

W E N D Y H U D S O N

MINE  
TO KEEP



# PROLOGUE

He sat below a patch of leafy birch trees, the late spring sun glittering down through the yellows and greens. The paper in his hand remained unread. Instead, he watched as his wife wandered the garden, their five-month-old daughter in her arms.

Starlings danced overhead, their chatter loud and shrill. He saw her stop to point skywards at them, murmuring in his daughter's ear. They were both smiling, a rare sight, and he closed his eyes a moment to log the memory and enjoy the calm.

Her voice brought him back to the garden. "I'm going to head up to the house. She needs feeding."

He nodded and gave her a half smile, then leant his head back against the trunk and shook open the paper.

A shriek snapped his head up from the sports page. He saw her in mid-flight, arms curling around his daughter as they tumbled towards the paved footpath. He was on his feet, moving with arms outstretched, nowhere near close enough to catch them. The thud of impact forced his eyes closed again for a moment. The blood rushed in his ears and his heart pounded double speed as the world righted itself.

There was no sound from the baby, only cries from his wife. Blood trickled from a gash on her forehead, matting the blonde, downy hair on his daughter's head.

He knelt down and pulled at his wife's arms. "Let her go, you stupid fucking bitch. What have you done? Let me see her." Eventually, he prised his daughter free and bundled her into his arms.

Her face was white, eyes wide open, and there was a small smear of blood on her chin. It only seemed to be a graze, but he touched her all over, feeling her head for bumps, her limbs for awkward angles. All the while she stared back at him, still and quiet with shock.

“Is...is she okay? I’m so sorry.” His wife stayed sat on the ground, holding a sleeve to the cut on her head.

He glared down at her. “No thanks to you. What the fuck? I know you’re useless, but now you can’t even walk up the path without falling over. What if she’d bashed her head? Eh?”

“She didn’t. I’m sure she didn’t. I protected her. Let me see her.” She made to get up, but he hugged his daughter to him and moved away.

“You protected her? Are you an idiot? You could’ve killed her.” Spittle flew from his mouth as he screamed the last sentence. A cry came from the bundle in his arms, and he realised how tight he was holding the child.

“Calm yourself.” She was on her feet now, dusting off her flowered dress. “It was an accident. Obviously, I didn’t do it on purpose.”

He breathed heavily, fury building towards his wife at her casual manner. “Oh really? There seems to be a lot of those lately. Can you really be that clumsy?”

He watched her eyes narrow. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Don’t play the fucking innocent. You’ve wanted to hurt her from day one. I can see the way you look at her, jealous she gets all my attention now.”

“That’s absurd. That’s your own crazy insecurities talking. I love my daughter.” She held out her free arm. “Give her to me.”

He jiggled on the spot as the small cries continued. Smoothing a hand over the back of the baby's head, he tucked her close under his chin. "No fucking chance. And don't you dare put this on me. What about when I get home from work and she's screaming her head off, while you sit and watch shit on the telly?"

"Christ." She heaved a sigh and looked off to the distance before closing her eyes. When she looked back, her frustration with him was palpable, and that irked him more. "I've explained that to you. She's fed, watered, dry, and safe. It's about her learning to self-soothe."

He watched her wince as she swapped sleeves, the blood from her head soaking through it almost immediately. "Safe? Are you fucking kidding me? You bloody bashed her face on the pavement. For all I know, this kind of shit goes on all the time when I'm not here. How the hell am I supposed to go to work and trust you to take care of her?"

He watched her look at the baby in his arms and then up at him. She looked him square in the eye and spoke through gritted teeth, "Keep pushing me, and it'll be an empty house you come home to."

*Wrong answer.*

The blood roared in his ears, and he glared right back at her, neither of them backing down. She'd lose. She always lost, but it didn't stop the bitch from trying. Constantly undermining him, insulting him, threatening him. Needling away at him, pushing and pushing, over and over, until the roar was overbearing and he had to let it loose. He made to move towards her, never breaking her stare, until a small hiccup from his arms drew both their attention to the wriggling bundle.

The noise in his head calmed, but he knew he couldn't let her away with it. It was one threat too far, a kick to the sorest part of his soul. And the bitch knew it. She was asking for it.

He spoke quietly, injecting some concern into his tone. "I'm taking her inside. Stay here. I'll bring something for your head."

She didn't argue, only moved to sit on the grass, watching him go. Once inside, he laid his daughter in her playpen, checking her over once again. He drew some warm water into a bowl and dipped a soft cloth in it to gently clean her chin. She smiled up at him, and he cooed along with her, washing the blood from her hair before placing her favourite stuffed bear in her arms. "Daddy will be right back, sweetheart. You're safe now."

He marched outside, down the steps to the path, never breaking his stride until he was over her, looking down at her pathetic face. He spoke low as the anger simmered. "Do you really think I'd let you leave?"

She huffed out an exaggerated breath, a half smile on her face. "What are you going to do? Lock me up like you did with your first wife?"

That caught him off guard. He stepped back. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Oh, don't play dumb with me. She wrote to me, you asshole, back when we first got together. Only, I was too stupid to believe her. I thought she was being a typical jealous ex. Because my sweet, handsome husband would never do something like that."

"She's a liar." He seethed inside, the fire in his stomach burning up through his chest as the anger became desperate to boil over.

She stood and closed the gap between them. “No. You are—”

His vision blurred and the rest of her words were muffled, then cut off. His hands were moving of their own accord, wrapping themselves around her throat, squeezing tighter and creating the blessed silence he craved.

Then the fire was in his groin as her knee connected with it. He tumbled sideways, howling at the sky and clutching himself. As his focus returned, he could see her running away. Away from the house, away from him. The pain disappeared as he zoned in on her. Back on his feet, he picked up speed as he ran her down.

The river came into view as he grabbed a handful of her hair. Then he was dragging her, her screams barely penetrating his mind. He knew what needed to be done.

Twenty feet. Fifteen. Ten. He didn’t stop. Not even when they reached the river’s edge. She clawed at him as he waded in amongst the reeds. The frigid water quickly soaked them both.

Then the screams stopped.

He watched her panicked eyes stare up at him through the murkiness. They were mesmerising, and he couldn’t tear his own gaze away. Faint clouds of blood dispersed themselves from her head, and her feet thrashed as he pushed her deeper until she connected with the muddy river bed.

She couldn’t stop him now.

She was meant to be different from the last. His salvation. His second chance. Fuck, he had tried his best to make it work. To at last have the family he deserved. But she had failed him at every turn, just like his disappointment of a first wife. Back then, he had allowed himself to be pushed around

and had given up the day she had eventually walked out. Well, not this time.

This time he was in control, and she would obey him.

Her life was his to take.

With his knee on her chest and a vice grip around her neck, he watched captivated as the breath left her in garbled bubbles. They forced their way out, furious at first, until time stretched from seconds to minutes, and she was finally, blissfully still.

When she was limp and lifeless, he hooked his arms under hers and waded out further. The river rose to his chest and the current pulled at his feet, but he stood firm. Her glassy eyes still chided him, dared him to do his worst.

Well, he had this time. She'd used the last of her chances. He released her body to the river and set himself free.

"Let's see you take her away from me now."

# CHAPTER 1

Erin's tears mimicked the fat raindrops battering her windscreen. They came out of nowhere more and more lately, and she had resigned herself to go with it. "Better out than in," as her mother would say.

One more nugget of wisdom to add to the list she'd grown up with. Not for the first time, she questioned setting off on this journey and ignoring the last bit of advice her mother had offered.

She flipped the wipers to top speed and slowed the car, approaching a left turn as directed by the satnav. Trees enveloped her from either side, their branches low, forming a dark tunnel for her to follow as she approached the hotel driveway. She saw the sign for Cornfield Castle and made her way carefully up the winding hill that climbed to her destination.

The castle rose before her as she approached the crest, an imposing shadow warmed with brightly lit windows and lanterns adorning either side of its grand entrance.

She parked in a space to the left side and took a moment, allowing the quiet to wrap around her with the darkness. Through the few remaining tears, she concentrated on the dashboard clock until finally, they stopped, and it changed from an orange blur to clear numbers. Another tissue was added to the pile on the passenger seat before she braced herself against the downpour and ran around to the boot to retrieve her case.

The gravel crunched and she skidded slightly as she hurried to the entranceway, and the bulky case bumped against her shins and thighs. Warmth poured over her the

moment she stepped over the threshold. A woman smiled through the glass door as she approached reception.

“Miss Carter, I presume?”

Erin dropped her bag and leant on the desk in relief. “Yes, it’s Erin. You got my message then?”

“I did. Your room is waiting, and by the looks of it, you’re ready for it.”

Erin attempted a smile and eyed the woman’s badge. “Thanks, Ann. More than ready.”

Ann passed her the booking form to sign. “You’re welcome, dear. Give me a second, and I’ll call George down to take your bag. He’s doing the security rounds. Do you want a tea or coffee to warm you up? There’s stuff in your room, but it’s only instant, I’m afraid.”

This time, Erin’s smile was real. “You read my mind. And real coffee sounds perfect.”

Ann pointed to her left. “You’ll find Abigail closing up the bar. Tell her I sent you. I’ll call when George appears.”

Erin thanked her again and headed around the corner as directed, taking in her surroundings for the first time. An imposing mahogany display cabinet stood to her right, filled with broken pottery pieces, silverware, and jewellery. An assortment of history that made no sense to her but clearly meant something to the castle.

She restrained herself from reaching out to touch the wallpaper—it had a furry-looking design, the same as she remembered from her grandmother’s dining room. A memory of catapulting peas and mashed potato at it made her chuckle, and she realised it was the first laugh to escape her in weeks.

Longswords, their handles patterned and ornate, crossed above an arched doorway that she guessed led to the bar. It

was past midnight, and her footsteps made no sound on the blue-and-green tartan carpet. She smiled when she noticed it, a prerequisite of traditional Scottish hotel bars, along with tartan curtains to match.

The room was dark apart from a couple of spotlights shining above the bar. The clinking of bottles came through a doorway to the side of it. She took a stool to wait for someone to appear whilst lustily eyeing the coffee machine.

The embers in the fire were barely hanging on, but the room was warm and a small sense of relief seeped into her with the heat. She could smell peat in the air, along with a mustiness you only found in a building that had survived the test of time. It wasn't unpleasant—rather, it was reassuring having the solidity of the castle around her.

The clinking continued in the stockroom, joined by a soft voice that drifted over her, singing in Gaelic. Erin considered knocking on the bar, but the melody was a soothing antidote to the drama of her day, and it cast a spell. She felt her shoulders sag and relax and allowed her eyes to close a moment.

“Can I help?”

Erin jumped, spinning on the stool from her view of the fire to a girl decked out in chef whites, holding a crate of bottles. “Sorry. Abigail? Ann sent me from the front desk, said you could help me out with some coffee?”

If Abigail was embarrassed to be caught singing, she didn't show it. She merely eyed Erin for a moment before dumping the crate, turning to the machine, and switching it on.

“What are you after? Latte? Cappuccino? I can do decaf if you prefer?” She turned back to Erin. “That's if you want any sleep tonight.”

“Decaf is perfect. Strong and black, please.” Erin smiled her appreciation. “Sorry to put you out. I got a puncture on the way here, so I’ve spent the best part of the night soaked, waiting for a recovery truck. So much for summer, hey?”

Abigail waved her away. “You’re fine. I’m only restocking for the morning. Our bar guy had to leave early, so I offered.”

“I did think that was an odd uniform for bar staff.” Erin indicated the whites.

Abigail set the steaming cup in front of Erin. “Aye, I’m the head chef, but I’m residential, so I help out here and there when needed.”

Erin watched as she pulled out the grips that held her cap in place and let wavy blonde locks fall free. She rolled her head from side to side and gave the back of her neck a rub, closing her eyes in what Erin imagined was satisfaction.

She returned to the machine and spoke over her shoulder. “Mind if I join you for one?”

Erin shrugged. “You’re the one that lives here. I don’t mind. That’s so cool, by the way, living in a castle.”

Abigail leant against the bar, cradling the coffee cup in her hands. She blew on it and spoke through the steam. “Sometimes. It can be weird living where you work, but it has its perks too.”

“Such as?” Erin sipped her coffee. It ran smooth across her tongue, and she would have groaned if it weren’t for the girl holding her attention across the bar.

Abigail smiled and took a sip of her own before answering. “Well, for a start, there’s no commute, the fridge and bar are always stocked, and I get the chance to have coffee in the middle of the night with pretty strangers.”

Erin felt the heat rise in her cheeks and heard her mother in her head telling her to take the compliment and not be so

awkward all the time. She coughed but managed not to look away. “Thanks. I think. Assuming you meant me, that is?” So much for the not being awkward.

Abigail laughed. “Yes, I meant you, but I’m sorry, I’ve made you uncomfortable. Not used to girls complimenting you?”

“Yes. I mean, no,” Erin stuttered. “I mean, there’s no need to be sorry. I find I’m always surprised, that’s all. As you can see, it makes me excruciatingly self-conscious.” She shook her head in defeat. “Feel free to leave now. You’ve fulfilled your coffee duty, and I won’t be offended.”

Abigail smiled mischievously. “Nah. I’d rather watch you squirm. Call it payback for you catching me singing.”

“See, I knew I should have called out or something to let you know I was here. Sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I was enjoying it. You sing beautifully.”

“I tell her the same thing, but she doesn’t believe me.”

They both turned in unison to the doorway. A tall, rangy teenager stood against its frame, stooped in the way of someone used to ducking under things.

A bar towel flew his way, and he caught it easily. “George, I’ve flipping told you about creeping up on people.

He threw the towel back. “Not creeping. I didn’t want to interrupt your smooth skills in operation.”

Now it was Abigail’s turn to redden. “I hate you, little brother.”

George crossed the room with his hand out. “George Miller. At your service, Miss Carter.” He gave a small, theatrical bow, blond hair flopping across his face. “I see you’ve met my charming sister. Has she even asked your name?”

Erin could see the resemblance. The unruly blond hair and light sprinkling of freckles across their noses, along with the

same slightly crooked grin gave it away. George was ridiculously tall and scrawny, not yet grown into his body, whereas Abigail seemed to have peaked at a curvy five-and-a-half feet. There seemed a reasonably big age gap between them. Erin guessed six or seven years.

She pretended to take a moment to think. “Do you know what, George, she didn’t.”

Abigail blushed harder, and Erin couldn’t help but laugh along with George.

“Erin Carter,” she offered in Abigail’s direction. “In case you were wondering.”

Abigail clattered her empty cup into the sink. Her mutterings were indecipherable, and Erin thought George would probably get more than a towel thrown at him later.

“Right, I need to get this place locked up. Erin, it was nice to meet you. George, show our guest to her room.”

Erin was faintly disappointed when Abigail disappeared back through to the stockroom, leaving her to drain the last of her coffee before following George back towards the reception area. “Will she be upset with you?” she asked.

George merely shrugged. “I’m used to it. It comes with the territory of living and working with your big sister. Don’t worry about it. She’s prone to bouts of grumpiness.”

He lifted Erin’s case easily from behind the front desk and collected her key. “You’re in room nine, which is at the top of the castle. It sits between two of the turrets. It’s pretty cool. We normally give them to folk staying a while. You are staying a while, aren’t you?”

Erin followed him up the wide, sweeping staircase, taking in beautifully rich tapestries hanging either side, adorned with colourful clan crests. Each one was interspersed with a variety

of stuffed animal heads, which never failed to creep her out. “Aye, well, maybe. We’ll see.”

He eventually stopped at door nine, handing her the key. “Breakfast is served until nine thirty. Dial zero if you need anything day or night, and lastly, sleep well.”

Erin smiled her thanks. “Cheers, George. Goodnight.”

He loped away, and she let herself into the room, flipping a switch that illuminated multiple ornate lamps positioned around the space. She leant back against the door and sighed in relief. The tears came from nowhere. Five minutes ago, she’d been unexpectedly laughing and semi-flirting, and now she was a blubbering mess. Again.

“Shit.” She swore aloud at her own stupidity and wiped at her eyes with a sleeve. “Sorry, Mum, but I’m getting really tired of this.”

The suitcase stared at her, begging to be unpacked. But the call of the bed was stronger, and she couldn’t ignore it. Only her shoes, handbag, and jacket made it off before she flopped diagonally across its plush surface. She was asleep before the thought of removing the rest of her clothes could even enter her mind.

## CHAPTER 2

Sunshine poured in through the window, pulling Erin from the peaceful doze she'd slipped into finally. After passing out the night before, her sleep had been fitful, plagued by nightmares she fought with her subconscious to avoid.

She'd passed the darkest hours of the night ritualistically, visiting places locked away from her in waking hours. Then the cold had awakened her as the dawn chorus sang, forcing her under the blankets. After that, real sleep had been elusive.

Erin reluctantly peeked out over the covers and squinted towards the offending light, cursing herself for not closing the curtains the night before. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, and they watered, blurred, and eventually refocused on the room around her. Still fully clothed, the sheets tangled around her legs caused a small tantrum as she tried to extricate herself.

Finally free, she crossed to the large sash window, unlocked it, and raised the bottom half. The hit of damp, fresh air washed over her as she stood, eyes closed, and allowed it to cleanse her of the nightmares. With her head tilted to the sun's warmth and the hint of summer that it promised, a semblance of calm found her.

The phone rang, jolting her from the moment. It was shrill in an old-fashioned way, kind of how her grandmother used to be. She crossed the room and hooked a finger under the receiver on the fourth ring. "Hello." Her voice broke, and she cleared her throat. "Sorry, I'm not long awake."

"Good morning, Miss Carter, it's George. We haven't seen you for breakfast this morning, and I wanted to let you know service is finishing up."

“Wow, what time is it?” She never wore a watch, or any jewellery for that matter, save a pendant left by her mother that hung low under her T-shirt. She looked around for her bag and the phone that would be in its pocket.

“Nine fifteen. There’s no rush. I wouldn’t normally call and disturb you, but I know you missed your dinner reservation last night as well. There’s a few spots for a late breakfast around the area, but trust me, you’re going to want to try Abby’s eggs.”

Erin scrubbed a hand over her face. “It’s okay. I appreciate it, George. Give me fifteen minutes to shower and change, if that’s all right?”

“Absolutely. We’ll see you soon.”

She replaced the phone in its cradle, smiling at the small-town, friendly service she’d received since arriving. She couldn’t imagine a city hotel being thoughtful enough to call if she missed breakfast. They’d more than likely be delighted to have saved the money.

As the hot water pummelled Erin’s tired shoulders, she allowed herself to go back to the nightmares, to the darkened rooms and the raised voices, muffled through the hands she had held firmly over her ears.

These were the only memories she had of her mum and dad together, although the words they had shouted and screamed never took form. The arguments never reached a resolution in her mind. The only clear moments were of herself in the places she hid: the attic, the wardrobe, under the stairs, or her bed. When the real-life nightmare had started, Erin had tucked herself away until her mum would eventually find her. With the house finally quiet, she would hold Erin, and they would rock together for what felt like hours, soothing each other.

She hadn't understood it all back then. If she were honest with herself, she still didn't. One day, not long after her sixth birthday, she and her mum had left the house. Since then, neither her dad nor his legacy were ever spoken about again. As years passed, the urge to ask questions had diminished. As they had moved house to house, town to town, Erin had gradually stopped looking for places to hide in case he came back.

Now her mum was gone, too, and the old feelings and fears had all returned in full force. She was back in those dark places from her dreams—her nightmares—desperate to get out.

Terrified that the haunting was only just beginning, after weeks of torture, she had resolved to take control and deal with it. In her usually orderly world, it made no sense to allow a shadow the power to dictate her every thought and dream.

This wasn't how she intended to live her life, in a constant state of mental paralysis, closed off to everything and everyone. She had to find a way to end it once and for all if she was ever going to find a trace of normality amongst the chaos.

So here she was, in a small town in South Lanarkshire, with a thousand questions tripping over each other, vying for her attention.

Her rumbling tummy brought her back to earth, spurring her into action. She dried and dressed quickly in skinny jeans and a light-grey sweater. After tugging on her favourite worn navy Converse, she brushed out her short dark hair and tucked it behind her ears still damp. It would kink as it dried, but flyaway hair was the least of her worries.

Finally, she picked up the shiny silver Mackintosh rose pendant and rubbed a thumb over the pattern before she looped the long chain over her head and tucked it under her top.

“You can do this, Carter, c’mon. It’s time.” Notebook under her arm, she took a calming breath. Time to face people. Time to find some answers.

## CHAPTER 3

The scent of bacon made Erin's mouth water as she descended the last of the stairs. Her stomach growled again, complaining at the lack of sustenance she'd provided it the past few days.

George greeted her at the dining room doorway with a crooked smile. "Good morning, Miss Carter."

"Please, call me Erin. Only my students call me Miss Carter."

"You're a teacher?" George looked her up and down surreptitiously. "I wish there were teachers who looked like you when I was at school. I might not have ditched classes so often."

As clumsy as the compliment was, she'd heard cruder and decided to appreciate his attempt. "You're sweet, George. Thanks."

He studied her a moment longer, and she shifted on the spot before asking, "Em, breakfast?"

"Oh, right. Yes, this way. I saved you the best table by the window. Although the early rush is over."

She followed him, winding her way through the mostly empty tables. Given the time, the majority of guests had already eaten and left. A few remained, taking their time over coffee and a newspaper.

He seated her in a large bay window away from the stragglers. The occasional beam of sunshine streamed in, warming the spot. "Here's the menu. I'll be back in a few moments to take your order. Tea or coffee in the meantime?"

He was all propriety again, and she went with it. “Coffee, thanks.”

He nodded and left her alone with the menu. The view immediately distracted her, and she scanned the vista before her. An ornate fountain spouted water playfully not far from where she sat. She watched as droplets caught in the wind and broke free from the cycle, spraying in the same direction as the leaves that tugged on their branches.

Behind it, the sun played peek-a-boo with fast-moving clouds, its warmth immediately missed on her face every time it ducked away. The hills were lush green, dotted with sheep and the criss-cross of stone walls, the shadows of the clouds moving over them as if within touching distance.

A river cut through the landscape—the Clyde, she knew—meandering its way over a hundred miles from the Daer Reservoir to the Firth of Clyde. She’d travelled its route from Glasgow to where she sat now in Hopetoun, and it gave her a small measure of comfort. She was still in touch with home, however empty it might be now.

She jumped as George appeared at her shoulder with a pot of coffee in hand. “I never get bored of the view here.”

“I can see why. It’s beautiful.”

He poured her coffee and set the remainder of the pot on the table. “Have you decided what you want?”

“Sorry, no. I was distracted. How about you ask Abigail to surprise me with some kind of chef’s breakfast special? Is that okay?”

He raised his eyebrows but smiled. “Sure. Should I tell her it’s a request from you?”

Erin was confused. “Of course. Is that a problem?”

“No, no. Not at all. Won’t be long.”

With that, he headed back to the kitchen, leaving Erin scratching her head. Had it been presumptuous to request some kind of special breakfast treatment? She hadn't meant to be rude or difficult. It was merely to avoid making a decision.

The last remaining guests left, and she was alone with her coffee and the view. She poured a second cup and pulled out her notebook to read over her notes on the area.

"Are you researching something?" Abigail stood in her whites, holding a plate and peering curiously at Erin's scribbles.

Erin closed the book and moved it, making room for the plate. She shook her head. "More like someone." She scanned her breakfast, liking what she saw. "Eggs Benedict?"

Abigail nodded. "It's a classic for a reason. Enjoy."

"It looks delicious. Thanks." Erin couldn't wait to tuck in but caught Abigail's arm as she made to walk away. "Oh, and sorry if I made you go out of your way. I didn't mean to be cheeky asking for something off menu."

Abigail smiled. "Not at all. It's actually on the menu, so it was no trouble. If you want something a bit more inventive, I suggest you have dinner here tonight. I'll try and impress you properly."

George appeared to refill her pot. "First coffee and now dinner? You're not hanging around, big sis, even by your standards."

Abigail turned to swat his head, and Erin couldn't help but laugh despite her blushing. "Get back in the kitchen, you little arse, before I hang you."

They watched George go as he rubbed the side of his head. Abigail turned, brushing down her whites self-consciously. "I'm sorry about him. I didn't mean anything ulterior with

dinner. I figured you're here for a while, and honestly, I get tired of the menu sometimes, so it's purely selfish getting to cook something different."

Erin shook out her napkin and looked up. "Sit if you want."

Abigail looked surprised, as was Erin. Since when did she invite company?

"You sure? You're the last order, so I have a few minutes."

"Aye." Erin nodded towards the chair opposite her. "You're kind of making me uncomfortable hovering like that."

Abigail smiled and seemed to breathe out a small sigh of relief. She slid into the chair. "Does this mean you don't think I've been highly inappropriate?"

Erin popped the top of a perfectly poached egg with her knife and took a bite. This time, she couldn't help the small groan that escaped. "If dinner is anywhere near as good as this, then invitation accepted." She went in for another bite.

Abigail swiped her forehead dramatically. "Phew." She poured herself a cup of coffee and nodded in the direction of the notebook. "Who is the 'someone' you're researching? If you don't mind me asking."

"I don't. But I also don't want to spoil my breakfast getting into it."

"Oh." Abigail looked disappointed.

"It's someone from a long time ago. I heard he might be in the area, so I thought I'd try my luck."

Erin had no more to offer at this point, and the last thing she wanted to do was discuss her past over breakfast with a stranger. The tears were at bay so far today, but any mention of her mum and she knew there might be no controlling their reappearance.

Besides, she liked Abigail. There was a relaxed vibe about her, a calmness that Erin felt in her presence that she enjoyed. Dredging up shadows from the past was only going to ruin that effect.

“Fair enough. Do you at least need any help getting around the area? Anywhere in particular you need to know about or get to?”

Erin thought for a moment, then shrugged. “I think the internet and my satnav have it covered right now, but that’ll probably only get me so far. I’ll let you know.” She felt Abigail study her over her coffee cup but didn’t meet her eye. Afraid she might start inappropriately spilling her guts, she concentrated on the silky sauce and eggs on her plate.

“So, what do you do when you’re not researching mysterious people?”

Erin was glad the conversation had returned to the mundane. “I’m a maths teacher. Secondary school, up in Glasgow.”

She watched Abigail’s nose crinkle. “I hated maths. My teacher was a witch of a woman who I swear would have used the cane if she was still allowed.”

Erin laughed. “I think every school has one of those. I’m not that teacher—well, most of the time.”

She again felt scrutinised under Abigail’s gaze and continued to busy herself, pouring more coffee and buttering toast. Eventually, the gaze left her and moved to the view.

Erin could hear the distant clinking of someone washing up and the footsteps of other guests on the stairs. Otherwise it remained quiet in the dining room, and she sighed as a feeling of peace flowed through her once again.

She joined Abigail staring out the window, but it failed to hold her attention. The woman quietly humming to herself

across the table was far too distracting. Her hair was caught up in the chef hat again, small wisps poking out from under it, tickling her forehead. As Erin watched, Abigail tucked a thicker lock behind her ear. Erin counted four tiny silver hoops in it, piercing their way down to a shiny star stud in the lobe. Her skin looked smooth and clear under the freckles. It was lightly tanned, but in a natural way. She wondered if maybe Abigail and George had Scandinavian blood in them.

Abigail turned her way and Erin quickly looked down at her plate, hoping she hadn't been caught staring.

"You don't like to talk much, do you?"

Erin wiped her mouth with the napkin, giving herself a moment. It was an observation she was used to hearing. The fact was, silence didn't faze her like it seemed to do most people. She was comfortable in it. Relished it, in fact.

After the torrid few years that were the beginning of her life, she had learned to embrace the quiet wherever it presented itself and sought it out the rest of the time. She had an uncanny ability to retreat and zone out from whatever surrounded her, to the point where she didn't always realise she was doing it until someone was irritably snapping their fingers in her face.

It was her first line of defence, and not something she ever felt the need to apologise for.

Erin found having conversation forced upon her by strangers tantamount to assault. On a train, in a shop or bar, sitting in a park. And what was with taxi drivers and their ridiculously personal questions? It was jarring and presumptive in a way she couldn't explain.

That wasn't how she felt now. She didn't have the usual urge to defend herself from Abigail. In this sunny room, she

sat with a beautiful woman, sharing a glorious view over a delicious breakfast. She was merely appreciating the moment and savouring what she had assumed was amicable silence.

“Sorry. I was just enjoying the quiet.” It was out of her mouth before she realised how Abigail might take it. Given she had been the one who had broken it.

Too late.

Abigail’s cup was back in its saucer. “Sorry, you should have said. I didn’t mean to disturb...” She was on her feet mumbling an apology.

“No, no.” Erin shook her head and held out a hand to stop her, but Abigail was already on her way back towards the kitchen. “Abby. Stop.” Erin got to her feet and followed, catching her by the wrist. Abigail stopped as requested and stuffed her hands in her whites. “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant I was enjoying the quiet with you. Not to mention my wonderful breakfast. You’re right. I don’t talk much, but I wouldn’t have asked you to sit with me if I hadn’t wanted you to.”

Abigail studied her again, tilting her head as if that would help see Erin better and gauge if she was telling the truth. “You’re sure.”

Erin smiled to reassure her. “I’m very sure. Sorry. I think something, but I don’t always say it very well.”

“You called me Abby.”

Erin was confused. “Sorry?”

“Only my friends call me Abby.”

Now Erin did feel awkward, unable to tell what she meant by that statement. They might have only just met, but Erin felt as if this was someone she would want on her side, someone who could maybe help her navigate the local waters. “Oh. Is it okay for me to call you Abby?”

“Aye.” Abby continued her retreat to the kitchen.

“Hey, wait.” Erin wanted to be sure they were cool. “Is the offer of a culinary treat still good for tonight?”

Abby stopped in the doorway. “Of course. I enjoy cooking for my friends.” She winked, and Erin knew all was well. “Book yourself a table for seven, and I promise you a treat.” She slipped through the door before Erin could respond.

Erin sat back at her table. Picking up her cup, she ran over the last few minutes quickly in her mind. She wondered if Abby offering to cook something special for a guest who hadn’t long arrived was unusual. *Was I flirting? Was she?* It had been so long, she couldn’t be sure.

*No. That wasn’t flirting; I barely said a word to her. Or if it was, it was the worst attempt in the history of romance.*

She chastised herself. The last time a woman had caught her attention in this way was, well, she couldn’t even remember. But the timing was impossible. Another emotional complication into the already jumbled mash-up of her life was not what she needed right now. Besides, there was no reason to think Abby had considered anything else.

~ ~ ~

Abby’s cheeks burned. *What a bloody idiot.* A pretty face appeared and nothing but silliness seemed to prevail in her brain.

*But what a pretty face it was.*

She could have killed George. Always fricking turning up and stirring the pot. It was hard enough to meet someone in sleepy, back-of-nowhere Hopetoun, never mind with him always peering over her shoulder. Thank the stars he hadn’t stuck around for the whole show at least. He’d have been relentless.

She clattered a stack of clean plates back on to their shelf and surveyed the kitchen.

*Done.*

She whipped the tea towel from her shoulder and hung it on a rail, before discarding her apron, hat, and jacket into a laundry bag in the adjoining utility room.

Her thoughts returned to the quiet stranger. Mysterious in her reasons for visiting, Abby had felt the sorrow emanating from her as soon as she had sat at the bar the night before. Her eyes had been red-rimmed, but even despite noticing the remnants of tears, Abby could still sense the oppressive weight that clearly sat tiredly on Erin Carter's shoulders.

Weary from the early-morning rush, Abby climbed the stairs to her room and stripped off the last of her whites en route to the shower.

Her mind turned to the menu for the evening, or to be more precise, the menu she would cook for Erin. An overwhelming urge to please this woman had descended from nowhere. Or was it the need to impress? Probably a mixture of both.

She checked herself. So a pretty girl had shown up—she might be nothing more than that, and she certainly wasn't volunteering any more information about herself. Who knew what or who waited for her back home, wherever that was?

Glasgow. She'd mentioned Glasgow.

How many times had someone waltzed through those doors and momentarily caught Abby's attention before they'd inevitably poured cold water on any ideas she had? She adjusted the water temperature until goosebumps pimples her skin. *Yes, exactly like that.*

She'd roamed the castle's rooms and hallways her entire life, and spent the past ten years of it mostly in the kitchen. In

all that time, despite the thousands of people who had crossed its threshold, only one had become more than a fleeting desire.

And look how that had turned out.

She held her face under the bracing stream and rinsed away the memories before they had a chance to take hold. There was no use giving in to maudlin what-ifs and maybes. They wouldn't change anything.

A fluffy bath sheet helped her rub the cold away, and she wrapped herself in it before flopping onto her bed. *Stick with the cold showers, Abby. There's no reason to think Erin's any different from the others.*

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# MINE TO KEEP

BY WENDY HUDSON

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