

STOLEN BY A HIGHLAND ROGUE - EPILOGUE

ADAMINA YOUNG

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HIGHLANDS' RECKLESS HEARTS

Book #1 (This book)
Stolen by a Highland Rogue

Book #2
Overthrowing the Usurper Laird

Book #3
Falling for a Highland Assassin

Book #4
Reviving Her Highland Spirit

EPILOGUE

*S*ix months later...

A letter arrived at a modest little house that smelled delightfully of baking bread. The boy who delivered it handed it to the baker's wife and received a bun for his trouble. It was a sweet little cottage, nothing impressive, on the outskirts of a village in Murray territory. Although perhaps it belonged to someone else now. The Murray lands had been torn apart after the death of its laird and the disappearance of his two daughters.

Some of the villagers complained about the daughters, calling them undutiful and unnatural. They ought to have married for the good of the clan, the villagers said.

The baker's wife said nothing. She knew the truth, and they would never understand. She didn't care to make them understand. For the first time in a long time, she was safe and happy. It was good to know that those girls had escaped at last. She could only pray that they were happy.

She'd held their mother's hand as the woman died and listened to her cursing her husband and promising to watch her children from wherever she arrived. In Glenda's experience, that was a woman who kept her word.

She waited until the boy was gone, then hurried inside, closing the door. Her husband, Peter, was busy in the kitchen. He could read—he'd always been a clever boy; she remembered that from her youth. He was a few years younger than her, and she had assumed that he would be snapped up by some local woman.

But no. He'd waited for her. The baker's wife was so, so glad that he had.

The fate of the girls had weighed heavy on her mind, though. Were they safe? Were they at peace? Was it all some hideous misunderstanding and the girls were buried in the woods somewhere?

She'd prayed daily for a letter like this one, and now here it was. Here it was, and the baker's wife could read well enough to read it for herself.

Maybe she'd spent the past few months agonizing for nothing, and the girls were safe and well. Or maybe the girls had met torturous ends that would haunt her until the day she died. Was ignorance better?

No, the baker's wife didn't like ignorance. She liked to *know*. And know, she would.

She sat down beside the fire, taking a few deep breaths to compose herself. This was it, then. The moment of truth. Or perhaps she was getting worked up about nothing. Again.

She tore open the envelope and began to read. Her eyes moved slowly but steadily over the words, the shapes still foreign and unfamiliar to her. Strange, but oddly familiar now.

Dear Glenda,

I hope you can find someone to read this to you, or that you've had the opportunity to learn. I know you always

wanted to learn, I'm sorry I never got around to teaching you - I suppose I never will, now.

I suppose you've heard of what happened. About my da being dead, murdered. I heard that there was a scramble for the position of the laird. I don't know who won. I don't think I'd care to.

I'd love to tell you where I am, Glenda, but I don't dare risk it.

You see, it's not just me who's wanted by powerful people - my husband is, too.

That's right, I said husband. I'm married to a wonderful man. You'd like him, Glenda. He and I didn't get off on the right foot to start with (and isn't that a long story for another time), but I love him more than life, and he loves me.

I'm happy. I never thought I'd be happy.

Lyla's happy too. She's apprenticed to the apothecary - a real apothecary, a lady, not one of those quacks you saw in the Keep. Lyla's got a real talent for it, too. People already come to her for treatment and medicine. I'm so proud of her.

As for me, my life is simpler and less dramatic. I'm happy with that. We've got a little croft house and some land. Sometimes it feels as if I'm holding my breath, waiting for something terrible to happen. Maybe it'll come, maybe it won't.

I heard you got married, to a baker, no less. Well, you always did like your pastries and bread - I hope you're happy. If it's the same man who used to write to you when you were with me, I know he's loved you for a long time. I wish you all happiness and the best.

That's all I've got time for now. I daren't tell you any more details. Maybe one day that'll change. Just know that I'm safe and happy, and I hope you are too.

All my love,

Sola

P.S. One last thing.

Go down the lonely forest road, as if you were going to McAlister territory. On the left, somewhere along the road, not too far in, there's an old carriage broken up and shoved in a ditch. Look carefully, I'm told that it's well hidden. There'll be a box there, with some clothes and coin in it. Some jewels too, if I remember rightly. My Ma's books are in there, too.

I always meant to go back for them, but that's Murray land, and I don't dare go back. I wish I had my Ma's books, but I don't miss the rest. You can have it, maybe you'll get some use from them. Besides, I have new books now. Bryce bought them for me as a wedding gift. He says he'll get more for our first anniversary, which is in six months' time.

I think my ma would be pleased with that, don't you? Me getting my own books?

I hope so. I really do, Glenda.



Bryce opened bleary eyes, squinting against the sun pouring in. He yawned, pulling his arms up in a luxurious stretch.

It was a warm spring day, unseasonably warm for this part of the country. The light filtered easily through the window, where light patchwork curtains flapped in the light breezes. Those curtains were a present from Jack, matching a beautiful dress he made for Sola and a cloak for Bryce. Marion might be the apothecary in their home, but Jack had the talent for making things.

Sola was still sleeping beside him, her back turned to him. She was naked, the sheets pooling around her waist and exposing her back. Bryce rolled over, pressing his cheek to the warm skin of her shoulder blades.

“Morning, love,” he murmured, and received a sleepy mumble in reply.

“Better get up. It’s market day. Lyla has a few dozen boxes of things to sell at the market. Odd little herbs in funny greenish water. Ye know, those tiny little vial thingies.”

“Aye, I know,” Sola mumbled, making no move to get up. “They sell like hotcakes. People love them. Come from all over to buy them, swear by them.”

“Well, we have to help her load them onto the cart and get them there. Besides, Simon and James are setting aside some time from their life of crime to come back and visit later today. Maybe we’ll see some of the gang. I hope we see Eyre. I missed that mute little bastard. Come on, up ye get.”

“Five more minutes.”

“It’s always five more minutes.” Bryce pressed a kiss to her neck. “Up ye get.”

“Well, Marion and Jack will probably get us breakfast. Lyla will have been up before dawn, but she’ll still be waddling around the forest, talking to the trees or something. Listening to mushrooms, maybe.”

Bryce snorted. “Listening to mushrooms?”

Sola rolled onto her side and flashed him a sleepy smile.

“Aye. She once gave me a tea with some mushrooms in it. She said it would help me relax. Well, I was seeing things, Bryce. Are ye laughing?”

“No,” Bryce said, laughing. “What sort of things?”

“A weird fox person, and the sky was pink. Oh, and the mushrooms talked to me. I remember trying to eat them, and Lyla panicked and slapped me away, saying that they were poisonous. She didn’t give me any more after that.”

Bryce suppressed a grin. “I’ll have to try that tea sometime.”

“Over my dead body. I was sick for hours when it wore off. I feel queasy just thinking about it. My point is, I don’t feel very inclined to help my

wretched sister carrying her little vials to market after that whole debacle.”

“That,” Bryce said, leaning forward to kiss her, “is not very charitable. Where’s yer sisterly feeling?”

“It died with those mushrooms,” Sola said grimly.

She relaxed into a smile as Bryce continued kissing her. She deepened the kiss, sliding her arms around his neck.

“Ye were right about one thing,” Bryce murmured. “We do have a little while before we need to get up.”

“We’d better make the most of it, then,” Sola said, a slow smile spreading across her face.



Somewhere, miles and miles away, in a cozy little house that smelled of baking bread and good things, a stocky woman sat with her feet propped up by the hearth. She was the baker’s wife. That was who she was these days. Her husband, the baker, hummed in the kitchen as he baked bread for the day. He was a cheerful man, always smiling and laughing and smelling clean of bread and soap. He leaned over to

hand her a corner of the bread, and she popped it in her mouth, chewing thoughtfully. He waited on her opinion with raised brows.

“Good?” he queried.

“Good,” she answered with a smile, and he grinned back.

The baker’s wife went back to reading the letter she’d just received. It was slow going, but she was getting there. She still had to read most sentences a few times to get their meaning, but that wasn’t bad for someone who couldn’t read at all only a few months ago. A smile split her face as she read. She wondered if her old mistress was looking down at her and her two daughters right now.

She hoped so. She really, really hoped so.



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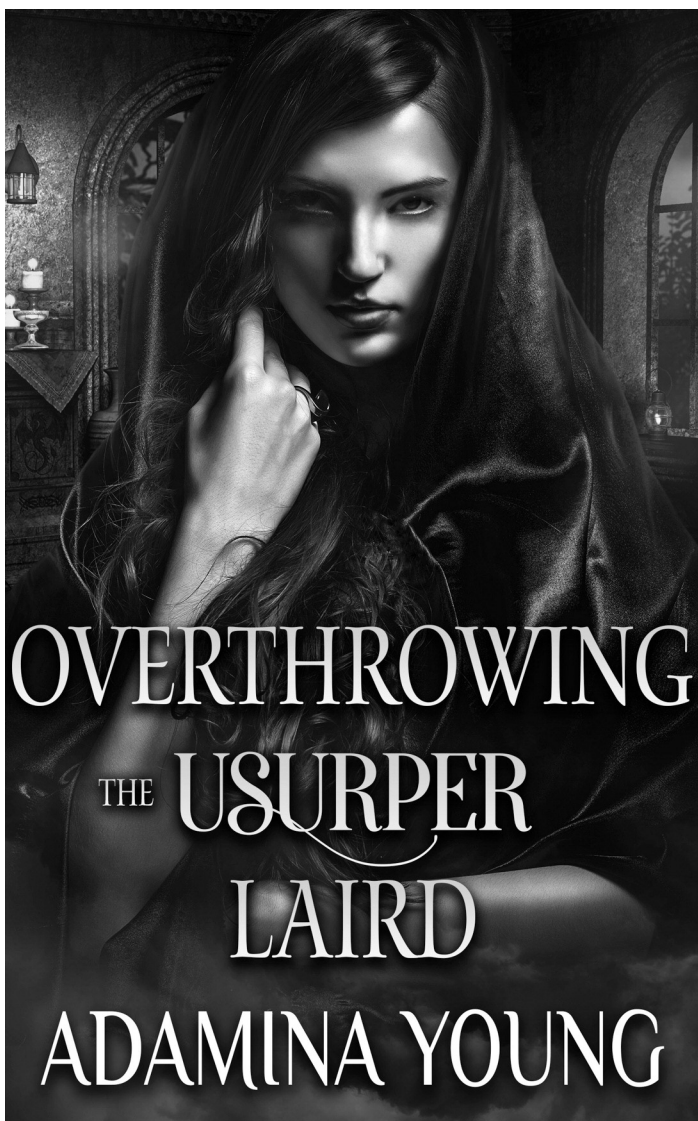
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OVERTHROWING
THE USURPER
LAIRD
ADAMINA YOUNG

PROLOGUE

*D*ear James,

On the worst nights, when the wind howls and the rain comes pouring down, I think of ye and your men out there in the forest, and I hope you're safe, warm, and dry. I feel almost guilty about staying in this warm, comfortable cottage while you're out there risking your life.

Ye probably know that it's just me and Marion now. Jack is gone, and both of us grieve him every day. He was like a father to me. A real father, not the facade of a father that Sola and I had. Marion and I push on - our village needs us. People come from miles around to get healed by Marion, and I'm making a name for myself, too.

I hear the power struggle for the position of Laird Murray goes on, so I'd suggest ye avoid those lands for a while. Bryce says that it's lawless there, and while I do feel guilty, I believe that my Da reaped what he sowed, and what he sowed was cruelty, violence, and selfishness. His people let him continue. They revered him, and now they're paying the price.

But I don't want to talk about that. Ye saw enough of the inside of my Da's dungeons to guess at what sort of man he is. I'm writing to ye because I've been thinking about the way things are. Sola says that I should let it rest - that if Bryce can let go of his rightful inheritance and be content, I should certainly be happy with the way things are.

Well, I can't.

Ye ought to be Laird McAlister. It's your rightful place.

Well, it's Bryce's, technically, but I know he's never wanted to be laird.

Ye do, though, don't you? It's hard to imagine it's three years since ye and Bryce rescued us from Da and Sola's fate in the McAlister clan, and I still think about it every day. I know ye said that I owe ye nothing, and ye see it as

your duty to help those in need, but I can't stop thinking about it. About you.

I'm going to help ye take your rightful position as Laird McAlister.

The truth is, James, I love you. I wish I'd told ye how I felt before now, but of course, it's too late now. Sola always used to say "if wishes were fishes, we'd never be hungry". Wishing is just a waste of time if ye don't do anything about it. I want ye to be happy, I want to save ye as ye saved me. I'm scared, but I can't back down now. I won't. I'll help you, James. I'll do whatever I can to make you Laird.

It's not just for you, though. We border with McAlister land, and we hear terrible stories of his cruelty, his bad leadership, and his mother's poisonous influence. People are afraid, and they're suffering. I just can't let it go on, and I know ye could make a difference.

I hope this letter reaches ye safely. I hope you're well.

Your Friend,

Lyla

. . .

Lyla sat back, looking over the letter she'd just written.

It was another rainy, cold night, the wind howling around their remote cottage. It was somewhere near midnight, and Marion was long asleep.

There was only one bedroom in the cottage, and Marion had set up a thick curtain bisecting the room so that Lyla could have her own space. The kitchen and living area of the cottage was dominated by the large fireplace where they cooked and made their medicines and herbs. There were bushels of herbs drying on the kitchen table, waiting to be hung from the ceiling or ground into pastes.

There were countless shelves around the walls, stocked with countless jars, bottles, and vials, all containing various ground herbs, flowers, roots, pastes, teas, and tinctures. When Lyla had first started living in the cottage and studying medicine under Marion, she'd thought she had no chance of ever learning all of those ingredients by heart, let alone their uses.

Well, three years later, Lyla could pick out ingredients for any potion or medicine she liked. There was woundwort for fevers, newt's tongue (which Marion

had told her was also called adder's tongue and dog's tongue, depending on what area ye visited) for infection, and many, many more.

Lyla had never known about the world of medicine. Back at Murray keep, the apothecaries laid a heavy blanket of mystery over the whole thing, and their medicines often did more harm than good. Fools, the lot of them.

The wind howled down the chimney, and the dying fire flickered. Lyla eyed the letter she'd written so painstakingly, and sighed. She had no idea where to send it. James could be anywhere within a hundred-mile radius, maybe more. Even if he was close by, she could never get the letter to him.

Even if she could, she wouldn't. It was too dangerous. McAlister likely knew that his three half brothers - Bryce, James, and Simon - still lived, and he'd never rest until his rule as laird was secure. A letter like this could damn them all.

Sighing, Lyla tossed her letter into the flames. She watched it burn, making sure every word was reduced to ashes. She stayed there for a few moments, long after every trace of the letter was gone.

There was a hollow place inside her that couldn't be filled, and Lyla was running out of ways to fill it.

Better get to bed. Long day tomorrow, in all likelihood, Lyla thought tiredly. She got to her feet and tiptoed into the bedroom, careful not to wake Marion.

She slid into her cold bed on the far side of the room, curling into a ball and waiting for her body heat to warm her bed. Lyla closed her eyes tightly and wished for sleep.

Lyla was awoken what felt like only minutes later. Marion shook her by the shoulder until Lyla opened bleary, sleep-gritted eyes.

“Up ye get,” Marion murmured, “There are some people from McAlister land here. They need help, four of them.”

Lyla groaned, stretching. As soon as her limbs slid out from under the cozy warm quilt, she felt the cold rush in. She could tell by the light in the room that outside, it was the cold, gray pre-dawn.

“Just once I’d like to sleep until I woke up by myself,” Lyla mumbled.

Marion smiled. “Ye shouldn’t have become a healer, then. Hurry up now.”

“Aye, I’ll be there in a minute or two.”

Marion gave her an approving smile and left.

Lyla had never been able to work out how old Marion was. Somewhere between fifty and sixty, in all likelihood. She wound her white hair into a braid and twisted the braid into a knot at the base of her neck. Lately, Lyla had started doing the same thing with her own long brown hair. Not only was it a convenient way of pinning her hair up out of her face, but it made Marion and Lyla look more like mother and daughter. Or grandmother and daughter, however ye wanted to look at it. It stopped people from asking awkward questions about who Lyla was and where she’d come from. They simply assumed that Marion and Lyla were relatives, and stopped caring.

Lyla didn’t bother to change, only pulled on her boots and draped a shawl over her nightdress. She could hear murmured voices in the other room, and gasps and wincings of pain.

She pulled back the curtain and stepped into the kitchen to assess their new patients.

There were two men, a woman, and a child. The child was more or less unhurt, only blue with cold. No doubt under Marion's instruction, the woman was hugging her child to her chest, rubbing at his body with her hands, trying to get the blood flowing again.

"Can I not bring him closer to the fire?" the woman said, her voice high with panic. "It makes sense to bring him close to the fire."

"Not till he's warmer," Marion said, not turning around. "Too much heat at once will kill him."

The woman pursed her lips. "That sounds nonsensical."

"Well, it isn't," Lyla snapped. "Do as she says."

The woman shot a glance of dislike at her but wisely fell silent. Lyla assessed their patients.

This was a familiar scene - McAlister tenants running for their lives, desperate to find a better life somewhere else - anywhere else. But McAlister common folk weren't allowed to leave without

permission from the laird, so they would be hunted down by McAlister soldiers. Some were killed before they crossed the border, no doubt, but the ones that made it would burst out only a few miles away from Marion's home, if they were traveling west, and would be discreetly directed to Marion if they asked for a healer.

The woman was bloodied and beaten, with a makeshift bandage wrapped around her upper arm. The left side of her face was bruised and swollen, one eye swollen almost completely shut. She'd need some salve, and the injury on her arm would need looking at, but she'd be fine for now.

One of the men had been stabbed, by the looks of it. He lay on his back in front of the fire, groaning, while Marion eyed his injuries. She'd prepared some herbs to make the bleeding wounds clot and was currently trying to clean out the injuries. Lyla hoped that the man didn't have a punctured organ. They were healers, not magicians.

"Ye see to him," Marion said, jerking her head towards the second man.

He had been shot twice in the back with arrows. Lyla knew that because the arrows were sticking straight

out of his back. He'd been lucky - arrows fired at his back could have punctured his lung or hit his spine.

Lyla moved over to him, and he eyed her nervously. He was around fifty, dark-haired and dark-eyed.

"Ye look a bit young to be a healer," he commented.

Lyla flashed a tightlipped smile. "And ye look a bit old to be doing something as dangerous as escaping McAlister land."

The man gave a huff of laughter that quickly faded to a groan of pain. "Good point."

"We escaped, didn't we?" the woman chimed in. "My name is..."

"No names," Marion said at once. "No offense - I don't wish to be impolite, but if anyone comes looking for ye, I'd rather not have anything to tell them."

The woman paled, swallowing hard. "Aye. Of course, of course."

"These need to come out," Lyla murmured, eyeing the arrows.

"Just pull them."

She chuckled. "No, that's a bad idea. It'll tear your flesh, make the wound much worse."

The man twisted, trying to look over his shoulder at the arrows sticking out of his own back. "What, then?"

"Have ye another shirt? I'll need to cut this one off."

"Aye, do what ye must."

Lyla moved quickly. She cut the shirt off his back, revealing flogging scars criss crossing his back. Oddly enough, that was a good sign - it showed that he healed well. She snapped off the arrows only an inch above the head, and the man gritted his teeth against the pain.

Marion had already taken out their tray of surgical implements - tweezers, knives, forceps, and other impressive-looking tools. She insisted on cleaning them in boiling water, piling them into a cauldron, and letting them boil for a minute or two. It seemed to work, with fewer infections than expected.

Lyla chose the tweezers, gently maneuvering the first one and then the other arrowhead out of the man's skin. To his credit, he barely flinched.

“Ye were lucky,” Lyla observed. “There could have been cloth fibers stuck in your wound. That sort of thing leads to a nasty infection.”

“But there isn’t?”

“No, it should heal nicely.”

The man gave a sigh of relief. The wounds bled again, but not too much for worry. Lyla smeared some Devil’s Ward on the wounds to fight against infection and some crushed heart flower petals to encourage healing. She bound it all up in a bandage, tying it tight.

“Keep this clean and dry,” she instructed. “Change the dressing within a few days, if ye can. Don’t move around too much, as it will make the wounds bleed again. Do ye have far to go?”

“We have somewhere to stay,” the man answered evasively. He didn’t say where, and Lyla didn’t ask.

She had time to rub salve on the woman’s bruises, change her bloody dressing, and give her a dew-feather tea for swelling, before Marion finished with the stabbed man. The child was warming up, looking around inquisitively, and Marion gestured for him to sit by the fire now.

The stabbed man sat up, clutching his side. "I don't know how to thank ye," he said hoarsely. "We have no money, but..."

"I don't take money from people who have none," Marion said brusquely.

"We have some food. Ye must take some for payment," the man said, nodding at the woman.

She scrambled for a sack left by the door, which Lyla hadn't noticed before. She took out a few potatoes, some carrots, and an empty burlap sack that would certainly come in handy. She hesitated, then took out a blue ribbon, offering it to Lyla.

Lyla chuckled. "We've not much need of ribbons here."

"Wait a moment," Marion said, reaching out and taking the ribbon. "If ye can spare it, we'll take it."

The woman smiled in relief. "We cannot spare much, but..."

"Whatever ye can spare is quite enough."

. . .

The sun was coming up as the four people limped away over the hill, disappearing into the distance. They wouldn't see them again.

Marion put away the potatoes, carrots, and burlap they'd been given while Lyla tidied away the herbs, potions, and implements they'd used.

"Ye did a fine job on the man and the woman, lass," Marion observed. "Ye are more than ready to take on patients of your own."

Lyla flushed with pride. "Thank ye, Marion. Still, everyone who comes here asks for ye."

"And soon enough they'll ask for ye, too. Now, come here. This ribbon is for you."

Lyla snorted. "Why do I need a ribbon?"

"It's pretty. Turn around."

Lyla obeyed and felt Marion bind up the ribbon around her braided knot of hair. It would be purely decorative, of course, but Lyla found herself wishing she knew what it looked like. She'd hardly given any thought to her appearance in the three years since she'd fled Murray keep. At the keep, she'd been preoccupied with her looks, dreaming only of the day

her father would marry her off to some laird, who she planned to promptly ensnare with her beauty.

It felt funny to think of it now. Lyla knew she was a good-looking girl, but her coloring was hardly outstanding. She had brown hair and blue eyes, a heart-shaped face, and full lips that she used to pout at herself in the mirrors. She was nineteen now, and every time she looked in the mirror it felt like a shock. Who was this older, more serious, more capable young woman who looked back? Why did she have a green smudge on her chin from some herbal paste or other? Were those *lavender* sprigs in her hair? There were no fine dresses, no maids to help with doing her hair, no perfumed baths.

It certainly didn't feel like Lyla Murray looking back.

"Do ye think we could snatch a few more hours' sleep?" Lyla asked, mostly to distract herself from musing on her own reflection.

"Ye will be lucky. Bryce and Sola are heading this way."

Lyla followed Marion's gaze and saw the familiar silhouettes of her sister and brother-in-law coming

up over the hill, and Bryce was clutching their new baby in his arms. Lyla sighed.

“No rest for the wicked, eh?”



Bryce perched on the edge of a stool, comically too big for his seat and too big for their kitchen. He watched every movement of Lyla's hands as she inspected the tiny, gurgling baby.

Sola seemed more relaxed, wandering around the kitchen and breathing in the scent of fresh herbs and greens.

“Is Marion not working today?” Bryce asked, trying to sound light and careless but not quite succeeding. His long, dark hair was tied back neatly, with tendrils escaping and falling around his face. His eyes were a blue-green, startlingly light in his face, shadowed by heavy black brows.

She wondered if James still kept his dark hair cropped short. Short hair would be more practical for a life in the forest, but where on earth would he get it cut?

It didn't matter. She ought to be concentrating on her baby niece, little Maggie, who gurgled and cooed, waving her chubby little hands at her auntie's questing fingers.

"It's nothing to worry about," Lyla said briskly. "It's not a fever. She's just teething. Here, rub some red wax leaf on her gums, that should soothe the pain."

"Are ye sure?" Bryce asked uncertainly. "What does Marion say?"

Lyla sighed. "She'll say the same thing I did. If ye want to wait for her to get back from feeding the chickens, then..."

"No, this is fine," Sola insisted. "Show some faith in her, Bryce."

Bryce rolled his eyes, smiling wryly at his wife. "Ye are right. I'm sorry, Lyla."

Lyla fiddled with the bottle of the crushed red wax leaf. "Have ye heard from the others? From... from James?"

This was clearly a sore point. Bryce's broad shoulders stiffened, and he got abruptly to his feet.

“No. We haven’t. I’ve not seen him in at least a month.”

Lyla chewed her lip. “Is he alright?”

“I don’t know. I trust the men he’s with, I just wish he’d give up being a bandit. It’s a dangerous life, and I should know.”

“Aye, but it’s how we met,” Sola chimed in.

Bryce chuckled. “I kidnapped ye, woman. It’s hardly the stuff of legends.”

Lyla got up abruptly, not wanting them to see the disappointment on her face. If James didn’t come back to visit his own brother, why would he come back to see her?

“I was just wondering, that’s all.”

“Well, our little cottage is too small and domestic for him,” Bryce said, the hurt evident in his voice. “He used to trail around behind me like some sort of adoring little dog, and now he thinks I’ve gone soft.”

Lyla said nothing. *We’ve all gone soft*, she thought.

“*A*re ye going to tell me what’s wrong, or shall I guess?”

Lyla ought to have known her sharp-eyed sister would know something was up. She pasted a friendly smile on her face and turned around from the water pump. The floors weren’t going to wash, and there were smears of blood and dirt on the kitchen floor from their visitors. Bryce and Sola would have noticed, of course, but they were used to strangers turning up at Marion and Lyla’s home at all hours of the day and night.

“What do ye mean?”

Sola was lounging against the side of the cottage, watching Lyla heave the rusty old water pump to fill a bucket.

“Ye seem off, somehow. And don’t think I don’t notice ye asking about James every time we come.”

Lyla chewed her lip. “Ye must worry about him.”

“Of course we do. Simon said right from the start that he wouldn’t stay here with us, and Simon says what he means, always. But James - well, James adored his big brother. I really did think we could get him to stay. But he won’t. We hardly see him from month’s end to month’s end, and every time he comes by he’s thinner and more exhausted. He looks ill, frankly. I know Bryce worries. There’s nothing we can do though.”

Lyla nodded. “That’s a pity.”

She thought for a moment that Sola had forgotten about Lyla being “off”. She should have known better.

“So, why are *ye* so preoccupied with James?” Sola asked archly, raising an eyebrow.

Lyla flushed. "I'm not."

"Don't play games with me. I know ye have a fancy for him. It's naught to be embarrassed about, he's a handsome man."

Lyla rolled her eyes. "Of course, *ye* would say that. Ye married his brother who looks exactly the same as him."

Sola chuckled. "Not *exactly* the same."

Lyla paused, biting her lip. "Sola, do ye ever feel... restless? I don't know how to describe it. Like your world is too small, and ye need something to happen, but ye don't know what?"

Sola's smile faded. "Aye, I used to feel like that, when we lived in the keep with Da. Like there was nowhere to go and nothing would ever change. I hated it."

Lyla nodded, swallowing. "I'm not comparing our life now to living in the keep. I love Marion, and I love my work. I just... it's not *fair*, Sola. We had four people come from McAlister land today. The soldiers had nearly killed them."

"This, again, Lyla? It's a shame, but there's nothing we could do."

"If Bryce would just..."

"Just what?" Sola's voice turned sharp. "Summon an army, and risk his life trying to kill his half-brother and become Laird McAlister, a position he doesn't even want?"

Lyla flushed, looking away. She'd struck a nerve. "I didn't mean..."

"Bryce is happy, Lyla. I don't think ye understand just how priceless contentment can be," Sola sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I sheltered ye from the worst of life at the keep. Ye don't understand how lucky we are here. We're safe, we're happy, and Bryce and I are *content*. I never dreamed I'd be so lucky as to be content."

"I didn't mean that Bryce should be laird," Lyla said, not entirely sure whether her sister believed her or not. "I just mean that something should change."

"Aye, it should," Sola shrugged. "But we're not the ones to change it. I'm sorry, Lyla."

They both heard Bryce calling in the distance, and Sola shrugged again.

“I have to go. I’ll see ye soon, Lyla. Be safe.”

Lyla forced a smile. She waddled to the front door with the heavy water pail in her hands, water slopping over the side, just in time to wave to Bryce and Sola as they disappeared over the hill. She stood there for a few moments, staring in the direction that they’d gone. If ye walked in that direction and kept walking, you’d eventually hit the border for McAlister land. The roads there were well guarded, but ye could slip in through the forests if ye knew the terrain and weren’t unlucky enough to run into patrols.

Rumor had it that McAlister insisted on more and more patrols, infuriated at his subjects disappearing in droves. Leaving without permission from the laird was punishable by death. It said something about the conditions in McAlister land that so many people were willing to take the risk.

Lyla gave herself a mental shake. Sola was right, she told herself. It wasn’t her business, and there wasn’t much she could do. Pointedly turning her back, she went inside, picking up the scrubbing brush.



It was five o'clock in the afternoon by the time Marion returned. Lyla had kept herself busy for the day, cleaning and scrubbing, collecting new herbs to replenish their supplies.

"Those were hungry chickens," Lyla commented dryly. "I was about to come looking for ye."

Marion winced. She was dragging a burlap sack behind her and dropped it heavily on the kitchen table. "A leg of lamb from Angus McTavish. He's thrown some potatoes and beets in there, too. His wife was sick again, he came running up and dragged me away from the chickens. Poor things still haven't been fed."

"Poor woman. How is she?" McTavish's wife had a lump on her breast and had been too terrified to let Marion try to cut it out. Now it was apparent the lump was killing her. She was fading fast, and Marion gave her what she needed to ease her pain, never once letting slip a word of complaint. It angered Lyla. If the woman had just trusted Marion, just tried the surgery she recommended, then maybe - just maybe - she would have had a chance.

It was too late now, of course.

“Not long now,” Marion said brusquely. To hear her talk, you’d think she didn’t care at all for her patients. Lyla knew the opposite was true. Marion cared so much she had to distance herself, or her mind and heart would break under the pressure.

Marion swapped out her morning shawl, pulling on a thick, waterproof cloak and heavy boots.

“Are ye going out again?” Lyla asked, frowning.

“Aye. Lynn’s about to give birth. I’d barely gotten clear of the McTavish house before one of her boys came to find me. It’s a little early for her, but not too before her time for me to worry.”

“Do ye want me to come?”

“Nah. The woman’s birthed ten children already, and not a single problem with any of them. More than half of her babies were born by the time I got there,” Marion shook her head, chuckling. “She probably knows more about having babies than me.”

“Shall I make supper for ye?”

“Save me some stew, but don’t bother to keep it hot. I don’t know how long I’ll be,” Marion paused on the

doorstep, glancing back. "I hear rumors of men on horseback riding around the countryside. Strangers."

Lyla frowned. "That's not usual."

"No, it's not. I'd suggest ye stay at your sister's tonight, but it'll be dark before ye get there and I don't have time to walk ye there. So I want ye indoors with the door locked, do ye hear?"

Lyla chewed her lip. "Well, what about ye?"

"I'm a grumpy old woman who'll probably come home covered in blood and other fluids. Nobody will get in my way. Ye, on the other hand, are a pretty young woman. Stay inside."

"But the chickens..."

"They'll survive. Stay inside."

Lyla nodded obediently. Marion closed the door behind her, and stood there, clearly waiting to hear the latch click.

Lyla listened to her footsteps recede. The calm, peaceful cottage suddenly seemed dark and foreboding, and Lyla hurried to stoke up the fire. At this

time of year, the countryside would be pitch black by around six o'clock. It was possible that the men on horseback could be nothing more than more McAlister escapees.

However, they might also be bandits, desperate men, or just McAlister soldiers, keen to do some damage to the villages they suspected might hide McAlister escapees.

Lyla shivered, sinking down onto a stool by the fire, drawing her knees up to her chest. If Lynn's birth was as uneventful as Marion hoped, then perhaps she wouldn't be more than a few hours. Lyla was sure that if she went to bed in the dark, silent house, she wouldn't be able to sleep.

At eleven o'clock at night, Lyla heard hoofbeats. She must have been dozing because the fire was guttering and she'd almost slipped off her stool. Lyla leaped upright, fear coursing through her. She hoped with all her heart that the hoofbeats were something from a half-dream she was having, but no. She could hear them now, getting louder and louder.

Closer.

She rushed to the window, lifting the corner of the patchwork curtains and peeking out. It was a dark night, but the moon was full. It clearly illuminated a man on a horse, racing towards the cottage. Lyla let the curtain drop, fear paralyzing her. He was coming here. Whoever he was, he was coming here.

She had to look. She couldn't just hide under the bed and hope that he went away. She lifted the corner of the curtain again.

The man had stopped and stayed where he was. Lyla frowned. He was swaying in his saddle, leaning too far forward. The horse was sweating and huffing, steam pouring off its flanks.

Then the moonlight illuminated the man's face a little better, and Lyla's breath caught in her throat.

"James!" she gasped. She stumbled to the door, wrenching it open, and ran out.

It was raining now, a gentle patter of raindrops making the ground wet and slippery. She could see where the horse's hooves had torn up the turf.

As she approached, James slowly slid from the saddle. Lyla wasn't strong enough to catch him, but

she'd learned enough about fainting people to be able to guide him down to the ground relatively unhurt.

It was James. She could see him properly now, the moon glinted off his high cheekbones and his dark, wet hair, slicked back with rain and sweat.

More importantly, it glinted off the bloody mess that was the front of his tunic. Lyla cursed. He was injured, and now, he was unconscious. She slipped her arms under his shoulders, lacing her fingers across his chest. He was far too heavy to lift, of course, but perhaps she could drag him a little like this.

Slowly but surely, she managed to slide James' heavy, unconscious body across the muddy ground towards the entrance of the cottage. He was soaked through, and she could feel how cold he was. At least the cottage was warm. Even with the door open, she could feel the heat wash over them as they stepped inside.

She dragged James in front of the fire and gently laid him down, hurrying over to close and lock the door. The horse would have to wait. She ignored the

muddy marks left on her newly cleaned floor and hurried back to James' side.

His wounds were bad but not as bad as she'd initially thought. His left shoulder was dislocated, and there were several shallow stab wounds on his abdomen. He'd been in a fight with someone. There were bruises on his face and he had a bloodied nose. Some of the blood was clearly not his own.

Lyla bit her lip, not allowing herself to think too hard about what had happened and why he was here. The point was that James had come here, to her and Marion, for help. She half expected to hear someone knocking on the door or hear more hoofbeats, the sound of either pursuit or the rest of his gang come to find him.

There was no one.

Lyla worked diligently, cleaning wounds, applying salve and paste, and even tipping James' head up so he could sip on a healing tea she'd made. He didn't wake up, but he murmured in his sleep, and his skin gradually grew warm and dry. Some color returned to his cheeks, too.

When he wakes up, Lyla thought, once the immediate danger was over, I'm going to kill him for scaring me like this.



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