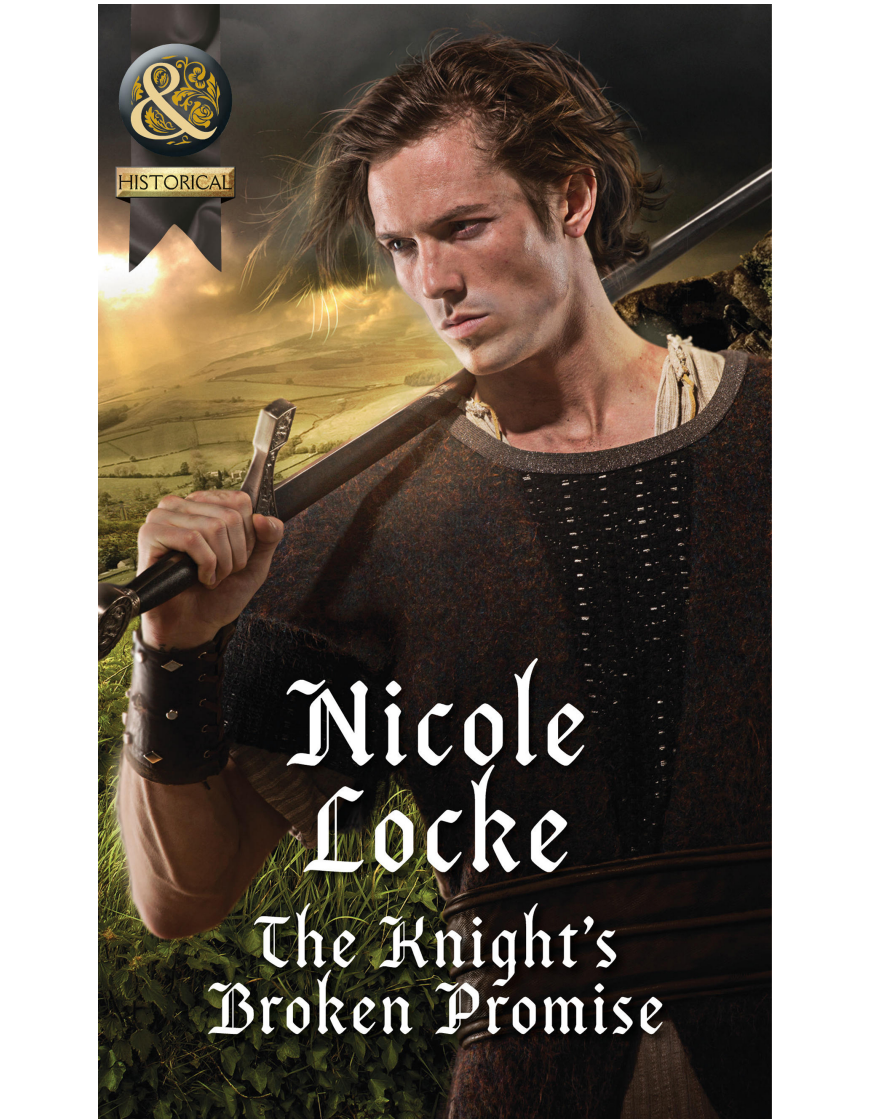




HISTORICAL

A man with long, wavy brown hair and a serious expression is shown from the chest up. He is wearing a dark, textured tunic with a lighter-colored, possibly leather, collar. He holds a sword with a dark hilt and a long, straight blade across his chest. The background is a dramatic landscape with rolling hills under a sunset sky, with the sun low on the horizon creating a golden glow. The overall tone is historical and dramatic.

Nicole Locke

The Knight's Broken Promise

Nicole Locke
The Knight's Broken Promise
Серия «Mills & Boon Historical»

Аннотация

BLACK ROBERT. THE MOST FEARED OF ALL KING EDWARD'S MEN... When an English knight approaches the charred ruins of her sister's Scottish village, Gaira of Clan Colquhoun knows better than to trust this fierce-looking man. Yet, struggling to set her war-shaken world to rights, she has little choice. Robert of Dent will see her to safety. He can promise nothing more. Never again will he make a vow like the one he broke years ago, even though Gaira's fierce resilience makes him long to protect her. But what will happen when Gaira discovers exactly who Robert is... ?

Содержание

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

79

‘Artless and bootless.’ She angrily picked up each branch and leaf and tucked them into the crook of her arm. ‘That’s what you are. In more ways than one.’

She slid backwards until the slope became flat and then she whirled around. Robert stood a hand’s breadth from her. Startled, she stumbled, branches flew, and her body slid against his.

Her world was instantly, aggressively, the smell of hot male and cedar and the feel of sweat-covered skin. Her fingers clawed down the shoulder muscles she’d stared at all day. Her breasts burned...her legs tangled. She teetered and pressed harder for support.

Robert inhaled sharply, as if he’d been dropped into an icy lake. He ripped himself away.

AUTHOR NOTE

There are times in your life when you think you’re going to have one experience and you have a completely different one. This is what happened to me when I toured castles in Wales.

Now, I knew I’d be excited and awed, and that my imagination would run wild. They *are* castles, after all. What I didn’t plan on was the unerring sense of story, of the people who lived during that time. I didn’t have to close my eyes and pretend, and I didn’t have to squint to force my eyes to see. They were all simply *there*.

Robert, an English knight, was there. Hunched and grieving under a tree. His broad back and bared arms were a testament to the times and to his training—and to a man used to war. But his grief came from something else...from loss, from hope forsaken.

I could do nothing for him. But I knew he couldn't stay where he was and I knew there had to be someone for him.

And there *is* someone...in Scotland...in 1296...on the cusp of the greatest conflict. But Gaira of Clan Colquhoun laughs at conflict—in fact she curses at it all the time. And when she meets Robert she curses at him, too.

The Knight's Broken Promise

Nicole Locke



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NICOLE LOCKE discovered her first romance novels in her grandmother's closet, where they were secretly hidden. Convinced that books hidden must be better than those that weren't, Nicole greedily read them. It was only natural for her to start writing them (but now not so secretly). She lives in London with her two children and her husband—her happily-ever-after.

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To Mom.

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Excerpt
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Chapter One

Scotland—*April 1296*

‘Faster, you courageous, knock-kneed, light-footed bag of bones!’ Gaira of Clan Colquhoun hugged lower on the stolen horse.

How much time did she have before her betrothed or her brothers realised in which direction she had fled? Two days, maybe three? Barely enough time to get to the safety of her sister’s home.

She couldn’t push the horse any faster. Already its flanks held a film of sweat and its breath came in heavy pants with each rapid pound of its hooves. Each breath she took matched the same frantic rhythm.

There it was! Just up the last hill and she would be safe. Safe. And there would be food, rest and the vast warmth of her sister’s comfort and counsel.

She turned her head. There was no sign of pursuit. Her heart released its fierce grip and she eased up on the reins.

‘We made it. Just a bit more and you can eat every last grain I can beg from Irvette.’

She smelled the fire before she crested the hill. The stench was a mixture of blackened smoke, heat, dried grass and rotting cow. The horse sidestepped and flicked its head, but she kept its nose forward until she reached the top.

Then she saw the horror in the valley below. Reeling, she fell upon the horse's neck and slid down the saddle. Her left ankle twisted underneath her as it took the brunt of her descent. She didn't feel the pain as she heaved her breakfast of oatcakes and water.

When she was emptied, she felt dry dirt under her hands, crunching grass under her knees. Her horse was no longer by her side.

She stood, took a deep breath and coughed. It wasn't rotting cow she smelled, but burnt hair and charred human flesh.

The stench was all that remained of her sister's village. The many crofters' huts resembled giant empty and blackened ribcages. There were no roofs, no sides, just burnt frames glowing with the fire still consuming them.

The entire valley looked as if a huge flaming boulder had crashed through the kindling-like huts. Large twisted and gnarled swirls of black heat and smoke rose and faded into the morning sky.

She could no longer hear anything. There were no birds chirping, no rustling of tall grass or trees and no buzzing insects. All of Scotland's sounds were sucked out of the air.

Her heart and lungs collapsed. Irvette. Her sister. Maybe she wasn't down there. She wouldn't think. Pushing herself forward, she stumbled as her ankle gave way. It would be useless for the sloped descent.

She looked over her shoulder. Her horse skittered at the base

of the hill. He was spooked by the heat and smells; she could call, but he would not come.

Bending to her hands and knees, she crawled backward down to the meandering valley. Blasts of heat carried by the wind ruffled up her tunic and hose. She coughed as the smoke curled around her face. When she reached the bottom, she straightened and took off the brown hat upon her head to cover her mouth.

Her eyes scanned the area as she tried to comprehend, tried to understand what she saw. Thatch, planks of wood and furniture were strewn across the path between the huts and so were the villagers: men, women, dogs and children.

Nothing moved.

They were freshly made kills of hacked and charred bodies. The path was pounded by many horses' hooves, but there weren't any horses or pigs or even chickens.

Dragging her left foot through the ashes behind her, she stumbled through the burning village, which curved with the valley.

At the dead end of the devastation, the last of the crofters' huts stood. More intact than the others, it was still badly scarred by the flames and its roof hung limply with pieces falling to the ground.

Near the doorway, she looked at the two burned and face down bodies of a man and a woman. The man was no more than a husk of burnt flesh with his head severed from his body.

But it was the woman's she recognised: the flame-coloured

hair burnt at the tips and the cream-coloured gown smeared with dirt. Blood spread along the gown in varying flows from the two deep sword-thrusts in the stomach. Irvette.

Her world twisted, sharpened. She suddenly heard the popping and hiss of water, the crash of brittle wood splintering into ashy dust and a high keening sound, which increased in volume until she realised the sound came from her.

She stopped, gathered her breath and then she heard it: a whisper, a cry, fragile and high-pitched. She quickly limped into the hut and weaved before crashing to her knees.

‘Snakes and boars,’ she whispered. ‘Thank God, you’re alive.’

Chapter Two

Scotland, on the border with England

Sheets of rain drove down on the battlefield, making mud out of dirt and streams in the dips and cracks of the earth.

Robert of Dent fought on foot. His black surcoat and hose were plastered to his body. His quilted black gambeson, saturated with mud, no longer protected him from the chainmail of his hauberk and chausses. Long hair streamed over his face and shoulders impairing his sight, but it did not matter. The rain provided no visibility. He could no longer see his men, whether they stood or had fallen; he could no longer call out, for the downpour drowned out sounds. All he could hear was the harshness of his own breath.

Rain fell, but blood sprayed the air. It was everywhere: on his clothes, in his hair, streaming through his mouth and beard. His

sword from tip to hilt was slick with it and it flowed from his wrists to his shoulders.

He knew his enemy only by the swing of a sword towards him and he thrust upward, sinking his own sword deep through the man's neck. The blade stuck fast and he wrenched it free.

Shoved off balance, he had just enough time to block the fall of an axe. The reverberation of the strike pushed him to his knees and he quickly rolled over spikes of broken arrows to miss his enemy's killing blow. The Scotsman's axe sunk deep into the mud. Still rolling, he sliced his sword across the man's shins. The man fell. He stood and plunged his sword into the Scotsman's chest.

Spitting the mud and blood out of his mouth, he fought, moving forward, trying to keep his balance as he stepped over the dead covering the ground. His boots slipped as he continued to parry and thrust, block and kill.

He emptied himself of everything but the battle. He did not think of glory or survival. He did not count the enemies he felled. He did not think at all. He was muscle and training and sword.

When this battle was done, there would be the removal of the wounded and dead. Then there would be food, drink, sleep and another battle. He knew nothing else, breathed nothing else. His past was forgotten by his will alone.

* * *

Robert stepped through the mud and tangled grass of the battlefield. He could hear the screams of his men, their cries

of pain and, worse, the gaping silence from those who could no longer make a sound.

He swallowed his anger. Too much haste had cost them dearly. He was tired, but his men were worse. Since King Edward had rallied more soldiers, the battles were more frequent, more driven. The men had not had enough time to rest between the fights and as a result, he saw men fall today who had no place on the battlefield.

He looked up. Hugh of Shobury slowly walked an abandoned destrier towards him. Hugh was tall and lean like King Edward, but there the similarities stopped. Hugh was no seasoned ruler, but young with blond hair, blue eyes and skin so white, a touch of the sun burned it red.

‘How many?’ he asked when Hugh was close enough.

‘Too many to count,’ Hugh replied, his hand on the shredded bridle of the destrier. ‘What are the instructions now?’

‘We pull camp and wait for the king’s reports from the east.’

‘At least we get to rest.’

Robert stopped surveying the field and turned to walk to camp. ‘Let us hope for a long reprieve. There are too many complications with this war we wage.’

‘Hardly a war. Balliol hasn’t the troops to defend against King Edward’s fleet.’

‘Since Balliol was crowned, it made sense for us to strengthen the northern defences. I have too many questions why a fleet of our countrymen was sent north as well.’

Hugh shrugged. 'It is not for us to know. And since we followed orders, the king could hardly fault the infamous "Black Robert".'

He ignored Hugh's use of his title. He did not welcome the description of him on even the most favourable of days. This day was not favourable. 'It will take several weeks to recover.'

'Aye, but he will be pleased at what we accomplished today. Even what happened up north could not weaken his resolve.'

'What do you mean, "what happened up north"?'

'You did not hear? There's a small village, Doonhill, tucked into a valley just northwest of Dumfries. A faction of men, under Sir Howe, went there when it appeared we would not be victorious.'

'Howe purposefully pulled his troops when the battle was not yet over?' He quickened his stride. 'That could have cost us victory!'

'Aye, but Sir Howe said he had to retreat or all of them would have died.'

The story was sounding familiar. 'Howe? Is he the one who commanded and pulled the destriers at Lockerbie?'

'The very same.' Hugh coughed into his hand.

'So the bastard thought he could do it twice?' His jaw tightened. 'What happened at Doonhill?'

'It was a small village, but apparently had many women.'

He did not need to hear any more. He was not naive and knew rapine happened as a result of war. Indeed, many men thought

it was their due.

‘What did the king do for the women?’

‘Nothing.’

He stopped and turned his entire focus on Hugh. They had almost reached the camp and he wanted to finish this conversation in private. ‘What do you mean, “nothing”?’

‘There could be no repairs. The king said he’d be sending a message to Balliol about the incident in case there were repercussions.’

‘Why would there be consequences? Why does he not pay the men of Doonhill as he has done in the past?’

‘There are no men, Robert, or women, or children to pay,’ Hugh spoke slowly. ‘Our men destroyed the entire village.’

His head and body filled with anger and disbelief. Even to his own ears, when he spoke, he sounded distant. ‘How is that possible?’

‘It is the risk of war.’ Hugh’s horse yanked impatiently at his bit. ‘Pray excuse, I need to get this horse to rest and food.’

He shook off the hesitation he felt in following Hugh. Long ago he had stopped looking to correct the past and the destruction of the village could not be undone. Dismissing his thoughts, he patted Hugh on the back. ‘I will come. I find I must be more hungry and tired than I thought.’

* * *

Robert crested the hill. He still did not know what had compelled him to come. Hugh hadn’t been pleased he travelled

alone in enemy territory. But it wasn't logical for others to make the journey. Now that he saw the valley, it seemed meaningless.

The day ended, but the impending darkness did not dim the devastation. It was worse than his dream. Howe would have to pay for what he'd done.

His horse impatiently tossed his head and he tightened the hold on the reins. It would never make a good war horse. What good was a horse if a few smells made it shy? And there were smells. The valley was steeped in death.

Dismounting, he walked down. The stench of decaying bodies and burnt wood accosted his nose. He breathed through his mouth and stopped.

There were no bodies. He could smell them, he had been in Edward's wars too long to mistake the smell, but they were not strewn along with the furniture or broken pots. He quickened his pace.

Close to the lake, he came across a large plot of freshly tilled land. It was a garden. The stench was so strong now he wished he didn't have to breathe at all.

There were fresh, shallow graves mixed with patches of burnt vegetable stalks. The bodies were laid close together and there was a long scrape made in the dirt between the bodies and the garden. The bodies had been dragged to their resting place.

It was a gravesite and a gravesite meant survivors burying their dead. There were footprints, too, but it looked as if they were the same size and at least one foot dragged.

He scanned the surrounding area again, but he could hear nothing. Everything was still.

Was one man trying to bury many? He wondered why anyone would bother. There was nothing left in the village to save, no way of healing and rebuilding after the destruction Howe's men had caused.

Knowing he was not alone, he unsheathed his sword. Keeping his weapon low and at his side, he carefully walked towards the lake.

Then he heard it: a scrape, quick and loud, coming from one of the partially burnt huts.

Wanting to make sure his words were heard, he waited until he was closer. 'I come in peace!' he said in English and again in Gaelic. 'Please, I mean you no harm.'

Another scrape—it sounded like metal. There was someone definitely inside the hut.

'I offer help.' He tried to make his words as convincing as he could. Whoever was in there, they could not have warm hospitality on their minds.

Approaching the open doorway, he raised his sword to hip level. He would rather have waited until whoever was in the hut had come out, but the person inside could be injured and needing his help.

Setting his shoulder in first, he entered the hut. The moon's light slashed through the burnt roof. The one room was small, square, but he could see little else. There was no time to avoid

the small iron cauldron swinging towards his head.

Chapter Three

‘Oh, cat’s whiskers around a mouse’s throat, I’ve killed him!’

Gaira stopped the still-swinging cauldron and swallowed the sharp bile rising in her throat. With shaking knees, she knelt beside the man. Slowly, so slowly, she lowered her hand to his mouth and felt hot breath against the back of her hand. He breathed!

Her heart swiftly rose. Dizzy, she closed her eyes and drew in a steadying breath. When she was sure she could, she opened her eyes to inspect him.

He was a large man, not taller than any Scotsman, but maybe thicker, and his chest was so broad it was surely carved from the side of mountains. She could not discern his face in the moonlight, but she could see his hair was long, wild and he had let his beard grow unkempt.

His hair and beard puzzled her, for it was very un-English and this man grew his as if he were the lowliest of serfs with no comb. But an English serf would not be this far north and all alone.

Carefully, she felt along his sides for a pouch or weapons. He smelled of cedar, leather and open air. Only the fine, soft weave of his clothing gave beneath her fingers. His body, warm through his tunic, was hard, unforgiving. She frowned at the fanciful word. A body could not be unforgiving.

Feeling along his front, her palms suddenly dampened, tingled, and she stopped at his hips. She wanted to continue her

exploring, but she realised it wasn't to find weapons.

What was wrong with her? She had three older brothers. This man could be no different. *But he feels different.* She squashed that thought. Foolishness again. If her hands felt strange or hot, it was because she was scared he'd awaken. Aye. Plain nervousness was all she felt.

Willing her hands to obey, she moved them around his waist. Did his breathing change? No. His eyes were still closed. Taking a steadying breath, she felt the flat ripples of his waist, the knot of his hip bones. She stilled her breathing as she slid her hands down each bulging cord of his legs. At a strap near his boots she felt the hard hilt of a dagger. Pulling it out, she felt the weight and heavily carved decoration on the handle.

'Nae a peasant, are you?' Setting the dagger aside, she felt along his broad arms and immediately felt the cold steel of an unsheathed sword at his side. Her skin prickled with anger.

'Even if you hadn't spoken, I'd know you're English for the liar you are. Peace! Hah! What man comes in peace when his sword is drawn?'

With trembling fingers she unwrapped his fingers from his sword. Wobbling at its weight, she set it on the other side of the room and grabbed the rope hanging at her waist. It wasn't long enough to tie his hands and feet, but it was mostly his hands she was worried about.

Her heart thumped hard against her chest. She was worried about other parts of him, too. She was not so naive to think this

man was safe. His muscled body, his ability to speak English and Gaelic, were testament to a soldier's training.

Without a doubt, he would have a foul temper when he woke. But what choice did she have? She had hid in the hut. It wasn't her fault the brastling man had entered. She'd had to swing the cauldron and protect herself.

But now what? He was sure to awaken soon. He was English, but she didn't know if he'd burned the village. She couldn't take any chances. It wasn't just her own life she had to worry about.

'Think, Gaira, think!' She had his weapons. They might give her some control. Quickly finishing the knot, she scrambled back into the scant shadows to wait.

* * *

'What do you mean she's not at her brother's?' Busby of Ayrshire spat on the ground. The glob hit square in the centre of the old leather shoe worn by his messenger.

'She's not on Colquhoun lands, my laird,' the messenger stuttered. 'Her brothers were most surprised to see me.'

Busby rubbed his meaty hands down the front of his rough brown tunic. The only satisfaction in this bit of news? His cowering messenger was afraid. He liked it when they were afraid.

'Did you explain to that whoreson Bram if he dinna produce his sister to me within a sennight, our bargain was off?'

'Aye. We were given leave to search the castle.'

Busby took a step forward. 'Did you tell them for this bit

of inconvenience, I demand the further compensation of five sheep? And I wouldn't have taken her had I known she was so bothersome? And if they want war between our clans they'll have it?"

'Aye, my laird.' The messenger bent his body to look up. 'I told them all, every bit of it. It dinna make nae difference. We searched everywhere and there was nae sign of her.'

The wench had been missing for three days while he waited for the messenger to bring her back or bring him news. The fact he had neither fuelled his fury.

'Tell me their response,' Busby demanded.

The messenger shifted his feet and almost imperceptibly took a step back. 'They were not pleased.'

'What. Do. You. Mean?'

The messenger took a full step back. Busby let him. It did not matter. The messenger was still within his reach.

'They were most displeased. I, er, feared for my life. They said something about losing their sister and, if anything should happen to her, it's on your head.'

'*What?*' he roared, and clenched one hand around the man's thin neck.

A croaking sound escaped the man's mouth and Busby eased his grip. 'They told me they'd search the area from here to Campbell land first, but you should go south.'

He released the man, who scrambled back. 'Go south? What for?'

‘There’s a younger sister,’ the messenger wheezed. ‘Married and living in Doonhill.’

‘That is days south of here! Prepare my horse. I’ll not be wasting any more time.’

The messenger started to shake. ‘Which horse for you, my laird?’

‘What do you mean which one? *My* horse, you knapweed. ’T is the only good horse in this wreck of a land!’

The messenger gnawed the inside of his cheek. ‘She took it.’
‘She *what!*’

‘Took it,’ he stuttered. ‘’Tis also missing.’

Busby took a ferocious step forward. He desperately wanted to wrap his hands again on the messenger’s throat and squeeze until he could release some of the raging frustration he felt, but instead, he turned his anger inward, let it cool. Only one person deserved his full wrath and he had every intention of delivering it to Gaira of Clan Colquhoun.

* * *

Pain throbbing through his temple woke Robert from blackness. He opened his eyes and saw shafts of moonlight through wisps of a burnt roof. He started to sit up.

‘Move too fast, English dede-doer, and I’ll throw this dagger at your loopie nobill part!’

He stilled. The voice came from the corner of the hut. A woman took a step forward.

Highlighted from the moon above her, she stood dressed in

a tunic and leggings too large even for her tall and thin frame. Her hair was plaited in sections and swung like tiny ropes over her breasts. Her stance was wide-legged and crouched and she waved a dagger in front of her. He peered closer. His dagger.

‘You threw a cauldron at me,’ he accused in Gaelic.

‘Swung it, more like, and I reckon you deserve a lot more than that! You had your sword drawn and you stink like an English knight.’

Moving his arms, he felt the ties of rope around his wrists, but his legs were free and, using them as leverage, he sat up. The grip on her dagger tightened and he moved slower. He knew from his battles that those afraid were just as dangerous as those angry. From the pain ringing in his head, he knew she was both.

‘The hut was dark. It would have been foolish not to have my sword drawn.’

‘That’s supposed to make me feel better?’ she scoffed.

The conversation was not going well.

She was angry, a Scot and a woman. He was English and in a Scottish village that Englishmen had massacred. She held a dagger and his wrists were tied. The odds were not in his favour.

As far as he could tell, it was only she and he, and she could not make him stay on the floor for ever. But if she was a villager, how had she survived?

‘I mean you nae harm,’ he continued in Gaelic. ‘What do you do here?’

‘Now, that should be a question I should be asking you.’

‘I am but a traveller.’

‘An English one despite your trying to use our language you’re mangling,’ she pointed out. ‘What is your name?’ she asked in English.

She spoke the King’s English. If she was a villager, she was no simple one. ‘I’m called Robert of Dent and there’s hardly a crime to being English.’

‘There is when we stand in a village where my kin were killed.’

She straightened; the dagger did not waver. His hands were still tied, although he was fast loosening the rope. ‘I have just recently come. I had no play in this. What do they call you?’

She ignored his question. ‘How am I to know you had nae hand in their deaths?’

He was surprised by her response. ‘So are you not one of the villagers?’

Even in the dim light, he could see her features pale, then darken with anger. ‘Nae, you weedy outwale! How’m I to be a villager? I’m alive, I am.’ She stopped. Tears sparkled, when she continued, ‘You must have seen what happened to the villagers when you passed this way.’

He didn’t understand. ‘You escaped.’

‘Nae, I’m a traveller, too, and came too late.’

Her reply was too careful and his wrists were now free. ‘You are more than a traveller, you said you had kin here,’ he replied. ‘Did your kin perish?’

Her body jerked at his question. ‘You just be passing by?’ she

asked.

She ignored his question. Given their surroundings she had a right to be suspicious of him.

‘Aye,’ he lied.

‘Hah! You with a sword drawn and a fine dagger, I’m to believe you?’

He could tell this wouldn’t be easy. ‘Pray—’

Running footsteps behind them!

‘Auntie Gaira, there’s a horse at the top of the hill. Auntie Gaira, it smells and I can’t see anything. Are you all right? I’ve come to warn you!’

The woman’s attention flew to the door. It was all the diversion he needed. Dropping the rope, he sprang to his feet and caught the boy entering the hut.

‘Put him down!’ she shouted. ‘He’s done nothing to you! Put him down, I say!’

The boy, absorbing the woman’s panic, wriggled and fought in earnest. Robert grunted when sharp teeth chomped into his side. Yanking the boy free, he held him out in front of him. ‘Seems I’ve got something of yours.’

‘He’s innocent, I tell you.’

‘He may be, but it seems we’re even now. You’ve got the dagger, but I’ve got your boy. I’ll guess you’ll not throw that dagger any time now.’

The woman looked defiant and he tensed, ready to dodge if the dagger flew. Regardless of what he said, he had no intention

of the boy getting hurt.

She threw the dagger at his feet. 'You may do what you wish of me, but I beg you to leave the boy be. He has seen enough.'

He took the dagger and the boy flew into the woman's arms. The darkness would not allow him to discern her features, but he sensed her relief and something else.

'Can the boy leave the hut before we begin?' she asked.

Her voice was uneasy. It was so different from before that he didn't comprehend her words, but then he understood. She thought he'd rape her. What horrors had she known before he arrived? He'd been here only moments, but seen charred ruins and shallow graves.

It had been two days since the attack. From the rancid smell, he knew some had died of sword wounds, but many more had been burned. She'd been here longer than him and seen too many horrors.

'I'll not be harming you or the boy. I may be English, but I meant it when I said I came in peace.'

'We are beyond your peace.'

Guilt. An inconvenient feeling along with his need to protect, but he suddenly felt both. It had to be the woman.

Her arms were around the child. She was vulnerable, yet she still challenged him. She was brave, but through the filtered moonlight, he could see the exhaustion in her limbs and hear the grief in her voice.

He lowered his eyes. Her ankle was crudely wrapped and

didn't hide the swelling. It was her feet he had seen in the tracks. Only hers.

'I passed by your...garden. Are you the one doing the bedding for the spring?'

Instead of answering, she fell to a crouch and tried to turn the boy to face her. 'Alec, please go up to the camp.'

The boy wrenched his head to keep his wary eyes on him. 'Doona want to.'

'Alec, you be listening to me on this. You know I forbade you from coming to the valley. You disobeyed me. But I'll be letting any punishment go if you leave now.'

The boy didn't move.

Her tone softened. 'Alec, if you go right now I'll give you my last honeycomb.'

The boy looked at her, his face scrunched up. She nodded vigorously at him. With barely a glance back, he ran out of the hut.

As the boy's footsteps faded, the woman slowly straightened.

'My life for a sweet. Ah, to be five again,' she said wistfully. She smiled and grasped her hands in front of her. 'I fear we had a misunderstanding. I'm Gaira of Clan Colquhoun.'

He wondered where her anger and defiance had gone. Her stance, the very air around her, had changed. He was suddenly suspicious. 'Your manner has changed.'

'Aye, you may be English, but you are different than the men who burned Doonhill.'

This woman made no sense. ‘Aye, I am, but how do you suddenly know?’

‘Gardening?’ she said, looking at him in exasperation.

He was thoroughly confused. Did she want to speak of plants?

‘You did not ask if it was I burying the dead. You asked whether I had been gardening. Any man not wishing to hurt the feelings of a child cannot be the same as the monsters who destroyed this village.’ As she turned her back to him and bent down, the large tunic fell forward and exposed her stretched backside under the tight leggings.

All thoughts left his head. He knew the moonlight played tricks on him; knew his thoughts were filling in what his eyes couldn’t possibly be seeing. But still his mouth turned dry. The fine strong curve of her legs seemed to stretch to heaven and her derrière was round, full, lush and entirely too...there.

All these years without a woman and he had never been tempted. They had pressed against him, flashed their breasts, licked their lips and he hadn’t felt a flicker of emotion except annoyance. But this woman’s backside, wrapped tight in a man’s leggings, struck him across the loins with heat. He felt the rush, the quickening, and forcibly focused at the object in her hands.

It was a sword and pointed towards him.

‘I thank you,’ she said, her tone still polite. ‘I have been trying to protect him from what really happened to the people here.’

She cleared her throat. Paused. She was waiting for his response.

It wasn't just any sword. It was his sword. Embarrassment doused his lust. What would Edward think of his soldier now? The sword flexed slightly as she wiggled the hilt.

It would be so easy to take the blade from her. Her balance was off and the sword was too heavy for her. She was no threat.

But he was a threat to her. 'What are you doing?'

'I'm pointing a weapon at you, that's what I'm doing.'

'I thought you said I wasn't a monster.'

'Aye, I said you weren't the same as the monsters who burnt this village. But you're still English. I can't trust you.' She nodded her head. 'Kick that rope and dagger to me. I'll be using them again.'

Concentrating on his movements, rather than his thoughts on what she looked like, Robert slowly kicked the dagger and rope to her.

'I'm awake this time and you're all alone,' he said. 'Why would I hold still so I can't protect myself?'

She didn't take her eyes off him. 'To prove you aren't one of the monsters.'

He paused. He knew there was a woman and a boy. He didn't know if there were any other survivors.

'It didn't hold me before,' he pointed out.

'I'll not be making that same mistake twice.'

'And my sword?'

'I'll be keeping it, as well as your dagger.'

He fought the instinct to fight back. She was Scottish, but a

woman and she had Alec to protect. She was vulnerable enough without him adding to her fears. Still, too, he needed more answers and she wouldn't be talking if he was a threat. But if she tied him more tightly, he would be defenceless.

He held his clasped hands in front.

She shook her head. 'Behind you and turn around.'

'I'll need to relieve myself.'

He could feel her weighing his words before she nodded and placed the sword down.

'For an Englishman, you're right, you know.' She slowly walked to him.

He didn't feel right as he held still for her to bind him again. 'About what?'

With more twists around his hands, she wrapped the rope around his wrists. She tied more securely this time, but he didn't clasp his hands tightly and would still be able to loosen the rope. It was dark and she didn't notice.

'I've been burying the dead,' she said, stepping away from him. 'But only at night and my ankle slows me too much.'

He turned around and saw her picking up his sword and dagger. The angle wasn't the same as before, but his memory was still too fresh and her legs were still too long...and shapely.

'Why at night?' He cleared his hoarse voice.

'I'm trying to hide what I do,' she answered.

He thought of the boy running past the gravesite. Even at such a tender age, he had to have known what she was doing. 'You

have more to bury.’

‘Aye. I’m afraid the smell is getting so bad I can hardly do it any more.’ Her eyes filled with tears. ‘But I won’t leave Doonhill till it’s done.’

He ignored the conviction in her voice. He had come only to get some answers and report to Edward. Not help her bury her kin.

She pointed towards the door and he turned to leave the hut. Keeping her distance and his sword, she followed afterwards. She held it over her shoulder to support the weight. Robert honed his blade so it could slice full-grown trees. Her neck was no barrier and her ankle made her clumsy.

‘Take my scabbard,’ he offered.

‘It won’t fit around my waist.’

He stopped. ‘Hold the sword like you are, just put it in my scabbard.’

She gave him a look he did not understand, but she did as he asked. After placing the sheathed sword back on her shoulder, they continued walking.

Why he wanted to save her neck, he did not know. ‘Your name’s Gaira?’ he asked instead.

She stiffened. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘I thought *Gaira* meant—’

‘Short,’ she interrupted. The tension in her shoulders eased. ‘It does. I think my ma had hopes I wouldn’t end up like my brothers.’

She had brothers. Were they the ones killed here or were they camped nearby? He had no intention of being strung up by some Scotsmen.

‘Is the boy safe where he is?’ he asked.

‘Aye, we have seen nae one for almost a week and the camp is somewhat hidden by the forest. He’ll stay there till I return. He has been too frightened to disobey.’ She stopped, shrugged her shoulders. ‘Or maybe too busy eating honeycomb. Do you have a camp?’

‘No, I just arrived.’

‘Will there be other Englishmen?’

‘Shouldn’t you have asked that question before you kidnapped me and walked me to your camp?’

She laughed, but it was the sound of panic and she quickly silenced it.

Not for the first time, he wondered at his acquiescence, but for the first time, he was apprehensive.

She had not revealed if there were others, but he was fairly sure there were not. It had been only her footsteps in the dirt. Still, he could not be certain.

He knew he could protect himself from one Scotswoman, albeit one mercurial in nature. But he could not control the consequences if there were others. He would not shed any more blood here. She might have tied him up and taken his sword, but he still knew how to fight. If there were more, he needed to leave. ‘Give pardon, but I fear—’

‘Ach, I won’t have you afeared. You’ll stay where I stay. And I’ll not be biting you. You’re too hairy for that.’

He blinked, not understanding the direction of her thoughts, until he remembered his overgrown beard and long hair. Hairy. Something rumbled inside him. Laughter. She had almost made him laugh.

Chapter Four

Gaira kept glancing over her shoulder at the stranger who quietly followed her. No, not quiet. Contemplative. Dark. He was dark like the bottom of a turbulent river. This man, though seemingly tranquil, was as forceful and powerful under his surface as any Scottish river. It made her nervous that he hid it.

He hadn’t said a word since he’d retrieved his horse. Now he walked behind her with the huge horse in tow. She had his dagger and sword, but the horse was laden with a larger sword, blankets and two pouches, one she was sure jangled with coins. He was quiet, but she could almost feel his thoughts. She tried to stop biting her lip.

She had invited a stranger to the camp. An English soldier, who talked of peace but walked with his sword drawn and carried more weapons on his horse. But she had to invite him. What else could she do?

If he truly meant her harm, all he had to do was follow her to camp and catch her unawares. It was best to keep him tied and close. But close did not mean stupid and she had some talking to do first.

She whirled around to face him. He stopped just as suddenly and looked at her expectantly.

* * *

Robert watched the woman staring at him. In less than an hour she had displayed several emotions: bravery, fear, gentleness, affection and humour. Now a myriad of expressions were crossing her face, the dominant one being determination. She clearly wanted to tell him something, but didn't know how to say it. He felt the heady rush of anticipation. It had been a long time since anyone had intrigued him.

But then he saw them.

Behind her was a crude camp. A fire blazed around a steaming cauldron. The fire was strong and the moon was full. Both provided enough illumination. The night's light was not playing tricks with his sight.

'Who are they?' he asked.

Her eyes, so expressive before, became shuttered. Her only movement was the almost imperceptible tensing of her shoulders, the slight raising of her chin. 'You'll not be harming them, you ken?' She kept her voice low. 'If you do, I'll be taking away more than one sword of yours.'

'Who are they?' he repeated.

She did not answer him, but kept her eyes unwaveringly on him.

As if pulled forward, he walked past Gaira to face four children who emerged out of the trees. They lined up like soldiers

for battle. Gaira hurriedly passed him and stood behind the tallest girl.

The image hit him. These children were not lined up like soldiers for battle, but for inspection. His inspection. Gaira did not stand between them to protect them, but behind them as if to point out their merit.

He couldn't speak.

She brought the children close to her, whispered low, but she did not take her eyes off him.

'Children, this is Robert from Dent and he is English.' She stood and raised her voice. 'I do not believe he means us harm so I asked him to our camp this eve.'

He could sense their wariness turn to fear, but they did not make a sound, nor did they break ranks. Ridiculous as it was, he could not get soldiering terminology out of his mind.

Pressing her hands on the girl's shoulders and briefly pointing to the boy of equal height to her left, she said, 'These are Flora and Creighton, they're nine and, well, twins.'

Flora and Creighton shared the same dark brown hair and, although he could not be certain, their eyes appeared bright blue.

But where their colouring and height were the same, the way they acted towards him was not. Flora's nose was jammed into her chest, her lips trembling.

Creighton's eyes were a flat stare and he held his hands fisted at his sides.

Gaira took a quick sidestep and waved her hand briefly over

the head of a boy whose hair looked as if it were trying to escape. ‘You met Alec.’ She roughed the boy’s brown hair and it barely moved. Alec smiled, obviously pleased to be introduced.

‘The little one there is Maisie.’ Gaira pointed to the girl hanging on Alec’s left arm. ‘She’s not two, but learning words.’

Maisie’s hair was so blond it was practically transparent in the firelight, but her eyes were round, green and took up half her face. He could not discern much more of her features because it looked as though she were trying to swallow her free hand and arm whole. Spit glistened.

He forced the words from his mouth. ‘Are these yours?’

‘Aye.’ She jutted out her chin.

None of the children resembled each other and certainly not the tall woman in front of him. The camp itself was a single blanket attached to a rope tied to a tree, making a crude tent too small to fit them all. She had a single horse, with a single satchel.

This woman was not their mother, maybe not even their relation. Yet she claimed them. He didn’t know who she was, or even if she was from Clan Colquhoun, but she had been taking care of four children who had survived the massacre. By herself.

And she was burying their decaying parents’ bodies at night. By herself.

It looked, too, as if she had no protection, no companion and was camping in a godforsaken land on the brink of the most bloodthirsty war he’d ever known in his lifetime.

Her eyes were challenging him, her hair coming loose from

the many plaits resembling Medusa's snakes. In the full fire's light he could make out the roughness and largeness of the tunic she wore. It was not a woman's garment, but a man's. Had she been wearing that before or after she arrived here? There were too many questions.

Whatever he was expecting by coming to this small farming village, this was not it. By coming here, he had wanted to see if the rumour was true—if his English brethren could have the capacity for such horror. He hadn't expected survivors. Yet here they were: four children and a woman.

And he didn't know what to do with any of them.

Chapter Five

He was going to leave. Gaira could see it in his eyes. She felt a moment of panic before she relaxed again. His hands were tied. How was he supposed to go?

She glanced at the children. Creighton looked as though he might murder Robert. Flora looked as though she might cry from fear. Alec, bless him, looked happy just to be there. Maisie's big eyes absorbed everything around her. At such a tender age, she had seen too much.

She couldn't soothe the children's feelings, which had to be just as confused as her own. She had just brought an Englishman to the camp and the English had slaughtered their families. Had killed her sister. She choked on the grief clogging her throat.

She couldn't risk letting him out of her sight. 'You must be hungry. Would you like some food?' she asked.

He looked to the children as if they had some say, but they were quiet. They knew something was held in the balance.

He nodded and she released her held breath.

* * *

Sobbing.

Gaira woke. The sun was just cresting the hills and it cast the morning mist a milky white. When had she fallen asleep? Late, but it should not have happened.

She moved slowly, careful not to wake Maisie and Alec, who were snuggled against her.

Broken words. Nightmares again.

With the crisp wind biting her cheeks, she tucked her shawl around the children and turned to Flora and Creighton, who slept closer to the fire.

Flora was awake, crying, frantically patting her brother's shoulders.

Creighton made not a sound, but his entire body keened of the demons trapped inside. This nightmare was worse than the last.

She gently laid her hand on Flora, who jumped. 'Let me,' she asked.

Flora shifted away from her brother, her hands locked tight in her lap.

Singing very low, Gaira gently brushed Creighton's brow until his breathing eased and his body slumped. Singing helped. She had startled him awake before and wouldn't do it again.

Slowly, Creighton's body eased and when he woke, he looked

surprised that Gaira was there.

Smiling, she stood. The cold wind whipped around her and she wrapped her arms around her waist. Then froze.

Robert was sitting and staring at her. She became aware of the arch of his brow, the shape of his nose, the colour of his deep brown eyes.

She was no longer aware of the children or the biting wind. All she could feel were his eyes. She thought he hid himself just under the surface, but now everything she ever wanted to know about the world, about him, was right there. Without blinking, his eyes became opaque, the brown turning flat.

She felt as though she had been pushed from a summer brook to the cold sand of shore with no chance of submerging back to the warmth.

Acutely self-conscious, she looked to Maisie and Alec, wrapped tightly in her only shawl. She glanced again.

He looked angry and more than frightening.

His hair was a beautiful shade of brown, but it was long, unkempt and fell in deep waves to his shoulders. It looked soft and wild at the same time. She followed each strand, each curve of each wave. A strange tingling in her palms occurred. Nervousness again?

Trying to calm her suddenly heightened nerves, she unwrapped her arms and raised her chin against him. Without her arms, the wind plastered her tunic and leggings tight against her body. 'Twasn't decent, but it couldn't be helped. She wouldn't

show her nervousness.

His eyes flickered; his frown deepened. Aye, he was frightening. She couldn't believe she'd invited him to their camp.

His entire appearance indicated he couldn't be bothered with a comb, frippery or anything to make him pleasing to the eye. He wore a beard, like a Scot, but his did not have pretty plaits to keep it tidy—his was full, waving and long. If it wasn't the same beautiful colour, she'd have thought him an old man.

'We'll need food,' he said.

The timbre of his voice was clipped, abrupt, the tenor still too pleasing.

Stray curls swept across her face, blinding and stinging her eyes, but she did not push them away. 'I've set some traps.' She waved her hand in the direction of the trees. 'We haven't had much luck. Our baits have been—'

He interrupted her and gestured with his tied arms. 'I can get food if you untie me.'

Arrogant. She looked at his hands, which she had tied in the front so he could relieve himself. He must think her small bit of kindness meant weakness. He would soon learn otherwise.

'You need to eat,' he continued.

She took several steps closer to him. He continued to sit and was forced to look up at her. He should have looked diminished to her. But his eyes remained too steady and the tilt of his chin too proud.

Who was he? An English solider—a nobleman, too, she

suspected.

His clothes were fine, rich, but he wore all black. Not a bit of ornamentation or colour. Except for a gold ring, he dressed plainly as if he had no money. But he travelled with a jewelled dagger, two swords and a pouch weighted with coins. Such costly items spoke of great wealth. She had never known a wealthy man to go without ornamentation on his clothing. Even her brothers wore a bit of this, a bit of that.

‘You think me gluttonous enough to risk our lives by releasing you?’ she retorted.

‘Your taking my weapons and tying my hands is but a false sense of security,’ he answered. ‘If I wanted to harm any of you, I would have.’

‘I haven’t given you the chance, Englishman.’ She pushed her hair behind her ears. ‘And I won’t. Ever.’

‘Aye?’ he answered, his voice gone softer. ‘And the times you closed your eyes last night? Those moments weren’t enough for me to strike?’

Oh, aye, he was arrogant and just a bit too frightening. He was sitting, he was tied and yet he was still intimidating. Worse, she feared, he also spoke the truth. She had fallen asleep a time or two last night.

She was these children’s only guardian and she was all too aware of how little protection she was. Even more so for bringing this man to their camp. He might not have slaughtered their kin, but she knew he’d killed others. There was no other reason an

Englishman would be here. It was not safe to release him.

‘You need to eat, Gaira,’ he continued. ‘And so do the children.’

The fight, if there was any, went out of her. They did need to eat. Desperately and in great quantity. Their traps did not work and the fires had scared most of the animals away.

He seemed to sense the change in her and stood.

‘What promise do I have?’ she asked.

‘None that you’d believe,’ he said, his lips curling at the corners. ‘But I have to eat, too, and maybe that is enough.’

She searched every nuance of his face. What she saw wasn’t quite a smile, but it wanted to be. ‘Maybe that is enough.’ She untied his knots. ‘But the moment you take your sword and dagger, leave this camp. I won’t let the children see a weapon in your hands.’

She didn’t wait to see him go, but grabbed the kindling to rearrange the fire. She sensed his departure and she let out the breath she’d been holding.

He was gone and there was no reason he should return. She trusted him, which made her all the more nervous because he had done nothing to deserve that trust.

He was a nobleman that kept his hair like a peasant and hid the wealth from his clothes. He was an enigma, obscure, as if trying to hide something of himself and personify another.

There was something he hid just under the surface like a river. She pushed her hair behind her ear again. And one she had no

time to contemplate. Maisie would need feeding, changing, and the leather skein would need filling for water to boil.

And she would have to explain to the children that they were on their own again.

* * *

Busby threw together the few supplies needed and walked down the narrow stone stairs of his keep.

The rushes in his hall squished under him and even in the dim lighting the grease-splattered walls and thrown bones from previous meals were visible. He breathed in the smell of damp wood and rotting meat and couldn't wait to get outside. But his three youngest were crawling on the ground and prodding the rushes with sticks.

‘What do you three do inside on a fine day as this? You should be outside.’

Delight widened their eyes before they rushed to their feet and surrounded his arms and legs. Wiping away his impatience for the delay, he roared, ‘What do we have here?’ They giggled and gripped him even tighter.

Familiar with this game, he crouched down and they immediately climbed on top of him. He lifted all three and clumsily walked outside, where he shook them off.

‘What were you doing on your hands and knees?’ he asked.

The oldest of the three stepped forward eagerly. His heart swelled as he realised it was his daughter Fyfa. She was a brave lass.

‘Papa, we’re removing vermin, just like you wanted!’ she exclaimed.

‘Vermin?’

‘Aye, we heard you wanted to remove the vermin from Scotland, so we thought we’d help you.’

Busby snorted and blinked his eyes. ‘You’re good children, you are, and do your papa proud, but I doona want you crawling. ’Tis not becoming of your station.’

‘But, Papa—’

‘I’ll be obeyed in this. Where is Lioslath? She is to be taking care of you.’

Fyfa pulled a face. ‘She’s cleaning the stables.’

‘Hmmm,’ he growled. His wilful oldest daughter had run the keep since his second wife had died. But she never took care of the softer things, like clean rushes or good food. Always with the horses or in the fields, she was unfit for any marriage although she was of marriageable age.

If only he had a wife!

‘Get along now. I doona want to see you cleaning again.’ He shoved them all towards the fields and waited until they were away before he headed to the stables.

He kicked the rocks at his feet. Blast his betrothed for running! She acted as if she didn’t want to be wed. But wed her he must. He had made a deal with her no-good lying brothers and he would make sure she kept it.

When he had received the invitation from the Colquhouns to

meet their sister for a possible betrothal, he had thought they were joking. Everyone in the region knew his second wife had died years ago and had left him with children and a poor keep. No one had ever approached him as a suitor and he had long ago stopped his own fruitless pursuits.

It all should have made him suspicious, but when he had seen their clean profitable castle, tasted well-spiced fare and had been offered twenty sheep, he was eager to get the deal done. Fool that he was.

When his intended had finally been presented to him, her face was puffy and splotched red. Despite this, he assured himself he had made a fine deal and had packed her up along with her belongings.

Now she had run away and before he could even show her the keep or his children!

His keep needed order and a wife could do it. Aye, a wife could order clean rushes and have bread made without stones.

And his children needed a mother. His children had good Scottish blood on the inside, but even to him their outsides needed some polishing. It was too late for his eldest daughter, Lioslath, to be made into a lady. Yet Fyfa, only seven, still had a chance.

And what of his clan? They expected him to return with a rich bride and twenty sheep. He had the sheep, but without the bride, he'd have to return them.

There were only two places she could be. She was only a

woman, after all. Weak-hearted and a Colquhoun at that. She wouldn't last on her own, which meant she was either on her way north and his snivelling messenger had missed her, or on her way south as her brothers had suggested.

He was confident if she returned to her brothers, they would bring her to heel. In these turbulent times, they would not want a feud between their clans.

But if she was south it would be he alone who would capture her. He allowed the pleasure of revenge to course through him.

Aye, he would catch her. At the least, the ride south would give him time to think of the punishment that would not hamper her use to him.

Chapter Six

'Paddocks and spiders!' Gaira exclaimed. 'Not again!'

She grabbed at her loosening hair, but the swirling wind wreaked havoc with her attempts to replait it and she tugged at the strays until her head hurt.

'Alec!' she called high and sharp, her agitation growing with the pain in her head. 'Alec! Where are you?'

She heard no reply and she could see no movement. The hills around her dipped and rose as they saw fit. All she saw were the sparse, thin trees to her right and the wide steep valley that dipped to a small lake on her left. She turned her back on the valley.

She limped towards the trees and away from the camp. It was a sparse affair meant for her lone survival. It wasn't enough for her

and four children. Especially since one of the children included a five-year-old with a penchant for stealing.

‘Alec!’ she shouted. ‘So help me, dearest God, if you doona return that leather skein, you won’t get a drop of water for a week!’

Giggles.

Gaira whirled around on her right foot and spotted a blur deeper in the trees. She limped, trying to catch the boy who ran as fast as his legs could run. She admired his spirit, even though she had to lunge to tackle him as gently as she could. The boy struggled in her arms before becoming still and looking at her solemnly.

Laughing, she grabbed the skein. ‘You’ve got to stop stealing, ’tis taking me too long to get the chores done and I still have to find food.’

The boy’s eyes widened. ‘Will that man return, Auntie Gaira?’

Frowns. Arrogance. English. But they were all still alive. She hoped she was right to trust the man. He hadn’t returned and it was already late morning.

‘I think not,’ she answered. Knowing her concerns could be read in her eyes, she poked him in the belly. ‘Now get, so I can prepare food for your fat belly.’

The boy stood. ‘Won’t there be food where we’re going?’

There should be food, but whether her back-stabbing brothers would give him any, she didn’t know. ‘Aye, child. There’s food a-plenty back at my home. Why, my brother is the biggest,

strongest laird in all of Scotland, and his larder is so full he'll be grateful for you just showing up to help him empty it.'

'But if there's so much food for you there, why were you fleeing down here?'

Her heart flipped. 'Who says I was fleeing?'

'When we were in the trees, we could see you flying up the hill on your horse. Flora said you were running away from something bad.'

'Oh, Flora said that, did she?'

'Aye, we figured you couldn't be running from Doonhill because you hadn't seen...' He stopped. His eyes started to tear. 'Hadna seen...' he started to say again.

Gaira knelt down and gave him a fierce hug. 'Aye, Flora's right. I hadn't seen what had happened to your home yet. But I was anxious to get to Doonhill all the same. Nae reason to think I was fleeing.'

The boy leaned into her. 'Are we going to be safe again?'

Dear God, she didn't know. She wasn't sure of anything since her brother had forcefully handfasted her to the cruellest laird in all Scotland. But her brother's land was the only safe place she knew where to take the children.

Gaira tightened her embrace. 'Nae matter what it takes, I swear I will keep you safe.'

Quickly, she grabbed and tickled him. 'Except from me!' Alec squirmed and giggled again, all worry leaving his face.

'Now get your fat belly back to the camp and doona let me be

catching you stealing again.’

Laughing, he ran towards the camp.

She walked after him. His belly wasn’t as fat as it was just a few days ago. Still, if they didn’t leave Doonhill soon, they’d be in a worse predicament than starving to death.

When she reached the camp, Robert sat hunched over the fire pit. He was poking several large pieces of meat that sizzled and flared over the open flame. Her stomach growled in response.

But it wasn’t Robert’s returning or the fact he was cooking that surprised her. It was the children peaceably nibbling on oatcakes. Each sat, perfect as could be, in a semicircle around the campfire and Robert.

Except for Creighton, who sat the furthest away, his eyes never leaving the Englishman’s back. She so wanted to soothe Creighton, to help him release his anger, but despite wishing otherwise, he still would not speak.

Creighton and Flora were the ones she had most been worried about with Robert’s presence. They were the oldest and the most aware of who had killed their parents.

Robert suddenly met her gaze and she stumbled.

‘The meat will be ready soon.’

The timbre of his voice, rather than his words, broke her thoughts. She breathed air into her starved lungs and straightened herself. What was wrong with her? She felt as if nothing would be normal again and all he was doing was making them breakfast.

‘You’re here,’ she said, not hiding her confusion from her

voice.

‘Aye, the food is far into the wood line. No wonder your traps weren’t working.’

She wanted to ask him why he’d returned. Why bother, when he so clearly did not belong here? But she was all too aware of the children watching her and all too worried about his answer.

And now he had brought them food, shared his own oatcakes.

‘Do you have any more oatcakes?’ she asked. Maisie would need them.

‘Plenty.’ He glanced at Flora. ‘But I’ve already promised I’d save the remainder for Maisie.’

Flora’s cheeks were rosy. No doubt, it was protective Flora who had braved asking Robert for the cakes.

‘I dinna know men cooked,’ she said.

He shrugged and poked at the meat. ‘I like to eat.’

So did her brothers, but that did not mean they had bothered to learn. She wondered what other skills he was hiding behind his appearance.

It was too much thought this early in the morning and too much thought when she had troubles of her own. She didn’t need to be wondering about the workings of one lone Englishman. She lifted Maisie from Flora’s lap.

‘She’ll be needing changing again,’ she said to no one in particular.

She went to her satchel hanging in a small tree and grabbed the squares of cloth she’d cut.

How many days had she been here now? Two? Three? Alec thought she had been fleeing when she had raced up the hill towards Doonhill. She'd never tell him how close to the truth he spoke.

They were too close to the borderlands and too close to the skirmishes beginning there. That alone would be bad enough since she had nothing to protect herself and four very dependent children.

She laid Maisie down, unwrapped her dirty linens and quickly wrapped her in the clean ones.

No, her proximity to the borderlands and one confusing Englishman were not her trouble. Her trouble was an angry Scotsman, who thought she was his wife. And worse, far, far worse, was that she'd have to return to and beg for protection from her brother. A brother who had tricked her into marriage and leaving Colquhoun land.

If she had just herself, she'd never return to her land again, but she had the children now. She had to return to keep them safe.

Her entire plan for escape, to find sanctuary within her sister's village, was gone. Scorched. Her only means of survival now was nothing more than burnt timbers, dead bodies and conflicting vows. All of which she meant to keep.

But her vow to bury the dead had slowed her down. And if Busby caught up with them, she'd never get the children to the safety of her clan.

Squealing, Maisie grabbed the tall grass around her and Gaira

stood to scrape the dirty linen against a trunk. It would have to be washed later.

She quickly pivoted and stumbled. Gingerly, she lifted her left ankle and tried to flex it within the splint she'd made. Her ankle was still swollen and she could barely wear her boot. She sighed. There was no hope for things to be different, no chance that things weren't worse than they were just days ago and no use wishing otherwise.

But, she reminded herself, she still had some supplies, a strong horse and she was smart enough to get them out of this mess. What she didn't have was time. She scooped Maisie back to her hip. She wouldn't worry over something she couldn't control. There was simply no one to come and help her.

She gripped Maisie tight against her.

What of Robert? No. He wouldn't want to help them.

But she couldn't help her sudden thought. Somewhere between her clobbering him on the head and his cooking breakfast, something had changed.

He hadn't killed them, had even cooked them breakfast.

Maybe he was the answer to her prayers. He was an English soldier, but he was here. He was here. And that's what counted.

Sending this Englishman appeared to be God's will or His joke. Either way, this Robert of Dent would help her bury the dead.

Shifting Maisie to her other hip, she cleared the trees. If her ankle wasn't hurting, she'd be skipping.

‘Aye, you’re getting to be a big girl, you are.’ She snuggled her closer and snorted loudly into her neck.

‘Big!’ Maisie grabbed one of her plaits and yanked.

‘Oh, it’s going to be like that, is it?’ Gaira, limping, swung her around.

Alec bounded over. ‘Can I play?’

Alec’s face was covered in oat crumbs and charred meat. Just as it should be. She feigned resignation. ‘Ach, I suppose so.’

She dislodged Maisie and picked up Alec, who squirmed until he was safely on her back. Bracing her weight on her good foot, she swung Alec back and forth, making sure her plaits whipped along so he’d squeal louder.

Dizzy and stumbling, she dropped Alec and sprawled on the grass to look at the spinning sky.

Sighing and giggling at the same time, she closed her eyes. Suddenly, a darkness covered her. Robert was standing over her, his thick body blocking out the sun.

She couldn’t determine if she was dizzy from whipping her head around or because warm brown eyes stared at her.

‘We need to talk,’ Robert said.

Aye, they did. She patted Alec’s stomach and got up. Maisie had walked around a tree. Brushing the dirt from her little fingers, she placed her in Flora’s lap and grabbed her shawl.

She gave Flora a smile. ‘Please check the traps and set them again. See that Alec picks up some kindling sticks. We’re awfully low. I’ll be right back.’

She turned to Robert. 'We'll walk to the valley.'

Since her arrival, she hadn't dared go to the valley in the full light of day. However, it would afford them some privacy and maybe in the light of the devastation he would offer his help.

* * *

Robert followed. He tried to pretend to himself it was curiosity that made him watch the way she walked or how she nervously bit her bottom lip.

Her shawl was a deep hue of green and it highlighted her colouring, framed the length of her curves. Her hair was not a dark brown as he had supposed, but a flaming red. Not the soft red of English beauties, but a deep poppy-coloured hair, almost unreal in its intensity. Her eyes were the colour of whisky in bright sunlight. Her skin was covered by so many freckles they darkened her skin. Her mouth was wide and her lips were the colour of peaches.

Her limping was more pronounced the further they walked and he slowed his pace to walk beside her.

In all his years, he had never seen a woman look as she did. It was as if she were sent down from the sun. Her colouring alone would have made her unusual, her height something to gawk at. She was not beautiful. Indeed, her nose was almost crooked and her chin too pointed. But it didn't matter.

He wanted her. He was too experienced not to recognise the first talons of lust. But that, too, did not matter. There were other matters needing his attention.

‘When you came here, you didn’t come with four children, did you?’ he asked.

‘Nae. They are the only ones who survived.’

‘Is the boy mute?’

Her brow furrowed and she gave a quick shake to her head. ‘Creighton refuses to speak.’

He suspected as much. All morning, the boy had glared with silent unflinching hatred. Fortunately, Alec’s chatter had filled any awkward silences.

There had been plenty of awkward silences, too. He did not know what to do with the children. So he had fixed breakfast for himself and for them. He was glad he wouldn’t have to worry about their care much longer.

They reached the crest of the hill and Gaira turned around to begin her descent.

‘Here, let me help you.’ He moved closer and gestured with his arms.

She waved him away. ‘I’ve been doing it fine.’

He pointed to her ankle. ‘Is it broken?’

‘I doona think so.’

She didn’t say any more, though the ankle was swollen. What woman didn’t complain about an ailment?

‘You said you were travelling to Doonhill when it occurred?’ he asked. They passed the valley’s curve and he could see the lake.

‘Aye, I think I arrived only a few hours later. I was coming

to visit my kin.’

‘Alone?’

‘Of course alone.’ Wariness entered her eyes. ‘What does it matter?’

It didn’t. He didn’t know why he asked. But he didn’t know why he was here, either.

‘What woman travels alone and dressed in a man’s clothes?’ he asked.

She stumbled, but he pretended not to notice.

‘What kind of English soldier travels alone in Scottish lands to inspect a village his men massacred?’ she retorted.

He didn’t have an answer for that. What would she think when she knew that he was no mere soldier, but ‘Black Robert’, the most feared of English knights?

His squire had started the rumours and songs of Black Robert. The more deeds he did, the more the rumours and songs spread. He couldn’t enter a new camp or battlefield without the name being whispered. He was lucky she did not recognise him. If she had, his sword would be through his own gut.

They reached the bottom of the hill and walked to where she’d been digging. As they neared the bodies, she made a clearing sound in her throat.

He waited. Although it was he who had wanted to talk, he knew why she wanted the conversation here. In the light of day, there were unflinching views of the horror. Children with their plump arms ripped off, women sliced and men face down were

all lined up. Waiting to be buried with the potatoes.

‘Will you help me?’ she asked.

After battles, dead bodies had simply been landscapes of war. He and his soldiers had buried many. But she was no hardened soldier. She could not have seen such atrocities before. Why would she endure such hardship?

‘Why do you not just leave?’

‘I won’t.’ She paused. ‘So, will you do it? I need to bury them and quickly.’

‘It would be more expedient if you burned them on a pyre,’ he said.

She gasped. ‘They’ve seen too much fire.’

He was not prepared for the weight of grief hovering over him. He was not prepared for any feelings. But this woman, bringing him here, was causing all the emotions of the world to stab and slice at him.

There was no logical reason for him to be here. He had had a bad dream and suddenly he was making the journey. He massaged the back of his neck and tried to distance himself from the gnawing gripping his chest.

But it hadn’t been a bad dream compelling him to come here. It had been a memory and one he had tried to forget.

It had been a long time since he’d felt anger and even longer than that since he had thought of the fire. But he had done both. It was the village that troubled him.

An entire village destroyed and his fellow Englishmen had

done it. He could not shake the feeling he was responsible. If he had not been fighting a battle so near Doonhill, then all those people would be alive. They were innocent and shouldn't have died.

'So, will you bury them? Put them at peace?' she repeated. 'Quickly?'

To answer her would be to commit to something he did not want. But he could not mistake the urgency in her voice. Alone and only working a couple of hours a night, she would have to be here the better part of a sennight to get all of them buried. It would make her vulnerable to more danger.

'You risk much staying here as long as you have.'

'Tis their kin. I felt... Nae, I needed to let the children know their families rest peacefully.'

It was practically a death wish for her to persist. 'I am sure they are grateful for the efforts you have been making, but it is foolishness to remain here. The Englishmen who did this could have returned and slaughtered you all.'

She stopped biting her lip. 'Like you?'

'I told you it was not me.'

The haunted look in her eyes vanished. 'Aye, but I'm not so sure I believe you. You're obviously an English soldier and couldn't have just been passing by.'

He did not answer her. He didn't need her to believe him.

She folded her arms across her chest. 'It is irrelevant to discuss this. They did not return and all I ask is for your help.'

She wasn't leaving him alone. He added stubborn to her personality. 'Aye, but there are other dangers here. The children informed me your supplies ran out. How are you able to gather food enough to feed five?'

'We've been surviving.'

'But for how long?'

She whirled to face him, anger bringing her to her full height. 'I had hoped to have been done by now. I hadn't planned on being injured. Will you help me? Because I know how precious little time I have to survive out here. I doona need you telling me. What kind of man won't help a woman bury her kin?'

She pushed herself forward and grabbed a spade lying on the ground. He could see it was a crude tool, hardly sufficient to do the task before them. The blade was black, the handle nothing but a roughened stick. The original handle had probably burned in the fire.

Aye, she was stubborn, her chin was sticking out and there was a challenge to her eyes, but her lips were trembling and she was pale under her freckles.

Cursing, he covered the distance between them and grabbed the spade from her hands. She stumbled a bit from his force and he put his hand at her elbow until she got her balance.

'Your dead will be buried today,' he growled.

He could see her anger was quickly crumbling. She was struggling, choking on emotions and words he didn't want to hear.

‘Why now? Why now are you being kind?’ Grief filled her voice.

An image of a slender body wrapped in white and lying against green leaves flashed before him. He abruptly let go of her elbow. She lost her balance, but this time he did not touch her.

‘I will bury your dead,’ he repeated, his voice cold. ‘But do not mistake what I do for kindness.’

He drove the weak spade through the tilled earth. The blade wobbled, but did not break. He could feel her standing behind him, but this time she did not interrupt him.

Chapter Seven

It was late in the day when Gaira stood on the crest of the valley’s hill. It was her third time to do so, but this time she had a purpose. She clenched the greenery she had gathered for the graves.

Where she stood, she could see the garden of graves and the lake just beyond. Her eyes did not linger on the landscape, but on the man working below.

In the heat of the day, he had taken off his clothes and wore just his braies as she had seen the English peasants do in the fields. But this man was no peasant.

He dug with a spade and toiled at her request, but he held himself as a man used to commanding. Maybe it was the tilt of his head, his shoulders thrown back, or his sword gleaming by his feet.

He dug deep into the dirt and threw it off to the side. Each

rugged cord of his muscles was defined by each movement he made. There wasn't an ounce of waste on him and he was thick from his neck to his calves. A woman could trace his sinews with ease.

She felt a curious pull and her fingers were tingling again. She didn't understand the tingling now, but she knew it wasn't nervousness.

She focused on his more disagreeable features: the unruly length of his hair, the scruffiness of his beard, the flat scars peppering his body from his neck down and along his arms. But it was no use. His body pleased her.

'Nothing but a ragabash loun you are, Gaira of Colquhoun.' She had more important matters than noticing Robert of Dent was a fine-looking man.

Irritated, she took her eyes off Robert and saw new graves were dug and filled. He had even worked on the few graves she'd started. They were deeper now, the bodies more protected. In less than a day, he was done.

He was a contrary man. She had begged him, pleaded with him, but he hadn't taken the spade until she had given up. He'd agreed to help and she still didn't understand why.

And he had done it far more quickly than she would have been able to. She could only hope it was quick enough; that she had time to make it to her brothers before they were caught by her betrothed. There was a chance of making it. But she still needed Robert's help.

She tried not to think about his reluctance to bury her dead. Surely he would stay now and help them the rest of the way.

Shifting the greenery in her arms, she carefully sidestepped down the steep hill. Slipping, her foot hit a rock and she stumbled, scattering branches everywhere.

‘Artless and bootless.’ She angrily picked up each branch and leaf and tucked them into the crook of her arm. ‘That’s what you are. In more ways than one.’

She slid backward until the slope became flat and then she whirled around. Robert stood a hand’s breadth from her. Startled, she stumbled again, branches flew and her body slid against his.

Her world was instantly, aggressively the smell of hot male and cedar and the feel of sweat-covered skin. Her fingers clawed down shoulder muscles she’d gawked at all day. Her breasts burned, her legs tangled. She teetered and pressed harder for support.

Robert inhaled, sharp, as if he’d been dropped into an icy lake. He ripped himself away.

She lost her balance. Strong arms yanked around her waist before her face hit the ground.

Greatly irritated and embarrassed, she flexed her foot. ‘Ach! ’Tis not further damaged. Nae thanks to—’

She couldn’t finish as she met his gaze.

Gaze was too tame a word. She felt pinned by brown eyes moving over her face as though she were a feast laid out before a starving man. She felt him taking in each and every one of her

considerable freckles, her too-wide mouth and her unfeminine chin.

She was consciously aware of her raw-boned frame, her small breasts, the gangly length of her legs. The tingling in her fingers was spreading to the rest of her body. Rapidly. And back again.

His arms, arms she had been admiring only moments before, wrapped more tightly around her, cradled her, began to lift her.

She soaked up the thickness of his eyelashes as they shadowed the hard planes of his cheekbones, the cluster of tiny scars disappearing into his beard along the right of his jaw, the fullness of his lower lip.

He was going to kiss her; she knew it. She parted her lips to take in air.

Then he put her down and took a huge step away.

Humiliation swept through her. She stared at the pebbles around her feet. Braving the year-long seconds between them, she finally thought of something to say.

‘You’re done?’ she asked.

‘Almost.’ He picked up the spade and started to flatten some of graves.

She glanced at him. He wasn’t looking at her. Which was good. She was feeling too raw from his rejection.

‘What do you do with those branches?’ he asked.

The greenery from birch branches, twigs and fern leaves lay as scattered as her thoughts.

Frowning, she concentrated hard before she remembered.

‘They’re to honour the graves. I wanted to give them more than just dirt.’ He didn’t help her as she picked up the scattered branches. ‘Let them know they were—’

She couldn’t finish the thought. It hurt too much to think of her sister. Pained too much to remember how the children had lost their parents. She tiptoed over the graves and placed the branches and greenery over them. She was glad she could hide her face while she arranged the branches. But it didn’t take long. She didn’t have much.

Now she only had the living to worry about. And that included herself. At least until her body stopped feeling this longing for a stranger and her heart stopped feeling this foolish hurt.

She brushed the back of her hands across her cheeks. She didn’t know what to say to him.

‘I prepared the food,’ she said when she could bear the silence no more.

He didn’t answer and she looked up. He was looking at her decorated graves, his brow furrowed, his cheeks hollowed out. He stuck the spade into the ground with unnecessary force, his eyes not meeting hers.

She hesitated before walking back to the camp. He followed her, but when she stumbled at the top of the hill, he did not help her.

* * *

Grief, anger and lust coursed through Robert’s body as he followed Gaira to the camp. The decorated graves were a painful

reminder of his past. His grief crashed into his lust. The feelings could not be more different. Hot, cold, pain, pleasure. His anger at feeling anything at all underlined everything.

Worse, his years of abstinence mocked him as he followed Gaira up the hill. He tried to look at the countryside around him, but the slope of the green hills were weak substitutes for the fire of Gaira's multiple-plaited hair.

He watched as each plait's swing pointed to every female detail of her: the tapering of her waist, the flare of her hips, the curvature of her buttocks, the lean strength of her long, long legs.

His desire for the woman was too complicated and the situation was difficult enough. He had let Hugh know where he was going, but he was late to return to camp. It was good her dead were buried because so were his obligations to her.

'It is getting late,' he said. 'If you don't mind, I'll keep camp again tonight.'

She didn't break her stride. 'Aye.'

'I'll try not to wake the children when I leave in the morning.'

She stopped so suddenly, he almost walked into her back. When she whirled, her plaits slashed like tiny ropes against his arms and hands.

'What do you mean when you leave in the morning?' she asked, one eyebrow raised.

'I told my men I would be gone for no more than one day. I have been gone for almost two. If I do not return soon, they will come to check on me.'

A crease began in the middle of her brow. 'Tomorrow I was taking the children and returning to my brothers on Colquhoun land. It is north up the Firth of Clyde.'

He did not see how this pertained to him leaving in the morning, but he knew well where the Firth of Clyde was.

'That is miles north and across cold water,' he pointed out. 'You and the children couldn't possibly make it that far.'

She did not question why an Englishman would have such accurate knowledge of Scottish territory. 'That is the plan.'

He turned more fully towards her, waiting for her to finish, to comment their next of kin would be here soon and it would be best if he left as soon as possible.

But all she did was look pointedly at him, as though she was waiting for him to say something. He did want to say something. A blind man could see the danger in her plan.

'You'll never make it with one horse,' he said. 'Flora is so slender and slight in body and spirit, you can practically see through her. Alec and Maisie are too young for such a trek on horseback.' He took a step closer to her. 'What if you run out of oatcakes for Maisie—what will she eat? Creighton will not speak—what if he spies danger, but will not warn?'

She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times. She looked as though she had no idea how to reply to him. He started to walk past her.

She did not move. 'You are so good at telling me what cannot and should not be done. You have nae say here. Alec may be

small, but his determination is strong.’ Her fists clenched at her sides. ‘Maisie’s teeth may still be coming in, but she has some and if we run out of oatcakes, we can grind the meat we have and mix it with water. I’ll make sure she doesn’t starve.’

She took a couple of steps away as if to distance herself from him and released her fists. ‘As for Flora and Creighton, I suspect they were nae always mute and weak. I believe your soldiers had something to do with that, but they survived; they were smart and quick enough to protect Alec, too.’

The sun was setting behind her, making her hair look licked with fire. The whisky colour of her eyes was shaded a golden tawny. She was all flared anger and determination and she was magnificent. He could not keep from wondering what her hair would look like unbound, what shade her eyes would go when she was feeling emotions other than anger. He could not help feeling a fool for noticing.

‘They’ll make it,’ she confirmed. ‘They’ve grown up despite my trying to protect them.’

She took another step closer to him and he could smell the fragrance of her hair, a mixture of greenery and something sweet, like some berry he’d never tasted.

He tried to focus his thoughts on the children. ‘You’ve come to care for them,’ he said.

‘Aye!’

‘Surely they have kin who would come for them.’

‘Do you think I haven’t thought of that?’ She waved her arms

at him. 'Flora says she has some, but she doesn't know where. Alec's too young to know otherwise.'

'And Maisie?'

'I know whose kin she belongs to,' she said. 'This conversation doesn't matter. I need to get them to my brothers. It is the only place where I know they will be taken care of.'

He could hardly argue with her on where the children would be safe. It wasn't as if he could take her back to the English camp, even if she and the children wanted to. The distance to her brother's land might be dangerous, but he knew of no other place for them, far or near. Still, he repeated himself.

'You'll never make it.'

She stepped closer to him, until she was right under his nose, and punched him in the chest. 'Oh, aye, we will and you're going to help.'

Chapter Eight

All sound was suddenly suctioned out of the air. No, that wasn't right, because she heard the sound of a bee buzzing past them, the rustle of the wind through the grass. It was just Robert who was quiet.

His eyes never wavered from her; his arms hung almost unnaturally by his sides. Had he heard her?

'No...' he breathed.

She clamped down on her quick anger. He had heard her. And his unwillingness shouldn't have surprised her. 'Aye, you are. Why did you come if not to do something for a village your

fellow soldiers massacred?

He didn't say anything. She took a step away from him. Guilt for his country wasn't motivating him. She would have to try another tactic.

'The children aren't safe. They must get to my brothers to receive the care they need. You're right, we'll never make it alone. But with your help, your supplies, your horse, we will.'

He still said nothing.

Her anger was quickly drowning in her panic. What if he didn't help? Could this man, could *any* man, really just walk away?

'Where are your feelings?' she accused.

Something moved in his eyes, a dark shadow that left a strange ache in her chest. She suddenly wanted to soothe him and that didn't make any sense.

She pressed her fingers under her eyes. It could not be his feelings, but her own making her heart ache. It had to be. He had no feelings, while she was rapidly losing control of hers—losing control of her pride, too. But she'd gladly beg if it would get him to *move*.

'You inding shirrow weevil, can't you see I wouldn't ask if I dinna have to? You're our only hope!'

To think she had been glad when he arrived. He had barely helped her before and now he wasn't even answering her request.

'Auntie Gaira! I saved you some rabbit!'

Alec, his wild hair flying behind him, bounded towards her.

Her heart lifted at the sight of his skips and jumps. Despite everything, children were resilient. And in that, she knew they'd make it. If only the children had a chance.

Stepping away from Robert, she crouched in readiness for Alec to join her. It was so natural, so easy. And there was her answer. They did have a chance. They had her. And with that, she stopped her doubting. Feeling as wild as his hair, she grabbed Alec's loose hand. Alec squealed and tried to get away.

'Oh, you saved me some rabbit, did you? Is this the rabbit you saved me? It looks so succulent.'

'Nae, not me, Auntie Gaira. I'm not the rabbit!'

She poked at him, pretending she was testing his fatness. 'Oh, you're a tasty morsel, you are.'

She began to smack her lips and Alec screamed louder. His eyes widened with delight and mock fear.

She could feel Robert watching her, but didn't spare him a glance. Instead she tossed her plaits and pulled Alec behind her as they ran towards the camp.

* * *

The camp was quiet, except for the slight crackle of the fire and the few insects and nocturnal creatures that scattered and rustled the leaves and twigs around them.

Gaira wrapped her arms tighter around her and watched as the fire's flames dimmed. She could not sleep. Her thoughts wouldn't let her alone. And they, just like the fire, dimmed and scattered in different directions.

She thought of the children, now fast asleep, and how she was getting them to her clan. She thought of what was to become of them and her if they were caught by her betrothed.

She thought of Robert, who hadn't said a word since Alec had interrupted them. But she had been aware of him watching her, watching the children. Watching her.

She had no idea what his thoughts were when she returned to camp and had played with Maisie, combed Flora's hair and made sure Creighton ate enough rabbit to fill his growing body.

She tried not to care about his thoughts as she cleaned up dinner, banked the fire and wrapped the children in her shawl to keep them warm in the night's chill.

She no longer felt frustrated at him or even hurt. She just felt confused. He acted and behaved like no man she had ever known.

He had seemed almost angry at her asking. Not angry because her request was an inconvenience, but angry because her request had brought him pain. But instead of giving her reasons, he had watched her all evening.

Even though he was on the other side of the fire, she still felt Robert watching her, which meant, he, too, was not asleep. That knowledge, probably more than anything, was why she still couldn't get to sleep.

Restless, she sat and began to unplait her hair. It had been cleaned before she had carefully plaited it, but the plaits pulled at her head and she wanted to be free from their confinement.

She had not heard him move, but rather she felt him move. It

was as if he had sat up, his watchful eyes now intent, focused.

On her.

Suddenly uncoordinated, she unwound her hair with uneven tugs until it was loose enough to comb.

With trembling fingers she massaged her scalp to relieve the sharp prickles. But Robert was watching her and the prickles spread, tingled across her sensitive shoulders and lower through her body and legs.

Shaking, she grabbed her comb. Raising it, she stroked the comb through her thick hair to unravel the coils.

She heard Robert stand and move behind her. But he did not speak and neither did she.

The air around her grew warm, thick, and her heart began to beat in an unfamiliar rhythm. She stroked the comb through her hair again, letting the teeth bite from her scalp through the ends and out.

He inhaled sharply.

For a moment, she held the comb suspended, then, lowering it, she whispered, 'I'm sorry I woke you.'

'I have questions.'

His response was such a direct contrast to what she was feeling. She waited, but he didn't say anything more and he didn't return to his side of the fire.

Unsure what else to do, she slid the comb through the rest of her hair, setting the coils free. But it wasn't enough to loosen the tension and she massaged her scalp, fingering her way through

the heavy curls. Her hair felt wilder somehow, her fingers noticing textures she'd never felt before. Just as she'd never felt a man's gaze as she felt Robert's gaze. Just as she'd never felt her breath quicken as if she'd burned herself and kept her hand in the fire nonetheless. She felt like her hair, freed but still coiled.

'How did you find the children?' Robert's voice was hoarse, unfocused.

Unbalanced, it took all her concentration to understand the question. He wanted to know about the children. Not this...unknown breathlessness.

She could talk about the children. He had helped her bury the dead and hunt more food. Her breath returned to normal. He deserved some of the truth.

'I arrived maybe only a few hours after the English left,' she replied.

He sat down beside her, his legs bent, his arms and hands hanging loosely between his knees. He was not touching or facing her, but it did not matter. She felt him beside her.

'In my hurry down the hill, I hurt my ankle, but I still walked through the valley.' She did not want to describe what she had seen. He had been to the valley, he knew what was there.

'I heard Maisie before I saw her. She was in the last hut and under some torn blankets and an upturned chest. They were unwashed horse blankets. I guess the English dinna want to bother with them.'

Even though she had not seen them, she had no doubt it was

the English who had destroyed Doonhill. She clenched the comb and let the sharp points press into her palm.

‘I grabbed her, held her. She had been my only hope. There was nothing else...salvageable.’ She breathed in raggedly. ‘I went back up the hill to get my spooked horse. He was near a small copse of trees. By then my ankle hurt and I was grateful he had not gone any further.’

‘That was when I saw movement in the trees. I was scared—I knew the English had just left. But it was the children. Flora holding Alec’s hand and Creighton standing with his fists at his sides.’

‘You did not mention your kin.’

She shoved the comb back into her satchel. ‘Aye, I was coming to visit my sister, Irvette, her husband and their daughter.’

‘Maisie,’ he said, no question in his voice. ‘Maisie is their daughter.’

‘Aye.’ There was no need to hide the truth.

‘You buried your sister and her husband.’

She nodded. At night she had buried them and so many others. It was at night she had felt the heavy weight of both the living and the dead depending on her. Only then did she allow herself to feel her grief and her anger.

‘I couldn’t leave Irvette like that and I wouldn’t leave her husband, either.’

‘You stayed to bury the rest because of the children?’

‘Partly, but that’s not all.’ She tried to close out the vision of

the night and her long trek down the hill, where the wind did not blow so hard and the moonlight obscured the remains of the village.

‘I have nightmares now. Not just because of what I saw, but —’ She stopped. It had been long, gruesome work moving the bodies to the garden. ‘I could hear the dead urging me to dig, you ken? I dug so hard the blisters on my hands broke, but the pain was sharp and dulled the ache in my ankle, allowing me to work faster.

‘Yet I couldn’t dig fast enough. Even in the cool of the night, I could smell the bodies and the flies swarmed. I moved, but the flies stayed on me as if they were waiting for me, as well.’

She shook her head. ‘But that wasn’t the worst. The worst was the sound the bodies made when they thudded into the grave I made.’

His gaze remained on the fire and she saw only his profile. She didn’t know what he was thinking.

‘I couldn’t make the graves deep enough to silence the sound,’ she said. ‘And it wasn’t the only sound they made.’

His brow furrowed, but he did not stop her speech.

‘I know you’ll think me mad, but I heard their voices, faint, coming from some other place, but loud enough for me to hear.’

She had to say it. ‘They thanked me,’ she confided. These were her most private thoughts, so personal she hadn’t thought she’d tell anyone, but somehow she knew he would understand what she spoke. ‘Thanked me for taking care of their children when

they nae longer could.'

Robert's hands jerked, but he remained silent. If he wasn't sitting next to her, she would swear he wasn't listening. How could he not hear what she was saying? Were her fears so easily dismissed?

'But to what end?' She gave a sort of hiccupped sob. 'You're not even going to help us.'

She was not mortified that her voice broke. She was beyond any pride. She *was* desperate. And afraid. And grieving. And he was going to leave her like this.

He breathed in raggedly. 'This afternoon, I told you I was not helping you.'

She did not need reminders of the afternoon's conversation.

'But Alec came and you played with him,' he continued. 'Then you played with Maisie, too, and cared for Creighton and Flora. You smiled at them, gave them affection and yet, I knew you were distressed.'

'Ach, there's nae sense in self-pity.' She batted at her cheeks and wished the tell-tale sign of any weakness would go away. 'I've never shirked a chore in my life. And the children mean more than that to me. Much more. I made them a promise and I'm keeping it, with or without your help.'

'I'll take you to the nearest village.' His voice was rushed with the release of his breath. It was as if the words escaped before he could stop them. 'No further,' he said more firmly. 'It'll be enough to get you an extra horse and further supplies.'

Instead of relief, her heart stabbed and tingled. He had given her some reprieve from her hardship ahead of her, but she knew it had been reluctant. It just added guilt to her already heavy heart. But she was in no position to refuse. She nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of her hands.

‘Aye,’ she whispered. ‘Only to the nearest village.’

He stood and moved as if he would leave, but then he stopped.

‘Gaira?’

She craned her neck to look up at him. His back was almost to her and he was looking over his shoulder. His body was fine and broad. She could see how his tunic stretched taut over the blades of his arm muscles, how his waist tapered to hose that were wrapped around legs sculpted from endurance and strength. The dim flickering fire did not allow her to see all the features of his face, but it did not matter. She felt his eyes, felt the return of the heat in them.

She felt her own body respond. She felt the sluggish heat of her blood, the shallow breath fill her lungs. Her clothing felt tight and confining.

It had to be her grief that left her feeling this raw, this open. She felt vulnerable to him, to thoughts he would not say.

‘Aye?’ she finally answered.

He did not touch her, but he might as well have been caressing her as the fire did. His eyes moved as if they were his hands. Not soft caresses of sight, but rough, consuming strokes of heat.

‘While I am with you,’ he spoke, his voice firm, ‘do not unbind

your hair again.'

She hoped the dim fire hid her blush.

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