

Excerpt: Rogue Of The Borders

Abigail Townsend adjusted her spectacles and stifled a yawn as she looked around Lady Jersey's gilded ballroom. Although the French doors stood open to allow the breeze in from the balcony, the room was already stifling with the crush of people, to say nothing of the mixture of too many perfumes. Young debutantes swirled past in pastel dresses like so many butterflies. Their partners, in formal black frockcoats, reminded her of crows. Even their chattering sounded like cackling.

Lord, could she survive yet another Season? At three-and-twenty, she was a bit long in the tooth for such foolishness, but being the Earl of Sherrington's daughter assured that she wasn't quite ready to be put on the spinster shelf just yet.

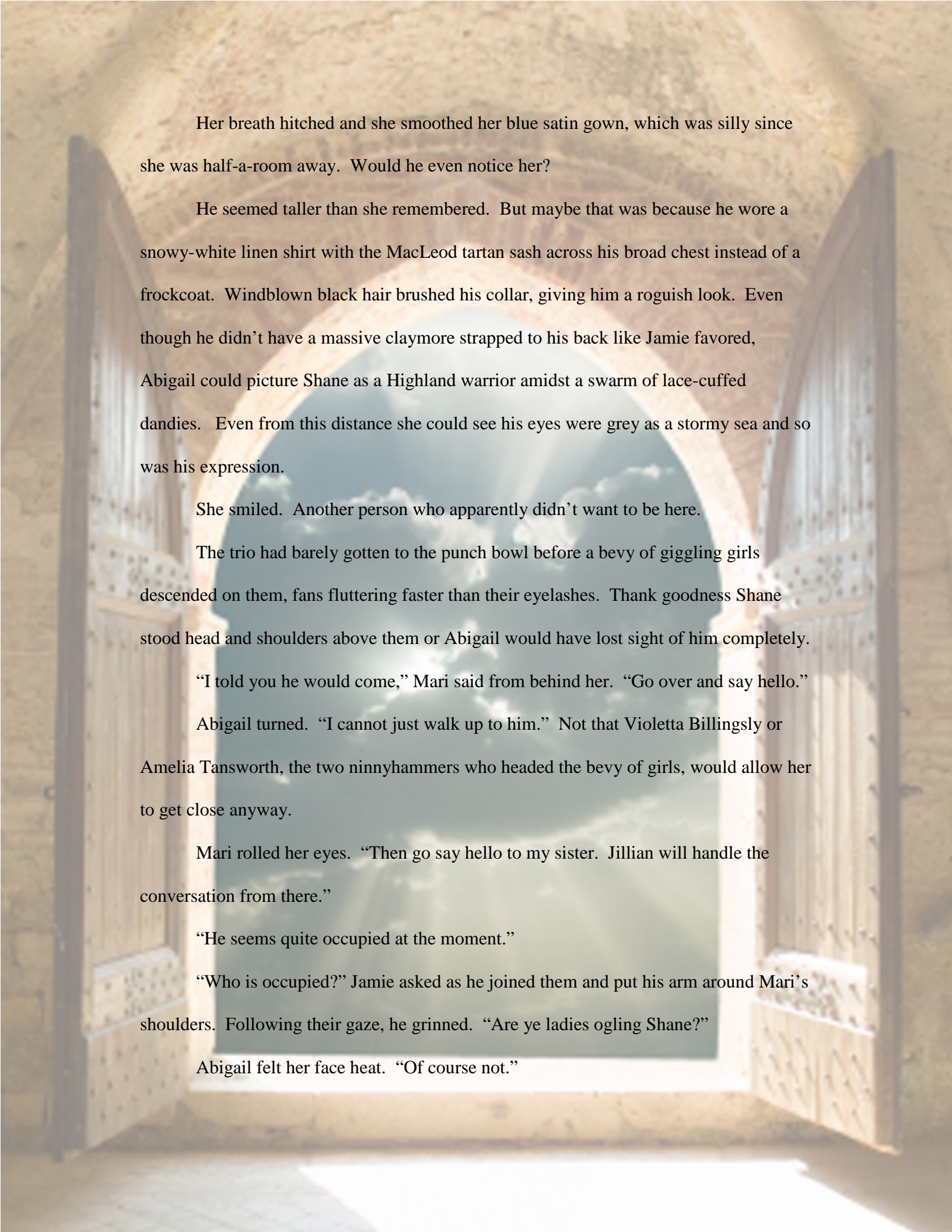
Putting up with the tediousness of never-ending *routs*, *soirees*, dinners, and balls with polite, stuffy conversations about nothing grew worse each year her father made her attend them. She would rather travel and see all the faraway places she'd read about in her beloved books. But women didn't travel alone. She hadn't even been to neighboring Scotland.

Scotland... and a Scot in particular...

Just where was Shane MacLeod anyway? Abigail frowned slightly, peering through the crowd. Surely he would attend the ball? Lady Jersey was hosting it to honor the wedding of his cousin, Jamie MacLeod, to Mari Barclay on their return from Raasay. Mari had assured her Shane would attend—

Abigail didn't have time to finish the thought as the butler announced the arrival of the Earl of Cantford, Ian MacLeod, and his wife, Jillian. And right behind them, as if Abigail had conjured the man, stood Shane MacLeod.



The background of the page is a photograph of a stone archway. The arch is made of light-colored stone and is set into a wall. Through the arch, a view of a landscape is visible, featuring a blue sky with white clouds and a green field. The archway is flanked by two wooden doors with intricate carvings. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

Her breath hitched and she smoothed her blue satin gown, which was silly since she was half-a-room away. Would he even notice her?

He seemed taller than she remembered. But maybe that was because he wore a snowy-white linen shirt with the MacLeod tartan sash across his broad chest instead of a frockcoat. Windblown black hair brushed his collar, giving him a roguish look. Even though he didn't have a massive claymore strapped to his back like Jamie favored, Abigail could picture Shane as a Highland warrior amidst a swarm of lace-cuffed dandies. Even from this distance she could see his eyes were grey as a stormy sea and so was his expression.

She smiled. Another person who apparently didn't want to be here.

The trio had barely gotten to the punch bowl before a bevy of giggling girls descended on them, fans fluttering faster than their eyelashes. Thank goodness Shane stood head and shoulders above them or Abigail would have lost sight of him completely.

"I told you he would come," Mari said from behind her. "Go over and say hello."

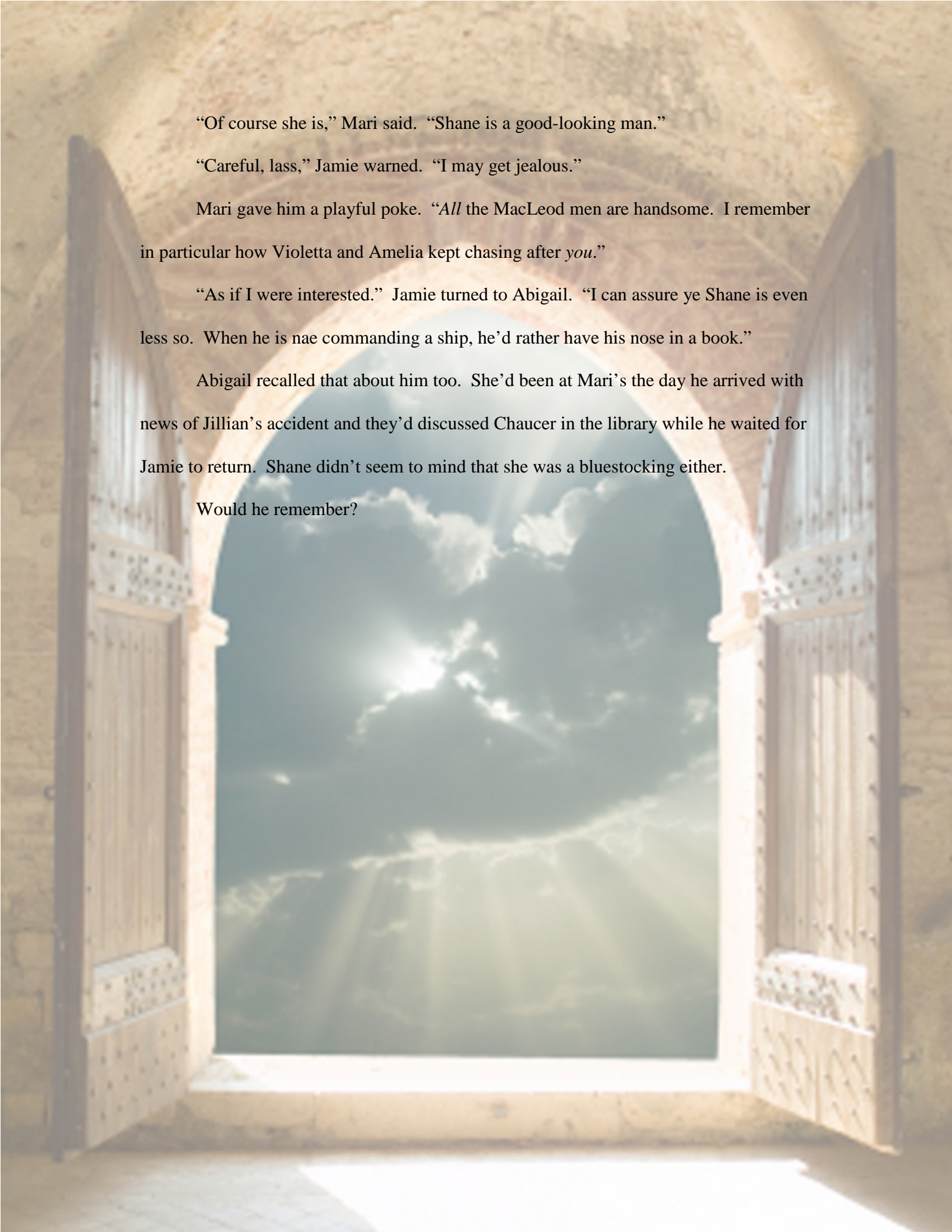
Abigail turned. "I cannot just walk up to him." Not that Violetta Billingsly or Amelia Tansworth, the two ninnyhammers who headed the bevy of girls, would allow her to get close anyway.

Mari rolled her eyes. "Then go say hello to my sister. Jillian will handle the conversation from there."

"He seems quite occupied at the moment."

"Who is occupied?" Jamie asked as he joined them and put his arm around Mari's shoulders. Following their gaze, he grinned. "Are ye ladies ogling Shane?"

Abigail felt her face heat. "Of course not."

A stone archway with two open wooden doors leading to a bright, cloudy sky with sunbeams.

“Of course she is,” Mari said. “Shane is a good-looking man.”

“Careful, lass,” Jamie warned. “I may get jealous.”

Mari gave him a playful poke. “*All* the MacLeod men are handsome. I remember in particular how Violetta and Amelia kept chasing after *you*.”

“As if I were interested.” Jamie turned to Abigail. “I can assure ye Shane is even less so. When he is nae commanding a ship, he’d rather have his nose in a book.”

Abigail recalled that about him too. She’d been at Mari’s the day he arrived with news of Jillian’s accident and they’d discussed Chaucer in the library while he waited for Jamie to return. Shane didn’t seem to mind that she was a bluestocking either.

Would he remember?