

Her Laird, Her Lover Scattered Book 1

by Sable Grey

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For my readers
I am eternally grateful for the career they allow me.
Their continued support is always greatly appreciated.

Word from the author

Dear readers.

Ever since I was a child, I've had a love affair with books. That affair has lasted more than thirty years, and in the last fifteen, has developed into a passion for writing as well. I write because I have a story inside to tell, and hope above all other hopes it is a story that readers want to share.

Every day I wake with an impulse to create, an urge to share the characters that have been brewing in my mind, a need to pound out the story that demands to be told. Some days I sit and stare at a blank screen, unable to sate the clawing desire inside to weave the tale in my head. But then there are the days when I sit for hours, immersed in the world of my imagination. Those days are the ones that make the rest bearable.

Today I bring you the result of one of those successful writing sessions, a new tale that will hopefully draw you into another world and allow you to live through the characters so lovingly born from my imagination. If you laugh, sigh, or feel for a character at least once during your read, then *Her Laird*, *Her Lover* is a success.

Thank you for purchasing *Her Laird, Her Lover*. I wish you very happy reading.

Sincerely, Sable Grey

CHAPTER ONE

Katie looked up from her sewing as the vibrations of hooves thundered in the earthen floor beneath her feet. Across the small living space of the cottage, Magda woke from her nap and tilted her head.

"Someone's coming."

Katie nodded. "Aye, I am to be blind, not deaf."

"This day you will have sight beyond that of mere eyes." The old woman counted out loud six riders and stood. "Tis a laird on his way to my home. Hurry and ready yourself to receive him."

Katie set her sewing in the basket in the corner and turned to duck into the second room of the small cottage. Three years she'd lived with Magda, and for three years she'd gone through this same ritual whenever someone rode upon them. She'd met Magda when she'd first arrived in this medieval period, confused and thinking she was actually dead. It had been an accident—the driver had lost control of the tour bus and sent it plunging over the edge of the cliff into the loch. Katie had awakened and followed the road into a village. She'd very nearly

been hanged for her hysterics, but Magda had come to her aid, lying that she was Katie's mother.

Katie thought of that day often, remembered the life she'd had before she came to be in the past. Things she took for granted were kept sweet in her memory—things like air conditioning, running water, strawberry cheesecake. She'd been a photographer in her old life, a successful one. Now she was an accessory to Magda's cons.

She grinned in the darkness of the room as she pulled on the heavy cloak, attached the dark-colored veil, and then pulled the hood of her cloak over her hair. She'd not agreed at first to Magda's devious plans, but as she grew fond of the old woman—and bored—she'd finally given in. She pinned the cloak closed around her dress.

Quickly she moved to the peephole in the wall and looked out at the riders. Magda had been right; it was a lord who came to them. He sat upon his horse, scowling down at the cottage. Her gaze lowered to the length of his legs. He was a tall man, widely built, with black hair. His face was a collage of wide angles, and his blue eyes were deep set. She moved away from the peephole as one of his men dismounted.

Katie missed the men of her own time, mainly because they were cleaner. She wished she'd enjoyed more of them before the bus accident. She'd been stupid to be so engrossed in her career. In the end that success meant nothing, and all she was left with were the memories of a few relationships. Still, she cherished those memories, for it had been a long and lonely three years. While she'd entertained a couple of the brutes of the century she had been thrown into—the ones Magda had said would pay better than others—she detested their stink.

She squared her shoulders when the knock on the door sounded, and she waited, listening to Magda shuffle forward to greet the visitor. He was there to seek the counsel of her daughter. Of course he was. This was a superstitious people, easily duped.

The door of the second room opened, and she took a deep breath. Showtime. Magda reached for her arm and led her into the main living space. The men stood at the main entrance, one who was not their leader in front. Many had tried to trick her like this in the past, but she'd learned from Magda's quick eye how to spot who was a leader of men and who was not.

"She is blind," Magda recited, leading Katie to the table. "And sometimes quite mad, but she was born with the gift of knowing things, my laird." Magda brought forth the parchment and set it on the table, then a piece of coal, placing it in Katie's hand.

Men came to Magda's cottage seeking her crazed daughter's counsel for many things, but a lord came for only one reason. It was the easiest con of all.

"We are poor, my laird," Magda prompted. The man frowned but dropped a heavy velvet purse onto the table. His hand covered it before Magda could reach forward.

"She must first prove herself."

"You think me a liar, my laird? I am poor, but I have pride, sir." Magda feigned offense, and Katie almost smiled. If the woman had been born in the future, she would have made an excellent actress.

"Nay, but these are hard times, crone, and some are desperate for coin." The man did not budge.

"Katie, you must prove to this man you have the gift," Magda said softly.

"Why must I?" Katie dropped the coal and folded her hands in her lap.

"Now is not the time to be impertinent, girl." Magda reached forward and placed the coal in Katie's hand again. "Do I not take care of ye? Do as I say now."

Katie released a practiced sigh. "For you I shall, but not for the man who doubts me." Her hand hovered over the parchment, and then she began to sketch.

She'd always liked to draw, even as a child. Practice over the last three years had given her a steady hand that worked well with her eye for detail. In moments, a portrait began to take form.

Hard, long lines for the jawline, shadowed inset around the narrowed eyes. Dark hair fell forward across a broad forehead. The mouth was defined and hard. She made her hand shake as she dropped the coal and reached out until her fingers touched the man next to her. She jerked him closer and lifted her fingers to his face when he leaned down.

"This man is an imposter. We are mocked this day by those who mean to trick us." She stood, knocking her legs against the chair so that it tumbled backward dramatically. "I will not be mocked. I wish to return to my room now." She held out her hand, and Magda took it. They were nearly to the door when the man called for them.

"Wait."

Katie didn't look back but halted her step, listening to the sound of the parchment being snatched up from the table.

"My laird, see this. It is your face she has drawn."

She cut her eyes at Magda and winked when a heavy step carried to the table behind them.

"How have ye drawn my face, wench? Have ye seen me before?"

Katie said nothing, waiting. That heavy step neared, and a hand caught her arm and whirled her around. She kept her gaze on the breadth of his chest.

"Answer me, girl."

"She is blind, my laird. She has been so her whole life." Magda managed desperation and fear in her voice so convincingly that Katie thought she deserved a standing ovation.

"How can I be certain of that?"

It was Katie's turn. She reached up and touched his chest, then slid her fingers up slowly to his thick neck. At least he had no beard. She always feared the lice that most bearded men carried. Her fingers slipped intimately over his face, touching every feature she'd just drawn. And thankfully he did not stink, only carried the smell of the ride on him. Her fingers moved higher to comb through his thick hair.

"How can I be certain that you are indeed a man, sire, rather than a very ugly woman dressed in men's clothes?" Someone behind him smothered a laugh.

"Do ye mock me, wench?"

"No more than you mock me, sire. Your hair needs trimming. If you do not believe me to be blind, mayhap you will hand me the shears and allow me the service?" Again one of the men chuckled, and the lord turned, sending the traitor a silencing glare before facing Katie again.

"I know not your name, sire, but I know your face from my vision. You come to me for counsel, and I shall offer it because we are poor, as my mother has told you, and because I love her dearly. If that were not true, I would demand you leave our home for your doubt and take your coin with you."

"I am Robert Shelley, laird of Dunham, and ye have a sharp tongue, wench."

"Indeed she does, sire," Magda whispered. "I have tried to beat it out of her, but she will not be affected. I have learned to suffer it over the years."

"Perhaps ye did not beat her hard enough."

"I used a hard willow from the tree at the edge of the wood, sire," Magda argued, and Katie had to fight to keep from laughing. She loved Magda. She was a clever woman with a sharp wit, but could appear as simple as a stray cur if she so chose.

"Why is her face covered?"

"Her skin is sensitive, sire." Magda's voice softened once more, then dropped. "The wind carries visions to my daughter, and the slightest touch she feels deeply."

"Is what the crone says true?"

"She has no reason to lie, sire," Katie answered.

"Then tell me why I have come to ye today," he demanded without releasing her arm.

"You seek guidance as to what to do against your enemy," she said simply.

"God's blood, my laird! She does have the gift! She knows of Rory's attacks!" one of the men exclaimed.

"My counsel is not for your men. It is for you only," Katie told him. Then she addressed Magda. "Take the others outside so that I might tell this man what I know."

Magda bustled forward, and once Robert gave his men a quick nod, they filed out behind her. Katie waited, her hands still lifted to Robert's face. She'd tell him what he wanted to know, and then he would fuck her. She prayed that his cock was as thick as the rest of his body.

"Your English enemy has his men gathered at the borders, waiting for you to retaliate, sire," she began. It had been easy to place his accent once she'd baited him to speak. He was a border lord. His man had said the name Rory; it was not a Scottish surname, but an English one. It was like taking candy from a baby.

"If you wish a victory, sire, you must wait until the end of the season, when his men have gone back to their homes and their fields. Attack quickly, burn as many homes as you can in the span of three nights, and then return to Dunham. Your enemy will think he had underestimated you and that you have more numbers to a powerful army than you do. He will be afraid to attack again soon." She swayed forward, dropping her hands to his shoulder as if to seek his strength. She nearly smiled when his large hands touched her waist to steady her.

"'Tis all I know, sire."

"I wish to see your face." Of course he did. They all wanted to see her face right before they bent her over the table to have their way with her. She didn't mind that part, though. She waited while he pushed back the hood of the cloak, revealing her dark hair. As the veil lifted, she locked her eyes on his chest again.

"God's blood," he murmured.

"You are disappointed, sire?" Katie asked. She knew he wasn't. Most expected her to be hideous beneath her veil. Katie took great care though to make sure they were surprised. Unlike other women in the village, she bathed often, keeping her hair washed so that is shined, and made certain that her teeth were clean. She chewed on the mint root Magda gave her so that her breath remained fresh.

She continued when he said nothing. "I do not care if you are. My comeliness or lack thereof should not affect your ability to strike back at your enemy. You did not come here to see my face. You came to first trick me and then to receive my knowing."

"I am cautious of those who say they have gifts," he said in defense. "I still don't believe ye entirely."

"Have I not given you the knowing you sought?"

"Ye've given me a strategic plan that is sound and clever," he argued.

"I know nothing of strategy, sire. It is the brutal business of men that causes bloodshed and death." She lifted her cloak back over her head but did not readjust her veil. "And there is a chill on the wind, sire. I tell you, you shall have a victory."

"If I do not, I will return and beat ye senseless," he threatened.

"Then I shall bid you farewell, sire, for I will not see you again if your threat is a true one, and I've no doubts about you despite your doubts in me." She waited. He was talking more than the others normally did. He should be groping her by now.

"How many come to seek your counsel, wench?"

"I do not keep count, sire."

 $\mbox{``I would}$ surmise a good many. And how many lay with ye before they leave?"

Katie feigned a gasp. "Lay with me, sire? I am no whore."

He chuckled then, surprising her. "It is a good ploy, I will admit. Tell me, how is it ye knew my face to draw it?"

"It was the knowing, my laird." So the lord of Dunham was not as superstitious as others.

"The knowing," he echoed. "I shall give ye your coin, wench. Ye needn't continue the farce."

"I know of no farce, sire."

She forced her gaze to remain straight ahead when he bent at the knees to bring himself eye level with her. His blue gaze searched, and then he straightened.

"Even still, your counsel was sound. At least ye do not give ridiculous rhetoric for the coin ye receive."

Katie almost frowned. He was going to leave. And without giving her a good romp. She thought quickly and then swayed forward, reaching again for the strength of his arms. When her knees bent, he brought his hands back to her waist.

"What are ye about now?"

"I wish you to leave now, my laird. You weaken me," she whispered. "Your touch is too strong; your very essence overpowers me completely." For a moment he said nothing. "I beg you to have mercy on my body, sire, and leave me to recover."

"Clever wench," he murmured when she swayed again, this time succeeding in pressing against his chest. "Your wiles are well practiced, and I pray ye are paid heftily for them." He released her abruptly and turned, then strode from the cottage. She stared at the door he'd disappeared behind, surprised and disappointed. He'd been much easier to look at than others, he carried no stink, and even his hair had been clean. She wouldn't have minded just a peek at what he was packing.

After they were gone, Magda returned, beaming. "Was he a stallion?"

Katie held up her hands, shaking her head. "I wouldn't know. I threw myself at him, and he left without even so much as a grope."

A look of disbelief wrinkled Magda's brow. "He paid enough to have had ye twice." She emptied the contents of the purse onto the table. Two gold pieces and one silver. Katie's eyes widened.

"I believe he knew we were not what we seemed, but he was not angry about it." Katie shrugged off the robe and stared down at the coins. "He did know my advice on his situation was sound."

"Men." Magda rolled her eyes. "And he did not seem overly wealthy. Sounded of the borders."

"He was." Katie propped her chin on her hand as she leaned on the table. "Big boy."

"Aye, and comely." Magda grinned. "And the first ye could not seduce. Perhaps ye are too old to draw them in so easily."

"I'm only twenty-six!" Katie argued then smiled at Magda's smothered chuckle. "You are an evil witch to tease me so. As long as he paid, it shouldn't matter to either of us if I'm losing my touch or not." Katie shrugged while Magda collected the coins and placed them in the basket hanging in the corner. They needn't worry of being hungry for meat for at least six months now.

"At least he didn't leave ye exhausted. The garden needs tending." Magda crossed her arms as Katie made a face. "I will have to have my herbs made by the fall. Everyone in the village will be bringing their children to me."

Katie nodded and rose, then headed from the cottage out to their small garden. Yes, Magda made good money "curing" the children of their maladies, which normally were no more than colds brought on by the change of the season.

By the end of the afternoon, Katie had finished her chores. As usual, she left Magda and took a walk down to the lake that was sheltered in the woods. It was her favorite time of the day. She would bathe and swim until the stars twinkled above her, and she would wake in the morning well rested.

The water was cooler that evening, and Katie could smell the rain coming on the air. Magda had taught her how to detect things like that, and often a prediction of rain would keep the villagers coming back each season. Some had even begun to whisper that it was Katie herself who brought the rain. Her life wasn't really a bad one, she thought, as she glided through the water, looking up at the dimming sky. She could have been hanged or become a slave to some farmer. Magda had saved her from that kind of humiliating existence.

Despite her cons, Magda had a tender heart. She was a survivor and taught Katie how to do the same. She'd never had any children, and Katie had seen her warm smile and the loving way she looked at her. Even if she were given the opportunity to go back to her own time, she would never leave Magda, and she'd told the woman that time and again over the years.

She didn't think Magda really believed she was from the future. She might even believe Katie slightly crazy, as she told others, for it had taken her awhile to adjust to some of the phrases Katie used when speaking. But she had accepted Katie, taken her into her home.

Making her way back to dry land, Katie frowned as she searched the bank for her dress. She'd left it, as she always had, on the large boulder near the water's edge. She leaned over the boulder, but found it hadn't slid off into the mud. A twig snapped behind her.

"'Tis hard for a blind woman to find her clothes in the dark."

She squeaked out a cry as she spun. There stood Robert Shelley, a torch in one hand, her dress in the other. He tilted his head, his gaze lowering down the length of her and then back up again. She tried to cover herself with her hands, but then let them drop to her sides.

There was no telling how long he'd been there, watching her. He'd already seen her completely.

"Why are you still here? You rode away hours ago."

"We set up in these woods, deciding a good rest before we travel back to Dunham would strengthen our ride." He moved forward with a lazy step. "Ye will not attempt to cover your lies now?"

"What would be the point?" She held out her hand. "Might I have my dress back?"

"I'm thinking about it." He tossed the dress up so it fell over his arm and then cocked his hand on his hip. "Ye were very convincing. I very nearly believed ye."

Katie reached back and pulled her hair forward, squeezing the water from its length, then allowed it to remain over her shoulder, offering some coverage as it hung just over her breasts. She'd never kept her hair so long before she came to this time. But she found the men appreciated the length.

"You will not get your coin back." She half leaned, half sat on the boulder behind her, its hard, cool surface offering some comfort in the awkward situation she found herself in. "It should take twice the number of men you brought with you to pry it from Magda's fingers."

"Then should I not receive something of truth for my generosity?" He arched a heavy eyebrow. "Or should I ride into the village and reveal your trickery?"

"What do you want?"

His gaze lowered to her breasts. "Ye are a very petite woman."

"And weak and simple and stupid, my laird," Katie added. Maybe she'd have a romp with the big border lord after all.

He grunted as his gaze rose. "Somehow I do not believe any of those to be true of ye."

"Shall I begin weeping, my laird, to prove it? Would you have me run through the woods so that you might hunt me down and have your way with me?" While he didn't move closer, she could see her proposition did appeal to him.

"Mayhap you would rather I bite and scratch at you until you wrestle me to the ground?" She walked forward and stopped directly in front of him, but still he didn't move.

"Is that what you expect from those who come for your counsel?" She shrugged. "It's what I know of men."

"Ah, the *knowing* again," he said sarcastically. "Then tell me, what am I thinking right now?"

"You want to fuck me." Katie grinned when his gaze narrowed. "Of course, it takes no real gift to know that." She reached forward and ran her hand over the front of his trousers to find his cock bulged and pressing out.

"How did ye know my face when you drew it? Ye didn't once look at me." He reached down and grasped her wrist when she rubbed him, jerking her hand away. "Are ye employed by Edmund Rory?"

Katie rolled her eyes. "You sought me out, sire, not the other way around. You did not strike me as stupid. I'd never heard of either of you until today, when you came to our cottage and your man said his name."

"Then how could ye know why I was there and what I looked like?"

"It's simple. Rory is not a Scottish name. It must be English. Therefore your troubles most likely involve the border between Scotland and England." She shook her head. "It took no real guesswork."

"And my face?"

Katie released a breath in exasperation. "A girl must keep some secrets. I have not denied our ruse. I have told you I will willingly allow you to fuck me. And I stand before you completely naked with nothing to hide behind. Must you ask for more?"

"How did ye know my face?" he repeated. "Ye will tell me, or I will return to your cottage and beat the crone, take my coin, and tell the villagers of your farce."

Katie gritted her back teeth together. "There is a tiny hole in the wall of the second room of our cottage. I merely looked out before your man knocked on the door, saw you were indeed the leader, and drew you from that glimpse. And now I've given you what you've asked for and tolerated your threats. Give me back my dress so that I might return to the cottage before Magda begins to worry I have drowned."

His fingers tightened on her wrist, indicating he wasn't done with her yet. "I believe ye mentioned offering yourself to me."

"No, I said *fuck*. And now, I think not." She tried to pull away from him, but he held her. "Release me, sire."

"Ye think me one who would do as ye wish just because ye ask it of me?" He tilted his head.

"No, I think you should do as I wish because I *command* it. You had your chance but lost the opportunity when you threatened me." She lifted her chin. Despite this one's cleanliness over the others, he was proving to be no less a brute. They always underestimated her.

"And if I do not release ye?"

She looked him right in the eyes. "I warn you only this once because you are a laird and not the usual blacksmith or farmer. I'm *not* a woman to trifle with."

"Now ye threaten *me*." He chuckled then. "It seems the only truth of ye I saw today is that sharp tongue."

"It wouldn't be so sharp but rather very accommodating right now had you treated me better." She saw his gaze darken as he understood her meaning. "Perhaps the great laird of Dunham would do well to learn to think of what he has to lose before he sharpens his own tongue? Now release me, and it is the last time I will tell you to do so."

"The lesson will be yours tonight, wench." He jerked her forward. "To still that tongue when in the presence of those better than ye."

"My tongue *is* still when in presence of those better than I!" she shot back at him.

He drove the end of the torch into the ground. His free hand wrapped around her, cupped the back of her head, and in the next moment, his lips crushed hers. Katie's first instinct was to kick him right between the legs, but she forgot her intentions when his tongue thrust between her lips, sweeping heat over her entire body and scattering her thoughts. The fabric of his shirt rubbed against her nipples when he released her wrist and slid his hand around her to jerk her against him. But he stilled when she reached up and kissed him back.

CHAPTER TWO

Robert Shelley could not explain the fire the dark-haired wench had ignited inside him, nor had he expected to find her spine and sharp tongue so arousing. She'd unabashedly touched his cock, knowing she would find it swollen, and had spoken just as brazenly when making it clear that she wanted to fuck. What he had expected least was that little sound she made against his mouth just before her tongue danced boldly forward against his when he was trying to punish her for her disrespect and impertinence.

She lifted on her toes, reached up, and grasped him by the neck, bringing him down to her so she could feed off of his lips. Had she shown this fever in the cottage, he wouldn't have left without tasting her temptations. But that had been her attempt to draw more coin from him, and it most likely worked more times than not on other men. Most would be drawn in by her pretense of helplessness, but Robert had suspected she and the crone were merely women doing what they could to survive.

Nay, her hunger now was real. He pushed her roughly back to the boulder and tossed her dress atop it. He stepped forward, thrust his hand between her wet thighs, and curled his fingers into her cunt. She sucked air sharply through her teeth when he pushed deeper.

"Have ye any more sharpness for me now, wench?" he asked roughly.

Her eyes glittered as she met his gaze. "Forgive me my silence, sire, but I was hoping for something larger than your fingers. I am contemplating my disappointment." He freed himself from his trousers as he rocked his hand against her, watching her face when her gaze dropped. He ran his hand over his cock in a few quick strokes and groaned when her tongue slid along her bottom lip.

"Then I shall give ye something bigger to ease your disappointment." He removed his hand from her body and shoved her back against the boulder. He grasped her knee and lifted it so that her cunt was made available to him.

"I shall tell you in a moment if your attempt to comfort me was in vain."

He bent his knees and slid his cock into her, pushing his length deep so he was completely sheathed inside her. Her head tilted back, and a soft groan vibrated from her throat as her fingers grasped and curled in the material of his shirt. When he rocked back and then thrust again, her hips met his, and she pulled at him. He jerked back again and then thrust sharply, watching her breasts rise with her breath as she groaned again.

"Fuck me, sire," she whispered. He released her leg and gripped her hips when she leaned farther back on the boulder. He lifted her so he could stand upright and began rocking into her with force. Her cunt tightened with the new position, and she wrapped her legs around him, her hands leaving him so she could spread her arms out on the boulder, offering herself leverage.

He shook with passion, and tension knotted in his stomach as he increased his rhythm. God's blood, she felt good. His gaze raked across her flat stomach, the firelight of his torch reflected in every droplet of water still clinging to her soft skin. Her small breasts peaked so that the points of her dark nipples reached heavenward.

His gaze rose to her mouth. Her lips parted so that her moans and cries tumbled from her throat without restriction. He slid one hand around her to hold her as he fucked her greedily while freeing his other hand to reach up and run his fingers over those soft lips. In-

stantly her mouth closed over one finger, and her cheeks sank as she sucked. His balls tightened.

"That's right, lovely. Give your mouth something else to do than bite me." His hips jerked forward in response when she opened her eyes to look at him and grazed her teeth across the pad of his finger. She bit, a light threat that he could not deny he enjoyed.

He grunted as his breath came quicker and the tension in his groin grew more intense. He withdrew his finger from her mouth and slid his hand to her back to pull her upright so he could hold her suspended and fuck her at his pleasure. Her hands lowered to his shoulders, and her legs tightened around him, giving her strength to move down to his every upward stroke.

He watched as her body tensed around him, and then she thrashed, cries lifting from her throat as she found pleasure from his body. He kissed her deeply, drinking in the vibration of her rapture as his own release loomed closer. He buried himself deep as his cock filled her warm cunt with his seed. A shout of his own pushed against her mouth, and his hips moved of their own will, thrusting several times before they stilled.

Around them, no sound but their heavy breathing disturbed the lake or trees. He held her to him, liking the way she felt impaled upon him. He'd coupled with the occasional wench before, but none had made him lose himself in passion as this one had.

Carefully he lifted her off of him, her moan of protest making him want to fuck her again. He set her to the ground and then leaned forward, resting his weight on one hand against the boulder behind her. He took several steadying breaths, gaze locked on her as she reclined lazily back against the rock.

"Why didn't you do that earlier at the cottage?"

"Because I do not pay for women," he said. But he was beginning to consider the prospect of having one so spirited more often. He adjusted his trousers and then bent down to swipe up the torch.

"Good night to ye, wench."

"Katie," she corrected. "My name is Katie. I prefer that over wench, woman, or whatever other brutish word you mean to refer to me with."

He smiled over his shoulder. "Good-bye, Katie."

CHAPTER THREE

But it was not good-bye forever. Nearly three months later, a roll of red silk was delivered along with a letter from the laird of Dunham.

"Well, what does it say?" Magda demanded impatiently.

"The blind enjoy the feel of things against their skin. May the knowing find its way to you easier when you are wrapped in silk." Katie ran her hand over the soft material. "It is signed by the laird himself."

"This is a sign of something good," Magda predicted.

"You have the gift of knowing now?" Katie teased.

"I have eyes to see well enough that this is expensive silk," the old woman argued. "A man does not give a woman silk unless he wishes to see her in it."

Katie didn't say so, but she thought the same. Would the laird of Dunham come to her again soon? Her body heated at the thought. Two weeks later, another delivery came, this time of furs, a roll of linen, and a roll of wool. The following week she was brought a copper bracelet with a ruby in the center.

No more gifts came after that, and Katie went to work making a new cloak with the red silk, lining it with the wool and trimming it with the fur.

Magda made them both new dresses with the linen and new coats and winter shoes with the rest of the fur. Rumors of their good fortune and that their predictions had pleased a wealthy lord traveled beyond the village, and more visitors came, offering coin more for actual counsel than for coupling now.

But it wasn't until the late fall that the laird himself returned. As before, he came following the thunder of hooves, this time with more than a dozen men rather than the five he'd ridden with the last time. And he was not fresh when he stepped through the door of the cottage, but rather battle weary and filthy.

"We've come from our attack on the English," he explained, his gaze locked on Katie. "We will set up camp in the woods and will ride on to Dunham once we are rested."

"Was your attack successful, or should I prepare for my beating?" Katie knew it had been a success. Men carried victory in their eyes like diamonds. His gaze dropped to her dress and then to the bracelet.

"I see ye have put to use the gifts I sent."

"Your generosity is greatly appreciated, my laird," Magda praised. "I made the dresses myself, and Katie has made a new cloak that has convinced the villagers she has favored ye with good fortune."

His lips slanted. "Many are easily convinced with a bit of influence. A dropped word here or there of a strange woman who bespoke my victories before they came to pass, and that word shall travel quickly."

"I thought you did not believe in such whispers of superstition." Katie smiled at the hungry look that washed over him again.

"I do not."

"So you've come to demand your percentage of our earnings, then, for the rumors you started?" Katie asked.

"I would settle for a soft word, woman." He stepped toward her, but she turned her head and wrinkled her nose.

"None could find their way to my tongue through the stink you carry, sire. Was there nowhere you could have rinsed battle from your body and clothes before you came to the cottage?"

"Katie," Magda hissed.

"Do not silence her." Robert held up a hand to Magda. "It is her way, and I have found I have missed the bite of her tongue."

Katie smiled slowly. "Thought of me often, did you?"

"Do my gifts not speak the truth?" He inclined his head. "I shall do as ye wish. I will go to our lake now and wash myself clean so I do not offend your delicate senses. I will return by dark." He turned and quickly strode the way he'd entered.

"Ye've bewitched him, my dear." Magda's face was alight, and her dark eyes danced. "It shall bring us more fortune."

"You have become a greedy old woman," Katie teased.

"Aye, I have." Magda chuckled.

True to his word, Robert returned at dark, refreshed and much cleaner than before. Magda served him stew, and as he ate a second helping, she mumbled something about taking the rest to his men. She heaved the large kettle and ambled through the door, leaving them alone.

Katie observed Robert from across the table. "Your appetite is ravenous."

His blue gaze glittered when he looked up at her. "Indeed it is. Your plan for attack was a good one, but we had little time to rest or eat." He scooped the last morsel from his bowl before pushing it away and leaning back in the chair, stretching his long legs forward.

"Come here," he told her.

"Perhaps I wish you to come to me instead." She remained in her chair.

"And next ye shall address me as Robert rather than with respect, I imagine? Do not give me troubles, woman. Come to me." He waved a hand at her. Slowly she stood, and he smiled, nodding. She sent him her brightest smile before turning and reaching for her cloak.

"It is time for my own bath, Robert. I shall return shortly." She pulled the cloak over her shoulders and lifted the fur-lined hood around her face. As she opened the door, she heard the scrape of the chair. She grinned when his heavy steps followed her. She lifted her skirts and fled toward the trees in the direction of the lake, turning to find him taking chase behind her.

She wove her way through the trees easily. She knew the woods well, but he was faster, and in moments a thick arm curled around her and lifted her feet from the ground. She shrieked with laughter when he pulled her back against him and set her feet back to the earth. A low chuckle vibrated against her back moments before he turned her to face him.

"Have ye a bed, or must I only fuck ye in the trees whenever we meet?" He touched her face with the palm of his hand.

"I have a bed that I share with Magda."

"The trees it shall be, then." He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her deeply. Katie would not admit it to him, but the truth was she'd thought of him often too and missed the passion with which he kissed. It surrounded her now, filling her with his masculine scent.

"Remove your clothes, Katie," he murmured. The sound of her name in his deep voice sent hot shivers down her spine. With her heart racing, half from her run through the trees, half from the excitement of him, she undressed, careful to set her clothes where they would not become soiled.

He moved forward, grasped her waist, and lifted her so he could clamp his lips around one of her nipples. Combing her fingers through his hair, she closed her eyes, enjoying the tug of his mouth against her sensitive skin as he sucked fiercely, first one breast, then the other.

"The excitement of battle has left me hungry. I wish to savor ye, but the first time will be over quickly." He set her to the ground and then freed himself from his trousers. Katie shivered. It would not be like before. He would not fuck her and then leave; he meant to take his fill more than once.

"You think only men are lusty?" She stepped back and slid her hand down her stomach to touch herself. "I like sex too, Robert. I desire just as strongly as you do."

His gaze dropped to the movement of her hand, and he stood still, watching her. His nose flared. His hands opened and closed at his sides. But he didn't take even the smallest step toward her. His scrutiny intensified the sensations she brought to her body. Her fingers played over her clit until she gasped with release. The moment her fingers left her body, however, he leaped forward and grabbed her, then pushed her down to the earth with him atop her. In one swift movement, he pushed his cock into her.

Katie cried out, bringing her legs up and wrapping them around him, pulling him to fuck her deeper. He obliged in a fever, his body slapping into hers soundly. His breath came quick and hard as he grunted and groaned in response to her body.

"God's blood, ye feel good."

"As do you," she panted. It was no lie. He filled her completely, warming her cunt with his heavy thrusts. She felt his body stiffen moments before he bore into her, and she tightened her legs around him, reaching up to pull at his large shoulders. He threw his head back as he released inside her, baring his teeth and shouting through them.

God, he was beautiful. Katie stared up at him as he rocked forward and placed his hands on either side of her head, holding his weight off of her while he dragged deep breaths through his nose. And so *male*.

"Are you finished now, my laird?" she asked, and he chuckled deeply.

"I am not."

"For I'll surely need a bath now that you think to bury me alive in the ground." She grinned when his lips parted for the smile that creased lines in the sides of his face.

"I like ye like this," he admitted. "It is as if ye are of the very earth we lie upon, like a witch from the trees." He leaned down and licked at her jaw.

"Be careful. Talk of witchery, and when you next come to my cottage, you shall find I have been hanged," she warned.

"I would not allow it to happen." He licked again and then nibbled at her skin.

"It would save you from purchasing so many rolls of material," she teased, and when he continued to just gaze down at her, she tried to push his chest, but he did not budge. "If you mean to have me again, fair is fair. You get pounded into the dirt this time."

He slipped an arm beneath her, and then he fluidly rolled over so that she lay atop him, his cock still inside her.

"I'm happy you are so obliging. I don't like men who do not do as they are told." She laughed when he growled up at her and grasped her waist. He lifted his hips, pressing into her, and she felt his cock grow harder. She leaned forward and planted her palms on his shoulders so that her hair fell down around them.

"I will not wait for you. I will please myself."

His eyes glittered at her. "Ye know ye are a dangerous kind of woman."

She didn't reply. Instead she began to move atop him, pressing him deep inside her as she rocked her clit forward and against the woolen material of his trousers. The soft abrasion felt good. She rode him hard and fast, her heated body readying for orgasm. She was on the verge of release when his fingers tightened on her hips and lifted her off of him.

"No, wait!" She stared at him, her breath quivering from her lips. Tension taut inside her, her body shook and demanded release. He stood and lifted her off her feet, then carried her down to the lake. Setting her down in front of their boulder, he turned her back to him and pushed her forward. Then he lifted her and folded her over so that she was lying on her stomach across the flat surface of the boulder.

"I am about to burst," he murmured. "We shall see who waits for whom." His cock slid into her cunt from behind, and he leaned over her to wrap his arms beneath her shoulders. He rocked his hips into her, deeper because of the position. With every thrust, his arms pulled her back to him.

"Damn, that feels good," she moaned. "More."

His hot breath kissed her cheek, and his hips surged against her, driving him harder and deeper. "I can't get enough of ye, woman."

"Nor I, you."

He pounded into her, rekindling the heat that wound tight inside her. Her whimpers fell in unison with his grunts, and in moments, she bucked against him beneath the explosion of pleasure that thundered through her. He came hard and shouted her name into the dark. Her name. And then they were still.

"You will have to move. This rock doesn't make a comfortable bed."

He pulled out of her and then lifted her before setting her to the ground. She rubbed her sore nipples as she turned. Leaning forward, he licked at those sensitive tips, murmuring apologies to each of them.

"And now I want ye to lick me clean," he spoke as he straightened.

"Do you?" She looked down at his slick cock. "As you wish, my laird." She knelt. He wanted to show her he was the boss. She ran her tongue over him, slowly licking away the salty evidence of their joining. She continued, happy when it began to show signs of new life. At least nine inches, she surmised, as his cock jerked upward in response to her attention. But thick—so thick, it made her cunt throb.

Then she stood, attempting an innocent look when she raised her gaze to his. "Not a drop left. And now I shall have my bath."

"Ye would leave me like this?"

"I did as you bid, my laird. Doesn't that please you?" she asked and smiled at the growl he made in his throat. Gingerly she stepped down the bank and waded out into the water. Above her, no stars twinkled; only heavy clouds that promised rain filled the sky. The water was cold, and its chill loosened the soreness in her legs and body as she waded deeper. She arched backward, dipping her hair, and then straightened to look at him. She found his hand wrapped around his cock, moving steadily as he watched her.

She licked her lips as she realized he would pleasure himself right there in front of her. She did not look away, watching how his breathing deepened, how his hand's rhythm quickened. When he came, she watched his face. It wasn't the same as when he'd been inside her, not as fiercely passionate. But it was a release.

She suddenly gasped and ducked underwater. Swimming smoothly beneath, she emerged again near an overhanging tree, careful not to send any telltale ripples. He'd walked to the edge of the lake and called out. In an instant, he shed his clothes and dived in.

As he broke the surface, she laughed, and he whirled around. "Ye wench! I thought ye had drowned! Or something had pulled ye under."

She laughed again as she swam near. He reached out and grasped her arm, then brought her through the water to him. His eyes flashed with anger. It was a cruel trick, she had to admit.

"You jumped in to save me." She lifted a hand to his face, ignoring the tightening of his fingers on her arm. "Then it is true you are very brave."

His eyes narrowed. "I would not have stood on the banks and watched ye drown."

"Don't be angry with me, my laird," she said softly. "Not unless you mean to punish me with your passion."

The anger in his expression diminished. "Ye deserve a sound beating for that trick."

"I cannot possibly help that I am more clever than you, sire." She giggled as he splashed her.

"That old woman is not your mother. There is no resemblance at all. And ye have a different lilt to your voice. Where do ye come from?" His hands slid around her in the dark water and pulled her so that her legs drifted around him.

"You would think me mad and call me a liar if I told you the truth." Katie reached up and pushed his wet hair from his face. "I like that you have no beard. I liked that about you the first time you came to the cottage. Many with beards carry bugs in their hair. I know now you keep yourself too clean to have them if you did grow a beard."

"I'll have one when it grows colder," he admitted.

"Like a big bear adjusting to the seasons?" She laughed when he pinched her nipples.

"Where do ye come from? I care not if ye are a lunatic."

She laughed again. "Very well. But remember, I did warn you." "Aye, ye did."

So she told him. Normally she lied when asked. But she liked Robert Shelley and wanted to tell him the truth. He said not a word while she spoke. His expression did not change once, though his fingers continued to work over her nipples, pulling, pinching, caressing.

He spoke only after she had silenced. "That's quite a story. As I said, I do not care if ye are a lunatic. So the old woman lied to save ye?"

"She did."

"Ye love her?"

"Dearly." She closed her eyes and drew a breath as he cupped her breasts and ran his thumb over the nipples. "Not as much as I love what you are doing right now."

"Come and let us return to the cottage before it rains on us." He slipped his arms beneath her and carried her out of the lake. Katie shivered as the cool air met her wet skin. She waited for him to pull on his clothes, and then they made their way through the trees to where she'd left her dress and cloak.

Magda had already retired in the second room when they returned, and Robert set to starting a fire in the hearth. "The English never knew we were coming." He spoke without looking back at her. "It was a small victory for our borders."

"You must spend the next few months building up your defenses." She brought out a blanket and laid it on the floor in front of the hearth. "Rory will be afraid at first, but men's fear often turns to anger quickly."

As the fire began to crackle, he turned on his heel and looked at her, then watched as she lay down on the blanket. "Ye are a clever woman, Katie. It is good ye are not a man, for I believe ye could lead a vicious army."

"Not to mention what might be said of you for your interest in the same sex." She liked when he grinned. It lit his eyes.

"Aye, and that would be unfortunate." He rolled onto his knees and crawled forward so he could settle beside her.

"When will you leave?" She asked the question that had been nagging at her.

"Not tomorrow but the day after. I will let my men rest a day before pushing on to Dunham."

"Tell me of your home. Have you a large family?" She snuggled against him.

"I have three brothers and a sister. I am the eldest. My father, the retired laird of Dunham, remained there rather than battle with me to make certain Dunham was well guarded in the event that your predictions were not accurate and Rory decided to lead an attack while we were away." He tucked one arm behind his head and slid the other beneath her, curling her against him. "Dunham has been my home since I can remember. I know everyone who lives there."

"You love the place?"

"Aye, I do." He nodded. "My brothers and their wives have large families. My sister just married and is expecting a bairn soon."

"And you? Are you married too with many children?"

"Nay," he said softly after a long silence. "I am not wed. I was once, but she died during childbirth. I have not found another to replace her."

"You loved her?" He needn't answer. Katie heard it in the tenderness of his voice.

"Aye, deeply."

"I wish I had married." Katie sighed heavily. "I never gave myself time for many relationships. I was always busy, so focused on my work. It was a waste. What good is success if it can be taken away from you in just a flash? And now I'm left with no one to miss me as you do your wife. I envy you your pain."

He turned his head and looked at her. "Envy?"

"It is better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all," she whispered.

"Ye say that because ye've never lost anyone." He faced forward again.

"I lost my mother when I was very young," she argued. "I think it is why I love Magda so deeply. She has healed that hole in my heart. I think you shall find a woman someday who might help heal yours." Again he looked at her, then rolled to his side and touched her face. Tenderly he kissed her. She knew he was trying to tell her that he appreciated her words.

"Stop before you start to weep like a weakened woman," she murmured.

He chuckled and leaned back to gaze at her. "Ye have a spirit I like, Katie. I've never met a woman so clever with her words before. What shall I send to ye next? Tell me something ye desire."

"Some type of horse-drawn cart would be appreciated. Magda's bones are old, and riding causes her pain," Katie admitted, but when she saw the disappointment in his expression, she held up her arm and added, "I wouldn't mind something shiny to match my bracelet. The people in the village think it is magical."

"Ye will have a new bauble in a month's time," he vowed with a chuckle.

"And when shall I have you again?"

"As ye said, I will have to build up our defenses. I will not be able to return for several months." He tapped her nose. "What is that look? Ye will miss me? Are there no other men that come to ye seeking your knowing?"

"I shall miss the look on your face when you charged into the lake like a fool." She giggled when his hands dropped to tickle her side. "And would you want me to tell you of other men who come to me when you are not here?" It was obvious from his expression that he did not like the idea of her with other men. As she suspected, he was one who laid claim to anything he felt was his.

"How many have come to ye for knowing and lain with ye before they leave?"

She refrained from laughing at his jealousy. "I can't very well remember how many in total. Magda and I have been doing this for a long time."

"How many since you and I were together the first time?" he persisted.

She made a show of holding up her fingers and counting them off, then laughed when he cursed under his breath. "I have entertained no men in your absence. Stop your foolishness."

Then he kissed her hard.

CHAPTER FOUR

Robert rode through the gates of Dunham, lost in his memories of the two days he spent with Katie. They'd gone into the village once, her in her veil and him leading her about. Some of the villagers approached with gifts, thanking her for the rain the night before. He'd very nearly laughed. The rest of the time they spent making love across the countryside.

"Ah, my victorious son returns!" His father's voice snapped him out from his thoughts, and he smiled as he dismounted and received his father's greeting. James Shelley had reached his fiftieth year but moved with the agility of a youth. He'd aged well and remained a solid head of power for both Dunham and his family.

"Ye were away longer than I thought ye would be."

"He got tied up in a woman ten miles out of the way from home." His captain, Gwain, chuckled.

"Traitor," Robert growled.

"A woman?" James echoed. "What woman?" When Robert didn't answer, he turned to Gwain for details.

"Some spirited wench belonging to an old crone. They call her gifted, but her only gifts are those of experience." Gwain slanted his gaze at Robert. "Not that I would know personally, for your son is greedy and would not allow us more than a few moments around her before he hauled her off for his own enjoyment."

"What is her name?"

"The crone's name is Magda Stewart. Ugly to look at, but makes the best rabbit stew I've ever filled myself with. Her daughter is Katie. And she is a bonny one, with a sharp tongue and enough spirit to make this one stumble over his bootstraps." Gwain jerked his head toward Robert.

"It is good to hear ye are taking up sport. I'd worried ye had turned your body cold to women." James clapped his son on the back.

"If it is sport, she has bested him." Gwain laughed. "He looked as if he would burst into tears when we rode away."

"When I pull my blade from your chest, I swear I will weep as ye have accused," Robert vowed, and Gwain laughed harder.

"Not before I acquire the ruby ye mean to send to her," Gwain reminded him.

"Then she pleased you well?" James's bushy eyebrows rose in surprise. "Perhaps we should have this woman brought here and given her own cottage so ye would not have to travel such a great distance to take your fill."

The thought had crossed Robert's mind more than once during their journey home. "How is my mother?"

"She is well, waiting inside for your return." James began walking toward the house as he spoke. "If ye want this woman, son, I will have her brought here for ye."

"I want her," he finally admitted.

"Then it is done." James nodded as he led Robert inside.



A month later, Gwain stood in the center of Magda's cottage, watching Katie touch the necklace that circled her neck. She ran her index finger over the large ruby that hung between her breasts. "You must convey that I am very pleased with my gifts and thank him for remembering the cart for Magda. It was very thoughtful."

"He would rather ye convey your sentiments yourself, as I've been charged with bringing ye and the old woman to Dunham when I return."

"Dunham?" Katie repeated. "Why on earth would he want us

there?"

Gwain's mouth slanted. "I cannot speak for him, but I could guess a few reasons why he might want ye closer to him." His gaze dropped over her petite frame. She was indeed a bonny little thing.

Katie giggled. "He missed me, then?"

"Pined," Gwain corrected as his gaze rose to her heart-shaped face.

"Perhaps I should not be so quick to go to him." Katie tilted her head then grinned wickedly, her eyes taking light. "Return without me, and tell him that if he wishes me there, he is commanded to come for me himself."

Gwain's laughter bounced around the walls of the cottage. "I see why he likes ye so. Ye are a spirited wench!"

"He shall be furious?"

"I would say he would." Gwain nodded, laughing again at the pleased look on her face.

"Then you must also tell him that he has spoiled me so that I have not entertained the stink of other men since he took his leave." Her grin softened to a smile. "That should soften his temper enough that he will indeed come for me."

"Is it truth?" Gwain asked curiously.

"It is." She nodded. "He has provided for us, and there is no need for me to lay with every beggar who stumbles into enough coin to seek *counsel*. While my body yearns, I am happy to be rid of the fear of lice and whatever other itchy things that crawl out of their beards and off their heads."

"She is a picky tart." Magda chuckled from the doorway. "She is that."

"I was no tart until I met you. I learned from the experienced," Katie shot back. Gwain could see the old woman was pleased with Katie's quick retort.

"I shall ride straight to Dunham and relay your command," Gwain vowed. He started to turn but stopped when Katie put a hand on his arm.

"Far more important, he must not come alone," Katie said softly, and his gaze darted to Magda when she nodded. "Englishmen rode through the village a week ago. Magda heard someone say the leader's name was Rory. I fear he may be planning an attack against Dunham. Tell him not to come for me until the summer. If Rory is planning an attack, he will most likely do so when everything is thawing and the

men at Dunham are at home preparing to plant."

Gwain stared at the woman. Many would not have offered a warning. Most kept to themselves, afraid to become involved unless they wished the enemy to come down on them too. He took her hand and brought it to his lips.

"If he will not come for ye, bonny Katie, I shall come for ye myself, for I am nay a fool and can see ye are a woman to be kept." He kissed her knuckles again. "And I would keep ye well." He released her and strode from the cottage. He would have to ride hard back to Dunham to deliver her warning.

"Keep safe, Gwain Ashley!" she called after him as he galloped away.

CHAPTER FIVE

Katie settled at the table. She had not donned her veil in months, and it seemed no one who came to her seemed to notice or mind. The man who stood next to her was not like others who had visited. The cut of his clothes and the style of his blond hair told her he was English. Magda's expression was one of nervousness.

"I have come because I am told you have gifts." His accent told Katie she'd guessed his heritage correctly. "A gift of knowing, I was told."

"Aye, she was born with the gift, sire," Magda said.

"Then here is your coin," he said as he tossed several to the table surface. "Take it, for I will have my answers today." Magda took the Englishman's money.

"I can tell you many things, sire," Katie said.

"I only need one question answered." He pulled the other chair around so he could sit close to her. "Send the old woman away."

"She's blind, sire. I remain as her eyes." It was the first time Magda did not hurry to the door once told to leave. Her change in routine scared Katie. "I said leave us."

With some reluctance, Magda did as she was bid.

"Do you know me?" he asked softly—too softly.

"I do not, sire," Katie answered.

"I am Edmund Rory." His hand touched hers and slid up her arm, beneath her cloak. "Do you know me now that I have given you a name?"

Katie's heart pounded. "I do not, sire."

"Then it was not you who warned Robert Shelley of my attack on his home?" His fingers slipped around her wrist and held her gently. "You see, my dear, I have heard rumor that he comes to you, that you are favored by the arrogant border lord. I have also learned that his own captain came to you last month. I suspect that is when you sent warning to Shelley."

"I do not know you, sire." Katie tried to pull her arm away from him, but his fingers tightened.

"How can I be certain you are telling me the truth?"

"Were it possible, I would transfer my gifts to you in exchange for your sight, sire, and then you would have the same knowing I do." She tried again to pull away from him, but he didn't release her, leaning closer.

"Then you do not know Robert Shelley?"

He was attempting to trick her, as if she were as stupid as the villagers he most likely intimidated into giving him information. "I know him only as a woman can know a man, sire."

"And how is that?"

"And would a whore warn her lover if not doing so meant her supply of coin would be cut off?" He baited her.

"Were that true, sire, I would have no reason to continue offering counsel for coin."

"Did you offer him counsel?"

Katie smiled. "He did not come to me for my counsel, sire."

"You have no relationship with him other than what you've told me?" $\,$

"You have been misinformed, sire." She nodded.

"Then you have no qualms about my fucking the sight back into your eyes?" His voice hardened. Shit. He was on to her.

"I would not, sire, except for one thing." $\,$

He reached forward and groped her breasts. "And what is that?" His hand slipped down and began to jerk up her cloak and dress. His long fingers found her cunt and stabbed into her.

She turned and looked directly at him. "I'm not blind." She struck with all her might, the heel of her palm connecting with his long nose. As soon as his fingers loosened and fell away from her, she jumped up and backward, knocking over her chair.

He roared as he brought one hand to his bloody nose and leaped to his feet. He stalked forward, but she was quicker, and he didn't expect her to strike at him first. She swung her foot hard, right between his legs. While he didn't double over, he froze, the pain evident on his face. She smiled sweetly.

"You are a fool, Edmund Rory, to think you can come here and force me as you have others." She heard Magda's gasp at the door. "I am no woman to be trifled with." She drew back and head butted him right in the mouth. Whirling, she then grasped the knife from Magda's work station and pointed it at his throat.

"Get off of Scottish soil, sir, and don't you ever return here again, or I swear by everything that is holy, I will cut you open from collar to cock. I am Katie Stewart. And the next time you ask someone if they know your name, you remember mine." She leaned back, lifted her foot, and kicked him in the stomach with all her might. As he fell, his head bounced off the corner of the table. And then he lay still.

"Ye've killed the English bastard," Magda whispered.

"Good riddance." But Katie dropped and placed her finger to his throat, then breathed out as she felt the faint pulse of life. "He is not dead. Let us drag him to his horse."

It took them nearly ten minutes to drag the man from the house and another twenty to heave him across his horse. Magda led the horse to the road leading away from the village and slapped its flank, sending it forward in a full gallop.

"Ye have skills I didn't know about." Magda drew a ragged breath as they walked back to the cottage. "Had I known ye so capable, I would have had ye robbing wagons on the side of the road."

Katie laughed as her hands started to shake. "I was so afraid. But when he touched me, I snapped." She drew a breath of her own and released slowly. "He will come back and burn us down."

"Most likely." Magda nodded. "Hopefully your laird will come for us before that happens."



"God's blood!" Robert kicked his horse forward as they topped the hill and the cottage came into view. Fire engulfed the stone walls, the roof, set ablaze. Part of it crashed in before he got there, and he swung off his horse before the animal completely halted.

"Katie!" he yelled as his captain and father rode up behind him. "Katie, woman, are ye in there?"

"I'm here." A small voice found him, and he turned, searching the landscape wildly. He found her kneeling several feet away from the cottage. She was filthy, and tears streaked clean paths through her blackened cheeks. At her knees, Magda clutched Katie's hands.

"What happened?" He dropped to his knees, but Katie did not look at him, leaning closer as Magda's burned lips parted slightly.

"I hid the basket in the woodpile," Magda whispered, her voice filled with the pain she must have been suffering. "Do not forget it, daughter. Ye have made me a happy woman. I could not have birthed one of my own that I would love so much as I love ye. Take the coin and make a good life for yourself." And then she died. Katie wailed her agony, clutching the old woman's lifeless body to her.

"Katie." Robert reached for her, and she succumbed to his arms as he brought her to her feet. She grasped his shoulders as she wept. He held her like that for a long time, and finally her sobs ceased.

"You were supposed to come for me. If you had come, this would not have happened to us." She stepped back from his embrace.

"I could not know." He shook his head. "Tell me how this happened."

"Edmund Rory happened. He came here, one month ago, accusing me of warning you of his attack. How is it he could come to me so soon after a loss, yet you find your way here a month after him?" She shook. "He accused me. He put his fingers inside me. And I bloodied him...for you! And now Magda is dead!" She pointed at the woman on the ground.

"God's blood," he murmured, then strode forward and grasped her shoulders, but she pushed at his chest. He did not release her, bringing her back to him.

"Forgive me, Katie. I could not know this would happen. I could not. I would have killed him dead had I suspected," he whispered against her temple.

"Yes, well now you will not have the chance." Katie ceased her fight, leaning her forehead to his chest. "I will kill him myself, for he has taken from me the only person who loved me in this godforsaken place."

"Give me the dress," he called over his shoulder, and Gwain dismounted to bring the dress Robert had had made for her.

"I do not want your gifts." She started to turn, but he curled an arm around her and brought her back to his side.

"I will take ye to the lake. Ye will wash this madness from your body. Your dress is ruined. And my father and Gwain will tend to Magda." He looked over her head at Gwain, who nodded. "Come, Katie." She offered no resistance as she walked beside him through the trees and to the lake. He silently undressed her at the banks and then waded into the water with her. Using her ruined dress, he began to wash the fire's residue from her skin. Gently he leaned her back and washed her hair until it was also clean.

"I am sorry he hurt ye because of me," Robert whispered when she laid her head on his chest. "I will make certain he suffers greatly for your pain." He kissed her cheek tenderly.

"I have no one now," she whispered. He didn't like to see her like this, broken and hurting.

"Ye have me, Katie. Ye will come with me to Dunham, and I shall make certain ye never hurt like this again," he vowed. "Come out of the water now." She obeyed and stood there while he slipped the new dress on her. Then he led her back to the cottage.

His father and Gwain hauled water back and forth from the lake until they finally extinguished the flames, though smoke continued to drift up from the cottage's crumpled frame. They carefully wrapped Magda in the linen he'd brought for them, dug a shallow grave, and lowered her into the ground. Katie said nothing as she stood by Robert's side, watching. Afterward she found the basket that Magda had hidden and offered no argument when he lifted her to her horse. She didn't look back once as they rode away.



On the third day of riding, she seemed to wake from her silent mourning and turned to Robert's father, offering a weak smile. "Thank you, sire, for your attention to my mother."

He reached over and patted her hand affectionately, but said nothing.

Gwain rode alongside her. "Ye say ye bloodied the bastard?"

"I am certain his nose is broken, and he is missing teeth because Magda had swept two from the floor after we sent him off, draped over his horse. I imagine he was not a full man for two days, for when I kicked him, I did so with all my might." She lifted her chin. "No man touches me if I am unwilling."

She looked at Robert. "I wish you to do something for me."

He inclined his head. "Anything."

"Take my knife and use it to cut him open. Tell him I bid you to do it." She retrieved a knife and held it out to him. "I swore I would open him with this."

Robert looked down at the blunt weapon, then reached forward and accepted it from her. It would be his pleasure to open him with the thing. He glanced at his father to find James's head tilted as he stared at the woman.

At Dunham, she was given a room close to his. While his mother and brothers were curious about her, she retired immediately. Robert readied his horse that night.

"I will go with ye." Gwain strode forward.

"Ye will not. Ye will stay here and take care of her until I return," Robert told him as he swung onto the horse's back. "If I succeed in killing him, I will ride straight to the king and will return in no less than three months."

"If he does not grant you your request?" Gwain pressed.

"Then I will leave Dunham for good." Robert guided his horse around and rode toward the gates.

CHAPTER SIX

Katie laughed as Gwain hefted her over his shoulder and made a production of looking for her in front of Murdoch's children. They screamed and pointed, but he kept turning as if he didn't see her.

"You are a beast!" she screeched as the door of the great hall opened. "Put me down this instant!"

"Yes, do put her down."

Gwain set her to the floor, and she whirled to find Robert standing there, his father at his side, beaming with obvious happiness to have his son home again. Katie rushed forward, flung herself against Robert, and wrapped her arms around his wide shoulders.

"James, why didn't you call for me when you saw him returning?" She stepped back and beamed up at him. "Then he is dead?"

"He is." Robert nodded.

"Good riddance." She placed her hands on his chest. "And you are well?"

"I am, but that sounds dangerously close to concern for me, wench. Am I to believe ye missed me while I was gone?" He shrugged out of his coat and leaned to kiss his mother when she greeted him.

"Why should I miss you when I had Gwain to entertain me?" she asked with feigned innocence.

"Did ye?" His gaze darted over her head suspiciously, and she fought not to grin. "And did he entertain ye well?"

"Aye, he did." She suddenly laughed. "You realize your jealousy makes you look the fool, Robert?" Slowly his eyes lowered.

"Then ye mock me when I have returned from killing a man ye wanted dead?"

"No more than you mock me when you believe me to have lain with all of Dunham in your absence, or when you leave without bidding me farewell, or when you stay away so long." She glanced at Murdoch's wife as she called to her children. She'd enjoyed her time at Dunham, had become close with Robert's family. They'd allowed her to remain in the house rather than have her stay in her own cottage, and they seemed to like her as much as she did them.

"I had business to attend to."

She frowned. Their reunion was not as warm as she would have liked it to have been. She'd expected his strong arms to greet her. Instead he remained just inside the door, that gaze locked on her. Finally she blew out a breath and slapped at his chest.

"Do not be so suspicious, my laird. I have not repopulated your precious Dunham."

James laughed heartily as he stepped from his son's side. "Not for lack of opportunity. Every man here has fallen in love with her."

"Not every," she said slyly. "Only a few."

"Then ye have fared well in my absence and shall continue to do so for another hour or so." Robert stepped around her, calling for one of the servants. "I'll eat my fill, and have a bath drawn at once. I am weary of riding."

Katie should not have been hurt by his coldness, but she was. "Shall I come to bathe you?"

He halted at the stairs without looking back. "No." Then he took them two at a time.

"He is often of poor company when he has ridden so long," Gwain offered, but she smiled and shrugged, then hurried to assist Murdoch's wife with her children.



"Laird Shelley has bid ye to come to him." Rafe, the head servant of the house, stood in the doorway of the hall, causing Katie to look up. "Has he?" She started to stand, then settled back into her chair. "Tell him if he wants for me, I bid him to come to me instead." She saw the faint look of amusement cross Rafe's otherwise solemn expression before he inclined his head and turned stiffly.

"Ye shall push him to madness," Gwain murmured, and James laughed, nodding in agreement. "He will not come to ye. This is Dunham. While he would come to your cottage, he is laird here, and his pride..." Gwain's words trailed off as the sound of heavy steps echoed down the stairs. James laughed again.

"The power of lust is great," James offered as Robert burst into the room.

"Ye bid me come to ye?" Robert strode forward. "In my own home? Have I not done enough to please ye yet?" Katie blinked. He was angry. So much that he looked violent. Perhaps Gwain was correct, and she had pushed too much.

"I did not say I was displeased." She shook her head and stood as he halted. "You are angry, my laird, but here you stand before me as if you meant to do my bidding. Were I certain you were so eager to see me, I would have eagerly come to you."

But his eyes were wild, and her words did not soothe him. "Robert, I did not mean to make you angry with me. I'd hoped for something as passionate, but not anger."

"Did ye lay with Edmund Rory?" he suddenly blurted.

She jerked as if she'd been struck. "What?"

"Did ye fuck Edmund Rory as I suspect ye have done with my captain in my absence?" he demanded.

Hurt and anger welled inside her, and before she could stop herself, she slapped him. His head snapped to the side, then slowly he faced her again.

"Did ye?"

She lifted her hand to slap him again, but he grasped her wrist, then the other when she lifted it. "How dare you ask me such a thing, to think—"

"Then ye deny it?"

"Robert." Gwain stood. "What are ye doing? I have not lain with this woman."

Robert's nose flared as he glared over her head. "Have ye not?"

Gwain's voice was tight as it rose. "I said I haven't. She has lain with no one. She has waited these months for only ye, ye besotted fool. Your jealousy has ye mad to think I would not remain loyal to ye. Do ye know me not?"

Robert released Katie's wrists and ran a hand through his hair. "Forgive me, Gwain."

"Gwain?" Katie found her voice and screeched. "He shall forgive you anything, for he is loyal to you until the day he dies. But I will not!" She stamped her foot and felt satisfaction when she saw him wince.

"This shall be the last night I wait for you, you can be certain of that, Robert Shelley. I shall bed every man I cross from this door to the gates." She turned on her heel and then yelled when his arm swept around her. "Release me!"

"Katie," he said softly, but she turned and slapped him again.

"Men are all the same. It doesn't matter what century they live in. You lay with any woman you stumble upon and are thought no less of as a man. A woman does as she must to survive and then is accused of having no honor at all." She hit his chest. "Gwain is right. You are a fool. A big, foolish brute. Yours was the only body I took into mine since that first night at the lake. I hope that eats you alive after I am gone."

She jerked, but he still did not release her. "Rory said he lay with ye right before I sawed open his throat with your knife. Why would he say that when he knew he would die?"

"Because, son, in desperation, a man taking his last breath will try anything to win. And it would seem that he has indeed won." James finally spoke. "Release her. You've hurt her enough tonight. Come here, my dear. You needn't leave Dunham because my son is blinded by his jealousy."

But Robert did not release her. Her vision blurred, and she fought desperately to blink back her tears. He'd hurt her deeply.

"If I had lain with Rory as he wanted me to, my home would not have been set afire, and Magda would not have perished as a result." Her breath shook. "Had I not remained loyal to you—not your coin, but you—I would still have her here. And until this moment, I have not regretted that sacrifice."

Robert stared at her and then bowed his head as he released a breath. "Very well."

"Very well?" She laughed coldly. "Not well at all. I would have come to you tonight had you sent Rafe back to me and commanded it. But I will not come to you now. You can bid it until the sun rises. I will not."

She jerked free and fled to the stairs.

"Well done, my laird. Ye've succeeded in pushing away a woman who watched from the rooftops for your return every night since ye've been gone," Gwain growled after Katie had disappeared up the stairs.

"I could not ignore Rory's last words to me." Robert moved past his captain and father to heave himself into a chair. "It has gnawed at me these many months so that I could barely breathe."

"She is not your wife," Gwain reminded him.

"But the king granted me permission to have her," Robert murmured.

"He did? How did ye convince him?" James settled back into the chair across from Robert.

"I told him if he would not grant me the right to marry her that I would take her and leave Dunham so that I could marry her anyway." Robert smiled weakly. "Your name still holds respect with the king, Father, and Dunham's favor is still valued on the borders."

"Then ye do love her," James said softly. "Ye must, to be willing to give up your home for her."

"It matters not now." Robert shook his head. "She is a determined lass. She will not come to me again if she says she will not. And I shall not force her."

"Perhaps if ye apologized to her, she might reconsider. Ye do regret your foolishness, don't ye?" James prompted.

"Aye, I do. As I said, I was tormented by my thoughts the entire ride home. And upon arrival, I see the woman I want draped over another man's shoulder. I could not breathe." He looked up, but found his father looking past him. He turned and sucked in his breath when he saw Katie standing right behind him.

"Tell me that Edmund Rory suffered," she said quietly.

Robert stood and faced her, hope winding around his heart. "Aye, greatly. I made certain of it."

She wiped a tear that spilled over her cheek. It hurt him to see her pained because of him. He wanted to protect her from hurt, not cause her more.

"You are a fool."

"Aye, I have been told so before." He nodded, grateful her voice had softened.

"I should beat you senseless for your cruel accusations." She lifted her chin, and he breathed out. She would forgive him. Her tongue was sharp again, cutting him.

"And I would take your beating without fight. Forgive me, Katie." He reached for her, and when she did not move away from him, he took her hand and pulled her to him.

"I shall consider it." She looked up at him. "A ruby might help ease my disappointment in you."

He smiled down at her and reached into his pocket. "Had ye come when I bid it, ye would have had your ruby, and several emeralds." He produced the combs he'd had made at court.

Her eyes widened, and he saw the corners of her mouth start to lift before she remembered to check herself. "Well, I suppose I shall accept your trinket."

"Will ye accept me as your husband as well? The king granted his permission."

"So now you await mine?" She smiled then.

"Will ye have me?" he pressed, slipping his arms around her. Her hands moved to his face, reminding him of that first day he'd met her, when she'd touched his features, feigning blindness.

"Aye, I will have you, my laird—my love. And too I am yours to have. Forever." She lifted on her toes and brought his face to hers so she could kiss him.

Biography

Sable Grey resides in the deep south of the United States with her wonderful husband, three spoiled dogs, and three crazy cats. She spends her time researching her genealogy, designing cover art, watching movies, and reading.

With favorite authors like Stephen King, Piers Anthony, and Iris Johansen, it's no mystery where the inspiration to write tales of love, adventure, and mystery come from. An avid reader and storyteller at a young age, Sable began writing short stories for her mother as a child. However, it wasn't until she was well into her twenties that she realized her calling was sharing her stories with an audience larger than just family members and friends.

Now Sable is dedicated to her craft and to bringing her readers quality fiction with unforgettable characters. For her, writing a story means writing a story meant to touch the mind, body, heart, and soul.

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