off running again.

"Jack?" Emma called. "Don't leave me here!" His hands fisted at the sound of another man's name, at the thought that someone had abandoned her. "Please, Jack! I don't want to be alone."

Dodging around a tree, he spotted her. A gap in the forest canopy had let in a single beam of sunlight, wide and bright. Emma stood in the spot of light it created on the ground. Her bare feet were covered in mud and she looked cold in only a knee-length smock.

"Emma?" he said gently. She gasped, turning toward him. He came closer to the light and her startled expression softened into relief. "Iain."

He took a deep breath, realizing for the hundredth time just how beautiful she was. A step closer and he could touch her. Another step closer and he could see tears swimming in her eyes. "Jack's gone," she said. "He left me."

Iain pulled her into his arms. "I'll stay with you." Her arms slid around him. She smelled sweet and natural. Her body was warm and soft. His heart was pounding but not from exertion.

Sunlight poured in, expanding the ring of light and pushing back the darkness. Emma gasped and pulled him closer. He swallowed hard, his body reacting to her nearness, to the feel of her arms around him, accepting him and wanting him. His hands moved of their own will, both seeking to comfort and needing to discover. The smock was so thin.

Grass sprouted beneath their feet as he ran one hand over her hip. His fingers gathered a fistful of material and then gathered more, slowly bringing up the hem of her smock. When finally he touched bare skin, he couldn't stop the groan from leaving his throat. Sliding his hand under her clothing, he cupped her lush backside and greedily squeezed.

She moaned, surprising him. Her hands slid up his back to grasp his shoulders and she pulled back to look at him. Her cheeks were flushed, her expression both knowing and longing. "Iain," she whispered.

They came together, their hands searching and stroking. Iain pressed feverish kisses to her neck even as he yanked her smock from her body, ripping the neckline and dropping it to the ground. Her arms came back around him, encircling his neck as he drew her up from the grass and held her tight against him. Her legs climbed up his body, wrapping around his hips.

"Kiss me." She brought her mouth close, waiting for him to meet her, to penetrate her lips as a prelude to what was coming.

He couldn't. He saw those full, pink lips and hesitated.

"Iain?" Her eyes opened. She seemed confused.

"I...I canna," he whispered. Her confusion became pained disbelief.

"Don't you want to kiss me?" Christ, she didn't understand just how much he wanted it, how he stared at her mouth when she spoke, how he envied the cup she drank from. As if she had heard his thoughts, she said, "Then do it, Iain. Kiss me."

He felt her hands tighten on his shoulders and let her pull him closer. He closed his eyes and tilted his head.

And woke up.

Chapter Eight

The next morning, Emma was woken with a gentle shake. By the time her shoes were tied, Iain had already washed his face and was stoking the fire. Feeling more self-conscious than usual, she shyly pulled her kirtle over her head.

Something felt very different between them and she couldn't put her finger on it. It had been the same after she had cried that second night but the tension had lessened and then disappeared in the days following. The feeling had returned though, a disorienting flutter in her stomach, like little butterflies. She felt an impatient need to be near Iain, to look at him and to have his attention.

Last night, when he so easily plucked her out of her cold, lonely bed and placed her on the wide mattress still warm from his body heat, she had been confused at first, wondering why he would offer his bed just when he had it to himself again. She was immensely relieved when he offered up a thin excuse to let her stay. She also hadn't wanted to admit that she needed more from him than heat, so she let him use whatever pretext he wanted. Perhaps he was lonely as well and hoping for something more intimate. Perhaps she was starting to feel the same way.

She wasn't the sort to delude herself but she worried about the reasons for her feelings. Was she coming to depend on him simply because he was helping her? Because he made her feel safe? She couldn't be entirely sure but what she did know was that she felt guilty, more so with each passing day. Iain wanted the truth from her but she knew that he wouldn't believe the truth and she had no way to satisfy his curiosity about her previous life.

When she was dressed and had nothing else to pick at and smooth, she glanced over at the table to see Iain setting out the leftover bread she had made yesterday and some cheese that Aili had helped her make.

Approaching the table, she watched as Iain retrieved a cup of ale for himself. She didn't like having to brew ale but it was probably a large amount of Iain and Kenneth's calorie intake every day, considering that it was made from barley. Pouring some water for herself, she sat across from Iain just as he took a seat.

"Good morning," she said, breaking the silence. Iain made a sort of grunting noise in response. "I'm sorry about last night." Iain broke apart the remaining bread and set half of it on her plate.

"A nightmare?" he asked, doling out some cheese next.

"Yeah. I haven't had that nightmare in a long time."

Smoothly cutting a slice of cheese from the chunk sitting on his plate, Iain applied it to his bread and raised his hand to his mouth. "Who is Jack?" He took a bite of his food,

his free hand gesturing for her to start eating. Emma didn't have much of an appetite though.

"He was my older brother." Iain's jaw slowed down for a few seconds, his gaze heavy. Emma realized that he wanted her to continue. "Well, Jack was my hero. When he died, it was very hard on all of us."

"How old were ye?"

"Fourteen. Jack was two years older."

Iain took another bite of his food, slowly nodding. "When did he die?"

"A little over five years ago." Had it been five years already?

"So that makes ye nineteen?"

"Twenty," she corrected. "How old are you?" She had tried to guess many times but his beard made it difficult. Iain frowned at the question.

"Twenty-eight." She was relieved to know that he was younger than he looked but still, eight years was a large difference—not that their age difference should have anything to do with anything. Right?

Iain drank a swallow of ale. "What is a woman with only twenty years doing in the middle of the Highlands with no kin or a home to call her own?"

Emma began to chew on the inside of her lip, wishing she could just tell him the truth. *You want to know how I ended up here? I was born several hundred years in the future, grew up in a country that no Europeans have discovered yet and died in an accident while wearing a necklace that I now can't take off.*

He would probably just stamp her as officially crazy and call it a day.

"You'll think I'm lying. You wouldn't believe me," she hedged, hoping he would start guessing so that she could choose one story and confirm it.

"Try me," he said as he set his elbows on the table.

Her heart fluttered in her chest, her stomach twisted into knots and she licked her lips, trying to decide how to put it best—or rather, how to put it so that he believed her.

"I'm not, ah...that is, I was born in... There's a place across the—" She watched his face, saw the slow rise of his eyebrows and the tightening of his jaw. "U-uh, I should say that I was...well, will be—did..." *Oh for crying out loud!* "It doesn't matter where I came from. As far as I care, whatever story you want to tell is the truth." Iain's high eyebrows slammed down and he frowned as though she had just insulted his mother.

"For the love of God, woman! How can I trust ye if ye willna do the same? Did ye kill someone? Is that it? Are ye afraid to admit a crime?"

"No, it's not like that! I'm not a fugitive or anything. There's no one who knows me."

"Then why will ye no' tell me?" he shouted, standing up. "I have opened my home to ye, allowed ye into what remains of my family. I have fed, clothed and sheltered ye..."

Why will ye no' let me have something in return?" Iain struck the table with his fists, his voice rising to a roar. "Who *are* ye?"

His anger frightened her this time, without a doubt. She knocked over the bench when she stood up and stumbled over it on her way to the door. Blinking as though waking up, Iain took a steadying breath but then he frowned again and stomped toward the door. Emma scurried out of his way, retreating to the sleeping side of the house. She watched as he lifted the bar and flung the door open. Without comment, he left the house.

Her knees abruptly gave out and she collapsed onto the extra bed. Her chest seemed tight. She fumbled for the locket around her neck, gripping it tightly. She had seriously ticked him off. Even worse was that there was little she could do to cool his anger.

She would have to leave soon.

* * * * *

Iain threw a bucket of milk down next to Kenneth, who was still milking another cow. The milk inside sloshed tumultuously, nearly spilling over. His brother-in-law regarded him with one eyebrow high on his forehead. "Ye seem...agitated. More so than usual."

Iain pulled in a slow breath, teeth clenched. He wanted to hit someone and hitting Kenneth would certainly suffice. He had always had a short temper, one easily stirred. Aili had the courage of senility and the condescension of old age to shield her from his anger. Kenneth had been teasing him and laughingly dodging fists since they were both barely able to walk. They both riled him but they had never looked at him with fear.

But Emma... Damn it, why did he snap at her?

"Take that one with ye when ye're done," he said, having gained a little control.

"Ye're nae coming? Did ye already eat?" Kenneth spoke with suspicion while his hands hurriedly milked the cow in front of him.

Even as he answered, Iain knew he had hesitated too long. "I did. We'll be verra busy today, so—"

"Ye're lying," Kenneth said bluntly. "What did ye do this time?"

"How can ye ken it was me who did something?"

"Because ye just lied about it."

Iain sighed. "That girl brings out the worst in me."

"So ye suffer from lust," his friend said with a grin.

"That's none of yer damn concern and that wasna my meaning," Iain growled, enraged that Kenneth was so easily prodding his open wounds. He had woken rock-hard, so swollen that he thought he might come right there on the bed, like some

inexperienced youth. Only the distraction of the morning tasks had somewhat cooled his ardor. It had taken a great deal of creativity to hide his arousal from her line of sight.

Like it or not, he wanted Emma. He wanted all of her forever and in every way he could take her. Iain had tried to tell himself his need was just an infatuation—that it would die away but it had only become stronger. The need to cover her with his body, to explore her soft skin with his mouth and hands, to spend himself between her thighs and then watch her grow with his child... That primal need was now an inferno beneath his skin, barely contained.

“’Tis guilt then.” Kenneth stood up while casting a disapproving glance at him. “Ye did something and now ye canna face her.”

“I shouted at her, just like I’m shouting at ye! Can ye go on with yer day now that ye ken?” His friend opened his mouth but Iain cut him off with an angry gesture. “Just take the milk down to her and dinna ask me questions.”

“Mayhap I’ll invite her to my home,” his friend offered. A raw, burning sensation suddenly filled Iain’s lungs. “Beth likes her and I also—”

“No,” Iain growled, his body starting to shake.

Kenneth’s eyebrows twitched with confusion. “If ye truly dislike having Emma with ye, Iain, I am more than willing—”

“No, damn it! She stays with me.” A violent urge came out of nowhere. God help him, he wanted to throttle his friend and not in the sense of rough play. The redhead’s eyebrows rose high and he took a step back, lifting his hands in surrender. Iain realized that his hands had been clenched into fists. He stretched his stiff fingers.

“I think I finally understand,” Kenneth said, picking up the two buckets of milk. Iain swallowed, listening to his brother-in-law walk out of the barn. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on breathing slowly but all he could see was Emma’s terrified expression.

* * * * *

Emma leaned against the side of the tub, sighing. She hadn’t seen Iain all day, though she had made sure to send the rest of his breakfast to him when Kenneth had stopped by with fresh buckets of milk. Shearing took the entire morning since only Kenneth and Iain knew how to do it properly, yet they still had many more sheep to trim. Malcolm had come to fetch their lunch, taking time only to inform her and Aili of their progress. The old woman had headed home an hour ago, leaving Emma to prepare her usual evening bath.

All day, she had been mulling over the scene at breakfast, trying to think of how she could have handled it better. The truth may have been a one-way ticket to eviction and she couldn’t bring herself to concoct a lie. She had never been good at lying. Whenever she tried, she hesitated and her cheeks flushed with guilt.

She wanted to tell him exactly how she had come to this place—and time—so she had been practicing the best way to say it but it was difficult to explain. She didn't know why or how she had been brought here and she didn't have a good way to prove anything. She had burned her cell phone, steering wheel and wristwatch in the same fire that had consumed her fake fairy wings. Whatever wouldn't burn had been buried in the woods, and it wasn't likely she'd remember where. She had nothing else that could confirm her story.

"Wait," she said aloud. Bringing her hands out of the water, she leaned over the side of the tub and reached for the towel to dry her hands. Then, sitting higher in the water, she looked down at her locket and slowly opened it. The delicate paper was still inside and she plucked it out. Careful not to drop it, she unfolded the note.

Tensing up, she gave a tiny shriek. Tears of fright sprang to her eyes and she instinctively held the paper as far away from her as she could. It was all she could do not to crumple it up and throw it at the fire.

The note had changed. Not only were the letters much larger but the script had changed from neat cursive to hastily written block letters. Most frightening was the set of eyes at the bottom of the page, drawn in heavy black ink and staring at her with terrifying violence.

The wolf doth watch and patiently wait.
Vengeance dangles, a bittersweet bait.
None are saved from blistering hate,
But caution may avoid a mortal fate.

Emma quickly refolded the note and stuffed it into the locket. She then glanced around the now familiar interior of Iain's home, hoping to find a clue as to what she should do. She was nude, weaponless and alone. Even the door was wide open!

Her heart pounding, she was overwhelmed with the need to be at Iain's side, to be surrounded by people she knew and trusted. She stood and grabbed for her towel, then stepped out of the tub. Once she was dry enough, she hastily bunched up the towel and set it down on a stool. She reached for her smock.

Someone entered the house, his footsteps heavy. "The boys willna be supping with us toni—" Gasping, Emma snatched up her smock and turned to find Iain standing a few feet in from the door, his mouth open. She covered the front of her body with the linen as fast as possible but knew it was too late. He had seen everything.

Iain couldn't look away, didn't want to. He had forced himself to stop avoiding her, to come to the house and tell her that it would only be Kenneth and Beth with them for the evening meal but he had forgotten the time of day.

He didn't regret his mistake though.

The brief glimpse he had taken in of her smooth, pale nudity had inflamed his lusts far more than any fantasy ever could have. Like music to the ears or sweet fruit on the tongue, the sight of her had been pure pleasure, beauty for his eyes to behold. Her breasts were high and well shaped, the raspberry-colored tips begging to be tasted. Her rear was perfect for a man to grasp so that he could pull her against him.

And at the top of her thighs...

There was no helping his reaction. He didn't need to look down to know that his desire was easy to see. She was freshly washed, already undressed and not one but two beds sat a few strides away. A dozen fantasies assailed him, all of them starting with a vision of his hands yanking her smock away and snatching her into his arms as he carried her to the larger bed.

A needy groan issued from his mouth and he stepped toward her. He would kiss her first. He dragged his eyes up to her face but as quickly as it had come, his lust washed away.

Emma's face was white with terror, as though she had seen something that deeply disturbed her, something that had snuffed the light from her.

He had frightened her. Again.

An odd sort of pain, cold but sharp, bit into the center of his chest and carved a path down to his stomach, for in his more lucid moments when he wasn't thinking of her as a fairy or a MacGregor, he had entertained thoughts of taking her to wife. Though she didn't drink ale and attracted Auld Aili's company, she was selfless, kind to children and hardworking. He could see in her an inner strength and wisdom that women like Rossalyn lacked and when she had sensed his desire to start a family, he had been surprised that she had spoken only of matching him with other women, as though she weren't available, even though she had said no other was in her heart.

He saw now that she did not feel for him what he felt for her. Closing his mouth and swallowing the words he wanted to say, he turned and left.

Chapter Nine

Curled tightly under a woolen blanket, Emma lay awake in the extra bed, unable to sleep. Dinner with Iain, Kenneth and Beth had been extremely awkward despite the little girl's innocent chatter and Kenneth's overt attempts to lighten the mood. Once the two of them left for the night, she and Iain spoke not a single word to each other.

She did want to talk to him. She wanted to tell him everything, to show him the message inside her locket, to know that he wouldn't let the wolf get her. The pair of eyes on the note still tormented her and it was even worse to know that the note was still in her locket, touching her skin.

The moment when he had caught her naked also kept her awake. She couldn't stop replaying it in her mind—the strained silence between them, the unmistakable swell under his tunic and then his abrupt exit. For a split second, she had thought that he would come to her—that he would take her—and he had even taken a step toward her. Why hadn't he done what he obviously wanted to do? Why had he left without saying anything? Although his delicious groan did seem to say something.

His short temper had already snapped once that day and she hadn't wanted to risk upsetting him again, so she didn't ask such questions. She wasn't even sure if she really wanted the answers anyway.

Her mind turned it all over again and again. The hours slowly slipped away, marked only by the slow shrinking of the fire as it ran out of fuel. She listened to it crackle and could hear Iain's quiet, deep breaths as he slept. She wished she could be lying next to him, resting in the curve of his body and in the safety of his arms instead of lying alone. For a few brief moments of sweet distraction though, she imagined rising from her bed, walking to Iain's and stretching out over his long, wide body. She imagined those thick arms clamping around her and rolling her beneath him...

The fire popped. Iain exhaled. A dog began barking.

She softly gasped, realizing that it was one of Puck's younger sisters, a high-spirited merle. She had a higher voice and the other sister howled more than barked. It was only a couple of seconds before the other two dogs started up.

The wolf.

She sprang out of her bed and ran to the other one. "Iain! Wake up!" she yelled. Shaking him, she shrieked when he suddenly grabbed her arms and tossed her away from him. She stumbled back, managing to catch herself against the side of the empty tub. Iain was on his feet, knees bent and hands out before she could even regain her footing.

"Iain, the MacGregors." He eventually realized who she was and what was happening. He cursed violently and ran to the door, where he grabbed his sword from the wall.

Emma was horrified to see him handle the deadly weapon, to watch him rip off the sheath and toss it to the ground. "Stay here," he ordered. All the breath left her lungs at the sound of his voice. He had never sounded so serious. "Bar this door behind me." The bar was up and the door open in no time. He ran out of the house.

"Iain!" she screamed. Despite her better judgment, she ran to the entrance, intending to ignore his command and follow him but the instant she looked outside, she wanted to slam the door shut, run to the bed and pull the blanket over her head.

In her old life, there was always light—traffic signals, streetlamps, porch lights, headlamps...but not here. She had not yet been outside past sunset or before sunrise, not in this place. She hadn't even realized it until now.

The night was pitch-black and the darkness seemed to press against the house almost like deep ocean waters against the hull of a submarine. According to one of Aili's rambling outbursts, the moon was waning and on top of that, thick clouds had rolled over at midday, so no starlight or moonlight could penetrate. Only the fading fire cast any illumination on the ground just in front of the door.

Iain had gone out into that darkness with only a sword. All three dogs were going nuts and she could hear shouting, though she didn't know who was doing the shouting. The snarls of a dog attacking someone rang loudly across the glen. Then a man's scream. Emma began to panic, worried that someone was hurting Iain, was killing him. She wanted to go to him, to help him but to blindly run into that darkness, to leave the only light she had, the only familiar thing she had...

Clenching her hands and taking a deep breath, she dashed out of the house, trying to keep her mind on helping Iain. Her lungs heaved for air as her heart raced with adrenaline but she didn't stop. The ground beneath her bare feet was cold. Muddy. The sheep were crying. Two dogs were still barking. Puck's merle sister was eerily silent.

In the distance, the flame of a single torch emerged from behind the barn. Emma skidded to a stop. The person carrying the flame wasn't Kenneth and certainly not Iain, so it had to be a MacGregor. Why would they bring a blazing bull's-eye to steal cattle? It was like begging to be caught.

She had an immediate answer when the man touched the flame to the roof of the barn. Iain and Kenneth's barn. She didn't know where it had come from but incredulous anger flared inside her. Stealing was one thing but this... It wasn't something driven by desperation. It was reckless cruelty.

Turning around, she ran back to the house, still able to see the rectangle of light cast by the hearth. Once inside, she grabbed the two buckets she normally used for bathwater and then darted back outside, running full tilt toward the river. She could waste no time. The barn's thatch roof was wet from the damp afternoon but who knew if that would slow down the fire at all.

After filling up the buckets, she ran toward the barn, the heavy double load slowing her down a little. It was easy to find her way there this time because a portion of the roof had caught fire and she followed it like a beacon. The torch was now lying on the ground nearby and the man who had wielded it was nowhere to be seen, though that wasn't exactly a comforting thought.

She could hear Kenneth shouting about the fire but she couldn't see Iain. A few scared sheep were running free and the dogs were still frantically barking at the intruders. Another man yelled, followed by another scream.

It was pandemonium. About nine square feet of the barn's roof had caught fire near the edge. She had only two buckets of water, so once she was standing close enough to feel the heat of the flames, she set one bucket down and held the other bucket in both hands. Aiming carefully, she tossed the first bucket of water, dousing most of the fire. Crying out with relief, she grabbed the second bucket and made quick work of putting out the flames with half of the remaining water. She then picked up the torch.

"Get out of here!" a man yelled. She couldn't tell from where the voice had come. Another man shouted but his exact words were lost in the chaos.

"Iain!" Kenneth shouted. "Where are ye?" Emma held the torch high, barely able to see Kenneth about fifty feet away. The man was standing over someone's body with his own sword in hand. She grasped at her throat, wondering if the thief was dead.

"Here!" Iain called. Emma breathed a sigh of relief, her eyes searching the darkness beyond Kenneth, who stood on the path outside the paddock that sat between the barn and his home. She didn't spot Iain until he had nearly reached the redhead.

"This one is still alive," Kenneth said grimly, nudging the man lying on the ground with his bare foot. Knowing that the man wasn't dead made it far easier for Emma to breathe.

"My pommel met with the back of his head," Iain explained. "The other one wasna so lucky." Iain had killed one of them? Just like that? "Two more escaped. Did ye see any more?"

"No," Kenneth said. "I heard no more than four."

Both men looked in her direction at the same time. She jumped and grasped at her locket. Iain stalked toward her, still gripping his sword. She stepped back, inadvertently kicking the empty bucket.

"I just wanted to help," she said. Iain ripped the torch out of her hand and then lowered it to see into the bucket half-full of water. He dropped it inside, dousing the flame and plunging them all into darkness. Unable to see, she was surprised when he reached out one steely arm and hauled her against his chest.

"I told ye to stay inside," he whispered, hugging her close. "Why are ye here?"

She wrapped her arms around him, holding on as tightly as she could. "I was too worried. Are you all right?" He pressed his lips against the top of her head.

"Aye, lass, I'm all right," he said.

"I'll run and fetch a man-at-arms, Iain," Kenneth called, walking up to them. "Once we have someone to keep watch, we'll go to the constable with this." Iain released her but she couldn't help stroking his arm as he stepped away from her. "Emma, ye dinna mind watching Beth, do ye?"

"Of course not," she said. "I'll go get her —"

"I'll bring her. She was frightened when I left and 'tis a verra dark night." She felt Iain step closer. Her eyes were slowly adjusting to the faint light penetrating the thick cloud cover and she could just barely make out Kenneth's features.

"I understand," she said. She thought she saw him smile.

"And thank ye for saving the barn," he said. Yes, definitely smiling. Iain gripped her shoulder and squeezed gently. She didn't know what to say, so she nodded, hoping that they saw it. "I'll bring Beth and then be back with a man, Iain."

Iain slid his hand to the small of her back. "Let's go home."

* * * * *

An hour later, Iain and Kenneth set off for the village. The unconscious thief was slung over Kenneth's shoulder, hands bound behind his back. Iain had the honor of carrying the dead one, who was considerably heavier. Though they were on their way to speak to the laird, a man Iain had spoken to only a few times, Iain could only think about who he was walking away from. Emma and Beth were safe inside his home and guarded over by two men but leaving them alone still made him uneasy.

When he and Emma had returned to the house, he saw in the light of the fire that she had run outside without her shoes and was surprised by how he felt to see mud on her feet. It had seemed wrong. She had also been shaking and the bottom of her smock was also splashed with mud and wet up to her knees.

Insisting that she sit by the fire, he replenished both buckets and set one to be heated. He then fetched his mother's best smock from a trunk in the shed where he had stored her things.

"I can't take this, Iain. I already have something to wear." She held out the folded smock in refusal. Kneeling in front of her, he lifted her hem and showed her the mud on it. Of its own accord, his other hand wrapped around one of her delicate ankles.

"I promised ye something to wear when ye wash this set of clothes. Ye wouldna wear a muddy smock with my sister's dress, would ye?"

Her eyes flicked to the mud-splashed skirt in his fist and then returned to his face, silently watching him as his thumb caressed the inside of her ankle. She slowly brought the smock against her chest.

Kenneth then arrived with a sobbing Beth, who clung desperately to his neck, not wanting to part with her father anytime soon. However, if they were to deliver the surviving thief and help the constable's men-at-arms hunt down the local pack of MacGregors, it had to be done quickly before the main group could pick up and move.

Once Kenneth had secured their captive and had returned to the croft with men-at-arms, they had taken time only to shepherd the loose animals back into the barn.

"An ungodly hour to be visiting the laird," Kenneth observed.

"I dinna think he'll be unhappy to see us." Iain adjusted his hold on the dead body, trying to keep the strain on his shoulder to a minimum. "Let's hope the live one comes around soon though."

"Did ye hit him too hard?"

Iain sighed with annoyance. "I wasna thinking about how hard to hit him."

"Ye probably hit him too hard," Kenneth mumbled.

"Quit yer nagging, ye woman. All ye did was run around waving yer sword."

The redhead chuckled. "True, true. 'Tis hard to kill any thieves when ye canna see yer hand in front of yer face. Ye truly have the eyes of a stag."

"I've no such thing. Just good ears."

They were only a few steps out of the forest when one of the patrols caught sight of them. The young man-at-arms loudly alerted the other night guards, waving his torch. Iain ground his teeth together.

"The fool is announcing it to everyone," Kenneth said. The man's shouts woke up several villagers who emerged from their homes to see what all the noise was about. When they passed by Aili's home, Iain was glad to see the old woman shuffling toward them, gripping a lamp in one hand and holding a shawl around her thin shoulders with the other. She even seemed relatively lucid.

"Aili, go out to the croft and stay with Emma and Beth," he said in a low voice once she was close enough.

"What has happened, Iain?" she asked, her cloudy eyes searching the darkness as she lifted the lamp higher. She gasped when she recognized what Iain was carrying over his shoulder.

"MacGregors." The old woman dropped the ends of her shawl and covered her mouth with fingers. "They're scared, Aili." Wordlessly nodding, she turned back to her home. Iain breathed a little easier to know that Aili would be with the girls.

As they neared the castle's gatehouse, one of the men-at-arms took the dead thief off Iain's hands. They were then led into the castle's empty great hall and surrounded by half a dozen men, the constable's best soldiers and the laird's personal *leuchd-crios*, there to keep an eye on the prisoner dangling between Kenneth and Iain. Everyone waited in silence while the laird was roused by one of the servants.

Iain watched as another servant went around and lit extra candles and torches. The great hall was roughly the same dimensions as his home but much more richly appointed. The laird's table sat on a dais at the back and a door to the right of it led to the laird's private rooms. Two long tables sat perpendicular to the laird's table, both empty save for a row of candles. He had been inside the great hall before but not for a

long while. The last time had been to officially take over his father's croft, which had been under his uncle's guardianship.

Iain looked down at the man on his knees next to him, a boy barely into adulthood. He had a wiry frame, one that could grow taller still. Blood had dripped down his neck from the cut on the back of his head where Iain had hit him. He had gone after the boy when he had seen his barn roof catching fire. The boy dropped the torch and attempted to feint around him but he had hadn't been prepared for the pommel that struck the back of his head.

The laird's deep, loud voice resounded from behind the door before it opened. "How many? Damn it, ye didna ask?" The door to the private hall banged open and Laird Archibald marched through, followed by a meek-looking male servant, and tying a fur-trimmed coat around his neck. Though the laird was as thick as an oak, he was a man of short stature and he didn't step down from the dais to stand level with everyone else.

"Iain, is it? And Kenneth?" The man's voice echoed inside the great hall. "Where's my constable?"

The larger door behind them opened and the laird's constable, James, strode into the great hall with another man-at-arms. "I'm sorry to be late, laird. One of my men woke up half the village with all his crying about the MacGregors," he said. Iain nodded at the constable, who nodded back.

"Is this one of them then?" the laird asked.

Iain looked to Kenneth, more comfortable with the redhead talking for both of them. "Aye, laird. We counted four. Iain killed another and the last two fled."

"Did ye lose any livestock?"

"Only one of the dogs, laird. The thieves tried to burn the byre roof but it was put out before it could spread."

The laird looked off to the side for a couple of seconds, thinking. The boy's arm flexed in Iain's grip a second before he groaned. The MacGregor then tiredly lifted his head. "James, this one will be ready to talk soon," the laird said. The constable gestured to a couple of his men, who took the boy from Iain and Kenneth and dragged him away.

"I'll take care of it," the constable said as he and the rest of his men followed him out. Only the laird, his servant, Iain and Kenneth remained, though the servant stood back by the private door.

"Ye've done well," the laird nodded. "I'll see to it that ye get the reward I promised. Hopefully, this will solve the MacGregor problem—for a while at least."

"Thank ye, laird," Kenneth said. Iain echoed the sentiment.

The laird sucked on the inside of one of his cheeks, his eyes settling on Iain. "However, there's something else we need to discuss." Iain inhaled deeply, knowing

already what the laird wanted to talk about—or rather, who. “Is it true that a young woman has come to stay with ye, Iain?”

“Aye, laird.”

“And my son has met this young woman?” Iain nodded at the laird’s question. “Her name wouldna be Emma, would it?”

“It would, laird.”

The laird smiled. “Colin talks about her. Says she’s magic and I’ve heard rumors that she’s one of the good folk. A fairy,” he whispered. “Is that true as well?”

Iain hadn’t wanted it to come to this. He knew the laird was a superstitious man but he could neither pretend to believe that Emma was some kind of creature from a fable, nor could he lie to the laird like he had to Rossalyn.

“It is true, laird,” Kenneth said. Iain shot a glance at the redhead. “Her-her manner and speech and appearance—they are more than foreign. It is difficult to describe, laird, but the first time I saw her, I couldna believe my eyes and in the days since she came to us, she has transformed into a normal woman. She does still speak with an accent, one I’ve never heard before, and she uses strange words.”

Now that Kenneth had said it, Iain couldn’t refute it so easily, especially when the laird was nodding with fascination.

“When did she arrive?” he asked.

“The morning Finian and Duncan’s kine were stolen.”

The laird looked to Iain. “Tell me of yer time with her. Do ye suspect her to be other than what she seems?”

Iain opened his mouth to answer, only to realize that he had no reason to think she was anything but a fairy. She knew next to nothing of their culture and their history. She did speak with an accent he couldn’t place and had indeed transformed into a human woman. Even her possessions were strange and her experiences and knowledge were beyond his. She had not told him about her past but she also hadn’t denied the common belief that she was one of the good people.

“No, laird, I dinna,” he finally admitted with some surprise.

“A good omen,” the laird insisted. “She will bring us luck. After all the trouble with the MacDougalls and the MacGregors and then that God-forsaken sickness, the foul death of the English...”

“And she was the one who put out the fire on the byre roof,” Kenneth eagerly added. The laird’s eyebrows shot up.

Suddenly, it became clear to Iain what his friend was doing. He was taking advantage of the laird’s superstitious nature, reassuring him that Emma was not a MacGregor or kin to some other rival clan. He was ensuring her safety.

“Her presence is just what we need,” the laird said, slapping his thigh and smiling. “She is at the croft? I will meet her and welcome her to the clan myself.”

“Aye, laird,” Iain said.

"What of the fairy rumor, laird?" Kenneth cut in.

"The rumors about her canna spread to other clans. The good folk are powerful. Their knowledge is vast and they can do things we canna. Others would want some fairy luck on their side." The bottom of Iain's stomach dropped out. "Bring her into the village so that she may be seen as a normal woman and introduce her as such. Otherwise, the rumors will only grow worse."

"Laird, I dinna believe that would be wise—" Kenneth tried to say.

"It will be enough. For now, we can only worry about the present thorn in our sides, the MacGregors. I'm glad to see that yer sword isna rusty, Iain."

"My sword will always serve ye, laird," he vowed. He gripped the hilt of the sword at his side and stood straighter.

"I know ye would go but I would charge ye to protect the lass in yer home." Iain fought not to let his disappointment show, having been eager to join the war party. "She canna be left defenseless for anyone to take her from us."

Iain's fist clamped hard around the hilt of his sword. It bothered him to hear the laird speak of Emma as a possession or a lucky charm, as though she belonged to him. Iain and his entire family did belong to the laird but Emma... She wasn't a Campbell. She didn't belong to Archibald or the MacGregors or anyone else.

She was his!

Chapter Ten

Gratefully taking a seat across from Aili after kneading a new batch of dough, Emma rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand and pulled her kerchief off her face with the other. She hadn't yet slept and felt as though a heavy weight hung from her neck. It took all her concentration to keep her eyes open and her head up.

Beth had cried for half an hour after her father left with Iain and just like her mother had done for her, Emma sang *Blackbird* to calm Beth down. Even then, it wasn't until an entire Beatles album a couple of hours later that the little girl finally fell asleep. Aili arrived at the croft a short while before dawn. Now midmorning, the men-at-arms were patrolling the area and Beth was sleeping soundly on the extra bed. Emma was tempted to go take a nap as well.

"Ye dinna seem well, child," Aili said, "and 'tis more than the long night." Emma sighed to hear that someone clinically blind could still see her real anxieties. "Ye dinna have to tell me why but know that ye were meant to be here. Ye've brought us good fortune."

"How's that? We were just attacked by cattle thieves," she pointed out, wiping her flour dusted hands on her apron.

"But they didna succeed. Ye snuffed the fire on the barn roof. Iain and Kenneth brought the laird two thieves, one still alive." Emma winced, thinking of the man Iain had killed. Thomas had stopped by earlier to fill them in, telling them that one of the dogs had indeed been killed by a MacGregor. Next to the thief's death, though, it was strange to feel grief for the dog. She honestly didn't know what to feel anymore.

"The laird knows about me, doesn't he," she said as a statement. After all, how could anything stay quiet for very long in this place?

"And I'm sure he'll ask Iain and Kenneth about ye," the old woman said.

"He wouldn't kick me out or anything, would he?"

"Now dinna fret about that. The laird's a good man and he'd never hit or kick a woman."

Emma almost corrected Aili's mistake but decided to let it go. "But what will the laird do? Should I swear fealty or something?"

The old woman cackled loudly, revealing the number of teeth she had lost. "I suppose it'll depend on what Iain says and on the laird's mood."

Oh great, she thought. Emma folded her arms and put her head down in defeat too tired and too worried to keep a straight spine.

"Besides, it isna the laird ye should worry about," Aili said.

Cold fingertips skittered down the back of Emma's neck and she lifted her head. "What did you say?"

Sudden footsteps brought Thomas to the door, breathless and smiling. "They're back! With a whole cart!"

"What?" Emma got to her feet. Thomas could hardly contain himself and took off running toward the road. Stepping outside, she saw Kenneth fielding questions from a smiling Malcolm as the redhead led a horse-drawn cart. Iain walked behind, his sword sitting against his hip. When he raised his hand, Emma somehow knew that he was waving to her. She waved back.

"Seems the laird was in a verra good mood," Aili said, coming up behind her. Emma looked askance at the old woman. "The horse, cart and everything inside are gifts to Iain and Kenneth for bringing in the thieves. Far less costly than a sop."

"But there are many more of them, aren't there? Won't they just keep coming?"

"Dinna forget that one of the thieves is alive and has a tongue. They'll learn where the rest of the nearby MacGregors are camped."

"You mean they're going to kill them," she said, swallowing hard and pressing her hand against the cold lump in her stomach. It was chilling to hear that the laird planned to kill another group of people. They weren't foreign terrorists or a violent cartel. They were the laird's own countrymen.

"'Tis more complicated than ye think, dear. The MacGregors would otherwise demand a high bribe and we'd all have to pay it. If the year's harvest is poor, we could starve at wintertime." Emma looked back at the approaching cart. Kenneth was smiling and talking with Thomas and Malcolm. Iain, though not smiling, looked quite relaxed. They were happy to have caught the thief.

The mix of emotions tumbling inside her heart made her entire chest ache. She hoped that most of it was simple exhaustion.

"We're going to celebrate tonight," Kenneth said once their caravan arrived. "The sheep are shorn, the MacGregors are thwarted and the laird's finest ale awaits us!" Malcolm and Thomas cheered.

"Dada?" Beth called, eyes blinking sleepily as she emerged from the house.

Kenneth held out his arms and his daughter ran to him. Thomas and Malcolm began to unload the cart. Iain, though, walked straight toward her, his stride confident, the heel of one hand resting on the hilt of his sword. She took a deep breath and her cheeks warmed from the memory of being held by him in the inky darkness, of the kiss he had pressed to the top of her head.

Iain reached out, gently taking her chin in his hand. "Ye look tired," he observed, brushing his thumb across her cheek.

The feeling behind the gesture was unmistakable and she knew that her red cheeks were betraying her. She felt so awkward, much more so than any other time she had flirted with a man. She wasn't even sure if "flirt" was the right word. Flirting was for

carefree singles mingling in a bar. With Iain, it was something more serious and far more powerful. As her fingers impulsively brushed the back of his hand, she thought her heart was going to explode.

"Did ye sleep at all last night?" he asked in a quiet tone.

"I couldn't," she admitted, knowing that she couldn't lie to him. "And then the MacGregors came."

"Ye can rest easy tonight." His fingers slid to the back of her neck as if he would pull her close and kiss her. His hand inadvertently brushed the clasp of her necklace. She tensed and began to pull his hand away but he seemed to notice her uneasiness and abruptly stepped back. He looked confused.

"Wasna I brave?" Kenneth asked his daughter with a smile.

Beth pressed a loud kiss to his cheek. "Dada is the bravest man ever!" Her giggle floated in the air as Iain turned his back to Emma and walked away.

Emma struggled for words, for something to say to explain herself, for something that would take away the confusion and pain she had seen in his eyes. Nothing came.

Iain climbed up to the bed of the cart and laid a large sealed barrel onto its side. He then rolled it to the edge of the cart, where Thomas and Malcolm waited to grab both ends and carry the heavy load into the house. One barrel alone looked like enough ale to last for at least a couple of weeks.

"Half for Iain's house and half for mine," Kenneth explained, gesturing at a second large barrel on the cart. "But I eat most meals over here, so they'll both go inside. The laird gifted us with a few fur pelts for winter, some foodstuffs, such as fruit to satisfy Iain's sweet tooth—" He grinned, briefly looking back at Iain's disgruntled expression as the man laid the second barrel on its side. "And even a new dress for my little lamb." Emma and Aili stepped aside to make way for the farmhands as they carried the first barrel of ale into the house.

"I get a new dress?" Beth asked. Kenneth nodded.

"And me?" Emma finally brought herself to ask. "Did the laird ask about me?" Kenneth's expression sobered then and Emma thought she might have a heart attack. "H-he isn't angry, is he? He won't burn me at the stake or something, right?"

"Let's hope it dinna come to that," he said quietly.

"Y-you can't be serious!" she gasped.

"Kenneth!" Iain barked. "That isna something to tease her about." Thomas and Malcolm ran back outside to get the second barrel of ale. "The laird has no ill intent toward ye," he said to Emma. "Ye have no need to worry."

Her mouth dropped open. Kenneth had the common sense to look contrite. "I'm sorry, Emma. Ye just looked so distraught."

"Sorry, indeed!" Aili chastened, jabbing the ground with her cane for emphasis. "Ye're teaching yer daughter some very cruel behavior." Overwhelmed with relief,

Emma closed her eyes as the old woman continued scolding Kenneth. He laughingly apologized to Aili, who paid his suave charm no attention. "Ye should be ashamed!"

When she opened her eyes again, Iain was approaching her with a wrapped bundle in his broad hands. "The laird was rather pleased to hear of ye." He then lowered his voice. "He's a man who...believes in such things." Iain held out the bundle. "This dress is a gift from his household to ye. It has never been worn, something ye can call yer own."

Wide-eyed and struck once again by the generosity of the people around her, Emma accepted the dress. The laird hadn't even met her yet but he was giving her a gift.

"The four of us," Iain said, gesturing in Kenneth and the farmhands' general direction, "will be delivering the sheared wool to the steward. Today is a good day for ye to go to the village."

Clutching the dress to her chest, Emma couldn't shake her head fast enough. "I can't." She took a step back from him. "I'm not ready."

Iain stepped toward her and took hold of her elbow. "Everyone is in good spirits today. They'll be happy to meet ye."

After meeting Rossalyn though, Emma wasn't so sure that the curvy blonde hadn't spread terrible lies about her.

She tugged against Iain's hold on her elbow. "But I'm not one of you. I don't know how to act in public. I don't even sound Scottish!"

"Ye're part of the Campbells now. The laird wishes to welcome ye into the clan," Iain said. The news made Beth cheer. Emma looked over at the little girl and her smiling father. Iain stepped even closer, wrapping his other hand around her upper arm. "We willna put ye on display and demand a performance. Ye'll simply come with us to the steward and back. Whoever we meet along the way will be a good start."

"Can I come, Dada?" Beth asked.

Kenneth ruffled the girl's hair. "Of course, sweeting."

"Dinna worry yerself, child," Aili said. "Most of them are good people. Just stay away from my bastard neighbors and that Rossalyn. I'll stay here to prepare supper."

Iain sighed, shooting a wry look toward the old woman. "Ye are nae helping."

Aili bristled at his comment. "How am I nae helping? I wash yer clothing. I cook yer food. I am good company."

"Good at giving me headaches," Iain grumbled.

Aili came close enough to jab Iain's side with the head of her cane. "What was that?" Emma felt his hands flex around her arms a second before he let her go. He frowned at Aili, rubbing his sore side. He then looked back at Emma.

"Once the wool is loaded, we'll come for ye. Make yerself ready." With that, he turned away to lead the horse back down the path. Emma's shoulders drooped in defeat.

"Come on, lass! We need to get ye into that new dress," Aili said. The old woman curled an arm around Emma's waist and steered her into the house.

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As their small caravan crested the hill over which the path ran between the village and the glen, Emma followed closer and closer behind Iain. After pulling on the new yellow kirtle, she had brushed her hair and applied some lip balm, thinking that if she looked somewhat well groomed, it would help her confidence, but it didn't, so she found herself sticking close to Iain.

"Dinna step on his heels, Emma," Kenneth teased. He and his daughter both sat astride the mare pulling the cart. The horse snorted, eliciting an excited squeal from Beth.

Iain glanced over his shoulder and caught her cowering behind him. Before she could retreat, he reached back and grabbed her wrist.

"Come now, where's the backbone I saw last night?" he asked as he pulled her to walk beside him. He released her wrist only to clasp her hand in his. "They'll be curious—that's a certainty—but no one will harm ye."

She looked down at their joined hands and saw how completely his hand engulfed hers. Strangely, the sight made her feel better. His thumb stroked the back of her fingers.

"If only I'd been there," Thomas bemoaned. "I'd ha' caught the other MacGregors!" Emma glanced back at the two boys walking a distance behind the cart.

Malcolm playfully shoved Thomas. "Ye'd have wet yerself and cried for yer mother!" Thomas shoved back but Malcolm easily put the younger boy in a headlock.

"'Tis just as well that neither of ye were there," Kenneth said. "Ye'd only have been confused for more sheep running about in terror."

Iain squeezed her fingers. "Stand straight and nod to those looking at ye," he said as Kenneth and the farmhands continued teasing each other. "We'll pass near to where Rachel sells her breads and ale. Ye'll enjoy meeting her. She's verra kind." Emma was surprised to hear Iain speak so warmly of someone.

"I've heard her name several times," she said as she straightened her posture. "Is she married?"

"Widowed last summer but she has a very young son. He is not yet a year."

"Oh." She could guess how the husband had died. "You've known her for a long time?"

"She and my sister were close ever since they were bairns. She is like a second sister to me." Ah, that explained it. "And she has loved Kenneth for many years," he whispered. Emma gasped, briefly glancing back at Kenneth, who was disentangling his daughter's fingers from the horse's mane.

"Her husband?" Emma whispered back.

"I dinna believe she mourned his death for long," Iain said. "He wasna the best of men."

"Why didn't she tell Kenneth her feelings?"

"Because he loved her dearest friend." He released her hand when the village came into view. "I tell ye now so that ye willna be surprised when we speak to her. She isna very subtle." Iain then gave an angry sort of snort. "And he calls me unfeeling."

Beth cheered upon seeing the break in the trees and the village beyond, which looked much the same as when Emma had passed it over a week ago. Many men and women were out and about on errands. She could hear the clangs of a blacksmith's shop. Smoke rose from the many thatched roofs. In the distance on the shore of the loch, she saw quite a lot of men constructing what looked to be a large boat.

"They're well along with the galley," Kenneth noted.

"Aye, they are," Iain agreed. In an irrational corner of her mind, Emma somehow expected all the villagers to drop what they were doing and rush her, either gasping with shock or crying out with rage while carrying torches and an arsenal of sharp rocks. No one looked in their direction, though at least not until they crossed the small stone bridge that straddled the river.

Two middle-aged women were standing in front of a home close to the bridge and were talking to each other. One noticed her and pointed her out to the other woman, who wheeled around as if hoping to catch sight of a unicorn. They stared at her, mouths ajar, but didn't run into the house or pick up the nearest rock. Emma did as Iain suggested and nodded at them, even smiled a little. They looked appalled.

Maybe not a unicorn – maybe "leper" was the right word.

They passed by more homes – a couple of which looked empty – and nearby people either waved at Iain and Kenneth or generally ignored their party. As they approached a more crowded area of the village, Emma noticed a grouping of stands where people were selling various goods, such as vegetables and even live poultry. The odor of unwashed bodies grew stronger and Emma tried subtly to breathe through her mouth.

Looking around, she noticed half a dozen people staring at her from the tiny market ahead and those half dozen were poking others to get them to stare at her too. How was she supposed to nod and smile at all of them without looking like she had some nervous tic? She grasped for Iain's hand and he closed his fingers around hers.

"Can we go see Rachel?" Beth asked.

"An excellent plan," Kenneth said, stopping the horse and easily dismounting. He plucked his daughter from the mare's back. Iain tugged Emma forward and they followed Kenneth and Beth into the crowd of people. Emma did her best to make eye contact with a few of the gawkers and acknowledge them.

"Iain, I heard what ye did this morning," a man called. "Come by and I'll give ye the best cut!" Emma looked over at the older, bearded man and saw immediately on the table in front of him what his profession was – butcher. She looked away, a little green in the face.

"Why only a cut?" Iain shouted back. "Have we nae earned the whole cow?" The older man guffawed loudly.

"Fine work, Kenneth, fine work," another man said. Emma looked ahead and saw Kenneth with a very old man. The man was so bent over that it was a wonder he could see anything but the ground. "Who's the young doe standing beside our Iain?"

"That's Emma, come from the eastern coast," Kenneth answered. Emma's eyebrows twitched. *Eastern coast?* The old man nodded slowly as though the reply was both illuminating and confusing.

"Oh Kenneth!" a woman called. "I'm so happy to see ye! Are ye hungry? I've just finished some pies." Kenneth continued on before they could catch up to him. Emma stood on tiptoe to see over others' heads and get a glimpse of what could only be Rachel. Brown hair and a blue sleeve.

Iain led her past the unabashed gawkers and they arrived at a food stand covered with breads, cheeses, pies, bowls of ingredients and a couple of open ale barrels. Beth sat on the edge of the stand, eating a small meat pie with obvious bliss.

Rachel was all smiles, a woman as cheerful as Iain was grumpy. Her teeth were rather large and her skin a little blemished but even though her looks were nothing like Rossalyn's, she was very beautiful. Emma could even say that the woman glowed.

"Here, try this. 'Tis my new recipe," she said, holding out a large hunk of pie for Kenneth. She was all too happy to feed it to him.

Kenneth chewed with relish, his eyes smiling. "Delicious." Rachel clapped with delight and cut out another sample for him.

While the redhead chewed, Iain caught the brunette's attention. "If anyone should be given free food, it should be me."

"Iain! I was wondering when ye'd...come by," she said, her words faltering when she noticed Emma. She looked at Iain expectantly.

"This is Emma, come from upcountry," Iain said. *Upcountry? What happened to the eastern coast?* "Emma, this is Rachel."

"Aye, I had heard that a—that someone had come to stay with ye," Rachel said. She stared at Emma's locket for a long couple of seconds.

"She's bonny," Beth said from around a mouthful of food.

Her father chuckled. "My little lamb is verra taken with Emma. We all are." Kenneth slid a coy smile in Iain's direction and his meaning was not lost on Emma as Iain's fingers squeezed hers again in the pregnant pause that followed.

However, his meaning was definitely lost on Rachel, who glanced between Kenneth and Emma as though fate had just stabbed her in the back. Emma scrambled for something to say or do to correct the misunderstanding. Nothing that came to mind seemed at all tactful.

"Ah, Emma should try one of yer breads." Iain stepped back and pulled Emma in front of him. Her heart leapt when he pressed his chest to her back.

"I'd be happy to gift ye a loaf," Rachel said coolly.

"Hey, ye never give us food for nowt," Thomas complained as he and Malcolm walked up. Emma felt Iain turn—he was standing that close.

"Ye didna stay with the cart?" he asked. She could hear his temper flaring up.

"We're in the village," Malcolm said.

"Aye and wool is expensive. Ye'll go back and stand by the cart until it gets to the steward."

"But we're hungry and standing in the middle of the market," Thomas said.

"Why dinna we make the delivery now?" Kenneth suggested. "We'll be back to fetch Emma by the time she's chosen the loaf she likes best."

"Ye'll be all right?" Iain asked her in a low voice. She nodded, a little flushed. "Then we'll be by again shortly."

Kenneth scooped up his daughter, whose cheeks were stuffed with the last of her pie. "Give Rachel yer thanks, sweeting."

"Fank yew!" Beth said as she waved. The men and farmhands wandered off toward the cart even as the boys made a show of rubbing their stomachs and complaining of bellyaches.

"I hope to see ye again soon!" Rachel called. Emma furtively glanced around at the many people staring in her direction. It was truly unsettling, especially when she saw how many of them were gesturing at their own necks while speaking to others. They were curious about her locket.

Doing her best to arrange her hair to bring less attention to it, she turned to Rachel, who regarded her with tight lips.

"Which would ye like to try first?" the brunette asked, sweeping her hand over the many loaves of bread arranged on the table.

"There's nothing between Kenneth and me," Emma confided. "He didn't mean what he said the way you thought he did."

Rachel twitched as though little thorns were poking her sides. "I dinna have any idea what ye're talking about. Why would ye think I care about that?" Emma's eyebrows went up. *Wow, she really was transparent.*

"That is...what did he mean?" Rachel asked, her eyes looking at her askance. Emma would've smiled at the other woman's question but the answer was complicated—really complicated. It was Emma's turn to fidget.

"Well, I kind of hope...that is, I would like to think that Kenneth was talking about Iain." Rachel's eyebrows shot up. "It's just that I really admire Iain and, you know, it's difficult sometimes to tell what he's thinking. He's very h-honorable and I never realized how rare that is. I mean, he's my knight in shining armor but not the kind from stories—the real kind. Then again, we don't get along all the time, so...I could be wrong..." Emma trailed off, unable to think of something to say that would make her seem even dumber.

Rachel's expression had softened considerably, her smile just a little sad. They stood there for a few seconds without saying a word. Emma's ears caught the words "good folk" from someone standing nearby.

The brunette then reached for a loaf of light-colored bread. "I think ye might like this one but hide it from Iain. It's his favorite."

The comment was inexplicably hilarious and Emma laughed.

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Dinner that evening was louder than usual. Emma might have thought that it was due to their victory against the MacGregors but she decided to blame the abundance of ale. Iain was still rather subdued, considering how much he had already imbibed, but Kenneth and the farmhands were roaring with laughter every other second. Aili's high-pitched cackles and Beth's giggles added to the din.

Emma had to admit, though, that their laughter was infectious. Kenneth's litany of jokes and quick wit had her smiling if not chuckling along with everyone else. He sometimes reminded her of her brother.

"When he sees that Iain's asleep, Father Patrick jabs him and gives him as evil an eye as a holy man can." Kenneth made a comical imitation of the minister's angry face. "He says, 'Ye dinna want to go to hell, do ye, Iain?'" The redhead then imitated a low, rough voice. "And Iain says, 'Father, I'm already there.'" Renewed laughter burst from the farmhands. Thomas even had to wipe away a bit of ale that dribbled from his mouth.

"I dinna sound like that," Iain complained. Unfortunately, a small smile quickly undermined his mock anger. He had apparently enjoyed terrorizing Father Patrick. His comment only made the rest of the men laugh harder though, for Kenneth's impression had been pretty close to the real thing. Kenneth's face was red from laughter.

"Well, boys, the burden is ready to sleep in her own bed." Aili braced her hands on the table and pushed herself up to her feet.

"But Aili, we have nae even started the real drinking yet," Kenneth bemoaned. The smile fell from Emma's face. More drinking? "I think I may win this time!"

"Ye never win, lad," Aili said, shaking her finger at him. "I dinna want to see what may happen if ye ever drank more than Iain. Ye might float home on a river of ale." Thomas and Malcolm sniggered into their cups, both of them already three sheets to the wind but neither of them old enough to even shave.

"It amuses me to see ye try though," Iain goaded as he finished off his fifth cup of ale. Kenneth gulped down the rest of his fourth cup in retaliation.

Emma wanted to say something but she had never seen Iain so relaxed and didn't want to ruin their evening. He was an adult. He knew his limit.

"'Tis a waste of good ale, I say," Aili said as she turned toward the door. She hobbled away, leaning heavily on her cane. "Not impressing her at all." The men at the

table didn't seem to hear the old woman. The farmhands were snickering over the rivalry between Iain and Kenneth, who were both refilling their cups from the open barrel. Emma bid Aili good night. The woman grunted in return, waving over her shoulder.

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With one hand fidgeting impatiently under the table, Iain glanced at Emma over the rim of his cup, his eyes devouring her. Her new dress was a little tighter and hugged the outline of her torso. His hands tingled as he imagined the dress against her skin, cupping her breasts and brushing against her legs. His fingers craved to touch her, to reaffirm that her skin was as smooth as he remembered. Opportunities to stroke that creamy flesh had been so few and far between. Even now, he could barely follow the stream of conversation, his mind filled with fantasies of her body writhing beneath his touch.

Ever since that moment in the pitch darkness after the attack, he had been looking forward to being alone with her again but it didn't seem that anyone else would be leaving soon. The boys were barely lucid but Kenneth was far too sober for Iain's liking. The only thing that took the edge off his frustration was the ale.

He took another large swallow.

Emma confused him and he both hated and loved it. Her stubborn silence on her past still made him anxious but when he looked at her, he saw nothing dishonest. She rather seemed anxious as well and he was completely fascinated. Fragile and alone, yet trying to fend for herself. Quiet and uncertain, yet hard-working and capable. Otherworldly at times but also familiar and natural, like she belonged. She surprised him every day and he had no doubt that more surprises were coming. He tipped back his cup of ale.

Her heart was just as much a mystery. He sometimes had hope that she felt the same as he did but too often he saw fear in her eyes or heard indifference in her words. After so many years with only a mother and sister to look after, Iain had thought he knew the secrets of a woman's heart but the last couple of weeks had taught him differently.

Finishing off his cup, he realized as his head went back that he was drunk. The room went awry and he had to grip the edge of the table to keep from falling off the bench. How many cups had he drunk? Seven? Eight? He hadn't been paying attention. Swallowing and leaning forward to set down his cup, he tried to focus his eyes again. Something Kenneth said set the boys to laughing again.

Looking across the table at Emma, he saw her eyes on him. With the fire behind him, it was easy to see the concern on her face...and the disapproval.

"I can hold my ale," he said, though not as clearly as he'd have liked. Malcolm and Thomas both guffawed, half lying on the table as if they would take a nap. "Pick yer

heads up, boys. This isna a bed." It was only a second or two after the words left his mouth that Iain realized how foolish he sounded.

"I think the girl's beauty has gone to yer head," Kenneth said. "Otherwise this is indeed some fine ale!" He cheered, raising his cup high. The farmhands joined in. They tried to tap their cups together but missed.

"I am nae drunk," Iain insisted.

"You are," Emma said in a hard, even voice, "and killing brain cells with that poison."

Brain what? "I'm fine, woman. Get me another." He held out his cup to her since she was a little closer to the barrel than he was. Who did she think he was? He was no child, clinging to his mother's skirt. He ran his own house and would do what he liked.

"Get it yourself, if you can." Emma got up, taking an empty plate with her. What was her problem? Just because she didn't drink ale didn't mean he couldn't enjoy drinking it. He had earned his rewards.

Kenneth unsteadily set his cup next to Iain's. "One for me as well." The boys had crossed their arms and laid them upon the table as pillows for their heads. "No sleeping! Wake up! Drink to our victory!"

"No victory yet," Malcolm mumbled, raising his head only a few seconds. Thomas looked up as well, his eyes barely open. "Aye, the war party ha' nae come back."

"We dinna know if they found the MacGregors," Iain said. He tried not to think of what might happen if the rival clan had already gone into hiding. Standing up, he fumbled for Kenneth's empty cup and, with no small amount of satisfaction, successfully made it to the ale barrel a couple of paces away.

After refilling the two cups, he turned back to the table. Emma stood on the far side and was whispering into Beth's ear. The child was listening closely and nodding her head. He slammed the cups back on the table, not caring that some of the ale sloshed out.

"Hey, careful!" Kenneth warned. Emma looked up at him, frowning.

"Dada, I'm tired," Beth said with a pout while tugging on her father's sleeve.

With his cup in hand, the redhead looked down at his daughter. "Are ye?" He glanced at the sleeping farmhands and then out the open door at the dark sky. "I suppose it is late. Ye're usually asleep by now." The man gulped down his last cup of ale. "Let's go home then."

"Boys, get out of my house." Iain didn't care how rude he sounded. Leaving his drink on the table, he walked behind the two farmhands and gripped their arms to haul them up.

"I feel sick," Thomas groaned. Malcolm managed to step over the bench but Thomas needed help. Beth was already walking hand-in-hand with her father to the door.

Emma was standing by the fire, her arms crossed. "Drink some water before you go to bed, Thomas. Sleep on your side, in case you throw up," she said. The younger boy nodded as he and Malcolm leaned on each other for support, both stumbling to the door.

"Say good night, sweeting," Kenneth said to his daughter. Beth waved as they left the house. The boys soon followed. Malcolm was trying to get Thomas to sing with him but the younger boy groaned petulantly in resistance.

"The same goes for you." Emma grabbed the water jug from the table, poured a cup and set it down next to a plate with a hunk of bread. "Eat that and drink the water."

"I can hold my ale," Iain maintained. Just to prove it, he picked up the cup he had just filled and downed it all. Quite satisfied by her livid glare, he was tempted to go refill his cup and gulp that down as well, just to see what she would do to stop him.

"You asshole." Iain blinked, astounded by her language. "Do you think that's supposed to impress me? Does it make you a man? It seems you have a problem knowing what makes a man and what doesn't."

For a couple of seconds, he could see only red, slapped in the face by her gelding insult. His body shook with anger to hear her questioning his manhood. "I do know what makes a man," he ground out. "Perhaps ye're the one who has a problem. We were all having a good time."

"You think you need ale to have fun? Poison is still poison. Everyone has a limit and very few are smart enough to stop when they reach it. I had thought you were a smart man. Maybe I was wrong."

"What is this hatred ye hold against drinking liquor? Ye treat it as though it were a sin." His vision suddenly became blurry and he had to blink to focus his eyes.

Something in Emma's expression seemed at a loss. "N-not a sin! Just stupid!" she yelled.

"S-stoo-ped?" he shouted back. *What the hell did that mean?*

"Yes, stupid! Did you think that drinking something until you can't walk right is good for your health? Drinking so much that you pass out? So-so much that you stop breathing?" Her voice broke and she abruptly sat down on the bench. "What kind of logic is that?" He noticed the slightest change in the tilt of her eyebrows and realized she was on the brink of tears.

Through the haze of anger and ale, a realization struck him. Punched him right across the face. "That's how yer brother died," he said. Emma dropped her head to hide her face behind the fall of her hair. Guilt overwhelmed him. His anger bled away, leaving his stomach in knots and his head aching.

Careful to watch his balance, he took a seat next to her, both of them now facing the fire. She was quiet for a long moment and he wondered if she didn't want to say anything more, didn't want to share this with him. Lifting his hand to touch her shoulder, he softly called her name. She recoiled from him, hugging herself.

Putting his hand back in his lap, he cursed under his breath. It was maddening how he couldn't do anything right when it came to her.

It seemed he couldn't have any part of her. It was like trying to look inside a house but there were no windows and the door was locked. He imagined himself knocking at the door, only to have no answer. He then imagined her sitting alone in the dark, listening to a stranger testing the lock and demanding entrance. It was a strange exercise but he wondered if there was another way to lure her out.

He took a steadying breath.

"Gwen appreciated the Church far more than I ever did. I didna have faith the way she did. She and—and some others helped Father James at the kirk when the sickness reached us. Kenneth forbade her from going but no one could ever tell Gwen to do aught." A fleeting smile tugged on a corner of his mouth. "When she first became sick, my mother tended her. She insisted that Kenneth and Beth stay here with me. Gwen started to get better but then my mother fell ill as well. I tried to help them—Kenneth and I both did—but mother wouldna let us. I begged but she didna let either of us stay longer than a few minutes. She didna want to give it to us."

He gripped his knees, knuckles white. "Then a man came through, selling some sort of potion that he said would cure the sickness. Smelled like bad ale to me but Kenneth and I were in such great need. We gave the bastard my father's sword, and his 'cure'? It only made them worse, made the last days of their lives more painful. If I'd had the courage, I would have ended their misery." He could still hear their moans of agony, both knowing that nothing could save them and both wishing for death. "But even in that, I failed."

Iain started when cool fingers touched the back of his hand. He looked at Emma, his vision blurry but blinking a few times cleared his sight. The tail of a single tear slowly sliding down her cheek glistened in the firelight. Had that imaginary door cracked open? He turned his hand over, lacing their fingers together.

"I worshiped Jack," she whispered. Iain tightened his fingers around her hand, his attention fixed upon her words as the door slowly began to open. "He was very popular. Tall, charming, talented. We had our own secret language. Just hearing him laugh made me smile, even if I hadn't heard the joke."

Her forlorn and lonely expression bespoke of many treasured memories but strangely, Iain felt a surge of jealousy. He had never had that kind of friendship, not even with Kenneth. Moreover, his greed for Emma was becoming irrepressible. He craved something deeper than any kind of friendship either of them had ever experienced. He wanted it so badly that impatience chewed at his insides, biting and clawing. The aggravating sensation pulled his mouth into a deep frown.

"The night he died," she went on, looking down at their tangle of fingers, "he was at a party with his friends. Most of them were seniors—I mean, older than him. One had an older brother who brought the beer. Jack was trying to impress them, I guess," she shrugged. "Probably thought that someone his size could handle it. When he

passed out, his friends thought they were taking care of him. They put him on a bed and left him, assuming he would just sleep it off." She looked up at him again with pinched, upturned eyebrows and a slight frown. "The doctor said that he went peacefully. After he passed out, he never woke up."

Eyes fluttering closed, she took a deep breath and he watched her throat move as she swallowed, as though gulping down the pain. When their eyes met again, she had herself under control.

"For a while after he was gone, I found myself remembering only the good things about him, forgetting that he hadn't been very studious, that his confidence was often arrogance, that he was sometimes mean to other kids. He was perfect in my memories but truthfully..." she trailed off, looking off to the side and squinting as though searching for the right word. "I was angry at him. I didn't want to be. I wanted to be angry at his friends, at the alcohol...even at God."

Not sure if it was the silkiness of her hand, the heat of the fire, the ale, or all three, a sudden wave of dizziness swept over him. His body stilled as he waited for it to subside, which it eventually did.

"I'm sorry for ruining your night," she said.

"Thank ye," he mumbled.

Her eyebrows twitched and he thought he saw a little smile sitting on the corner of her mouth. "Thank you for ruining your night?"

He shook his head. "For telling me. For listening." Her thumb brushed the back of his, making his heart trip.

"You're welcome."

The heat of an ale-born fever finally overwhelmed him, rushing up and rocking him back on the bench until he hit the table. Drowsiness came next. His eyes lost focus but blinking to get it back didn't work this time.

"Iain?" His eyelids were at half-mast, his body careening in every direction. His hold on her fingers had gone limp. Standing up and leaning over him, she held his face in her hands, marveling for a second at the coarseness of his beard. "Iain, look at me. Look at me." She lightly slapped his cheek and he looked up.

"Hey," he complained, wincing at her.

"You need to stay awake." Wrapping her fingers around the cup of water, she brought it to his mouth. "Here, drink this." Satisfied when he got half of it down his throat without spilling it all over himself, she set the cup back on the table and grasped his shoulders, if anything to hold him up. "Maybe you should lie down before you fall down."

He nodded, though it was more like his neck nodding than his head doing it. She watched him closely as he stood up, grateful that he was able to do it on his own, for he was much too heavy for her to even drag him, let alone carry him.

He walked toward his bed with great care, one step at a time. She pulled stools out of his way, worried he might trip over one. What she didn't think of was that he might trip on his own feet.

Iain pitched forward. "Whoa!" he said. She darted to catch him, wrapping her arms around his bulk. His arms clamped around her as he tried to find his footing. She sagged under his weight, her body shaking with effort. God, he was heavy!

Some of the weight lifted as his feet found purchase and together, they got him to his bed. The frame creaked as he sat down with a huff.

"Take off your shoes. You still need to eat that bread and finish the water." She started toward the table but his hand grabbed her wrist.

"Stay," he murmured, tugging on her arm.

Warmth rushed to her cheeks and she found out just how strong he was when she was inexorably pulled between his legs, even though she dug her feet in. He brought her flush against his chest and she braced her hands on his shoulders to keep from falling on him. One of his arms held her close and his other hand roamed over her backside, squeezing and rubbing. His deep, satisfied sigh was followed by a swift inhalation through his teeth.

She gasped, stiff with shock. Softly crying out when he pressed his face against her chest and groaned, she watched with wide eyes as he nuzzled the valley between her breasts. His nose nudged aside her locket as his lips kissed the flesh above the square neck of her dress. His beard was rough against her skin. Her cheeks burned and her heart was pounding so fast that even she became a little dizzy.

He moaned her name, his voice muffled against her body. "I want ye," he said. "I need ye." His hands were dragging her skirt up and when she tried to slip from his grasp, he snatched her close again and wrapped his legs around hers. "I need ye, Emma."

"Iain, not like this," she whispered, trying to squirm away. She wanted him too, damn it all, but he was drunk and she was still angry at him for it. He was so strong though. Even intoxicated with only one arm around her, he was so much more powerful than she was and she couldn't break his hold.

His free hand pulled aside the low collar of her dress, stretching the kirtle and smock until her bare breast slipped out. "Iain!" she squeaked.

"Have to taste ye," he mumbled. She tried to cover herself, tried to pull his head away but when he locked onto the peak of her breast, she went limp. A long, heavy sigh signaled her pleasure, like the sound of her resistance deflating.

He hollowed his cheeks, moaning while lost in his own pleasure, and she moaned with him. She was no naïve virgin susceptible to first-time swoons but Iain knew just how to touch that particular nerve ending—perfectly. Every pull of his lips, every nibble of his teeth and every stroke of his tongue felt like a hard tug on a rope leading deep inside. She didn't know when her hands came up to hold his head against her, her

fingers combing through his messy hair, but she did know that she didn't want it to end.

She didn't stop him when he drew her skirt up to her knees and slid his rough palms underneath. She didn't resist when he pulled her knees over his hips, his head following her breast as she sat on his thighs. She was even encouraging him when he grabbed her hips and jerked her against his pelvis.

Oh God, he was hard. Huge. Her pulse throbbed throughout the swelling lips of her pussy. Instinctively, she rubbed herself against him, somehow gaining immense pleasure from feeling his muscled chest and hard thighs against her softer, more yielding flesh.

If he had wanted it, she would have eagerly spread herself open for him, accepted his weight upon her and let him ride her to a sweaty, wonderful end.

Therefore, nothing could have surprised her more when his fervent grip on her slackened abruptly. He made a strange sound, like a groan mixed with a sigh. He slipped out of her arms, flopping onto his back.

For a few seconds, she sat there stunned, straddling his massive erection and half-exposed. Then came the quiet snore with which she was already familiar.

"The hell?" she panted. He was asleep? "What the freaking hell?"

Chapter Eleven

Angry all over again, Emma drove her fist into his chest but he didn't react beyond a puff of air that burst from his lips. Climbing off him and off the bed, she righted her dress and kicked his shin for good measure. That got more of a reaction, though a small moan wasn't much better.

All sorts of unsavory language spewed out as she stood there and fumed. The man had gotten wasted, wouldn't even admitted to being tanked and then had fallen asleep! What pissed her off the most, though, was that he had passed out only after getting her hot and bothered. She had woven this fantasy around him, one that included her nails marking his flesh as his weight pressed her into the mattress but the reality before her was a man who hadn't made a pass at her until he was hammered on nine cups of ale. Yes, she had been counting.

"And then he passes out," she groaned in frustration. Her eyes closed and she took a deep breath, trying to calm down. When she opened her eyes again, she looked at him lying there on the bed and sighed. Then she noticed that he was still hard and her teeth began to worry her lower lip. As liquored up as he was, he shouldn't have gotten so hard in the first place and yet there it was—a bulge under his tunic.

It would be so easy to take a peek.

With such a gorgeous specimen laid out before her, the temptation was irresistible. Gingerly, she stepped between his knees, quickly glancing at his face to see if he was still sleeping, and slowly sank down.

Her heartbeat fluttered in her throat. Her cheeks were hot with excitement and she almost wanted to fan herself. Crouched there between his legs and savoring the giddy sensation, she laid her hands just above his knees, palms first and then one finger at a time until both hands held the muscular flesh of his thighs. He was so warm. Sucking on her lower lip, she slid her hands up his legs, gathering the hem of his tunic between her thumbs and forefingers. Then, with one last glance at his face, she lifted the cloth. Her eyes went wide and her lips fell open in a soft gasp.

His cock was incredibly thick and as long as the distance from the heel of her hand to the tip of her longest finger. The length, she probably could have handled but the width... Her teeth bit hard into her lower lip and her pussy began aching all over again. Her body certainly wanted to see just how much of him she could take.

She wished she could go further, for her fingers ached to stroke that hard, velvety shaft, to wrap around its breadth and feel it grow even thicker but without him awake and watching her touch him, it wouldn't be right and wouldn't mean anything.

Dropping the hem of his tunic and heaving a sigh, she stood up. He couldn't remain on his back, so she went about the monumental task of rearranging him. First

taking off his shoes, she noticed an odd bump on the inside of his right kneecap. An old injury? It would explain his limp.

A couple of minutes later, she had him on his side, head tilted up and his position shored by his arms and legs. Just in case, she set a bucket on the floor in front of him. As she cleaned up, she couldn't help frowning with resentment and disappointment.

She was no closer to understanding the locket's purpose in guiding her to Iain than when they had met ten days ago. Had it really been only ten days? She had begun to think—to hope—that she and he had actually been chosen for each other but they didn't get along well at all. The physical attraction was there. Undeniably. Unequivocally. More often than not, though, one or both of them ended up yelling.

Finally lying down on the extra bed, she mulled over her first theory again, that Iain was merely a link in a chain of events, someone she was only supposed to meet. Anyone else who met her now would think she was just another woman. Iain and his family knew differently but she had her own clothes now, a basic understanding of how to run a household. She could pass as normal. It wouldn't be easy to hide her necklace or come up with a good story but maybe it was time to move on.

Tears welled up just from thinking about it.

* * * * *

"Serves ye right," Aili harrumphed. Emma looked up from stirring a fresh pot of stew to glance at Iain. Having just come back inside from the rainy day, no doubt to answer Nature's insistent call, Iain complained of Aili's grating voice and how it pierced his brain like a rusty knife. The small bit of water he had drunk last night had apparently done little to stave off a dehydration headache. Aili wasn't finished scolding him though. "Drinking all that ale, not greeting the day until it is half over... 'Tis irresponsible."

"If I agree, will ye close that mouth of yers?" With one hand pressed to the side of his head, Iain looked from Aili to Emma. The annoyance on his face didn't ease but became something else—regret. It made Emma furious to see it. She continued stirring the pottage, though she didn't know if anyone was going to be eating it that day. Kenneth and the farmhands also had very late starts, all of them hung over to the point of nausea. Thomas wasn't even going to come that day too wasted to move.

Still grinding some cheap spices as if on autopilot, Aili continued unperturbed, "Now that yer lordship has risen, ye might be interested to know that the war party returned just before dawn this morning." Emma immediately looked to the old woman, mouth open. Why hadn't she said something earlier? "A few got away but James and his men did well and I hear that the laird is considering making an example of the one ye caught," the old woman reported. "The man would do better to worry about the bastards still running around." She then checked her progress and continued grinding.

"How many is 'a few'?" Iain asked.

"How should I know?" Aili said irritably. "I had to hear it from Rachel. No one tells me aught, a poor old woman. Ignored, run over by horses and woken in the dead of night by some fool yelling about MacGregors..." Emma met eyes with Iain as Aili rambled on. His gaze flicked briefly to Aili, his lips pressing together, before settling upon her again.

Emma knew instantly that he wanted to talk to her—just not in front of Aili. He remembered last night after all. She'd be damned if she went anywhere with him though, so she simply looked away. She could imagine the frustration on his face. As always, he tossed some excuse over his shoulder about checking on the animals and stormed out of the house.

"There's time enough to talk later," Aili said, ceasing her mutterings. "I doubt Iain even knows what he wants to say right now."

Emma's jaw fell wide open. "How did you know?"

"That ye two had a fight? Dear, 'tis as clear as daylight. Iain hardly ever drinks that much."

"What do you mean?"

"The one other time I recall him being sick with drink was after his mother and sister passed. For nearly a week, he and Kenneth drowned themselves in ale. The only reason they came out of it was Beth. I may be half-blind but last night, I could see that Iain was about to boil over. Something about ye has him riled."

"That's one way of putting it," Emma said wryly.

Aili began cackling. "Ye were so quiet this morning. He must've boiled over after I left. Keep it up, lassie. It eases my aching bones to see him so sore." The woman's shoulders shook as she chuckled, her voice raspy and dry but it was somehow contagious and her lips curled into a sad smile.

"Aili, thank you so much for everything. I don't know what—"

"Child, even if ye were nae a fairy, I would have helped ye. 'Tis my Christian duty and we Scots pride ourselves on hospitality."

"I was going to say, I don't know what I'll do without you."

It took only a second for the meaning to sink in. "Wha—but dear, ye dinna have to leave," Aili gasped, taken aback. "Whatever it is, it canna be all that bad." The woman suddenly looked off to the side at an empty space beyond the table. "Ye be quiet! I'll handle this." Uncomfortable with Aili's slipping grasp of reality, Emma couldn't help backing up a step. The old woman didn't seem to notice her alarm. "It was true when I said that ye were meant to be here. Things willna be right if ye leave. Is there any way I can entice ye to stay, dearie?"

"No, nothing you could do at least."

A frown weighed down the corners of the old woman's mouth as she let out a deep breath and solemnly nodded. "I understand. We should talk about where ye can go from here."

The old woman kept her company for most of the dreary, gray day—thankfully with no more senile outbursts—but they spent little time talking about chores and recipes and instead discussed the layout of the immediate area, such as neighboring villages and natural landmarks. There were also customs to observe and dangers to avoid. Emma couldn't say she wasn't scared at the thought of being on her own again but her relationship with Iain was too volatile. She was more frightened of getting her heart broken than anything else.

Unfortunately, she didn't think she was going to avoid that now.

Emma had expected the others to come for the midday meal as they usually did but only Malcolm stopped by to eat a bowl of pottage and a fistful of bread. He was the kind to shovel food into his mouth but today, he ate cautiously.

"How are you feeling?" she asked him.

"Better than this morning," he said. "May I have some water?" Emma tried to hide the surprise on her face, for it was the first time he had drunk anything besides ale at their table.

She silently poured the water and didn't question his preference but that didn't mean Aili wouldn't. "The first time the drink fights back is always a hard lesson, boy. One ye'll not forget."

"Aye." Malcolm looked embarrassed, so Emma changed the subject.

"What kind of work do you do on a rainy day like this?"

"We muck out the barn but I couldna today," Malcolm said. She was confused for a split second before she realized why he couldn't do it—the smell. It had probably turned his stomach. "Iain and Kenneth told me to watch Beth today while they did it instead." He frowned as he fed himself another spoonful of soup.

"Aw, Malcolm, don't be upset." She patted his thin shoulder. He likely felt ashamed, like he was somehow less than the other two, especially when they had assigned him as Beth's playmate for the day. "Iain and Kenneth have had more practice at being drunk and hung over. You'll feel much better tomorrow and you'll be able to run circles around those two old men." Pressing his lips tightly together, he tried to remain stoic and resist her attempt to cheer him up but a crooked smile slowly overpowered the frown on his face.

"The four of you work so much every day though. Why are there no other boys to help out?" Emma thought it was a simple, trivial question but Malcolm's smile fell faster than when Aili had scolded him.

He swallowed his food before gesturing with his spoon toward the southeast. "Ye've seen the empty house over there?" Emma nodded at his question. "A family of five used to live there. Also, the house farther west of Kenneth's...a family of four." All too quickly, Emma realized where his explanation was going. "We had a farmhand from each. Douglas and Neil."

"You don't have to say it, Malcolm," she said.

The adolescent opened his mouth but then quickly shut it, screwing his lips up again. He fidgeted with his spoon, sloshing soup around his bowl. "They were my best friends."

"I'm so sorry. I don't think enough about my questions before I ask them."

Malcolm shook his head at her and she was surprised to see a smile on his face. "'Tis all right. Me and Thomas, we still have each other and we have ye now."

Emma tried not to think about her impending departure when she returned his smile and patted his shoulder again. She offered to prepare some food for Iain and Kenneth to eat in the barn or at Kenneth's home but Malcolm said neither of them was interested in food yet. He did take a bowl of pottage and some bread for when Beth woke up from her nap though. Emma hated to think of how upset the little girl would be when her new fairy friend said goodbye. She was a playful, lighthearted child and Emma was going to miss her.

As the afternoon wore on, the rain grew heavier, accompanied by low, rolling thunder. Malcolm stopped by once more to say that he was going home and Emma insisted he take some food with him, wondering if she would see him one more time before she left. She almost hoped she didn't.

Just as Emma was heating up the first bucket of water for her daily bath, Aili took her leave, promising to come in the morning and help her prepare a bag for her journey. Fetching water to heat over the fire was made easy that day by the rain. She only had to set the buckets outside and catch the rainwater. By the time one bucketful was hot, the other one outside was nearly full.

She was almost done heating a bath for Iain when he finally returned to the house, his entrance announced by a gust of cool, wet rain as the door burst open. His messy, tangled hair was matted to his forehead and neck, his tunic drenched. He didn't look happy.

After closing the door behind him, he attempted to wring some of the water out of his hair. He didn't look at her as he said, "Kenneth and Beth have chosen to eat dinner at their home tonight."

Emma could guess why. She continued to brush her damp hair and mentally sighed. It was just as well. "It'll be a few more minutes until your bath is ready. You'll find plenty of soup in the other pot there." She gestured to the vessel sitting on a stone near the fire close enough to keep it warm.

Iain sighed. "I've been soaked all day. I dinna wish to continue in such a state."

An angry pout on her face, she resisted the sudden urge to throw her hairbrush at him. After all the trouble she went to! "Malcolm said you cleared the muck from the barn this morning. At least use what's in the tub to wash your face and hands—with soap," she amended. "It's a good thing Aili brought your clean clothes today." She gestured at the fresh tunic sitting on the table.

"What are ye saying?" He frowned at her, pulling his towel off a line behind the fire and using it to dab at his face. "That my clothes stink of manure?"

"I'm saying that your clothes are wet through," she explained, exasperated with him. "You might as well take a hot bath and change into something dry. You can eat while you're waiting for the last of your bathwater."

Tossing his towel to one of the stools near the tub, he – very wisely – refrained from retorting and came to the table. She set out some soup, bread, cheese, ale and a ration of raspberries from the basketful of fruit he had received from the laird. He began his meal as she folded up her hairbrush and squirreled it away in her purse. Then after pouring in the last bucket of hot water, she used a stool as a stepladder to hang a hastily constructed screen from the rafter just in front of the tub. The screen was made of two old pieces of cloth that she joined together with her four safety pins.

"What's that?" he asked sullenly. Looking over her shoulder from where she stood on the stool, she saw him sit back from his half-eaten meal.

"It's for your privacy. It's too rainy for me to wander around outside today." After tying the corner of the sheet around a crude nail jutting out of the rafter, she carefully stepped down and turned toward him. "You'd better get in while it's still hot." Something in Iain's expression was ill at ease, as though he wanted to say something but couldn't. She had the feeling it was an apology but she didn't want to hear it.

Breaking eye contact, he looked down at his food. She noticed his hands were clenched. He stood up abruptly, walking across the house to duck behind the sheet and start his bath.

Sitting down on the other bench before her knees completely turned into jelly, she looked at the food on the table with no stomach to eat it. All day, she had been practicing how to tell Iain that she would depart in the morning and in her mind, she went over her speech again, hoping that she could coolly and calmly recite it.

However, what worried her more than what she would say was what he might say. Would he ask her to stay or would he be relieved to hear that she was going? She knew which one she wanted to hear but if he didn't say it, she didn't want to break down in front of him. She wanted to let it slide off her like raindrops off a leaf, to flash a fake smile like it was what she wanted to hear.

More thunder rolled overhead as Iain's splashes floated to her ears. The sounds of bathing flushed out the still-vivid memory of his wet, muscular back, which then reminded her of the night he had caught her naked just after her bath and finally the fresh memory of last night took over. Her nipples hardened underneath her dress as she recalled his firm, greedy lips. The fantasy she had been entertaining lately of lying beneath his bulk and rocking under his heavy thrusts brought a bright blush to her cheeks.

Yet here she was, untouched and likely to stay that way.

A loud splash announced that Iain had stepped out of the tub and she glanced in his direction. Already? His baths never took more than five minutes but it felt like it had only been a brief moment since she had taken a seat at the table.

"When are we going to talk about last night?" Iain called from behind the sheet. She could see his feet at the bottom of the screen and the towel flicked out once in a while as he dried himself.

She prepared to start the spiel she had been perfecting all day took a deep, calming breath and licked her lips. Something nagged at her though. One thing she didn't yet have an answer to that needed one before she said anything else.

"Emma?"

"Was it only because of the ale?"

All movement behind the sheet stopped. She held her breath, both anticipating and fearing his answer.

"Aye."

To say her heart broke wasn't accurate. That sounded like a vase smashing against a wall. It was better to say that her heart was brutally ripped in half, like so much meat in two ragged pieces bleeding on the floor. She closed her eyes, hot tears welling up.

Unable to speak, she couldn't beg him to lie to her and take back his rejection of her. She could hear him doing something behind the sheet and fought to swallow her sobs and regain her voice. The next few minutes would hurt even more if she couldn't keep herself under control.

"I-I'm sorry, Emma." She briefly glanced up at the ceiling in silent prayer, wiping away a stray tear. "For what I did. It willna happen again."

"I think it's time that I leave." Her voice was a little hoarser than she wanted but she was glad that she didn't sound like she was crying.

"What?" Iain yelled. Emma started, surprised by his vehemence. The sheet was suddenly torn from the rafter, revealing Iain as he strode toward her. He had tied his shoes on and knotted the towel around his hips.

She hadn't yet seen his naked chest and was shocked to discover a long, thin scar that cut a path from just below his left shoulder down to the right side of his ribs, as though someone had slashed at him with a sword. The rest of him, though, did not disappoint. A generous sprinkling of hair covered his upper body and tapered down to nothing at his navel. His pectorals were huge, the skin stretched tight over his muscles as it sloped gently up to his shoulders, which looked like they were chiseled from marble.

"Where are your clothes?" she blurted out. As soon as she said it, from the corner of her eye, she spotted his clean tunic still sitting on the table. He had apparently forgotten to take it with him and had been preparing to come fetch it.

He justifiably ignored her question. "What do ye mean ye're leaving? Why?" She began to stutter, unable to think straight let alone say anything intelligible. It was mortifying. "I already said I was sorry. Ye've no need to worry about aught like that happening again."

Finally, her tongue came unstuck. "Well, my staying here wasn't supposed to last forever, was it? I was unwanted in the first place and that apparently hasn't changed." Disquieted by how he towered over her, she stood up. It didn't help much. "I would be better off with people who don't know anything about this — this fairy crap that keeps haunting me."

"Just where do ye think ye can go after only a week?" he challenged, making wide sweeping gestures. "Ye dinna know enough to be on yer own."

"It's been closer to two weeks, not one and after only two weeks, I can manage a household well enough. I'll just start over in one of the Campbell villages farther northeast."

"Do ye even know where ye're going?"

She scoffed at him. "I spent most of the day talking to Aili about the area. I know exactly where I'm going."

"Aili?" he yelled. "That meddling old —"

"Stop right there because this isn't about Aili. You and I... I-I mean, look at us! We fight almost constantly!"

"We fight because ye canna be honest with me!" Iain held his hands in front of him as if shaking a basketball. Right then, Emma wanted a basketball so she could throw it at his face.

"Well, there's no longer a need for honesty, is there? Because I'm leaving!" she shouted. "You can stop worrying about the trouble I'll cause. I'll take my mischief with me and out of your life. I don't need your drunkenness anyway."

"I got drunk because of ye and I already apologized for it!"

"Then me leaving is a win-win situation, isn't it?"

Iain didn't retort immediately, seemingly confused by her jargon. "A-and who are ye to lecture me?" He pointed one big hand at her. "This is my home. If I want to get drunk, I will!"

"So much for your apology," she mocked. "But you know what? You're right. It is your home and I'm leaving it first thing in the morning!"

Iain roared with frustration. "Good Christ, woman! Ye're maddening!" Without even bothering to grab his tunic, Iain stomped to the door, whipped it open and slammed it shut behind him as he left the house.

For a couple more seconds, she indulged in her anger. It gave her a false sense of empowerment and too often lately she had been feeling powerless. When he didn't immediately return to argue more and only the sounds of rain and of the fire contentedly consuming its fuel were to be heard, her anger abruptly vanished, leaving her cold.

Oh no.

What was wrong with her? Why hadn't she kept her cool? Why hadn't she caved and admitted that she was scared to be away from him, that it broke her heart to

imagine it? Why hadn't she begged him to let her stay forever? She had only antagonized and insulted him.

Her hand grasped at her throat as a painful sob burst out. Tears began streaming down her face. Running to the other side of the house, she threw herself on his bed. Arms curled up in front of her chest, she hid her face behind her hands and cried—not because of her family or her old life or her new anxieties but for her dashed hopes and stupid mistakes. It was like dying all over again.

Only much worse.

* * * * *

Iain's body knew well the path to his brother-in-law's house and it steered him there without his help. He didn't feel the cold rain buffeting his exposed skin or even see the ground beneath his feet whenever it was lit up by lightning. Anger boiled in his gut, shaking his whole body like a pot full of boiling water. He wasn't angry with Emma though. He was furious with himself.

He had lied to her, hoping that if he did, if he promised not to take advantage of her again, he could continue to hold onto her but even though he had apologized, she still wanted to leave him. She wanted it so much that she would risk the considerable danger of traveling alone.

In truth, only a few snatches remained of what he did after the ale hit him full force. However, what he did recall was enough to know that she hadn't wanted him. He remembered her helping him to his bed, her attempts to push him away when he went after her and her hands tugging on his hair while he was enjoying the soft tip of her breast. He vaguely remembered being punched in the chest, though he wasn't sure if that was a dream or not.

His fist pounded against Kenneth's door.

"Who is it?" his brother-in-law called. Then, much more softly, "As if it were nae easy to guess."

"It's Iain." He had only a few seconds to wait before the door opened.

Kenneth stared at him for a couple of seconds, a frown of disappointment on his face. "Why am I nae surprised to see ye half-naked?" He then stepped aside, allowing Iain to enter. Iain glanced at the only bed in the house. Beth lay asleep in a tiny ball on one side of the mattress. "So tell me what has happened now," Kenneth said quietly as he closed the door against the rain.

"She wants to leave in the morning." Kenneth tossed a length of dry cloth at him. Iain caught it, using it only briefly to wipe the water from his face. "She dinna care for her safety, as far as I can tell."

"Ye're only telling me half the story. Why does she want to leave?" Kenneth sat down on a stool near the fire. "All day, ye were in an especially sour mood."

"Last night, I..." Iain couldn't help frowning as he tried to explain his misdeeds. No matter how he said it, his actions were contemptible.

"Ye tried to take her," Kenneth gathered.

Iain sighed. "God help me, I did. She smelled sweet and —"

"She resisted?"

Iain sighed "As far as I can remember." Kenneth regarded him with one eyebrow raised. "I passed out before I could..."

"Ah," his friend said. "What do ye remember?" Iain glanced back at Beth, who was still sleeping soundly. In a low voice, he recounted his spotty memories of the previous evening, though he kept it vague. He wouldn't discuss the softness of Emma's breasts with his brother-in-law. "And now she wants to leave. Did ye discuss last night at all?"

"She asked me if it was just the ale. I said it was."

Kenneth frowned at him. "Unless I've been completely misled, was that no' a lie?"

"Well of course but it was what she wanted to hear," he whispered angrily.

"She wanted to hear the truth, Iain," Kenneth said. "I dinna pretend to know the workings of the female mind but from what I've seen, Emma is enamored of ye. She therefore must be mad." Iain scowled at the insult. "But even so, she does favor ye and to hear ye say that it was only the ale likely crushed her."

"Are we talking about the same woman?" Iain said. "The one who I canna speak to about aught without a fight? The one who confides in no one?"

"Ye said just this afternoon that she told ye about her brother."

"The one who always looks at me with fear? She thinks me a beast."

"With that hideous beard, 'tis no wonder. Come now, ye degrade yerself too much."

"What about last night? She pushed me away."

Kenneth sighed. "Ye know how she feels about drinking. Did ye expect her to enjoy being pawed by a drunkard?" Iain wanted to continue arguing his point with Kenneth but could find nothing else to say. Kenneth stood up again and clapped his hand onto Iain's shoulder. "Kinsman o' mine, if words only serve as obstacles, 'tis time for action."

His brother-in-law turned away and walked to the back wall, where he retrieved a small bundle that was hanging high on the wall. It wasn't until he drew it out that Iain saw it was a short dagger. The sharp blade was well cared for.

He looked up at his friend and sighed with resignation. Kenneth grinned.

* * * * *

Emma's tears subsided eventually but it was still difficult to breathe, as though a boulder were pressing down on her chest. Kicking off her shoes, she tried lying on her left side, the one she slept on whenever she was in Iain's bed. She instantly began to feel

better, lost in memories of his arms around her, but only a moment later she remembered their awful fight and the boulder returned.

Iain had been gone for half an hour and she suspected with a fretful frown that he was bedding down for the night at Kenneth's. Would he return before dawn? Before she stuffed some provisions into a cloth sack to take with her? Before she left his house forever? For the tenth time since Iain had walked out, she thought about reneging on her intention to leave. She could apologize, make up some plausible story to tell him about her past and buy more time with him. Assuming she could learn overnight how to lie to him.

On the other hand, she also kept trying to convince herself that she was simply clinging to him because he had helped her when she had absolutely nowhere else to go and no one else to depend on. That whenever his intense eyes focused upon her, the flutter in her heart was just nerves. That last night hadn't meant anything to her either. It had only been a physical craving for comfort, one that still skittered around her insides, gnawing at her.

Over and over, she swung back and forth between wanting desperately to stay and wanting desperately to have the courage to leave. It was enough to make her nauseous. She rubbed her stomach.

The door banged open. Emma gasped, though it was more like an inward shriek. Grasping her locket, she sat up with a jerk and rolled onto her other hip as she turned toward the door. The torrent of rain sounded louder now that the door was open and the thunder almost didn't stop. Lighting flashed outside as though paparazzi were descending upon a celebrity. For a split second, she was ready to scream, not recognizing the man who strode into the house and into the light of the fire.

Then she saw the scar across his chest and the towel around his hips.

"Iain?" she breathed.

Chapter Twelve

Iain's thick, poorly trimmed beard had been hiding a wide mouth, a strong jaw and prominent cheekbones. She had found him handsome before – albeit unapproachable – but now that his beard had been shaved, he was blindingly masculine. Even his wet, messy hair had received a trim. Her fingers recalled the sensation of holding his head against her body, of his warm skin and of the tangles in his hair.

Rainwater made his skin glisten in the flickering firelight, just like the first time she had seen him naked. He had never looked so tempting and relief at seeing him brought the sting of tears to her eyes. She watched the muscles in his cheeks flex as he pushed the door shut behind him. He then reached for the crossbar and lowered it, jamming it into the metal hook with decisiveness.

Emma swung her legs off the bed to stand up but when his thumbs slid underneath the edge of the linen sheet around his hips, she found that she couldn't stand up.

"I lied, Emma," he rumbled. She watched the sheet loosen, just barely enough that it would easily slide off but he held it up. He was growing beneath the towel. "It wasna just the ale."

The towel slipped an inch lower – then another and she could see a few black hairs peeking at her. Her eyes glazed over. Dragging her gaze up to Iain's face, she could see he was trying to gauge her reaction. He looked determined yet uncertain. Didn't he see how much he affected her?

"Drop it," she said softly. Heart pounding, she watched him inhale deeply and lower his chin, his eyes still on her.

He let go of the linen sheet and stood naked before her, wearing only his leather shoes. Heat bloomed under her skin, flushing her cheeks. That heat found its way deep inside, burning down to her core like a smoldering hunk of coal. The second she ignited, she gave a breathy moan.

Emma couldn't say anything more, too mesmerized by the sight of the heavy cock jutting out from his pelvis. Knowing exactly what he would do with it, she swallowed hard and licked her dry lips. She then leaned back on one hand and with the other drew up her skirt in silent proposal.

A relieved groan tumbled out of his throat. In just three steps, he was at the bed, hauling her into his arms. Her feet touched the ground for only a second. Without restraint, she clung to his powerful shoulders, ready for the tight clamp of his embrace. Desperate for his kiss, she immediately sought his lips but his hands on the back of her thighs boosted her up and she closed her eyes at the feel of his wet mouth against her neck.

She was panting, trembling as he gathered some of her kirtle in one hand and turned to sit on the bed. Iain pulled her arms from his shoulders, deftly loosened her laces and jerked her smock and kirtle down over both shoulders, trapping her arms against her sides.

"Let's try this again," he whispered. His left arm held her against him while his right hand cupped her breast. He drew the peak of her other breast into his mouth, molding his lips around her nipple and flicking it with his tongue.

Her eyes fluttered shut. "Iain."

She couldn't get her arms around him, not with her dress down around her waist and her arms still in the sleeves, not with his hot, greedy mouth on one breast and an equally greedy hand on the other. She could only hold onto his lower back, her nails digging into his skin as the scrape of his teeth over her nipple jerked on that mysterious rope connected to the big, raw nerve deep between her thighs. The bit of skirt she was sitting on was drenched, she was sure, and not from Iain's wet skin.

His hand briefly left her breast as he reached down behind her to pull apart the tie on his right shoe. The laces slid off the shank of his leg. As he switched arms, his mouth traveled to her other breast, leaving in its wake a trail of kisses.

"Ye're just so perfect," he said with reverence. If he hadn't been holding her against his body, she was certain that she would have slid limply to the ground, overwhelmed. She had never been so worked up in her life. Once his other shoe was undone, his thighs flexed under her as he pushed the leather off his feet. Her nipple then popped free of the suction of his lips, the wet tip tightening even more in the chill of the open air.

His strong arms lifted her, holding her gently as he twisted and laid her on her back. She shifted another few inches up the bed to rest her head on the pillow and dragged her skirt out of the way. Iain crawled over her, the wet tips of his hair dripping cold rainwater onto her skin, and it was a wonder that the water didn't sizzle and turn into steam.

His mouth open and his lungs working overtime, Iain sat on his heels between her thighs. Her knees touched his sides and she could feel the head of his cock brushing the curls over her slick folds. *Oh please, oh please...*

He leaned over her, both hands stroking her breasts, his gaze jumping between the sight of her distended nipples and the pleasure on her face at his touch. Her locket slid off her shoulder as she impatiently writhed under him, arching into his palms and about to mewl like some kitten addicted to her master's indulgence.

"Iain, I'm gonna burst," she whimpered.

"Are ye now, lass?" He investigated for himself, dipping his right hand between her legs and groaning to find out what she already knew.

With her lower lip caught between her teeth, she sighed achingly at the urgent yet gentle slide of his thick, rough fingers through slick cream that now flowed even faster. She could see a strange tension in the set of his shoulders, in the way he moved, as

though he couldn't stop himself and was barely restraining some primal instinct. It was utterly enthralling, for he was so much bigger and so much stronger, yet he didn't overpower her, didn't just selfishly take what he wanted.

Smoothing her hands down her abdomen to join his, she grabbed his wrist and pulled it toward her, impaling herself on his longest finger. Iain's moan was deep and for a few sweet seconds, he didn't move, his palm pressed tight against her mons. She locked eyes with him and slowly clamped down on his finger. A gloriously guttural sound spilled from his lips and he took over, pushing a second finger inside her. His other hand left her breasts, taking a short detour to stroke up the inside of her thigh before he pressed down on her undulating pelvis and used his thumb to tease her clit.

A series of breathy, high-pitched groans squeezed out of her lungs with every other thrust of his fingers and the sounds...oh the sounds his hands made. Even over the patter of rain, between the rolls of thunder, she could hear just how wet he had made her.

Instead of watching Iain's hands though, she watched the play of emotions across his face. His fascination made her insides twist. His stiff lower jaw jutted out, his mouth open and his eyebrows were pinched in concentration.

"Ye're tight," he breathed. "Christ, ye're too tight." His fingers sped up, jabbing into her as his thumb rapidly swiveled her clit in tight circles. She cried out, one of her hands seizing his forearm. It was already starting. Tremors, burgeoning heat...

Pleasure slammed into her, dragging a scream out of her as she punched her head back into the pillow. She bucked hard onto his fingers and grabbed his other wrist, holding his hand against her. After sucking in a breath of air, she sobbed his name.

His cock twitched as Emma came, her muscles rippling over his fingers, her voice shakily crying out his name. Her pert, perfect breasts bounced every time she thrust herself onto his hand. Her strawberry blonde hair glowed in the firelight, looking soft and fragrant, and he couldn't wait to rub his face in its silkiness. The ecstasy on her face brought out a triumphant pride like nothing he had ever felt before, which made him even more possessive of her.

She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

After massaging her a moment more, he gently pulled his fingers from the wet warmth of her body and slid them between his lips, watching her slowing breaths as she grew more relaxed. With her scent in his nostrils and her taste on his tongue, he stroked his swollen cock, desperate to sate the deep-seated need to take her, especially after discovering that she was not untouched.

By God, no other man would ever have her again, not as long as he breathed.

Taking his fingers from his mouth and releasing himself, he hooked his hands under her knees and pushed them toward her shoulders. Emma looked at him with sleepy eyes, sliding her hands up her own thighs and holding them back. His hands

now free, he sidled closer to her, his eyes fixed upon the beautiful pink slit waiting for him.

He wanted her so badly, so much that his entire body was trembling but she had been so tight around his fingers and he absolutely would not hurt her. Taking a deep, steadying breath, he rubbed the head of his cock up and down the seam of her nether lips, slipping inside and notching the aching tip in the cup of her body.

When he met her eyes, drowsy with pleasure, he realized that she almost looked drunk. Her cheeks were pink and her eyelids low but her breaths were shallow and her gaze was steady. As his hips pressed forward, he held her gaze. He needed to see every little change in her expression, to savor every husky moan she made.

"Iain!" She grasped his arm. He stopped, only halfway sheathed, and pulled back a little, waiting until she relaxed.

"Are ye all right?" His voice sounded much too harsh to his own ears.

She nodded. "Just wasn't quite prepared." Unable to wait any longer, he pushed again and groaned like a man about to die when his cock sank home, sliding inside until the black hairs at the root of his erection mingled with her blonde curls. Emma let out a heavy sigh.

"Mother o' God," he uttered. He leaned over her, matching the bend of his elbows to the bend of her knees and planting his hands to either side of her creamy shoulders. His eyes roamed over the longing in her lips, the blush in her cheeks and the trust in her eyes. Aye, never would another man have her.

With this thought in mind, he slowly pulled his hips back, moaning when her body tried to suck him back in. Emma pinched her lush lower lip with those perfect white teeth, looking at him with such expectation. He didn't make her wait and plunged back inside, smugly noting her feminine gasp even as his own pleasure shot up his spine and forced out a breathy grunt.

Her silky hands gripped his biceps, stroking down to his forearms. "More," she whispered.

"Ye'll have it." His body knew what to do and slowly sped up but he couldn't help the strangled groan that rattled his chest after only a few thrusts. Her taut muscles gripped his cock just right, as though she was made for him. Watching her body lurch under his heavy thrusts, following the bounce of her breasts, listening to the beautiful little sounds she made between every gasp...

"I dinna want ye to leave." Iain didn't even know the words were coming until he had already said them. Emma's hands tightened around his forearms, her eyes still trained on his. "Promise ye willna leave. Promise me ye'll never leave." She nodded, gasping when his thrusts became rougher. "Say it, Emma. Swear it." Her soft little moan made his chest tighten.

"I promise. I'll never leave you."

Iain fisted his hands in the mattress, already trying to fight off the rise of pleasure for which he had yearned ever since the very first second he had set eyes on her. He

didn't want this first time to end so soon but his body was in charge now, not his mind. It wanted to go faster, so his hips began pounding into her. His lips wanted to capture one of her bouncing nipples, so he leaned down, craning his neck to one side, forcing her legs even farther back, and caught the raspberry tip between his hungry lips. Her hands were clamped onto his backside, her nails digging in. With a moan, he sucked her sweet flesh into his mouth.

She called his name and then called it again, only louder. With her next breath, she cried out. Releasing her wet, reddened nipple, he lifted his head. He had to see her face, had to watch the pleasure overcome her.

Her entire body suddenly jerked. "Iain," she groaned in a long, shuddering breath.

He felt the flutter of clenching muscles and came completely undone. His whole body tightened, shook with tension, as his pelvis slapped against her one last time. When the blessed heat of ecstasy grabbed hold, a throaty sigh pushed out of his lungs. With short, hard jabs, he emptied every bit of strength he had left into her welcoming heat. He pressed his forehead to her shoulder, fought to catch his breath, fought to keep his weight off her.

One arm at a time, he released her legs, spreading kisses across her neck and shoulder. Her pleased sigh accompanied the gentle touch of her hands on his arms and sides. He never thought a woman could smell so good or feel so right beneath him, especially not a woman about whom he knew so little, about whom he wanted to know so much more.

But just maybe, that door to her heart was finally open.

Chapter Thirteen

When Emma woke the next morning, it was to the sound of Iain's deep, even breaths warming the back of her neck. She smiled just a little, snuggling back into his arms. He gathered her closer, one hand cupped loosely around her breast and somehow, she enjoyed the tenderness between her thighs. Last night was also the best night of sleep she had enjoyed since arriving. Only one thing kept her morning from complete perfection.

Iain hadn't kissed her yet. She had wondered briefly before falling asleep if he wasn't the kissing type but he hadn't had any problems licking, sucking or biting any other part of her. Indeed, he was the best lover she had ever had – by leaps and bounds.

So, why?

"Mm, good morning," a deep voice said behind her. Her smile grew wider. His voice sounded like chocolate. Extra-rich dark chocolate.

"Good morning," she answered. She wanted to say more but realized with growing shyness that she didn't know what to say. Iain seemed to have the same difficulty and said nothing for a moment. He then made a strange noise, like he was in discomfort. His nose and lips burrowed through her hair, nuzzling the back of her neck.

"Iain?" His hand squeezed her breast, rolling it in slow, small circles. His other hand stroked her side. When he rolled against her, her lips fell open as his massive erection slid against her backside. "Holy sh –"

"I need ye," he murmured.

"Yeah, I got that," she breathed. The chain of her locket pressed against her skin as his mouth gave the bend in her neck a warm, wet kiss. One of his hands ventured down her stomach and between her thighs. "Aili might be here soon."

"Then she'll wait outside," he growled, grinding his loins against her rear. Emma pressed her lips together and closed her eyes at his impatient fingers. She relented with a sigh and lifted her knee, giving him better access, of which he took full advantage. "I should confess something," he said as his other hand plucked the tip of her breast.

He expected her brain to function while he had a hand between her legs? "What?" she said after a second's hesitation.

"The first morning I woke next to ye and every morning after that – without fail – I was," the last groaned word came off a hard swallow, "affected." His blunt finger pressed and rolled her clit, eliciting a sharp gasp. "My cock was so hard that I nearly pulled ye open and buried it inside ye."

As she imagined his restraint, her mouth went dry while another part of her grew wet. "Then what are you waiting for?" She hooked her leg over him. Her hand went

searching behind her and she moaned restlessly to find nothing but hard, unyielding muscle that contracted when she touched it.

"Emma." His stubbly cheeks lightly scraped the skin on her shoulder. She wanted to kiss those cheeks and then his jaw, his chin, his lips... Her fingers slid around his weighty rod but just barely. She pumped her hand up and down. He laid an open-mouthed kiss on her neck, panting against her skin.

For several breathless moments, they rubbed, stroked and gyrated against each other, both eagerly exploring and exploiting every erogenous zone they could find. Emma couldn't believe how quickly his fingers became drenched in her arousal, how much she loved being trapped between the rock wall in front of her and the wall of flesh behind her.

"Iain, please," she begged.

"I know," he whispered into her hair. She angled his erection down to slide it between her legs and he took over, guiding himself to where they both wanted him. His thighs flexed against her rear as he thrust into her.

She didn't know if she would ever be used to the amazing breadth of him, the thickness that spread her so wide. Her breath hitched every time he pierced her. If kissing his mouth was first on her list of things she wanted to do to him, wrapping her lips around his impressive cock was second.

His body curled tighter around her, his cheek rasping against hers and his chest flush against her back. His fingers were split in a vee between her legs and she matched her hand with his to feel the push and pull of his cock, to verify that her small frame was actually taking every inch of the hard flesh being plowed into her.

He did fit though, just as perfectly as a tailored suit.

"I should confess something too," she gasped. "I—" Her deepest muscles began to bear down on him. "I'm falling in love with you."

He groaned her name through clenched teeth. The next thrust flung her over the edge and the sensation rising up was as sudden and exhilarating as free-fall. Crying out, she gripped both his wrists, riding the pleasure. His length pushed through her shuddering flesh once, twice, a third time.

Her body sank slowly into a languid buzz but his only became tighter, his thrusts faster and harder, his breathing more labored. She was as pliable as dough and just as oblivious, so she bounced and jerked in his arms, accepting every inch of cock slammed into her. Then his hips paused, undulating against her. She licked her lips as something warm spurted inside her and Iain made the most delicious groan, harsh yet relieved. He didn't let go of her though, didn't even loosen his tight hold around her.

His voice was thick when he said, "I think I've already fallen."

* * * * *

It was only a few moments later that Aili banged on the door with her cane. Emma and Iain both quickly pulled on their clothes and Iain, as always, avoided as much conversation with the old woman as he could by leaving to start his morning chores. Emma leaned toward him for a kiss but he cleared his throat and stepped away from her, exiting the house. She couldn't deny that it had hurt—terribly—but she did try to deny that it was anything personal. She supposed that he simply hadn't wanted to kiss her in front of Aili.

Of course, Aili was ecstatic to hear that she had decided to stay. The elderly woman even grabbed her hands and hobble-danced in a circle, singing off-key in her gravelly voice. More surprising than that was her gleeful praise of Iain. "I knew that boy was good for something!" she hooted.

They spent the next hour preparing breakfast, a job made much easier and more interesting by the abundance of rarer ingredients that the laird had gifted to Iain and Kenneth—ingredients that she once took for granted. Then, when everyone else arrived for their first meal of the day, she hastily pulled her kerchief off her face and smoothed her tangled hair, which she had forgotten to brush.

The farmhands had been ribbing Iain on his newer, smoother look but when he came in the door with Thomas trapped in a headlock, his playful mood faded the second his gaze landed on her and the heat in his eyes warmed her even better than the fire only a few feet away. Thomas escaped Iain's hold and Kenneth cheerfully shoved Iain aside in order to enter the house.

Sitting next to him during the meal was both wonderful and embarrassing since everyone else at the table watched them with little smiles. Even Beth seemed to know because she kept grinning at Iain, though she was probably just amused by his clean-shaven face. After thirty minutes of happy blushing, everyone headed out again. Iain squeezed her hand and the corner of his mouth turned up in a small smile, hinting at the most adorable dimple, but he still didn't pucker up and she didn't force it since five people happened to be watching them.

By midmorning, though, the mystery of why he wouldn't kiss her was starting to gnaw at her. He hadn't kissed her when they made love last night or when he had taken her again that morning. It didn't make sense.

"What has ye frowning now?" Aili asked, kneading a fresh batch of bread dough. Emma hadn't realized that she had stopped kneading her own batch of dough, or even that she was frowning.

Pulling her fingers from the sticky substance and rubbing her hands together, she sighed, "Nothing."

After adding another splash of water, Auld Aili the Bread-Making-Machine continued kneading. "Well, that proves it. If ye had been daydreaming about Iain, ye would have giggled when ye said that."

"Aili!" she whispered sharply.

"So what has ye frowning? Was the boy nae as good as I guessed?" Emma imploringly said the woman's name again, now certain that her cheeks were heating up. "Lass, I was married for over thirty years. I'm no innocent girl and ye know I dinna embarrass at all."

Walking around the table and taking a seat on the bench opposite Aili, she wiped her hands on her apron and pulled down her kerchief again. "He hasn't kissed me yet."

"What? Wh—I'm going to bury my foot up his—"

"So it's unusual that he hasn't? Well...why?" she asked. "Why doesn't he want to kiss me?" Aili opened her mouth to answer but nothing came out. "You don't know, do you," she said. "The stonemason's daughter, did he kiss her?"

"I never saw him kiss her in front of me—"

"Aili," she pleaded.

The old woman let out a tired sigh and pushed away the bowl of kneaded dough. She began to wipe off her hands on a linen towel. "My eyes were a little better then and from a distance, I did see him kiss her."

Emma began blinking as tears welled up out of nowhere. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, trying to hide her weepy reaction. Suddenly the old woman's hand was on her shoulder. "Dear, he has a reason. Ask him later and he'll tell ye. Maybe he thought his breath smelled bad." An airy laugh burst out and Emma smiled up at her elderly friend.

"Or maybe mine was bad," she guessed.

"The lord knows my husband never smelled good," Aili joked.

Emma was laughing when a shadow filled the open entrance. Iain stood casually in the doorway, his hands braced on the doorjambs and his eyes only on her.

"Is that Iain?" Aili said, squinting in his direction. "Oh of course it is. Set this one aside, dear." She touched the edge of the bowl in front of her. "I'll fetch more water." Emma's heart leapt when Iain stepped into the house and she both hated and loved the giddy nervousness that made her start fidgeting. She stood up to take care of Aili's bowl, glancing up only once to watch the old woman totter outside. Iain still stood by the door.

After covering the dough and setting it in the center of the table, she went back to her own batch and plunged her hands into the malleable mass, working in the last of the flour. She could hear Iain's footsteps as he approached, could see his shadow on the table.

"How are ye feeling?" he asked. Her eyes were trained on the dough in her hands and from the edge of her periphery she saw his fingers touch the table.

She wanted to say she felt fine but she really couldn't lie to him. "Sore, but happy about it. You?"

He walked around to her side of the table. "Distracted." The wall of heat that preceded him began to soak into her right side and his voice deepened. "I canna stop

thinking about ye.” His hands grasped her hips, smoothing a slow path around her waist to her abdomen and then back again. His chest was heavy against her back and his firm lips kissed the nape of her neck. The cradle of his pelvis was a perfect fit against her rear and she already knew how well his swelling erection fit.

“Iain,” she sighed, trying to wipe the thin layer of flour off her fingers. His hands were also busy, roaming over every curve she had. By the time she was wiping her hands on her apron, he was already fondling her breasts, pinching her nipples through her dress and nibbling on the sensitive flesh just behind her ear. She couldn’t help it when she shivered. “Do you...do you want to go somewhere?”

“Aili willna be back too soon,” he whispered.

“Well I—you want to...here?”

“She isna ignorant—a pain in my ass, aye but nae ignorant.” Iain kept one hand on her breasts as his other reached low and grabbed her skirt. “We have enough time. It willna take me long.”

A little offended, Emma laughed. “It won’t take you long?”

His hand found her bare thigh and his weight on her back became much heavier as he tried to bend her over. He chuckled in her ear and as she set her hands on the table, she would’ve given anything in that moment to see his smile.

“Aye, it willna be long at all ’til ye’re screaming my name. I ken that between those thighs,” he breathed, sliding one hand to the inside of her leg, “ye’re already wet.”

The man was psychic.

“I shouldna be surprised,” an annoyed voice said. Emma’s eyes flicked to the door and utter horror filled her to find Rossalyn standing there. It was completely obvious what Iain was doing—what he was about to do.

“Damn it, Rossalyn.” Iain took his weight off Emma and allowed her to stand up straight. He then tucked her against his side. As embarrassed as Emma was, Iain’s deliberate display filled her with a very satisfying sense of victory.

Rossalyn’s lips lifted into what looked like a sincere smile. “I shouldna be surprised that the *man* who finally brought in a MacGregor thief was ye.” As though she had the right, she boldly strolled into Iain’s home. Her eyes roved over the extra baskets of food and the two barrels of ale, one still half-full. “I see the laird gave ye yer *just* reward, Iain,” she said.

“Kenneth as well,” Iain said. Emma saw his frown from the corner of her eye, could see the frustration in his body. It was no coincidence that her bowl of bread dough happened to be hiding his loins from Rossalyn’s line of sight.

“Do ye ken what’ll happen to the thief? I’m *sure* the constable told ye.” Rossalyn’s voice was coated with a sickly sweet lilt that was as feigned as it was annoying and it undoubtedly worked on almost any man within earshot.

“He didna,” he said. “If ye are so curious, any of the men-at-arms that tail ye could probably give ye better information.”

She pouted, twirling her finger around a knot in the wood of the table. "None of them knows. I was so *sure* that ye would, Iain."

"Ye were mistaken then."

"Oh but I'm trying so hard to ask *nicely*," she said with that hateful, pretty frown. "Do ye think they'll kill him?"

"What concern is it of yers?" Iain released Emma but not before squeezing her arm. She glanced down to verify that he was decent, almost smiling to know that Rossalyn had taken the fire out of him.

"Everyone knows I *loathe* violence. Would it nae be a kind, *merciful* gesture to let him go?" Emma looked at Rossalyn, disturbed that they held an opinion in common, but the lack of passion in the other woman's voice made the sentiment insulting. Rossalyn didn't really care about the thief. She was trying to win admiration at the expense of someone else.

"That's the laird's decision to make," Iain reminded the other woman. He then heaved a disappointed sigh. Emma knew he was becoming restless to return to his work and escape the licentious woman. She didn't want him to go, didn't want him to leave the two of them together. Her ardent wish was in her eyes but Rossalyn spoke.

"I'm sorry, Iain. Ye must be so busy. Dinna let me keep ye," she said, daintily waving him toward the door. "I only need to ask Aili something when she returns."

"Aili? I thought ye hated her," Iain said.

Rossalyn giggled, crossing her arms but holding one hand over her mouth. She then flapped her hand at him. "Dinna be silly. Aili and I dinna get *along* so well but she's still my *elder*. Rachel has run out of soap and I need some today. I know Aili *always* has some extra soap to sell." This excuse relieved some of Emma's worries but not all of them. "I'm sure that...uh," Rossalyn said haltingly. "I'm sure that *we'll* be fine together for just a couple of minutes." The woman didn't even know her name. Emma frowned.

"All right," Iain relented. Emma almost grabbed his elbow when he walked around the table toward the door and she looked at Rossalyn, who wasn't smart enough to wipe the superior look off her face. She didn't want to beg Iain to stay, though. Rossalyn would think she was afraid of her.

"Call if ye need me," he said, watching her for a couple of seconds before ducking out the door.

Emma glanced at Rossalyn. The woman didn't look hateful but she did look miffed, like a child who didn't get the present she wanted.

"I dinna see *how* he could bed a woman with skin as *spotted* as yers." Slap! Emma very nearly reached up and touched the sprinkling of freckles across her cheekbones. "Then again, he seemed to prefer *nae* to look at yer face. Perhaps he's just scratching an *itch*."

Oh, this was so not going to happen. "He was pretty content to look at my face last night when he was on top of me."

Rossalyn crossed her arms, wearing her ugly frown. "Ye're nae really any relation of his, are ye?"

"If I were, I wouldn't have been bent over his table."

Rossalyn lifted her nose, taking in a deep breath. "Ye are nae part of the Campbell clan either?" she asked. "Ye're nae one of us?"

Emma blanched, realizing what she had just admitted. Her hesitation was answer enough for Rossalyn. A tiny smirk sat on the woman's perfect little mouth. The linen kerchief around Emma's neck suddenly felt too tight and she pulled it off completely.

"Not exactly but I will be soon. I'm staying with Iain," she said. "He's all I want."

A sound more delicate than a snort accompanied Rossalyn's tiny, cynical shrug. "All ye *want*? Aye and the King of *Scots* is all I want. Iain has the largest herd of sheep in the *ten* closest villages. The laird only owns a small part of the flock. The rest are Iain's. He's the *richest* crofter for fifty miles."

Emma's eyes grew round and her jaw suddenly felt as heavy as a full jug of water. Rossalyn made another dainty snort. "Oh *dinna* tell me ye didna know. I can tell when someone is lying to me. A selfish, spotted, *shameless* outsider like ye *dinna* deserve Iain." Rossalyn's tirade continued but Emma was too preoccupied to hear anymore.

Iain had never said anything about the size of his wealth, though why he would, she didn't know. He wasn't boastful or wasteful. She had thought that she was merely lucky to come upon someone with a real bed—two of them—someone who didn't worry as much about food for the leaner months and who had clothing to spare. She felt like such a fool for not guessing, not noticing.

"Are ye even *listening* to me?" Rossalyn began walking toward her, fists swinging at her sides, but for a couple of agonizing seconds Emma couldn't react. "Ye *dinna* deserve *this* either." The woman grabbed at her. She lifted her arms and tried to shield herself, instinctively worried about a blow.

Emma felt the snap when her locket was ripped off.

She screamed—or at least, she thought she did. She couldn't hear a scream. Only a high-pitched ringing filled her ears, the kind that stays with you for days after a rock concert. For a few seconds, she couldn't see either. Then the pain began to penetrate—blinding, white-hot, breath-stealing pain. It hurt so badly that she didn't feel it at all when she hit the ground. One second, her arms were in front of her face and the next, she was on her left side facing the fire only a couple of feet away. After the first wave of pain crested, another one slammed into her. She heard her reaction this time but it was only a hollow, wheezy exhalation.

Finally, she sucked in her first breath of air. She didn't know how she managed it but she turned her head a little and looked up at Rossalyn standing over her. The woman's face was stark white, her eyes wide and her lips ajar. Her right hand held the locket, which dangled from her trembling fist. Another blow of pain made Emma see spots, made her whimper. With her next breath, she tried to speak, to tell Rossalyn how to save her.

Rossalyn's fingers snapped open, dropping the locket. Emma could only guess that it landed by her feet. The curvy blonde ran out the door.

Chapter Fourteen

With every torturous jolt of pain, it felt as though a giant pair of hands was trying to break her in half. She couldn't get enough air in her lungs to scream for help. She could barely even move and something told her she didn't have much time.

Her first attempt to sit up nearly put her under. Her vision narrowed and shimmered and breathing suddenly became twice as difficult.

"Emma?" Aili called. Emma was too involved in trying to breathe to even feel relieved. "*Chan urrainn dhomh do fhaicinn!*"

Gaelic? The locket had indeed been translating for her.

Thinking beyond that was impossible though. She couldn't get any air and another round of pain shuddered through her. The edge of a skirt brushed her ankles just before Aili walked into her, kicking the sole of one of her black sneakers.

"Locket," she wheezed. Something warm was rising up her throat. "Locket." Those two words cost her a great deal. She could see only a tiny pinpoint of space in front of her. The rest was black. She coughed and that warm something spilled out of her mouth, dribbling across her cheek.

Aili dropped her cane. Her voice faded as she yelled, "Iain! Iain!" Emma managed to get another blessed cycle of air. It sounded like someone blowing bubbles in chocolate milk but it was at least air. She didn't try to move anymore or speak another word, too worried that it would push her into unconsciousness – or worse.

* * * * *

Iain ran to the house, his right leg limping and his chest aching with anxiety. Something sank its claws into his chest at the sight of Emma crumpled on the ground. He knelt at her side, calling her name and reached for her, wanting to lift her from the ground, to wipe away the blood splashed across her cheek.

She whimpered feebly when he tried to sit her up and he let go, cursing at himself for not thinking. Coughing up blood was a bad sign. Had Rossalyn stabbed her? He ran his hands over her, searching. Her ribs had broken in several spots. The bones shifted and rolled without anything to hold them in place.

"L-lahket," she gurgled. More blood spilled from her mouth. "Fahynd thuh lahket." Iain reared back, stunned to hear her speaking a strange language and nearly panicking because he didn't understand.

"She keeps saying 'lahket'," Aili fretted. "Oh God, Iain, help her."

"I...I canna," he said. A pierced lung meant death.

When she weakly touched her fingers to her chest, he felt tears in his eyes. Resolutely blinking them back, he watched as she pawed at her neck.

Something was missing.

Hope surged inside him. Leaning toward her, he covered her hand with his. "Rossalyn? Does Rossalyn have it?" She shook her head, moving her fingers again. He lifted his hand and watched as she pointed at her feet. His head whipped around, his eyes spotting the glint of a small object half-hidden under a fold of her skirt. He grabbed for it.

The "lahket" was warm and heavy in his hand. The clasp was still intact and the chain unbroken. Wasting no more time, he slid it around her neck and fastened it. With a sigh, she went slack and her eyes fluttered shut.

"Emma, no," he whispered frantically, gripping her shoulders. She was dying. Jesus, she was dying! He laid his head over her chest, listening for her heartbeat, and was surprised to hear a strong, steady pulse. "Mother o'..." he breathed, leaning back up. "Wet a cloth, Aili." He smoothed strands of hair off Emma's forehead. Aili did as he said without comment.

The slap-scuff of sprinting footsteps grew louder outside just before Kenneth appeared at the door. "What has happened?" he panted. Aili set a bowl of water next to Iain and handed him a small cloth from her basket. Iain dipped it into the water and cleaned the blood from Emma's face.

Kenneth's voice became harsh and cold. "Did Rossalyn do this?"

"I dinna know," Iain answered.

"I saw her running away," Aili said. "A red blur tearing off toward the village. I got here as fast as I could, Iain. As fast as I could."

"I ken, Aili. I thank ye for that. Ye saved her life."

Kenneth squatted on Emma's other side. "But what happened, Iain?"

Frustration filled him. Frustration at Kenneth for asking him what he didn't know, at Rossalyn for hurting Emma, at fate for delivering him a woman as impossible to understand as she was alluring.

He barely knew anything about the stranger on the ground in front of him. He didn't know where she was from or how to help her. He didn't know why she had come to the Highlands. If only she would give him some answers.

"Her ribs are broken and she was coughing up blood," Iain explained. "Her charm was missing. Perhaps Rossalyn tore it off but Emma...she was trying to tell us to put it back." He tossed the bloodied cloth into the bowl.

"It sounded like she was speaking English," Aili said. Kenneth's head whipped up and Iain glanced grimly at his friend.

"English? That's impossible." The redhead looked at Emma again. "I'm sure it just sounded like it."

"It wasna exactly English," Iain said with a nod. "She settled when the charm was back around her neck."

"My God, she really is one of the good people," Kenneth said with awe.

Iain squeezed his eyes shut. "I was hoping ye wouldna say that."

* * * * *

Rossalyn looked over her shoulder, making sure for the tenth time that no one was following her. Though she had some information for him, she wasn't looking forward to seeing the MacGregor that night—assuming he was still alive to see her signal. If it weren't for certain unavoidable reasons, she would not meet him ever again but the MacGregor still had some uses and she was willing to chance his wrath.

Pausing, she stopped to listen for footsteps but heard nothing and continued on her way to the top of the hill, picking her way around the denser underbrush and watching her step. When she crested the hill, she stopped to catch her breath. Not much farther.

A hand covered her mouth and a cold blade bit into the skin on her neck. A large, warm body stepped against her. Rossalyn shrieked but it was mostly muffled.

"Nowt would be there to stop me? How about three dogs and a giant farmer good with a sword? Tell me why I shouldna kill ye here and now," Craig growled in her ear. Her blood ran cold as she realized that she hadn't told him about Iain's dogs.

Craig's hand left her mouth, his palm shoving her chin up to keep her throat exposed. "P-please, I made a mistake. I can make it up to ye," she begged. A tear tumbled down her cheek. She hadn't thought he would be angry enough to kill her.

"My baby brother fell into their hands!" he snarled. Brother? Oh God, he was going to do it. He would slice her open and bleed her all over the ground. "Ye think ye can remedy this? Ye think I care about ye? A Campbell whore? The only thing ye can do is be still while I slit yer throat." He pressed the knifepoint harder into her skin.

"No, please! I-I have information about yer brother and I can help ye g-get him back."

"He's still alive?" The pressure of the knife lessened. "Talk then. We'll see if yer information is worth yer life."

Rossalyn spoke as fast as her nerves would let her. "The crofter's name is Iain and about a week ago, a woman came to live with him, h-his lover."

"What are ye talking about? What do I care for another Campbell whore?" he spat, pricking her neck with the sharp blade.

"S-she's nae a Campbell! She has no clan!" Craig stilled, his attention caught. "She is important to both Iain and the laird. I have seen what she is with my own eyes—one of the good folk, the people of the mounds."

"Ye lie. I've never seen one of their kind."

“’Tis true! She wears a special charm. I saw its power, which should belong to the MacGregor clan. It was on yer lands that she appeared. It should be the MacGregor clan that benefits from fairy luck.”

He didn’t speak for a couple of breaths. “What power?” he then asked.

“To stop death.” She felt his surprise, heard the deep breath he took. “Ye can use her to get yer brother. The laird values her—I heard it myself from his servant. Once ye have yer brother, ye can kill her. Ye would have yer revenge.”

For a long, tense moment, Craig said nothing. Rossalyn knew she was putting her life at risk just to eliminate the fairy—she almost expected to feel the knife slice a long, deep line across the front of her throat—but ever since Iain’s first love had died, she had been trying to attract the well-off crofter. She wasn’t about to lose to an outsider whom Iain had known for only a couple of weeks.

Rossalyn nearly cried with relief when he released her and took the knife away from her throat. Pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders, she reached up and delicately touched the tiny nick in the side of her neck. The little wound stung terribly. A fast-moving cloud revealed the moon for a few seconds, splashing the area with pale light. She looked over her shoulder at Craig.

When she had first encountered the MacGregor a few months ago, she had been alone outside the village, trying to snare a rabbit to prove to a rival that she could do it herself. The fright that had thrummed through her at the sight of a handsome but dangerous stranger became an instant obsession. Both of them had been curious about the other and by the time she had returned to the village much later that day, she was not only carrying a freshly killed rabbit but had also lain beneath the forbidden MacGregor. She grew to crave the danger of associating with him the way some men crave the taste of ale. For a time, their secret meetings brought a strange fulfillment to her life.

It seemed, though, that both of them were simply using each other.

Craig frowned at her. “Why do ye stare? Do ye think I’ll beg forgiveness?” He snorted. “What could a whore really expect, other than the usual?” His hand shot out and he grabbed her arm hard enough to bruise. She gasped, instinctively pulling away, but he dragged her toward a low boulder jutting out of the hillside. Shoving her in front of him, he grabbed the back of her head with one hand and bent her over the rock. Her palms smacked against the rock’s cold surface, stopping her body before her head could smash into the boulder.

The MacGregor then flipped up her skirt. The bottom of her stomach dropped out and she tried to look back over her shoulder at him. He gripped the back of her neck and kicked her feet farther apart. “This is going to hurt,” he warned with a smile.

Chapter Fifteen

Emma woke with a vague sense of déjà vu. The same aches and pains from her first morning in the forest were ghostly echoes throughout her body. She opened her eyes, taking a few moments to enjoy being alive. With each breath, the pressure inside her chest eased more and more, until at last she felt as though she had woken from a good night's sleep.

The low brightness of the fire, the dark outline of the door and the hush of nature outside told her that it was nearing dawn. Any second, bird calls would usher in the new day. The lull was rather peaceful.

The taste in her mouth was awful though and her throat felt like she had tried to swallow sandpaper. She turned her head and found Iain sitting on a stool next to her. He lay half on the bed, his arms pillowing his head, and the tips of his left fingers were touching the side of her hand. He was asleep. She was very tempted to reach up and touch his face, to pull her fingers across the stubble on his cheek but she didn't want to wake him.

Emma sat up slowly, still wary of injuries but she felt no pain. Pushing aside the woolen blanket, she discovered that she wore only her smock and looked beyond the foot of the bed to find her kirtle folded on the trunk. Cocking her head, she saw her shoes placed neatly on the ground nearby.

Careful not to jostle Iain, she scooted down the bed, slid her feet into her shoes and then tiptoed to fetch her kirtle. She shivered as she pulled the yellow dress over her head. The fire would need to be fed soon. Sneaking over to the table, she glanced back at Iain to make sure he was still asleep and gratefully poured a cup of water from the full jug sitting alone in the center of the table. The only other plate sitting out held half a loaf of bread.

She reached for the bread after swallowing some water and tore off a sizeable chunk. It went down well but the taste in her mouth was still terrible. She wished she had some toothpaste. The next best thing was a breath mint, so she finished her water, went back to the trunk and retrieved her bag. After chewing up a couple of mints, she closed her purse and placed it back inside the trunk, closing the lid gently.

She then sidled around the foot of the bed and sat down. Iain was still asleep but frowning. Watching him, she reached up and touched her necklace, carefully checking the hook and eye clasp that she was so sure had broken yesterday. She was tempted to open the locket and check the note inside but she didn't want to see those frightening eyes again and couldn't bring herself to do it.

All she wanted was to be normal again—or at least be as normal as possible—but in only a second, Rossalyn had shattered Emma's fragile illusion that she might have a life

with Iain. The locket was keeping her alive but what kind of life would it be? Would she be able to grow old with Iain? To give him the family he wanted? Would she ever be able to take the damn thing off? None of the locket's clues had mentioned any specifics.

Her first question couldn't be answered easily—only time would tell. As for her second question, there was no easy way to know if she could ever have children. She hadn't even given motherhood much thought before meeting Iain. The thought of it now was enough to flush her cheeks. As to whether she would someday be free of the locket, she had little hope.

Iain woke with a start and lifted his head with a deep breath. He first noticed the empty space in front of him but then found her farther down the bed. His deep voice was husky from sleeping. "There ye are." He pushed himself to his feet and, in only a step, he turned to sit next to her. "Ye should be resting."

"No, I—" She cleared her throat, looking away from his concerned expression to stare at her lap. "I think I've slept enough."

He said nothing more, didn't even move and Emma realized with a tired sort of dread that he was preparing to say something important, that the time had come to tell him the truth.

She had always wanted to tell him, she never doubted that but what she feared was his reaction. The tension began building, growing more agitating as the silence stretched out. Her hands began to fidget but she couldn't bring herself to speak first.

"Emma—" Iain hesitated. She looked up and something in his eyes pulled at her, something ardent. "I deserve some answers. I had been so certain that ye were simply lost or abandoned when ye came to us but yesterday... Ye almost died. Ye should have died but ye didna. How is that possible?"

She nodded with resignation, tired of dodging his questions, of the guilt she felt. Keeping him in the dark about something as important as where she came from was cruel. Would she be able to trust someone who wouldn't talk about his past? Perhaps that was why he wouldn't kiss her.

Emma took a deep breath.

"I'm neither Scottish nor English and I was not born on the continent. Far across the ocean to the west is," she paused to find the right word, "another land mass—two continents, actually. The northern one is where I was born but not for another several hundred years."

As the words came out, Iain's gaze grew incredibly intense and she found it difficult to maintain eye contact. He didn't move except to breathe, though she could see his breaths coming faster. The muscles in his face were tight, his lips slightly ajar.

"Aili told me that it's the year one thousand three hundred and fifty-one but I was born in the year one thousand nine hundred and eighty. On Friday, October 27, 2000, I was in an accident. I was wearing this locket." She touched the book suspended from her neck. "And when I woke up, I was here in Scotland. I don't know who brought me here or why. All I know is what the note inside the locket said."

She recited the poem she had read under the tree by the stream but she didn't like the way Iain's expression gradually changed the longer she spoke. His eyebrows slowly pinched together but rather than widening, his eyes became narrower. Her words sped up as she tried to convince him that she was telling him the truth.

"That first night when we ate dinner, Kenneth called you a stag. The blackened arrows are The Black Death, which killed your mother, your sister and...and your lover. The locket wanted me to find you —"

Iain stood up abruptly, shaking his head. Her eyes stung with salty tears but a deep breath kept them at bay for a few seconds more. It was as clear as day that he was rejecting her story. Iain wasn't like Kenneth or Aili, who had both much more easily accepted that there was something unnatural—or at least unusual—about her. Iain, though, was hopelessly cynical.

"Such things are merely stories for children. They're nae real." He began to back up.

She stood, calling his name and stepping toward him but he only backed away faster. A painful sob became lodged at the top of her throat but she swallowed it down.

"Why me? Tell me why the locket chose me," he said, stopping at the table on the other side of the room.

"I-I don't know why. I already told you." She took small, slow steps toward him, her hands wringing.

"Then why do ye think it chose me?" he yelled.

His shouting elicited two hot tears that rolled down her cheeks. "I think we are meant to be together," she said. "We're a perfect pair."

"A perfect pair? Ye call this perfect?" he said. "Ye keep secrets and dinna trust me to keep them. Always ye elude my questions!" His head tossed from side to side, as though he were wrestling for control. Her chest ached at the pain on his face. He took a breath, looking at the fire rather than at her, though he didn't look any calmer. His jaw was tight. "Ye must be a MacGregor, playing some cruel game."

"I'm not!" she insisted, stepping even closer "My family name is Campbell." His eyes widened at her admission. "My father's side was Scottish and my mother's family was German and Irish. My ancestors had been living in America for over a hundred years when I died."

His pointed gaze swung to her. "Ye speak Gaelic but yesterday ye spoke some kind of English. I've heard it spoken before. I know what it sounds like. Are ye some Englishman's coddled daughter, run away from her idle, useless life?"

She reared back, feeling as though she had just been stabbed. The barb stung terribly but she pressed on.

"The locket is translating. I speak English because America was an English colony before it became independent." She closed the distance between them, fisting her hands in his warm, rough tunic. Iain shifted as though uncomfortable with the contact, which hurt even more. "Iain, please! Did you think I was faking yesterday morning? That my

pain and blood weren't real? The locket is the only thing keeping me alive! You know I'm a terrible liar. Do you think I'm lying now?"

Iain's face scrunched up and his wide mouth turned down into a deep frown. Lines appeared between his eyes as his hands compulsively grasped her elbows. She pressed close, fitting the length of her body against his.

"No," he finally admitted. "I dinna believe ye're lying."

Relief made her tears come even faster and she silently berated herself for acting so weak. Needing comfort from Iain like she needed air, she rose up on tiptoe, sliding her body up against his. She wanted his arms around her so badly.

"Iain, please..."

She tugged on his tunic to pull him closer and slid her arms around his neck. Her eyelids drooped. Bringing her lips within a hand's breadth of his, as close as she could stretch, she sighed when his hands cupped the backs of her shoulders.

"Iain," she breathed. He leaned down. She could feel his breath against her mouth and nearly groaned.

"But I do believe ye're mad," he whispered. His hands slid up to pull her arms from him. Her eyes blinked open. He set her away from him, his expression very severe. Her vision shimmered and for a split second, she thought she was going to faint. A soft sound of disbelief left her throat.

Without looking back, Iain walked to the door and lifted the bar. She couldn't let him leave though, not this time. "No, Iain, don't—"

"Leave me be, woman!" he snapped, slamming the door shut behind him.

Emma stumbled to the table and shakily sat down on the bench. She closed her eyes, pressing her hands against the throbbing ache in her chest.

* * * * *

Iain's stomach roiled as he stood at the edge of a paddock with Kenneth and watched the farmhands and dogs herd the sheep into another paddock with fresher grass. He hadn't eaten yet, but it wasn't hunger that pained him. Rather, he felt almost nauseous.

He had always prided himself on his honesty, loyalty and sincerity, though Kenneth would instead call him blunt, stubborn and suspicious. With Emma's arrival, though, he could no longer believe himself to have any of the qualities he esteemed. He had lied to Rossalyn about Emma and had let Kenneth lie to the laird about her, both fellow clansmen to whom he owed his loyalty, fellow clansmen whom he had betrayed. Emma was an outsider, of that he was certain, and he had far too readily sided with her rather than his own people.

Even so, she had pleaded with him so sincerely that morning, begging him to believe her outlandish story. Moreover, her story had done well to explain some of the many strange things he had noticed about her. Her strange possessions were from a

time that he wouldn't fully understand—a country and a culture different from the one he knew. She hadn't hesitated to explain her language or her heritage, yet she hadn't been able to explain much else.

The reason for his nausea, though, was how badly he wanted to believe her, to throw away his loyalties despite all his misgivings. When she had pressed herself against him, her warm breath laced with mint, her lips flushed from her worried bites and her cheeks wet with tears, he had almost covered her lips with his, almost slid his tongue inside to taste her, almost plunged his hand into her hair to hold her still as he pillaged her mouth.

Yet, how could her story be true? She was either a liar or a madwoman but she seemed like neither. He frowned as his thoughts went around and around in circles, his frustration only building when no epiphanies came to him.

"Ye didna break your fast with us this morning," Kenneth said, breaking into his thoughts. "I've never seen Emma so sad." Saying nothing, Iain looked askance at his friend. The redhead was standing at ease with his arms crossed, watching the flock. "I tried to talk to her," Kenneth continued, "but she didna answer. She could barely smile for Beth's sake." Iain looked across the paddock as the boys went after straggling sheep. "Aili talked with me though."

"'Tis always Aili," Iain ground out.

"My God, Iain." Kenneth laughed lightly. "I already ken that ye're a little hardhearted but never did I think ye were slow." Iain turned to his brother-in-law with surprise. "I told ye that story of the fairy kiss only to caution ye. Those legends of the good folk and their like are meant to teach morals. They're nae to be taken as truths."

Iain was confused. "Then—then ye..."

"Do ye nae ken what lust does to men and indeed to women as well? Rossalyn knows how to use lust against the men of the village and in the story yer uncle once told me, the fairy finds a man well steeped in drink, seduces him and then robs him after he passes out. The first night she was with us, I worried that Emma was another Rossalyn."

"Ye never believed that Emma was one of the good folk?" Iain asked.

Kenneth shook his head, his smile fading. "Not until yesterday." Iain was about to interrupt but Kenneth held up his hand. "Ye saw as well as I did what powers that charm has. That blood was real. I dinna know what was said this morning but I do know that it is killing her."

Iain frowned, his gaze sliding down to the ground as he recalled her tear-stained face for the hundredth time. "I asked her where she is from."

Kenneth abruptly stepped forward, the toes of his leather shoes entering Iain's vision. "And?" he asked with hushed excitement.

Recounting the story Emma had told him hours ago, Iain found it difficult to repeat some of the extraordinary things she had told him—that she was reborn in a new time

and place, living only with the protection of a mysterious charm and guided by a strange rhyme.

Kenneth was quiet for a long moment and Iain eventually glanced up at his friend. The redhead's expression looked almost frozen, eyebrows arched high on his forehead. "Ye believe her daft, I take it," Kenneth surmised.

"She spoke with honesty and without hesitating. If she isna lying, what else would be the reason for such a story?"

Kenneth made a thoughtful noise. "If she were truly mad, why did she hide this story? Why didna she offer it at once? The mad dinna try to hide their madness because...well, because they're mad. If her story was true and it was me in her place, I would do aught to bury the truth. Anyone who knew would think my brain had curdled."

The epiphany that Iain had been waiting for finally hit him. Emma's many vague comments came rushing back. Her "ah-muh-let", her unfamiliar jargon, the contents of her strange bag. All were little pieces that now fit into a complete whole.

"Will yer past come looking for ye?"

"I'm dead to them."

"What is a woman with only twenty years doing in the middle of the Highlands with no kin or a home to call her own?"

"You'll think I'm insane. You wouldn't believe me."

"Is that James?" Kenneth said, once again interrupting his thoughts. Iain looked over his shoulder at the path. Emerging from the trees on a horse was indeed the laird's constable, followed by four men who surrounded a fifth.

"And the laird," Iain said with surprise.

* * * * *

With her nose and mouth covered with her kerchief, Emma vigorously stretched and folded some fresh bread dough in a wide-mouthed bowl, her lips twisted into an angry frown. She stood at the end of the table near the door since the light was better and Aili sat with her back to the fire as she cut up leeks for the day's pottage.

"Could it be Iain's face ye're imagining right now, dearie?" Aili asked.

"Rossalyn's, actually," she admitted as she mashed the sticky goop back together. She then gently dented the fluffy top to test it. It was ready, so she began forming the dough into a ball, stretching the sides down and under and pinching the folds together.

The old woman made a disgusted noise. "That woman was running like her skirt was on fire." Aili pointed her knife at the door with her bony hand. "She willna come back here anytime soon."

Emma set the dough back inside the bowl, covered it and set it aside. "I hope not." She then dipped her hands into a nearby bowl of water, rinsing her hands off before wiping them on her apron. "What if she told someone about me?"

Aili grunted as she resumed slicing the leeks. "I dinna believe she did. She wouldna want any of the men who stick close to her heels ever thinking that she was a liar."

Letting her apron slip from her fingers, Emma grew quiet as her earlier anger at Rossalyn drained away. "So you think I'm crazy too?"

"I dinna ken what ye mean by kray-zee but no, lass, not at all. People have been calling me mad for years and my mind is as sound as when I was yer age," Aili assured her with a firm nod. Emma winced, not at all comforted. "But by my troth, I wouldna have believed it if I hadna seen ye for myself yesterday. Well, look at ye now, child! Making bread as if nowt had happened. There's magic at work here."

Emma pulled down her kerchief, letting it cover her locket. "But Iain —"

"Is suspicious of everything, sometimes even his own instincts. He does believe ye. He just dinna ken how he can believe something he normally wouldna. He never did understand well the meaning of faith."

"How do you understand it?" Emma asked, allowing herself some hope.

"He is?" the old woman gasped, looking at the empty space beyond the opposite end of the table.

"Aili?" She leaned down to look more closely at the woman's face when she heard the horses approaching, their hooves clapping along the dirt path. "Oh no," she breathed. Had Rossalyn blabbed about her? Was she about to be arrested and tossed into a dungeon like that poor MacGregor?

The old woman got up and walked toward the door but Emma backed farther away, retreating behind the table toward the rear of the house. She heard a couple of deep-voiced shouts and the sound of someone landing on their feet. Aili made it to the doorway. "Who is it?" she squawked.

"Aili, ye beautiful girl!" a man exclaimed. "This is where ye've been spending yer days. I should've known." Emma backed up until she hit the rear cabinets. Where was Iain?

Leaning heavily on her walking stick, Aili hobbled outside and out of view to the left. "James! I'm happy to see ye safe. I hardly see ye and no one tells me news of ye anymore."

"I'm good, ma'am. Very good." The man named James then said something in a serious tone too low for Emma to hear and she actually found herself looking around for something to use as a weapon.

"'Tis always a pleasure to see ye, laird," Aili said with obvious respect in her voice. "Though I dinna really see aught these days," she joked. The laird? The laird was here?

"Ah, there ye are, Iain," a second man called, one who spoke with authority. "I didna recognize ye without yer beard. Ye look ten years younger!" He laughed good-naturedly. "No need to run! The lass is inside, aye?"

James interjected, "If ye'll wait only a moment, laird."

A man almost as tall as Iain stepped into the doorway, though he was much leaner. He obviously took far more care with his appearance as well. His brown hair was loose but tame, combed back from his narrow, sharp face and his full beard was well trimmed. He wore a jerkin over his tunic, as well as breeks and boots, probably because he rode a horse. She somehow expected him to be holding shackles, or at least a long length of rope but he wasn't. His left hand was wrapped around the scabbard of a sword hanging from his leather belt.

When his eyes found her, she couldn't bring herself to say anything but he didn't speak either. He glanced around the interior of Iain's home and she found herself glancing wherever he did, wondering what he might be looking for. The man named James then silently stepped inside, relaxing his stance and taking his hand off his sword.

The next man to come inside was shorter and stockier than James and she could tell instantly by his dress that he was the laird. The color of his clothing was more vibrant than anything she had seen in the village, parts of it trimmed with fur. His brown hair was graying but he looked very fit. His chest and shoulders were massive. He smiled upon seeing her and walked up to the table.

"Welcome, young miss," he said jovially. As he spoke, Aili came back inside and two other men remained outside, standing guard on either side of the door. "I am Archibald Campbell, the laird of these lands and loyal to the King of Scots, David II and his regents."

Emma froze, having absolutely no idea how to respond. The laird was watching her expectantly but what did he want her to say? The fairy king sends his regards?

Iain stepped into the house, followed by Kenneth. Both were out of breath. Emma glanced at Iain, somehow hoping that the right answer was written on his face. "What is yer name?" the laird said, seemingly baffled by her lack of response.

"It's Emma." She looked back at the laird. "I-I mean, it's Emma, your...lordship?" Was she supposed to bow? Curtsy? Prostrate herself on the ground?

Thankfully, the laird smiled at her answer. "A lovely name and just 'laird' will do." Iain began walking around the fire toward her. "Are ye comfortable here, Emma?" Iain touched her arm with his left hand and pressed his right hand against the small of her back, bringing her closer to the laird.

"Yes, I am, laird," she answered with more confidence. It seemed that the laird was rather happy to be meeting her. The man looked around Iain's home for a few seconds, his eyes noting the food being prepared on the table and Emma's dress.

"Is life here far different from in the mounds?" Not sure how to answer that one, Emma stalled for a few seconds, unconsciously backing up against Iain. The sharp-eyed James was eyeing her closely. Iain's right hand settled on her waist.

"Yes, but I've come to like it."

"If ye desire it," the laird said with a smile, holding out his hands, "ye may stay in the castle with my family. Colin speaks of ye often and my wife would enjoy the company." Iain's hand tightened against her waist.

Taken aback, she couldn't help her slack-jawed reaction. Just how were fairies regarded that she would receive such an offer? "W-uh... Thank you very much, laird. You're much more generous than I ever would have expected. I'm very grateful." Iain's fingers now bit into her flesh and his other hand gripped her elbow.

"Jeh-ner-us?" the laird laughed as he looked over at Kenneth. "I ken now what ye meant when ye said she spoke strangely." He turned back to Emma with a grin. "It's settled then!"

"However," she interrupted, "I'm perfectly happy here." The hand gripping her waist relaxed.

"Are ye sure, young miss? Iain is one of our bravest but we can offer ye more protection at the castle," the laird entreated.

"If I may, laird," Kenneth cut in. "Iain is the reason why she wishes to stay." As if to back up the redhead's statement, Iain moved his left hand up to her shoulder and pulled her tighter against his body.

"Oh," the laird said with raised eyebrows, looking at Kenneth. He then glanced back at Emma with a smile. "I see."

The laird was smiling but Emma wasn't and her flushed cheeks were not a sign of shyness. Iain's possessiveness, clashed with his earlier rejection, made her utterly livid. She wasn't staying for him. She simply didn't want to be kept under constant guard at the castle, which was only a step away from being a prisoner in the dungeon, just like the MacGregor.

She would have tossed Iain's hands off her if weren't for the laird and constable.

"I expect to hear a wedding date soon," the laird said with arms akimbo. "And I shall expect ye both at the festival come harvest-time, hopefully with a little one on the way." He wiggled his finger in the general direction of Emma's abdomen and her cheeks lit on fire, most definitely from shyness this time. The man was worse than Aili! The laird splayed his hands, looking around and leaning forward. "Is there aught else ye may need, lass?"

"N-no, nothing else. You've already given me this beautiful dress."

"Well then!" he barked as he stood up to his full height again. The laird looked at Iain. "I also came to see how this year's lambs are faring. Ye have time now, aye?"

"Of course, laird," Iain said, speaking for the first time since arriving.

"I'll take ye over to the herd," Kenneth offered, briefly glancing at Iain. The redhead was out the door first and the laird called ahead a question to him as he followed. The men-at-arms were quick to follow. The constable, looking at Emma one last time, ducked out of the house to bring up the rear.

Emma let out the breath she had been holding, her entire body relaxing. She hadn't realized how fast her heart was racing but already it began to slow down as relief set in. Then she remembered Iain's hands on her. Jerking away from his touch, she turned to look at him, letting her pent-up anger spill out.

Iain had the gall to look confused. "What..." His features sank into contrition. "This morning, I—"

"The laird is waiting. You'd better go," she said.

"Damn it, Emma, I need to say —"

"You don't need to say anything."

"She isna in the mood to talk and ye dinna have the time, Iain. Best hurry up," Aili said. Her normally coarse voice was strangely smooth and persuasive. Iain looked across at Aili but then his eyes came right back to Emma.

"Iain, are ye coming?" Kenneth called faintly.

He cursed under his breath and his hands snapped into tight fists and he strode to the door. Just shy of leaving the house, he stopped and turned his head to speak over his shoulder.

"Emma, dinna forget yer promise."

Her throat tightened as she instantly recalled his gruff voice demanding her word to never leave. The memory was still so powerful that for a couple of seconds, she was back on that bed, breathless and half-naked beneath him.

She almost screamed at him for reminding her of that night but he was gone before she could.

* * * * *

Iain was almost ready to throw out his dinner guests once they had finally finished off the bread and pottage. Emma set out raspberries after clearing the empty bowls but his impatient glower and the uncomfortable silence were thankfully quite enough to inspire an early night.

All afternoon and all evening, Emma had been ignoring him. She spent the entire midday meal away from the house washing clothes. After the day's work was over, he had arrived in time for his evening bath but without saying a word, she had stood up, dumped in the last bucket of hot water and left. When she returned to finish preparing dinner, he tried talking to her, hoping that she would notice his freshly shaven face, but she didn't so much as look in his direction. It had been only a moment later that Kenneth and his daughter arrived. Emma had smiled for Beth but throughout the entire meal, she avoided all conversation and even eye contact with him.

"But I dinna want to sleep yet," the little girl complained as Kenneth led her to the door, where Iain stood. Malcolm and Thomas had already left, both grabbing up a handful of raspberries to take with them and mumbling hasty goodbyes. Iain didn't care if they took the entire basket of fruit, as long as they all left.

"Emma is tired, sweeting," Kenneth cajoled, tugging Beth along. The little girl looked back at the blonde standing by the table, somehow discerning the fatigue on her face. Iain could see as well that she wasn't in a good mood – and it was his fault.

"I dinna have to sleep yet?" Beth asked, looking up at her father.

"No but say good night."

"Good night, Emma," she said as she waved her small hand. Emma waved back, smiling gently. Beth then looked up somewhat fearfully at Iain, no doubt troubled by his expression. "Good night, Uncle Iain," she whispered. Iain wished her the same. Kenneth lifted the little girl into his arms and Beth wrapped her arms around his neck, laying her head on his shoulder.

Kenneth then stepped close. "Actions over words," he reminded him.

Once the redhead left, he gratefully closed the door and set the bar in place. Behind him, he could hear the soft sounds of splashing and scrubbing as Emma cleaned up. He turned around to watch her. Her hair had dried already and hung in a long, light, flossy curtain. As she made her way to the closest end of the table, she rewet the cloth in the bowl of water, squeezed out the excess and then slapped the wet rag down again to scrub some more. Her movements were sharp and fast, her mouth set in a straight line.

"I ken why ye're angry, Emma but –"

"No, I don't think you do," she flippantly retorted. She flung the cloth back into the bowl of water in the center and turned to him, her fists on her hips.

"'Tis about this morning, isna it?" His voice rose to match hers. "How could it be aught else? And how could I be expected to believe such a story, without any hesitation, on blind faith?"

"I didn't expect it to be easy for you but I expected you to keep an open mind," she said, punching both hands down to her sides. "After the first time we had sex, I worried over why you wouldn't kiss me. I thought it was just your preference but no, it wasn't that. I thought this morning that it was because you felt I didn't trust you to know my secret but no, it wasn't that either. After you called me mad this morning, after I cried for you to believe me and told you what you have been so eager to know, I had to sit through breakfast and put a smile on my face while you were off condemning me in my insanity."

Iain could barely keep up. Her words came fast and he honestly didn't understand a couple of them. However, he knew exactly where her destination lay.

"I had to find out from Kenneth through Aili that the reason why you haven't kissed me is because you think I'll use some magical fairy power on you!" She gestured wildly. "How is it that you're allowed to believe whatever you want about me but I'm the mad one?"

"Nowt makes sense with ye!" he blurted. "Until ye came, I thought I understood my life. I thought I understood how the world worked, or at least my part in it. Ye turn everything on its head and I more often than not dinna understand what I see anymore. I dinna ken what to believe."

"Yes, you do," she said harshly, taking a step toward him. "I weigh half as much as you and despite your limp, I can't even outrun you, but you believed him when Kenneth suggested that I might hurt you or steal from you. You believed him because you trust him." Iain clenched his jaw to hear sense coming out of her, especially when it made him look like a fool. "After what you saw yesterday—even after that—you first called me a liar when I tried to explain and then you thought I was out of my mind."

"But Emma, I—"

"And even though I fooled myself into thinking that you'd believe me, that's not why I'm angry either." He closed his mouth, falling silent as confusion ambushed him yet again. "It was a mistake to stay here after knowing that I was in love with you because you know that I'm not normal. You know this, so you don't trust me...not even enough to kiss me." The air in his lungs left in a whoosh as a tear spilled down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away. "And how can you love someone you don't trust? How can I be normal again if everyone knows I'm not?"

"Emma," he whispered. He took a step toward her but she retreated, holding her hand up while the other one continued wiping at the burgeoning stream of tears.

"So the reason why I'm angry," she said, "is that I promised you I wouldn't leave and I can't even bring myself to break my word."

"Enough of this." He closed the distance between them, snatching her wrist when she tried to evade him. He hauled her against him.

"Don't." She braced her hands on his chest to keep him at arm's length but he forced her close and clamped his arm around her. His other hand grabbed a fistful of her hair and forced her head back. She gasped.

"Never doubt that I love ye."

He kissed her. Lips already ajar, she was compelled to accept his tongue in her mouth. She stiffened in his arms. He slanted his mouth across her lips, tasting the tang of raspberries. He wanted to feel her lips seeking more though, to feel her relax against him and clutch him closer. Though she didn't resist, she also didn't yield and he lifted his mouth.

"Kiss me, Emma." His lips lightly brushed hers. He pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. "Kiss me." He pressed another kiss to her cheek, tasting her tears. "Please."

With a shaky sigh, Emma slid her hands up his chest and wrapped her arms around his neck. He heard her whisper his name just before she touched her lips to his. A growl rumbled out of his throat. He slammed his mouth against hers. Emma sighed desperately as she answered every kiss and met every thrust of his tongue with her own.

The more he kissed her, the more he wanted. He couldn't have enough and only grew more frenzied, sucking her lower lip into his mouth to gently nibble on it with his teeth before taking her mouth again in another kiss. A warmth that he had never felt before filled him and, if it was the fairy magic he had dreaded, he didn't care. He reveled in it, his heart pounding and his head spinning.

When they came up for air, he couldn't resist more small kisses and it seemed that neither could she. She stretched high to leave kisses along his jaw, across his cheeks and even one planted firmly on his chin. Her fingers played in his hair—light, swirling touches that tickled his scalp.

"A perfect pair?" he panted. His gaze traced a path from her sweet lips to her adorable freckles to her clear blue eyes.

"Made for each other," she said.

Every nerve ending in Emma's body was buzzing and she could almost hear the hum. Iain was easily and indisputably the best kisser of any man with whom she had ever locked lips. Interesting, passionate and focused, his kisses made her dizzy, made her toes curl and her knees weak.

One of his brawny arms held her tight and she could feel his erection pressing against the softness of her abdomen, pulling her attention downward. Iain brushed his nose against hers and took her mouth in another kiss. She slid her left arm down his body, fished under the hem of his tunic and grasped the warm, thick cock prodding her navel. Iain grunted against her lips. She rubbed her thighs together when he began thrusting into her fist. He was so warm in her hand, so velvety smooth and yet so hard.

"Iain," she gasped, pulling her lips away. "I..."

"What is it?" He pressed more kisses to her cheeks.

Her cheeks burned as she realized she had no eloquent way to tell him what she wanted to do to him and he wouldn't understand modern slang. "I w-want this," she stuttered, lightly squeezing him as he pushed into her grip. "In my mouth."

He paused for a couple of seconds, his eyes staring into hers with obvious disbelief. "Aye," he groaned. "Hold onto me." He picked her up and they exchanged more kisses as he walked to the table. Though she was surprised that he didn't carry her to the bed, she was glad he didn't—the table was closer and she was already soaking wet. When he set her on her feet in front of the bench, she was eager to sit and pull his hips between her knees but he stopped her by gripping her arms.

"I want ye naked for this," he purred. She didn't think it was possible but her heart beat even faster, thumping inside her chest as loudly as a drum while his hands pulled at her laces. Once there was enough slack, Iain pushed both garments off her shoulders and past her hips. Her dress fell against the bench and to the ground with a muffled rustle. His smoldering eyes perused her nudity, his glance just as real as the stroke of his hand. He slowly knelt, letting her use his shoulders for balance while he helped her step out of her clothes.

She felt silly wearing only her black sneakers, so while Iain set her dress in a haphazard pile on the end of the table, she shucked her shoes, not caring about the dirt floor. She sat down. As Iain came to stand in front of her, he unfastened his belt and cast it aside. He pulled his tunic up and over his head, tossing it on top of her dress.

Her breaths began to come in short and shallow. He stood over her, the insides of his knees brushing the outsides of her thighs. When he fisted his hand in her hair and brushed the side of her face with his other fingers, she whimpered softly and leaned forward with the gentle push of his hand. She licked her lips.

Holding the root of his thick length, she laved the head of his cock in one long lick from the back of her tongue to the tip. Iain made a soft noise, as though someone squeezed the air from his lungs.

She licked him again and then again, tantalizing him with slow passes up the length of her tongue. It was barely ten seconds before he was pulling her closer, straining for more. She pumped her hand up and down his shaft, pressing the tip of her tongue against the slit on the head. Exploring the sensitive skin, she heard his breathy groan and looked up to find him watching her. She held his gaze as she slid him between her lips.

Watching his face as she pushed him deeper into her mouth, as she then pulled her lips back up the smooth, hard length while trying to suck him back inside her mouth, Emma had never felt more powerful, even though he was the one standing up.

“God,” he grunted before pulling in a shuddering breath.

She sped up, bobbing up and down his cock. She gripped his thigh with her free hand, feeling his muscles clench as his hips began moving in time with her mouth. His other hand went to the back of her head. The little grunts and sighs that issued from his mouth affected her far more than she had expected. She wriggled on the bench, squeezing her thighs together whenever he sped up and relaxing whenever he tried to slow down. His groans grew louder but he swallowed them and his hips paused. He was holding back.

Growing impatient, she cupped him from underneath and stroked. Iain threw his head back, releasing a loud, harsh breath. His fist in her hair pulled her back and his shaft left her mouth with a soft, wet pop.

Though it had lasted only a couple of minutes, Iain was already dragging her to her feet. He leaned down, simultaneously kissing her and sliding his hands around the back of her thighs. She grabbed onto his shoulders. He lifted her and stepped over the bench. Reaching back, she braced her palm on the table as he leaned forward to set her down.

“’Tis good ye’re on the table,” he said, pulling his lips away.

She licked her lips, trying to find her voice. “Why?”

Iain nuzzled her again, a smile pulling up one side of his mouth. His answer was soft and low. “Because I intend to eat ye.”

Her vision blurred and didn’t focus no matter how many times she blinked. She struggled for air even as he kissed her neck. His tongue flicked out and touched the hollow of her throat. Lower he went, one hand palming her breast and the other boldly sliding between her legs. His longest finger pulled up on the knot of nerves hidden in her folds.

She rubbed her fingers across the nape of his neck and watched his lips tug on the pert peak of her breast. Once it was flushed with color, she brought her hand to her other breast, pushing it toward his mouth as he kissed his way across her chest. She groaned as he slid a finger inside her. Her back arched when he sucked her other nipple into his mouth.

Biting down on her lip, she rubbed her knees against his sides. The quiet night made it easy to hear his mouth on her skin, the wet glide of his fingers inside her. His teeth lightly scraped the blushing flesh in his mouth. Her lips fell open. She softly but swiftly inhaled. His lips released her breast and he meandered lower, gently nipping the skin on her abdomen.

Holding herself up with both hands, she watched with flushed cheeks as he lifted her knees, could feel his damp fingers gripping the back of her thigh. His eyes burned with lust as he sat and propped her thighs on his shoulders. He then pressed close as though he were about to start a meal, his heavy gaze sliding down her body while his hands slid up, caressing her from her knees to her hips. She could feel his breath on her skin.

Her eyes closed when he pressed his mouth against her and dipped his tongue between her lips. It wasn't the first time a man had done this for her, so she had an idea what to expect but Iain wasn't just any guy. He was her perfect match. He was made for her, just as she was made for him.

The fire's pops died away. The faint sigh of the night breeze blowing past the house faded. She could only hear the smacking noises of his lips and tongue. She couldn't feel the hard wood beneath her hands and backside. She could only feel his chiseled shoulders beneath her thighs, his strong, coarse hands stroking her skin, his firm mouth...

Her breath caught in her throat. She tensed.

When she opened her eyes again, she lay fully upon the table, one hand loosely gripping the edge below and one hand slipping free of Iain's hair. Both hands ached terribly and there was a ringing in her ears. The room was spinning but it was worse when she briefly closed her eyes, so she kept them open. Iain lifted her thighs from his shoulders and stood.

"Stay with me," he said roughly. The wide head of his cock nudged the entrance to her body. She wasn't sure if she could take any more just then but she couldn't find her tongue to speak.

Iain leaned over her with a deep, breathy moan as his hips pressed forward. "Just ease up." He grabbed the opposite edge of the table and planted his other hand by her shoulder. She flattened her hand on his chest, trying to stay relaxed but with every inch that penetrated her, it became harder not to clamp down. "That's it," he whispered as he worked farther inside. "Ye can take all of me."

One at a time, Emma brought her feet up from the bench and braced them on the edge of the table. The position opened her just a little wider. He pulled back slightly and then firmly bucked, sinking in to the hilt.

His eyes found hers and for a few poignant heartbeats, they didn't move. She wanted to say something, to tell him how dearly she loved him, to vow that she would be his until her dying day but she couldn't. Nothing would come out.

He drew back. She couldn't help it when she squeezed, wanting to keep him inside. He growled her name and began a jarring rhythm, one that shook the entire table. Her other hand hit the wood with a slap as she grabbed the edge. Each urgent lunge stole her breath and she could only accept, only submit. She quickly caught on though, canting her hips up to meet every thrust.

It was so much to feel. Her emotions were still tender and his declaration of love was still fresh in her mind. Her lips throbbed from his searing kisses and her legs shook with strain. Though the table was solid beneath her, she could hear it protesting the weight, the movement. She could hear the water sloshing around in the nearby bowl. She could hear Iain sucking in shallow breaths, could see the ecstasy on his face. She wondered if she looked as out of control as he did, for her body was no longer under her own authority. It sought him like the waves sought the shoreline, surging against his pounding hips, undulating under him.

She couldn't look anywhere else but his face—didn't want to. His eyes obviously watched where he was driving himself into her body, perhaps fascinated by the sight the same as she was fascinated by his expression. He inhaled through his teeth, releasing it with a wide-mouthed groan. His forehead was covered with sweat. The muscles in his arms bulged as his entire body tightened, focusing its power between her thighs.

Her climax rose from deep inside—not sudden but imminent, like she was about to be hit by a train. Heat bloomed, intensifying as every muscle in her body contracted, yet still it didn't arrive, didn't explode but only built higher. Iain opened his mouth as if he would speak but all that came out was a strangled sound.

Pleasure erupted. Her back bowed sharply, her vision blurred and her eyes fluttered shut. Iain was right on her heels, pushing deep inside and giving her everything he had. For several long, glorious seconds, she was only a tactile creature—blind and deaf to everything else but basking in something pure and all-consuming.

Iain's bellowing roar still echoed in her ears when her other senses slammed back into place. His hips continued to ram against her and then undulate for a few seconds before jabbing again. Emma gasped for air and whimpered as she throbbed around his hard cock for a moment more until finally, her body was quiet again.

The insides of her thighs were wet with pleasure and the skin on her back was a little tender but she sighed contentedly, not caring that she was splayed across the table. Her leaden limbs were too heavy to lift anyway.

She licked her lips and then swallowed, finding her voice. "Iain, that was...just..."

His fingers greedily stroked across her abdomen. "Aye, I was thinking the same."

"Then does that mean you're thinking what I'm thinking now?" she asked with a lazy smile.

Iain grinned.

* * * * *

Emma collapsed onto the bed, covered in a fine sheen of sweat. It was difficult to breathe with her face against the mattress though, so she turned over, wincing as her muscles objected. She was going to be so sore in the morning. The thought made her smile.

Her lover rolled against her side, his hand sliding over her ribs and grasping her other arm. "Have ye ever ridden a horse?" he asked. She turned her head to look at him, her close-lipped smile growing wider into a full grin.

"Only a couple of times." She curled her fingers around his forearm lying across her stomach. Her eyes followed as he boosted his head up with the heel of his other hand. He smiled rather lasciviously at her and her heart twisted as his dimples appeared again.

"Yet ye ride so well."

She laughed, stroking his arm as she answered. "I had a very good mount."

"Ye didna travel much before?"

Emma didn't have to guess what "before" meant. "Horses weren't really used for traveling—or won't be. You're right though. I didn't travel very much."

Her comment sparked interest in his eyes. "If nae horses, how did ye travel?" She breathed in to answer but quickly realized that she didn't know exactly how to answer. Iain didn't know about trains or machinery. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"It's not easy to explain what a car is. Um...think of a big cage." She tried to shape her hands into the vague shape of a car. "It has doors in the sides so that you and other people can get inside and sit. The car can move on its own without animals to pull it. It uses a special fuel and one person drives it with pedals on the floor to control the speed and a wheel to change the direction."

"Wait, that round thing ye were carrying—"

She was glad he remembered. "Yes, exactly. I was actually driving a car when I—well, anyway, I'm not sure why the steering wheel came with me. I mean, why only the wheel and not the entire..." The end of her sentence was lost as two thoughts finally merged into one realization.

"What is it?" Iain asked.

The wheel was what had killed her. She hit it first when the careening SUV slammed into her front end. Emma looked up at the serious expression on Iain's face.

"Is that how ye died?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said with a small nod. "Cars can go very fast and if anyone makes a mistake, then accidents happen." His arm pulled her tighter against him.

"Yer parents lost their only other child?"

"Not their only... My mother was pregnant when I left, so—I can't imagine how painful it was for them to—" Emma swallowed. "I just hope the baby is okay."

"Oh-kei?"

"Okay is the same as 'all right'," she explained. "I mean, my mother is strong but..." Iain smoothed his hand up to her face and brushed his thumb across her frowning lips.

"I'm sorry. I shouldna have said aught."

She swallowed, shaking her head. "No, it's fine. I think it makes me feel better to tell you." He was quiet for a moment, his eyes studying her mouth. He looked puzzled.

"The fashion in yer time was quite strange. So much uncovered skin and unnatural coloring, though I think it was yer hair that amazed me most." His words made her smile again.

"I should probably explain that. I had been on my way to a...uh, special holiday celebration. My clothes, hair and makeup—um, coloring were only a costume."

"A kos-toom?"

She wracked her brain for a similar word. "Yeah, um...a disguise?"

"Why would ye wear a disguise to a celebration?"

"The point of Halloween is to become someone else and fool the visiting dead spirits. I think Halloween is descended from Samhain?" She was sure she was butchering the pronunciation.

Iain's eyebrows pinched together for a few seconds as he pondered that silently but then they shot up. "Ye mean *Oidhche Shamhna*? Yer family must have been very wealthy to buy silk for such an occasion."

She was about to correct him and say that the dress hadn't been all that expensive but she stopped herself. "I suppose we were. I hadn't realized." She glanced at the obvious question on Iain's face. "Well, my family would've been considered 'middle class'."

"Middle?" It was Iain's turn to frown. "I canna clothe ye in silk and rare furs or adorn ye with silver buttons and jeweled girdles. I canna even afford most spices."

She reached up to touch his hand. "Oh Iain, I don't need any of those things. That was a different time and place." Literally.

"Next season, I'll be able to sow barley. I could someday give such things to ye."

With a smile, she pressed her fingers against his lips. "Iain, please. Right here is what I need. The only thing."

Iain pulled her hand away and leaned over her. She licked her lips in anticipation, shutting her eyes. His kiss was tender, almost chaste.

It still made her toes curl.

He lifted his mouth a moment later and did the nuzzling thing that only made her want to kiss him more. "Although it would be nice to have a pair of shoes," she said.

His dimples made another appearance. "Then ye shall have them."

She smoothed her hand up his chest as they exchanged more kisses and her fingers found the long scar that ran from his shoulder to his opposite side. Curiosity struck her and as she explored the scarred flesh, she wondered how a simple crofter had received such a wound. She thought of how painful it must have been and of how high the chance for infection had been. She was contemplating a way to ask him about it when his hand wrapped around her fingers.

"It happened many years ago when I was only a year older than Malcolm." He lifted his head to look at her. "For my size, I was chosen to be trained as one of the laird's *leuchd-crios* to guard him when he traveled, and on the road to Kilmartin, we were set upon by a group of men. I was trained well but I was inexperienced and the man who came at me was many years my senior."

Iain set the tips of her fingers at the top of the scar and slowly pulled her fingers down and across the old wound, letting her sensitive fingertips feel every inch. "James saved my life when he pulled me back. The rain saved it again when I slipped and dodged a swing from another man that would've taken my head off." Enthralled, she couldn't look away from his intense eyes. "That second man was the first I ever killed."

"Iain," she said softly.

"I served the laird until the winter when my uncle died and my mother begged the laird to return me to her. I was about yer age then. Kenneth had just married my sister."

"I noticed your right knee. Did that happen while you were a...a, uh—"

"A *leuchd-crios*?" Emma nodded. Iain actually smiled. "No, I was thatching the roof and fell. It hurt far worse than this did," he joked.

"Seems hard to believe." He leaned down again and she tilted her chin up to catch his kiss. His fingers brushed the chain of her locket and he paused before his lips could touch hers. "Iain?"

"Will you ever be able to take it off?"

She worried the inside of her lip, shaking her head. "Neither of the notes was very specific. Maybe someday I can but...I don't think so."

His eyebrows went up. "Ye can read?"

"You can't?" She was floored when a slash of red appeared on his cheeks.

"No," he grumbled. His eyebrows twitched. "Ye said 'neither of the notes'. There was another?" As soon as he said it, the memory of the frightening pair of eyes flashed in her mind. It must have shown on her face because Iain's expression turned to concern. "What did it say?"

She tried to recall the exact words but she had only seen the poem once and hadn't dared to look at it again. "It warned me about a wolf. It said the wolf wanted vengeance, that it was watching."

His voice hardened. "Rossalyn?"

The thought made her pause and for a moment, she wondered. Rossalyn was certainly hateful and had tried to take her locket but somehow it didn't fit.

"On the note was drawn a pair of eyes—a man's eyes but I don't know how I could tell. I can't think of Rossalyn as a wolf. I thought it would be a MacGregor," she guessed.

"Show me the note." He gestured at the locket sitting against the top of her shoulder.

Her heart quivered and she vehemently shook her head. "I don't want to see it again. Please."

He squeezed her shoulder. "Ye dinna have to. Just give me the note."

Her stomach tightened with unease as she reached for her locket. She popped open the clasp. Plucking out the folded note, she held it out to Iain, who took it wearing a grim expression. He sat up, turning away from her and she heard him open up the delicate slip of paper.

"There is nowt here," he said with confusion.

"What?" Her heart leapt with hope and she sat up, scooting nearer and peering around his arm. He held the note closer to her and it was indeed blank. She leaned her head against his shoulder, tears of relief swimming in her eyes as she took the note back from him. Iain remained silent and for a few seconds, she stared at the blank, delicate paper, fighting to keep her composure, before folding it up and slipping it into the locket.

Just as she released the locket to let it hang free, the moisture that had pooled above her lower lashes spilled over. She tried to wipe the tear away before Iain saw it but the movement was what gave her away.

He twisted toward her, leaning on one hand and sliding his other arm around her waist. "None of that, now. I die a little whenever ye cry." She gratefully leaned into him, pressing herself against his body. Iain held her close and she slipped her arms around his torso.

She sighed. "I've cried more in the last two weeks than in the last two years. I'm not a brave person, I guess."

"That isna true. Ye're very brave."

"But those eyes... When I first saw them, I nearly dropped the note into my bathwater. It felt like they were really looking at me, like they could see me." She hoped—and prayed—that the blank note was a good omen.

"Ah, so that was it," Iain said. He pressed a kiss to her temple. "The night I saw ye after yer bath, I thought it was me that scared ye."

She pulled back to gape at him. "So...so that's why you didn't..."

A corner of his mouth curled up. "Did ye want me to?"

"I don't really know but it was obvious that you wanted to." She inhaled as Iain caressed her from her hip to her knee and back again. His eyes fell to her lips.

"When I saw ye..." His voice deepened. "Nipples as ripe as raspberries, skin as creamy as milk. Ye tried to hide yerself and it made my cock even harder." The vivid poetry of his words followed by the almost vulgar admission was a combination that made her vision gray at the edges. His roaming hand cupped her breast and he pinched the stiffened tip. "How could I not want ye?"

Why was it suddenly so hard to breathe? "Well...you're welcome to...interrupt my bath anytime you like," she whispered. Iain bore her down, sliding his leg between hers.

"Aye, love. I will."

Chapter Sixteen

"Emma, ye've done nowt but blush and sigh all day," Aili teased. Emma looked down at the hunk of cabbage she was supposed to be tearing up and realized that she had been spacing out. Across from her, Colin and Beth both giggled, their mouths full of raspberries that had turned their teeth, tongues and lips pink. It was adorable and Emma smiled. Sitting next to her at the table with his arms crossed, Donald was as still and silent as stone.

"I'm sorry, Aili." She began tearing up the cabbage leaves, dumping the remains into a bowl. "I guess I can't help it."

Aili cackled, which got Beth going again. "'Tis expected. Ye're in love."

Hearing the word "love" warmed Emma's cheeks. "How long ago did your husband..."

"Oh, a long while, at least ten years but seeing ye these last few days... I had almost forgotten how much I miss him." Aili wore a small, sad smile.

"I didn't mean—I'm sorry if I made you sad."

Aili reached over and patted the back of her hand. "I dinna want to forget, dear. I like being reminded."

She wasn't sure if Aili saw it but she smiled at the old woman. Concentrating on her task, she continued to tear up the cabbage leaves and even had some help from the children, who greatly enjoyed ripping apart the vegetable.

Emma had lost count by now of how many days she had been in this place but it felt as long as a month. She and Iain hadn't yet discussed a wedding but she could feel that it was expected—and soon. Of course Aili brought it up at every meal, telling them to wait until after the next new moon and promising to have a wedding dress ready for her. Emma didn't understand the reason for half of the strange wedding customs that Aili warned her of and she was especially leery of any mention of people being in the room when she and Iain were "put to bed" on their first night.

As far as Emma was concerned, though, their honeymoon had already started. Iain was not overtly affectionate in front of his family but in private... It seemed that every moment they were alone, he was seducing her anew. Only yesterday, he had followed through on his promise to interrupt her bath. The area around the tub was still drying and Iain was planning on having a larger tub built, saying that it would be less work to prepare only one bath a night.

"Emma," Aili gently chided. Coming out of her reverie with a blink, she looked down at her unmoving hands. *Crap.*

"Why dinna ye fetch some more water?" Aili reached over and gathered up the remaining cabbage. "I'll finish these."

"Ow-w-w," Colin groaned. Rubbing his midsection, he leaned over until his chin touched the table. Donald finally moved, unfolding his arms and half-standing.

Beth gripped the arm of Colin's tunic. "What is it?"

"Och, ye ate too many berries," Aili said. Emma stood up from the table and walked around to Colin. Donald went to the boy's other side. Gently pulling back his shoulders to make him sit straight, she laid her palm across his forehead. No fever.

"Your stomach hurts?" she asked. Colin nodded. "The uh...the top of your stomach or the bottom?" She wasn't sure if he would understand the difference between stomach and intestines.

"I dinna know," he answered. Emma chewed on her lower lip in thought. Half of an aspirin would do the trick if it were just a stomachache. She reached for the water jug to pour a cup for Colin but as soon as she picked it up, she recalled that Aili had just asked her to fetch more. The jug was empty.

"I'll need to get some water but I have something that will settle his stomach."

Donald shook his head. "I should return him to the castle. The laird's physician —"

"I dinna want to go yet," Colin complained. "We just got here!"

Aili clucked her tongue. "'Tis nae so serious as that. The young master just needs to take a walk. I've found that berries sometimes give me such wind!" Emma had to press her lips together to keep from laughing. Ah, the miracle of fiber. "Why dinna ye go with Emma to the river?" the old woman suggested to Colin.

"I'll need to come as well," Donald insisted.

Still fighting off laughter, Emma opened her lips only long enough to say, "That's fine."

"I want to come too!" Beth piped up.

"No, ye need to help me with this cabbage. They'll be back in no time. Ye'll see," Aili said.

Beth pouted a little but made no protest. Donald plucked the boy up from his seat and set him on his feet. Smiling at Puck, who was dozing by the door again, Emma led the way out.

* * * * *

"Is that her then?" Shamus asked. "Please tell me that's her."

"It is," Craig said after briefly glancing around the tree trunk. "She's getting water."

"Is that right?" Shamus rubbed his hands together and his leg began twitching with impatience. "The man behind her — is he the one who killed Gordon?"

"No, the crofter has black hair."

"Then who is he?"

"Is it nae clear enough for ye?" Allan said in a harsh whisper. "He's huge and carries a sword. I dinna like this."

"What's a *leuchd-crios* doing out here?" Shamus asked.

"Watching the boy, ye damn fool," Allan answered. "Ye think a farmer's son would be wearing clothes like that? Taking the girl is one thing, Craig, but the Campbell laird's son is another."

"He's only one man—we've three. The boy and girl count for nowt," Craig said.

"He's certain to raise the alarm and the one who killed Gordon isna far," Allan said. "Ye have my sympathies, Craig, but 'tis too dangerous. We canna help yer brother if—"

"If my brother's dead, then what better way is there to repay the laird than by killing his seed?" Craig growled. "If he's still alive, the son will make a better ransom. This is our only chance and if ye think ye can walk away, ye had better grow another pair o' eyes in the back o' yer head."

"They're almost to the river. I'm going," Shamus said, licking his lips and leaving their cover. Craig frowned at Allan as he followed the redhead.

"Damn it," Allan hissed. He drew his sword.

* * * * *

"I feel better now," Colin announced. Emma looked over her shoulder at him as she stood, now weighed down by a full water jug.

"Then why are ye still holding yer stomach?" Donald asked.

Colin paused, a frown on his face, and put his hands down. "I dinna like the things the fisi—fuhzee...the things the doctor gives me. They taste bad."

"If ye want to feel better, ye'll have to take the physician's medicine," Donald explained with some exasperation.

"You know, I think he just needs to um...relieve himself," Emma said. Thankfully, an abundance of underbrush and tall summer grass lined the river. The young heir would have somewhere to do his business. She wasn't so sure the "physician" would have a real remedy for Colin anyway.

Donald glanced at her before looking back at Colin. "Well, do ye?"

"I dinna want anyone to see," he whined. Emma had to stifle another giggle.

"No, ye've slipped away too many times. I'm keeping my eyes on ye," Donald affirmed.

"I can just turn that way and give you some privacy," she offered.

Colin looked at her with a strangely desperate confusion. "What's prahy-vuh-see?"

"Uh, it means that I won't peek," she said haltingly. "I promise."

The young boy hesitated a few seconds but then nodded. "All right."

Emma walked a few paces away, grinning with amusement. She looked forward to Iain's reaction when she told him of Colin's predicament. Iain's dimples would come out and she would just have to kiss them.

She wondered if his parents and siblings had also had dimples – if perhaps her own children with Iain might have them, for he had already mentioned having a family with her, though not in the manner she might have expected.

"I wish I still had some of my makeup. I hate these freckles," she had lamented last night as she closed her compact mirror and shoved it back into her purse. Iain lowered the bar after closing the door, locking them in. She lifted the lid of the trunk at the foot of the bed and set her bag inside.

"What I need is some bleach," she mumbled, closing the trunk lid. She made a noise of surprise when Iain's arms snaked around her waist and pulled her back against him. How was someone his size so quiet?

"Never say that again," he said. "I adore yer freckles and I hope that our children are blessed with them." Her cheeks flushed with emotion, both the hope that she could still have children and the thought of a child with her freckles and Iain's dimples. "Come to bed." He kissed her neck and his hands began to roam. "Ye're expected to be with child by the harvest festival and I intend to make it happen."

"Now I really feel better!" Colin said. Realizing that she had been daydreaming again, Emma took in a steadying breath and pressed her hand against her heated cheeks. She turned around.

The water jug fell from her grip and she sucked in a loud gasp. Three men, mostly hidden in the tall grass, were swiftly advancing toward them from upstream.

"Look out!" The water jug smashed into the ground.

Donald didn't hesitate and wheeled around, tossing Colin back. The boy cried out. The three men made a beeline for them, now sprinting.

"Get him out of here!" Donald yelled as he drew his sword. For an agonizing second, Emma couldn't move. Her entire body was shaking. "Emma, now!"

The man's plea penetrated her terror and she darted forward to grab Colin's wrist. Hoping she didn't dislocate his shoulder, she jerked him into her arms and turned to run.

"Get her!" one of the men barked. Colin was crying loudly in her ear, his little hands gripping the shoulders of her dress.

Emma didn't look back, even when the clang of swords met her ears, and just ran her heart out. She couldn't lead the men to the house – Beth and Aili were there – so she ran toward the barn farther away, where Iain was.

She heard Donald yell and chanced a quick look over her shoulder, just in time to see him crumple to the ground. The redheaded man was hot on her heels and the other two were leaving Donald to come after her.

This couldn't happen. *Oh God please don't let this happen!*

Air sawed in and out of her lungs. Her legs were both burning with strain and shaky with adrenaline. She sucked in a big breath, knowing that her last chance would be to scream at the top of her lungs and hope that someone heard her.

A body slammed into her. Colin's arms clamped around her neck. The redheaded man's momentum twisted her around and she landed on her side. The man shoved her onto her back and roughly grabbed Colin's thin arms.

"No!" she begged breathlessly. "Please!" She held onto Colin as tightly as she could. The redheaded man pulled hard, drawing her up to a sitting position and then forward onto her knees. The two other men came upon them then and wrenched the frightened child away from her. Before Colin could even gather a breath to start wailing, the tallest of them laid his hand across Colin's mouth. Looking up at the other two, she realized that her vision was blurry and her cheeks were wet.

The redheaded man grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet. She looked to the third man, meeting his eyes just as he forced a gag into her mouth. Her scream was muffled when she realized who she was looking at.

The wolf.

"Let's get out of here. We could be seen any moment," the tallest man said.

The redheaded man smiled at Emma as he bound her wrists. "I like blondes." Her eyes widened with dread. He took hold of her arm again and pulled her behind him as the three men all turned to escape. Emma did the last thing she could and refused to walk, falling to the ground and nearly pulling down the redheaded man.

"Damn!" he cursed.

"Carry her," the wolf ordered. Emma kicked at her assailant, trying to buy even just a few more seconds and hoping that by some miracle, someone would venture outside and see them. "Pick her up!"

The redheaded man was no longer smiling. He held her down, pushing her bound wrists against her chest. She saw him raise his fist, saw it coming toward her face but didn't see what happened next.

* * * * *

"God knows that Aili brings it up whenever she can but have ye talked to Emma about marriage?" Kenneth asked. He was leaning against the wall of a pen, watching Iain dump piles of the grass in front of their cattle.

"Not yet." Iain stood up straight, patting the side of a cow chewing contentedly. "I'm preparing a gift for her and I want to wait until it's ready."

Kenneth looked impressed. "Ye've taken my advice to heart, I see."

Iain laughed. "And what advice was this?"

"Action over words, especially in yer case," the redhead said as he gestured vaguely at him.

"I'll still have to ask for her hand. I think about it whenever she isna there to distract me."

Kenneth snorted with amusement. "The words will come easily when the moment is upon ye, or at least...I would think they will."

"That is my hope." Iain turned to grab up more handfuls of the harvested grass.

"I have to admit that I am a wee bit jealous," Kenneth said. Iain distractedly dropped the grass in front of another cow.

"What's this? Always pushing me to marry and now ye're jealous?" A very faint, high-pitched noise met his ears just before Kenneth answered. His body went as still as a stag sensing a hunter.

"Seeing ye and Emma..." Iain's heart tightened and he strained his ears, wondering if the noise had been merely his imagination. "I think about Gwen and how happy we were before she passed." Donald was at the house though. Emma was not alone by any means. "I mean, of course I think about her every day—every time I see Beth—but..."

Iain tried to get his mind back on the conversation. "Any of the girls around here would be glad to fast hands with ye."

"It's nae that," Kenneth said with mild exasperation. The redhead dropped his eyes to the ground. "I just...dinna feel right taking another wife. It would feel as though I were betraying her."

"Yer vows were only until death parted ye and as her brother, I would think Gwen wouldna want ye to be alone. She would want a mother for Beth. Can ye not think of a woman who Beth likes? A woman ye both like?"

Kenneth chuckled, still watching his feet. "Aye and ye've already taken her."

"Damn it, Kenneth, that isna who I'm talking about." The redhead stopped smiling and raised his eyes to look directly at Iain.

"Aye, I ken who ye mean." Kenneth pushed away from the wall and took a few steps toward Iain. "Did ye think I never noticed?"

Iain was appalled. His mouth hung open and for several seconds he couldn't say anything. "Wuh... Well, why have ye nae done aught about it?" Iain thundered.

"Ye think it is as simple as that?" Kenneth yelled. "I do like her! I've always liked her. When I married yer sister, I had to—to put her in a place in my heart where my feelings for her couldna grow. I loved Gwen, yet still I struggled with myself." Iain could only watch, too shocked by the man's sudden anger to say anything.

"And then her parents gave her hand to that bastard..." Kenneth raised his fists and gnashed his teeth as though the ghost of Rachel's dead husband stood before him. His eyes closed tightly. "Every time I saw a bruise on her face, I wanted to pound the man's head into the ground. How could he nae be content with such a wife?"

Opening his eyes, Kenneth dropped his hands. "But it wasna my affair to come between a husband and wife and what kind of man would I be to so easily forget the years when she and I were silent? When he beat her and I did nowt? To pretend as

though every look she gave me and every secret feeling I ever had were nae a betrayal of the vows I took? I carried such guilt, Iain." Kenneth looked at him beseechingly, eyebrows pinched and chest heaving. "How can I take her to wife with such guilt?"

"Would ye deny yer own happiness for the rest of yer life? Let her raise her son alone? Have her pine for ye until she grows bitter? Will that ease yer guilt?"

"Of course nae!" Kenneth said. "I would have her marry a man who adores her."

"And ye think that she has eyes for any man but ye? That she ever will? She's loved ye for nearly ten years." Kenneth closed his eyes, turning his head away. "Ye want to know how ye can take her to wife? Ye forgive yerself. Then ye find Rachel and ask for her hand."

A thump at the door of the barn drew their attention. Iain whipped around, ready to yell at the farmhands for spying. A deathly pale Donald stumbled into view, one shoulder leaning heavily on the door jamb. Blood soaked the front of his tunic and all the way down his legs.

"Jesus," Iain breathed. He ran forward to catch Donald before the man collapsed. "Kenneth, check on the house! Fetch Aili!" He lowered the *leuchd-crios* to lie on the ground. The redhead was already sprinting toward Iain's home.

"Colin's gone," Donald wheezed. "They're both gone."

"They took Aili?" Iain asked.

"Nae." Donald seemed to choke on something but after a few coughs, he had his breath again. "They took Emma."

Iain's entire mind went blank. Donald said something more but the only thing Iain heard was that faint, high-pitched noise. A hand shook his arm.

"Ye have to listen. I willna survive this." Donald's face was a mask of pain and he writhed in Iain's arms. "Ah God!" Iain squeezed the man's shoulder, at a loss for what else he could do. "They were MacGregor men. I recognized Craig. 'Tis his brother ye caught." Iain recalled the young, skinny boy whom James had dragged away to question. "Craig would...t-trade Colin for him but as for Emma...ye may never see her again."

No. Iain refused to believe that. He would have her back. He would kill Craig and his men, would tear out their hearts and feed them to his dogs for what they had done.

"I'm...nae afraid to die," Donald said, his voice thready, "but I...never told Colin...how...much..."

"I'll tell him for ye," Iain promised. Donald's eyelids sagged. "The laird will know ye gave yer life for his son." Iain wasn't sure if the man heard him. The tension left Donald's body and he breathed his last.

"Iain," Kenneth gasped out. Iain looked up as Kenneth ran up to the barn door, holding a wide-eyed Aili in his arms. He set down the old woman, who hobbled over to Donald. Kenneth put his hands on his knees, fighting for air. "Emma...she wasna...at the house."

"Then she and Colin have been taken," Aili said. Iain was surprised by her lucid tone. She pressed her ear to Donald's chest. "He's gone," she said quietly.

"Iain, what do we do?" Kenneth asked.

Looking down at himself, Iain saw Donald's blood all over his hands and arms. It was smeared across the front of his tunic, cooling and darkening. Something was rising up his throat.

"We need to go to the laird with this," Aili said. Iain's hands shook. "The MacGregors will send a messenger soon."

"Oh God, I hope Emma is still alive," Kenneth said.

Iain threw his head back and screamed.

Chapter Seventeen

"Oh ye *canna* really mean that," Rossalyn giggled. A young man-at-arms hoping to become one of the laird's *leuchd-crios* stepped toward her, his eyes flashing with sincerity and determination.

"I swear it. Ye're the girl I would fast hands with, Rossalyn. Ye're so beautiful that...I-I canna help but look at ye whenever ye're near," he said.

Rossalyn pouted. "But am I the *most* beautiful girl ye've *ever* seen?"

"W-well..." he stuttered, wringing his hands. She couldn't stop the frown that took the place of her carefully practiced pout. Why was he hesitating?

"Rossalyn!" Ruth called out. Rossalyn looked past the man standing at her door and espied her friend, who was running up with the look of pressing news on her face.

"O-of course ye're the most beautiful! No one would disagree."

Rossalyn looked back at the worthless man, attempting a pout of disappointment. "I'm so sorry but my friend is here and she seems upset. Could ye come back later?"

"Aye, I can!" he said, beaming. Rossalyn barely stopped herself from rolling her eyes.

"Thank ye," she said, waving him away. Ruth arrived all out of breath and Rossalyn ushered her inside.

"I just heard – the worst – possible news," Ruth gasped. Rossalyn let a tiny sneer sit on the corner of her mouth, looking at the chubby woman with disapproval.

"Has Rachel already sold all her meat pies?" she asked.

Ruth shook her head, completely unaware. "The laird's only son, young Colin...he-he was taken by MacGregors earlier today, a-and that new-new girl as well."

Rossalyn felt the bottom of her stomach drop.

"He wasna supposed to take h –" She slapped her hand over her mouth.

"What?" Ruth asked.

"He...is just so young," she explained, trying to cover her mistake.

Ruth nodded with a frown. "How could those thieving traitors take a child?"

"Does the laird know – um, know who is responsible?"

"I dinna know," Ruth said with a shrug. "I wasna told that." Rossalyn's stomach began to hurt. She took a deep breath. "Are ye well?" the thick woman asked.

"I am," she lied. "A little tired, I suppose."

"Then ye should rest awhile. I'll visit again. I'm on my way to speak to Rachel."

No doubt to fill her face with more food. Rossalyn could only nod, hoping desperately that the woman left before she completely broke down. She was shaking when she sat at the table. Her sister and brother-in-law were both away, working in the laird's castle. She looked at the empty pot nearby, recalling how her sister had begged her to cook at least once that week—how she had pleaded that she was always so tired and why did she have to cook for both the laird and her family every single day?

The blonde then looked around the cramped house. Most of her possessions were gifts—a bolt of fine cloth for a dress, buttons and cloaks. The men of the village all grabbed after her skirt and most of the women despised and envied her.

If they all found out...

Rossalyn grabbed for the empty pot and threw up into it.

* * * * *

"Wake up," a young voice begged. "Please wake up." Emma was lying on her side and someone was shaking her. The left side of her face was throbbing terribly. She tried to open her eyes and found that one eye was swollen almost shut. It was already dark but a fire burned a few feet away.

"He should be back soon," a man said quietly.

"The mean one cut off some of our hair," Colin whispered. Emma looked up and saw that indeed, a large hunk of Colin's brown hair had been hastily chopped off. She didn't want to see where her hair had been cut. "He took it with him and they said he was going to send a message."

"The..." She swallowed to clear her throat. "The redheaded man? Shamus?" she asked softly.

Colin nodded. His lips twisted and his eyebrows turned up. He swallowed a hiccup and took a deep breath. "They killed Donald," he said, "and they have his horse."

"Everything'll be all right. You'll see," she lied. She didn't know if either of them would live but it was at least very likely that Colin would survive—and besides, she wasn't really alive anyway, was she?

"The tall one is Allan. I heard the mean one say it and the other one is Craig. He scares me most," Colin said.

"Me too." Remembering what the wolf was after, she felt for her locket, somehow worried that Craig had already taken it though it was obvious he hadn't since she was still alive. Her wrists were bound together but her fingers grasped at her neck and found her linen kerchief. It was hiding her locket.

"I should've drawn that circle on my hand," Colin said. "I forgot and now we're in trouble."

"No, don't worry about that."

"Can yer magic save us?" he whispered hopefully. "If ye draw the fairy mark again, will we be saved?"

"You have the magic quill?" she asked. Colin hurriedly nodded. A sudden thought occurred to her. "Can you give it to me? But slowly. Pretend you're scratching an itch or something." Colin reached back. She couldn't see from where he drew the pen but assumed it had been inside his boot.

Colin handed her the pen and she pulled the cap off, slipping it into her sleeve. She did her best to hide the pen lengthwise between her palms.

"Ye're nae going to draw some magic?" Colin asked, sounding upset.

"Do you remember me telling you that it was a kind of weapon?" It was a small, ineffective weapon but it was all she and Colin had. His mouth opened in recollection and he slowly nodded. "I'll protect you, Colin. I promise."

"I'll protect ye too," he whispered. Emma gave him a small, close-lipped smile.

It seemed that Craig and Allan hadn't noticed that she was awake yet. They sat on the other side of the fire and were eating some kind of roasted meat. Allan made quiet comments that she often couldn't catch and Craig merely stared off into the forest. Keeping her eyelids low, she hoped that they wouldn't notice she was conscious for a very long time.

"Do ye really think she's a fairy?" Allan asked. "She dinna look like one to me." Emma slid her eyes open just a hair farther and could see that Allan was looking at her from across the fire. "And what about this charm yer girl told ye about?"

She closed her eyes and pulled in a long, slow breath as her stomach filled with ice water. Her hands squeezed the pen between her palms. Emma could guess who Craig's girl was and if she survived, she would tear out Rossalyn's hair.

"There he is," Craig said, swiftly standing. He tossed the rest of his meat onto the fire. Emma wondered if they had even offered any to Colin.

She heard the sound of hoofbeats muffled against the grass just before Craig called out to his third accomplice. "Is it done?"

"Aye, it is," Shamus answered. At the sound of the redhead's voice, the cold water in her stomach solidified into ice. Colin stretched his arms over her, pressing tightly against her side.

"And ye were nae followed?" Allan asked. Emma hoped like hell that he had been.

"Would ye stop yer fretting? Ye sound like a woman." For a moment, all Emma could hear were the sounds of the horse's saddle being removed and low murmurs. She could also hear Colin softly crying against her arm, though it was more like moans of fright than weeping. She almost couldn't help doing the same.

The men drew nearer to the fire.

"The girl's nae awake? I was hoping to enjoy her tonight," Shamus said.

No, no, no! She repeated the word inside her head, hoping that if she wished hard enough, it wouldn't happen. She stayed as still as she could, face slack and eyes closed but her heart hammered hard and fast. It was impossible to breathe slowly and evenly.

She knew what was coming and she also knew that there was next to nothing she could do to stop it.

"Leave her be. She's nae moved since we put her there," Allan said. "I've seen some men never wake up after a hard hit to the head."

"If she dinna wake, I'll be sure to gut ye for being a fool," Craig said.

"She was kicking me," Shamus said defensively. Neither of the other two men said anything. She heard someone coming toward them. "Get off her, boy," he ordered.

Emma felt Colin being pulled away. Colin resisted, shaking his head. "Nae!" he shouted. "Leave her alone!"

"Ye'll do as ye're told," Shamus barked. Colin yelled in rebellion as he was pulled away from her again. "Here, take him." Knowing she couldn't play possum anymore, Emma opened her eyes. Shamus handed Colin off to Allan. Craig stared at her.

"See? She's awake now," Shamus said, pointing at her but talking to Craig.

"So she is." Emma shrank just a little, seeing in that moment the same eyes that she had seen on the note inside her locket. "Sit up," he ordered as he stalked around the fire to her. She pushed herself up, though it was awkward with bound wrists. Craig squatted in front of her, wordlessly staring at her for a long moment. His head tilted to one side and he snorted, half-smiling.

"Aye, I can see why she wants me to kill ye," Craig said softly. Emma stiffened. "I heard ye have no clan. Ye just...appeared out of the mist?"

"I do have a clan," she said. She glanced over Craig's shoulder to verify that Colin was just out of earshot, standing with Allan on the other side of the fire. She lowered her voice. "And I'm not whatever Rossalyn said I was." She hoped like hell that she sounded convincing because by her ears, her voice was shaky.

Craig snorted again, his smile widening. "That's an interesting accent. Not English though," he surmised. "Rossalyn thinks herself clever – that she can have aught as long as she bats her eyes or lifts her skirt." Craig stretched his arm toward her and she turned her head away, tried to lean back as far as she could. He brushed the backs of his fingers down her bruised cheek. The touch reminded her of Iain and Emma shuddered. "But in my dealings with her, I've never found her to be a liar."

He snatched at her hair, grabbing a fistful and jerking her toward him. She cried out at the pain. With his other hand, Craig pulled at the knot in the linen kerchief around her neck. He then threw the kerchief to the ground.

Emma wanted to protect her locket but she couldn't do that and also hide the pen between her palms. She watched Craig fearfully, knowing that at any second, he would yank off her necklace, just like Rossalyn had. His grin was wide but his eyebrows were slanted down and his chin angled close to his chest.

He reached for her neck.

"No! Don't take it off!" she cried out. Craig paused, sneering at her. "I'll die and...and its magic won't work anymore." She honestly didn't know if the latter was

true but it was the only thing she could think of. He would otherwise have no reason not to take it.

"Explain," he growled, dropping his hand.

"Um..." She scrambled for something to say to stay alive. Craig would want some kind of power, so she had to convince him that she could give it to him.

"Whatever Rossalyn told you, she was wrong. She didn't understand what she saw. Fairies can't survive for long in this world and this charm is what keeps me alive. It only works for fairies."

Craig's eyes glittered with anger. "Then what use are ye to me?" He jerked her face closer.

"P-please! If you let me live, I'll grant you a wish. Anything." It was the only thing she could conjure up and she knew, even as she said it, that the chance of such a statement backfiring was high.

"Is that so?" he asked. She nodded, dreading his answer. "Then tell me the future. The fate of my clan."

The future? This she could do. It was the one thing she could give him.

"I can tell you the future," she agreed, "but not until you give Colin back to his father." Craig's expression turned downright livid. "N-not until then. I want to see him safe and o-once I've answered your question, you'll let me go."

"Ye think ye can bargain with me?" he spat.

"There's no point in killing her now," Shamus said, "and ye'll need to trade the child for yer brother anyway."

"Shut it!" Craig shouted, looking over his shoulder and no doubt throwing the redheaded Scotsman a withering look. Emma was confused. The laird had Craig's brother?

Craig turned back to her, his face a mask of immense frustration. He shoved her away from him, releasing her hair, and she fell onto her side, still alive for at least a few hours more. Colin struggled futilely against Allan's hold on his arm.

Craig towered over her. His expression had calmed to a deep frown. "Take her now if ye want her," he said, turning away from her.

"No!" she yelled. The redheaded man glanced between her and Craig, a slow smile pulling his lips wide. He walked toward her. "Get away from me!" She tried to crawl away from him but her bound wrists made it difficult to do anything.

His hand clamped onto her elbow and she flailed her arms, pulling out of his grasp. "Don't you dare touch me!" She fell onto her side and he grabbed her again. She screamed as he dragged her away from the fire. She kicked the air, twisted and struggled but it did her no good.

"Iain, help me!" she cried out. "Iain!"

* * * * *

"Close the door and sit down, Iain," Aili said from her seat on the far side of the table. Kenneth was sitting across from her, his back turned to the table and Iain was pacing back and forth in front of the open door, clenching a long lock of soft blonde hair in his fist. The old woman had already told him earlier to shut the door, saying that night had fallen but he had refused. He hadn't been able to bring himself to do it. It was as though closing the door meant that she wouldn't come back.

"I willna," he said. "I promised James I wouldna leave the house tonight but I didna say I would close the door."

"So ye've said," she nodded.

"She is alive, Iain. Ye must rest for tomorrow," Kenneth urged. Iain threw a glare in his friend's direction but did not stop pacing. His legs felt restless. His hands itched and his chest ached. Aye, she was alive but she was not safe.

Just before sunset and as the cart holding Donald's carefully wrapped body was about to depart, a redheaded MacGregor had ridden into their glen on Donald's stolen horse and tossed down a wad of cloth, yelling instructions and then riding away.

"Tomorrow at dawn! The boy for the MacGregor! If we see anyone besides the crofter and the Campbell laird, the boy dies!"

"What about the girl?" Iain had hollered, fighting to break free of Kenneth and James' hold.

The MacGregor had laughed. "Ye'll get her back—if she survives the night!" Iain did the only thing he could and cursed the MacGregor for the bastard he was. Only when he had ridden out of sight did Kenneth and James release him. Running to where the MacGregor had appeared from the west, he had snatched up the wad of cloth and opened it to find two pieces of hair. The shorter hair was mousy brown and the longer hair was reddish-blond.

When he imagined what they were doing to her...

"How can I rest?" he ground out.

"Tomorrow willna go as well as ye may hope," Aili said. "Ye'll be of no help to the laird or Emma without yer strength and if ye willna close the door, then at least sit down."

He couldn't. His imagination tortured him. The day's events haunted him. He stood on the edge and was wildly flailing his arms to keep from tipping over.

"I heard her," he confessed in a raw whisper.

"What? Heard who?" Kenneth asked.

Iain paced faster. "I heard her screaming...a moment before Donald found us." Aili gasped. "I wasna sure but—Christ, I should have checked. If I had only gone outside..."

"I didna hear aught," Kenneth said. "Ye could have imagined it."

As upset as he was, Iain couldn't help the wry look he cast at his brother-in-law. "I imagined hearing a scream just before Donald died in our barn?"

Kenneth frowned, saying nothing more. With his free hand, Iain rubbed the back of his head. The headache pounding there reminded him of the first night Emma had come to stay with him. She had given him medicine and he recalled suspecting that it was poison.

"Iain, please. Sit down," Aili bade. Finally taking her advice, Iain walked to the table and took a seat next to Kenneth, though he put his back to the fire. His right leg bounced impatiently. He looked across the table at Aili, who was oddly still. He had never seen her not doing something in the precious few moments when her mouth wasn't flapping.

He looked down at the table and its half-made meal. "What if they see her lahket?" Uncut vegetables, a bowl of shredded cabbage and another with a few raspberries sat on the uneven surface. "What if they take it from her? They dinna know and she could..."

Though he couldn't bring himself to finish his thought out loud, he was sure Kenneth and Aili both knew what he had almost said.

She could already be dead.

* * * * *

Emma was scared out of her mind. Far worse than when she had realized where the locket had brought her, being dragged through a dark forest by a man intent on rape had her shrieking. Her cheeks were wet again and she blindly shook her head, still somehow trying to deny that any of this was really happening.

She wasn't sure how far he took her—no doubt he wanted a little privacy—but it seemed like not far. All too soon, he stopped walking.

"I canna wait any longer," he said. "Ye just lie still."

"Go to hell!" she shouted as he crouched over her. She held onto her anger as hard as she could—it was the only thing keeping her sane.

One of his hands was still clamped around her arm and no matter how hard she thrashed, she couldn't wrench herself free of his bruising grip. He pushed her wrists against her chest again, holding her down and trying to insinuate himself between her legs. She kicked at him, trying to mash her sneaker into his groin and only managing to connect a couple of kicks against his side and leg. He whispered a violent curse.

"Get off me! *Get off me!*" she yelled. With one knee, he pinned her thigh. His free hand shoved her knees apart. He dropped between her legs, laying his heavy bulk on top of her and laughing at her in triumph. She screamed, shaking her head and struggling even more. She strained her muscles to their limits, trying to roll him off. "Get off me, you bastard!"

"Ye canna win, girlie. Just lie still." His breath was terrible. He began rubbing himself against her through their clothing and she screamed in disgust and fright. Then one of his hands groped for the hem of her skirt.

No.

Throwing her head forward, she bashed her forehead into his face. He cried out, sitting up and holding his hands over his nose.

Her eyes were wide as she rolled the pen up to her right fist. Desperate, she stabbed at him and the pen pierced what felt like a ripe plum. Shamus screamed. Shocked, she let go of the pen and watched in horror as he flung himself away from her. The pen had punctured his eye and he hurriedly pulled it out.

"Y-ye're a demon!" he hollered. "A witch!" The man grabbed at his side. A blade appeared in his hand. He came at her, crawling strangely since one hand was cupped protectively over his eye. His mouth and chin were covered with blood. She tried to scramble away but without her hands free and with a skirt twisted around her legs, she couldn't escape him fast enough.

Wide-eyed, she watched her death coming toward her, watched so intently that she didn't notice the second man who had arrived. He kicked Shamus onto his back and without pause swung down an enormous sword, hacking it into Shamus' stomach. The redheaded man went silent except for a wet gurgle and she felt something hit her cheek. The sword rose. Its wielder changed his grip and stabbed down, plunging the sword into the other man's chest. Shamus grunted, writhing on the ground very briefly before abruptly going slack.

Panting and in disbelief, Emma looked up at the tall MacGregor, who coldly contemplated what he had done. He jerked his sword out of Shamus' body and wiped the blood off the blade using the man's own tunic. He then sheathed his sword.

"He was your clansman," she said breathlessly.

Allan frowned deeply at her. "He was no clansman of mine. Neither of them are."

"But why?" she asked breathlessly. Allan reached down and drew her to her feet.

"My little sister looks like ye. I couldna let them ruin ye as well." His grip on her elbow was firm but not painful as he led her back to the fire, leaving Shamus where he lay.

Chapter Eighteen

Kenneth and Aili stayed with Iain through the night and Beth was sent to Thomas' family in the village. If Iain slept at all, it was only for a few moments at a time and in his dreams—each more disturbing than the last—he was haunted by the screams and sobs of a woman calling for him.

He wasn't sure how many times he drifted in and out of sleep but he knew that sunrise was not far when he woke to find that Aili had risen from her bed. It was not the sound of her moving about the house, however, but the light patter of rain that had rescued him from another nightmare.

Dawn neared and with it, the laird and the constable entered the glen, escorting a tall, lanky youth who seemed skinnier than Iain remembered. The lad's eyes were flat, staring at the empty space in front of him, and rivulets of dark water dripping from his dirty tunic ran down his bare legs. If his brown hair were a shade darker and his eyes closer together, he would've looked much like Malcolm.

No morning mist afforded the croft any cover from the surrounding trees in which an archer could hide. The light rain was unceasing, eventually soaking everyone who stepped outside for more than a moment. Wearing his breeks and a sword, Iain somberly greeted the laird and constable with a bowed head.

"A terrible morning," Archibald said from atop his horse.

"It is, laird," Iain said. "I'm sorry to have failed ye."

"It wasna yer duty to look after my boy," the laird said, shaking his head. "It was mine. As for the girl, I must admit that I am glad she is with him. After all, she's one of the good people, aye?" Iain squeezed his eyes shut and turned his face away. If only she were.

"The MacGregor was there when he delivered the hair," James said, looking toward the west and nodding his head subtly in the direction of Duncan and Finian's croft.

"The paddock behind the house will be less slippery, laird," Kenneth said. "It was eaten down only a day ago."

"Then we'll wait there," the laird said. "James, I'm counting on ye." The constable sharply nodded and quickly made his way behind the house. The laird dismounted and grabbed the MacGregor boy's arm. The two of them and Iain then set off for the southwestern field to await the arrival of the MacGregors and their two hostages. Aili stood with Kenneth at the door of the house, lifting one hand in farewell.

* * * * *

Emma was kicked awake sometime before dawn, cold and wet. The left side of her face felt no better but she was able to open her left eye a little more. The fire had gone out in the rain and only a faint light from the very first rays of the morning allowed her any vision. She looked up and saw Craig's outline standing over her. He was undoubtedly far warmer than her under his cloak. She wondered who he stole it from.

"Get up," he said. Glancing down, she saw Colin's head resting on her arm, his small frame curled up next to her. She hurriedly shook his shoulder and the boy weakly groaned, probably as exhausted as she was.

"It's time to go," she whispered. Colin sat up and rubbed his eyes as best as he could with his wrists still tied together. Emma was attempting to get onto her knees to stand up when Allan hooked his hand under her arm and pulled her to her feet. She looked at him briefly and then reached down to help Colin stand up.

Allan had saved her last night and though she should have felt grateful, she couldn't feel anything but malice toward him. He and Craig had killed Donald. He had helped abduct a child. They obviously believed that their fellow MacGregor was worth the violence but when would it end? If Craig took back his brother and safely delivered Colin to the laird, would either side call it even? Of course not. The laird's war party had already killed the group of MacGregors who had come to reive cattle. Craig and other MacGregors would want satisfaction.

She already suspected how and when Craig would take his revenge—and who would die first.

"Give me yer hands, girl," Craig ordered. Emma turned to him, espying another horse behind him besides the one they had stolen. She saw a length of rough linen rope in his fists, one end of which was tied to the front of his saddle. She held up her hands and let him attach her to the other end of the rope. She was to walk, it seemed. After placing Colin on Donald's horse, Allan swung up and sat behind him. Over the rain, she could hear Colin sniffing.

Emma had been terrified last night of what Craig would do when he found out that Shamus was dead. Though Allan had done the killing, it had been done defending her.

When asked what happened, Allan pushed her down to sit by Colin, who was curled up in a frightened ball near the fire and simply said what he had done. "He offended me, so I killed him."

Craig shrugged and gave a small snort. "I didna like him anyway." Emma could tell that she was missing some vital piece of information but knew she would never learn it.

Neither man said anything to her or Colin as to where they were going that morning, or how far their destination was. They simply began walking the horses and Emma did her best to keep up. With every step, she could feel the bruises that had been inflicted upon her in the last day. Her arms and thighs were likely covered with purple splotches from where Shamus had dug his knees and fingertips into her.

They wouldn't be her last bruises either. A few times when there just wasn't enough light to see by and no way to hold out her arms for balance, she slipped and fell. Once, she was even dragged by the horse for several feet before Craig thought to stop the animal and let her regain her feet.

By the time the sun was moments from the horizon, she had reached a new level of exhaustion.

Even so, her spirits picked up when she recognized where they were headed. Her eyes darted around and her heart pounded so hard that she thought it might leap out of her chest. She couldn't help but feel hopeful.

They stopped a short distance from the glen and both men dismounted. Allan lifted Colin from his horse and Craig unknotted the end of the rope attached to his saddle. Colin tried to run to her but Craig caught him by the back of his tunic and growled out a warning. "Ye'll stay by me."

Emma watched the cringing boy with a frown of sympathy and then looked to see what Allan was doing. Her back went ramrod straight to see him pull out a bow and a quiver of arrows from behind his saddle.

"If it isna going well," Craig said to the taller man, "shoot him." Emma looked back at the shorter MacGregor, horrified.

"You can't kill him! He's only a child!" she protested. "He's just a—a b-baby," she stuttered when Craig sneered and walked toward her. "Please." He slapped her across the face. Heat and pain exploded within her already sore cheek and she stumbled back a step.

"Dinna speak again until spoken to or ye'll get more of the same," he warned. Keeping her eyes downcast, she nodded and was suddenly grateful for the rain that masked her fresh tears.

Craig made some sort of motion at Allan, who ran off into the woods without comment. He then told her to walk in front, nodding in the direction she was to go, and they set off again on foot while he tugged Colin along by the back of his tunic.

Emma desperately hoped that their shared nightmare was almost over. She was incredibly anxious to see Iain, to have him hold her, to hear his voice reassuring her. In her mind, the glen was sunny, the breeze strong and a little cool. Her bonds were cut and she was running, flying over the grass. Iain would run out of his home, calling her name, and reach out for her.

What she saw when they entered the glen was much different from what she had imagined but not unexpected.

The muted light of an overcast day and the haze of light rain washed out the bright colors of summer. In the paddock directly behind the croft, three people awaited them. One man was holding the arm of a gangly youth and Emma could only guess that the man was the laird. Exhausted as she was and with one eye still a bit swollen, it was difficult to see through the veil of rain.

Even so, she knew that Iain was the third. His height and the breadth of his shoulders were unmistakable and she knew he was looking at her as ardently as she was looking at him. She could feel it.

"Iain," she whispered. Her feet sped up. She saw him take a couple of steps toward her but the laird put a hand on Iain's shoulder and he stopped. "Iain!" she screamed. She began to run. He was so close! Only a moment more and she would be in his arms.

She was yanked back, her bound wrists following the hard tug that twisted her around. She looked to Craig, who growled something she didn't quite hear and was pulled off her feet when he jerked on the rope again. She tried to brace her fall but she landed on a rock protruding from the ground and was certain that her arm nearly broke.

"Emma!" Iain bellowed.

The MacGregor dragged her backward for several feet. She then watched his boots walk up to her and didn't realize his intent until he kicked her in the stomach. She almost vomited. Colin, still being hauled around, began to cry.

"That's enough!" a man yelled. It took Emma a second to realize that the laird had spoken. "Are ye kin to this boy?" Holding her stomach and gasping for air, Emma lifted her head and watched the laird bring the young man forward.

"Aye, I am. Ye'll let him walk to me and I'll do the same with this one," he shouted back. Emma looked up at Colin, who was watching her with fear in his eyes. She held his gaze for a few seconds and nodded, hoping he understood. His face scrunched up even more but he returned her nod.

In a quieter voice, Craig said, "Do nowt but walk. Dinna look back. Dinna run. Dinna speak to my kinsman." The MacGregor pushed Colin forward, releasing the back of his tunic. Colin hesitated for a second but then shuffled away. "Get to yer feet, girl," Craig said.

Emma braced her hands on the ground and rolled to her knees. Her arms and legs shook as she stumbled to her feet under the weight of her waterlogged wool dress and her fatigue.

"Look there," he said, nodding in Colin's direction. She glanced briefly over her shoulder and saw that Colin was nearly halfway to his father. "He is safe now. If ye wish him to stay safe, ye'll tell me what I asked."

She thought of Allan hiding in the trees, armed with a bow. Would he really shoot at a child? Would he be able to hit Colin from so far away? She couldn't risk it.

"You wanted to know the fate of the MacGregor clan," she said. "I'll tell you but you won't like the answer."

"Say it quickly," he ground out.

She took a deep breath. "The MacGregor clan will struggle for many years —"

"How many?" he interrupted.

With no clue as to any exact dates, Emma hesitated to answer but eventually said, "Several hundred." Craig frowned. "But the name MacGregor will survive. Many famous MacGregors will have influence in the world. Your clan won't die out. I can promise you that," she nodded. At least she hoped she could promise it. She only knew a couple of famous MacGregors and assumed the rest.

Craig's jaw tightened and he swallowed hard, glancing behind her. Emma looked over her shoulder just as the two hostages passed. The young MacGregor looked down at the child but Colin firmly kept his face forward. The young MacGregor then turned his eyes to his older brother.

It was subtle but Emma saw dread on the young man's face. For a second, she thought he was simply afraid, worried that something would suddenly go wrong. Then his pace slowed down. He looked as though he was near to crying.

He was scared of his own brother.

Emma glanced at Craig again, whose eyebrows had slanted down and whose mouth was ajar in angry disbelief. He gestured for his brother to come to him. She looked back at the young man just as he stopped entirely and vehemently shook his head.

"Peter!" Craig whispered harshly. Colin ran the last few feet to his father, who scooped him up and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

"I dinna want to," Peter said shakily. He backed up a step. "I willna let ye do it anymore!"

A sensation like nothing she had ever felt before filled her from the tips of her toes to the roots of her hair. With dread, she glanced between the two MacGregors and the three Campbells, realizing what would inevitably happen. She didn't know how but it was coming. She looked at Iain, wishing she could have spoken to him just one more time.

"Ye're my brother. I wouldna hurt ye," Craig vowed. Iain drew his sword. She had known he would try but it wouldn't do any good.

"Liar!" Peter screamed. He turned to run back to the Campbells and from the corner of her eye, she saw Craig lunge forward to grab his brother – whether in anger or desperation, she didn't know.

Farther behind Iain, a man stood up from behind the wall separating the paddocks. Emma barely recognized the constable, who held a bow loaded with a single arrow. He let go of the string.

Oh no...

Craig yanked his brother into his arms. The arrow, undoubtedly meant for Craig, landed squarely in the center of Peter's chest. Over the drizzling rain, she heard the thud of the arrow hitting him. His eyes went wide, the tendons in his neck standing out. Craig made a harsh, anguished sound.

Emma was rooted to the spot, too horrified to move. Craig laid his brother on the ground and then looked across the field at the Campbells. Panting and shaking, he turned to her, his intent easy to see.

"Don't." She held up her hands as he stood, backed away when he walked toward her. "Please," she begged.

"No!" she heard Iain bellow.

Snatching up the rope, Craig pulled her toward him hand over hand, dragging her toward him even though she dug in her heels and screamed for mercy. She glanced desperately between his cold expression and Iain. He was running toward her but she knew he wouldn't get to her in time.

Half-standing and half-hanging from her wrists, she was screaming still when Craig grabbed the locket and ripped it off. He let her go so suddenly that she hit the ground hard and the breath was knocked out of her. She saw Craig chuck the locket as far away as he could.

Iain let out a roar and Craig ran out of her blurry field of vision. She heard the clang of swords a second later.

Strangely, she wasn't in pain. She was exhausted to be sure, unable to move but there was no pain. Was she in shock? She turned her head, worried about Iain, and only a couple of feet away lay Peter MacGregor. His eyes were open but unblinking and he wasn't breathing. He somehow looked peaceful, as though he had been content to die.

But she didn't want to die yet. She wanted to be with Iain. She didn't want her strange adventure with the locket to end this way.

Perhaps she didn't have a choice. Perhaps whatever task the locket had set for her had been accomplished. She didn't know what would happen when she closed her eyes this time. She might never wake up again.

It was inevitable though. Her eyelids were as heavy as bricks and it felt so good and so right to let them fall shut.

The sound of clashing swords began to sound strange—more like the never-ending peals of sirens than clanging metal. Under her head, the grass was as hard as stone and the air was far colder than it had been a moment ago.

The sirens cut out. After a few seconds of silence, she heard footsteps and a man's voice—no, two men. They were talking to each other but she couldn't make out what they were saying. A hand gently touched her face.

The voices faded and she couldn't fight the tide that bore her away from them, that pulled her under and deep into a dark abyss. Then there was nothing but silence.

* * * * *

Iain ran toward Emma as fast as his legs could carry him. Her screams ripped through him. He noticed his limp growing worse but he wasn't in pain. All he felt was a desperate need to reach the one he loved, to stop anyone from hurting her ever again

but the cursed Craig MacGregor ripped away her lahket, dropped her on the ground and hurled her charm into the distance.

Anger erupted, burning his throat and flushing his skin. He trembled with it and his hands clamped tightly around the hilt of his sword as he raised the blade high. He wanted to slice the MacGregor in half but the coward was running away and trying to draw his own sword. Iain recklessly hurled himself forward, hacking down as though chopping wood with an axe, and was ready to feel a spray of hot blood across his arms and face. He was sorely disappointed when his sword met steel instead of flesh.

Craig threw off Iain's blade and began to attack, his expression both wild and fixed. Iain turned aside each blow but the MacGregor was strong and his strikes were powerful. Dodging to his enemy's weaker side, he tried to become the attacker but the MacGregor recovered well. As the first moment stretched into two, Iain grew both impatient and fatigued. He couldn't focus when the one thing most important to him was dying.

"How does it feel?" Craig spat when Iain failed to take control yet again. "To lose someone ye love?"

"I didna take her to lift cattle in the middle of the night," he said. "Or abandon her like a coward when the rightful possessors defended themselves."

Craig sneered and his next stroke was vicious, jarring the joints in Iain's arms. "Rightful possessor?" he scoffed. "Campbells dinna have aught that ye didna steal. This is MacGregor land!" He swung his sword again, harder than ever. "Yer woman was only the start."

Snarling, Iain blocked the man's next blow and swung his sword around before Craig could lift his own blade again. He swiped at his enemy, savagely satisfied when he drew blood, though not enough to kill.

Holding his hand over the gushing wound in his right arm, Craig retreated several feet, dodging out of range when Iain followed to finish him off.

"Will ye nae meet yer death like a man?" Iain yelled. He darted forward to slash at Craig again but his right knee gave and he missed, barely catching his fall. The MacGregor withdrew even farther, leading Iain away from where Emma lay.

"Allan!" Craig yelled. "Allan, now!"

Realizing the reason for Craig's retreat, Iain hesitated to follow any farther and looked at the trees ahead with suspicion.

He then glanced over his shoulder in time to see both Kenneth and the constable kneeling down next to Emma, having not moved from where she fell. She was so still. Kenneth laid his hand on her face.

"Shoot, damn ye! Allan!" Craig shouted.

Iain's hand tightened around the hilt of his sword. He could not let him live. He started forward just when Craig dropped to the ground. Iain saw an arrow sticking out of the ground beside the MacGregor, who was staring at it in open-mouthed surprise.

Craig looked to the trees again. "Allan, what are ye doing?" he yelled. Seeing his chance, Iain set off at a run, quickly closing the distance between them, but the MacGregor scrambled to his feet and turned to face Iain with his sword held in his good hand.

A second arrow landed in Craig's back.

Iain skidded to a stop only a few feet away, panting for air and watching as the MacGregor's sword dipped and then fell from his hands. Craig's mouth was wide open, eyes blinking in disbelief. He fell to his knees.

"I..." he gasped. Iain lifted his sword. "I hope—she was right." With one clean move, Iain lifted the MacGregor's head from his body, both of which fell to the ground after a second's pause.

Frowning despite his triumph, he cast his eyes along the tree line, unable to see any movement. Then quite deliberately, he plunged the tip of his sword into the ground and backed away. Whether or not the hidden MacGregor understood, he didn't know but he had no more time to waste and turned to run back to Emma. As for why the hidden MacGregor murdered his own kinsman, Iain could only guess at the man's reasons but knew for certain that Craig's death would be blamed on the Campbells.

Kenneth was still kneeling next to Emma but the constable was looking after the dead MacGregor boy. The laird had already placed Colin atop his horse and it seemed that they would return to the castle without delay.

"Kenneth!" he called. "Did ye find it?"

"I dinna even know where to start!" the redhead shouted back. "But she's still breathing!" Iain stumbled with relief, tears stinging his eyes. By the time he was at Emma's side, both knees had turned to mud out of fear and he dropped down to lean over her.

She was indeed still breathing. Her dress was torn to shreds, covered in mud and soaked by the rain. He first set his fingers against her ribs, wondering if her injury had returned, but found no broken bones.

"Cut her bonds," he said hoarsely, reaching to pull her wet, muddied hair off her cheek. He grimaced when he found the bruises on her face, especially the wicked knot just to the left of her eye. Kenneth pulled a knife from his belt and gently severed the rope around her wrists. Iain helped remove her bonds and let out a shuddering breath when he saw red welts circling her wrists. Her hands were also bruised.

"Bring her inside," a third voice called. Iain looked up with surprise at Aili, who was holding her shawl over her head like a tent. "She needs warmth and a dry bed." Iain looked down at Emma, afraid to move her. She looked so damn delicate.

"'Tis all right, Iain," Aili said. "'Tis over now."

Taking a deep breath, Iain slid his hands under her body and gently lifted her. He cradled her against his chest, urging her head to rest on his shoulder and slowly stood.

Kenneth's expression was tired and solemn. "I'll take care of the rest." Iain nodded at the redhead. Nearby, James shut the MacGregor boy's unseeing eyes.

The constable's tone was very careful. "If ye think I feel sorrow over this, then know that I wasna aiming for Craig."

Surprised, Iain's eyes widened but he said nothing, already knowing the answers to his questions. No matter his age or circumstances, the boy was an enemy of the Campbells, only kept alive to be traded. If Colin hadn't been taken, Peter would've eventually died in the castle's dungeon.

Even so, Iain could see that were he able, the constable would've let the boy go.

Looking down at Emma, Iain hiked her farther up into his arms and turned to follow Aili to the house.

Chapter Nineteen

Emma opened her eyes. Took a deep breath.

She'd had the strangest dream. She had been inside a crude house with a dirt floor and had followed an old woman outside into a sunny glen filled with the scent of warm summer grass. Quite strangely, the old woman was walking very quickly, so she tried to catch up and just when she was near enough to touch the woman's shoulder, the dream had faded.

It took her a couple of seconds to realize where she was. A heavy blanket was tucked around her and she felt just a little too warm. The light in the room was dim.

Turning her head, she espied someone next to her. Just as before, Iain was sitting on a stool and half-lying on the bed with his arms crossed beneath his head. Emma was about to touch his hair when a movement behind him caught her attention. Her eyes focused on the door and she saw that it was unlocked.

Somehow compelled to venture outside, she sat up. The blanket fell to her waist. She wasn't surprised to find that she was naked but the air inside the house was a little chilly and she crossed her arms. Looking around, she spotted a clean smock on the trunk at the foot of the bed and eased down the bed to snatch it up. After pulling it over her head, she tried to locate her borrowed dress but it was nowhere obvious. After pushing the blanket away, she swung her legs off the bed, her toes searching for her black sneakers.

Instead, she found a pair of fur shoes. Recalling the moment when she had asked for them, Emma smiled softly and glanced over at Iain's sleeping face. Gingerly sliding her feet into the shoes, she was surprised at how soft the leather was. She had expected it to be rough and stiff but it was fairly flexible.

The shoes came up to her ankle, the fur turned out and she wasn't sure why but a hole had been cut on the outer side of both heels. They had no soles to speak of, or any uniform shape at all. They looked a little silly and smelled strongly of leather—obviously—but she instantly loved them and did her best to tie them shut with leather strips laced through holes that had been punched through the top of the shoes.

It wasn't until she stood up that she realized something important. She wasn't in any pain. She didn't feel tired or bruised. Looking down at herself, she examined her wrists and hands, her arms and even pulled up the skirt of her smock to look at her legs. She didn't find any injuries at all.

Then the bigger realization hit her. She wasn't wearing her locket.

Her eyes turned to the door as the foggy memory of losing her locket floated to the surface of her mind. Craig had torn it off her neck and thrown it away.

Without knowing why, she had to find it – now.

Emma walked to the door and opened it to find that dawn had arrived, lighting up the lush glen still wet from the previous day's rain. Walking around to the back of the house, she made her way to the paddock and scaled its surrounding wall. Once on her feet again, she paused, trying to recall about where she had been when Craig took her locket.

They had entered the paddock from the open gate on the other side and Iain and the laird had been waiting for them with young Peter quite near to where she stood now. Choosing a direction, she headed farther into the paddock, scanning the ground for a bit of shiny metal.

A moment later, she was nearing the gate and stopped. She closed her eyes, replaying her memory. Craig had grabbed her locket with his right hand and thrown it to his left. Turning east again, Emma shuffled slowly and searched the ground.

There it was. Tucked between a few tufts of grass, the locket shone dully, damp and a little dirty. Emma squatted and reached for it but then couldn't bring herself to touch it. Would something happen if she put it on? Or even picked it up? Or even worse, if she didn't put it on?

For a long moment, Emma stared at the locket in indecision. Then, slowly and hesitantly, she picked it up. She sighed with relief when she felt no different and brought the locket closer to her face. Carefully opening its clasp, she pulled out the small slip of paper and unfolded it.

To return, simply don the locket.

To stay, thou need only bury it.

Mouth open, Emma stared at the note with tears in her eyes. What had she done that the locket would finally reveal that she could go back to her own time?

It was a cruel choice. Just by putting on a necklace, she could return to her old life and put the last few weeks behind her. She could go back to a time that she understood. A time that was easier and more convenient. A time and a place that was safer. She could appreciate better the rich life she had lived. Most importantly, she could spare her mother and father the pain of losing another child.

She wouldn't have Iain though. The thought of lying down to sleep without his warm body curved around her, of never seeing his dimples again, of eating a meal without his arm touching hers... How could she go back after what she had been through, after falling in love? How would she ever get past that or feel normal again?

Her chest ached terribly as she reached for a rock to cut a hole in the dirt. The ground was soft and wet and after she had a sizeable hole, she set the locket in the bottom and used the rock to push the dirt back into place.

Tossing the rock away, she stood up, taking a deep breath and closing her eyes.

"Emma!" a man screamed.

Whipping around, she looked toward the house, realizing with horror that she had left Iain alone. Hiking up her smock, she ran back the way she came.

"Iain!" He appeared from the side of the house. As soon as he spotted her, he was running again and vaulted over the paddock wall.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as her vision of returning to Iain and his home became reality. The locket no longer bound her. The rain clouds had been swept away by the Highland winds. She was free and it was far better than she had imagined.

"Emma," Iain gasped just as she threw herself at him. His arms clamped around her, held her high off the ground. She wrapped her legs around his waist, hiccupping and sobbing and laughing.

Iain teetered as though about to fall over and sank down to his knees. They pulled back to look at each other. His eyes traced over her face as his hands smoothed down her hair and cupped her cheeks. Her hands rested on his chest, though one hand ventured up to touch his face. The rough stubble of a two-day beard prickled her fingertips. She saw fatigue in his eyes.

"I thought ye had left me."

"I'm sorry," she said with a fretful frown. "You must've felt so... Iain, I'm so sorry."

He shook his head, petting her hair again and wiping at the tears on her cheeks with his thumbs. "When I found that knot on the side of yer face..." The back of his fingers stroked her left temple. "And all those bruises. The one across yer stomach and...the ones on yer thighs." His voice broke on the last and Emma knew what he suspected. She set her fingers over his lips, shushing him.

"It didn't happen," she whispered. Iain's eyes shut tightly. "And I would never leave you. I love you. I want to be your wife."

He made an abrupt sound of relief and took her mouth in a kiss. It was passionate and desperate, tender and romantic, everything she needed to know how right a choice she had made.

"I love ye," he moaned between kisses. "I love ye. I love ye." His hands pushed up the hem of her skirt, slipping underneath. He gently but eagerly stroked her thighs, like he had to touch her, his desires both in check and yet unrestrained. She knew then what she needed. What they both needed.

She leaned back, pulling Iain over her. He followed her down with no protest. In only a few seconds, he had tugged his tunic out of the way and was inside her. His scent was so familiar—peat smoke and fennel-scented soap. The ground was damp and cold but he was warm and she didn't care about grass stains or even getting caught.

The things he whispered. Questions that she could only nod to, soft exclamations that made her heart pound. His voice made her melt. His shuddering breaths matched the smooth pumping of his hips. She could see nothing but him. Feel, taste, smell, and think of nothing but him. The strain in his words when he was close, the fascination in

his eyes when he watched her climax and the ecstasy on his face when she watched him.

"Emma," he sighed. His body slumped over her, his lungs working overtime and his warm breaths puffing over her shoulder.

"Stay with me, Iain," she whispered, petting his back. He grunted but didn't move for another moment. His cock was still twitching inside her. When he eventually leaned up on his elbows, she smiled at the satisfaction on his face.

"I will," he said.

She tilted her head to one side. "You will?"

"I'll stay with you." He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I'll be with you always. Forever," he emphasized.

The words she wanted to say were a balled up in her throat and she couldn't speak. Instead, she pulled him closer, shut her eyes, and waited.

He kissed her.

When they returned to the house—Iain carrying her the entire way—they found Aili sitting inside. The woman was mysteriously unsurprised but overjoyed by the outcome and the rest of the day was spent celebrating with her and everyone else. Word of her recovery also spread to the laird and Archibald himself came out to the croft with Colin and a large escort to express his relief—and his shock at her miraculous recuperation.

The constable James had been along, of course and had been curious as to whether she knew how the MacGregors had known that Colin was at the croft the day before yesterday. Emma could guess that Colin's presence had been an unlucky coincidence—that Rossalyn had sicced Craig and his men on her with the promise of catching a fairy and trading her for their captured clansman. She couldn't tell the constable any of this though. It would be like signing the woman's death warrant and Emma wouldn't have been able to live with herself.

* * * * *

Rossalyn wondered how long it might be until she was missed. A couple of hours? Surely someone would stop by and wonder why she wasn't there. For the first time, she hoped no one did. She hoped she might have a full day before anyone worried about her. It might be enough time.

She stopped by an obliging tree, her body aching from the weight of the bag on her back and leaned against the trunk to catch her breath after climbing up past a dangerous set of falls.

Or were they looking for her even now? Was the constable coming after her? Tears welled up at the thought of what they would do to her. Surely the fairy wasn't going to stay silent about what she had done. Craig would've told the woman just who had

betrayed her. How had she gotten herself into this mess? Why hadn't she realized what consequences awaited her?

It wasn't her fault. If anyone was to blame, the fairy was at fault. If she had never appeared, Rossalyn wouldn't be running from the only home she had ever known.

Pulling the heavy bag off her back, she set it on the ground and approached the river to relieve her thirst. Then she would have to keep going.

She stepped onto a rock to kneel down and reach for the fresh water. Her foot slipped and she went down. Pain exploded in her head. The world dimmed. Shimmered. She hadn't stopped moving though. Her body was sliding down.

Water splashed against her ankles just before she fell off the riverside boulder. She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't see. More pain burst inside her shoulder, then her back. Her leg throbbed as she was thrown against another rock.

She knew she was dead but perhaps it was better this way. She wouldn't have to face the laird or her friends. Wouldn't have to suffer their punishment.

Aye, it was better this way.

Epilogue

Jason Campbell sat in his favorite chair—the leg rest up—and was sleeping peacefully with a healthy baby girl on his chest. He had a towel draped over his shoulder and a half-empty bottle of milk in his left hand. His right hand rested on his daughter's back.

Danielle, his wife, watched the scene with tears in her eyes, both pleased and saddened. Pleased that her husband was finally sleeping and saddened to recall another time when he had held his first daughter just the same way.

As quietly as she could, she sat in the easy chair next to him, glancing briefly at the program on the television.

"The Great Vowel Shift that took place sometime between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries and brought us the pronunciation of Modern English – and indeed the frustration of English spelling – is still somewhat of a mystery for many linguists and is the focus of tonight's program..."

Some sort of history show. She stroked her fingers across the book on her lap, somehow needing to look at it again even though it was still painful to remember.

Emma had always loved her encyclopedia on magical creatures. Her grandmother had given it to her after a trip to Great Britain. Danielle had memorized the entire book because she read it to Emma at least a hundred times when Emma was a little girl. Entries on unicorns, mermaids and leprechauns filled its pages—even entries for stranger and lesser known creatures such as kappa from Japan and kobolds from Germany.

A lump was already firmly lodged in the back of her throat when she opened the worn, well-loved book. After only a moment, she was hurriedly thumbing through the pages. She had to look through the entire book or else the whole exercise had been a waste.

Just when she thought she'd have to give up and slam the book shut, her misty eyes caught something and she stopped. Flipping back a couple of pages, she spread open the page on Scottish creatures—or rather, two pages. She could have sworn the book had only dedicated one page to the rich mythology of Scotland but more than that, the second page contained a drawing she had never seen before.

She skimmed the entry on the new creature and then had to read it again.

"Jason?" she whispered. Her husband made a soft noise. "Jason?" she said louder.

"Is the baby crying?" he mumbled.

"No, honey, she's not. Wake up and look at this." She lifted the book and set it on the arm of her chair. "Wake up, Jason." She shook his arm and he tightened his hold on

the baby as his eyes opened. He glanced at the book and then winced, averting his eyes with a frown.

"Not now, sweetheart. I can't look at that now," he said, shaking his head.

"You know this book as well as me. Tell me you've seen this page before," she challenged. His interest piqued, Jason turned his head and looked at the page his wife was pointing at. His eyebrows slanted down but his mouth fell open.

"It's..." he breathed. "Sweetheart, did you do this? How could —"

"I didn't!" she insisted. "I wouldn't do this. How in the world could I do this? It's not like I can rebind a book. Read the entry."

She couldn't wait for him to read it to himself and began to read aloud. "'Scottish fairies are known by many names, such as the good folk or the people of the mounds. In Scotland, they are a race of people driven into hiding by humans, living in mounds and only appearing to create mischief. Many different and sometimes conflicting stories still circulate today. One famous story in the southern Highlands related to the fairy legend of *The Glaiistig* speaks of a girl who appeared to the local clan and became a strong ally to the laird and his family by protecting their cattle and children. The fairy eventually married into the clan. She had a green dress, cloven feet, hair the color of a baby's lips — though some versions of the story say she had blonde hair — and flew with large wings. See picture to right.'"

The rest of the entry was irrelevant but as Jason and Danielle studied the picture of the Scottish fairy, they couldn't help but see their daughter, just as she was the night she was killed by a drunk driver.

"You've seen this page before, right? I haven't read this book in a long time," she asked. Pulling her eyes from the drawing, she looked up at her husband.

"I-I don't remember it but...she had to have — she must have worn that costume because of this book. It's just a coincidence," he said, shaking his head but still looking at the illustration.

"Jason," she pleaded. "It was me who suggested she wear green. She wanted to wear pink to match her hair."

Her husband's eyes slowly rose and they both stared at each other for a long few seconds. They then both looked down at the book again.

"It has to be a coincidence," Jason whispered.

"Oh Emma." Danielle pressed her fingers to her lips. It sounded crazy but she could feel that it was true. "Oh thank God," she whispered.

* * * * *

Iain stood at the door of his home, waiting for his wife to return from the river. Content to no longer be a stag, he watched with a smile on his face as Emma laughed at Puck, who was dancing around her skirts. She cooed at the dog, continuing to walk and drying her hands on her apron. Iain walked out to meet her some distance from the

house. He managed to steal a kiss from her but she leaned down away from him to scratch behind the dog's ear. Puck panted with delight.

The dog wasn't calm for long though. He hopped up and down, whining for more attention when Emma stood straight, smoothing her hands down the front of her dress and over the bump in her stomach.

"He canna get enough, can he?" Iain noted with a chuckle.

Emma smiled coyly at him. "Just like someone else I know." Growling at her comment, Iain couldn't resist and pulled her face close with one hand on the back of her head, laying a kiss on her.

She pulled away a moment later. "Did I see Rachel just now?"

"Aye, she stopped by to ask after Kenneth," he said, nodding in the direction of the redhead's house. "Her basket was full of his favorite meat pies." No sooner had Iain finished his sentence than a woman suddenly burst out of Kenneth's home.

Emma gasped. Rachel, still holding her basket, turned around to yell something at Kenneth, who had followed her outside. Iain was too far away to hear anything being said but when Rachel dumped the contents of her basket on the ground and then threw the basket at Kenneth's head, all the time waving her hands wildly, it wasn't difficult to guess what they were arguing about.

Rachel shifted between wiping at her cheeks and pointing at Kenneth, who silently watched her with something akin to shock on his face. Iain's eyebrows went up as Rachel even jumped up and down.

The brunette then turned around, not bothering to fetch her basket and began walking away. Kenneth ran after her. He touched her arm but she threw his hand off and slapped him before turning away again.

Frowning this time, Kenneth grabbed her elbow none too gently. Iain heard Emma gasp again as Kenneth forced Rachel into his arms and kissed her.

"Oh wow," Emma breathed. Rachel jerked as though trying to wiggle her way free but Kenneth fisted his hands in her dress and the second Rachel stopped resisting was obvious even from such a distance. Kenneth then lifted her into his arms and walked back to his house. They vanished inside and the door slammed shut.

Iain and Emma were quiet for a few seconds, neither one moving.

"Beth is visiting Colin, right?" she asked. Iain nodded, still mute with surprise. Emma laughed. "I suppose we're not going to get the stew Kenneth was making. What'll we eat for supper?"

Iain turned to look at her, not bothering to hide his lecherous smile. "I know what I'm eating for supper." His smile only grew wider when her cheeks flushed.

"But what will I eat?" she teased back.

"Ye willna be thinking about food," he promised. Emma walked around him and toward the croft.

"But Aili's still inside." She backed away from him.

"Ah but she isna there now," Iain said with a grin. Emma's jaw dropped with surprise and she stopped. He continued forward. "I told her to get out of my house and she left even before Rachel was here. Ye were the one idling at the river."

"But who will be making dinner if you and I are – you know..."

Iain caught her about the waist, pulling her closer. "Aye, I know ye're eating for the wee one as well. Aili wouldna let me chase her off unless I promised to let her bring food for ye, so we only have an hour."

He gazed at his wife's blushing cheeks and wanted to nibble her. "O-only one?"

"Aye," he answered, "only one today." Then, taking from his friend's example, he lifted Emma into his arms, carried her into the house and shut the door behind him.

About the Author

Ruby Duvall is an avid reader of many romance and erotica genres, but her favorites are fantasy and paranormal. She also enjoys movies, RPGs and maybe a little shopping too. She currently lives in Washington.

Ruby welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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