

OLIVIA KERR

HIGHLANDER'S
POISONOUS
PAST



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Chapter 1

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PROLOGUE

“Would you like to play with this stick or that one?” Logan asked his younger brother, Cailean. He wanted to be exceptionally kind to his younger brother since Cailean had fallen, skinned his knee earlier, and was still quite upset. Logan felt responsible because his mother had told him to watch his brother when they went out to play on the grounds of Shaw Castle. Although there were servants lurking nearby, Logan was certain that it was his fault, and he was going to do everything he could to make it up to his brother.

“I would like that one,” Cailean said, as he sniffed and wiped away the tears that still fell from time to time. There hadn’t been very much blood, but Logan understood that it could be frightening to fall. He had fallen last week while he was playing, and it was only because his father told him to stop crying that he did.

Logan handed over his brother’s chosen stick and then picked up the one that was left. “Now, let’s keep walking. The river is just here.”

“But there are no fish in the river, Logan. We’ve been there half a hundred times this week and—”

“I know,” Logan replied, with a smile, “but don’t worry. The fish are not what we are after today.”

“Then what are we after?” Cailean asked, confused. “The frogs?”

“Just wait. When I was playing with Bartholomew last week, he showed me this new game, and I want to show you.”

“Really?” Cailean asked, and perked up at that thought. “Thank you for showing me a new game, Logan!”

Logan smiled at his younger brother. They played together often, but he knew sometimes he went off to play with the other children in the village, and he ignored his younger

brother. They had only recently been allowed to play with the other children in the area. For the first few years of their life, they had been raised exclusively in the castle, as children of the laird, and only had each other to play with. Lately, though, it seemed that both their parents were distracted, and the rules were a bit more lax. Logan didn't know why that was the case, but he certainly wasn't going to ask.

When they reached the wooden bridge, he beckoned his brother over to one side.

"Now, on the count of three, we are both going to drop our sticks, and then they are going to race."

"With the river current?"

Logan nodded. "As soon as we drop them, we must go over to the other side of the bridge to see which stick has won."

"What happens if my stick wins?" Cailean asked.

"If your stick wins, then when we see Father tonight, I shall tell him what a champion you are," Logan replied. That made Cailean's smile widen, and both the boys leaned over the side of the bridge to drop their sticks down.

Logan made sure to drop his stick off to the other side, where he knew it would get caught in the weeds. When they raced to the other side of the bridge and Cailean's stick came through, he took pleasure in his brother's large smile.

"I win!" Cailean cried. "I win, I win! Let's play again!"

They played several times, until Logan worried he would accidentally create a dam if he continued. The sun was setting, and Logan took his brother's hand as they headed back to the castle. The servants smiled at them as they went inside. Logan decided that he was having one of the best days of his life.

"Logan!" his mother said, as soon as she laid eyes on them. "Where have you been?"

"I've been playing with Cailean. Let us tell you what we—"

"No. There is no time. I think you should both retire to your rooms. The servants will bring you supper there."

"Huh?" Logan did not understand why his mother would say something like that. "Am I in trouble?"

"No, you are not in trouble, but your father and I agreed this is the best course of action

right now.”

“I don’t understand,” Logan said. “I did not do anything wrong. I...you said that Cailean and I could play, as long as the servants were nearby.”

“I know I said that,” she replied. “We will discuss it in the morning, Logan. Go, now. Both of you.”

Logan looked to Cailean, who looked like he was going to cry.

“But...” Logan started.

His mother shook her head. “Go, Logan,” she said, and pointed up the stairs.

The sun was setting, and Logan noticed there was an odd energy in the castle. Everyone was whispering, and they were closing the doors tightly. Normally, the warm evening air was allowed to follow through the castle until well after supper.

“What did we do wrong?” Cailean asked.

Logan shrugged. “Nothing. Come, let us play in the nursery.”

True to his mother’s word, the servants brought supper to the nursery, and they helped the boys get dressed for bed. They were reasonably quiet, and Logan felt frightened. Normally, the servants were quite kind, and they laughed and smiled with them. The fact that they weren’t saying anything at all made him quite concerned.

“Go to bed,” one of the servants said. “And do not come out of the room, for any reason.”

“What is happening?” Logan asked.

“Nothing,” the butler said, and left.

Logan did not think he would be able to sleep, given the circumstances, but sleep actually came relatively easily to him—until he was awoken by his mother.

He did not know what time it was, but he could tell it was very late. His mother was shaking his shoulder, and she had a candle in her hand.

“Logan,” she said, “get under the bed. Cailean, you too. Not a word.”

“Under the bed?” Logan asked. “But why?”

“Logan, do not question me,” she said. She grabbed his arm, a little bit roughly, and practically dragged him under the bed. Logan felt pain, but he somehow knew enough

not to cry out. There was something very wrong. He had never seen his mother behave this way before. She was normally very kind and gentle with him. This was a side of her that had been hidden up until this moment.

"Don't say a word," she said, as she moved away from the bed.

Despite the fact that they had just been given explicit instructions, it seemed that it was too much for Cailean.

"Logan," Cailean hissed, "what is the matter? What's happening? I'm scared."

"Shh," Logan said, as he reached out to squeeze his brother's hand. "It's fine."

"But what is happening?"

"I don't know," Logan said, and searched his mind. "Maybe Mother is playing a game."

"A game? What game would she be playing?"

"Maybe she's, uh...maybe she wants us to hide until Father finds us."

"You think Father is playing this game too?"

"Oh, yes," Logan said, thinking quickly. "I think they are both playing. I think soon, Father will come in looking for us, and we will pop out and everything will be fine."

"Alright," Cailean said. "Well, we should stay quiet then."

"Yes, we should remain quiet."

It was very hot under the bed; Logan didn't know how long they could stay under there. He could feel his stomach start to growl and wondered if he would ever eat again. He wanted to believe what he told Cailean, but he knew this wasn't a game.

Within a few minutes, they heard a noise within the castle that sent chills down both their spines. There was a crash, a yell, and then a thump.

"What was that?" Cailean asked.

Logan shook his head. "Nothing, Brother. Stay quiet, remember? We want to be the champions of this game, don't we?"

"Yes..." Cailean said, although he seemed very unsure about it.

Logan saw another candle enter the room and thought that perhaps it was his mother returning. He was about to call out to her when he realized it was his father instead, and

he was panting.

Logan tried to look over to Cailean. His younger brother seemed content with playing with a few stones that had been in his pocket, and hadn't noticed his father yet. Logan breathed a sigh of relief and tried to shift forward so the sight of his father was out of view. Something was very wrong.

In front of Logan's eyes, he saw what looked like a shadowy figure enter the room. He watched, paralyzed with fear, as the figure stabbed his father, who fell. The only sound that was made was the clunk of the candlestick as it hit the stone floor. The candle went out instantly, leaving them in mostly darkness once again. Only the moonlight, shining in and under the bed, gave them a light source.

Logan was glad the bed was mostly behind a door. He didn't know what had happened, but he did know he would figure out what happened and avenge his father. He would find his killer within the shadow figure and hunt him for the rest of his life, until he found him.

Logan's only question, in his childhood mind, was: How will I find a man made of shadow?

More than a decade later...

Maisie stuck her tongue out a tiny bit, and leaned over the hem of her dress. She knew she could hem it if she just concentrated. Maisie had never been particularly skilled at sewing, especially compared to the rest of her sisters. She could sew well enough, but if Glenna came by, for example, she knew her sister would raise an eyebrow at her skills.

She was the youngest of her sisters, and while she loved them all, she sometimes wondered if they inherited all the skills, and she was left to figure out whatever was left. She felt as if certain things came easier to them, such as finding love or picking the right color of dress. All the rest of her sisters were married; she was left at home alone with her parents even though she was a very good looking lass with long brown hair and beautiful green and brown mixed eyes.

Maisie bit her lip as that thought raced through her head. She certainly didn't mean to sound ungrateful. She loved her parents and knew that as the youngest, it seems she had gotten away with quite a bit. She could always be a little cheekier, a little more adventurous, and her parents hadn't scolded her as much.

Of course, she was also the only one of her sisters who wasn't married and didn't even have any suitors, so perhaps that was also something to consider.

She made a final few stitches and then pulled the dress back to look at it with a triumphant smile. The hem looked almost as nice as before, and it was certainly wearable.

She looked up in surprise as Glenna walked into the room. "Maisie, your skill has improved!"

"Glenna, what are you doing here?" Maisie asked in surprise. Her older sister lived a ways away, with her husband and children, and while she did visit often, it was usually planned. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes, everything is pleasant," Glenna said, as she took a seat beside her sister. "I cannot come and see my youngest sister without a reason?"

"Of course you can," Maisie said, as the two of them embraced. "How are you? How are the children?"

"They are wonderful!" Glenna said. "Little Shaun has lost his first tooth!"

"Oh, my goodness! He must be quite excited."

"Oh, yes! He keeps following his father around, insisting that he is grown now that he has lost one. I have not the heart to tell him that he needs to lose quite a few more."

Maisie laughed as she handed over her dress to Glenna.

"Do you really think my skills have improved?" she asked. Glenna looked over the hem in great detail.

"You sure have! I was not just saying that. I really do think that you have used your time at home to improve your skills."

"Well, I'm not sure whether to take that as a compliment or an insult," Maisie teased her. "But don't worry; I know your heart is kind."

"And I'm quite sure your future husband will tell you as much when you marry him."

"If I marry him," Maisie said with a sigh. "If he even exists."

Glenna raised an eyebrow at her. "Why would you say such a thing? There is a perfect husband out there for you. In fact—"

"Glenna, I know that you are only saying those things to be kind. You do not have to be, though. I am very aware that there may not be someone for me. I mean, all of my sisters have married well. Perhaps you have used up all the luck for the family, and I am satisfied with that."

"Maisie..."

"I have tried to accept my circumstances and be happy anywhere I am, with whatever God has given me."

"Well, I am sure that is a very good attitude to have. However, it is not the attitude that you will have to carry with you for the rest of your life."

Maisie caught the sparkle in her sister's eye. "What do you know?" she asked.

Glenna smiled. "Oh...I may just have a secret that Father happened to mention to me first."

"Tell me," Maisie said, with a grin, just as when they were children.

"I can't tell you," Glenna said. "It is Father's surprise to you."

"Tell me!" Maisie howled, and it appeared Glenna could not resist the charms of her younger sister.

"Alright, but only because you are my favorite sister, who I hold so dear. It seems that Father has found you a suitor."

"What?" Maisie's jaw dropped. "Who is it? Tell me, dear sister! Please tell me."

"I don't know who it is," Glenna replied. "However, Father said to meet him here just after luncheon, and he would tell both of us."

"In that case, I am very glad to have you with me, especially as Father is going to make the most exciting announcement of my life, apparently."

"I'm sure it will be someone grand," Glenna said. "Perhaps Laird Tavinish?"

"No, I believe he is already betrothed."

"Are you sure?" Glenna asked. "I thought he had rejected that proposal."

"Rejected it? Whatever for?"

"Because he refused to marry a woman below his station," Glenna said, quietly.

"I am sure that he will not want to marry me then."

"But you are kind and wonderful and—"

"And I am the youngest sister," Maisie said. "Of a very large family."

"At least you are the last to get married," Glenna said; Maisie paused at that.

Glenna clenched her sister's hand. "You know what I mean. I do not mean to insult you in any way. I simply mean that at least it isn't one of us who is to get married last. No one

thinks there is anything wrong with the youngest sister getting married last.”

“It certainly does not make the youngest sister feel any more adequate.”

“Everything will work out,” she replied. “Come. I think Father will be back at any moment, and then we can find out the truth.”

“Has anyone else come home?” Maisie asked, as she stood up. She left the skirt she was mending on the nearby table and followed her sister as they walked through the stone hallways.

The hallways had been as much a part of her childhood as her sister’s. They had been where she ran, where she played, and where she hid. She did not think she could ever leave this place, even if she were married.

She knew it was unrealistic, of course. Once she was married, she would be expected to leave and not return until she had a child or two. She knew there was also a good chance that her future husband would not be someone who lived close by. She might have to move far away, and likely see her family rarely.

Maisie was aware she would not have a match made of love. However, she hoped her husband would be kind and listen to her. She also wanted him to be a good father as well as handsome.

She could never tell anyone most of this, of course. Being handsome and being a good husband was secondary to the match that could be made for her. She trusted that her father knew her heart, and that he would make a good match when it came down to it.

Laird Gregor, her father, was often away, especially as his children grew. He looked to travel and liked to keep a good eye on his lands. It was possible that Maisie thought he wanted some time to himself, but he never admitted that.

When she saw him ride up the hill, as she perched on the windowsill, she smiled. He looked as if he was in a good mood, laughing with his squire as he dismounted.

“Did Father stop by your house first?” Maisie asked Glenna, as they waited for him to arrive inside the house.

“On the way out,” Glenna said. “It seems that he has planned this very moment perfectly. And I understand why.”

“Oh. Why? I am the youngest child. I do not offer a strong allegiance to the clan with my marriage.”

"But what an accomplishment, to have five successful marriages in the family."

"Perhaps we are celebrating prematurely," Maisie said, as her father came inside.

"Maisie!" he said. "Just the woman I wanted to see."

"Welcome back, Father," Maisie said, as she embraced him. "Glenna says that you have something to tell me."

"Yes," he said. "I figured you would want your sister here for one of the most exciting announcements that you will ever hear."

"Oh?" Maisie grabbed Glenna's hand. "What is it?"

"I have found a suitor for you," her father said. "And I think you will like him."

"I am sure I will, if you have found him for me," Maisie replied. "And I'll admit...Glenna has told me there was a suitor. But she did not tell me who it was."

Her father smiled at Glenna. "No, she could not because I had to secure the deal, of course. But now that it is secure, I am happy to tell you who it is."

"Who?" Maisie asked. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and her palms felt as if they were dripping in sweat.

"It is a laird," her father said; she clenched Glenna's hand tighter.

"A laird? I never thought...a laird? Oh, my goodness! Father! Who is it?"

"Laird Logan Shaw," her father said.

Both of the women fell silent and shared a look. Maisie felt a completely different thud in her chest.

"Of Elphin?" Glenna asked, as if there was another one.

"Yes," her father said. "The very same."

Maisie did not know what to say. She knew that she should be grateful for her father's announcement, but this felt like a shock.

A laird. She never thought she would ever marry a laird. And she never thought it would be Logan Shaw, that was for certain.

"Maisie," Glenna said, and gave her sister a little nudge. "Shouldn't you thank Father?"

“Yes...” Maisie said, as an uncomfortable silence fell over the room. Her father gave her a stern look, and she swallowed hard. “Thank you very much for this opportunity, Father.”

Luckily, her father knew her better than that.

“Maisie,” he said, “whatever is wrong with being matched with a Laird?”

Maisie knew that she had to choose her next words carefully. It wasn't that she wanted to offend her father, because she did not. However, she hoped that perhaps this was all a big misunderstanding.

"Father..." she said, hesitantly. "Aren't the Shaws known for being a bit rough? And mad?"

"Wherever did you hear that?"

Maisie knew her father was lying to her the moment it came out of his mouth. He could create great business deals, but she had always known, even as a child, when he was not telling the truth.

Glenna gave her an odd look. "Do you not want to be married?"

"Well, yes, I do."

"Wonderful," the laird replied. "And I want all my daughters to be married. However, I want more than for you to just make a marriage. I want you to have a happy marriage, and have many children. The fact that I have five children meant that I would always have a small challenge on my hands. But now, I have the opportunity to have all of you married, and the last one will be married to a laird! What great luck is that!"

"But Father," she said, carefully, "I would be happy with anyone you matched me with. He does not need to be a laird. After all, I am the youngest daughter, and I—"

"Yes, and that is why it is an amazing match," her father said. "Now, I am tired after my journey. I think I will retire until supper."

"Of course," Maisie replied. "Thank you, Father."

"You are welcome, Maisie," he said, with a smile. "I shall see you soon."

Both women had the sense to wait until he was upstairs before they turned to each other.

"How are you?" Glenna asked her younger sister in concern.

"I never expected that name to come out of his mouth," Maisie said. "Surely he has heard the rumors, hasn't he? He can't just be ignorant to them."

"He must be," Glenna said. "Because if he knew, he would never let his precious daughter marry someone who comes from a family deep in madness and cruelty."

"Maybe it isn't as they say. Maybe the rumors are just that... rumors."

"Oh, do not think the rumors are just rumors," Glenna said, with a shudder. "I have heard far too many stories about that family."

"Whatever are we going to do?"

"Well, you have to know that you are not alone," Glenna said. "We will all assist you."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but it is not as if you can move in with me."

"No, but I can visit often, and I can bring my family. I can make excuses for you to visit me."

"From what I've heard about him, I do not think that we have anything in common," Maisie said. "Even if he is not mad and cruel as the rumors say, what will I speak to him about? We come from two completely different worlds. We come from two different families."

"Well, I can give you advice on that," Glenna said, "for I knew nothing about my husband when I met him, and I do not think we have anything in common to this day. Except for the fact that we have children and have lived together for many years."

"I would be happy to take any advice you have."

"I have found that the secret to a happy marriage is to be silent most of the time."

"Silent most of the time?" Maisie asked. "Of course, I can be respectful, but..."

"You do not have to be silent when with your ladies, and you do not have to be silent on your own," Glenna said. "But if your husband speaks to you, he is doing so to discuss the matters that are important to him, and you should listen."

"I would be a loyal and faithful wife, and I will serve my husband. But if he is cruel, I do

not know how I will endure that.”

“What if he is not cruel, but he is mad?” Glenna asked. “Do you think that would make it easier?”

“Oh, I am not sure. I suspect it would make it perhaps a little bit easier because I would not be worried for my safety.”

“No, but there is your reputation to think about,” Glenna pointed out and shook her head with a sigh. “Maisie, are you sure you want to go through with this? The more I discuss it, the more I do not think this is a good idea. We can talk with Father.”

“It is easy for you to say that you can speak with Father. You are already married. He has done his duty, and you are now confident in your place in the world. However, I am unmarried, and Father is offering me the best marriage I could possibly get—marriage to a laird. If I agree to be married to a mad and cruel laird who could ruin my reputation...”

“You see?” Glenna said. “You cannot go through with it, and you know that.”

Maisie put her hands to her face and took a deep breath. This morning, when she got up, and this afternoon, when she saw Glenna, she had been so happy. She thought the day was going to be lovely. However, it had now taken a turn for the worse.

“I don’t know,” Maisie admitted. “I have never been more uncertain of anything in my whole life.”

“But you know we cannot refuse,” Glenna said, quietly.

“It is nice to fantasize that we possibly could, but I know that we cannot. This is Father’s will.”

“Yes, but what we can do is pray about it.”

“Yes,” Maisie said, with a sigh of relief. Until Glenna had suggested that, she had completely forgotten that was an option. She was glad there was at least something she could do because she felt like everything was out of her control. “Yes, let us pray.”

Glenna smiled at her, and they exited the house to start the walk into town. They used to do it all the time when they were children. They felt like it was their first freedom, to walk down the street and go into the chapel by themselves. What they did not take into account was that they had lived in the same place all their lives and were perfectly safe where they were. They had known most of those people their entire life, and they always had some eyes on them. Everyone knew about the large family, and the charming

daughters, and they watched out for them wherever they went.

Glenna linked arms with her sister. "Isn't this just like old times?"

"Yes, when life was simple."

"It will be simple again," Glenna said. "I am sure once we pray, we will shortly have our answer."

The chapel hadn't changed their entire childhood. It was polished and rebuilt when something crumbled, but it was always made to look the same.

Although the doors of the chapel were open, it was empty. They found a pew they had favored before, and kneeled down to pray.

Sometimes, they prayed out loud, but today, both of them fell into silence. Maisie knew that Glenna was probably saying a prayer for her and then saying a prayer for her husband and children as well. She envied her sister so much in this moment. Glenna would assist Maisie as much as she could, but when it was over, or when they decided there was nothing they could do, she would go back to her marriage that seemed happy, and to her children who seemed to be growing like weeds. There would be no more time to lend a thought to her youngest sister.

"What is wrong?" Glenna asked Maisie, after a long moment of silence.

Maisie realized that she had tears tracing down her face.

"Nothing," she said, and quickly wiped the tears away. "I am sorry."

"Do not apologize to me for crying," Glenna said and squeezed her hand. "You can always be truthful with me."

"I just...I have never prayed and not felt an answer in return. Do you think we are praying against God's will?"

"No, although they do say that God had chosen a husband for you when He created you."

"I have heard that. And it isn't that I don't believe it. If it is truly God's will, wouldn't God also want me to feel happy?"

"No. You know that he has a bigger plan than what we know about. Perhaps he wants you to be happy at some point, but perhaps he wants you to earn it."

"To earn it?" Maisie asked, in confusion. "But..."

"The Lord works in mysterious ways," Glenna reminded her. "Now, I feel as if we have prayed enough for one day. The Lord will let us know if we have been heard."

"Yes," Maisie said, even though she wasn't so sure of that. Sometimes, she felt like she was praying in a blank space. She knew God was out there, but she also knew that her prayers were perhaps not at the top of his priority list.

"Come," Glenna said. "I am staying the night, and Father did say that he wanted to have us at supper."

"Yes," Maisie agreed. "Besides, how quickly could this marriage move?"

"Oh, I imagine it will be weeks or months," Glenna said. "The Shaws live quite a distance away, and it will take a while for them to work out the fine details of everything. Do not worry."

"I hope it will take so long that Father will forget about it," Maisie replied.

Glenna chuckled at that. "Have you known Father to ever forget anything?"

"Only the things that are not important. Besides, the Lord also said that we should obey our earthly father, and I would never dream of doing otherwise."

"Maybe you will be pleasantly surprised," Glenna said. "And we will find that all the rumors are false and that Logan Shaw is a perfectly normal and happy man."

"Perhaps."

"You have to hold out hope. And you were always good at being hopeful, Maisie."

"I try only because I felt like pessimism never accomplished anything."

"You see? That is exactly the type of attitude you need to get through this. And I will be right here by your side. We all will."

"Thank you," Maisie said, and embraced her sister. She had no idea what was to come, but she knew she would always be supported by her siblings, and that made her smile. Perhaps Glenna was right, and the Lord did work in mysterious ways. Perhaps this marriage was about to be the happiest one that ever existed.

Maisie knew that was a lot to hope for. In reality, all she wanted was for Laird Logan Shaw not to turn out to be as the rumors said he was. She didn't mind if he wasn't handsome, and she didn't mind if he was quiet. She just did not want him to be mad or cruel. The rest could be completely up to the Lord.

“Mother...” Logan said, as he tried to get a word in edgewise.

“And it will be a marriage that would have made your father very happy,” Deoiridh said, as she continued to chat.

Logan sighed. “Mother, please stop.”

“Stop telling you about your bride-to-be?”

“You have told me everything there is to know about her,” Logan said. “And while I appreciate the very thorough description, it seems that you could have stopped after the important parts.”

“And what exactly are those?”

“That she is the fifth child,” Logan said. “I am a laird, mother, and while their family has a decent enough reputation, it’s not...”

Deoiridh’s face fell, but she quickly put on a smile again. Logan knew that many years of being the wife of a laird had taught her to conceal her feelings and put on a brave face.

In this case, he did not think she was being particularly brave, but that she was clearly trying to hide the disappointment.

“Mother, you can have me marry whoever you like,” Logan said. “I have always said that it is your choice. I have said my piece on the matter, and that is all.”

“Are you sure?”

“The deal is made, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said. “It is.”

"Then let this be the end of the conversation," he replied, and stood up from the chair he had been sitting in. It seemed that he had sat down on it hours ago with a very different intention in mind. He had intended to pour over the ledgers for the land this quarter, and he had been making fairly decent progress until his mother interrupted him.

He decided that the day was shot anyway and put down the accounts as he got up.

"Well, when is she due to arrive then?" he asked. His mother pretended to look innocent. He knew her well enough to know that the next thing she said would not be quite the truth.

"Oh, I imagine her father will send her any day now."

"She is already on her way, isn't she?"

"She is. And be kind to her, Logan."

"Why would I not be kind to her?" Logan asked, as he headed out to the garden. He knew it was rude to walk out on his mother like that, but he did not wish to carry on the conversation. Deoiridh had few failings, but one of them was that she did not know when to walk away from a topic. He had other things on his mind on this day, and if he stayed, he knew he would snap at her.

It was nearing the anniversary of his father's death, and Logan always felt like a dark cloud settled over him as the day drew closer. Anyone who knew why, of course, would say it was a fair reason to be under the weather, but it wasn't just grief that rocked Logan's soul.

As the date drew nearer, he thought about the moment his father was killed, and tried to make sense of the shadowy figure he had seen commit the crime. He saw the moment again and again, in his nightmares and in his mind's eye. He had made it his mission to solve his father's murder, but in the years since it happened, he had made very little progress. Logan knew it was unlikely he would ever accomplish it, now that so many years had passed, but he did not want to give up hope. If the situation had been reversed, his father would never give up on him.

He also knew that he would have to marry someday. The fact that he had put it off for so long thus far was a miracle, especially given that he was the oldest son. He owed it to his father to avenge his murder, but he also owed it to his father to continue the family line.

He looked back at Shaw Castle as he walked through the garden. It had remained mostly unchanged over the time he had lived there. There was a tower that had started to

crumble and had been repaired, and some of the flowers in the garden were new, but aside from that, it was still the place of his childhood.

He looked up as a bird flew by and squeaked in the grey sky, which looked like it was threatening to rain and suited his mood perfectly at the moment.

Maybe she would be pretty and very kind, or maybe she would be silent and submissive. It was insulting to be married to the fifth child, but he knew nothing could be done. He just wanted her to stay out of his way and allow him to continue his work. He hoped she did not ask too many questions, or that she did not think him strange for being so focused on an event that happened many years ago. He would not tolerate her saying a word about such a thing, especially given that her reputation was not stellar. No one wanted to marry a daughter so low down in the clan, and she probably knew that.

He wondered what magical words her father had said to convince his mother to make such a match. Maybe there was a great deal of profit involved, or some other secret.

He decided that whatever the reason was did not matter anymore. The words had been spoken, and soon the vows would be said. Logan just had to figure out how not to let it distract him.



As Logan was wandering the garden, Maisie was across the Highlands, saying goodbye to her father and sister. Glenna had been kind enough to visit again just as Maisie was due to leave, and the two sisters embraced and promised to write to each other often.

Maisie had decided that she was going to make the best of the situation, and tried to smile as she got into the carriage that began to travel across the Highlands.

She wanted to say that she had made peace with the initiation, but that wasn't quite true. She had prayed about her marriage, and felt guilty praying about her happiness. She had asked God to just take care of her, and make sure that she had many children and made her husband happy. She did not think that was too much to ask for.

Maisie had even gone so far as to write a letter to her future husband. She figured that it might be easier to express herself in a letter, and introduce herself, rather than speaking to him. She could be shy at times, and first conversations could be awkward. She had even dried some of her favorite flowers from the garden to bring.

Maisie looked out the carriage window as the Highlands rolled by. She had spent many

nights picturing this moment, and many nights wondering if this day would ever come. True to Glenna's word, it had taken a while for negotiations to be complete, although Maisie had no idea what they were. She figured there was a dowry involved and that some conversation about the fact that she was the fifth child took place.

Glenna had told her that it wouldn't matter once her husband met her. She had assured Maisie that she was beautiful and kind, and that she was going to make him forget any misgivings that he originally had.

Maisie tried to smile as the sun began to sink. This was her opportunity for adventure. She had heard stories of those who were constantly off on an adventure, and she had never admitted that it sounded exciting.

She clutched the letter to her chest and closed her eyes, deciding that she would make the best of the situation, no matter what.

Maisie was surprised that she managed to fall asleep, and that she managed to sleep quite well. She knew they would be traveling through the night, but when she awoke, she couldn't tell whether it was evening or early morning.

What she could tell was that they were approaching a beautiful castle. It was one of the most beautiful castles she had ever seen, and she could not help but gasp as she looked upon it.

"Is this Shaw Castle?" she asked her driver.

The carriage driver nodded. "Yes. We are here."

"Oh, my goodness," she said, as she leaned halfway out of the window. She knew it wasn't quite ladylike, but she could not help it. If this was going to be her new home, then things were off to a wonderful start.

She managed to wait until the carriage had at least rolled to a stop before she got out. The driver came around and opened the door; she stepped out and tried to fix her ruffled skirts.

She saw a figure approaching and thought it was a guard from the way he was dressed. He did not look particularly noble, but as he pulled down his hood, she bit her lip.

The man approaching her may not be noble, but he certainly was incredibly handsome. He had dark hair, which contrasted with his light blue eyes, and very high cheekbones. He had a short beard and was tall and muscular.

If Maisie was honest with herself, the man was the most handsome person she had ever seen in her life. She immediately felt like that was a sinful thought, and blushed.

"May I present," the carriage driver said, "Laird Logan Shaw."

Maisie almost stumbled back in shock. She could not believe her ears.

This was the laird? This was to be her husband?

But he wasn't dressed like any laird she had ever seen. Most of them were very rich, and they liked to show it off in their clothing and jewelry.

Laird Shaw was dressed as if he did not want to be noticed. It immediately made her wonder if the rumors were not true. A man who was mad and cruel would want to be noticed, wouldn't he? He wouldn't dress like a common guard and try to hide in the shadows.

Laird Shaw looked upon her for a long moment, and Maisie felt herself flush.

What is he thinking? Does he not want me here? Is he not pleased with the way I look?

She realized that she must look frightened, given that she had just spent many hours in a carriage. She tried to fix her hair and straighten her dress at the same time.

She realized that she had just been standing there, and dipped low to curtsy to him instead of fixing anything.

It must have looked like she was frantically waving her arms, because he gave her an odd look.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, sir," she said, because it was the only logical thing she could think of saying.

This is a terrible start, she thought.

After what felt like an eternity, Laird Shaw finally spoke.
“Hello,” he said. “It is a pleasure to meet you as well.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. The fact that he was speaking and hadn't turned and left made her feel like there was hope for the future. Perhaps he was shy, or perhaps he hadn't expected her so soon.

“Was your journey pleasant?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “I have never been this far north. This is wonderful.”

“Well, you will be seeing the north more often. Shall we go inside?”

“I uh...wrote you a letter,” she said, and he turned back to her in surprise.

“I'm sorry?”

She nervously handed over the letter that she had worked on in the carriage.

“I wrote you a letter,” she repeated. “I thought that it might be easier to get to know each other this way. It tells you all about my favorite things...and what I would like...what I would dream for our life.”

“I see,” he said, and took the letter. She thought she saw something in his eyes that possibly was a happy emotion, but she wasn't sure whether it was that or that he thought she was strange.

As they headed inside, a woman approached them. Unlike what was clearly her son, Maisie could see that this was the lady of the house. She was certain that her name was Lady Deoiridh. Her Father had briefed her before she traveled, and Maisie had tried to remember every detail. She had wanted to write it down, but her father said that she

must memorize it, to appear a good wife who took interest in her new family. She had tried to remember the names of all the people surrounding Laird Shaw, and all the people in his past.

She was lucky in the sense that her father hadn't been able to produce much information about the Shaw family beyond the immediate history and the rumors about the family. She learned that Laird Shaw had a brother and had lost his father early on.

"This must be Maisie," Lady Deoiridh said. She had a smile on her face, but Maisie wasn't sure whether it was a kind one or not, seeing as Maisie was the fifth child. She wondered what Lady Deoiridh thought. Was she happy with this marriage for her son? Did she think that he settled? Did she think it was the best he could do?

"Yes," Maisie said, and curtsied. "Lady Deoiridh, it is a pleasure to meet you."

"How was your journey?" It seemed that she had the same pleasantries as her son, and Maisie did not know what either of them really thought.

"It was pleasant," Maisie said. "I very much appreciate you...choosing...myself."

She knew it was an awkward sentence and cursed herself for not being able to speak clearly. She wanted to thank Lady Deoiridh for helping to arrange the marriage, and she wanted to thank them for welcoming her into the castle, but it did not come out clearly. This was exactly why she had written a letter. She wished Logan had read it before they spoke to anyone else.

"Aileas," the lady of the house called, and a servant stepped forward. The servant was about Maisie's age, and from what Maisie could tell, she had a genuine smile. Her eyes sparkled as she dipped low.

"I will be your handmaiden," Aileas said. "Shall I show you to your room and around the castle?"

"Yes, please," Maisie said. "Thank you, that would be lovely."

"Is there anything I can arrange for you before we go?" Aileas asked.

Maisie assumed this was a genuine question and not just a pleasantry, and so she answered it honestly.

"Are there books in my room?" she asked. "Or perhaps a library? I did not bring any of my own because I did not want to weigh down the carriage when there was already so much packed."

"Books?" Aileas said, and looked to her master and mistress.

"There is a library," Laird Shaw said, although he was clearly very surprised by her question. "And you are welcome to borrow any of them you like."

"Is there anything else?" Aileas asked.

Maisie shook her head. "No, thank you," she said, and curtsied to her future husband and his mother. "I shall see you soon."

She followed Aileas out of the room. Once they were in the hallway, Aileas turned to Maisie.

"Have you ever been to the castle before?" Aileas asked.

"No. And I am surprised it is so big and light."

"Oh, yes," Aileas said. "Although once the sun goes down, it can get quite dark."

"I see. And I assume curfew is in effect?"

"Curfew?" Aileas gave her a funny look. "Why would there be a curfew?"

"I apologize; I had heard that there was a curfew in effect."

"No," Aileas said. "The laird is often up late, and he does not mind if the candles burn all night."

"I see," Maisie said, as Aileas threw open the doors to the dining room. Maisie gasped at the bright windows and the high ceilings. She was sure it was the most vast and beautiful dining room in the entire world.

She was not sure what she expected—perhaps for the entire castle to be as dark and gloomy and cruel and mad as the rumors that surrounded the family?

So far, she had not seen any evidence that the rumors were true. Laird Shaw was quiet, and the situation had been awkward, but it did not make her want to run for the hills.

"How many servants work here?" Maisie asked.

"I am not sure," Aileas said. "I do know that I have been here the longest of most of them. Almost four years."

"What?" Maisie asked, in surprise. "What do you mean? You are so young."

"I imagine we are almost the same age," Aileas said. "Laird Shaw does not seem to keep

anyone employed for very long.”

“Oh, dear. Is there any reason for that?”

“What do you think of the dining room?” Aileas asked, clearly changing the subject. That alarmed Maisie, but she did not want to be seen as too inquisitive on her first day.

“I think it is beautiful,” she said. “I imagine the rest of the castle is just as lovely?”

“Come with me and I’ll show you,” Aileas said. The young servant seemed content to show Maisie the castle rather than talk about the family, and Maisie respected that. Maybe Aileas did not want to be caught gossiping. At least, she hoped that was the case, and not that the young servant did not want to be let go before her career really started.

“If you do not mind me asking, my lady, what is the place you grew up like? Is it like this?”

“Not quite,” Maisie said. “But I have to admit that over the last few years, the estate felt much bigger. Or rather, emptier.”

“Oh?”

“All my siblings have recently married, and so a once-full house now feels much different.”

“All of them?” Aileas asked. “How many do you have, if you do not mind me asking? And forgive me, my lady, if I am asking too many questions.”

“Not at all. If we are going to be together often, it is important that we know each other. I have four other siblings.”

“My goodness!” Maisie could hear that Aileas was more than surprised at that. Of course, anyone would be surprised to hear a woman of her status was marrying a laird, even if it was a laird who did not have the purest reputation.

“Do you have any siblings?” Maisie asked, trying to get the attention off of her.

“Yes, I have two sisters, and I am the eldest. My family was very proud of me working here.”

“Are you married?”

“I am not, but I think that would be lovely, as I know that many servants marry and work together.”

"Yes, in the palace," Maisie said. "I have heard of servants who meet and marry there. It is a lovely story."

"Ah, well," Aileas said. "The focus is not on my marriage, but yours. You must be very excited."

"I am, but if I am honest, I am also quite tired."

"Let me show you to your room."

Maisie was equally impressed with her room, with the four-poster bed and the window that overlooked the garden. She thought it was a very pretty garden, even if it seemed the colors were a little muted. It seemed that all the flowers were of a darker variety. They were beautiful, but it seemed a bit odd.

"I shall bring you a variety of books from the library so you can have something to read. I do have a confession to make, though, my lady..."

"Oh?" Maisie said, as she stood near the window. The bed looked incredibly comfortable, and she did not realize how tired she was. She knew the sun was rising, but she could not wait to lie down.

"I cannot read," Aileas said. "I am sure that will come as no surprise. I will bring you as many as I can, and hopefully, there will be some that are to your liking?"

"Yes, that sounds lovely. I am happy to come as well and see what selection you have for myself."

"When you are rested, my lady," Aileas said. Maisie smiled at her.

Aileas curtsied and then disappeared around the corner.

Once she was alone, Maisie sat on the bed and breathed a sigh of relief.

This wasn't what she was expecting. She had hoped everything would be fine, and as far as she could tell, it was. However, the fact that it all appeared fine made her feel even stranger about the whole thing. Was there something that was yet to be revealed?

Was she going to find that she was trapped here? Was Aileas telling the truth about everything, or hiding something?

Would Maisie be happy here, with the muted garden, far away from her family? She missed her sisters terribly, and it had only been one day and one night.

She wondered if Laird Shaw had read her letter yet, and whether he found that they had anything in common. Perhaps he would say that they were a perfect match and declare his love for her right then and there. She felt incredibly lucky that he was so handsome.

Or perhaps, Maisie thought, he will order me gone, and all of what I heard of him would prove true.

She wasn't sure what to think but wanted to trust in the future. Either way, there was nothing she could do but wait and see.

Logan had every intention of listening to his mother when it came to the matter of his marriage. It wasn't that he was particularly obedient of his mother, or that he thought she was correct. He figured that who he married, if anyone, really didn't matter because there were much more important things to worry about.

As the laird, he had to meet with the lower clansmen from time to time, and those who sat on his high council were expecting him to show his face more often than not.

Logan had a high council meeting today. He dreaded telling them about the matter of his marriage. He was certain they had already heard, and they had a thousand things to say. However, if they hadn't already heard, the news would not go over well. He could guess what each of them would say before he even brought up the topic.

Nevertheless, he headed to their meeting spot with a distracted mind. They were already there when he arrived, and he quickly glanced up at the sun to check if he was late.

"My laird," they said, almost in unison. Logan waited until they had all risen and then sat before he cleared his throat.

"Thank you all for coming today," he said. "As you have likely heard, we have a lot to discuss today."

"Yes," Douglas, the most outspoken of the group, said. "We have all heard about your impending marriage to the fifth child of a clan."

"My bride-to-be is called Maisie," Logan said, as he looked among them. "And I did not think that we were gathered here to discuss her."

"Of course we are gathered here to discuss her," Douglas said. "If I may be so bold, my laird, why would you throw away your opportunity at a new alliance?"

"I do not believe that I am throwing away an opportunity at anything. Not that it is any of your business."

The others roared with laughter, but Logan was quite serious. It seemed Douglas always knew how to overstep his bounds.

"I am not trying to anger you," Douglas said, as if that wasn't his exact purpose. "I am simply trying to discuss something that affects us all."

Logan raised an eyebrow. "May I remind you that being greedy and worrying about the alliance that will bring us the most profit was how we got in trouble in the first place."

Douglas fell silent at that, and everyone turned to him. Sometimes, Logan felt like the entire clan was on Douglas's side, even if they respected Logan as their laird.

"Well, I don't think that..." Douglas started.

"No, that is exactly why," Logan said.

"Well, then we need to fight against Macleod," Douglas replied. "We cannot allow a bad alliance and a—"

"You cannot allow it? Douglas, I think you are confused. Perhaps you stayed out too late last night and were deep in your cups. I am the laird."

"Well, yes, I know that..." Douglas blushed.

"Do you? Or do you think that perhaps the duty is on you on alternating days?"

The men roared with laughter; Douglas was clearly embarrassed. Logan was aware of that, but at this point, he did not care.

"Men, there is more to life than power and greed, and I think sometimes you forget it."

"With all due respect..." Thomas said, quietly. Thomas was often quiet, to the point where others were shocked when he spoke.

"Yes?" Logan said. The laird could see Douglas glare, and he did not blame him. Logan was always willing to listen to what Thomas said because he did not challenge him.

"Has she arrived yet?" Thomas asked.

"Who?" Logan's mind was so scattered on war with the Macleods that he had forgotten what they were originally discussing.

"Your bride?" Thomas asked.

"Yes," he replied. "She arrived last night."

"Ah. Well, then, I suppose it's a done deal. There is nothing that any of us can do about it now that she is here, so there is no reason to discuss it further."

"I agree. Thank you, Thomas."

It was clear that was the end of the topic. Logan looked down at the table for a moment, collecting his thoughts.

"Now, what information do we have on the Macleods?" he asked, his voice strong. He remembered when his father used to lead these meetings. He never faltered or seemed unsure of himself. Of course, that was many years ago, and Logan was aware that his mind could be playing tricks on him. Surely, when his father was laird, there were times when he was uncertain, or times when he stumbled.

"I have information on them," another man spoke up, and Logan leaned forward to listen. Although he would never admit it to anyone, the number of spies he had surrounding the Macleod clan bordered on insanity. He wanted to protect his clan, but he could also never let go of the idea that it could be the Macleods who had his father killed.

He had never proven it, but that did not mean there wasn't suspicion. As their greatest rival, they had many reasons to want his father dead. Maybe they did not think Logan would grow to be such a strong laird, or maybe they intended to kill him and his brother next.

"I am not sure that is accurate information," Cailean said, as soon as he heard it.

"You think it is a lie?"

"No, but from what I heard, the Macleods are not planning anything until after the solstice."

"I don't know," Logan said. "They always like to try some sort of skirmish."

"It won't happen," Cailean said. "I am certain of it."

Logan paused. If there was anyone left in the world that he trusted, it was his brother, without a doubt.

"I will take your word for it, Cailean. But if it is wrong—"

"Oh, I am aware of what happens if it is wrong," Cailean said. "I have not lied to you since I was three years old."

For some reason, that got a chuckle out of even the most hard-hearted men. Logan could never figure out how Cailean could make them laugh when no one else could. Perhaps it was because Cailean was the younger brother of the laird and therefore could afford to be more relaxed with his smile. Logan often envied Cailean because it seemed he was born into the best place in life. He had privilege, and he could come and go as he pleased without any real responsibility.

Logan could change that if he wanted, but he did not wish for Cailean to have any burdens. It was bad enough that the two of them ached after their father died. Logan did not think Cailean should have to suffer anymore in life, especially since Logan could shoulder the burdens for now.

"Now," Cailean said, "if that is all, my brother needs to attend his wedding ceremony."

"The wedding is today?" Douglas said, in surprise.

Logan shot him a look. "We already went over the fact that my bride had arrived and is waiting, and that we would be moving forward with the wedding."

"I am aware of all that," Douglas replied, as he glared at Logan. "I suppose I expected you to—"

"It does not matter what you expected of me. I am getting married today, and that it is that."

It wasn't that he was entirely happy with the choice, as he barely knew her. He simply did not care enough to make a fuss. He pictured her face as he and Cailean made their way back to Shaw Castle. At the very least, he thought, she is beautiful. He did not think he would notice such a thing, but he had looked deep into her eyes when she arrived and felt something in his soul move.

Maybe this will not be the worst marriage, after all.



Back in Shaw Castle, Maisie was exhausted. Despite the fact that her journey had tired her out, she had not slept well. She had eaten, walked for a bit in the gardens, and then returned to her room for most of the day, tossing and turning in an attempt to sleep. No

one expected much of her that first day, and despite the fact that she said she was turning in early, sleep did not come easily to her. Her mind was racing with a thousand thoughts. What if Logan is cruel to me? What if I never find happiness here? What if I long for home? What if his mother is cruel or mad?

She had heard stories of husbands' mothers who were very unkind to the brides of their sons. She had no reason to think this since his mother had been nothing but kind to her, but that didn't mean such things would not appear on the day after the wedding.

Maisie yawned and tried desperately to wake up. Normally, she was famished the second she awoke, but today, she found she did not want to eat a thing.

She had been at the weddings of all her sisters. She had stood by while they walked down the aisle, sometimes to men they barely knew, and recited their vows. She had held flowers, and cried happy tears. She had always thought they would be at hers as well. Despite the fact that she was in a full castle, she felt completely alone.

There was a knock at the door, and she turned her head. She tried to smile and make it seem as if her eyes were wide open.

"Come in," she called, and Aileas swung in the door with a wide smile.

"Good morning!" Aileas said. She had a large tray of food. Maisie faked a smile as it was placed in front of her.

"Good morning," Maisie said. "Did you sleep well?"

"I slept very well," Aileas said. "But it is you who I should be asking. You are getting married today."

"Yes, I thought of it all night."

"Are you excited?"

"I am really not sure. I think so, but I barely know him. I know that is not uncommon."

"Of course, being nervous is expected," Aileas asked. "But if I may so, you will make a beautiful bride, and I am sure my laird will be very happy."

"Thank you," Maisie said. "I am nervous that I will not be exciting for him."

"Oh, you will be," Aileas said. "And it will be a beautiful wedding. Everyone is very excited."

“Who is everyone?”

“Well, the servants,” Aileas said. “We have been preparing for this for weeks, ever since we heard.”

“I see,” Maisie said, and looked at the trunk she brought. “I suppose I should get dressed.”

“Oh, I have not shown you the best part,” Aileas said, and went to the wardrobe. When she pulled the door open, Maisie gasped.

Inside the wardrobe was the most beautiful dress she had ever seen in her life. It was green, and there was a plaid that wrapped around the waist. It was stunning.

“That is for me? I did not expect a new gown.”

“We knew that you would be bringing quite a few gowns, and would have something to wear if it did not fit, but we were hoping it would. My laird’s mother insisted that you have something new to wear in the clan’s colors.”

“Oh,” Maisie said. “Well, I must thank her.”

“You will see her at the wedding, of course,” Aileas said. “Shall I help you get dressed?”

“Thank you,” Maisie said. “I would appreciate it.”

She did not feel worthy of a new gown. She felt tired and limp, but she did have to admit that the colors of the gown perked her up slightly.

Aileas helped her with her hair and encouraged her to eat a few things. Maisie did manage to nibble on the bread Aileas had brought, and as the sun continued to rise, she felt more awake. Maybe this day would be just fine, after all.

“There,” Aileas said, when she was done. “You look wonderful!”

“Thank you. I do not think I would be able to get there without you. I am so glad that you are here.”

“You are very kind, my lady,” Aileas said. “But I am simply doing what I have been asked to do. I would be out of work very quickly if I did not do as I was told.”

“But you do not have to be so kind while you do it.”

Aileas blushed. “Well, that is different. I believe that kindness is the only way to make the world a better place.”

"What time do I have to be at the chapel? Do I have time to take a stroll in the garden?"

Aileas looked at the sun. "Yes, I am sure you have time for that. Is there a particular reason you want to do that?"

"I think I would just like some time to myself, to pray. Normally, I would go to the chapel to do so, but..."

"But everyone is expecting you to be hidden away. I suppose it would not hurt if you were in the garden for a short while."

"I promise I will not make a scene," Maisie said. "I just need a moment."

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" Aileas asked.

Maisie smiled. "No, you have done so much already."

Maisie truly did not intend to take too much time in the garden. She just intended to take a quick stroll and clear her mind. However, as soon as she got to the tiny pond, she could not help but pause and look down at her reflection.

She barely recognized herself. She did feel beautiful, just not like the girl who left her home only a couple of days ago.

She felt like a stranger in a clan's colors that were not her own. Her hair was braided and wrapped around her head in a way that she would never have styled it. This was not the girl who left home. This was a woman, who was about to be a wife.

Maisie took a deep breath and told herself not to cry. This was supposed to be the happiest day of her life. If someone told her when she was a child that she was going to marry a laird, she would have been over the moon.

Eventually, she managed to force the tears back and headed back to the castle. She could not delay much longer unless she wanted to delay the wedding.

When she got back, Aileas checked with her to make sure she was well, and then put the finishing touches on her hair.

"Did anyone see you down in the garden?" Aileas asked.

"No. There was no one out there."

"Everyone is at the chapel," Aileas said. "Do you think you are ready to join them?"

"Yes," Maisie said. "I am ready."

Both of them fell silent as they walked down the stairs. The chapel wasn't far away, and Maisie elected to walk instead of taking a carriage. Aileas was surprised, but she did not say anything. She simply fell in step behind Maisie, as they walked down the path.

Maisie felt like it was her last walk of freedom. She tried to force a smile on her face as she walked through the chapel doors.

There were fewer people than she imagined. For some reason, she thought the chapel would be overflowing with unfamiliar eyes.

She picked up her skirts as Aileas gave her the signal to begin walking down the aisle. She was so focused on trying to avoid the unfamiliar gazes surrounding her that she forgot to look forward.

When she finally did, her heart fluttered. If there was anything that reminded her that she was lucky, it was looking down the aisle and being reminded of how handsome Logan Shaw was.

He was standing at the end of the aisle dressed in what must be his finest clothes. A man that she assumed was his brother was standing beside him. The two of them looked alike, and the younger man seemed to be giving Logan an encouraging look.

Maisie knew there was no turning back now. There may have been a chance to escape when she was in the garden, or when she was walking here, or even last night. Now, however, there was nowhere to run.

Looking into his eyes, she did not want to run. She could not read his expression, but she did not see madness or cruelty in them. He seemed to be quite calm, although she had no idea how he managed to do that. Her heart was beating a hundred beats a second, and her palms felt sweaty.

In a moment, she would be married.

Maisie tried to ignore the empty spots in the chapel as she repeated the vows the priest spoke. The accent was unfamiliar, and it took a moment to understand him. She smiled and nodded at all the right places. Logan did not seem like he wanted to run, so she decided to take that as a victory.

Maisie knew very little about who made the match. She knew that her father had talked to his mother, but ultimately, Logan had to be the one to make the choice, didn't he? He was the laird; he had to approve the marriage.

Maisie was so lost in her thoughts that she did not notice the wedding had ended. Logan leaned in to kiss her. It took her by surprise, and to her regret, she leaned backward.

Logan looked surprised, and then quickly recovered. He didn't say a word to her, and she felt instantly embarrassed. She hadn't meant to pull away from him. She hadn't meant to embarrass him in front of his friends and family.

He took her hand and held it up so the crowd could see that they were united. There were some clapping and cheering, and Logan and Maisie began to walk down the aisle.

She did not know what to say. She did not know whether she should apologize to him, or whether she should just leave it. Maybe he would forget about it. Maybe he would kiss her later, and she would have her first kiss and realize that this was the man she was supposed to be with.

She knew that was silly and unrealistic. She had just met him, and he had a horrible reputation. But whether she believed this was her soul mate or not, they were married now.

"The reception is back at the castle," he said. "Do you want to walk, or shall we wait for the carriage?"

"I don't mind either way."

He looked down the road to the castle and then back at the people who were exiting the chapel.

"Perhaps we shall take the carriage," he said and waved to the one that was approaching. Maisie wasn't sure whether it had been waiting for them or had been asked to wait for some of the elderly people at the ceremony.

Either way, Logan pulled open the door for her, and she got in.

She realized that she had never been alone with him before. Of course, they hadn't had much time to get to know each other, but now, with the carriage door shut behind them, it felt like she had to say something.

"I am sorry about..." she started. He shook his head, as if he knew exactly what she was talking about.

"It's fine," he said.

"That was...a good turnout?" she tried again. "At the ceremony?"

He looked back at the chapel and the guests walking down to the castle.

"I suppose. I am surprised so many of them came, given the short notice."

"Perhaps word got out when you approved the marriage?"

He didn't say anything; she wondered whether he wanted this marriage at all. Perhaps it had been all his mother's doing, and he had just accepted it. Perhaps his father had made a very good case for her. Perhaps the dowry had been very large, although she didn't see how that was possible. With four sisters before her, there wasn't much left that her father had saved.

"I heard your father talking about you, and I did not stop it."

"Oh," she said. She did not think that was a compliment, but it wasn't an insult either. She looked out the window as they arrived at the castle. "Well...here we are."

"Yes," he said, and got out of the carriage. He opened the door for her, which she appreciated. She got out, and they headed into the grand hall, where the tables had been set up and were groaning under the weight of the food that had been prepared. Because they had taken the carriage, they were the first to arrive.

The food smelled delicious, and under normal circumstances, she would have been thrilled to have such a wonderful meal.

Today, though, she still felt nervous. The wedding was over, but she knew she would have to talk to those she barely knew for a few hours during the reception.

She was also worried about the wedding night and what that would bring. She had absolutely no experience in that area, and Logan seemed to be a man who knew what he wanted.

She did not bring any of those up, of course, and just forced a smile. Logan seemed distracted by the people entering the room, so she stood close enough to join the conversation but far enough to look away if she could tell that she wasn't wanted for any reason.

The man she assumed to be his brother headed over to both of them.

"Well, Brother," he said, loudly, "you are finally married. The rest of your life is right in front of you! Congratulations. and good luck!"

This was another instance where Maisie wasn't sure whether it was a compliment or an insult.

"I do not believe we have been introduced. I'm Cailean. Logan is my brother—my much, much older brother."

"By three years?" Logan said and shook his head. "You'll have to forgive my brother, my lady. He sometimes thinks his sense of humor is funny."

"Come now, Brother," Cailean said, "if we cannot joke on your wedding day, then when can we?"

"My sisters are the same way," Maisie said.

Cailean smiled at her. "All four of them?"

Her face lit up. "That's right! How did you know that?"

"Everyone knows that you have four sisters," Cailean said, and then spotted someone across the room. "It was wonderful to chat with you. Please excuse me for a moment." He smiled kindly and then walked across the room. Maisie thought that was a rather odd thing to say, but it brought joy to her heart. Maybe they had been talking about her for a while. Maybe the excitement was in the air about the wedding, and Logan had told

everyone about his bride-to-be.

She wondered if he had read the letter yet. Maybe he was standing next to her because he wanted to say something about the letter, or the things she hoped they had in common.

She was going to ask him about it when someone made a toast and then another, and it seemed like the reception was in full swing shortly after. Before she knew it, everyone was drinking and shouting loudly, and there was no way she'd be happy to have a conversation with Logan.

She thought it was a shame, especially because neither of them seemed to be having a conversation with someone else. They were both looking out awkwardly into the crowd and then back at each other and then away.

Maisie wished she could think of something to say. Instead, she looked down at the food that she had barely taken a bit of. She was about to ask him whether he liked his meal when a man approached.

Maisie did not know who he was, but she could see from the way he sweated on the spot that he was drunk. He had a cup of mead in his hand and raised it.

"To you, Laird," he said. "For managing to destroy a legacy."

Logan's eyes nearly flew out of his head.

"Excuse me?" he asked, in shock. "How dare you?"

"I mean no disrespect," the man said. "But I served with your father, and he would have not wanted you to marry a fifth daughter."

Maisie felt herself turn red.

"I think you should stop speaking now," Logan replied.

"No," the man said. "I really do mean no disrespect. I just am saying what everyone is thinking."

"No one is thinking that."

"Everyone is thinking about it!" the man cried. "Isn't that true?"

He looked around as if he expected others to support him. No one stepped forward.

Logan turned his head towards his mother, who looked terribly upset.

"I am afraid that I have made a mistake," she said. "I have put some thought into this, Logan, and..."

"Mother, you are the one who arranged this!" he cried.

"Yes, I am aware of what I did," she said. "However, I do not think that this...I'm sorry. It's too late right now."

"That is correct," Logan said. "It is too late."

Maisie couldn't even hear the rest of the conversation. She felt like she was going to cry.

Is this what everyone thought of her? That she was a mistake? That she wasn't good enough for Logan? Or were they trying to say that she wasn't good enough for anyone?

She felt tears spring to her eyes and felt like she might collapse if she did not leave the area quickly. She pushed herself away from the table and headed for the hallway.

Unfortunately for her, it seemed like there were suddenly a hundred people between her and the hallway. It could have been that her eyes were blurring, or it could have been that she felt like she couldn't breathe and there were people everywhere.

Either way, it took far longer to reach the hallway than she wanted to.

Once she was alone, she put her hands to her face.

She had thought that everything would be fine. She did not have to be just the fifth daughter. She could be her own person: a wife and a lady of the castle.

Instead, all they saw was what everyone back home saw.

Maisie wished she had never come.

The fact that his mother had been the one to make the arrangements made her sob even harder.

He didn't even want her. She had put his reputation aside and tried to think of him as a fresh start. She had written him a letter, and she had tried to be happy and excited about it.

Instead, she was the laughingstock.

"Maisie!" she heard Logan call, but did not want to talk to him.

If she knew the castle a little bit better, she would run off into the night. She would find

her way through the winding hallways, and head to her bedroom. However, she had been to the great hall maybe once before and had no idea how to get back to her bedroom.

Was it even her bedroom anymore? Would she be one of those wives who were expected to attend to her husband every night? Would he barge in whenever he wanted?

“Maisie!”

She frantically looked for somewhere to go. The only place she could see was the dark hallway that she was positive was not the way that they had come down.

She heard the voices from her wedding reception behind her as she took a step towards the hallway. This was supposed to be the happiest day of her life, and instead, it was ruined. Those voices no longer sounded fun or pleasant. They sounded cruel, just like the rumors. She hated this place.

“Maisie! Please!”

She wanted to stop. But it was too late.

Logan managed to catch up with Maisie, and he looked just as hurt as she was. "I'm sorry," he said. "Please do not go."

"Do you think what they think?" she asked, as she tried to wipe the tears away. "It is understandable if you do. I do not blame you."

"I do not. And from the moment you arrived, I knew I had to make this marriage work."

"From the moment I arrived? What about before then? Your mother just told you what to do?"

"Your father arrived to speak to me many months ago," he admitted, "but I did not want to speak with him. I did not want a wife. So, to let him down easily, I told him to speak to my mother. I thought she would reject the offer, yet the more I listened from the other room, the more I realized I did not want her to. You sounded just like the bride I wanted."

"But your mother accepted the offer!" she cried.

"Yes, because she thought I might never marry," Logan said. "And I let her think it was her idea. Now that we both have time to think...I am confident that you are the right one for me."

"But you do not know me!" Perhaps he had read the letter? Perhaps he knew her a little better than he let on? As she gazed into his eyes, she could not help but think how handsome he was. Even now, when she was very upset and not sure what to believe, she thought he was the answer.

"It is true; I do not. But I am hoping that as the years go on, I will get to know you."

The fact that he was speaking in years rather than minutes or days warmed her heart.

Maybe she did want to see what happened in the next few years as well.

“Do we have to go back?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. We can go wherever you want.”

“I want...” She bit her lip as she thought. Logan smiled at her, and she thought he had the most beautiful smile that she had ever seen. “I wouldn’t mind a stroll in the garden. I know that it is not the most exciting, but—”

“No,” he said, and held out his arm. “If that is what you desire, then that is what we will do.”

“Thank you,” she said and walked with him down the hallway that she previously had been afraid to go down. “How did you ever learn your way in this place? It seems so confusing.”

“It may not give you much hope to learn that I am sometimes lost when I am not paying attention,” he said. “But eventually, we will learn the ways of the castle...and maybe we could learn them together?”

Maisie felt her heart warm at those words.

She felt like she could actually stop crying by the time they reached the garden. It seemed so secluded, and despite the fact that she could still hear voices around them, she felt like they were alone.

“I used to walk through the hedge maze as a child, not caring if I was lost for hours, because I had no responsibilities. It used to be my favorite place in the whole world,” he said.

Her eyes widened.

“You have a hedge maze?”

“It’s just on the other side of the rose garden.”

She couldn’t help but turn to him in excitement. “Can we go? Can we see it? I think that would make me smile.”

“Well, if it would make you smile,” he said and held out his arm. “Please, come with me.”

Maisie had stories of hedge mazes, but she had never actually seen one. She didn’t think her first time seeing one would be when she was newly married, but she decided that it

wouldn't be the worst memory she ever made.

When Logan led her around the other side of the rose garden, she gasped with delight. It was everything she believed it would be.

"Wow!" she said, as she leaned forward to get a better look. "Everything is intricately designed. This is so wonderful!"

"It hadn't changed much on the outside since I was a child," he said, and she paused at that comment.

"On the outside?"

He smiled. "They do change the route through it every season. Sometimes, twice a season if the hedges are growing particularly well. Shall we attempt it?"

"Yes, please!" she said, and they ventured in.

Inside, it was dark and cool. Despite the fact that they were really no further from the castle than when they stepped in, she suddenly felt like they were a million miles away. "Oh, my. This is beautiful."

"It provided relief from the summer heat and the rain," he said, as he looked up at the thickly woven ceiling. "And it provided a hiding place from my brother."

"Cailean seems..." She paused. She did not want to insult his brother, and she did not think particularly badly of him. She just wasn't sure what to make of him.

"Cailean is wonderful," Logan said. "Really, he is. It is just...sometimes he does not read the energy of those around him. He sometimes feels as if he needs to entertain the whole room."

"Ah," she said. "Yes, my sister can be like that."

"Which one?" he asked, with a smile. "I genuinely mean that. If we are to be married, then I should know the names of your sisters."

"Glenna. She is the one that I am closest to. Glenna is lovely, but she feels the weight of everyone else on her shoulders. She thinks it is her job to care for and be certain, no matter who is in the room."

"At the expense of her own interests?"

"I think she is lucky. Her interests are her family, so she doesn't mind caring for us, or

trying to entertain us. I just sometimes think she is going to run herself ragged trying to do it all."

"Cailean can be the same," Logan said. "He is always loud, always looking around to include someone who feels left out. He has a kind heart, but sometimes..."

"Sometimes you wonder if it is too much," Maisie said, as she gazed into Logan's eyes. She felt completely comforted whenever she looked at him, and wondered how anyone ever could have said he was cruel or mad.

Of course, there was still plenty of time to figure that out. However, currently, she had a hard time seeing him as anything but handsome and kind.

As they came to a dead end, she giggled and turned back. He turned at exactly the same time; their lips were inches apart.

"Maisie..." They probably both meant to take a step away from each other, but instead, they took a step forward.

Their lips met, and she felt tingles travel up and down her spine. His lips were soft, and the kiss was gentle. It was almost as if it were forbidden, and she had to remind herself that it wasn't; if she enjoyed kissing Logan, she could kiss him as much as she wanted.

And she did want to kiss him, over and over again. He put his hands up to her face, and they kissed with more passion. Slowly, his hands dropped to her waist as she pressed up against him.

This feels wrong. But it is not. We are married, and if I want, I can go further.

She didn't even blush at that thought. This was her husband, and she did want him.

"Do you want to leave the maze?" Logan asked, with as much dignity as he could muster.

"Yes," she managed, breathlessly. "Do you know the way?"

"I do," he said and pulled her back the way they came. She didn't even stop to wonder if he had known the way the whole time. Instead, she followed him out of the maze and back into the castle. Her heart was beating quickly in her chest, and her palms were sweating as they climbed the stairs to what she assumed was his bedroom.

At that moment, she did not even care whose bedroom they went to. But when he kissed her, again, behind the privacy of the door, she kissed him back.

It was not long before he tore her clothes off with the strength she knew he had all

along. He was very clear about what he wanted as he lowered her down onto his large bed.

Maisie responded to his touch and his soft moans with her own noise. It came so naturally, and she was not aware that she was making soft sounds until she saw the reaction it brought to Logan.

He began taking deeper breaths as he was touching her, and she felt the blood that was warming every part of his body. The heat that he began radiating impressed her immensely. All his muscles and strength reminded her of an animal, and she felt like he could trap her in his arm and do whatever he wanted with her if he so desired. She felt powerless for a moment, but the slight fear gave way to desire very quickly.

When Logan took her womanhood, it was pleasant, but she could not help but cry out. He seemed ecstatic.

She remembered that it was she who caused such a reaction to him, and that made her feel powerful again. She wanted to see how far she could take it and how much more she could arouse him. She tried to play with him and see how his body and mind would react.

He responded to every touch or sound she made, and as they were finding a rhythm, Maisie began thinking of the whole situation as a dance of senses and intentions.

She had thought this moment would be unpleasant and that it would just be something that she had to endure. However, if it would be absolutely wonderful if it were not for the slight pain she felt.

When he finally surrendered to her she felt a deep sense of satisfaction as his breath became even deeper and his body rested with all his weight and might on hers.

She stayed there for a while feeling his heart pumping hot blood into his body while being drunk on his manly musk.

She did not know how long the whole experience took. All she could remember, in the end, was how good she felt and could not wait to try it again.

Logan laid beside her, panting more slowly now. Maisie rolled over to put her head on his stomach.

"That was wonderful," he said, as he wrapped an arm around her.

"It was!

He chuckled. "You sound surprised."

"I am...yes, I am surprised, although it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with what I was told."

"I see," he said and stroked her hair. "And what were you told?"

"I was told that it would be unpleasant, the first time, and I was just doing my duty."

"And is that how you felt?"

"Not at all."

"Well, then, would you like to stay?"

"Yes," she said. She already felt sleep taking her. She would not mind, though, if her sleep was interrupted by another moment of pleasure. "Yes, I would like that very much."

"Wonderful," he said, and pulled her closer. "Because I would very much like it if you stayed."

Maisie curled up to him and felt the world start to blur. "Goodnight...Husband."

"Goodnight, Wife," he said, as he kissed the top of her head. Maisie realized that she had not thought of how homesick she was at their awful wedding reception in hours. They had let the moments slip away, simply being with each other. If this was the start of her marriage, then it was a start she was content with. She hoped that she would be this happy and comfortable forever.

She was warm, safe, and a wife now. Shaw Castle was her new home. She could not wait to see what tomorrow would bring.

When Maisie awoke, the dawn light was already streaming into the room. She felt warm and sleepy, and rolled over to snuggle with Logan for just a few more minutes.

To her surprise, the bed was empty. She sat up and looked around frantically.

"Good morning," Logan said. He was still there, standing at the edge of the bed and getting dressed.

"Good morning," she said. "Is it late?"

"No, it is not late," he said, "but I unfortunately have some early morning duties to tend to."

"So you cannot stay?"

"No, but that does not mean that I will not see you soon. Perhaps I could find time to send for you, for lunch?"

"That would be grand," she said, as he leaned in to kiss her. His kiss brought back memories of the previous night, and she never wanted it to end.

It seemed that he did not as well, because he pushed her back as the kiss deepened.

Maisie was positive if he had another minute or two, they would have gotten up to what they did last night. However, it seemed Logan managed to constrain himself enough to pull back.

"I will, um...see you at luncheon," he said, and Maisie nodded, blushing.

Was this what married life was going to be like? Would they never be able to get enough of each other? Would they always be happy?

She hoped so. She hoped they managed to find small ways to make each other happy for the rest of their lives.

Once Logan was gone, she settled back into the bed for a moment to calm her excited nerves. Her stomach growled. She didn't quite know how to get from Logan's room to hers, and even if she did, she did not want to walk down the hall in last night's clothes. Everyone would know exactly what they had been up to.

Everyone knew already, she realized, because they were married yesterday.

Suddenly, all the memories came rushing back. The memory of the night had been pleasant, but the memory of the awkward ceremony and the reception was also foremost in her mind. Would everyone be staring at her today? Would she have to stay hidden, just to avoid the stares? She wasn't sure if she could face a castle full of strangers without Logan by her side. She certainly couldn't face them if they were going to continue to think that she wasn't good enough.

There was a knock at the door, and Aileas came in with a tray of food and several books piled beside the plate.

"Good morning," Aileas said. "Did you sleep well?"

"How did you know where to find me?" Maisie asked, and Aileas smiled as she set the tray down.

"Well, when you weren't in your room, I guessed you were either here or you had run away. And between you and I, lass, may I say that I am very glad to find you here instead of the other option."

Maisie chuckled. "Well, I am glad to see you too. Aside from my new husband, I do not think there is anyone else in the castle who would be glad to see me."

"Do not say such things," Aileas replied. "The reception was just the way things go around here. Someone has too much to drink, and things get out of hand. You should not take it personally."

"But everything they said was true," Maisie protested. "It isn't as if I'm not the fifth daughter, or if—"

"Do not listen to them," Aileas said, kindly but firmly. "Today is a new day, and I dare say, you look as if you've had a good night."

"I have," Maisie said, as she drew the covers closer. "At least there was that."

"You see? Then it's not all bad. Now, I've brought you some things."

"I am far more interested in the books," Maisie said, as she leaned forward. "I'm sorry, I know breakfast is probably lovely..."

Aileas chuckled as she slid the books across the covers to her. "I figured you would be," she replied. "I asked someone in the library to choose a variety for you. I hope you enjoy them."

"I am sure that I will," Maisie said, excited, as she picked up one and began to thumb through it.

"Perhaps..." Aileas said, shyly. "Perhaps...when you are done, you could tell me what happened?"

Maisie remembered that her newfound friend couldn't read, and smiled gently.

"I would be happy to," she said. "In fact, I would even be willing to read some of it to you."

"Oh," Aileas eyes lit up. "That would be lovely. Find the most exciting one, and I'd be happy to listen for hours."

"Certainly," Maisie said with a grin. Her stomach growled again, and she looked down at the tray. Perhaps she would eat and read at the same time. It was something that she used to do all the time at home, and she was at home now, so why should she not continue the same habits?

"Will there be anything else?"

"No, that's all. Thank you."

"I look forward to the stories," Aileas said, and curtsied before leaving the room.

Maisie picked up the tray and took it over to the windowsill, where the sun was streaming in. She leaned up against the wall, and placed the pillow that was there behind her back. The morning dew was still in the garden, and she was reasonably sure that she was in the most comfortable place in the world.

Maybe she could be happy here after all.

Maisie wanted to read all of the books right away. She knew that she could easily lose hours just sitting there. It had happened at home more than once.

She decided that she should at least take a bite of the food while it was hot. She reached over, and idly brought the spoon to her mouth.

At first, she thought that it was her. Perhaps the lack of sleep had turned her taste buds. But when she looked down, she realized it was the food. It both smelled and tasted off.

Someone had spoiled it.

She took another very tiny nibble, just in case she was imagining things.

It was disgusting.

She was glad she was alone, because it was not very ladylike to spit it right back into the bowl.

How could it be spoiled? It had only been here for a few moments.

She realized that it must have been spoiled before it got to her.

That or someone had poisoned it.

Was it in the kitchen? Was she even hated by the servants? Was she hated by everyone here?

She tried not to let the hot tears prick her eyes. Perhaps it had been a mistake. Perhaps whoever had done it hadn't known that they were cooking with ingredients that were spoiled.

She knew that wasn't likely, though, not after yesterday.

She shifted the bowl away and stared at the ceiling.

Who could she tell?

She couldn't tell Logan. It would seem like she was causing problems after such a wonderful night.

She couldn't tell Aileas. She was certain that her friend hadn't been behind this, but she did not want her to feel like she was in trouble.

Maisie had never felt so alone in all her life.

After a moment of long thought, she got up and went to the writing desk in Logan's room. She hoped he wouldn't mind her rummaging around.

Eventually, she found some parchment and some ink and picked up a quill.

She desperately wanted to speak to her sister, but a letter wasn't the same as talking to her. A letter was likely to be read by others, especially since she was the wife of a laird.

She desperately wanted to tell Glenna what happened, but she couldn't.

So, instead, she tried to force a smile on her face and hoped that the smile would make it to the page.

Dear Glenna,

I was married yesterday, and it was wonderful. Laird Shaw is actually quite kind and quite handsome and I am very happy.

I hope that you are and the children are well. Perhaps one day, if you could get away, you could come for a visit. Or perhaps Laird Shaw and I could visit you. I am sure that it will be a wonderful journey.

I miss you and the rest of the family very much. However, I am certain that you are safe and happy, and I know that I will enjoy my new life here very much.

Your loving sister,

Maisie

Or shall I say now...Lady Shaw?

She knew Glenna would see right through the letter. It didn't sound like her at all. However, even writing it made her feel slightly better. Perhaps by the time it got to Glenna, she would feel normal.

Maisie waited until the ink was dry and then folded it up. There was a knock at the door, and Aileas came in, with a smile on her face.

"Are you ready to get dressed for the day?" Aileas asked.

Maisie nodded. "Oh, yes," she said, as if everything was fine. She decided not to mention the breakfast right away. If Aileas asked, she might mention that it wasn't quite right. But truthfully, Maisie did not want a reputation as a complainer. If she was the perfect wife, then no one could dislike her. And if she were the perfect wife, then they wouldn't poison her breakfast anymore.

"I have brought some of your dresses here," Aileas said, as she indicated the ones she

was carrying. "I assumed that you did not want to walk down the hall in your wedding gown."

"Thank you," Maisie said. "That is wonderful. I do not mind what I wear, though."

"You do not mind what you wear?" Aileas asked in surprise. "Really? I thought perhaps you would have a favorite on your first day as a wife."

"No, really. I just...what would Laird Shaw like?"

"Any of them, really," Aileas said. "Perhaps the purple one?"

"The purple one then."

Aileas looked like she wanted to ask her something, but the caution faded on her tongue. Maisie searched her face for a moment, as if she was looking for a sign of guilt, but Aileas did not have one.

Maisie wasn't sure who made her food taste like mud, but she assumed it would happen again, if she wasn't careful. She would be perfect from then on, even if it meant not being herself. She was fearful that the first time, it would just be bad-tasting food. The second time, though, it could be much worse. Maisie did not want to leave Shaw Castle in a box, and she did not want people to shake their heads in pity when they spoke of her. She needed to be perfect. Besides, she had nothing to lose. She had already lost everything.

This was the thought she had when she felt her stomach turn over.

"Oh, my goodness," Aileas said, as she paused in dressing her. "Are you alright?"

Maisie wanted to answer, but instead, she leaned over and lost her fight with keeping the food down. She vomited on the floor, and Aileas managed to kick a bucket forward just in time to catch the second half of it.

"Oh, no! I shall fetch the laird!"

Aileas was gone before Maisie could even protest.

When Logan entered the room, Maisie was curled up on the windowsill. She felt pale, but much better since she had vomited. She certainly did not want to eat, or really do anything, but seeing his face made her smile.

"I heard you're unwell," he said. "I came as quickly as I could."

"There is no reason to worry," Maisie assured him. "I think I just ate something that did not agree with me."

"It is still worrisome," he said, and sat opposite her. "I do not want to hear that you are unwell, or in pain, for even a single moment."

"That is quite sweet of you. But really, I am fine."

"Well, I would still feel better sitting with you all the same," Logan said, as he searched her face. "In case you are sick again."

"You do not want to see that, trust me."

He chuckled and reached over to take her hand. "You are my wife, and I made a vow through sickness and health."

She smiled. "Well, I appreciate it, though you left very early because you said you were very busy and had many things to do today."

"But none of them are as important as making sure you are taken care of."

"You are very kind. Not like..."

She realized that she was about to say something that was hurtful.

"Not like...?" he prompted.

"Nothing...my mind is playing tricks on me. I am still very tired from last night."

"I am quite tired from last night too," he replied, with a grin. "But I have never been so happy to be tired in my life!"

Maisie could not help but laugh at that.

"What did you cancel today, to rush and be by my side?" she asked.

"Just council and clan meetings," he said, with a shrug. "They can manage just fine without me. The truth is, they have been managing just fine without me for most of the meeting. I let them talk and yell, and I just interrupt them to give the final say."

"That is certainly one way to conserve energy!"

"Yes, you could say that," he replied, as he reached across to squeeze her hand. "You were going to say that I am kind, unlike the rumors."

Maisie's face turned red. "No, I wasn't going to say that. I—"

"There is no shame in speaking the truth."

"You know of the rumors?"

He nodded. "Indeed, I know them well. In fact, I may have started some of them, so that folks would leave me alone."

"Logan!" she said, surprised.

"Perhaps I should tell you the whole story, now that you are part of the clan."

"I do not want to pry. You do not have to tell me anything that you feel is not my business."

"Ah, but Maisie, you are my wife now. Everything is to do with you. And the truth is...I rushed back here because I was worried that it was this business with one of the rival clans that made you sick."

"What do you mean?" she asked in alarm. "Do you think someone poisoned me?"

"I don't want to say that, as you seem much better now...but it was one of the things that worried me as soon as I heard you were ill."

"Well, if it were poison, it is not a very good one, for I feel much better now."

"I am glad about that," he said. "But are you sure that you do not want me to summon a

healer? I could—”

“Please, I think I just need a bit of fresh air.”

He searched her face and then nodded. “If you are sure. We could go back to the garden if you like.”

“Yes, I would love that. Let me just get a shawl.”

“Take hold of my arm,” he said, as she rose. “Go slowly. There is no rush. I have canceled everything, so there is no need to be anywhere except by your side.”

“You are too kind. I would say that this marriage is off to a good start, except...”

“Except you were ill.”

“Who do you think...” She paused as they walked down the hallway, and then spoke when they were alone again. “Who do you think could be responsible for this? I am not poisoned, by the way. I feel better with every step.”

“I am glad to hear it,” he said. “If it was poison, it might have been the Macleod clan. Or really, any other clan in the area. The Macleods are the largest and the ones that we blame the most often...but that does not mean it is them.”

“How many clans are you at odds with?” she asked, in surprise.

“Some days, it seems like all of them,” Logan admitted, as they walked into the garden. “This is what my father was trying to avoid.”

“He wanted peace? That is admirable. I do not know many clan leaders who strive for peace.”

“He died for peace,” Logan said.

Maisie turned to him in surprise. “Was he killed in battle?”

“No, it was worse than that. My father was killed in front of my brother and I, in his own castle, and by someone we cannot bring to justice.”

“You watched it? Oh, my goodness, Logan. I had no idea. That must have been...”

“It certainly was scary,” he said. “Cailean was by my side, and I was torn between trying to make sure he was safe and being broken down in grief.”

“Did the killer not go for you too?”

"We were just children, and he did not see us. My mother must have known something was happening because she hid us...and she refuses to talk about it to this day."

"I am so sorry," she said, and squeezed his arm. "What a terrible thing to carry around."

"Since then, it has been my life's work to try and find out who did that to my father," he said. "All I want is justice...but I do not want war. I want peace."

"What if you find out it is the Macleods?"

"It wouldn't be the whole clan. Someone was guilty, and I want that person brought to justice. After that fight is over, I just want to live a quiet life."

"I..." she started; he gave her a pained smile.

"It's not quite the Laird Shaw you heard about, is it? You thought I was power-hungry?"

"I didn't know what to think. I hoped that the rumors wouldn't be true, but—"

"They aren't. At least, I don't think they are. I haven't heard all of them, to be honest."

"Well, so far, I have not seen any evidence that they are true," she replied, and leaned in.

This time, their kiss was sweet. They took their time getting to know each other.

Any ill feelings that Maisie had were swept away. She was safe here, and Logan was kind and warm.

The fact that he thought she had been poisoned was a little worrisome, especially since that was the first conclusion his mind jumped to. Was her life in danger from the sheer nature of knowing him? Or being married to him? Should that not have been mentioned before her father made the agreement?

"I suppose it's too late to ask you if you are sure you want to be married into this clan," he said. She smiled as she stayed in his arms. His hands were strong in her hair; she wished that she could stay that way forever, just snuggled into him.

"Of course I do," she said. "It is the best offer I have gotten."

"Well, then you haven't gotten a very good amount of offers, have you? You do not have to pretend that you chose me. I know how it is—that you had to do as your father said."

"I did, but that does not mean I would not want to be married to a man who is kind to me."

"Unlike his ancestors," he said, and Maisie met his eyes.

"You can tell me anything you like," she replied. "I will not judge you or your family."

"I am hesitant to tell you everything. You may want to run for the hills."

"No," she said, with a smile, "I am already here. Running won't do any good."

"It isn't as if there is much to tell, really. It's the same from generation to generation. My relatives were all power-hungry. They did not care who they stepped on, or who they killed, or whose lives they ruined in order to take what they thought was theirs. And even if it wasn't rightfully theirs, they would take it if they thought they could have it. I have generations of blood on my hands..."

"They are not you," she said softly.

"Of course they are. Their blood runs through my veins, and everyone expects me to act just like them. That is how the clan marks a good laird. That is how they decide if I am worthy."

"It is not up to them to decide if you are worthy," Maisie replied. "It is up to you, and as far as I can tell, you are a very good laird."

"You have only been here a few days," he said, with a soft smile. "Perhaps your opinion would change in the next few weeks."

"I doubt it, based on what I have already seen. Besides, even if you strive for more power and more lands, I would not judge you for it, as long as you were fair and just about it."

"Well, you see, I think that is the problem. None of my ancestors have been fair and just about anything. They have just been...villains, really."

"Even villains have a story," she replied, and he reacted in surprise.

"That is right, you do read," he said. "I have to admit, I was quite surprised when you asked to have some books."

"What did you expect me to do all day?" she said, with a giggle. "Stare at a wall?"

"No...I suppose I am not quite familiar with what women do with their day. The truth is, I am not quite familiar with what women do in general."

"Oh, I see," she said. "Well, I suppose that is good to know."

"Did you think that perhaps I have a reputation as a womanizer, on top of everything

else?"

"I did not really think of it, if I am honest...I did not think of most things. The past is the past, after all."

"That is a very refreshing attitude," he replied, "especially given the fact that most of my high council seems to believe the opposite."

"Perhaps it is because I never had any experience with a high council. But I do not feel like that is a useful way to spend your time. You cannot change the past. One can only change the future."

"That is how I feel as well. However, the clan feels the opposite, it seems. They think the decisions of the past influence every single moment of the future."

"They are mad," she said, and he leaned in to kiss her.

She wondered if they could spend their whole lives like this, kissing sweetly in the garden. She felt so much better than she had at breakfast, and she was certain that it was not poison in her food. It had probably just been a passing moment, anxiety or fear, or perhaps the food simply had not agreed with her. Regardless, she felt full of life.

"Do you want to keep walking, or do you want to go back?" he asked her.

"Oh, I would like to keep walking," she replied. "But only if you have time."

"Of course. I told you, I put everything aside to be with you."

It was the sweetest thing she had ever heard in her life. She leaned over and took his hand, and they continued their walk in the garden.

Maisie looked back to the castle and felt a sense of peace. It was odd since she had only been there for a few days, but the castle was now home, and it made her feel at home.

She briefly wondered what their walks in the garden would be like if there were children in their lives. Would they take them for walks in the garden as well? Would they sneak off for a few moments of peace, or would the children wait eagerly by the window for their return?

She wondered how many children Logan wanted. Would he be disappointed if there was a girl first and then a boy? Would he be thrilled with whatever came along? Would she be blessed to have a large family like her parents, or upset that they were all girls?

She reveled in the fact that they had their whole lives to figure it out. And perhaps, after

last night, she was already carrying her first child. Maybe they would be blessed with a child every single year. Maybe she and Logan would change the way the clan was.

Maisie was beginning to get used to life at Shaw Castle. Despite the fact that they hadn't sorted out why she got sick, they had put it behind them. She did not talk to many other people, but that was because she spent most of her time with Logan. He seemed to know how to arrange his schedule perfectly so that he was always around whenever she wanted to speak with him. He made time for her, he was kind and gentle, and he always smiled when she entered the room.

Maisie was beginning to think that she was truly the luckiest woman on Earth. When she wrote home, she truly meant the happiness she put into her letters, rather than the fake one that she had written on the first day.

She thought her sisters might visit because they wrote back, and she could read their disbelief between the lines in their letters. She did not blame them. They all knew the rumors about Logan before she married him. The fact that Maisie was happy felt like a miracle. She was happy and felt free to wander the grounds. Even though Logan said that he was happy to be by her side, she knew that she couldn't monopolize his time every second of every day. She tried to wander on her own, to see the grounds and learn about her new home. She didn't speak to many people, as her wedding reception was still fresh in her mind. Her new in-laws seemed to mostly leave her alone. However, while she did notice that servants were kind to her, she was certain that none of them had poisoned her food on the way from the kitchen. She did not ask Aileas about it, not wanting her to think that she was blaming her.

Instead, one bright morning, she asked Aileas another question to clear the air of any lingering tension that either of them might have felt.

"I was wondering whether it might be possible to arrange a horse for me to go riding?"

Aileas's eyes lit up. "Yes, it would be possible, absolutely! Do you like to ride?"

"I will admit that I have not done it as often as I would like to," she said. "I am sure one never forgets."

"I can arrange a horse for you, and an escort," Aileas said.

"Do you think it would be possible to ride without an escort?" she asked.

Aileas reacted in surprise. "Possibly. I mean, you are the lady of the castle; you can do whatever you like...but...I don't think...that is the way the lady would normally spend her day."

"I understand that it is a bit odd, but I could explore and take in the sights better if I was alone. I wouldn't go far."

"What if you were in danger?"

"Why would I be in danger? Is there something in particular I should watch out for?"

"No," Aileas said, a little too quickly.

"Aileas?"

"Everything should be fine," she replied. "Besides, you won't go too far, will you?"

"I don't think so," Maisie replied. "There is a lot of vast land to explore that can be done while still keeping the castle in sight."

"Then everything should be fine," Aileas said. "I shall finish getting you dressed, and then take you down to the stables, if that's alright?"

"That would be wonderful," Maisie said. "I've been here for over a fortnight, and I have not yet seen the stables."

Aileas smiled as she helped Maisie put the finishing touches on her hair.

"What are the stables like where you are from?" she asked.

"Much smaller," Maisie admitted. "We have three horses usually, and they are meant for the help, so there isn't much time or opportunity to ride. We used to have a mare that was gentle enough for my sisters and I to ride, but that was many years ago."

"My mother taught me how to ride," Aileas said.

"Really? That sounds like a wonderful thing to do with your mother. Was there a need for it where you lived?"

“Yes,” Aileas said. “My father worked far away, and I was the oldest by quite a bit. So, I was the one that ferried messages between him and my mother. It was dangerous because we lived quite rurally, but there was also no other option.”

“How exciting,” Maisie replied. “I had no idea that you lived a life of adventure.”

“I would not call it a life of adventure, but it certainly was an interesting time in my life. By contrast, life at the castle is tame.”

“You think this is tame?” Maisie asked with a smile. “Oh my, what kind of life must you have lived?”

“I think you must have lived a life of bravery,” Aileas said. “To be so calm and happy after such a disastrous wedding reception. Forgive me if you find that offensive; I think that it is a compliment but—”

“No, I understand what you mean,” Maisie said. “Thank you. I have not lived a life of bravery, actually. Instead, I have lived a life of being...coddled, I suppose. As the last child, my parents kept me very well protected. My sisters went out and experienced the world long before I did, and now I feel like this is my last shot.”

“Well, that is interesting,” Aileas said, “because you give off such confidence.”

“I think perhaps it is because I am happy.”

“Yes, you do seem to be happy. I am glad Laird Shaw is being kind to you.”

That sentence made Maisie pause. “Is he not normally kind to people?” she asked.

Aileas looked around, as if looking for something to distract her. When she found nothing, she sighed.

“It is just that he is sometimes very...abrupt. And some people do not appreciate that.”

“It could be he is that way because he has tried to be kind and patient for a long time, and it has not worked.”

Aileas smiled as she put the finishing touches on her mistress’s jewelry.

“It’s possible,” she said.

“Or perhaps it has to do with his father.”

“He told you about his father? I am only surprised because people do not hear him speak about his father.”

"That is surprising," Maisie replied, as Aileas began to lead her down the stairs. "His father's death seems to be a huge influence in his life. Everything he does, from what I can tell, is motivated by it."

"Perhaps that is true," Aileas said. "I can only tell you what I have heard in the servants' kitchen. Only those who have served here a very long time have heard Laird Shaw speak of his father."

"Well, then I am honored he trusted me," Maisie said.

Aileas smiled. "I am very grateful that you came here, my lady. I think you are just what this castle needs."

"Ah, well," Maisie said, as she blushed. "Not everyone seems to agree with that."

"They do not know you as I do," Aileas said, as she led her to the stables.

Maisie gasped when she saw the stables. She could not believe how large they were. They seemed bigger than the top floor of the castle, and there were so many horses to choose from.

She was glad that the stables were well staffed because she could allow the grooms to pick out a horse they thought would suit her.

After asking her about her experience, they picked out a mare they said was quite lively. Her name was Stella; Maisie loved her from the moment she set her hand on the mare's nose.

It took a little while to saddle Stella up, as the grooms were not used to working with a sidesaddle. Maisie assumed the former lady of the castle did not ride very often, and she made a note to ask Aileas later.

Once Stella was saddled, Maisie was given a boost into the saddle. She gripped the reins with strength and determination. Although it had been several years since she had been on a horse, her muscles remembered how to do it quite quickly.

"Oh, this is wonderful!" she said. "I don't know why I don't do this more often."

"You are welcome to take the horse out as long as you please, my lady," the groom said. "Are you sure that none of us can come with you?"

"I'm afraid not," she replied. "I really do want to explore by myself. I think that it's going to be an eye-opening experience."

"I am sure, my lady, that you will be fine," Aileas said. "I think that you will find your new home and your new land quite beautiful."

"I will," she said. "I am certain of it. I will see both of you later?"

"Yes," Aileas said, as Maisie spurred her horse forward. Since it had been a while since she traveled by horseback, she did not want to go too fast. She decided to go slowly, and tried to control the horse to go at a light trot. Stella was very in tune with her, and before long, Maisie felt as if they were one.

"Are you happy here too, Stella?" Maisie asked, as she patted the side of her neck. "Are they kind to you?"

The horse snorted, which she took as an answer. Maisie smiled as she looked around.

She hadn't gone very far, but the flowers around her looked different than the gardens. She didn't want to get off the horse for fear that she could not get back on by herself, and so she just leaned forward to look at them from the top of her saddle. She thought they would look lovely in her bedroom, and she made a note to ask Aileas what they were and whether they could be picked and brought back to the castle.

She heard a noise behind her and spun around, but there was nothing there. She wondered if she was just imagining it. Her mind was certainly wandering as she stayed out longer.

Glenna would love this; she would bring her children and explore all day. Glenna wasn't afraid of anything, and Maisie always admired that about her.

Just as Maisie was about to move on, she heard the noise behind her again. She sat up completely and looked around.

She felt like there was someone watching her, that she was not alone in the vast field.

Just as she was about to look the other way, she felt incredible pain in her shoulder. She put her hand up, but it stung even more.

Maisie had enough sense to spur the horse forward, despite the fact that she almost fell off. The pain was intense.

It was an arrow. She had been shot.

Maisie could not stay outside. If she did not get back to the castle, and quickly, she may not make it back at all. She decided that she was going to throw caution to the wind and spur Stella forward. Stella was already reasonably jumpy, as if she could tell there was something wrong with her rider and knew to go back to the castle.

Had she really been shot? Was it an accident? Was it on purpose?

She didn't know what to think. Her heart rate was accelerating; she was worried that she would swoon in the middle of the field, and no one would ever find her.

This was not how she wanted to die—as the momentary Lady Shaw, who passed away because she insisted on riding by herself.

But if someone had been with her, what could they have done? They could not have prevented an arrow from lodging into her shoulder. They could not have prevented an attack, if one came. They might be able to stave one off, but that was it. She wouldn't have been saved if they meant to kill her.

But did they mean to kill her? Or did they mean to wound her? Or did they mean to shoot some deer that was running behind her?

Maisie's vision was starting to blur, and she felt like she was going to fall. She gripped Stella's reins as a feeling of cold terror washed over her.

This was how she was going to die. She was sure of it. And that terrible thought was the last thought that raced through her head as she fell to the ground, right in front of Shaw Castle.

She hoped Logan knew that she really liked him.

Maisie thought death would be something that came quickly. But instead, she was in and out of consciousness until she found that she was not dead at all. Instead, she was lying on the bed, and Aileas was standing over her.

“Oh, thank goodness!” Aileas said. “You’re awake!”

“Yes,” Maisie managed; that was when she realized how much pain she was in. Her shoulder hurt terribly, and she briefly thought that she would be in less pain if they cut it off. It throbbed and ached, and she felt hot and cold all over, her mouth was dry, and she felt like she might be sick.

She supposed, on the bright side, that was alive—at least, she thought she was. Aileas’s face was still blurry and she wasn’t sure what day it was, let alone what time of day it was.

“I was so worried,” Aileas said, as she placed a cool compress on her brow. “You were asleep for so long.”

“How long?”

“Two days,” Aileas said and dipped the compress back in the bowl of cool water. “Everyone was afraid that you weren’t going to wake up again.”

“Well...I seem to have survived,” Maisie said as she reached up to touch her shoulder. It was heavily bandaged and wet. “The arrow is gone?”

“Yes, we took it out,” Aileas said. “It was quite gruesome, and you screamed quite a bit. I felt terrible for you.”

“I did?” she asked, confused. “I do not remember it.”

“You were quite delirious. It seems that your fever has broken.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“No, although Laird Shaw is out right now, trying to get to the bottom of it.”

“I do not want to be in any trouble,” Maisie said. “It may have been an accident.”

Aileas’s face darkened. Maisie could tell right away that it wasn’t.

“What do you know?”

“I will wait for Laird Shaw,” she said. “However, I am here for you, whatever you need. Is there anything I can get you?”

"No, I do not think so."

"Would you like me to arrange for a letter to be sent home to your family?"

Maisie paused for a moment and then shook her head. "I do not think that it is a good idea. I do not want to worry them since I am clearly fine."

"But if something happened to my family, I would want to know," Aileas said. "Even if they were well."

"I do not want to worry them until at least the cause is known," Maisie said.

"I understand," Aileas said.

"How is Stella?" Maisie asked. "She was so good to me. I would like to ride her again, but I fear that I have traumatized her."

"She is doing very well," Aileas said. "Any secondary arrows missed her, and she got put back into the stables and rubbed down. There was no issue."

"I am glad for that," Maisie said. "I would never forgive myself if something happened to her."

"Stella is a sweet horse."

"Have you ridden her?" Maisie asked and tried to sit up. She winced and immediately lay back down. Her arm hurt more than she thought.

"Oh, no," Aileas said. "I am not allowed. However, she seems very sweet."

"Well, as the lady of the castle, I would like to grant you permission to ride her...if you would like."

Aileas smiled. "That is very kind of you. I am sure that you will be up and about in no time, and everything will be just fine."

"Thank you," Maisie said, as the door opened.

Maisie was overjoyed to see Logan at the door. She managed to sit up again, and this time, she managed to find a more comfortable position for her arm. Logan came right over to her and placed a kiss on the top of her head.

"You're awake," he said. "Thank God!"

"How are you?" Maisie asked.

Logan raised an eyebrow. "Well, I'm fine, given that I have not been shot by an arrow."

"I am fine, really," Maisie tried to assure him. Logan looked at her lovingly, and she felt warmed by his gaze. In that moment, she was certain that there was nothing Logan couldn't do or solve for her. Everything in life would be good as long as he was by her side.

"I am glad of that."

"I will give you two some time to yourself," Aileas said and curtsied. Maisie gave her a smile as she left the room and then turned to her husband.

Despite the fact that they were reunited and Maisie was better, she felt like there was something dark under Logan's gaze.

"What is the matter?" she asked him.

Logan shook his head and stroked her hair again.

"Nothing," he said. "We can talk about it when you are better."

"Logan, if something is the matter, I would like to know. I can handle it. Has something terrible happened?"

"After you made it back, I sent out scouts to the area that you were riding in."

"You did?" she said. She did not know why she was surprised that he would do that. She felt very cared for and loved in that moment. "Did you find anything?"

"Well, unfortunately, I did," he said. "Near the spot that you rode out, we found a banner."

"A banner?" she asked.

"A banner belonging to the Macleods, which means that it was likely one of them that shot you."

"Are you sure? I thought you said that there was an uneasy peace right now?"

"It appears that uneasy peace is no longer peace. They were trying to kill you."

"Maybe they weren't trying to kill me. Maybe they were just trying to warn us?"

"I don't care what they were trying to do," he replied. "This is not acceptable."

She felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. "I am sorry."

“For what?”

“For causing all this trouble. I barely have moved in, and I am—”

“This is not your fault. This is the fault of a feud long ago that neither of us was a part of.”

“But I am the one who restarted the feud.”

“No. We have intelligence to suggest that they have been trying to plan something for a while.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I am going to find out who is responsible for this, and I am going to make them pay for it.”

“Are you going to...” She lowered her voice. “Are you going to kill them?”

“Yes,” he said, bluntly. “I do not want to disturb you...”

“I am aware of the spoils of war.”

“Indeed,” he said, as he squeezed her hand. “I am just sorry that you have to be a part of it.”

“I am glad that you are here with me now.”

“I was so worried that you would never wake up again and I would never get a chance to say how much I have come to care about you.”

“I was worried about the same thing. All I could think about on the ride back to the castle was how I would not be able to tell you that I was really enjoying my time here. And that I am...really glad that we are married.”

It seemed that neither of them was ready to say that they loved each other, although Maisie’s heart was beating fast at the idea of saying such a thing.

“I should leave you to get some rest,” Logan said.

Maisie pulled him closer. “No,” she said, a bit too quickly. “I mean, I wouldn’t be upset if you stayed. That is, if you aren’t too busy.”

“I am not too busy at all. Perhaps I could order up some food, and we could enjoy a meal together? That is, if you are hungry?”

“Yes, I think that would be lovely.”

“I’ll ring for it,” he said, as he kissed her on the cheek. “Is there anything in particular that you want?”

“I am happy with whatever you order, although some of that sweetbread from our wedding reception would not go amiss.”

“I am glad you got a chance to enjoy something from our wedding reception. I will specifically ask for that and bring you a whole plate.”

“Oh, you don’t have to bring an entire plate! Unless you want to share with me?”

“I am thrilled to share anything with you,” he replied, as he went to call the servants. “Including our life together.”

Maisie blushed and settled down against the comforter. Her shoulder may be in pain, but she had never been so happy in her life.

She didn’t know what the future would bring, but she decided to enjoy the next few moments with Logan now. For all she knew, these may be the last few moments of peace she ever enjoyed.

Maisie realized that it seemed she was spending a large amount of time inside Shaw Castle recovering. First, there was the food that upset her, and then there was the arrow to the shoulder. This wasn't exactly how she imagined spending her first few weeks as a married woman.

There were good things too, of course. Every day, she fell a little more in love with Logan. She was hoping that perhaps he was going to tell her that he felt the same way.

It was clear by his actions that he did. He was very kind to her, and he always made sure that she was well and had everything she needed. He went out of his way to spend time with her, and they spent long nights whispering together, or taking walks through the castle. Each night, she hoped he would confess his love for her, or at least dreams he wanted to include her in. He opened up more, but the magic words had not yet come.

Maisie started writing solely about Logan to her sisters. She did not mean to, but she could think of nothing more interesting to write about. To her, everything he did was brilliant, and she couldn't wait to tell her sisters about it.

They wrote back that they were glad for her, even if they were a little perplexed to hear how happy she was. This was clearly not the marriage they envisioned.

While her relationship with Logan was improving, she wasn't sure about her relationship with the best of the estate. Cailean barely spoke to her, though he was kind when he did speak. Her mother-in-law was the same way and yet also intimidating. Maisie had not yet forgiven her for the words of harshness at her wedding reception. The Bible preached forgiveness, and she knew that she should do that, but it seemed like she could not find it in her soul, no matter how much she prayed.

Maisie did not want to be called a mistake. She had a place in the world where God intended her to be, and this was it. She was positive, with each passing day, that she was

destined to be Logan's wife.

"You are thinking deep thoughts tonight," Aileas said, when she walked into the room to get Maisie ready for bed one night.

Maisie had been sitting on the windowsill, staring out into the moonlight. When Aileas appeared, she smiled. The two were becoming fast friends, and it seemed Aileas knew exactly what to say or do to make Maisie feel better.

"Not quite," Maisie replied, with a smile. "I am just thinking of the past few weeks and how they have turned out."

"It certainly has been an exciting adventure for you. And I have to say, it is not the kind that any of us planned for you."

"Of course, I understand that. But I am grateful for all of it."

"Grateful?" Aileas said, with a raised eyebrow as she indicated that Maisie should stand. She had her nightgown laid out, and she helped Maisie out of her dress in a few swift movements. No matter how much the women talked, Aileas was very good at her job, and often, the morning and evening routines were done before Maisie even noticed.

"Well, yes," Maisie said. "God never gives you more than you can handle...and in addition, I think God is going to reward me for everything I have gone through. At least, I hope he will. I hope that he will bless Logan and me with a child, and soon."

"I am sure he will. You are very strong, and I suspect you have been made stronger through all of this."

"I think so," Maisie said. "It has certainly made Logan and I closer."

"Yes, I have noticed that. The two of you are getting along very well."

"You are surprised?" Maisie asked. She knew her friend well enough by now to know that note in her voice.

"Well, yes," Aileas replied. "I suppose I should not be but...but Laird Shaw was never—"

"I understand that he can be a difficult person to get along with," Maisie said. "But that is only because he kept his thoughts so close to him, and was hesitant to show what he really believed in, as it seemed to go against the high council and it goes against the clan's former beliefs."

"He wants peace, doesn't he?" Aileas asked. "I have been able to pick up on that much."

He wants peace when so many others seem to want war."

"Exactly," Maisie said. "Although the sighting of a Macleod banner is not a good sign."

"It is not. However, what else can he do but remain silent, when war is practically in their blood?"

"Do you think he should go to war with the clans?"

"That is not my place to say," she said. "I don't think that at all. I just think...that maybe...if that is the way it has always been done..."

"Just because something has always been done a single way does not mean it has to continue that way," Maisie replied. "There are many other ways it can be done."

"Maybe," Aileas said, as she brushed her mistress's hair. "In any case, it really isn't my place to say."

"I appreciate that you let me know how you feel," Maisie said. "I feel that there are too many secrets within this castle. There does not need to be more."

"Oh no, you aren't cross with me, are you?" Aileas asked.

Maisie shook her head. She turned to squeeze her friend's hand and offered a gentle smile.

"I could never be cross with you. You are my dearest friend here."

"That is very kind of you to say," Aileas said, as she put the finishing touches on her hair.

"There, you are all ready."

"Thank you," Maisie said, and then turned to look at the empty doorway. "I am surprised that Laird Shaw is not here yet."

"I am sure he will be in soon," Aileas said. "You look very tired, mistress. Should you go to bed?"

"I suppose I should," Maisie said. "But will you put word out that...I wish him to come to me? We have gone to bed together nearly every night for the past week. Discreetly, of course."

"Of course," Aileas said, as she took the candle with her. It left the room very dark, and Maisie settled into the soft pillows and closed her eyes.

Aileas was right. She was incredibly tired, and as much as she wanted to stay up for

Logan, she did not think that her eyes would do so much longer. They were already beginning to close like the drawbridge outside the castle. It had been a long day, and she was not fully healed from her injury yet.

Maisie slipped off to sleep fairly quickly, but awoke when she heard a noise.

“Logan?” She opened her eyes and expected to see him standing over her.

There was no one else in the room. She thought that she must be dreaming, and rolled over.

She heard the noise again and tried to ignore it. Perhaps it was coming from somewhere else in the castle.

After a third time, though, she realized she recognized that noise. It was her doorknob rattling.

She rolled over, and sat up. A hooded figure was standing over her bed.

Maisie opened her mouth and screamed.

The figure seemed startled by her scream and turned towards the door. Maisie had the good sense to throw off the covers.

“Stop! You will never escape now.”

The figure threw open the door and ran into the hallway.

Maisie’s bare feet hit the cold floor as she ran after it.

She did not get very far. The hallway was dark, and she almost ran into the doorway, and then into a wall.

“Maisie!”

She screamed as she felt arms around her.

“Maisie, it’s alright, it’s me.”

She relaxed as she saw it was the arms of her husband around her.

“What is it?” he asked, frantically.

Maisie tried to catch her breath and make sense of what just happened.

“There was...I thought it was you...there was a man in my room. At least, I think it was a

man.”

Logan’s face darkened as he listened to her tale.

“A hooded figure?” he replied, after she explained. “Which way did he go?”

“That way,” Maisie said, and pointed down the long, dark hallway.

“I shall set the guards after him at once,” Logan said, and started to head down the hallway.

Maisie grabbed his hand. “No!”

“No?”

“I mean...I don’t want you to go. I want you to stay with me. Can’t you ring for someone from the bedroom?”

“Of course I can,” Logan replied. “What was I thinking, trying to leave you alone again. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I am just a little shaken up. Who do you think it was? Do you think I was dreaming?”

“Unfortunately, I do not think you were dreaming. I suspect it was a Macleod man. Somehow, they have breached the castle walls. But do not worry, Maisie. We are going to get to the bottom of this.”

Maisie took a deep breath. “How could they have gotten in? You have so many guards. The castle is almost impenetrable.”

“That it is, but do not underestimate the power of the Macleods. They seem to always find a way to make my life miserable.”

“Logan...” Maisie sank onto the bed, heartbroken. “I am sorry that all I have done since I have gotten here is cause trouble.”

“You haven’t. Please do not think that of yourself.”

“It seems that this is a lot of extra work for you.”

“It is worth it,” he promised her, as he kissed her on the cheek. “Now, let me ring for the servants, and we will start a search through the castle. You are safe now.”

“Thank you. What were you doing?”

"Hmm?" he asked as he rang the bell.

"Tonight," she replied. "Where were you?"

"I was just working," he answered. "I lost track of time. I should have come to bed with you."

"It's fine."

"Clearly, it wasn't. I promise you, Maisie, things will get better."

"I appreciate that," she said, as she snuggled closer to him. "Maybe tomorrow we can act as if we are having a normal day?"

"Tomorrow can be anything you want," he promised her. "We are going to catch this man tonight."

"In that case, I cannot wait for tomorrow."

It seemed that things did not go according to Logan's plan. Maisie did not sleep much, especially since Logan kept coming in and out of the room and people kept whispering to him. She wanted to ask him what was going on, but every time she did, he told her to sleep and that he would take care of it.

By morning, though, he broke the news to her that they had not achieved their goal.

"I do not want you to worry," he said. "The man will not be able to leave."

"He will not be able to leave?" Maisie's eyes widened. "Does that mean he is still in the castle?"

"He is because we locked down every nook and cranny. However, you are completely safe. My guards will be with you at all times. No one will come or go from this castle until we find that man."

"I do not think I could possibly feel safe while he is inside."

"Don't worry. He will eventually come out, as he cannot go without food and drink forever."

"Are you sure it was a Macleod man?" she asked. "What if it was just a common thief? That isn't much better, of course, but at least it wouldn't be so dangerous."

"A common thief would not have the skills to break into the castle," Logan assured her. "What I am not sure about is whether it is a man acting on his own from the Macleod clan, or whether the laird himself sent him."

"Which do you think is worse? If the laird sent him, of course it would mean war..but if it was a man acting on his own, it would mean the laird did not have control of his clan."

He raised his eyebrow. "You are very smart, for that was what I was trying to work out

myself.”

“I am applying the principle of sheep,” she admitted. “We had sheep on the property, and my father would always talk about the fact that it was better for them to be in a herd than wandering off on their own. I assume the same applies to the clans.”

He laughed. “Yes, and thank you for always making me smile.”

“We have to smile, or else we will drown under all of this. I wish we could go for a walk in the garden. It would make me feel so much better.”

“It would make me feel better too,” Logan replied. “We will find him soon, and then it will be no trouble.”

“I hope so,” Maisie replied. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Just know that however you go about your day, you are safe.”

“You are leaving me?”

“Do not put it like that. There were a few of the high council members who stayed overnight in the castle, and we are going to meet to decide on the next best course of action.”

“But...” Maisie paused. He squeezed her hand and looked deep into her eyes.

“I promise you, my dear, you are safe.”

“I know. And I know that you wouldn't do anything if it was going to hurt me...but that does not mean I am not a little bit fearful.”

“Do not worry,” he assured her. “If there is even the slightest hint of danger, I will return. For now, I must head to the meeting and continue to make sure that every part of the castle is safe.”

“Laird Shaw!”

Maisie jumped as she saw a man come toward them. He was strong and looked angry, and for one moment, she was afraid that it was the hooded figure. Once he got closer, however, she realized that it was Douglas, one of the clan members who was not particularly kind to her. If there was one man she could pinpoint as the cause of Logan's stress, she knew it was Douglas. He was often crass and pushing Logan to go in a direction that Logan had made clear he did not want to go in. She did not like Douglas and would not forget that he was part of the cruelty at her wedding reception. She did

understand that he was part of the clan, and his family had been part of the clan for as long as Logan's had. Still, she stiffened when he came close, and she was only marginally glad that he wasn't the hooded figure.

"We have to attack the Macleods," Douglas said, "and we have to do it now. We cannot just let them get away with this."

"Is there new information?" Logan asked. "Do we know for sure that it is the Macleods?"

"No, but do you have any other suggestions?"

Logan glanced between Douglas and Maisie, and then clearly fought to choose his words carefully.

"I am relatively certain that it is the Macleods," he said, "but we do not know if it was a rogue actor or if it's someone ordered by the laird."

"It doesn't matter," Douglas replied. "We should attack, and now. They breached our home."

"I understand that, though how would you feel if they attacked us, when it was a rogue actor and not someone who I ordered to attack them?"

"I would understand that those are the rules."

Logan sighed and then glanced at Maisie.

"I will be back soon," he promised her; Maisie nodded. She really did not want him to go, but she could not think of anything else to say. He had to deal with this officially, rather than under the radar. She had not realized that being a laird was so complicated. She thought that perhaps it was just as simple as giving orders, and everyone listened. Now, she could see that Logan always had to be thinking on several different levels.

It was something that made her love him even more. She was also grateful to see Aileas coming down the hallway.

"I met Laird Shaw around the corner, and he mentioned that you might not want to be alone."

"He is correct," Maisie said. "I did not want to be alone right now. I understand that he needs to be gone."

"I will stay with you," Aileas said, with a smile. "And we can do anything that you want to do, since I assume going back to sleep is not an option."

"There is no way that I could go back to sleep now. But perhaps...we could look at the scrolls and scripts?"

Aileas seemed confused by this for a moment. "The scrolls and scripts?"

"Yes," Maisie said. "Of the clan?"

"Oh," Aileas said. "Well, I suppose such things would be available in the library. I cannot read, as you know, but I am happy to take you there."

"That would be wonderful," Maisie said. "I do think there may be something in the scrolls and scripts that speak to this never-ending feud between the Macleods and the Shaws."

"Correct," Aileas said. "You do not necessarily need to read the scrolls and scripts to know that such a thing will happen."

"Well, what do you know about the history of the clans? How deep does the feud run?"

"Some say it runs from the beginning of time," Aileas said. "And some say it started with Logan's father. It is hard to know."

"You see, that is why I need to read the scrolls," Maisie said. "There could be something in there that could explain everything...and that could allow us to end the feud."

"End the feud?" Aileas said, in surprise. "I do not know if you would be able to end it."

Maisie raised an eyebrow, and Aileas immediately pedaled back on her words.

"Not that you wouldn't be able to do anything you set your mind to, mistress. It's simply that...well, ending the feud could be more complicated than you think."

"I have to at least try and understand it because my very life is at stake."

Aileas guided her towards the library as she kept her voice low.

"Do you think that man would have killed you, whoever he was?" Aileas asked.

Maisie tried not to think such horrible thoughts.

"Yes," she said, as devoid of emotions as she could manage. "I think he would have killed me, and he wouldn't have thought twice about it. There was just something about his movements that was so...swift and so...I don't know, free of hesitation? Devoid of thought? I have no doubt that he had done such a thing before."

"I am sorry that you had to go through that," Aileas replied, as they reached the library.

"I hope you will find what you are looking for here."

Maisie had not realized that the library was so large. The fact that Aileas couldn't read meant that she couldn't ask her for help in knowing which section was which. So instead, Maisie gave her a smile and began to walk through the stacks.

She had no idea how the Shaws managed to collect so many scripts and scrolls. She realized that the castle must be much older than she thought.

She felt like it took her nearly an hour to find the correct section. When she did, she was immediately enchanted by the history on the page. She had found one of the elder scrolls, and she read through it carefully. The script was hard to read, but she guessed that it was from the time of Logan's grandfather. It was a fully detailed account of a clan meeting, and she saw a feud with the Macleods even then.

Maisie wondered what had started it. She knew that feuds in families could last for generations, but it certainly was not something that she had ever experienced. Her family did not seem to have a feud with anyone.

She made short work of the scroll in front of her and moved on to the next one.

She wasn't sure how long she spent there. It seemed like hours and, at the same time, like seconds.

She moved to another scroll, and then another. She could not believe how many there were, and shortly, she was making a mess of the library.

She wondered if she should set them all out at once, and then go through them for consistencies. That seemed like the best plan, and she began to unravel rhythm. She noticed that there were more, hidden in some less accessible places, such as behind books. She wondered if they were just unorganized or if someone was trying to hide them on purpose.

It was while Maisie was trying to get one wedged behind a book that she put her hand on the wall by the shelf. She noticed a crack under her hand and turned to look at it.

She never would have seen it if she hadn't put her hand on it. As she looked closer, she realized that it was more than just a crack in the wall.

There was something behind it.

Maisie took a deep breath and then looked around. Aileas had wandered off, into the hallway, and Maisie could hear her talking to someone. It wasn't that she did not trust

her friend. It was more that given what had happened today, everything was uncertain. Even the walls in Shaw Castle were not as they seemed.

Maisie managed to pry open the crack, and she felt the entire wall shift. Whatever was hidden behind the wall was not going to stay hidden for long. There was a cloud of dust, and then with one final tug, she was on the other side.

It did not take Maisie long to realize that the room was basically right behind her own room. After all, the library was so close by, and this secret room possibly meant that the hooded figure could have snuck in this way. Maisie wondered if there was a crack in her bedroom wall that led from this secret room right to her bedside.

She shuddered as she thought of it. She told herself that it wasn't possible. After all, there had been a cloud of dust, so no one had entered from the library side.

But that did not mean they had not entered from her bedroom side, she realized.

She heard Aileas's voice grow closer, and she quickly made a choice. Before she even got a good look at it, she scurried out of the secret room and closed it behind her. It appeared that she closed it just in the nick of time, as Aileas approached her.

"Oh my goodness, my lady," Aileas said, with a smile. "You are all dusty! I did not realize that some of the scrolls had been hidden that long."

"Oh, it is no problem," Maisie said. "Luckily, dust does not make me sneeze too much."

"I am sorry that I had to leave you for a moment," Aileas said. "Someone asked me about lunch, and I had to arrange it. I told them, with everything going on, that you and Laird Shaw would probably prefer to eat in private."

"Have you heard from Laird Shaw at all?" Maisie asked.

"No," she replied, "but I am certain that he will come to you as soon as he is able."

"Yes, I am sure he will."

She desperately wanted to see Logan and tell him about what she saw. She wondered if he knew about the room. He must know about the room, she reasoned with herself. After all, he had grown up in the castle. Maybe he and Cailean used to play there as children?

She had to find a way to sneak back into the library when she was alone. Until she knew exactly what was in the room, she did not want even Aileas knowing about it.

The hidden room plagued Maisie's mind as she retired to her room for lunch. Logan did not return to her, although she heard from the other servants that he was safe in his meeting. She did not feel comfortable wandering about the castle alone, especially with a possible intruder still on the loose.

It was almost nightfall before she finally devised a plan to get back to the library on her own.

"Aileas," she asked her loyal maid, who had stayed with her all day, "would you mind if I went back to the library?"

Aileas looked up from her needlepoint. "Of course we could go. The light in there is often so dim, as we were only allowed two candles, so I would have to put this aside..."

Maisie knew that rule about two candles because she had heard Logan mention it. It was a safety precaution, to make sure no accidental fires were started. When she first heard the rule, she thought it was silly, but now, she was hoping it would work to her advantage.

"No, you don't have to put it aside," Maisie said. "You could stay out in the hallway and work, and I could go into the library?"

"Would you feel comfortable with that?" Aileas asked. "I suppose there is one way in or out of the library, so as long as I am at the door..."

"Everything would be fine," Maisie replied, with a smile.

Aileas nodded. "Yes, let us do that then. Was there something in particular in the library you wanted to look at?"

"No, I just did not get to reading as many scrolls as I would like, and I will not be able to turn in for the night until Logan returns to me. I thought I could spend some time reading the scrolls I left out."

"I see," Aileas said. "Of course, whatever you desire."

Maisie was glad that Aileas did not question her. She simply picked up her needlepoint, and both women took a candle and headed towards the library.

Maisie wondered if she was going to be able to find the crack in the wall again, especially

as the library was much darker. The castle was also quieter now that the daily noise had died down, and Maisie knew that the door had made quite the squeak when it opened.

She waited until Aileas was settled down with her needlepoint and then crept into the library. Without the sunlight shining in the windows, it was a lot more intimidating than in the daylight.

It took Maisie a while to remember exactly where the secret door was. She was very careful with her candle because no one had picked up the mess she had left, perhaps thinking she wasn't done. There was loose paper everywhere, and she did not want to ruin even a single page.

"Is everything alright in there?" Aileas called to her, after a few minutes. Maisie hoped that she would still be able to hear her from the secret room.

"Everything is just fine. Thank you!" Maisie called. "I am just reading."

Eventually, she found the crack in the wall again, and pulled the door open. She had to do it slowly, to avoid the squeak, and she managed to also avoid being covered with dust again. She picked up her candle once the door was open wide enough for her to walk in, and she bravely made her way through the darkness that was in front of her.

The room was quite small, but Maisie thought it was interestingly set up. She figured someone actually spent a lot of time there, whether accidentally or on purpose. She shuddered to think that perhaps it was against their will.

It was too dark to see if there was another crack in the wall that led to her bedroom, but she did get a good look around. There was a comfortable chair, and Maisie noticed there was a scroll that was tucked just under the chair; only the corner was peeking out. She was certain that she would not have seen it if she had not just spent a good amount of time looking at the scrolls outside.

She placed her candle on the chair and then bent down to pull it out. She tilted her head to make sure that Aileas was not calling her and then sat down in the chair. She had to squint a bit, but she was soon able to make out the words.

Another day within these walls. There is glamour all around. Everyone is happy and well fed, and it seems that everyone has some sort of secret to keep.

She felt her blood run cold at that. She didn't need to read on to know that there was something bad about to happen. She took a deep breath and then started to read again.

I wish that everyone would just be honest. It is a great secret to keep.

The lady of the castle has to maintain the perfect image. She is always dressed well; she is always seen with her head held high and she is always smiling. Perhaps she is happy because she is finding her happiness elsewhere.

Maisie paused and tried to make sense of that.

Where else would she be finding her happiness, besides Logan's father?

She knew that Logan's father had been killed when he was very young. She started to scan the document with her eyes, hoping that she could find a date or some other indication of when it was written.

There was nothing, and so Maisie decided to read on.

She has two perfect sons, who would each make fine lairds. People were very thrilled when she gave birth to one and then the other. They were convinced that the line was now secure.

If only they knew what I knew. If only they knew that this wasn't the truth.

"My lady?"

Maisie immediately jumped. She dropped the scroll and grabbed her candle.

"Yes?" she called out. It sounded like Aileas was still outside the door, which made her happy. She was glad that Aileas seemed to be content to just call through the doorway, and she even flickered her candle around so the servant thought she was just moving through the library.

Maisie wasn't sure why she had the instinct to keep the secret room a secret. However, after rereading parts of that letter, she was glad she did.

Once Aileas's curiosity seemed to be satisfied, Maisie headed back into the room to read the rest of it.

They don't know what I know. They don't know what secrets I try to keep within these walls. They don't know that what I know could damn them.

There is happiness the lady takes outside of her marital bed. Her husband does not know; her family does not know; her sons do not know. The eldest was born when they were first married, but she quickly learned that there was more to her new life than the marital bed.

The youngest is lucky he looks like her, so that no one can question it.

Maisie felt her heart catch in her throat.

Did this mean what she thought it meant? Did her new mother-in-law have an affair?

Did she give birth to a child outside of wedlock?

Was Cailean not a Shaw?

She continued to read, to try and figure out exactly what this mysterious journal entry seemed to be saying.

Perhaps it would not be so bad if she stuck to the bloodline. A brother of her husband; a cousin; anything such as that.

But my lady did not think about bloodlines or loyalties. Perhaps she had another reason for doing so. Perhaps she did not think that it would matter. Perhaps she did not think that anyone would find out.

Well, I know.

I know that she crossed enemy lines. I know she made a pact with our greatest enemy.

Do they know? Does he carry the secret that I have?

I suppose time will tell, and I will take this secret to my grave if I have to.

No one must know.

Maisie had to reread everything twice. She squinted and tried to understand if there was something else it could mean besides what she thought.

There was no way she could possibly be misunderstanding it.

Maisie did not know what to do. Should she keep this secret? Did it matter?

She certainly thought that it mattered when it came to the fact that there was such a big feud. Maybe a secret like this could be something that ended the feud. If people understood that the two clans were united, they might not fight as much.

Of course, it would ruin the reputation of her mother-in-law. She did not know what to say or do. She knew what that could do to a woman.

Maisie closed her eyes as the candle burned. Should she tell Logan? Should she tell Aileas? Should she tell Cailean?

She did not know what anyone's reaction was going to be. She imagined it would be a mix of anger and confusion.

What if this paper was a giant lie? What if it wasn't meant to do anything but drive a bigger wedge between them?

She knew that papers like that could be planted, but she did not know how it would be purposely left for her. Was someone else meant to find it and start an even bigger feud? Or end it?

Maisie heard a noise at the door and looked up.

"Aileas?" she asked, and then gasped.

It wasn't Aileas standing there at all. Instead, to her horror, Maisie saw that it was Deoiridh, and Deoiridh was actually laughing at her.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," Deoiridh said. "You think that you are so clever, don't you?"

"I'm sorry?" Maisie asked. She felt her blood run cold. She did not know what to say. She did not know what to think. Either she was about to confront Deoiridh with a horrible truth, or she was about to confront her with a horrible lie. Either way, it was awful, and she wished she could be anywhere else.

"I know what you think you read," Deoiridh said.

"Is it not true?" she asked. Maybe Deoiridh would say this was all a big mistake, and everything would be fine. Maybe it was just some sort of practical joke to welcome her into the family.

Maisie did not think that was the case, but she could hope.

"Well, why don't you tell me what you think? After all, a smart girl like you who likes to read could surely have come to some conclusion."

"I thought you said you knew what I thought," Maisie replied, and Deoiridh laughed again.

"I would like to hear it from your lips," she said.

Maisie felt herself tremble, but she managed to hold her ground.

"I...read that you had an affair..." She felt dirty even saying those words. "And that Cailean is actually the son...of a rival clan."

"Oh, don't be so coy, girl," Deoiridh said. "Speak the name out loud. Who is the rival

clan?"

"The...Macleods," Maisie said. "But..."

"No, no," Deoiridh said. "There's no giving a second answer. You will never be a good Lady Shaw if you second-guess yourself."

"But if that's true, that would be terrible for the clan."

"Would it?" Deoiridh asked. "Or would it strengthen the bloodline?"

"Strengthen the bloodline?" Maisie asked, in confusion. "How would that happen?"

"It would mean that there was stronger blood in the Shaw line than what is there right now." Deoiridh shook her head. "Perhaps if my late husband had been smarter, we wouldn't be in this situation."

Maisie could not believe what Deoiridh said. She couldn't believe that someone would speak ill of the dead, let alone their late husband and the father of her children.

"Are you saying that you are responsible for that?"

"I am not saying anything," Deoiridh replied, smiling. "But perhaps my late husband was just like his son. Jumping at everything. Suspecting all sorts of things that were not true."

"What do you mean?"

"The banner on the field," Deoiridh said, as she shook her head with a smile that made Maisie shudder. "How ridiculous, that he thought the Macleods placed it."

"The Macleods didn't place it?" she asked. "But...who would place a Macleod banner if they weren't a Macleod?"

She realized as soon as the words left her mouth how ridiculous that sounded.

"No...why would you attack me? Why would you do something like that when I haven't done anything to you?"

"Oh, my dear, you give yourself too much credit," Deoiridh said. "You were just a means to an end."

"But I am innocent!" Maisie cried.

Deoiridh raised an eyebrow. "Are you? Because there you are, a lady, married to a laird, when you are the daughter of a not-so-wealthy man, and the fifth daughter at that."

"I didn't do anything to you! I did not ask for this marriage!"

"You should have denied it," Deoiridh said, "and not bring such shame on this family."

"I thought you wanted this marriage!" Maisie cried.

"I may have been bamboozled into it when your father came, but it became clear pretty quickly that he was just out after his own personal gain."

"Is that not what you were out after?" Maisie said and then regretted it. "I am sorry. I am sorry, I didn't mean to say such a harsh thing."

"What did I tell you about second-guessing yourself?" Deoiridh asked her. "The mark of a good lady is to always be confident."

"Please let me go free. Aileas will be looking for me."

Deoiridh looked her right in the eye. "No, let's just say she won't."

Maisie didn't think she could get any more frightened.

"Have you done something to Aileas?" she asked her. "She is innocent in all of this."

"You have not been here for long," Deoiridh said, with a chuckle. "You have no idea who is innocent and who is guilty."

"What could Aileas have possibly done? Please, just let me go! I won't tell anyone."

"You must think I am dim if you suggest I will believe that for even a moment," Deoiridh replied. "The second I let you go, you will go running to your husband and tell him everything. And he will believe you over his poor widowed mother."

"He will believe me because it is the truth," Maisie protested. "Please, I never hurt anyone."

"And sometimes, you have to accept that you will hurt people as a way to succeed," Deoiridh said. "Now, what do you think of this place? Do you think it is comfortable?"

"What do you mean?" Maisie asked. She thought about trying to brush past Deoiridh and run to the main part of the library. She thought about screaming. However, she knew in her heart that if this woman had orchestrated everything else, she had also made sure that no one would hear Maisie scream. "It is...I mean...the chair looks nice."

"It does look nice, doesn't it?" Deoiridh asked. "What would you say to spending an extended period of time here?"

"I would not be...thrilled about it," Maisie answered. "I am quite happy with my room."

"I am sure you are," Deoiridh said. "And I am sure that you are quite happy living off my husband's riches and quite happy making a well-known family name your own. I know many women like you. They will believe anything in order to elevate themselves."

"But I would have never hurt anyone!"

Deoiridh laughed. "You think I hurt someone? Did I fire that arrow at you?"

"But...did you order it? You did order it. I did not know that you would also want to hurt your own son."

"What are you talking about?" Deoiridh asked.

"Logan was very distressed to find out I was wounded," Maisie said. "By attacking me, you wounded him."

"No," Deoiridh said. "He has only known you a few days. Do not be silly. You are not in love."

"We are in love!" Maisie cried. She knew it might be a bit of a stretch, but she did not think it was a complete lie. She truly believed that Logan loved her, and now that she thought about it, she knew that she loved him. She had never been with another man, but she had met many of them during the parties her parents threw. There was no one else who made her feel the way Logan did. There was no one else who she never got tired of spending time with, or never got tired of smiling at.

When Logan spoke, she felt it was the most interesting thing in the world. She wanted to hang on to his every word. She wanted to learn everything about him that she had missed in his life.

"You don't know what love is," Deoiridh said.

That caught Maisie off guard. She thought that she knew what love was. Wasn't that what she felt with Logan?

"Please, I just want to see him again."

"I know you think you do, but that is not what is best for everyone."

"And keeping me trapped in here is best for me?"

"Well, you have a choice," Deoiridh replied. "I can keep you trapped in here, or I can end

your love. Think carefully.”

“I won’t tell anyone your secret,” Maisie said, but she knew it was too late.

“I am afraid that doesn’t matter,” she replied.

Deoiridh shut the door, and Maisie screamed.

She knew that screaming would not do a single thing. However, she had to try. If this were how she died, she would not die knowing that she had given up.

She hated how thick the walls were. She hated this space. She hated how curious she had been. Why hadn’t she just left it all alone?

She pressed her ear to one wall and heard noises on the other side. She wasn’t entirely sure, but she thought her mother-in-law was now standing in her bedroom and talking to someone. She couldn’t make out who it was, but it sounded like a male voice.

Maisie knew that she couldn’t risk going through the wall to her bedroom. She had also heard a deadbolt on the outside of the library door.

Screaming would do absolutely no good; no one would hear her. She did not trust her new mother-in-law at all, but she did trust that she took care of anyone who could help her.

Maisie frantically looked around for what could help her. She couldn’t see any way out, but her eyes did land on the desk drawer handles that were right in front of her. She decided that she could use one of them as a weapon if worse came to worst. She could also use one of them as a tool.

She reached over to try and pry one free. They weren’t on very tightly, and it wasn’t long before she managed to break one off. She wondered if it was possible that someone before her had tried, and loosened it. She did not think there had been anyone else in there in a long time, but it was possible that someone else had escaped.

At least, she hoped that it was possible that someone else escaped. Otherwise, she would not be able to get out. She needed to know that it wasn’t hopeless.

She picked the wall across from her bedroom, which she thought led into one of the spare rooms. She began to chip away at it, and was immediately excited to find that the wall bits were starting to come away quite easily. She could possibly make a hole and get out.

Maisie began to focus on all the things she would do when she got out. She would tell

Logan that she loved him. She would make sure he knew exactly what he meant to her. She would tell her sisters that she missed them so much. She would make sure she was always safe, but she would make sure that she was strong, and told people exactly what she thought. She did not care one bit if it was looked down upon. She was sure Logan would appreciate her saying such things because he wanted to stand up for the things he believed in as well.

She began to make a bigger and bigger hole, and eventually realized it wouldn't be long until she could squeeze her body out. She didn't know what was going to be waiting on the other side, and that terrified her more than anything.

She had to be strong.

She had to be strong to see Logan again.

Deoiridh believed she was the most accomplished woman on the planet. She felt like locking Maisie inside was one of the best things she had done in a long time. Maisie was very smart, and she had made sure that she would be safe with Aileas in the hallway. Dragging Aileas off and then trapping Maisie inside had taken some thought. However, Maisie was not the first person that Deoiridh had gotten rid of, and she would not be the last.

Deoiridh needed someone to do her dirty work—to make sure that Maisie was gone for good—and she knew just the man to do it.

Locking Maisie inside the castle had not been part of the plan. She should have been killed in the bedroom, but somehow, she had managed to scare the hooded figure off. However, now that she was still alive, Deoiridh needed to kill her off discreetly, and without anyone figuring out that it was her. Douglas had recently been meeting with Logan, and so she needed to make sure he was done with his meeting and able to sneak off.

Deoiridh passed a message through the castle that she wanted to see Douglas. She said in the message that it was his mother and that she needed to speak to him urgently. It wasn't a complete lie, because she knew the woman who at least pretended to be Douglas's mother. She could easily be telling the truth about the fact that she was ill, and no one would raise an eyebrow.

However, it wasn't Douglas's mother whose life was in danger.

"You sent me a note?" Douglas said, as he closed the door to Maisie's bedroom. It was the safest place that Deoiridh could think of to meet, given that Maisie was locked away.

"What does Logan think?" she asked.

Douglas laughed. "He's convinced that there is a Macleod man running through the castle, and he will do anything to save his wife."

"I see," Deoiridh replied. "And do you think he'll just...forget about that anytime soon?"

"I doubt it. He fancies himself utterly and completely in love with that lass."

"Oh, my." Deoiridh rolled her eyes. "When is he ever going to learn? We have done everything to keep them apart, and yet it has not worked."

"I assume that you have a plan to keep them apart for good?" Douglas asked, with a crackle. "I do like your plans."

"I trapped her in the secret room in the library, but I want you to do something about it."

"Be frank, my lady. You want me to kill her?"

"I do. But not in there. That is too obvious, and I fear someone will hear. Or worse, someone will find her eventually. We need another plan."

"I could knock her out and then drag her to the woods."

"I do like the sound of this plan," Deoiridh replied. "The only problem is, she really puts up a fight. She would not stop talking to me and begging for her life. A dignified lady should know when she is bested."

"Well, then, I will have to knock her out swiftly. Is there any way in or out of that room besides the library?"

"There is a door in her room. But it has been sealed off for years. So unless she is going to hack away at the wall, the answer is no. There is no way in or out."

"Wonderful," Douglas said. "Then we can leave her there until darkness is complete, and then I can do the deed."

"Can you get away from Logan long enough?"

"Logan is relatively confident in the safety of the castle," Douglas said. "He is convinced that the entire place is locked down. So I do not think that will be a problem. It will be if she struggles or causes a scene."

"Use whatever force you have to. Just do not create a mess."

"A mess?" Douglas said with a grin. "When have you ever known my...accomplishments to create messes?"

Deoiridh chuckled. "You are right, and we have worked together for a long time."

"That we have," Douglas agreed. "Now, is there anything more that you think you will need? Anyone else you want me to take care of?"

"I think Maisie is enough to start with," Deoiridh said. "Unless there are some members of the clan that are troublesome?"

"There are some high council members that I would not mind getting rid of once and for all," Douglas said. "But we can talk about that at a later time."

"Of course," Deoiridh said. "Now, where exactly is Logan?"

"He is still in the council chambers. He keeps going over and over the castle maps, trying to figure out how the man got in. He keeps saying that it does not make any sense."

"Has he gotten even close to the truth?"

"No, he doesn't have a clue. Watching him figure it out is pretty entertaining, though."

"I wish I could see him try. I should find him. I will tell him that Maisie has been taken and killed and that Logan must attack the Macleods now."

"I do not think he will hesitate, considering how much he thinks he loves her."

"It must have been fate that brought us together," Deoiridh said, with a chuckle. "When the Macleod lands are ours, I promise you great wealth! There will be enough of it to go around, after all."

"Well, I appreciate the very generous offer," Douglas said, with a grin. "Good luck."

"Godspeed," Deoiridh said, and the two parted ways.

It didn't take Deiridh long to find Logan, exactly where Douglas said he was going to be. She paused just outside the council room to put on a kind expression. She wanted Logan to think that she sympathized with him and was very sorry for his loss. She had to resist the urge not to cackle and smirk as she walked into the room.

"Mother!" Logan looked up. "How are you? I did not expect you to be wandering about the castle."

"I understand that you have had a very hard day," she said. "I did not intend to make it any harder on you."

"Any harder on me?" Logan asked, and then his face darkened.

"Why? Has something happened?"

"Yes," she said. "And I want you to sit down for it."

All color drained out of Logan's face.

"What is it?" he asked. "Is it Maisie?"

"I am afraid it is," his mother replied. "She has...it seems she has been taken."

"Taken? Where?"

"I don't know," she said. "But she is gone."

"Well, have you searched the whole castle? I will search. I will find her."

"Logan, that is not the best use of your time," his mother snapped.

Logan raised his eyebrow. "What would be the best use of my time then?"

"You need to attack those who took her," Deoiridh replied. "And only once they see the true power of the Shaws will they be able to bow to us."

"But we don't know who took her," he protested. "It could be—"

"Logan, you know that it could be no one else but the Macleods! You need to attack."

"I know that it looks very likely, but I will not wage war on a clan until I know they are truly responsible for all of this."

"And when we find out they are and you've wasted all this time?"

"I don't care. I will not put the lives of innocent people at risk! That is not what a good laird does."

"What does a good laird do?" she asked him. She was fighting hard not to snap at him, despite the fact that she could not believe this was the son she raised. "What does a good laird do, Logan? You would not know since your father left us so early."

"And I wish that he was still here to learn from," Logan said. "You may have noticed, Mother, but I am not power-hungry like the rest of the clan. I am not interested in taking lives or land that do not belong to me."

"So what?" she asked him. "You will not do anything?"

"I did not say I would do nothing. Make no mistake, the person who took Maisie will pay."

They will not live to see another sunrise. And if it is the Macleod laird, then I will make sure he is held to the highest punishment and suffering this land has.”

“Logan, there is such a thing as a mother’s instincts,” she said. “And trust me when I say I am certain that it is the Macleods who have breached this castle. Your Father and I dealt with them for many years, and we made sure that they knew our wrath. If you do not attack now—”

“I will find her,” he said through gritted teeth.

“What is going on?” Cailean strolled into the room then. He was surprisingly calm for the amount of chaos that was going on in the castle, and Deoiridh was certain that he was the better choice for laird. At least, at this moment, he was. She had always favored Cailean over Logan.

“Maisie has been taken. And Mother is fairly sure that it was the Macleods.”

“Why are you not waging war on them right now?” Cailean asked Logan, in shock. “If it were my wife—”

“But it is not your wife,” Logan said. “And you are not laird, so you do not know the pressure that I feel!”

“You really think that I know nothing of the pressures you face?” he asked his brother. “That I just stroll through life with no stress and no idea what happens here? I sit in these high council meetings, Logan. I know what you think.”

“If you know what I think, why do you constantly try to go against me?” Logan asked.

“Because I have to give you another perspective,” Cailean said. “Otherwise, you would just run this clan in good faith and prayers.”

Logan slammed his hand on the table.

“You will not speak to me that way!”

“Won’t I?” Cailean asked. “You have never done anything when I have teased you before.”

“This is not just teasing me,” Logan replied. “This is fighting against me.”

“I have done nothing except wonder why you are still standing here,” Cailean said. “Did you want me to do something differently? Perhaps praise you?”

“Get out!” Logan pointed to the door.

“Boys,” their mother said, “this is not what your father would have wanted.”

“Well, we will never know what he wanted now,” Logan said. “And we haven’t known for nearly my whole life, Mother. I am laird now, and I will decide what happens within these walls.”

“That is what I have been asking to hear all along!” His proud mother beamed. “So, Son, what is to happen? Will you chase your bride? Or will you do nothing?”

“I will be attacking,” he said, at last, “because I am certain they have my bride. But rest assured, Mother, this will not be my usual course of action.”

“Of course not,” she said.

Maisie was almost through the wall and could see the light on the other side. Her arms were tired, and she was sure that the drawer handle was going to break at any moment. She was physically and emotionally exhausted, and she hadn't even gotten to Logan yet.

Telling Logan is going to be the worst part, she thought. It would likely break the family apart, but she didn't know what choice she had. It was a secret that would decide the future of the clan.

Her heart was heavy as she continued to chip through the wall.

"Maisie? Lady Maisie?"

She paused, and turned towards the door. She didn't know whether she was imagining it or not, but she thought she heard a male voice calling out to her. She took a step towards the door, and the voice called out to her again.

"Lady Maisie?"

It wasn't Logan, like she hoped. She thought that she recognized that voice, but she couldn't pinpoint it.

"Yes?" she asked. "Who is it?"

"I'm here to help you," said the voice.

She desperately wanted to believe that somehow, help had found her, and everything was going to be fine.

However, she knew that was not likely the case. The truth was, her mother-in-law was the only person who knew that she was in here. Maisie also felt like something terrible had happened to Aileas.

Maisie took a deep breath and then went back to slowly chipping away at the wall. She did not want whoever was on the other side to know that she was still trying to get out, so she kept it as quiet as possible.

"I am well," Maisie replied, even though it was one of the least smart things she could have said at that moment. She had to get out before whoever was on the other side got in.

"I don't think you are well," the man said. "I'm going to come in now."

Maisie thought she had been scared before. However, nothing compared to this moment. She continued to hack away at the wall as quickly as she could. She abandoned her previous plan of the man not knowing that she was trying to escape.

"I hope you are ready," he said. His voice was calm, and she suddenly placed it.

It is Douglas!

He had a way of striking terror into the hearts of those around him, even when he was speaking calmly.

Maisie gasped as there was finally a hole large enough. She heard Douglas undoing the locks and she pushed herself through the hole before she could freeze in terror.

It was not easy with the length for her skirts, and they got caught. She tumbled through the wall and fell to the floor with a clunk. It hurt, but she did not have time to consider whether she had broken anything. Douglas would be in the room at any moment, and she had to escape.

She looked around frantically. She was in a spare bedroom, which she had seen only once. She frantically scrambled to her feet and pulled open the heavy door.

She felt her shoulders lift instantly when she found herself in the hallway.

I am safe!

At least, she was safe for now. If her mother-in-law could trap her in the library, she could trap her anywhere.

Maisie needed to get to Logan before she was discovered. She wasn't sure what the former lady of the castle had told everyone. For all she knew, Maisie was supposed to be dead, and turning up would cause a commotion.

Maisie tried to think as she stumbled down the hallway.

Logan might be in their bedroom. He might be in the great hall. He might be in the war room. He wouldn't be in the garden if the castle was still locked down.

She had to make a choice, and quickly. She didn't have time to be going from room to room to find him.

She closed her eyes and tried to think. Where was the most likely place he could be? Would he really be in their bedroom if he thought she was missing?

She realized that she did not have all the information. He may not know she was missing. He may not have looked for her yet. Time had no meaning in the room she had been locked into. It could be one hour, or it could have been ten for all she knew.

She was reasonably certain that her best bet at that point was going to be the war room. He would be actively arguing with the clan members or planning how to lock the castle down further.

She hadn't realized how much she hurt herself falling through the hole. Her knees were sore, and so were her hips. She stumbled down the hallway in the dark, wondering why none of the usual candles were lit.

Why is it silent? Where is everyone?

The war room was at the very end of the hallway. The castle had always felt huge, but this was a whole new world, as far as her broken body was concerned.

She could barely make a noise when she pushed the doors open and saw Logan there. He was leaning over some maps, and to her relief, it appeared that he was alone.

"Logan!" she managed.

He looked up, and his face broke out into a wide grin.

"Maisie!" he cried, and went to wrap his arms around her. "Maisie, you're here! Oh, thank God! Thank God!"

She let the feeling of safety wash over her as she relaxed into his arms. She did not know what was going to happen, but she knew whatever did, she was safe as long as she was with him.

"Yes," she said, "but I am afraid that I have terrible news."

"It can wait," he said. "My goodness, where have you been? You look dreadful. Have you fallen? Has someone hurt you?"

She was about to say no when she realized that wasn't exactly true.

"Yes, someone has hurt me. I was trapped in a secret room in the library, and I had to crawl out through a hole I chopped away in the castle wall."

"What?" he asked, in disbelief. "How? Who did that to you?"

"Your mother," she said, and Logan fell into silence. She thought he was in shock until he burst out laughing.

"What a good trick the two of you have played on me!" he said.

Maisie stared at him. "Logan, it is no trick."

"Of course it's a trick! My mother would never do such a thing."

"Here..." She pulled the scroll she had taken out of her skirts.

"What is this?"

"Just read it," she said. "It will change your perception of your mother."

He scanned the letter and then looked up at her in shock.

"This can't be real."

"I want to say that it is not real, but it very clearly is."

"But this would mean...that Cailean isn't my brother. It would mean he is my enemy."

"No, Logan, you mustn't view it like that. It's not Cailean's fault. He did not ask to be born this way."

"But this letter says that he is a Macleod," Logan answered. "Who wrote this? Where did you find it?"

"When I was in the room," she said. "I only discovered it because I found a crack in the wall. I swear, I wasn't snooping. But I am certain this letter is real."

"What does my mother have to do with this?"

"She was the one who found me reading the letter. And when I confronted her, she locked me in the room. I had to break off a drawer handle to make a hole in the wall."

"My mother would never do that."

"But she did," she replied. "You believe me, don't you?"

Logan took a deep breath, and then put his hands on his face.

"Oh, God. Yes, yes, I think I do. I was sitting here pouring over this plan, and I realized that none of it made sense."

"She is the one that arranged for the banner to be on the field," she said. "When I was shot."

"You aren't suggesting that my mother was the one who shot you, are you?"

"I don't think she personally shot me," she said. "But I do think she was responsible. She all but admitted it. I am sorry, Logan, I know that this is terrible."

"But it makes sense," he said slowly. "I don't want to believe it. I don't want to believe that my mother has been corrupting us our entire life. But...I think that you are right. What am I going to do?"

"I don't know. Are you going to attack the Macleods?"

"I don't want to unless she is in league with them."

"I don't know," Maisie said. "I was so appalled by what she was saying—"

"By what?" Deoiridh strolled in at that moment, and Maisie jumped several feet in the air.

"By..." Maisie said. "By what you said to me. By these scrolls."

She burst out laughing and turned to her son. "Logan, you can't actually believe this, can you?"

"I believe her," Logan said, firmly. "And now that I think about it, there are several other things that you have done over the years that make me suspicious, to say the least."

"Logan, you have known me your whole life," Deoiridh said. "I am your mother. You have just met this woman who is unfortunately now your wife. You don't know her. You don't know what she did in the past. You don't even know if she is who she says she is."

"I don't know her, but I look forward to spending the rest of my life with her. But you, Mother...you are the one who has done more than one thing that has made me raise my eyebrows. I put my feelings aside because I thought you were grieving after Father died, and then I thought you were trying to do what was best for me...but now I know, you are

doing what was best for you.”

“You actually believe her over me? She wrote those letters!”

“She did not.”

“There you are!” Douglas slid into the room. When he saw that Maisie wasn’t alone, he stopped.

“Logan,” Maisie said, as she tried to be brave, “Douglas tried to break into the room. I suspect he was going to harm me.”

Douglas looked to Deoiridh, and she gave him the tiniest nod.

“Oh, I wasn’t going to harm her,” Douglas said. “I was going to kill her quickly and painlessly.”

“Excuse me?” Logan asked. “How dare you speak about my wife that way? And how dare you speak about the lady of the clan that way?”

“Because she is not my lady,” Douglas said. “I said that you should not marry her. And I said that we would not support this.”

“Well, it is not up to you,” he said. “And you will pay for—”

“Oh, no,” Douglas replied. “You will pay.”

He launched forward, and Maisie screamed. Before she knew it, Douglas made contact with Logan’s face.

They stumbled back into the wall, and a vase smashed. Maisie looked up at the sky and began to pray. She did not know what to pray for. She wanted to be safe. She wanted to be at peace. She wanted to go back to her old life. She wanted to live a life with Logan that was peaceful and happy.

She simply looked up at the sky and prayed.

Dear God, she thought. Help. Please help!

Maisie felt like she was the only one that was horrified in the room. It seemed like her new mother-in-law was not bothered at all by the fact that the men were rolling around on the ground. Maisie screamed again as she saw Douglas pull out a knife.

She had a flash of Logan telling her about his father. She remembered the description of how he died, and she wondered whether it was the result of the former lady of the castle that his father had been killed.

She hadn't been aware of all of those when she married Logan, of course. She had a brief moment of happiness where she determined that she would still be just as in love with him if she had known all this going in as she was now. It would take some more time, but she was certain that she was meant to be with Logan until the end of their days

The end of their days could be here very shortly, given how quickly the fight was turning. Logan had his head smashed against the ground, and Maisie was hysterical.

If Logan died, there would be no protection for her. There would be no happiness, and there would certainly be no peace.

"Please!" she screamed at Douglas, begging him with all her soul. "Please, let him be! Please stop!"

Douglas was distracted for a moment by Maisie's screams, and Logan was able to gain the upper hand. He landed a punch to Douglas's face that knocked him back, and then landed another one on his nose.

It seemed that Logan was going to win the fight, but Maisie could not look anymore. This was not how she wanted to be made a widow. If she was going to be alone, she wanted it to be after a long and happy life. She didn't want it to be while Logan was young, and

they hadn't even had any children.

All of a sudden, she heard a thump. She looked up in horror, but saw that it was Douglas on the ground and not Logan.

She wasn't sure whether he was dead or not, but she didn't care. It was clear that he had lost.

She looked up to Logan, who met her eyes. She couldn't read his expression, but she could feel in the air that he was upset. She saw that his hands were trembling. He turned to his brother, who came in during the fight.

"What..." Cailean had noticed the letter that Maisie had brought in. Her mind was so hazy that she didn't even remember him coming into the room. He was looking at the letter in shock, and then up to his mother.

"Is this real?" he asked.

"Son..."

"It is real?" Logan said, and Cailean paused.

"But...that would mean we are not brothers. That would mean that we..."

"It means that we are just the same as we have always been," Logan replied. "I do not want you to think otherwise."

"Mother, how could you?" Cailean finally managed.

Deoiridh shook her head. "You don't understand."

"I don't need to understand. I cannot believe this! I have always felt different."

"No," Logan said, "there is nothing different about you. We are brothers. We were raised as brothers, and we will forever be brothers."

"Logan, have you even read this?" Cailean cried out in frustration. "I am a Macleod!"

"You are my brother!" Logan cried. "And you were raised by a Shaw. It does not matter what blood runs through your veins."

Cailean looked to his mother. "Who was it?"

"It does not matter now," she replied. "You could have absolutely anything you wanted. You certainly could have more than your father was ever able to achieve. Instead, you

want to throw it away.”

“By killing innocent souls?” Logan asked. “By waging war, when war does not need to be called? That is not who Father was, and that is not who I want to be.”

“At least this blood does run through your veins,” Cailean pointed out, and Logan sighed.

At that moment, the guards turned up. Maisie thought that they were rather late, given all the commotion, but she supposed it was better than nothing.

“Sir?” one of them asked Logan. He took a deep breath as he looked towards his mother.

Deoiridh’s eyes grew large. “Logan, you wouldn’t....you’re not actually going to...”

“Guards,” Logan said, “take her down to the dungeons. I will deal with her another day.”

“Another day?” Deoiridh cried. “Logan, I am your mother! I am the lady of the castle!”

“You are not,” Logan replied, through gritted teeth. “Maisie is the lady of the castle now.”

Deoiridh launched herself at Maisie, who shrieked and nearly stumbled backward. However, just at the moment before she was about to fall, Maisie remembered everything that her father and mother used to tell her. She remembered them talking about how she had to carve her own path, since she was the fifth child, and how she had to find a way to stand out and have others notice her.

She did not think that advice was ever more fitting than in that moment.

She wanted to continue backing away, but she held her ground.

Deoiridh got within an inch of Maisie, but Maisie held her ground just as the guards grabbed her and pulled her back.

“Mother,” Logan said, as the guards pulled her back. “Who killed Father?”

His voice was very calm, and almost eerie. The expression on his face was unreadable, and Maisie felt his pain down in the very depths of her soul. She wanted to go to him and wrap her arms around him, but she knew this wasn’t the time.

“I don’t know,” Deoiridh clearly lied.

“I suggest that you think wisely about your answer,” Logan said. “Because if you don’t and you lie to me, your time in the dungeon will be very long indeed.”

“As opposed to what?” Deoiridh burst out laughing. “It won’t be as if you were to set me

free and allow me to live my own life again.”

“I don’t know what I am going to do,” Logan replied. “Now, as the laird of the Shaw clan, I am demanding the truth from you. Who killed my father?”

“I had it done,” she replied. “I wanted him out of the way. He wasn’t going to elevate this family. He didn’t have any ideas on how to help. If you want my opinion, he should have never been laird.”

Logan’s expression did not change.

“Thank you, Mother,” he said. “I am reasonably certain that I will never want your opinion again.”

“Cailean!” Deoiridh cried out, and turned to her youngest son. “Cailean, you do not know what a gift I have given you.”

“A gift?” Cailean looked utterly baffled by this.

“You could be laird,” she said. “You have a claim. You could be laird and unite the two clans.”

Cailean looked positively shocked at this proposal.

“Mother, Logan is the oldest,” he said.

“That does not matter!” she hissed at him like they were the only ones in the room. “Logan is weak. If you were laird, both clans would have no choice but to listen to you. You have all their blood flowing through your veins. You could do it.”

“No one would ever support me...” Cailean said, tentatively.

Maisie felt fear rise in her throat. Logan’s younger brother seemed shocked by this proposal. So she was fairly certain it was not preplanned. However, that did not mean he wouldn’t betray them and give Logan and Maisie a whole new battle to fight.

“Cailean, don’t listen to her,” Logan tried to say. “Everything that she says is a lie. Everything.”

“I don’t think this part is a lie, Brother,” Cailean said, as he shifted his gaze towards Logan. “She speaks the truth. If she were lying about my heritage, this plan would not work.”

“Don’t you want it?” Deoiridh asked. “It must have been hard for you, Cailean. All these

years, living in Logan's shadow. It does not have to be that way. You can choose a different path, both for yourself and the Shaw legacy."

"Mother, I bid you to cease speaking at once," Logan said.

She turned to him with a wicked grin.

"You are the one who wants to try and live without war," she replied. "This would be a way to end the feud between the clans without war and bloodshed. Isn't that your dream?"

"Not this way," Logan started. "I—"

"You have a choice." Deoiridh turned back to Cailean. "This could be the moment that changes your life. I know you have always been jealous of Logan. I know you have always wanted to change the way things were."

"Well, I..."

"Cailean," Logan said, desperately, "I have always consulted you. I have always been fair to you."

"That is true." Cailean looked torn, and Maisie did not envy him. She thought that was an impossible decision. She hated that Deoiridh was speaking of things that could happen.

At least, if they were true. Maisie realized that there was no way to tell if her mother-in-law was lying again. She was so very clever. If Maisie had to give her a compliment, that was the one thing she would say. Deoiridh seemed to always be five steps ahead of them. Maisie began to wonder if any of it was true. Maybe Deoiridh had simply planted those letters to make this whole scheme work. She wondered if there were several other layers of the plan that she wasn't aware of. What would they discover if they continued to interrogate her?

Maisie never thought that she would be a person who considered interrogating another person. Being a lady married to a laird had certainly changed a lot about her.

There was something about the silence that helped Logan make up his mind. He shook his head and looked out the window for a long moment, and then looked back at his mother.

He snapped his fingers after a few moments, and the guards dragged her away.

Maisie knew it wouldn't be the last time she ever saw Deoiridh, but she knew that it

would be the last time she had to deal with her evil ways. She felt a weight lifted off her shoulders as she saw the back of her head. Another set of guards showed up and dragged Douglas's still form out as well.

Logan turned to Cailean, who looked more upset.

"I think I need some time," Cailean said. "Now that we have found that Mother is behind all of this...I would say that it is safe to go out into the gardens, don't you think?"

"Of course, if you need some time," Logan replied. "But Brother...you are innocent in all of this. There is nothing that I have against you."

"I know," Cailean said. "But I do not know how you are so calm. We just found out our mother is a traitor, Logan."

"Yes, we did. And now she will be dealt with. There is no reason to worry anymore."

"What are you going to do?" Cailean asked.

Logan shook his head with a sigh. "I don't know. But rest assured, I will consult you first. We are in this together, Brother."

"Well, I appreciate it," Cailean said. "I think I just need some time...to think."

With that, he left the room as well. As soon as he was gone, Logan's demeanor completely changed. Maisie saw his face crumple, and he punched the wall with an anguished scream.

She now understood that he had been holding it all in, and he needed an outlet. This broke his heart as much as it did for Cailean.

She saw as he pulled his hand away that there was blood. He was shaking, and his face was red.

"Logan," she said, gently. She went to him and tore a strip from her dress. It was already ripped anyway, and she could not think of a better way to use the tatters than to bandage his hand. "I am here for you."

"My whole life has just fallen apart. Everything I believed has been a lie. Everything that I thought...that I believed in...that I held dear..."

"That is not true."

"How is that not true?" Logan asked her, in shock. "My mother killed my father. She had

an affair with the enemy, and my brother is the product of it.”

“It is like what you said,” she replied. “Cailean is still your brother.”

“Of course he is still my brother. But—”

“There is no but about it,” she said softly. “And in addition, you are the laird now. And I think your father would be proud.”

He met her eyes with a smile.

“When did you become so wise?” he asked her, and she smirked.

“I think I was born this way,” she replied. “Having to fight my way to the top, with so many sisters.”

“I think you are very wise, indeed,” he said. “And surely the best of your sisters.”

“But you have not met any of them,” she said. “How could you possibly know that?”

“I do not need to meet the rest of them,” he said, as he leaned forward and kissed her gently. “I know it to be fact.”

The kiss was different from any of the other kisses she had gotten before. It felt rougher and yet more tender. Maisie felt her body sink into his as they wrapped their arms around each other. She hoped that as laird and lady, this was the worst day they ever had together. However, if it wasn't, she knew that they would find a way to get through, as long as they were together.

Together, they could do anything.

“We have to talk to Cailean,” Logan said, after a few moments of silence.

“Do you think that he is considering the option of—”

“No,” Logan said, “I do not think so. It doesn’t matter whose blood runs through our veins. My brother would never betray me, and I am certain of it. I need to thank him for it.”

“I could go to—”

“I want you to come with me,” Logan said, and Maisie reacted in surprise.

“Really?” she asked. “You want me to come? But...this seems like something between you and your brother.”

“It is something between family,” Logan said. “And you are family now.”

She felt a feeling of warmth rush through her body as she linked arms with him. She had no idea whether it was nighttime or daytime, and she had no idea what tomorrow held. However, she knew that at this moment, she wanted to be with Logan. In many ways, that was exactly what she wanted.

“I hope he’s still in the gardens,” Logan said. “I do not think I have ever been so tired. I do not feel like going through the castle looking for him.”

“That's what I had to do when I got out of the locked room,” Maisie said. “I had to make a guess as to where you were.”

“How did you guess?”

“I suppose I know you better than I thought,” she replied. “In fact, it feels as if I have known you my entire life.”

"I feel the same way," he said. "I feel as if we were truly meant to be together."

She put her head on his shoulder as they walked down the hallway to the garden. The first time they did this, it was just after their wedding. She had been feeling very different then. If someone had told her then that this was the situation she would be in now, she would have laughed.

Now, she felt confident as she walked down the hallway. This was her castle now. She was going to spend the rest of her life here.

Cailean was still in the garden, as Logan thought. He was pacing, rather than sitting, and Maisie thought he looked just as upset as his brother.

She hung back, but Logan pulled her forward. She was flattered that he wanted her involved, but she let him speak first as they approached Cailean.

"Brother," Logan said.

Cailean looked up. "What will you do with Mother? You can't leave her in the dungeon forever."

"I was thinking of sending her to the border."

"So you will not kill her?"

"No. Cailean, despite it all, she is still our mother."

"She is," Cailean agreed. "I just thought you usually show mercy, but she killed our father. If there were any time to not show mercy, this would be the time."

"I know," Logan said. "Despite that, I will. Her actions do not define me."

"I very much appreciate that," Cailean said. "But if you leave her alive, then you would have to deal with her for the rest of her life."

"That will be one of the conditions," Logan said. "She is not to make any contact with us. If we want to reach out to her, that is different. However, she cannot return that action. She will be banned from even sending a letter."

"I see," Cailean replied. "Well...I suppose that will be alright then."

"Do you disagree?" Logan asked.

Cailean shrugged. "I do not. However, it does not matter what I think. What matters is what my laird says."

"You know that it has always been more than that," Logan said. "You are my brother. We are always going to be close."

"I am only your half brother," Cailean reminded him, and Logan shrugged.

"It does not make a difference to me," he said. "And I owe you a debt of gratitude."

"You owe me? Why?"

"Well, because you did not betray me when the opportunity was presented to you. And I admit, it did seem a bit logical at the time...if one did not take into account the mass amounts of treachery."

Cailean shook his head. "Brother, I could never do that to you. You are the laird. I was not born to be a laird, no matter what mixed blood runs through my veins."

"I appreciate that because lesser men would easily take advantage of the situation."

"Well, I have always valued what you thought of me," he replied. "And I hope to continue to be able to do so. Rest assured, Brother, you will have nothing to fear from me. The only thing you should be concerned about is whether I show up for another early morning clan meeting or sleep through it."

"I suppose I could make them a little later in the day."

"That would be appreciated!"

Maisie decided it was time to speak up. "I wanted to tell you that I also appreciate what you have done. You could have taken your mother's offer, especially with our recent marriage, I would understand..."

"There is nothing wrong with your marriage," Cailean said. "And do not let anyone tell you otherwise. I approve of it, if it means anything to you."

"It does," she replied. "I very much appreciate you saying so. As far as I am concerned, Cailean, you always have a place in the castle and the estate."

"Thank you, Sister," he said, with a smile. In that moment, Maisie truly felt connected to him. This was her brother by marriage, and she would protect and think of him as long as she was a lady.

"You should come inside," Logan said. "It is getting cold out."

"I think I will," Cailean said. "When will you send Mother to the border?"

"As soon as possible," Logan said. "If it wasn't already so late, then I would send her now."

"I may want to say a few final words to her," Cailean said. "Would that be acceptable?"

"Are they kind words?" Logan asked, and Cailean shook his head.

"Let her go in peace then," Logan said. "Let this be the start of the newest Shaw legacy."

"And this is why you are laird," Cailean said. "And why you are better suited to be laird."

"We should both get some rest," Logan said. "It has been a long day, and I think a day that neither of us expected."

"That is for sure," Cailean replied. "Thank you, Brother, for holding your ground today."

"It is what Father would have expected of me," he replied. "And I will do my best to try and uphold his legacy."

They headed into the house, and Logan bid his brother goodbye in the hallway.

"Did you want to...did you have some work to do?" Maisie asked. If she was honest, all she wanted to do was have a quiet night with Logan. However, she did not want to stop Logan from doing anything he needed to do. It had been a very stressful day, and she did not want to add to it.

"I do have some things to do," he replied. "But I want to spend some time with you."

"That would be lovely," she said, and they moved forward into their bedroom. Logan yawned, and she wondered how he was doing. He seemed very calm, and he maintained that demeanor until they got behind the door. Then, he immediately wrapped her in his arms.

"What a day," he said, as he buried his face in her shoulder. "What a day."

"How are you?" she could not resist asking, as they sat on the bed.

"I cannot help but feel like I failed today. I should have known better. I should have known that something was off about everything today. I should have known that the castle wasn't safe, and the threat was from inside the castle."

"You couldn't have known. No one wants to think that their own mother betrayed them, and so deeply."

"This was not the first time that something like this happened," he said. "I have seen her

do things like this time and time again, and yet I turned a blind eye.”

“No one will blame you,” she said, as they ended up lying on the bed. Maisie felt like she never wanted to leave his side. She took his hand and they stared into each other’s eyes.

“I love you,” he blurted out, and she felt her breath catch in her chest. Neither of them had said it yet, and now felt like the perfect time.

“I love you too,” she replied. “We will get through this.”

“I know,” he said. “It just feels like everything is fractured. Despite the fact that I am so angry at her, Maisie...I have had my whole life with her at my side. After my father died, she guided me through everything. She was the one who taught me how to be a laird. I was so young when he died.”

“I understand that you are feeling lost. Know that I am here with you and that we will find a way to make it through.”

“I have always said you were incredibly wise, didn’t I?” he asked, and she smiled as he leaned forward to kiss her.

“What do you want to do tonight?” she asked. He grinned as he went to kiss other parts of her body.

“I have a few ideas. Here is to a lovely evening with my wife, who I love very much.”

“I love you too,” she replied, as she gazed into his eyes. Now that they had spoken those words, she felt like their future was truly cemented. She and Logan would be here for many years, and they would always manage to get through all the trials of life together.

“My husband.”

“My wife...my love.”

After that, there were no more words, just the sounds two people made when they loved each other deeply.

Maisie thanked God for finding her a perfect match.

Maisie did not want to be seen as a wonton, but the lovemaking she had just experienced with Logan was the best that she ever had in her life. She lay there, completely breathless with pleasure, as he rolled off of her and tried to catch his breath as well.

"That was amazing," he said.

"I agree," she answered. "I did not think that it could be so good."

"I heard rumors of such things, but I too did not think that such heights could be reached."

"How are we ever going to get anything done?"

"We aren't!" he laughed. "We are going to spend the rest of our lives in this bed, and we are going to be happy until the end of our days."

"I am glad that you feel that way because I feel exactly the same way. I imagine that you had a lot of fun in this castle. The other day I was walking through it and it felt so big, but I could not imagine the way it would feel as a child."

"Cailean and I used to play games, although we never found the horrible room that you were locked in."

"To be honest, it looked like someone used to use it as their space to retreat."

"What do you mean?"

"To escape...from the hustle and bustle of the castle, I suppose," she said. "I will wonder who wrote that letter until the end of time."

"I am sure we could find out if we asked enough questions," he responded. "But...do we

really need to find out? Carrying a secret around like that would be enough of a burden without us knowing."

"I agree," Maisie said. "But we should let them know that the secret is out, so they do not feel burdened forever, whoever they are."

Logan was silent for a long time, and Maisie realized what she said.

"You do not want people to know?"

"I...I actually think I do," he said. "At first, I thought it was a secret that needed to be kept until the end of my days because it would destroy the clans. But now, the more I think about it, the more I realize that it does need to get out. And if the Macleods are upset, they can come and discuss it with me."

"I will stand by that choice," she said. "But I stand by most things that you do."

He gave her a kiss on the head.

"What about your childhood?" he asked.

"Well, it certainly wasn't very exciting...at least, not as exciting as growing up in a castle."

"We had un-entertaining times too," he said, and she chuckled.

"I am sure you did. I just cannot imagine what they possibly would be, after a day like this."

"Tell me about your childhood," he urged her. "What was your favorite game with your sisters?"

"There was a little pond by my house, and my sisters and I used to like to go down there."

"To watch the water?"

"Well, yes," she said. "But perhaps not the way you think. There was a small bridge over the water, and we used to race sticks. We would drop sticks on one side and then race to the other side of the bridge to see whose stick got there first."

Logan gave a little cough, and she buried her face in his chest.

"I know, it's embarrassing and silly..."

"No, that's not why I was reacting," he said. "I reacted that way because Cailean and I used to play the exact same game!"

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"I used to always let him win, especially when he fell down or had a bad day."

"Oh, my goodness," she said. "I have just realized why I won so many times. My sisters were angels."

"I am sure that you won legitimately from time to time," he replied. "Just like Cailean won on his own from time to time. However, I would angle my stick to get caught in the weeds, so that it would not make it to the other side."

"That was very kind of you! I know that I was always thrilled when I beat my sisters."

"Do you think our children will play the same game?"

"I will make sure of it. And I will make sure the oldest is always kind to the youngest."

"What else did you do?" he asked. "I want to know everything about your childhood. I want to know everything about every moment that you spent away from me."

"We mostly daydreamed about the kind of life we would have. We would dream of the husbands we would have, or where we would live, or how we would visit each other all the time. We would imagine that our children would play together, and grow up and have wonderful marriages."

"You should invite them to the castle. We have plenty of room."

"Really?" she said. "I do have four sisters..."

"It will be fine," he said. "I will do anything to make you happy."

"I will do anything to make you happy as well," she replied, as she propped herself up on her elbows. "How many children do you want?"

"As many as God will grant us," he said. "But if I had to pick a number, three would make me happy."

"Three?"

"Yes, but we could fit three in a carriage with us so that we could go anywhere together."

"And, of course, you want boys?"

"Well, I want an heir. And possibly a spare one. However, after that is taken care of, a girl would be lovely."

"I think that sounds perfect. And should they be a few years apart?"

"Yes, each of them should be a year or two apart, so they can teach and care for each other."

"This sounds perfect," she said. "I would love to be beside you through all of that."

He squeezed her hand. "I love you, Maisie," he said, with determination. She felt the warmth of his statement go through her.

"I love you too," she replied. "Now that we've had this kind of day, what shall we do tomorrow?"

"Well, ideally not to find deep betrayal in the family and then get locked in a small room and have to change everything you believe," he answered with a deadpan expression. For a moment, she was worried that his mood was sinking again. Then, he smiled. "Ideally."

"Ideally," she echoed, and closed her eyes, realizing how tired she was.

"Are all your sisters married?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I was thinking of Cailean," he answered. "I know you and I are married, but you are so wonderful that I would do anything to continue to secure this alliance."

"I have cousins," she offered, and he grinned.

"That would be wonderful," he said. "Shall I write to your father?"

"Please," she said as he leaned over to kiss her. "But perhaps...in the morning."

"Yes, in the morning. I do not anticipate going anywhere for the next few hours."

"Thank God for you, Logan," she said as he shifted to move on top of him again. She would never tire of this. She would never lose interest in staring into his eyes and falling in love with his smile. "Thank God for bringing us together."

"You are the answer to my prayers," he replied, as he kissed her. "You are my soul mate. Now..."

Once again, there was no more conversation. Maisie felt her body give into him. She

could not stop now, even if she wanted to. She could not wait to build the life they had talked about. Three children, a perfect marriage, and a strong bond. This was all she ever wanted.

Logan was all she ever wanted.

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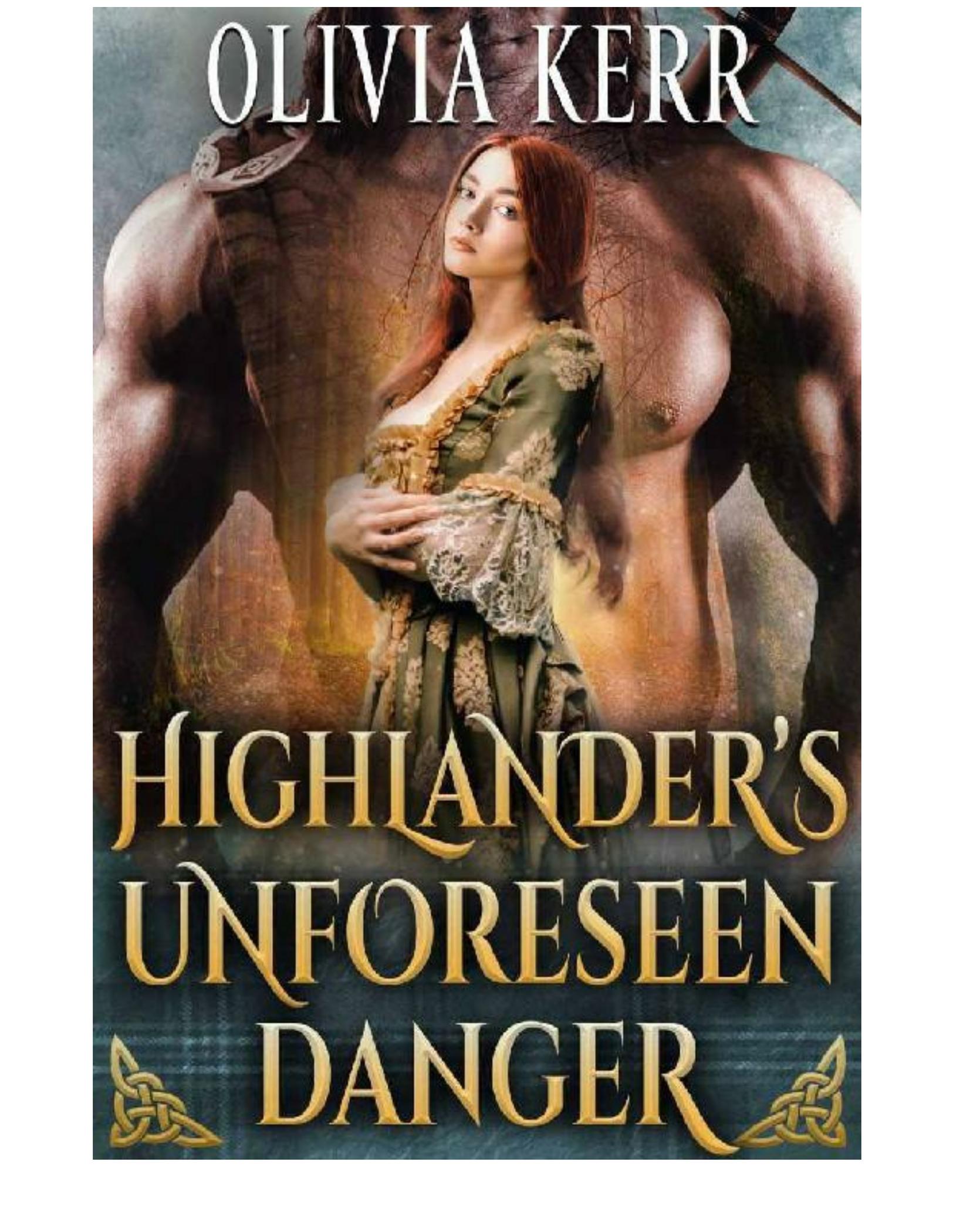
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OLIVIA KERR

HIGHLANDER'S
UNFORESEEN
DANGER

PROLOGUE

“Maxwell! Darling...what do ye mean ye wilnae be coming to visit me again?” Lady Elsbeth Drummond clutched at Laird Sinclair’s sleeve, as though to stop him walking out of the door and out of her life forever. “Ye cannae be serious? After all we have meant to each other, it is nae possible!”

Lady Drummond had long presumed she would be the woman to tame Laird Maxwell Sinclair and had made no secret of the fact that she had every expectation of becoming Lady Sinclair in the very near future. The knowledge that she was the one woman to catch and hold his cool, green-eyed stare at court made Lady Elsbeth preen herself in front of the mirror every day.

Laird Maxwell looked down at his mistress’s pleading countenance with a calculating gaze. He was well aware Elsbeth had been circulating the rumor that they were to be wed, and soon at that.

At the beginning of his liaison with the notorious courtesan Lady Elsbeth Drummond, he had made his intentions perfectly clear to her.

“I have nay plans to settle down just yet, Elsbeth, and if I am a good judge of character, ye seek a generous man.” Maxwell had come straight to the point when he had visited her luxurious apartments in Edinburgh five years before. He had found Lady Elsbeth dressed en déshabillé and reclining at her leisure on a chaise. “I will have seen seven and twenty summers this year and find it convenient to seek a companion while I am at court. Ye are kind enough to have looked favorably upon me, Lady, and Laird Drummond, yer husband, is good enough to look the other way when it comes to yer indiscretions.”

Lady Elsbeth had been on the hunt for a wealthy courtier to settle her gambling debts and share her favors alongside her husband. But to have caught the eye of the most handsome man at court was a trick worth crowing about. Every court lady, young and old,

sighed and flapped their fans a little bit harder when Maxwell Sinclair strode past. He would have stood out anywhere as the kind of man with whom it would be difficult to compare to another. Maxwell did not ape the strict court fashions at Edinburgh Castle. He wore his kilt when other men wore breeches; he refused to cut his hair or trim his beard into popular styles—keeping his face shaven or unshaven as though he was too busy to care; his wild appearance was offset by the great plaid he would casually drape over his shoulders whenever it rained. On top of all this, the reluctant courtier would frequently disappear to visit his estates up north, where it was supposed he ran free without the constraints imposed on other—tamer—men. Everything about Laird Maxwell Sinclair screamed Highlander.

He did not come to court very often, and this suited Lady Elsbeth nicely; during his absences, she thought she would be able to see other men discreetly.

Still, it would not do to appear too eager at first, and Lady Elsbeth had been offhand in her reply. “La-la, sir, before I reach an agreement with ye, how do I ken ye’ll keep yer side of the bargain? I have many interested parties, ye realize? How can I be sure it’s to me advantage to settle for ye?”

She had been shocked by Laird Maxwell’s response. He had simply shrugged his shoulders and turned on his heel to walk out of her dressing room. Lady Elsbeth had been outraged. No man had ever turned his shoulder on her before. She went pale, and her cheeks flushed with surprise, although it was hard to tell underneath all her ceruse and paint.

“Nay, come back! I mean...can ye nae take a joke, Maxwell?”

Laird Sinclair had halted his exit and turned round to face her again.

“When ye come to ken me better, Lady, ye will understand I never joke in matters of business,” Maxwell had said. The implacable look on his face informed her that she should take his statement seriously. “I expect ye to be faithful to meself from the beginning to the end. I have no plans to catch the pox from ye. In return for our arrangement, ye shall have a quarterly stipend paid to ye in gold. Yer gambling debts can be paid off with this amount, and more to spare. Ye will find that I am nae ungenerous.”

Lady Elsbeth had simpered and fluttered her eyelashes at the mention of gold. “I thank ye kindly, Maxwell.” She had stared at the man standing so tall and proud in front of her and realized he had just made her the happiest woman in Scotland. For many months, her dreams had been disturbed by images of Laird Maxwell. His brooding dark good looks, hard muscular frame, and air of unattainability made him so attractive in her eyes.

When he returned her gaze, Lady Elsbeth felt a shiver of excitement run through her body. She rose up from the chaise and went to stand in front of him. She knew she appeared to her best advantage in her dressing gown made out of delicately spun silk, and the white lace foamed around her shoulders provocatively.

“Will ye nae care to seal our bargain with a kiss?” she had murmured in his ear.

Laird Maxwell had spent a large portion of his adult life turning down women’s offers of physical intimacy, but he was more than happy to take Lady Elsbeth up on her suggestion once they had reached an understanding. He had followed her over to the chaise, and they had spent a delightful afternoon together.

Maxwell Sinclair had been content with his choice of mistress. She was amiable company and skilled in the boudoir. And Lady Elsbeth had obeyed his stipulations to the letter—that was, until Laird Drummond had died in a hunting accident six months before. It was then that Lady Elsbeth Drummond had begun to press him for more of a commitment.

Laird Maxwell had no intention of marrying his mistress and had been contemplating leaving her boudoir for good even before her husband’s death. Like the noble Highland chieftain he was, Maxwell always played fair when it came to love. Once he realized that underneath her coquettish mannerisms, Elsbeth Drummond was deeply in love with him, to the point where it was becoming almost an obsession, he had decided to sever all ties with her. He hoped that it would be momentarily awkward for her but that she would quickly recover to find comfort in another man’s arms.

Now, standing in her rose-colored boudoir, Maxwell knew he had left breaking his relationship with Lady Elsbeth slightly late, but it was best that the hammer fell at once, before she made even more of a fool of herself.

“I have plans to wed, Lady. However, it’s nae to ye. Ye broke our initial bargain, but there is naught I can do about that. For many years, I thought ours was nae more than a lighthearted liaison. So, please send a reckoning of yer final debts to me steward, and he will settle them all for ye as a final token of me appreciation for yer companionship these five years.”

“Ye callous bastard, Maxwell! How can ye cast me off as though I were naught?” Lady Elsbeth’s voice rose to a shriek, and she began to pace from one side of her chamber to the other. “Ye ken nae what ye do!”

Laird Maxwell had put every effort into making this as painless as possible. Every court lady knew that Highland lairds married to expand their sphere of influence and form

stronger bonds with their neighbors. He was not surprised at her reaction, though, because Lady Elsbeth was the kind of woman who believed the rules never applied to her.

"Farewell, Lady, and dinnae forget to send me steward a list of yer debts." Maxwell moved toward the door.

Lady Elsbeth ran after him and gripped his arm. "Max, please, if ye go, I swear I will take the fiercest revenge on ye and all yer family. It's nae too late to change yer mind."

Laird Maxwell peeled her hand off his doublet sleeve. "I have nae family, Lady," he said coolly, and left.

A long scream of anger and agony followed him down to where his horse waited for him.

CHAPTER 1

Early 18th century.
Scottish Highlands.

Ffion ran down the hillside so fast, she was scared her feet would falter. But she made it to the bottom without falling. Her palfrey was waiting for her next to a narrow stream that trickled over the pebbles and bog myrtle at the foot of the hill. The patient mountain pony was used to its owner climbing and exploring the craggy peaks and grassy Highland knolls. Ffion skipped over to the animal and gave it one of the bannocks she had saved after breaking her fast that morning. The palfrey enjoyed its snack and then nuzzled her hand for more.

“Nay, Rosie, ye will get even fatter than ye are already. Dinnae be greedy.” She patted her pony for a few minutes, taking comfort from the chewing sounds Rosie made every time she dipped her head to pull grass from the ground.

Ffion Mackay had spent more of her time outdoors climbing the isolated Altnaharra mountains since the tragic death of her older sister three months before. One week, Martha had been sewing fallals for her bridal chest, and the next week she had been laid low by a sudden deathly malady. The air of gloom and sadness inside the halls and chambers of her parents’ ancient lodge caused Ffion to steal down to the stables and saddle up a mount at every opportunity she got.

Poor Martha. I miss her so much. I wish there were some way I could bring comfort to mither and faither. All their hopes of securing the safety of our lands were wrapped up in her.

Ffion shook the moss and grass seeds off her thin linen round gown and prepared to ride

back to Altnaharra Lodge. The sun was sinking toward the western skyline, and Ffion knew her mother would look for her return soon. As much as it hurt for Ffion to see her parents' sorrow, she was kindhearted enough to spare her mother further pain by the continued absence of her last remaining child. With one final lingering look over her shoulder at the purple heather and grey rocks that studded the mountains surrounding the Mackay lodge, Ffion gave Rosie a gentle tap with her ankles, and the little palfrey began trotting home.

As rider and pony entered the courtyard back at the lodge, Ffion noticed a strange horse being led away by the groom.

"How now, Pevensie. Who's mount are ye stabling?" The lodge was situated at the edge of Scotland's northwestern border, holding the ground between land and stormy northern seas. Any visitor was a rare and unexpected thing. "Never tell me that it's more bad news."

The groom gave her a wide grin and shook his head. "Nay, miss, 'tis good news, I'm happy to say. A messenger from the castle over in Donnachaidh has arrived with a letter for yer faither."

Ffion paused when she heard this.

Surely, Laird Sinclair can have nay more business with me faither now that Martha has passed away? He never even met Martha before seeking to become betrothed to her. It's always about land and how many tower keeps the bride brings along with her. His grand plans will have to wait until he finds himself another willing bride.

Ffion clattered up the stone stairs that led up to the heavy wooden lodge door. Instead of ringing for the steward to open for her, she twisted the hefty iron ring up and pushed the doors open herself. As she entered the large, wood-paneled entrance hall, Ffion caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror stand where visitors hung their capes.

Somehow, her long red curls had managed to escape from their netting at the back of her head again. They sprung in a riot of russet and gold around her neck and forehead. One long ringlet cascaded down her back and had caught itself in the ribbon around her bodice. Knowing her mother would not be pleased, Ffion tried to tuck her unruly curls back into the netting, but she was too late.

"Ffion! Wherever have ye been? I have been searching for so long" Mistress Mackay, Ffion's mother, took one look at her daughter's tousled appearance and gasped, "Such untidiness and yer boots are muddy! Follow me to yer bedchamber at once afore Laird

Sinclair's messenger sees ye."

She obeyed dutifully. When her mother got Ffion behind the closed door, she relaxed her upright stance and became more confiding, "Dearest daughter, ye'll never imagine what's to do! We got wind of Laird Sinclair's man traveling hence, and for what purpose, I cannae say, although I ken yer faither has been in communication with the Laird himself."

Ffion was pleased to see her mother in happier spirits than she had been for a long while. Perhaps her father's northwestern watchtower was worth something to the wealthy Laird Sinclair after all, even without a blushing bride to go with it?

She hazarded a guess. "Mither, even though an alliance with Clan Mackay is nae longer possible, do ye think Laird Sinclair wishes to offer faither gold for our sea-facing tower?"

Her mother looked down at her lap for a brief minute before replying, "Aye, Daughter, it could be that...or it could be something a bit different."

Ffion was seated in front of the small looking glass above her dresser and tried to tuck her curls back into the netting. She mused out loud, "I have heard the servants speak of Laird Sinclair as being the kind of man who never stops until he gets whatever he has set his mind to. And as he wants our watchtower to guard the northern mountain entrance, we can safely guess he is going to make Faither rich so long as he can get his hands on it."

She turned around to look at her mother and saw the lady was looking sadly at the locket, where she kept a cutting of her eldest daughter's hair. Ffion got up off the little cushioned stool and went to place her arms around the good lady's shoulders.

"Never worry, Mither," she said comfortingly. "Even though the Mackay and Sinclair blood bond by marriage never happened, perhaps we will be able to find some other way to join our lands."

Mistress Mackay sniffled into a small lace kerchief and gave her daughter a misty smile.

Just then, there was a loud knock on the door. "Come," Ffion said, and wondered who could be banging as though there was a fire in the house.

It was her father's page. His face was flushed, and it looked as though he was bursting to tell the ladies his message. Between puffs, he managed to say, "Ye're to go down to yer faither's study at once, Miss Ffion. On a matter of great urgency."

Ffion whipped her head around to see if her mother had an inkling of why the young boy

looked so excited, but the elderly lady had turned her face to one side to prevent her daughter from reading her expression.

Ffion hesitated, but the page insisted. "Yer faither said, 'now,' miss."

Once again, she obeyed. Her father was a loving man, but he ruled his household with an iron fist. After five and thirty years of marriage, Chieftain Mackay had only one daughter alive to carry on his clan, and the death of his firstborn daughter had brought bitterness and despair. His wife had been content to allow their youngest daughter to run wild while placing all their hopes of advancement with Martha. Now, with not much else to offer, their thoughts turned to Ffion, just one month shy of her eighteenth birthday.

At her knock, her father bade her enter. Ffion felt the atmosphere was heavy with news the moment she came in.

"I bid thee good morrow, Faither." She dropped a polite curtsy and went to stand in front of the chieftain's desk. "Me mither is curious, as am I, as to what urgent good news Laird Sinclair's messenger brings? Are we still to be made rich from the leasing of our watchtower?"

The last part was said half in jest and half as a genuine question. Ffion's delicately arched eyebrows were raised, and she stared at her father with mesmerizing grey eyes.

Chieftain Mackay could not meet her gaze. He shifted in his chair as though it was making him uncomfortable and then finally said, "Ye are to pack yer trunks on the morrow, Ffion, me dear...ye are to take the place of yer sister as Laird Sinclair's betrothed."



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