

ANIGHT *with a*
Highlander

KENNA KENDRICK

A NIGHT WITH A HIGHLANDER

Can two sinners create heaven in their hell?

SPARKS AND TARTANS: THE MACKINNON CLAN'S ROMANCE
BOOK 4

KENNA KENDRICK



CONTENTS

[Thank you](#)

[Sparks and Tartans: The MacKinnon Clan's Romance](#)

[About the book](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

—

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Sparks and Tartans: The MacKinnon Clan's Romance](#)

[Do you want more Romance?](#)
[Marrying a Highland Outlaw](#)

[Never miss a thing](#)
[Thank you](#)
[About the Author](#)

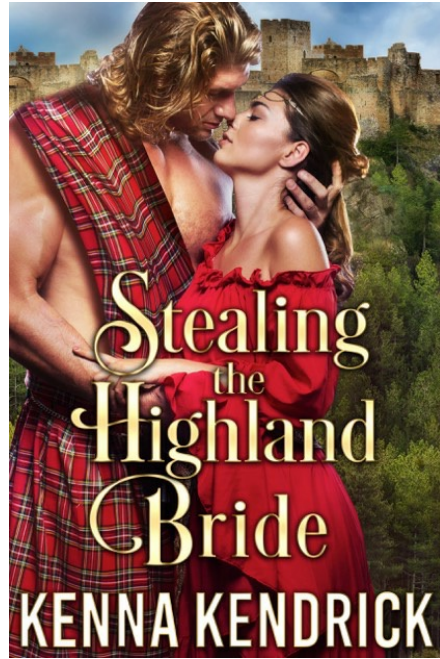
THANK YOU

I want to personally thank you for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me. It's a blessing to have the opportunity to share with you, my passion for writing, through my stories.

As a **FREE GIFT**, I am giving you a link to my first novel. It has **more than 300 reviews**, with an **average rating of 4.5 out of 5**.

It is called "[Stealing the Highland Bride](#)", and you can get it for FREE.

Please note that this story is only available for **YOU** as a subscriber and **hasn't been published anywhere else**.



Please click on the cover to download the book

SPARKS AND TARTANS: THE MACKINNON CLAN'S ROMANCE

Book#1

[The Laird's Reluctant Bride](#)



Book#2

[The English Beauty and the Highland Beast](#)



Book#3

[Marrying a Highland Outlaw](#)



Book#4 (this book)

A Night with a Highlander



ABOUT THE BOOK



“If someone finds ye in me chamber there’ll be the devil tae pay...”

Arya Macdonell never realized that **saving someone’s life would doom her own**. With a **bounty on her head**, courtesy of one of Scotland's cruelest lairds, she finds an unexpected **savior**. And it’s none other than **her brothers’ ally** Gillebride MacThomas.

But he seems to be the first man ever to resist her charms...

Scarred by his past, Gillebride is **resolute** to avoid the **siren call** of temptation, even from someone as enchanting as Arya. He can **never** claim her as his own for her brothers decide her fate.

Not when his tongue is twisted from all the lies he has told for her sake...



PROLOGUE

I sle of Iona, Scotland

Autumn 1304

Arya waited until full moon before she made her move to escape. She knew the moonlight would guide her steps from the convent all the way to the sea front. It was long after the ringing of the curfew bell and silence had fallen throughout the nunnery, before she was certain the nuns would be sleeping and she could leave without anyone noticing her slip away.

After tucking a folded note under her pillow explaining where she was going and begging the sisters not to worry about her wellbeing, she flung on her cloak and ventured from the small cell she'd been occupying during her exile here. Closing the door silently behind her she tiptoed down the corridor, her boots clutched in her hand.

Passing on soft feet along the passageways she drew open the creaky old door of the nunnery and found herself in the walled garden. This was where she'd

spent many hours learning about healing and herbs from Sister Dominique. Arya was convinced the old nun, with her amazing depth of knowledge and understanding, must have been a witch before she left the confines of the world and took her vows of contemplation and chastity among the sisters of Iona.

Arya looked around with something approaching regret. Her time on the island had not been without its consolations, and she wished she'd been able to thank Sister Dominique for her teaching, and bid farewell to Maggie Drummond, her loyal maidservant. But her enforced seclusion had now come to an end, and, if her plans were known, there were those who would do their best to forestall her departure.

It wasn't that she was a prisoner. She was a guest of the sisters, not their captive. She was here at the insistence of her older brothers. Payton, her eldest brother, the Laird of the Macdonells, and Taveon, two years younger, were convinced she should remain here, safe from the wicked Sir William de Coughran, who had threatened to kill her in his battle against the Macdonell clan.

More than anything, she wished to aid her brothers. Locked away in this peaceful community, she was no use to them at all. Although she was well aware that leaving the confines of the nunnery would incur their wrath, once they saw how much they needed her with them, she was confident they would see things her way.

Her most fervent wish was that she could earn their respect. Of course, as her older brothers, they loved their little sister. But she was no longer a child but a grown woman of nineteen years. Old enough for marriage and to have a household of her own.

Knowing her own mother had lost her life giving birth to her had always felt like a cruel curse hanging around her neck, weighing her down. The gift of life her mother had bestowed on her newborn daughter had meant depriving her older brothers of their dear mother's love. She'd never known it herself – although she'd felt its absence sorely – but nothing could ever compensate her brothers for the precious mother they had worshipped and loved with all their hearts. No matter how hard Arya had tried throughout all her days to redeem herself she could never rid herself of the guilt.

She sighed. This was her opportunity to prove to them she was worthy. Despite her one brief moment of doubt, she was resolutely determined to make her way home to Macdonell Castle. She fastened her blue woolen cloak tight around her, pulling the hood with its lining of white fur over her red curls, hauled open the door in the garden wall, and set off, the moonlight guiding her steps.

The first part of her mission gave her a tiny niggle of concern. She must take all her courage in her hands and knock on cottage doors seeking the services of a fisherman who would take her across to the nearby Isle of Mull. On her occasional brief breaks from the routine of the convent she'd been permitted to stroll along Iona's rocky foreshore from where Mull was clearly visible. She'd seen the fishing boats pulled up on the shore not far from the village and it was there she was heading.

Her faith in herself grew bolder. She could do this.

Squaring her shoulders, she pulled her confidence around her like a cloak. Once across to the other island, she would make her way to Ardtun, a few short miles away, where she knew she would find sanctuary with the MacKinnon clan. From Mull she would take the rest of her voyage home.

But there was something else about tonight's adventure that set her pulse thrumming. The tiny village of *Baile Mòr* lay less than a mile away and, until tonight, her itch of curiosity about the place had never been scratched.

The sisters were strictly forbidden to ever set foot there and the convent rules were strict, never to be broken. Even though she'd asked around, no one had ever dared pay a clandestine visit there. Mother Superior was unmoved by Arya's numerous pleas to be permitted, just once, to visit the village.

As far as the Mother Superior was concerned, *Baile Mòr* was only second to Hell when it came to wickedness. And, it was certain, the devil himself resided in the village tavern.

Of course, this made Arya even more curious.

Her heart was hammering as she made her way along the woodland path that would soon bring her to the rocky shoreline and, a little further along, to the village.

It was then she heard a strange growling sound. At first, she thought it was an animal, and she quickened her steps. Then the deep growl was followed by a high-pitched whimper and she registered that the noises she was hearing were all too human. These were the sounds of a man and woman locked in a fierce conflict.

She paused, peering through the trees into the nearby clearing. The moonlight shone brightly and she could clearly make out the two figures. Hearing voices raised in anger she crouched low, suddenly afraid of being discovered.

Although she couldn't make out the words they were speaking, it was clear they were arguing. The woman's voice rose higher, until she was almost shrieking, the man's voice was deep and unrelenting with rage.

The woman screamed out "Nay. Nay." and, heart in mouth, Arya craned forward, fearful, but struggling to make out more clearly what was going on.

Creeping toward the couple she saw the man had hold of the woman's arm in a tight grip. She struggled, her nails raking his cheeks. Breaking free of him, she went to run, but fell, tangled in the skirt of her long kirtle. Growling and cursing he was on her in an instant, hauling her to her feet.

To Arya's horror she saw the man draw back his arm and bring his fist up. The woman screamed as he landed a heavy blow to her jaw. Her head jolted back and he raised his fist and delivered a second blow.

From her hiding place, Arya could clearly see the blood streaming from the woman's nose and mouth.

The woman raised a hand to her broken face, making a gurgling sound in her throat. A fierce protective instinct galvanized Arya. There must be some way she could try and save the woman from this brute.

The woman's legs seemed to give way and she sank to her knees. At once the man seized her long hair and forced her head back, dragging her to her feet.

“Ye cursed whore,” he said in a low harsh voice. “I should slit yer throat.”

Horrified, Arya listened as the woman pleaded for her life.

“Please, nay, dinnae kill me. I swear I...”

The man was fumbling for the knife in his belt, the woman fighting fiercely.

Looking around feverishly for some kind of a weapon, Arya’s hand encountered a sharp, heavy stone which she clutched in desperation.

The man pulled up his hand, holding his dirk aloft preparing to slash the woman’s throat as he’d threatened, and Arya’s fingers closed tightly around the rock.

Just as the man was bringing down his weapon, Arya dashed forward. Coming up behind him she smashed the stone as hard as she could against his head. Letting out a roar he released the woman and staggered to his knees, his attention now on his attacker. Arya.

“Curse ye, devil’s wench,” he bellowed at her, scrabbling to haul himself upright, raising his dirk again, this time aiming straight for Arya’s heart.

In a wild panic she struck a second blow as he tried to rise, the heavy rock smashing into his temple. With a loud grunt, he dropped the dirk, fell back, rolled to his side, and lay at her feet, motionless. Blood gushed from the

wounds on his head where the sharp end of the stone had found its mark.

Arya knelt quickly, forcing herself, without success, to feel a heartbeat under the heavy leather jacket he wore.

Finally, rising to her feet, she gazed with revulsion and trepidation into the man's unseeing, lifeless eyes, her hands dripping with his blood. Frantically she grabbed his tartan cloak and wiped her stained hands clean.

Rolling her gaze to the stars, she breathed a prayer.

Oh, dear God in heaven what have I done? I've killed a man.

She turned to the trembling lass, her own body shaking uncontrollably.

"Ye saved me life," she heard the woman say. "I thank ye."

"Aye, that I did," Arya mumbled, scarcely able to believe the scene that confronted her. "I saved yer life by making this man pay with his."

In an instant the two girls were in each other's arms, each attempting to reassure the other.

"Ye've done aught tae be ashamed of lass, he was a wicked, wicked man and

the world's a better place without the likes of him in it. I'm grateful tae ye from the bottom of me heart," the trembling woman said quietly. Her words going some way to soothing Arya's shattered nerves.

Arya looked up into the lass' tear-filled eyes, surprised she was only about the same age as herself. She'd imagined her to be much older when she'd first come upon on the couple.

"There is nae need tae thank me fer..." Arya, said staring in true horror at the body crumpled at their feet where he'd fallen. He *had* menaced both of them with his dirk and she had no doubt he'd intended to end the lives of both her and the lass. "...and ye've aught tae be fearful of, now he is... nay more," she said, releasing the young woman from her tight, panicked grip.

Taking a seat on a fallen log nearby, the woman reached for Arya's hand and pulled her down to sit beside her.

"I am named Eleonor," she whispered. "Ye?"

"I'm Arya..." She hesitated, suddenly afraid of revealing the name "Macdonell" to this unknown girl. After all, she, Arya *had just killed a man*. Her head buzzed with a thousand bees. Perhaps she'd already said too much. She sucked in a breath, her eyes widening as the recognition of her own dangerous situation dawned. Once the dead man was found, there would be others seeking to find the culprit who had murdered him.

Shaking her hand free, she pushed herself to her feet. She had to get clear of this place. Now. Before someone discovered the man's body and came

searching for his killer.

The sound of distant men's voices made them both freeze.

"They're coming this way," Arya whispered as the voices grew louder.

Eleonor groaned. "That will be his men seeking him out now that he hasnae returned tae them. We must flee," she took a step toward the path.

Arya went to follow but her skirt was caught, snagged on the fastening on the man's plaid cloak. She tugged at her skirt but it was securely trapped.

"Here." Eleonor swiftly snatched up the dead man's dirk and slashed at the offending cloak. Her speedy action released Arya, but left the brooch and a fragment of the man's cloak still clinging to her skirt.

Arya went to undo the fastening, but Eleonor placed a restraining hand on her arm. "Come now. We must be quick. There's nae time tae fash about that now. We must run before they catch us here."

Turning back toward the abbey, Arya reached for Eleonor's hand. "I will find sanctuary with the sisters in the convent. I can hide there. Come with me. We'll be safe from pursuit."

Eleonor turned away, shaking her head. "Nae, Arya. I cannae go with ye. I have other things I must attend tae. I'll find me way back tae the village and

I'll be safe there. There's none who kens I was tae meet with this man, nae even his own soldiers, so they'll nae look fer me." She turned to go. "Ye bide well."

Desperate as she was to regain the safety of the nunnery, Arya held grave concerns for Eleonor's safety. "Ye must make haste tae hide, lass. But if ye ever need me help ye can find me at the abbey. If I'm nae there, leave a message for Arya with the sisters. They'll ken where I stay and get your word tae me. I'll help if I can."

They gave each other a quick hug and sped on their way, their footsteps racing along the path in opposite directions.

Stumbling along the path to the abbey, Arya's head was spinning. She was hardly aware of where she was until she found herself in the convent garden. The darkness of night was slowly being overtaken by the gray light of early morning and several nuns were pacing slowly toward the chapel for morning prayers. Passing the sisters, she entered the main hall, where preparations were underway for the breaking fast meal that would await the nuns on their return from Matins.

Head down, her hood almost covering her face, she crept along the passageway leading to the cell she'd only vacated a few short hours before.

In that time her life had changed forever. She had left here, her heart full, wishing only to be useful to her beloved brothers. She was returning with the blackest of marks marring her future. Her actions had made her a sinner. She had no right to be here, among the spotless purity of the contemplative women whose refuge she craved.

If she could only make it to her cell and take off the bloodstained kirtle and blouse and join the others in the chapel to pray for forgiveness.

Turning the corner and heading along the corridor that led to her cell, she was pulled up short by a voice crashing into her morbid and hopeless thoughts.

“Goodness child, where have you been so early in the day?”

Arya’s heart sank. It was the Mother Superior. The tall, angular nun studied Arya with an all-knowing expression in her gray eyes.

“Well, lass. I hope ye’ve nae been meeting with a lad outside these walls. Yer brother, the laird, willnae be happy if he discovers ye’ve found a sweetheart while ye’ve been with us.”

Arya shook her head. A lover would be the least of it. If the saintly Mother only knew the truth of the sin she’d committed.

Forcing a shy smile, she shook her head. Mother Agnes returned her smile, making no comment. Her gaze roamed across Arya as if search for an answer to her question, coming to rest on Arya’s skirt where the brooch with its remnant of bloodstained plaid was still attached.

Arya held her breath, fearful of the questions she expected.

Agnes reached down, undid the fastening and rose, clutching the brooch and

the fabric in her hand. She looked sternly at Arya.

“This is the MacQuarrie tartan, and the brooch ye have here is chased gold, bearing the Clan crest.” She tilted her head to one side questioningly. “Only the Laird and his family are able tae wear such treasures. How did ye come by this?”

Arya gasped. “I dinnae ken, I was in the woods, Mother. It must have caught in me kirtle.”

Mother Agnes took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “I pray ye speak truth Arya. The MacQuarries are a vile lot. If they believe this precious item has been stolen, they will nae spare the life of the thief. I must arrange fer this brooch tae be returned. It would nae dae fer any of the clan to ken it is in the hands of a MacDonell.”

“Oh, thank ye, Mother,” Arya muttered. “I’m of nae mind tae keep it.”

Mother Agnes tucked the brooch into the pocket of her surplice and gave Arya’s arm a squeeze. “Dinnae fash, lass. I’ll arrange fer one of our messengers tae take it across tae Mull, with the word that it was found in the woods by one of the sisters on her daily walk to the farms.” She made the sign of the cross. “I believe the Good Lord will forgive me the lie. Now, dae hurry and tidy yerself fer morning prayers. Yer brothers have sent news and it is now safe fer ye tae return home. After the prayers you can prepare tae leave.”

Arya could scarcely believe Mother Agnes had chosen discretion, and could

only nod as the older woman swiveled and continued her way along the passage. The news of being called home would have overjoyed her just a few hours ago, but now, it was secondary. Her heart was beating fast and the blood was pounding in her veins as the nun's dire words took hold. Feeling her knees buckling under her, she put a hand on the wall to support herself while her stomach roiled and a wave of terror swept over her.

Not only was the man she'd killed a member of a bloodthirsty, vengeful clan, it seemed he was an important member of the clan laird's family.

CHAPTER ONE

*E*arly Spring 1305

Isle of Iona

Grimacing, Gillebride slammed the heavy pewter tankard on the sturdy oak table. Ugh! This seedy tavern in the godforsaken village of *Baile Mòr* served what must surely be the worst ale in all of Christendom.

Looking around, he swiped his sleeve across his beard. He despised this place, and was only here on the Isle of Iona at the behest of the Laird, Blaine MacKinnon, who was keen to obtain the latest battle plans from their neighbouring clan, the MacQuarries.

Grumbling under his breath he scanned the motley throng of cutthroats, whores and poorly disguised clansmen seated around him in the fetid, smoky parlour. There was no sign of the man he'd been sent to meet, Beolin, a henchman of Anrias, Laird of the MacQuarrie Clan.

Although the MacQuarries and the MacKinnons were now allies, fighting side-by-side for their King Robert the Bruce, theirs was a long, uneasy history. MacKinnon land bordered that of the MacQuarries on the Isle of Mull and, for as long as Gilly could remember, there'd been ongoing skirmishes along the border and attempted incursions by the MacQuarries. Cattle had been stolen, crops destroyed, fishermen's catch taken. Not only that. They were a bloodthirsty, merciless clan with a reputation for engendering fear of their ruthlessness into all those unfortunate enough to encounter them.

Still, if nothing else, meeting on Iona they were in a neutral place, a short distance from either clan's territory. Despite that, it was a damned nuisance to make the short sea crossing even though, when the tide was out it took a strong oarsman only minutes to cross from one island to the other.

Apart from a few straggling, thatch-roofed cottages, this was the only meeting place on the island and it bedeviled Gillebride's thoughts that a place harboring so much evil was situated so close to the abbey and the nunnery.

Glancing around, his eye was captured by a parchment tacked up on the wall near the doorway. From where he sat, he could just make out a roughly drawn and painted woman's face. The features were indeterminate but what stood out was the mane of red hair cascading over the face, visible even at a distance. He squinted in the dim light, but was unable to read the rough script on the bottom of the parchment. Apart from the grim words "Wanted Dead or Living".

He had more than a little sympathy for the woman, whoever she was and whatever crime she'd committed. If she attracted the attention of the ruffians frequenting this disreputable hideout then pity help her.

A big-breasted woman whose blouse and kirtle were alarmingly low, exposing an expanse of her flesh, sidled up to his table.

“Only a penny fer such a handsome bear of a man as ye, tae take me tae bed,” she said, giving him a lascivious grin, her gaze roaming over his broad shoulders and huge size.

Gilly shook his head. “Nay lass, I’ve nae taste fer what ye’re selling.”

She huffed, shrugged her shoulders, and moved off to another table where one of the men seized her around the waist and pulled her onto his knee. The sound of her false laughter rang in Gilly’s ears as a shadow materialized beside him. He looked up to see Beolin pulling out another stool from under the table and lowering himself into the seat.

He grunted a greeting and Gilly dipped his head. He had no time for Beolin. He’d never trusted the man, despite their frequent meetings to discuss the plans being laid down by the clans in the war against the English. Beolin was a tall, gaunt, grey-bearded man who, to Gilly, always had the hungry look of a half-starved fox about him.

Beolin called the serving-wench over and requested an ale. Gilly shook his head. He’d had enough of the bad brew. Once the woman had placed the tankard on the table the two men bent their heads in conversation, apprising each other of the most recent strategies for the upcoming battles against the English.

Gillebride watched Beolin in disgust as the man licked his lips, his gaze fixed

on the young whores shamelessly parading their wares, half-naked before the men. No doubt after his conversation with Gilly was done, he'd take one of the lasses upstairs and have his way with her, offering nothing more than a small coin for her services.

“Have ye nae shame, man?” Gilly said when the man's obvious lust became too much for him to observe without commenting. “These lassies are young enough tae be yer own daughter.”

Beolin's only comment was a short sniggering laugh and an uneasy shifting in his seat, his hand on his braes.

Gilly shook his head, looking away in disgust. His gaze came to rest again on the rough painting tacked on the wall. “What's the story with the lass?”

Beolin swivelled to stare at the poster and turned back to Gilly, a frown on his gaunt face.

“There's a price on her head. If ye've a mind tae search fer her ye could earn yerself some coin.”

“I'm nae looking fer coin, lad.” Gilly offered a sharp laugh. “What's the lass done tae make her an animal tae be hunted?”

“An animal is too good a name fer her. The whole of Clan MacQuarrie is after her fer killing young Alasdair, the favourite son of Anrias MacQuarrie.”

Gilly raised an eyebrow. “The Laird’s son? Murdered by a wee lass?”

“She’s nae a wee lass, Gillebride, but the spawn of the devil and his bride. She’s a witch who killed the lad by smashing his head with a rock. When Anrias catches up with her he’ll most likely have her walled up fer eternity, to die a slow and hungry death. A quick death is too good fer the likes of her.” Beolin hoicked a blob of phlegm onto the scuffed dirt floor and ran his fingers across his belly and shoulders in the sign of the cross.

Gilly had seen and heard enough. It was time to take his leave and turn his back on this man Beolin and the ugly village of *Baile Mòr*. He placed a coin on the table as payment for the ale and rose to his feet.

“Bide well,” he said to the other man. As he turned to go a sudden commotion broke out.



The boatman lifted Arya out of his small boat and slung her over his shoulder as if she was a sack of barley. He waded the few yards to the sandy, rocky beach and lowered her, none too gently.

She handed him a coin for his trouble. “Wait here fer me, I’ll nae be long. I have business with a lass I’m tae meet in the tavern. Ye’ll get the rest when ye return me tae Mull.”

The man grumbled under his breath. “A decent lass would nae be here at all.”

Arya shivered and pulled her cloak tight around her against the wind, lowering the hood with its white fur trim. She was back in the place she'd vowed never to visit again and the cold breeze whipping off the sea and the drizzling rain simply added to her disquiet.

All these months she'd almost begun to put the memory behind her, almost begun to feel safe. Although, she knew in her heart, she would never be able to forget the awful secret of the man she'd killed.

“Dinnae fash,” she told the boatman, “I’ll be back in minutes.”

As she trudged up the hill toward the tavern her heart was pounding. A pall of wickedness fell over this place. It was clearly no place for a lass on her own. She'd learned it was a stronghold for the feared MacQuarries, even though their territory was on Mull. Despite telling herself she was safe enough to be here, unrecognized, her feelings of unease grew stronger with every step.

Why on earth has Eleonor sent me a message? It can only mean she is in trouble. And why of all places, has she asked me to meet her at the most dangerous place of all, the tavern in Baile Mòr?

Following Eleonor's instructions, she'd told no one of her destination. But now, as she approached the dimly lit tavern, hearing the raucous, raised men's voices coming from inside, she questioned the wisdom of her decision. If anything happened to her here, her brothers and her friends would have no idea where to find her.

Outside the tavern, she hesitated. Of course, she wished to aid Eleonor if she needed help, but coming here meant she was risking discovery by members of the MacQuarrie clan.

But, save fer Eleonor, nae-one kens me part in the death of that man. Surely, I'll be safe.

Taking a deep breath to settle her nerves, she tightened her cloak and, head well-covered by her hood, she pushed open the door and stepped into the noisy, fetid interior of the tavern.

The instant she was through the door she knew she'd made a horrible mistake in coming here.

All conversation ceased as she stepped into the tavern and every eye turned in her direction. Her eyes searched for Eleonor, but wherever she looked there were men accosting women, some of whom had their breasts bare, being fondled by rough-looking characters. Many of the men seemed drunk and staggering. One man was lying on the floor looking up the skirt of a woman who was bare to the waist and giggling as if she was tipsy.

Arya groaned audibly. There was no sign of Eleonor, even though the message she'd received was clear. They were to meet in the *Baile Mòr* tavern, shortly after sundown.

She waited, unsure of her next move and, after moments, the rough laughter and talk resumed. All the same, she was uncomfortably aware she was being closely scrutinized by several men at a nearby table. Two of them laughed

and nodded to each other as if in agreement with something. She shuddered as they gazed intently at her, their lustful intentions all too obvious

Stomach lurching, she looked away. It was then her eyes were drawn to the roughly-painted poster just inside the door. Her heart, which was already beating much too fast, suddenly felt as if it would jump right out of her chest.

The painting was childish, roughly drawn and colored, but the tilt of her head, the straight nose, the big blue eyes and, most of all, the cascade of red hair were sufficient for her to realize this was someone's attempt at creating a portrait of her – Arya Macdonell.

The words, *Wanted Dead or Living*, underscoring the likeness, sent a stab of ice straight to her heart.

I must get out of here. I cannae wait any longer fer Eleonor.

On the spur of the moment she pivoted, determined to flee from this horrid place as swiftly as her shaky legs could carry her. But her hopes of beating a hasty retreat without drawing any further attention were dashed. Her cloak flying out behind her as she turned brought glasses and tankards from a table beside the door clattering and smashing to the floor.

Once again, all eyes were upon her.

Ignoring the commotion she reached a hand to the door, determined to be gone before there was time for anyone to take another breath. But the men

who'd been watching her were already on their feet and in an instant two of them had seized her. One had her around the waist and the other pinioned her arms behind her back in an iron grip.

She screamed, struggling vainly against their tight hold on her.

“We’ll have some sport with ye tonight lass. Ye’ll nae be disappointed I guarantee ye.” one of the men said. “Mayhap we should take ye upstairs with us fer our fun.”

A bawdy laugh went up from the assembled throng. One man waving a tankard in encouragement.

“Let me go,” she shrieked. “Please,” she begged, attempting to kick out at the man behind her.

Her desperation only seemed to encourage them.

“Ah. I like a feisty one,” the man behind her said, leaning down to plant a wet kiss on her cheek. “Ye’ll keep us busy tonight, lass.”

She screamed again, bucking wildly as they hauled her toward the stairs at the side of the parlour.

Looking around beseechingly she implored someone – anyone – to please come to her aid and rescue her from this nightmare.

But the other denizens of the tavern were far too interested in their own debauchery to pay any further attention to her plight.

Except for one man.

CHAPTER TWO

Gilly had only just risen to his feet to take his leave of Beolin when a woman's scream rang out through the fusty tavern.

Looking up, he saw her struggling with two men near the doorway. They had her in a firm grip, laughing at her cries for help.

Gilly felt his blood begin to boil. No woman would venture into this filthy place unless she was a whore, but that mattered not a jot to him. As far as he was concerned a woman was being forced against her will, and whore or not, he wouldn't stand by and allow that.

Dragging the helpless young woman between them, the two men were heading toward the staircase leading to the bedrooms on the upper floor, close to where Gilly stood. He took one step ahead of them blocking their way upstairs with his enormous bulk.

Startled by his sudden appearance the men looked up as he loomed over them.

“What dae ye think ye’re doing. Let us pass,” said one of the men, keeping a firm grip on the young woman’s arms.

Gilly twisted his mouth into a sneer. “Seems tae me ye lads are nae tae the lassie’s taste. Mayhap she’d prefer a real man such as meself,” he ground out. “I dinnae wish tae hurt ye so I’d suggest ye let her go. I’ll take care of her now.”

The men fell back, clearly afraid of this giant of a man accosting them. They quickly released their grip on the woman.

While the men stood frozen, mouths gaping, he took the still struggling lass with both hands at her waist and in one fluid movement, flung her across his broad shoulder. She kicked and pounded his back, to no avail.

He barked a laugh. “I fancy a feisty one meself this night,” he muttered, and, carrying the young woman as if she weighed no more than a bag of feathers, he strode lightly up the stairs leaving the two men watching him go, shaking their heads.

“Put me down, ye big beast,” she howled pounding her fists against his back.

Reaching the upper floor Gilly was confronted by a short hallway with three doors opening off it. He kicked open the first door, disturbing a couple on the bed. The man looked up, opening his mouth to bellow but Gilly quickly pulled the door shut and moved to the next door. This led him into an empty room.

There was no furniture save for a rickety timber pallet in the corner, covered with a thin mattress and a threadbare covering.

He lowered the lass onto the floor, but instead of her turning her face up with a smile of gratitude for his rescuing her, she beat at his belly with her fists.

“Ye filthy beast, let me go,” she bawled, tears pouring down her cheeks.

For all the damage she was doing she could have been a gadfly battering itself against a large rock.

“Whoa, lass,” he said, trying to grab her hands as she flailed at him.

“Nay, nay. Let me go. I’ll nae oblige yer vile lust.”

“Hush lass,” he said, hoping to quieten her. “I dinnae crave yer body. Yer safe with me.” He ducked his head to avoid her fist. Her aim was good and he rubbed his jaw where a lucky blow had found its mark.

He held tight to her hands. That small fist of hers stung where it landed.

“Come now, I’ll nae harm ye. I didnae bring ye here tae ravish ye but tae get ye away from those two ruffians who were holding ye so tight.”

Chest heaving, she glowered at him, trying to catch her breath. “Ye... ye...?”

Gilly walked to the bed and pattered the faded coverlet. “Come, lass. Sit. Ye’re safe. I swear I’ll nae touch ye.”

She straightened her spine, drawing herself to her full height, and peered imperiously down her nose at him.

“Why should I trust ye. Only thieves and rogues come tae this tavern.”

He chuckled. “That’s coming from a lass who came here?”

“I was tae meet someone here. She may be here now, waiting fer me.”

“Well, if there’s a lass here waiting fer ye she’ll nae doubt be receiving the same treatment as ye. Any lass who’s ventured here before today kens what this place is.” He looked at her quizzically. “What kind of friend is she? Is she a whore? Nae self-respecting lass would ask her friend tae meet her here.”

“I dinnae ken. She’s nae really a friend,” she went on. “I’ve met her once only. And that meeting was nae auspicious. Yet, all the same, I promised tae help her if I could.”

“And is she needing yer help now?”

She looked up him, shaking her head. “Mayhap she is in trouble and needing me help. I dinnae ken. She only sent me a message tae meet her in the tavern but she isnae here.”

Frowning, she tossed her head, and the hood fell back to her shoulders revealing a tumble of bright red curls.

Gilly studied the girl. She was a rare beauty, no doubting it, with a heart-shaped face, wide blue eyes and rosy lips that trembled most enticingly. Yet there was something else snagging his memory. Had he met her before today? The girl’s appearance was troubling.

It was then Gilly realized with a chill just who it was he’d rescued. She was the wee lass from the painting. The one with the price on her head. The one who, it was said, had murdered the son of the Laird of the MacQuarries.

He shuddered. If that was so, then for her this tavern was a very dangerous place indeed.

A low banging on the door of the room broke into his thoughts. He drew his dirk from his belt and moved quietly across the room, signalling to the girl to stay quiet.

“Who’s there?” He growled, holding his dirk ready in case there was trouble.

“It’s Jamie MacEwan, the tavernkeeper,” came the voice. “Ye owe me fer the

room, Dinnae think ye can get away without paying.”

Chuckling, Gilly opened the door. He took a coin from the purse on his belt and handed it to the waiting man. “I fancy some food and a better tankard of ale than ye served me before.”

The man nodded warily. “Aye, lad,” he said sounding more polite now that he was confronting the big man face-to-face. “But ye’ll need tae come down tae the kitchen tae collect yer meal.”

Once the tavern keeper had scuttled off. Gilly closed the door behind him, pulling the latch down firmly. He strode back to the young woman who had taken up position on the edge of the bed.

He sat down beside her intending to offer some comfort and reassurance but she cringed away from him.

“Ye’ve aught tae fear from me, lass,” he said kindly.

She shook her head, her eyes wary. “Why should I believe ye?”

He chuckled. “Because I’m Gillebride MacThomas, lass. Those who ken me ken that me word is tae be trusted. On the other hand, why should I trust ye? I dinnae even ken yer name.”

“Me name is Arya,” she said, the words coming reluctantly. “If ye’ve nae

intention of using me, why have ye brought me tae this room.”

“Using ye?”

“Aye,” a pink flush rose in her cheeks. “Ye ken what I’m saying. Ye said ye had nae intention of ravishing me.”

“Nay Arya, lass. Think of me as a Good Samaritan who only wishes tae help someone in distress.” He shook his head. “Besides, ye’re a child, the same age as me own daughter...” his voice shook, “that is, if I had a daughter. I’m old enough tae be yer father. I’d never think tae lay a hand on ye. Beautiful as ye are.”

Eyes wide, she gazed at him. “I understand. I’m truly grateful tae ye fer saving me. I am ashamed now that I treated ye so harshly. But I didnae ken ye were a good man. I thought ye were one of them...”

She raised a hand to her mouth and drew in a sharp breath that was almost a sob.

He grinned at her. “Now ye can show me that ye’re a polite lass and nae a wildcat.”

There was some gratification in seeing the colour rush to her cheeks at his words.

He was sorely tempted to question her about the poster he'd seen downstairs and Beolin's words that the lass was being hunted for murder. But he held his tongue. He didn't know her well enough to be certain whatever she told him was the truth and he was in no mind to be lied to when there was so much at stake. Later, if and when he decided he could trust her, he'd find the right time to find out more.

She lowered her hands to her lap. As she did so, she turned up her wrists and a mark, like a small pink shell on the underside of her wrist, caught his eye.

He grabbed her hand and studied the mark, a frown on his face.

“Are ye a witch? Is this the devil's mark?”

She pulled her hand away quickly. “Of course nae. That's a daft thing tae say.”

“I dinnae give a fig fer witches.” Gilly said with a soft laugh. “They've never harmed me. But there are men here who would have ye fer a witch if they caught sight of that mark.”

Shivering, she pulled her sleeve down to cover the mark.

“Is that the only one ye have like it?”

She shook her head. “I've a wee mark shaped like a teardrop on me chest,

right next tae me heart.”

Gilly groaned. He had to get this girl away from here quickly. If they took her for murder and saw these marks, it would be a competition to see whether she was hanged or beheaded for murder or drowned or burnt at the stake as a witch.

Her eyes were suddenly bright with tears. “The nursemaid I had when I was a wean told me the tear on me breast was fer me mother who died bringing me intae this world.”

Gilly reached a comforting arm around her shoulders, liking the feel of her warmth against his chest. “Dinnae greet lass, we’ve all suffered the sad loss of loved ones. Bearing a tear fer your lost mother is a fine thing.”

She gave him a watery smile. “I believe that. It keeps me close tae me mother in me heart. When I was at the nunnery, Mother Agnes taught me that it is a gift from God that we all have the free will tae choose what we believe tae be true. Tae me the mark means I have a loving heart. If someone believes it makes me a witch, then they are choosing the devil’s path.”

He nodded. What she said held a great deal of truth. The lass was wise beyond her years. How on God’s green earth had she earned a price on her head for murder?

Perhaps when they’d finished their meal there would be time fer questions.

He rose. "I'll bring us some food from the kitchen. I'll nae be gone long but while I'm away, dinnae open the door. Only open it once ye're sure it's me who's knocking."

She pulled in a breath, looking indignant. "I dinnae need yer instructions. I can..."

Gilly shook his head grinning. "Nae lass. Dinnae tell me ye can look after yerself. Have ye already forgotten what those ruffians downstairs were planning? Ye were nae match fer those two. How would ye fare with the whole pack baying at yer heels?"

She subsided onto the bed. "Aye. Ye're right."

He gave her hand a reassuring pat. "Stay here last. Keep stumm. I'll go tae the kitchen and bring us back some nourishment. Dinnae open the door tae anyone but meself."

"Promise ye're coming back?"

"I willnae be long. Just sit tight and bide here fer me."

Passing through the parlour on his way to the kitchen he looked around, seeing no sign of the men who had attacked Arya earlier. He breathed a sigh of relief. He had to get her out of the tavern without anyone recognizing her from that cursed portrait on the wall.

He collected two trenchers from the scullery-maid, with a chicken and potato soup.

“This’ll make the hair grow on yer chest,” she assured him.

Adding a handful of bannocks and another tankard of ale he was soon on his way back upstairs, confident his presence had gone unnoticed by the rest of the tavern’s customers.

He rapped on the door of the room.

“Who’s there,” came a small voice.

“It’s meself. Gillebride. Open the door. The soup is getting cold.”

“How can I believe ye?”

A couple in the corridor paused at the door to the next room, the man’s arm wound around the neck of a buxom whore who was already half-naked.

He gave a drunken guffaw as Gilly knocked again.

“What’s wrong lad? Yer wee whore changed her mind?”

Gilly glared at him and the man disappeared into the room, slamming the door behind him.

“Are ye there lass?” He whispered again.

“I cannae take ye at yer word. Yer hushed voice could be any man’s.”

“Will ye believe it’s me if I tell ye I ken ye have a teardrop birth mark over yer heart?” he muttered hoarsely.

He felt the blood pulse in his groin at the sudden vision of Arya’s soft skin and the mark of a teardrop at her bare breast. He heard the latch being slowly lifted and moments later the door was eased open and he entered.

Arya was scowling. “I dinnae ken the reason fer ye tae announce to the entire tavern that I have a mark at me breast.” She huffed indignantly as he gestured fer her to sit.

He leveled his gaze at her. “Ye’re a contrary lass. Ye wouldnae grant me entry tae the room, yet when I said the one thing, I kent of ye that would convince ye, ye object. What else was I tae say?” He snorted a laugh. “I’ve kent ye fer less time than it takes fer a flea tae take its fill of yer blood.”

Her mouth turned up in a smile. “True. I’m sorry, I wasnae thinking sensible thoughts. Being in this place...” she trailed off.

“Aye, lass. Eat yer meal. The landlord has sold me this room until midnight. By then the place will have quietened and we can leave here unnoticed.”

He reached a hand to brush a curl from her shoulder and tuck it behind her ear. She was truly beautiful, lighting up even in this godforsaken hell-hole.

“*Nighean ruadh*, perhaps ye’ll tell me the true story of why yer face is displayed on the wall downstairs fer all tae see.”

The blood faded from her face and she drew in a sharp breath.

He took her hand, trying to find a way of reassuring her. “Dinnae fash, lass, I’ll nae press ye fer the story. But it seems I’ve thrown in me lot with ye now and any of the rogues downstairs who wish tae take ye captive will need dae battle with me. If I’m tae shed blood on yer behalf I need tae ken what ye’ve done tae set the wolves on yer trail.”

“Aye,” she muttered, supping her soup. “I’ll tell ye everything once we’ve bade farewell tae this evil place.”

CHAPTER THREE

Arya took her time eating her supper. She was nervous around this big man who had come to her rescue, yet being close to him also gave her a feeling that she was safe. She believed him when he said he would protect her.

Now that her identity had been revealed by the awful poster on the wall surely, he deserved to know her deadly secret. *But if he learns the truth about the terrible thing I did, will he nae turn me over the laird of the MacQuarries fer punishment?*

Damping down a rush of panic, she glanced sideways at him as he finished off his meal, scrutinizing his features. Despite his well-shaped forehead, straight nose and high, broad, cheekbones his size gave him a forbidding look. But his dark eyes when they looked at her were kind.

Surely, a man with eyes like his would never do her harm.

His ruffled hair was a rich dark brown, close to black in colour. He wore it longer than her brothers did and to her great astonishment she was suddenly

overtaken with a strong temptation to reach out and smooth it back from his brow.

She wished she could see his mouth, but it was well hidden beneath a thick beard of a similar colour to his hair, albeit touched with streaks of silver. She wondered about his age. He'd said he was old enough to be her father, but to her he looked a much younger man.

He appeared quite unconcerned to be eating his supper seated next to a murderess.

“Where dae ye bide, Gillebride MacThomas?” she asked, wishing to find out more about this man. “Dae ye he have a family waiting somewhere fer ye tae come home?”

He turned to her, his brown eyes roaming across her face.

“Me home is on the Isle of Mull and I've nae family waiting fer me return.” His voice was tinged with sadness as he spoke. “I travel abroad fer much of me time.”

“What was it that brought ye tae this cursed place tonight?”

He shook his head. “Me business was private, lass, I'm nae able tae discuss it with ye.”

She huffed at that. “Well, if ye insist I tell ye me business ye should tell me yers.”

“Hmm,” He rubbed the beard on his chin thoughtfully. “I’ll say this. I met with a man and talked about the war with the English. Nae more than that can I say.”

She could see there was no point in pursing this any further. Mayhap he was a spy or an assassin. Someone no better than she was.

At the sudden intrusion of the distant sound of the Priory bell ringing the midnight hour, they both raised their heads, listening.

“It’s time.” Gilly said softly, “We must leave here.”

He rose and walked silently to the door, lifted the latch and opened it. A murmur of voices greeted them, but the previous raucous, bawdy tavern sounds had faded. He turned to Arya with a whisper.

“Mayhap the patrons are too drunk tae shout or yell, or mayhap most of them have gone.”

“Is it safe fer us tae leave now?” At the thought of re-entering the parlor Arya’s belly curled into a tight ball and she clenched her fists.

Gillebride nodded, reaching a hand to squeeze her shoulder. “It’s as safe as it

will ever be. If we can make our way out of here without being noticed, with luck on our side we'll make it safely tae the Isle of Mull."

She nodded. Pulling her hood down she wrapped her cloak tightly about her tall form and slipped behind him as he tiptoed out the door and down the stairs.

Only a few customers remained seated at the tables. One or two others were head down, fast asleep.

She held her breath. *Two of the men, heads lowered in conversation, wear the distinctive green and red tartan of the MacQuarries.*

They had almost reached the bottom when Arya's foot slipped on the last rotten step. She gave a squawk as the timber gave way under her foot, and if not for Gillebride's strong arm seizing her, she'd have fallen flat on her face. She hastily snatched up the hood of her cloak, covering her hair and lowering her head.

She was too late.

The two MacQuarrie men were on their feet in an instant.

"It's the lass from the poster," one of the men shouted. Two more men appeared seemingly from nowhere, similarly clad in the dreaded plaid, and all four turned to face Gillebride and Arya as they made for the door.

“Quick lass,” Gillebride seized Arya’s arm, shielding her as the men came dashing toward them.

Needing no encouragement, she grabbed for the door and opened it and they raced out into the dark of midnight, closely followed by the men from the tavern in hot pursuit. Without thinking, Arya turned along the path, making a beeline for the beach but Gillebride grabbed her hand, pulling her into the darkness beside him.

“This way,” he muttered, scrambling onto another path leading away from the village. Arya recalled this path; it was the way to the Priory.

They crouched low as the four men passed them by and continued on the path they’d been on.

Dashing along the lesser path had bought them some time but once the men realised, they were not heading for the beach they’d be back, hunting them in the opposite direction.

They hurried on as quietly as they could but it was not long before they heard the sounds of pursuit gaining on them. They veered off the path, proceeding with great caution.

“Listen,” Gillebride said, suddenly.

They paused listening to the sound of a nearby burn tumbling on its way. The sound went some way to masking the noise of their own progress.

Cautiously, they followed the sound down a slope away from the path, to follow the stream where the water flowed faster and noisily.

Arya hiked her skirts above her knees and followed closely behind Gillebride along the edge of the burn.

“We need tae hide,” he said, “Let them keep searching until they give up.”

Arya nodded wordlessly, allowing herself to be led wherever Gillebride would take her. Her life was in his hands now.

They followed the course of the burn as it rose higher into the hillside where the country was wilder and at a greater distance from the Priory. The men’s shouts grew fainter as they raced along the path, quite unaware that the prey was now elsewhere.

As they climbed, Arya felt herself tiring, her breath was coming in little pants, and her legs ached with the unaccustomed stress. Her eyes were not used to the darkness and she looked around frantically as they climbed hoping to find a space where they could hide.

“There,” she said, grabbing tighter to Gillebride’s hand. “I think there’s a cave.” She pointed to a place where a dark space loomed between the trees under the hillside.

They crept closer. “Wait here a moment while I check it,” he whispered.

Watching him disappear into the darkness, Arya was relieved to have a moment to catch her breath. Her chest heaved and her heart pounded almost painfully against her ribs.

In a few moments she felt his presence and made out his tall figure beside her.

“It’s dry, there are nae wolves sleeping there. We’ll hide there until morning when we can make our way tae the other side of the island. The men will have given up on us by then, thinking we’ve got away.”

They groped their way to the small cave which held just enough space for them both to squeeze inside. Arya slumped against a rocky outcropping, resting her back and shoulders. Gillebride stood at the entrance, listening, before crouching beside her and pressing his bulk inside the cramped space.

“This is good,” he said, and she sensed him smiling. “We’ll be safe enough here.”

She reached for his hand. “Thank ye fer putting yerself in danger. If nae fer me, those men wouldnae be hunting us.”

“I daresay ye’re right, lass. And, before we progress much further together, I’d like ye tae explain, truthfully, exactly why those men are wanting tae capture ye.”

She sighed, wishing she could somehow avoid telling him her story. “It’s a

long tale. I'm nae sure I can stay awake tae tell it all this night."

He laughed softly. "Never fear lass. I'll nudge ye awake if yer eyes close before ye've finishing the telling."

"I... er..." She put her face in her hands, her knees drawn up. "This is hard. I ken ye're a good man, but I'm sore afeared tae tell ye me story in case ye think badly of me."

"Why would that be?" he said, keeping his voice low.

"I'm afeared ye'll think so ill of me that ye'll abandon me tae me fate with the MacQuarrie men hunting me."

He shook his head, reaching an arm around her shoulders to pull her close.

"Nae, lass. Dinnae fash. I'll nae leave ye. I've nae liking fer the MacQuarries. I ken them tae be a cruel lot. I'd never stand by and see ye taken by them if I could help if. Dinnae be afeared."

Her tears were flowing again. This was partly because of his kindness and partly because the thought of revisiting that terrible night when she'd smashed the man's head with the rock had brought back so much of the terror and the guilt.

He pressed her head to his shoulder, smothering her sobs. "I can help ye best

if I ken why these men are after ye.”

She hiccupped. *Perhaps he speaks truly, but how can I confide me worst secret tae this man I've only just met?*

“Would it help if I told ye I'd already seen the poster in the tavern, when I first came tae yer aid?” he said gently. “It didnae take more than a moment before I recognized ye. I already kent there was a price on yer head before aught passed between us.”

Clutching his hand, she gasped. “So ye already ken I'm accused of killing the heir tae the MacQuarries?”

“Aye, I ken that, lass. What I want tae ken is, is it true? And if it's true, I want ye tae tell me what happened. I ken ye're nae killer.”

She sighed again, allowing herself to slump against him, gaining solace from the feel of his strong, hard body against her. *He kens about me and he still came tae me rescue.*

He stroked her hair softly and she felt herself drifting sleepily into a snug, warm illusion that this was, after all, the safest place in Scotland. She jolted awake. Holy heavens, what was she thinking? Eyes wide-open she stared around the almost-dark place.

She wasn't resting her head on a plush cushion, safe in her own bedchamber at MacDonell Castle, she was in a dank cave on a hillside on the Isle of Iona,

resting on the huge shoulder of a bearlike man named Gillebride. A man who – giving a lie to his appearance – seemed as gentle as a lamb and the kindest, most courageous person she'd ever met.

Hastily pulling her wits about her she hauled herself, with an uncomfortable thump, back to the present. It was time to tell the truth about the night she wished more than anything to forget.

“And why were ye biding at the nunnery?” Gillebride asked, when she started the story at the point when she'd crept so stealthily from the convent.

“I was there under the protection of the Mother Superior, at the behest of me brothers. They feared fer me safety at the hands of Sir William de Coughran.” She paused. “But that's another story tae tell, involving me brothers and a wicked man who wished me harm.”

“I ken well the wickedness of the man,” Gillebride muttered, nodding.

She went on, sparing no detail of what had happened that night. By the time she had arrived at the conclusion of the story where Mother Agnes had revealed the identity of the scrap of tartan from the dead man, she was sobbing again.

“There, lass,” Gillebride said squeezing her hand. “I need time tae think about yer story. Yet, already, it's clear tae me, yer life and that of the other lass were hanging in the balance. If ye hadnae been so brave tae take the stone and ply it tae the hard skull of Alasdair MacQuarrie there's nae doubt in me mind that two lasses would have died that night. Ye and the other lass

ye were tae meet in the tavern.”

Arya looked up. For the first time she allowed herself to consider that her actions had been worthy. Something courageous. She had saved Eleonor and herself from a brutal killer. Although, to her lasting horror, the result was the same whichever way she looked at it. Whether for good or ill, a man was dead. At her hand.

“Trouble is,” he said rubbing his beard thoughtfully, “I doubt Anrias MacQuarrie would bother with the truth. He’d think ye a murderess nae matter how brave ye were and nae matter the life of the other lass ye saved.” He shook his head. “I’m nae saying this tae frighten ye. I only wish ye tae understand the peril ye are in. He and all his ilk are without mercy. An impulsive, bloodthirsty lot who’d think aught of ending the life of anyone who crossed them.”

She shuddered. Suddenly icy cold, she pulled her cloak tighter and leaned closer to Gillebride.

He rubbed her arm, bringing some warmth.

“Mayhap we could light a fire,” she said, “I am chilled tae the bone.”

Once the words were out, she felt him stiffen beside her, withdrawing.

“Nae. I’ll have nae fire,” he growled, throwing up his hands. “Whatever are ye thinking lass? We’d burn alive in this wee place.”

She was about to argue that it would be perfectly safe to light a fire here for warmth, when she registered the expression on his face. His jaw was set, his eyes staring into the distance. His big hands were slowly clenching into fists. He was somewhere else, no longer sitting warmly beside her, sheltering her.

Wherever his memory had journeyed, it was the mention of fire that had taken him there.

He was lost for only a moment, then he turned back to her. "I'm sorry lass. Nae fire. I'll keep ye warm enough." He pulled his cloak around her and, finally, she wriggled against him, finding a comfortable enough place.

Resting her head on his shoulder, Arya allowed herself to fall into a sweet, dreamless sleep that took her all the way to morning.

CHAPTER FOUR

There was no possibility of sleep for Gillebride. His long years of battle had trained him to stay alert whenever he was in a situation where danger threatened. His ears were tuned in on the sounds of the night – the hoot of the barn owl, the cry of an animal caught in a hunter’s snare, the swift yelp of a fox, the whisper of the breeze in the trees, the distant sound of the waves lapping against the sand. And the gentle, even breathing of the lass he was protecting.

Nothing was disturbing the rhythm of the night. It seemed the MacQuarries had given up their search, at least for tonight. He had little doubt there’d be scouts in the forest at dawn, scouring the woodland for any trace of him and the lass.

He and Arya must be well on their way before daylight.

A silvery beam of moonlight shone into the entrance of the cave, illuminating his charge. Asleep, she seemed so much younger, almost childlike, her features delicate, her face heart-shaped. Dark lashes curled over porcelain cheeks that were much too pale for his liking. Yet, despite their travails her sleep appeared untroubled.

He scanned her clothes and the blue cloak she was wrapped in so tightly. These were not the clothes of a whore, or even a courtesan, but the fine garments a noblewoman would wear.

Who was this lass whose fate and his were now entwined?

His mind tormented him with the way her soft curves had pressed against him and her breast had brushed against his arm before she slept.

Again, he felt the heat blood rushing in his veins and a discomfort in his groin. He shifted, suddenly uncomfortable.

What is wrong with me? The lass is a mere child, young enough tae be me own daughter.

He gave his head a shake in an attempt to dislodge the impure thoughts.

It was close to dawn when he woke with a start, sweating, heart racing, having fallen briefly asleep. He cried out as flames and smoke engulfed him. He heard the screams, felt the heat of fire and the smell of acrid smoke, the burning sensation in his lungs.

The fire that cursed his dreams was still as fresh as ever in his heart. Even after all these years.

Moaning, he placed his head in his hands.

Arya was instantly awake, looking around fearfully.

“Wha...? Are they here? Have they found us?”

He took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. “Nae lass. We’re alone here. But it’s time we were on our way.”

She tilted her head at him, one eyebrow raised. “Are ye well, Gillebride? I thought I heard ye cry out.”

He huffed. “Aught but a bad dream, lass. Sometimes me past comes out of the darkness and grabs me by the throat.”

She nodded, but he could tell from the way her eyes scanned his face she was unsure of his answer.

“I dinna like fire, lass, and it was there in me dreams. Mayhap because we spoke of it last night.”

He reached into the inside pocket of his leather jerkin and withdrew a small silver flask. He took out the cork and swigged a mouthful. After brushing his sleeve across his beard, he passed the flask to her.

“Here lass. A swallow of this will bring ye alive quickly. We must make our move before it’s light. Our pursuers will soon resume their search and we must be gone before then.”

She gulped a mouthful from the flask, coughed, screwing up her face as the liquid went down. “Good whisky,” she muttered, passing it back to him, her pink lips rewarding him with an altogether beguiling smile.

“Ow,” she rubbed the small of her back. “I’ll nae be exchanging a mattress fer a rock.” She gave a wry chuckle.

“C’mon,” he reached a hand to help her up. “We’ll head fer the northernmost part of the island. The lad I came here with should be waiting there with his wee cog tae take me back tae Mull after I’d finished me business at the tavern. If he’s still waiting as we agreed, we’ll be away and safe before the MacQuarries have taken their first morning bite.”

After they’d relieved themselves, they set out in a northerly direction, heading for the coast. By his calculations that was no more than a mile along the path they were on. He was yet to find out exactly where the lass was meant to be heading. But, first things first. Getting off the island and putting as much distance as possible between them and the MacQuarries was his highest priority. Once they were safely away, he could work out the best way of seeing her safely to her home.

They made their way down the tortuous slope, their feet in danger of slipping out from under them with every step. Arya clutching at his hand for balance, warmed his soul. She trusted him and, he discovered to his surprise, that he liked the feeling.

Once they had found the path again, they moved quickly enough.

Arya paused as the track forked.

“That’s the way to the Priory,” she said, her eyes growing round and large, her cheeks pale, her lips trembling.

“Does it hold bad memories?” he asked, searching in his mind for a way to bring her smile back.

She shook her head. “Nae. I have many good memories. I spent many tranquil days with the sisters. They were kind tae me. Mother Agnes must have suspected something when I returned on that terrible night, but she said naught and somehow managed tae return the gold fastening to the MacQuarries. Nae one at the convent ever suspected anything.”

She lifted her head and he was relieved to see a sparkle returning to her eyes. “I learned much when I was there. Sister Dominique taught me a great deal about healing and I believe I can be of use if the fighting comes close tae us. I would like nothing more than tae become a healer.”

He could see purpose written on her face with her slightly drawn-in brows and an upturn to her lips.

The dawn was breaking as they reached the water-side, the sun rising amid glorious streaks of pink and purple washing the sky with colour. They found themselves on another rocky expanse of beach in a small cove but there was

no sign of the cog Gillebride had been hoping would still be waiting.

“God’s blood,” he exclaimed. “The lad’s taken me on me business throughout the isles fer the past weeks and I believed I could count on him tae wait fer me.”

“Look,” she cried. A small boat was sailing around the rocky headland heading into the bay.

Gillebride raced to the water’s edge, waving his hands. He was reluctant to shout out to the boatman for fear his voice would carry and anyone searching for them would be bound to hear it.

Fortunately, the man caught sight of them and waved his hand in response.

It was not long before the small vessel had drawn close enough for him to wade out to it. He quickly took off his boots and slung them over his shoulder, bent and scooped Arya into his arms.

She wound her arms around his neck and for a moment he allowed himself to inhale the sweet scent of roses that drifted in her hair and to revel in the feel of her holding him tight. Then they had reached the cog and he was handing her over to the safekeeping of young Hamish Grant, the boatman.

“I grew concerned when ye were nae here afore dark last night as ye arranged, so I sailed round tae *Baile Mòr* in case ye’d met with trouble at the tavern there.” Hamish said. “They told me there’d been a wee brawl there

with a man who fit a description a lot like yers.”

Gillebride gave a sharp laugh. “Aye, lad. That goes part way tae explaining why we didnae get here on time. Now we’ve an extra passenger travelling with us and because of that little trouble last night, we need tae be away from Iona with all speed.”

Hamish grinned. “At yer bidding melord,” he said, turning his hands to the sail and steering them on a course toward Mull.

Once they had left Iona behind, Gillebride was grateful for an easing in the stiffness in his neck. But there’d be no real release until he was well clear of MacQuarrie territory and was back at Castle Ardtun with the MacKinnons. Once there, he would make whatever arrangements were needed to return Arya safely to her family.

A stiff breeze had whipped up from the south, filling the sails as the cog moved swiftly over the white-capped water. His heart lifted as he watched the mountainous country growing closer and the craggy coastline coming into view.

Arya’s small hand sneaked into his larger one. “Thank ye fer everything ye’ve done fer me, Gillebride MacThomas. If nae fer ye....” She shuddered. “I’d have been taken by those men and....” she shuddered again and he reached an arm around her small waist and drew her close.

“Think nae more on it, lass,” he said quietly. “Ye’re safe now and I pledge that nae harm will come tae ye whilst I am near.”

He felt her body grow looser, moulding to him, making his heart jump. “Dinnae fash. We’ll be safely in Ardtun before too many minutes have passed.”

She sucked in a sudden breath. “Ardtun?”

“Aye lass, that’s where we’re heading now.” He looked down, but her eyes were fixed on the approaching coastline and he was unable to gauge her thoughts.

“Are ye a MacKinnon then, Gillebride MacThomas?”

He laughed. “I’m nae kin tae the MacKinnons. The Laird, Blaine MacKinnon is me oldest friend and it’s true that me allegiance is tae him and his people.”

“Ye’ve left yer own people?” she enquired, shaking her head as if such a thing was not to be believed.

“Aye lass. That I have.” A flash of pain stabbed his gut at the mention of his family. “But that’s nae a story fer today.” He leaned on the bow, pointing, as the boat turned past a headland and headed into the sweep of a bay. “See that rise over there, beyond the cove. That’s Ardtun Castle.”

She laughed, looking at him, eyes wide. “It’s the place I was bound for. I’ve been a guest of the MacKinnons fer these past weeks while me brothers tarry in Glasgow with the court of King Robert.” She smiled up at him and all at

once it was if the sun's rays beamed down to warm him.

Releasing his hand, she took his arm instead. "Why, it seems fate has truly brought us together, Gillebride. If ye ken the Lady Hannah MacDonell, the Laird's sister, she is married tae me brother Taveon."

"Hannah has always been like a little sister tae me," he said wonderingly. "I was at MacDonell Castle fer the wedding. And I was with yer brothers when we rescued her from Lochnell Castle, saving her from the clutches of Sir William de Coughran."

She turned to him with a giggle, eyes glowing, keeping her hold on his arm. "And I didnae meet with ye then. I'd been banished tae Iona tae keep safe." She huffed. "If they'd only realised the danger I'd be in. And I missed the wedding."

As they drew closer it was possible to make out the cottages of Ardtun village and, clearer now, the imposing castle towering on the hill beyond the thatched rooftops. Soon enough they could make out the figures of the villagers going about their business in the narrow laneways.

Once they were close to the shore Hamish and Gillebride jumped from the prow into the water. They hauled the small craft onto the pebbly beach and, once it was secured, Gillebride leaned into the boat to collect a large leather satchel secreted on a wooden shelf near the tiller. He slung the satchel over his shoulder and reached a hand to Arya.

She stepped onto dry land, looking around with curious eyes at the busy

scene greeting them. There were fishermen unloading their catch, and fishwives, their skirts hiked up above their knees, loading baskets of fish and heading to the centre of the village to trade their wares. Children and dogs ran among the crowd and, overhead, hungry gulls wheeled hopefully.

After Gillebride had paid Hamish for their passage, he led her to a path on the other side of the village. It would take them through woodland and up the hillside to the castle.

“Mayhap it is best tae say little about what happened when we met on the Isle of Iona,” Gillebride said thoughtfully as they walked. “At least fer now.”

“Then how can we explain us being together?”

“Easiest tae say we met on this pathway and we’ve kent each other only fer the time it takes tae walk from the village.”

“I dinna fancy lying tae me friends,” she said, “but, ye’re right. I dinnae wish tae alarm them by telling them our tale.”

“Another day,” he said, “we’ll tell them all of it.”

The path grew steeper as they progressed.

“Can we pause a while?” Arya asked, “Me legs are aching and this is such a pretty place.” Daffodils lined the path through the trees, bees buzzed, birds

chirped happily in the warmth of spring sunshine. They paused and Arya made a beeline for a fallen log where she perched, breathing in the crisp morning air. Gillebride ambled over and sat beside her.

Running her fingers through the curls tumbling over her shoulders she untangled a series of knots. "I'm nae looking me best," she muttered with a laugh.

Gillebride's gaze roamed over her. Seated on the log she seemed almost a part of the woodland. A nymph, with her bright hair and her fae features. His heart skipped a beat. He found her utterly enchanting.

"Ye look very fine tae me," he mumbled.

There was nothing to disturb the tranquil moment of respite. This was an idyllic scene, yet his warrior's instincts were forever alert and on guard. He well knew that what seemed peaceful could turn into a battleground in the blink of an eye.

Reluctantly he got to his feet, reaching a hand to Arya. She clasped it, smiling into his eyes as she sprang lightly to her feet. He bit his lip. He was enjoying the touch of her soft hand in his far too much. He struggled to rid himself of this growing tenderness he felt toward her, reminding himself for the hundredth time that she was young. *Too young.*

Continuing along the pathway, they left the woods and joined the road leading to the castle some little distance further along. As they neared the portcullis, he made out two men standing guard. The gate had already been

raised and as he and Arya drew closer two horsemen he recognized set out at a gallop. One of them was Blaine MacKinnon, Laird of the MacKinnons, the other was his younger brother, Errol.

As they approached, he stepped out of the roadside shadows and waved them down. Drawing closer they both hauled on their reins, slowing their horses.

“Arya,” Errol shouted at the same time. “God’s blood lass, we were setting out this minute tae find ye. When ye didnae return last night, Hannah was sick with worry. What are ye doing with this big *mathan*?”

“Gilly,” shouted Blaine. “Fer God’s teeth, we were expecting ye here yesterday, I was afear’d something bad had befallen ye.”

Gilly laughed. It was so damned good to be home again with these two men. He noted the bright pink washing over Arya’s cheeks.

“Dinnae fash lads. I’ll tell ye everything once I’ve had a chance tae wash, put on something clean and filled me belly. And...” he added, “I’m looking forward tae a tankard or two of yer best ale.”

He turned to Arya with a wink. “Safe now, little one,” he whispered.

CHAPTER FIVE

Arya caught a look passing between Gillebride and Errol. Errol responded with a sheepish grin and dismounted from his horse, holding out his hand to Arya.

“Ye look weary lass after yer night in the forest, please take me place in the saddle. I’ll walk ye back to the keep.” Out of the corner of her eye she saw Gillebride nod. Errol took the reins and walked beside his horse, leading them through the portcullis and into the keep.

She was just alighting from her steed when a flurry of activity turned her attention to the entrance to the castle. Her brother’s wife Hannah, Errol’s wife Edina, and Blaine’s wife Ivy, braids and skirts flying, burst through the entrance and raced toward them.

“Where have ye been, Arya?” Hannah said as she took Arya into her arms for a hug while the other two stood by, their faces wreathed in smiles. “I’ve been sick with worry.” She gave a nervous laugh. “I was imagining all kinds of things. I was afeared ye’d mayhap been taken by a troll, or eaten by wolves.”

She was all smiles, but Arya could see that behind the light-hearted chatter was a deep worry. They were at war. Castle Ardtun had been attacked only a few short months ago, and it was not long past that Arya's life had been under threat and she'd been exiled to the nunnery on Iona. It was also not too long ago that Hannah had been kidnapped right here by Taveon, Arya's brother, and later held captive by a villain who had tried to force her into marriage with his son.

Hannah seized Arya's hand and looked up with surprise to see Gillebride standing by, watching closely, a grin on his face.

"Gilly," she called, "Ye're back. I hardly noticed ye standing there with all me attention on our darling Arya." She beckoned him excitedly. "Come. You must meet me newest sister."

Arya tried to speak but Hannah was far too animated to pay her any attention.

Gilly strolled over to the group, giving each a courtly bow as he greeted them individually.

Hannah unceremoniously flung her arms around his neck for a quick hug and turned to Arya. "This is me biggest brother, Gillebride MacThomas," she said proudly, "he's been looking after me since I was a wee girl."

Gilly cleared his throat. "Er... I've... already met the Lady Arya."

Hannah's eyes widened. "Ye've met. How can that be?"

Arya piped up, a shy smile on her face. “Gillebride very kindly came tae me aid after me horse was frightened by a wolf and took flight, leaving me lost in the woods.”

Hannah groaned. “Ye should never have gone riding by yerself, Arya.” She shook her head in disbelief. “I ken ye brothers allowed ye tae ride by yerself when ye were in yer own lands, but it isnae safe tae ride alone here.”

Edina chimed in. “Whatever would Payton and Taveon have tae say if they kent their wee sister was attacked by wolves in the forest and we’d allowed ye tae ride alone?”

“Dinnae look so woebegone Arya,” added Ivy. “We ken ye didnae mean tae worry us, but next time ye wish tae ride, please let us ken so we may ensure ye’re safe with a guard beside ye.”

Eyes glinting with mischief, Gillebride nodded, “While I’m here at Castle Ardtun, I pledge tae accompany the lass whenever she wishes tae ride out intae the forest.”

Arya turned to him. “Why thank ye. That’s very kind of ye Gillebride... May I call ye Gilly as the others do?”

“Indeed, lass. Gilly will dae me fine. It’s what me friends call me.”

Hannah clapped her hands. "As long as Gilly is riding with ye, we ken ye'll be safe Arya." She turned back to Gillebride. "Why, he might even take ye with him when he goes hunting or fishing, as we ken ye enjoy those activities."

Gilly nodded. "I'm at yer service melady."

Smiling into his eyes, Arya dropped him a curtsy. "I am in yer debt, melord, and I thank ye most kindly."

At that, Hanna folded Arya's arm into hers and the four women, heads together and chatting, wandered up the steps and disappeared into the castle.

"Now, ye must tell me everything that happened," Hannah said.

Arya took a deep breath. She was unwilling to continue the story she and Gillebride had prepared, as none of it was the truth.

Ivy must have sensed her unwillingness to say any more. "Hannah, mayhap Arya doesnae wish tae dwell on her dismal night in the forest. Let us simply say it is enough fer us tae ken ye are safe now, without needing ye tae tell us all of what happened."

"Thank ye Ivy," Arya said, relieved.

Hannah was momentarily downcast. "I'm sorry I pressed ye fer an account

Arya. Ivy is right.”

Edina chuckled. “When yer brother Taveon and then Sir William de Coghran’s men kidnapped her, she never told us much of what that was like.” She turned to Arya.

Hannah blushed a deep pink at the mention of Taveon. “Aye, I couldnae resist the charm of me wicked kidnapper,” she said with a grin. “Perhaps Arya will fall in love with her rescuer... there’s magic in the woods, ye ken.”

The others laughed as if nothing could be more unlikely, while Arya smiled quietly to herself, hoping none of them would notice her blushing.

The young women had reached Arya’s bedchamber.

“Promise tae meet with us again in the solar when ye’re rested,” said Hannah, reluctantly leaving her at the door.

Arya was smiling, but seeing the loving faces of her sisters-in-law, the awful burden of guilt weighed upon her shoulders. Whatever would they think of her if they knew the truth? Not only had she killed a man, but she risked bringing down the wrathful MacQuarries like a horde of angry wasps onto the entire MacKinnon clan.

Once inside her room, she sat quietly thinking, her head in her hands. There was only one person she could confide her fears to, and that was Gillebride. He was more than her rescuer. In only one night he’d become her trusted

confidant.

She wished she was with him now. When he'd held her close, she'd felt safe and the dreadful guilt that haunted her faded a little.

Sighing, she straightened her spine, allowing her thoughts to wander back to how it felt to be in his arms, pressing her body against his. She marvelled at his strength and the way he'd fought to save her from the men in the tavern. The feeling she was alone no longer tormented her as cruelly as it had done before Gillebride had come to her rescue.

Once the scullery maid her had brought a ewer of warm water, she washed and changed into a freshly laundered blouse and kirtle. A kitchen maid brought in a some mead, which she gratefully drank.

After dabbing some rosewater on her wrists and at her neck, she felt sufficiently refreshed to meet with the others in the garden, where they would partake in their midday meal.

They were waiting for her in the small walled garden. Ivy's children, the twins Mirin and Alba, played with a ball beside a trickling fountain, with Hannah joining them. Their meal was served on a long table under a shady arbor where they were joined by Edina's younger sisters, Skye and Margaret.

It was a happy occasion and there was much laughter and merriment as they ate their fill of cold chicken and sausage, apples and pomegranates, washed down with a tasty brew of mead.

Hannah squeezed her hand. “If ye ride with Gilly by yer side, nae harm will come tae ye.”

Arya nodded. “He is very kind.”

“Aye, he is, and a brave warrior at that. He and me brother Errol fought back-tae-back, keeping each other safe fer three years until Errol was captured by Edina’s father. When Edina freed me dear brother and helped him home tae us, and they fell in love, Gilly was the happiest of us all . And me brother Blaine depends on Gilly to keep him informed about the loyalty of the clans who will fight with us against the English.” She sighed. “I only wish yer brother was here with us now.”

This brought a smile to Arya’s face. She could see the longing in Hannah’s eyes. It had been weeks now since they’d returned to Ardtun after pledging allegiance to the Bruce, but her brothers, Payton, the Laird of the MacDonells, and her younger brother Taveon, who was married to Hannah, had remained at court.

“They’ll nae be away much longer,” she reassured Hannah.

Hannah looked at her sadly. “But, in the meantime, we are preparing fer battle against the English.”

At the mention of the coming warfare, Arya’s mind went to her determination to make herself useful as a healer. She straightened her skirt and got to her feet. “Dae ye want tae come with me tae visit the kitchen garden tae see how the herbs I planted are doing?”

“Nae, thank ye, I’ll sit here fer a while.” Hannah shook her head. “I’m feeling tired.”

Taking her leave of the others, Arya hastened away. Ever since she’d come to stay with the MacKinnons at Ardtun after visiting the King’s court in Glasgow, she’d been nurturing a selection of herbal plants. Some she’d foraged for in the woodland; others she’d managed to find in the village in the home of the oldest resident, Granny Watt, who’d been renowned as a healer when she was younger.

Arya wished to make the most of what she’d learned at the Priory and was determined to make her own aromatic oils, tisanes, poultices and other remedies when her little crop of herbs was sufficiently grown.

Even though Morag, the castle healer, had a small garden beside the kitchen, she was old now, and growing vague. There were fewer and fewer herbs available. As her eyesight was failing, distinguishing between the leaves was becoming difficult. When Arya had expressed her desire to learn the healing arts, Morag was delighted. Now they spent as much time together as they could.

She stopped briefly in the infirmary to bid good-day to the elderly woman.

There were only two patients there. One was an old man, fast asleep beneath his coverlet, the other was a small boy whose finger was being tended.

The old healer looked up, her weathered face breaking into a wide grin at the

sight of Arya. “This lad has broken his finger after slipping on a rock by the burn.”

Arya watched with interest as Morag prepared a small splint for the boy’s finger and she helped to complete the job of binding it tightly to help the bone set.

They sent him on his way with a tear-stained face.

“I heard ye were lost in the night,” said Morag. “Did the faery folk whisk ye tae the other world?”

Arya gave a wistful smile. If only that was what had happened instead of the events that had taken place in the grim tavern at *Baile Mòr*. “I dinna ken, Morag. I’m nae too sure what happened. But Gilly came tae me rescue and brought me safely home.”

The old woman chuckled. “He’s a fine warrior. There’s nae better man. One of these days a lass will catch his fancy and she’ll be a right lucky one tae have him by her side.”

At the old woman’s words Arya couldn’t conceal her smile. She’d been mulling over whether Gillebride had a wife or not. Now, thanks to Morag, she knew he was free.

“Gilly’s nae a MacKinnon?”

“Nae, he’s nae from these lands, but he’s as loyal tae the laird and his family as any of the MacKinnon clan.”

Arya was curious about Gilly’s background. He’d hinted at some great sadness in his past, but he made it clear he had no wish to talk about it. Perhaps Morag could fill in some of the missing story for her.

“Oh? Where is he from?” she asked, innocently enough.

Morag chuckled. “Has he caught yer fancy then?”

“Why nae,” Arya said, a little too quickly. She caught Morag looking sideways at her with a piercing look. “I’m merely curious.”

“I cannae tell ye much about him.” Morag responded. “He’s nae someone tae talk about his past life. I can tell ye that he’s been the laird’s friend fer many a year. They met when they were mere lads, fighting together fer the Wallace. I heard they saved each other’s lives on more than one occasion.”

Arya nodded. Morag had added a few pieces to the puzzle. Yet, somehow, she could tell there was a great mystery still to be unravelled that would tell her what she needed to know about this man who had come into her life in a most unexpected way.

After leaving the infirmary she crossed the keep, where some young squires were practicing their sword play and archery, making her way past the stables to the small patch of earth she’d been allocated by the gardener. The herbs

were flourishing, new green sprouts shooting up, tiny leaves forming. It would not be long before she would have the herb garden she'd been dreaming of.

Beside the tiny garden patch, she dodged around a stack of hay bales destined for the stables, and entered the small, dilapidated timber building she'd been using as a potting shed. It contained an old rickety table on which she had laid out a number of clay pots where the precious seeds she'd collected were sprouting.

As she pushed open the creaking door, she heard a familiar "meow". It was Grimalkin, the cat who spent his days dozing on the table and his nights keeping the mice in their place.

Arya bent and took the tabby cat in her arms. "Greetings dear friend," she said in a singsong voice that was rewarded by a loud purr as she stroked its soft, striped fur. Cradling Grimalkin in her arms she browsed along the neatly lined-up little pots, her eyes lighting up whenever she spotted a tiny green shoot appearing.

Giving the cat a quick kiss between the ears, she placed him on the floor. Picking up her small watering-can she dipped it into the water barrel outside the door and headed inside again to tend to the seedlings.

Humming idly to herself she moved from pot to pot, with Grim winding his way between her ankles, purring, his fluffy tail held high. Her thoughts were fully occupied with sprinkling the baby herbs with just the right amount of water to ensure they thrived, something she counted as a blessed distraction from other dark thoughts that had a nasty habit of intruding.

She was so busy, she failed to see the flaming arrow coming to rest in the hay bales beside the shed.

CHAPTER SIX

Once he'd had a chance to splash some water on his face and hands and find himself a freshly laundered shirt, Gillebride met with Blaine and Errol in Blaine's study.

This was a big chamber at the heart of the castle, with room enough for the clan meetings held there regularly. The trappings of the wealth and power of the MacKinnons were there for all to see in the rich tapestries and embroideries hanging from the soaring walls and in the giant silver and crystal chandelier that could hold a hundred candles, suspended by a heavy silver chain from the ceiling. There was a giant table at the centre where the men would usually be seated on benches.

But today the room was softly lit with only two flaming torches in the wall sconces. Rather than taking a place at the table, Blaine and Errol were seated in well-padded armchairs at the fireside.

Blaine poured them each a wee dram of whisky as they sat before the fire. Last night's chill was still claiming Gillebride's bones and the warmth was welcome, even though he always felt uncomfortable about being close to a fire, even one as tame as this one blazing merrily in the hearth.

He opened his satchel and took out a sheaf of rolled parchments which he passed to Blaine. These were the signed declarations of allegiance to King Robert the Bruce that Gilly had been charged with obtaining from his journeys through the islands over the past few weeks.

“There are some still tae make up their minds, and some who’ve downright refused tae join the fight,” he told Blaine and Errol. “But believe me, I sat in many a great hall, paid a million compliments tae too many crusty lairds, downed many an ale and drunk many drams of whisky tae get all of these.”

Blaine nodded with a short laugh. “Aye, ye’ve done a fine job tae have brought us so many allies.” He frowned, “But there are still many chiefs we cannae count on.”

“Aye, they all have their reasons fer staying out of the war, but none are fer the English king. If nothing else, we can be sure of that,” Gilly countered.

“And the MacQuarries?” Errol asked. “They’re our neighbours and supposedly our allies, but they’re still raiding our lands.”

Gilly’s thoughts raced over the events of last night. *Should I tell them that Arya has a price on her head? That she’s a murderess, and the clan laird, Anrias MacQuarrie has a personal debt tae settle with her?*

There was no doubt he would have to pass on this information. If it came to the notice of the MacQuarries that Arya MacDonell was residing at Ardtun Castle, there’d be all hell to pay. Blood would be shed.

But before he could betray Arya's dark secret, he would need to talk with her and get her agreement. Meanwhile, her brothers had left her under the care and protection of Clan MacKinnon, and that meant they were pledged to keep her safe.

“The MacQuarries are an unpleasant bunch. Although I'm certain loyal tae the rightful king, I dinna enjoy meeting with Beolin. I cannae trust the man, or his master the laird.” Gillebride said, shaking his head. At least he'd made it clear that, as far as he was concerned, their neighbouring clan was not altogether trustworthy.

In the meantime, there were these unwonted feelings – a slight giddiness, a fizzing below his waist and into his groin, a longing to feel Arya's soft body against his and to catch the scent of roses in her hair – that, try as he might, he couldn't shake.

Ridiculous. I have nae right tae feel this way. I should see her just as I see Hannah, as a little sister. Rightly, she is someone tae care fer and protect, but nae tae dream of holding and kissing, or tae hear, in me sleep, her moaning and crying me name.

After he'd finished his discussions with Blaine and Errol and eaten a selection of cheese and cold meats, he walked off to the stables. Looking out for his horses would be a way of distracting himself from his lusty thoughts of Arya and take his mind off the danger she was in. Even if it was only for a short while.

He'd been away for weeks and he'd instructed the grooms to bring them in

from the fields where they'd been turned out in his absence. Now he'd give them a vigorous brushing and take them to the blacksmith to clean and trim their hooves and made sure they were properly shod.

He walked toward the stables, whistling tunelessly. He was looking forward to it. He loved his horses and his favourite war horse, the bay destrier, Bayard, had saved his life on more than one dire occasion.

He'd only just entered the stables when he looked up to see Arya emerge from the infirmary and make her dainty way across the muddy cobblestoned keep. She seemed lost in thought and he wondered if she was plagued by thoughts of the heavy load of guilt she was carrying in secret. His heart ached. If only he could take some action that could make her problems dissolve and fade into nothing.

He watched as she ducked into an old timber outbuilding and he noticed, for the first time, the small patch of earth nearby where small green plants were growing. This must be where she tended the herbs that she'd told him about.

Craning his neck, curious to see what she was doing, he smiled to himself as he saw her pick up Grimalkin the mouser who lived at the stables. He felt a sudden flash of envy as he saw her plant a kiss on the moggy's head through the doorway. He was turning back to the stables when he heard the all too familiar 'thwack' of an arrow close by.

He looked up with horror to see flames darting up from one of the hay bales outside the old shed.

What the devil?

Realizing at once that a flaming arrow shot by one of the young squires in the keep must have gone astray, he felt his heart leaping like a startled frog in his chest. By all the saints – Arya was inside the little shack and as the flames danced higher, he could see she'd be in grave danger should a spark catch in the thatched roof. Holy Jesus! The old timber building was nothing better than a tinderbox. He felt fear gripping his chest, but he pushed the thought away. Arya was in danger.

Without further thought, he snatched up one of the saddle blankets stacked at the stable entrance and raced across the short distance to fight his way through the flames into the shed.

“Get down,” he shouted, racing through the door and slamming it behind him. Through the smoke already filling the room he could hear Arya coughing.

He grabbed her in his arms and flung them both onto the floor where the air was almost clear of smoke.

“Why did ye nae run the instant the flames rose up?” he muttered, breathing in too much of the smoke. “We canna leave by the door,” he said, coughing. “We must break the window if we're tae get out of here before the fire takes us.”

It was then he saw she was clutching Grimalkin to her chest.

“I cannae leave the wee moggy tae burn,” she said, and his heart softened at the sight of her gentle, caring expression.

Of course. She'd think of the damned cat and put her own life at risk.

Loud shouts came from outside, where men were already attempting to quench the flames.

“There's water in the barrel outside,” she whispered.

Holding her and her tabby bundle tight, he hauled her to her feet and flung the saddle blanket over them.

“Keep this pressed against yer nose and mouth so ye dinna breathe any more of the smoke,” he said. “It will kill ye faster than the flames.”

Keeping a kerchief wrapped around his face he guided her to the rear of the shed where one small window high up in the wall offered them a way out. By now smoke was entering from the ceiling and it was clear that the thatched roof was only moments away from bursting into flames.

He grabbed an old shovel that was leaning against the wall and, with one blow, took out the window, glass, frame and all.

“Quickly,” he said seizing both her and Grimalkin in his arms and lifting her up so she could get a hold on the window.

She released Grimalkin, who hovered for only a second on the sill before leaping to the ground below. Grabbing the sill, and with some heft from Gillebride, Arya hauled herself up into the window space.

“Dinnae tarry Gilly,” she cried before launching herself.

Gillebride was close behind. He was tall enough to reach up to the window sill and, praying the rotten old timber did not give way under his weight, he scabbled his way up and dived out.

He landed almost on top of Arya, who flung her arms around him and for a few moments they clung together. Grimalkin sat only a few paces away calmly washing his paws.

“You’ve saved me life again, Gilly,” she said.

Coughing mightily, he shook his head attempting to rid himself of the stark image in front of his eyes of a raging fire, consuming everything in its path.

Pulling himself into a sitting position, knees drawn up, he was all at once overwhelmed by the smell of burning and smoke filling his nostrils. The breath left his body, his head swirled with distant screams and he was overcome with a terrible sense of helplessness. He placed his head in his hands, trying to slow his racing heart.

Arya bent over him. “What is it?” she said.

It was hard to shape his tongue around the word. “Fire,” he managed at last, “me greatest horror.”

She took his hand. “And despite that, ye came through the fire tae rescue me?”

Shuddering, he drew her close. “Are ye all right lass? I was afeared....” He tried, but he could not find the words he sought to finish the sentence.

He allowed himself to drift as he’d done at other times. Like when he’d thought Errol MacKinnon had been killed taking arrow meant for him. It was almost as if he had been observing himself from a great distance. He was aware of things happening around him but he was no longer present.

“I’m perfectly fine, thanks tae ye Gillebride MacThomas, and so is Grimalkin.” Arya gave a tiny moan. “But I fear all me hard work with me herbs may have been lost.”

He did not respond to this and, when she glanced up, she saw his eyes were gazing at nothing in a distant stare and he seemed not to have heard a single word of her prattle.

Staying close, she gently stroked his arm, wishing there was something she could do or say that would relieve his anguish. Clearly, the fire had taken a great toll on him, yet their lives had not really been in grave danger and it

seemed, from the shouting, that the men were having success in putting it out.

“I think the fire will soon be quenched,” she whispered. To her relief he turned to her with a brief smile.

“Aye. Fortunate indeed they were quick and yer water barrel was handy.” He brushed a hand through his hair. “Are ye all right lass?”

She coughed again. “Thanks tae ye, Gilly, I’m nae harmed and neither is dear Grimalkin. But every breath I take makes me want tae cough. It feels like I’m filled up with smoke.”

“That’s one of the perils of fire. I feel the same.” He coughed as if to bring home the point he was making. “The smoke burns ye inside and it hurts when ye breathe.”

She screwed up her nose at this. “It could have been so much worse but fer yer quick thinking.” She leaned in and planted a soft kiss on his cheek.

Mayhap her lips lingered a tad too long and a little too near his own lips, but she saw his mouth quirk in a smile.

“Lass, ye never should be wasting yer sweet kisses on an old man like me,” he said.

But she saw a sparkle in his eye and was left in no doubt that he’d liked the

wee kiss. A trickle of wickedness slid through her at the thought of kissing his lips. Her gaze fell on Gillebride's mouth.

She pshawed at that. "Ye're nae old in me eyes Gillebride MacThomas, whatever ye may tell yerself. Besides, methinks there's nae such thing as a wasted kiss."

Leaving him with that morsel of food for thought, she gathered her skirts and went to stand. He rose quickly and reached a hand to help her up. Grimalkin, having finished his washing, wandered off in the direction of the stables. For a moment, she stayed as she was, her hand enveloped in Gillebride's, her blue gaze fixed on his dark eyes while a riot of delicious sensations rippled through her. Her heart, still beating fast from the drama of the fire and their escape, managed to speed up its pace even further.

It was Blaine who interrupted this heady moment. Rounding the corner of the stables he called out. "Gilly, Arya, thank the Good Lord, ye're safe." He rushed over to them.

"Word came tae me that one of the squires had sent a fire-arrow in the wrong direction, setting the outbuildings alight." He looked around, catching sight of the smashed window behind them. "Thank Christ ye were here, Gilly, tae bring Arya tae safety."

She nodded shyly and bobbed a curtsy. "Aye me laird, me brave protector wasted nae time in coming tae me rescue, yet again."

Blaine placed a hand on Gillebride's shoulder. "Seems the fire is out now,

without too much damage after all and, if nae fer the water so readily tae hand, it would have likely caused a great conflagration.”

Another man came running up. “Fire’s out, me laird. And...” he turned to Gilly, “thanks tae melord Gillebride the lass here was saved. The thatch will need repairing, but it’s a miracle we were able tae stop it in time.” He bowed from the waist to Blaine.

“Good work, I’ll come and thank the lads,” he said turning to follow the man. “And I’ll be having a very stern talk with those young squires who have yet tae learn how tae shoot their arrows straight.”

“I must go with Blaine,” Gillebride said, but he still kept her hand in his.

“And I must see tae me wee herbs,” she said, walking with him, clutching his hand.

The hay bales outside the shed were all but reduced to still-smoldering ashes, and the men were already clearing them away. Two scullery-maids from the kitchen were there with brooms sweeping the blackened remains up and placing them in buckets.

The thatch overhang beside the shed door had burned away but, fortunately, they’d flung enough water over it from Arya’s barrel to quench the fire before it took proper hold. In the process, they’d splashed a great deal of water through the door, saturating the shed to prevent the spread of the fire.

Blaine and Gilly conferred with the men while Arya surveyed the sodden mess inside her shed. She busied herself setting the pots to rights. Most of her plants were sturdy, foraged as they were from the woodland, and the damage was not too great.

But Gillebride MacThomas was another matter. The fire had taken him to a place of deep pain from his past, and Arya was determined to find out more.

Coughing, she straightened her kirtle and brushed a stray red curl out of her eyes. She'd brew them both a steam-remedy that would cure the fire that still burned with every breath she took.

Smiling to herself, she went off in search of just the right aromatic herbs she'd need.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The afternoon rolled on.

Arya rested in her room, her thoughts overflowing with Gillebride. How was it that he had sprung so quickly to her side when danger threatened? Was he keeping close to make sure she was safe? She was drawn to this big man, to his strength and the aura of protection and care that hovered around him. He had devoted himself to the MacKinnons and now, it seemed, he had pledged his protection to her.

Her heart skipped a beat as she recalled his quick embrace. If only he would take her in his arms again. But he had shied away from her kiss. Did he really believe he was too old for her? He seemed exactly the right age to suit her.

She had no time for boys or foolish young lads, having had been told so many times she was an old soul, wise beyond her years. She guessed that was because she had never been able to count on her parents for advice but had been forced to learn through making her own mistakes. Even though she knew her brothers loved her dearly, they always had had to be more concerned with the problems that beset the family than with her because of her father's drunkenness and his gambling debts. How could they spend time

listening to her hopes and dreams when they had so much to deal with?

But Gillebride was different. From their first meeting he had been a thoughtful companion and the time they had spent together had been special to her. He listened to her chatter, and had shown such an interest in her that, now, when she was not with him, she longed to be by his side once again. And there was that strange but wonderful feeling that overtook her body and swamped her with longing for his touch when he was close

When she joined the others for supper, she was hoping to have the opportunity of talking with Gilly some more. But once again he was silent and withdrawn, as he had been after the fire.

“Good evening Gillebride,” she said, laying a hand softly on his shoulder as she passed by him to take her seat beside Hannah at the giant refectory table in the great hall.

“Good evening tae ye, melody Arya,” he responded. For an instant, his eyes lit up but, too quickly the light faded to be replaced by the distant expression that seemed to take him to another place.

Throughout supper Arya kept a watchful eye on him, her heart sinking as she noted the way he wrapped himself in an aloof silence, rarely joining in the laughter and conversation.

Once the meal was finished, she accompanied Hannah, Ivy, Edina and her sisters to the solar where one of the serving-maids brought them mead and honey cakes, while the men retreated to Blaine’s study. No doubt to discuss

the fire and its aftermath.

It was pleasant to pass the time with the other women, they seemed so serene at their stitching, even though Arya knew well they each had a story of horror and resilience. Even Ivy, who seemed the most tranquil of all, had braved many terrors, even coming close to drowning, before she found her true love in Blaine.

Nonetheless, Arya couldn't settle. It felt like a storm was raging inside her and she found it almost impossible to join in the chatter.

She had to talk with Gillebride. She wanted to know if he had spoken to Blaine about the price on her head offered by Anrias MacQuarrie. Her stomach lurched painfully at the thought of laying the truth before him, but sooner or later he would have to hear her story. More than that, after seeing Gillebride's anguished expression, she was concerned for him and wished to help him.

Hannah held up her embroidery hoop and the fine linen she was stitching. "Would this blue thread be better than this one?" she asked, comparing the silks she was planning for a scattering of bluebells across the cloth.

Arya had no interest at all in Hannah's choice at that moment, but she forced herself to pay attention.

"This, one," she said, indicating the darker colour. "It matches your eyes."

Feigning interest in gossip about who might be newly engaged or with child, she passed the evening without anyone seeming to notice her preoccupation.

Finally, as their threads and buttons and cloths were being gathered, she closed the lacquered box she used to keep her sewing things tidy, replaced it on the shelf and pretended a yawn.

“I must bid ye all goodnight. The day has been long and, despite me earlier rest, I am still tired.”

“Of course. We should never have kept ye up so late,” Ivy said, offering a kind smile as Arya took her leave.

As soon as she was well clear of the solar, Arya made her way to the kitchen. Earlier, she’d picked a giant bunch of herbs— thyme, rosemary, oregano — she knew would help, and taken them to the kitchen to prepare her steaming remedy. With preparations for supper in full sway, there was no space available for her to carry out her tasks and Cook had shooed her out of the kitchen.

“Come back after supper, before ye go tae yer bed. We’ll all be done fer the night. I’ll leave the big kettle filled with water fer ye and ye’ll have all the space ye need fer yer work.”

True to her word Cook had filled the kettle and, while it boiled, Arya took the leaves from their stems.

Once the water boiled, she steeped the leaves in a pan for several minutes. Setting the pan on the stove to bring the water back to boiling then, once it was ready, she placed a towel over her head to catch the steam, leaned over the bowl and breathed in deeply for several minutes. Instantly she breathed easier and the leftover feeling of burning inside her was relieved.

It was such a blessed feeling she resolved at once to take some to Gillebride. It would be a small way of thanking him for all he'd done for her.

After repeating the process and equipped with another aromatic steaming bowl she quietly closed the kitchen behind her and headed up the stairs, intent on taking the remedy to Gilly's bedchamber. She was just starting along the lengthy passageway that led to the sleeping chambers when it occurred to her, she had no idea which room belonged to him. How on earth would she find him? Knocking on each door until she found him had no appeal whatsoever.

She was pondering this conundrum when she heard men's voices heading her way. Heart pounding, she quickly ducked into a small alcove, keeping out of sight. Squeezing her eyes shut she breathed a silent prayer that she wouldn't be discovered. She opened her eyes and held her breath as the voices grew near. She heard Errol, Blaine and Gilly's voices.

While the risk of being discovered made her feel like bringing up her supper, this could be the answer she'd been looking for. If she followed close enough once they'd passed, she would see which door belonged to Gillebride.

Staying as still as a mouse she waited until the three men had passed her hiding. The passage was well lit by flaming torches in wall sconces along the way. When she peeped out, she saw Errol pause in the first doorway and bid

the others good night. She crossed her fingers that Blaine and Gilly would end their conversation and go their separate ways.

The two men continued along the corridor until they came to the place where it turned a corner.

Arya issued a quiet groan as they disappeared out of sight.

Hastening as fast as she could without spilling the hot liquid she followed on tiptoe. As she turned the corner, she heard a muffled “Goodnight” as one of the men disappeared into his bedchamber.

Peering into the gloome corridor without the benefit of lit torches, she made out the figure of the remaining man. Was it Gilly? All three men were tall and broad-shouldered, but Gilly edged the others by inches. She watched the figure for a few moments. He was tall and broad, but there was something in his confident stride that helped make her mind up. Yes. it was him.

Waiting while he sauntered to the end of the passage she watched as he stopped outside the last doorway, raised the latch and strode from sight into the room.

Hardly daring to breathe she scurried along the passage until she found herself standing outside his door. Her courage almost failed.

What would he think of me coming tae his room like this? Everyone, from the youngest wean, kent it is unseemly fer an unmarried lass tae visit a man’s

bedroom in the night.

It was not too late to turn and flee back to her own bedchamber. But the longer she waited, more her remedy would cool down. *If she waited too long there'd be hardly any steam left fer Gilly to inhale.*

Hesitating at the door, she began slowly counting to ten. When she got to number eight her mind was suddenly made up for her by the sound of more voices *heading her way.*

She rapped on the door with an urgency that took her by surprise.

After what seemed like an age but, in reality, was only a few short moments, the door was flung wide and she was confronted by a scowling Gillebride.

Without waiting for him to invite her in she stepped through the door.

“Quick, shut it,” she hissed. “Someone’s coming.”

He peered into the corridor and she shrank out of sight behind him. He pivoted, pulling the door closed behind him and stepped past her into the chamber.

“Arya!” He exclaimed. “What in the name of the little-green-man are you doing here?”

She held aloft the bowl. “I’ve brought ye a steaming remedy tae fix that smoky cough ye’ve got.”

To her great relief that brought a smile to his lips.

“Ye shouldna be here now lass. If someone sees ye ye’ll be ruined. Yer reputation...”

She interrupted, pshawing loudly. “I dinnae give a fig fer me reputation, Gilly. I’ve a price on me head. Or did ye forget that? There’s naebody will care about me virtue — least of all meself.”

He put out an arm to steady her as she wobbled with the bowl and lowered it onto the table in the corner. “I dae. I give fig fer yer reputation, even if ye dinna care, lass. I dinna want tae put ye in a situation that will cause tongues tae wag against ye.”

She looked up at him frowning. “Dae ye nae understand Gillebride MacThomas. I wish tae be here. I’ve brought ye this steam bowl because I want tae see ye well.”

He shook his head but before he could say another word she reached up, raised her face and brought her lips to his.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*A*ny sensible thought Gilly had been entertaining flew out the door at the first touch of Arya's soft lips and the delicate fragrance of roses assailing his nostrils. As the kiss deepened and their tongues entwined, his reason disappeared altogether, fleeing down the corridor and out into the keep. When she raised her arms and twined her hands in his long hair, any possibility of talking sense to himself flew off to some other place, where kissing a maid who was young enough to be an old man's daughter seemed, suddenly, to be altogether reasonable.

She moaned in his arms, pressing her sweet curves even closer.

And then the mind he was in sore danger of losing, returned to its rightful place. He pulled back a fraction and took a deep breath.

“Nay, lass, I cannae dae this.” He muttered, coughing. “It isnae right. Ye’re so young and I’m a weathered man. I’m past the time of lust and have enjoyed me fair share of quick passion. That’s fer young lads.” He turned away so she would not see the desire in his eyes and understand he was lying.

He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted any lass. *But this was wrong. If his daughter had lived through the fire all those years ago, she'd be almost the same age as Arya. A man could not fall in love with someone his daughter's age.*

She looked up at him with those beguiling cornflower blue eyes and tossed a flaming-red curl over her shoulder.

“I’m... I’m... sorry. If I’ve offended ye, please forgive me Gilly. I dinnae understand, but something came over me that made me want yer kiss. It was as if I’d nae be able tae settle fer aught if I didnae feel yer arms around me and yer lips meeting mine.” She smiled airily and shrugged her shoulders in a way that made him want her even more urgently.

He groaned. “Lass, ye didnae offend me. I liked yer kissing all too much. It’s just that...” he trailed off, looking deep into her eyes. It took all his willpower not to seize her in his arms and continue where they’d left off. To his great shame, he was left in no doubt that he wanted her badly, when he felt the stiffening of his manhood.

“Dinnae fash, Gilly,” she said gently moving briskly to the table where she’d placed her steaming bowl. “Now, that we’ve got this out of the way, ye must take me breathing-remedy fer ye still have a harsh cough that needs seeing tae.”

“Here,” she said, lifting the cloth and indicating the bowl. “If ye dinna hurry, ye’ll be wasting it.”

He bent, drawing the cloth over his head and inhaled the aromatic steam, breathing in deeply. He was immediately relieved of the harsh, rasping sensation that had accompanied every inhaled breath since earlier. He filled his lungs, free of pain.

He offered her a wry smile. “Thank ye lass, ye’re very kind.”

“I’m happy tae help. After all ye’ve done fer me. Including saving me life.”

“’Tis what any man would dae, lass.”

She snorted. “I dinna ken any man who’d risk his life fer a wee lass he met in such a wicked tavern,” she said, her eyes glowing. “Why, I could have been naught but a whore.”

He chuckled at that. “Instead, it turned out ye’re a bonny murderess.”

Wailing, she turned away. “Och, fer a moment there I’d forgotten me sin.” She stopped talking for a few seconds and then whispered. “Willnae the laird despise me fer me crime and wish tae send me straight tae Anrias MacQuarrie?”

Taking her hand, Gillebride led her to a chair by the fire. “Dinnae fash lass, that will never happen. There’ll be a way tae deal with the MacQuarries. And I must talk with Blaine and Errol before much time passes.”

She shook her head. “Nae yet. Please” she said, clutching his hand.

Her pleading melted his heart. “Aye lass. Mayhap I’ll keep quiet about it until yer brothers have returned.”

Nodding dolefully, she looked up into his eyes and, once again, he felt as if he was falling into a great space. Giving his head a slight shake, he regained his composure.

“Leave it with me. I’ll speak tae them when the time is right. Meantime, ye must stay within the castle walls.” He grinned at her and shook his head, projecting a confidence he was far from feeling. “Nay more riding alone in the forest.” He wanted to reassure her but, at the same time, not wishing to downplay the terrible danger she was in. The MacQuarries were unreliable allies at best. There was no saying how they’d react if they discovered where she was.

He filled a drinking glass with mead from a beaker on the table and handed it to her and filling another drinking glass for himself.

“*Slàinte*,” he said raising his glass, “may ye be safe and all the demons keep their distance.”

She clinked her glass with his giving him a brave smile. “Thank ye, Gilly, fer all that ye’ve done fer me. I am indeed grateful tae ye.”

“And I too am grateful tae ye,” he said quietly, “Grateful that ye never

mentioned tae a soul that ye saw me so distant and strange this day after the fire.”

“Aye, I noticed. I saw that there was a heavy weight in yer heart that ye didnae wish tae visit. Mayhap one of these days ye’ll find the strength tae confide in me. But until then I’ll say aught. ’Tis yer story tae tell, nae mine.”

“Ye’re right,” he said, taking a gulp of the mead. The liquid warmed him, and her presence beside him soothed his troubled soul. “There are some times when memories crowd in and I feel me past haunting me. ’Tis then that I slip away.”

“I understand,” she said, reaching a hand to rest for a moment on his forearm. “I ken the same at times when thoughts of me crime press in and I cannae bear it.”

He shrugged. The turn in their conversation threatened tae bring memories to haunt him again. This afternoon’s fire had brought back so much pain and now it was washing over him again with the old fears. He swilled the last of his mead and rose to his feet.

“’Tis been a pleasant visit, melody,” he said with stiff formality. “But I must bid ye goodnight.”

She looked up and he saw her eyes flash with hurt as she nodded, quickly rising to her feet. Placing the half-finished glass of mead on the table she turned to him, her mouth drawn in a tight line. She held herself straight, her head high.

“I didnae wish tae intrude on ye.” She muttered, taking up the now-cold bowl of water from the table and stalking across to the door. “I shouldna have stayed.”

He joined her as she undid the latch.

“Allow me.” He opened the door a crack and peeked out into the passageway. There was no one in sight. He turned to her, his fingers straying to the tumble of curls on her shoulder, lingering there a moment too long. Then he brushed a curl behind her ear and bent to brush a kiss on her forehead. If she did not leave now, he’d take her in his arms, hating himself for being the cause of the woeful expression on her delicate features.

He flung the door wide. “Goodnight tae ye, melady,” he said, injecting a coldness into his voice that he was far from experiencing.

She was out the door and walking along the passageway before he’d had a chance to catch his breath. He quietly closed the door behind her, all traces of their brief spark of intimacy vanishing with every step she took.



With a heavy heart, Arya traced her steps along the passageways until she reached her own bedchamber.

Once she was alone, she allowed the tears to flow. She’d never intended to cross the unspoken line she knew existed between herself and Gillebride, but she had so longed to feel his arms around her. Berating herself for having

brought his past back to him, she stoked the fire and sat wearily on the bed. She slowly took off her shoes and stockings, laying them out neatly for tomorrow. Shivering as she removed her kirtle and underskirt, and pulled on her night-shift, she clasped her arms around her, wishing she could take back her few ill-chosen words.

Sighing, she pulled back the fur coverlet on her bed and was about to slip between the linen sheets when she spied a parchment lying on the small round table by the wall.

Curious she picked it up and, in the firelight, attempted to make out the small writing. Peering at the note she could only make out the scrawled “Eleonor” at the bottom, and her heart sank. Was this another cry for help from Eleonor? If she wanted to arrange another meeting at that cursed tavern, there was no way Arya would go through with it.

Her impulse was to fling the parchment into the fire without reading it. Whatever Eleonor had to say, Arya didn’t want to know. Surely she was aware there was a price on Arya’s head?

With shaking fingers, she replaced the parchment on the table. There had been some happy moments with Gillebride when she’d actually been able to push the terrible memories to the back of her mind, but now they crowded in, making her sick to the stomach. All she could think of was the ghastly vision of the man lying before her, his dead eyes, his pallor, and the blood seeping from the wounds on his head that she’d dealt him.

No. She would not read Eleonor’s message. Still, she held back from crumpling it into the fire. Perhaps it was better to know what Eleonor wanted than to go on imagining the worst. Perhaps she would tell her that Anrias

MacQuarrie had called off the hunt for the girl believed to have murdered his son and that he'd come to believe she had left the district.

Climbing into bed she did her best to rid herself of the vision that taunted her, but as soon as she closed her eyes it appeared before her again just as forcefully. She longed for Gillebride. Only when she was close to him did she feel safe.

After a restless night elusive of sleep, she was already washed and dressed when the kitchen maid appeared with a small offering of bannocks and raspberry jam to break her fast.

Eleonor's note was still where Arya had left it last night. She eyed it warily. She'd been half-hoping it might have been her imagination that had conjured up a message and it would have been gone when she looked again this morning.

Reluctantly she picked it up and read it. Eleonor was not in trouble like she'd said in her previous note. She apologised for not being at the tavern, but she was visiting someone in the nearby village, so she had an opportunity for them to meet in the woods by the loch in two days' time.

Arya was left wondering how Eleonor had found out she was at Ardtun. Mayhap Mother Agnes had told her she was under the protection of the MacKinnons.

Regardless of how Eleonor had found her, given the cheerful tone of her note, it seemed she might have good news. After searching her heart for some time,

she resolved to do her best to make it to the meeting, although it was a ride to the loch and she would have to come up with something.

Perhaps Eleonor would tell her that Anrias MacQuarrie had called off the hunt for the girl believed to have murdered his son. After she'd disappeared two nights ago mayhap he'd come to believe she had left the district and escaped.

At mid-morning, feeling a mite more optimistic than she had the night before, she joined the other women and children in the solar, where they dined on vegetable soup and oat bread and a delectable honeyed custard for dessert.

“Ye dae look tired,” Hannah said kindly. “Ye’re far too pale.”

Arya shrugged. How she would have loved to confide all her woes to Hannah, but she was certain Hannah would be shocked to hear that the object of Arya’s heart was Gillebride MacThomas, the man she looked on as a brother. And, of course, she could never reveal her other deadly secret.

Taking up her sewing she accidentally stabbed her finger with the needle. “Ow!” she muttered, putting the injured finger in her mouth and impatiently dropping her sewing on the table. Today she couldn’t settle to anything requiring her full attention.

Hannah looked up, her eyes filled with concern. “Are ye all right, Arya.”

Arya shook her head, offering Hannah a rueful smile. “I’m nae in the mood

fer sewing today. I've already stabbed meself so methinks I'd fare better if I head outside and tend tae me wee herbs."

"Oh, wait a moment," Hannah said, packing up her embroidery, "I'll come with ye. I could dae with a stroll. It is quite tedious these days being kept inside. There was a time when I used tae walk tae the village, but since Blaine heard ye'd been attacked by a wolf he's forbidden us tae stray."

Arya sighed. It was a lie she'd told about the wolf, and now the others were being cooped up inside because of it. She took Hannah's hand.

"Come, ye can help me take out the weeds."

Arm in arm, Arya and Hannah headed for the little patch where the herbs were still thriving despite their proximity to yesterday's conflagration.

Grimalkin appeared out of nowhere as they approached and Hannah picked him up, stroking his fluffy head. There was a chair nearby which had been rescued from the fire and she took up position there with Grim cuddling on her lap.

"I am feeling a little tired, Arya," Hannah said, settling herself into the seat. "Nae like meself at all. Dae ye mind if I sit fer a while with the wee moggy?"

"Of course nae, Hannah. Ye can keep me occupied with all the latest stories from the castle." She took her little trowel and set to the weeds that were shooting up all through the neat rows of sprouting herbs.

“You ken Ivy can twist Blaine around her little finger?” Hannah said.

Arya laughed. It was obvious to all that Blaine was besotted with his lovely wife, the mother of his twin daughters, Mirin and Alba. But Ivy was equally in love with her handsome warrior husband.

“I think Blaine does his fair share of winding Ivy to places he’d like her tae be.”

Hannah gave some thought to this. “Yer right of course, they are true lovers, just as me brother Errol and our dearest Edina are.”

Arya nodded wistfully. “And ye and me brother Taveon,” she said with a sigh. She was the only one without her true love. Her thoughts flashed immediately to Gillebride and all the feelings he aroused in her. *Perhaps I am falling in love with him.* If only he didn’t believe she was far too young for him. Somehow, she was going to have to convince him she was *exactly* the right age for him.

“...and so she’s gone to ask him.” Hannah glanced at Arya, huffing. “Ye havenae listened to a single word I’ve been saying.” She pouted, drawing her brows into a puzzled expression. “Ye’ve got such a faraway look in yer eyes. If I didnae ken better I’d think ye were in love.”

Arya jolted herself back into the present moment.

“Yer right Hannah. I’m sorry, I must have been woolgathering and missed what ye were telling me about Ivy.” She felt her cheeks flushing with heat. “Ye were saying...?”

Hannah laughed. “Have I discovered yer secret. Dae ye have a mystery suitor?”

Arya shook her head, but she couldn’t restrain a giggle. “Stop yer teasing. Of course, there’s nae suitor. Now, what were ye were saying about Ivy?”

“We’ve all been feeling cooped up here ever since the attack on the castle by Edina’s father, when Blaine forbade us to leave without an escort.”

Arya nodded. “What a story... Edina forced by her father to release Taveon from the dungeon, and then him coming back tae kidnapped ye at the behest of Sir William de Coughran.”

“Yes. We understand why Blaine is always so concerned about our safety. But when ye went out riding alone, it made him realise we all sometimes need to breathe the air beyond the castle walls.” She clapped her hands. “The wildflowers are coming out and I dae so love it when the bluebells are all in bloom.”

Arya nodded, smiling at her sister-in-law’s delight. “Yes, yes. But what were ye about tae tell me?”

“So, Ivy is planning to ask Blaine if we can all spend a few days beside the

loch and the forest at the MacKinnons' hunting lodge. The men can hunt and fish and we can swim in the loch and pick wildflowers.”

“That sounds wonderful. But is it safe?”

“We'll be well guarded. Gilly will be in charge of the soldiers so they will keep us from harm.”

Arya's heart skipped a beat. A few days away from the castle would be wonderful. It would also make her meeting with Eleanor much easier, she suddenly realized. And Gilly would be there...

“I think I'd like to go hunting and fishing too,” she said, laughing. “And I'd rather forage for herbs than pick bluebells. But swimming in the loch would be a great pleasure. When is she to ask him?”

Hannah gave a tiny giggle. “Why tonight. In bed, of course. So, he's bound to agree.”

“Then I expect some welcome news in the morning,” Arya said with a soft laugh, her thoughts turning to the wiles Ivy might employ to help Blaine see things as she did.

CHAPTER NINE

Gilly was wakened by a loud thumping on the door of his bedchamber. He groaned, opening his eyes and rolling over as the door was flung open.

His manhood was as stiff and hard as the iron poker at the fireplace, as it frequently was in the mornings. It was even more obvious this morning after the dream of Arya that had just been interrupted. Her lips on his, her soft arms twining about him, her breasts...

Blaine and Errol surged into the chamber, grinning like loons.

“What the...?”

Blaine took one look at Gilly’s disarray and laughed heartily. “Sorry tae burst in like this brother, when ye’ve nae had a chance tae allow yer friend there to properly greet the morning.”

Errol joined in. “Ye’re a fine one tae talk brother.”

Blaine had the good grace to look somewhat chastened. “Aye.” He glanced at Errol. “Ye’re right, lad. Poor Gilly has nae lass tae relieve his passion.”

Gillebride shoved the bedclothes aside and stood before them in his bed-shirt, his member rapidly subsiding under the amused gaze of his two friends.

“Tae what dae I owe the dubious pleasure of yer company so early, before the cock has finished crowing?” he asked crossly.

“Get yerself up out of yer bed, lad, there’s work tae be doing.” Blaine said cheerfully.

“I gather from the twinkle in yer eye melord, that we’re nae under attack.”

“Except from our wives,” Errol said with a wink.

“Oh, aye. Dae enlighten me.” Gillebride smiled to himself. *If only they kent the lusty dream they had interrupted so rudely.*

“Seems Ivy managed tae convince her laird last night that all of us need tae take ourselves tae the hunting lodge for a few days of recreation. In her view, the other wives are becoming restless and desperate fer a break from the confines of the castle.”

Gillebride laughed. “And how, exactly, did she convince ye of that pray tell. It’s so long since we’ve spent time at the lodge that I’ve almost forgotten the joys of hunting and fishing.”

His cheeks reddening, Blaine raised an eyebrow, “’Tis nae fer the likes of ye, unwed man, tae enquire as tae what passes between a lad and his wifey in the darkness of night.”

Errol roared with laughter and Gilly guffawed loudly.

“Did she...?”

“Dinnae ask lad, fer I’ll nae reveal me glorious secrets tae any man.”

Grinning, Gillebride pulled on his shirt and britches and hauled on his boots. “And ye want me tae ready a troop of the guard and a contingent from the kitchen tae accompany us?”

“Good lad,” Blaine said, patting him on the shoulder. He paused briefly and then gave Gilly a hard look. “I’m sorry, Gilly, but I’m charging ye with keeping our Arya safe. Dinnae allow her tae leave yer sight when we are outdoors. If she wishes tae ride, or go in search of flowers or mushrooms or whatever the lassies do, it would please me if ye were tae keep her company.”

Gilly nodded. His heart was doing somersaults. He could scarcely believe his ears. How in all the saints in heaven would he ever be able tae keep to his resolve to distance himself from Arya now?

“We’ll look to setting off before midday.” Blaine said, and, with that he turned on his heel and strode off. They heard him heading down the passageway, whistling tunelessly as he went.

Gilly turned to Errol. “Does yer big brother think I can work miracles.”

“Well, ye’ve done quite a few in yer time, Gillebride, so I’m guessing that is just what he’s thinking.”

“Aye. I take it I can call on ye fer help readying the men and the horses.”

“Indeed, I’m ready tae lend a hand at whatever ye need. But dinnae ask me to deal with the lassies.”

“Nae bother. We can safely leave the lassies tae Ivy.” Chuckling, Gillebride walked with Errol to the door. “Come lad, we’ll need tae fortify ourselves with some good break-fast tae nourish us before we set tae our tasks.”

After a break-fast of porridge, bannocks and sausage, Gilly had a quick word with Robert MacGreghere, the castle seneschal, requested him to arrange a party to ride out at once to the lodge to set up the larder, prepare the bedding and give the place a good airing, since it was last used more than a year ago.

After seeing to that, he headed for the stables to rouse the grooms to prepare the horses and, finally, made his way to the guard house to visit Colban

Brown, the master-at-arms in command of the guard and the squires.

Glad of the tasks that were keeping his mind and hands busy, he still found it difficult to keep his thoughts from straying to Arya. His wayward mind was already picturing walks in the woods or by the loch where the two of them could be together out of sight of the others.

Taking a deep breath, he forced his thoughts into line. There was still the important matter of the guards.

Colban was a stocky brown-haired man, almost as broad as he was tall, with startling green eyes under black, beetling brows. Despite his short stature, his discipline was second to none and he was still apologizing for the misdirected arrow from a squire that had caused a measure of havoc two days prior.

“I’ve dealt severely with the lad. He’ll be practicing his archery skills for an extra two hours daily until his aim is second to none.”

“Dinnae fash, lad,” Gillebride said. “I ken accidents sometime happen and arrows can go astray. But I’ve something else to request of the guard.” He went on to explain that the family would be spending some time at the lodge and he required a company of guards to accompany them.

“Are ye expecting trouble?” Colban queried, “How many men dae ye think ye’ll have need of?”

Gilly was tempted to admit his fears about a possible skirmish with the

MacQuarries, but he held back. There was no apparent reason for him to have doubts about their neighbouring clan so he simply shook his head.

“Merely a precaution, Master Colban. There are camps of bandits in the woods further afield and there’s nae telling if they might get it into their thick heads tae relieve us of our silver ewers and platters.”

Colban nodded, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “Aye. Will half a dozen men suit yer needs?”

After making a quick mental calculation, Gillebride nodded his agreement. Counting himself, Errol and Blaine, a total of nine fighting men should do well enough to keep everyone safe. Whether it was wolves or bandits they were up against.

“We’ll be setting out before midday,” he added.

Colban grunted in disapproval. “That’s a hard ask, but I’ll dae me best tae get the lads on their horses tae be ready tae ride with ye before noon.”

Once he was satisfied that all the arrangements were well in hand and his destrier, Bayard, was saddled and ready to ride, he returned to his bedchamber where a maid had already packed his satchel with freshly laundered clothing. Sheathing his short sword across his shoulder and inserting his dirk into his leather belt, he donned his leather jerkin, threw his plaid cloak over his shoulder and made his way out of the castle and across the keep.

He went into the armory where Errol was choosing from a selection of short and long swords.

“I pray these willnae be necessary,” Errol muttered, looking closely at the fine edge on the sword in his hand.

“In these troubled times ‘tis best tae be prepared fer the worst. And ‘tis been me experience, most of the time, ‘tis the worst I tend to encounter.” He gave Errol a grim smile.

These two had shared many a battle over the three years they’d fought together and it was only when Errol had been captured by Edina’s father, Sir Michael Wemyss, and imprisoned in his castle dungeon, that they had been separated. Gillebride would be forever grateful for Edina’s courage in helping Errol to escape and make his way safely back to Castle Ardtun.

Errol nodded, sheathing the sword.

After Gillebride had made his selection from the weapons, including a fine bow and a quiver of arrows, they both collected a leather shield and made their way to the stables.

Gillebride took Bayard out to the keep to walk him for a few minutes of warming-up while Errol did the same with his mount. The grooms were likewise engaged with Blaine’s horse and the sleek palfreys that had been allocated for the lasses to ride.

He glanced up at the sun. It had gone behind a cloud so it was difficult to judge the hour, but he guessed it was not long before midday.

At the sound of a clattering of hooves and the jingle of bridles he looked up. The guards were moving through the portcullis where they would wait by the roadside to take their places in the small convoy that would be making its way through the woodlands to the lodge.

Blaine suddenly appeared beside them.

“Good work, Gilly,” he said, glancing around. “I see everything is in order except, of course, there’s nae sign of the lasses.”

“They’ll be here. Edina promised she’d be ready and I’ve nae doubt Ivy will keep them on their toes.”

As he spoke there was a chattering and the women and children emerged from the castle, all smiles, each of them either wearing or carrying a straw hat to guard their complexions against the sun. He smiled to himself at the sight of Arya, looking fetching in a pale blue line kirtle and a cream-coloured blouse that complemented her flowing red tresses. Around her bonnet she’d tied a blue ribbon to match.

The grooms hastened over to assist the women and girls to mount, while Gillebride, Errol and Blaine mounted their steeds and rode through the portcullis to wait beside the guard. As the women were riding aside, their mild-mannered horses would have to be led by the reins, giving their riders very little control.

He wasn't surprised to hear both Hannah and Arya objecting loudly. They were both used to riding astride and made no bones about their displeasure at being made to ride sedately under the control of the men.

“Shush,” Ivy hissed at them. “Ye're supposed tae behave like noble ladies in front of the staff and the villagers. Once we're safely at the lodge ye can change yer saddles and ride as freely as ye like.”

At this admonishment, the complaining ceased and, amid squeals of joy from the children, they set off.

Once they reached the woodland, the party could only ride in single file or, in some places where the track widened for a few yards, two abreast.

In the few days since Gillebride and Arya had passed through the woods, fresh green leaves had unfurled, bringing the trees back to life at last. The grass was springing up all around, and the daffodils and bluebells gave a sense of fairyland to the formerly forbidding forest. Shafts of dappled sunlight shone here and there on bright butterflies and the air was clear and crisp.

Somehow Gillebride found himself holding Arya's reins bringing up the rear, with only a pair of guards some distance behind them and the twins on their short-legged Shetland ponies ahead of them. The air was filled with birdsong and the buzz of insects. It was a perfect chance for him to speak without the others hearing what was said.

Drawing on the reins he brought her horse close enough to Bayard for him to speak with her in a low voice and still be heard. “I hope ye didnae think I was avoiding ye yesterday.”

She tossed her head and turned her gaze to him. “Why, Gilly, why ever would I think ye were avoiding me?”

He groaned. This wasn’t how he was expecting the conversation to progress.

“Why... it was only that...” He stammered. He could hardly explain, “*Because of our kiss in me chamber the night before last*”? “Em... I... didnae see ye in the great hall fer supper or in the garden yesterday. I was afeared ye’d think I was hiding meself away.”

Of course, I have been avoiding those places, afraid I’d come-face-to-face with ye and find meself unable tae hide me feelings fer ye.

“I hadnae even noticed you werenae around,” she said airily.

He laughed at her teasing. It made him think the opposite. She had noticed his absence and she *had* missed his presence.

“Well, never fear melody, I’ll be with ye once we reach the lodge. The laird has bid me tae keep close watch on ye tae ensure yer safety.”

“Ha,” she exclaimed. “Ye mean tae ensure I dinna go off riding on me own.”

“Exactly. Ye’ll only be able tae ride with me by yer side.” He glanced at her and noted with a twinge of satisfaction, that her cheeks were flushing pink. Catching sight of the sparkle in her eyes and those soft lips upturned in a mischievous smile, he was overtaken with the urge to leap from his horse and seize her in his arms.

“Lass, ye shouldnae look at me like that.”

“Like what?” she said, pushing a wayward curl under her pretty straw hat.

He laughed. “Like ye’re the answer tae this old man’s prayers.”

The pink of her cheeks bloomed to a deeper shade. “Mayhap I like that idea.”

Her words and the sight of her brought a wild rush of blood to his groin. He shifted uncomfortably in his saddle and laughed at his own foolishness.

“So ye’ll nae gripe at me keeping ye company?”

She treated him to the full glory of her blue-eyed gaze, melting what little resistance he retained. “Why nae, Gillebride MacThomas, I’ll nae object tae yer company at all.”

The track narrowed and he loosened his grip on the reins and let Bayard move ahead of Arya's horse. Their moment was over, but his heart was beating faster at the thought of being closer to her once they were at the lodge.

For all the teasing and flirting, he nevertheless ground his teeth. It was ridiculous of him to allow himself to fancy Arya. He gave Bayard a kick and they moved on a little faster, speedily catching up to the children's ponies.

They rode on in silence and it was not long before the lodge came into view. Situated on a small rise leading to the loch, the lodge was in a small clearing in the forest. It was surrounded by a low stone wall. The living quarters were in a tall, ivy-covered stone building that housed a number of bedchambers and a larger hall where meals could be taken. The kitchens and servants' quarters were in a separate small building, connected to the main house by a slate-covered pathway.

An outside space enclosed in a vine-covered arbor completed the picture.

Arya looked around; her eyes glowing. "What a beautiful place," she breathed as Gilly put up his hand to assist as she slid from her horse.

The touch of her soft hand in his sent a jolt of desire through his veins. Was he losing his mind? This yearning for the lass was shameful. Especially since he was aware nothing could come of it. She could never be his.

He set his jaw. Keeping his feelings hidden was going to test all his willpower while he was so dangerously close to her while they were here.

Inside, a fire was already blazing in the hall and a large table was set for luncheon. After a quick wash at the barrel outside the heavy oak main doors, the party took their places. The children were jumping with excitement and Ivy was laughing with them. It was all merriment and delight at being away from the castle as they consumed the feast set before them.

After lunch it was decided they would take the path down to the loch and walk beside the waters. Gilly was both relieved and disappointed when Blaine called him and Errol to his side to talk about a proposed hunt he wanted to arrange for the next day.

Errol and Blaine were looking forward to the hunting. First, they would cross the high crags that towered over the lodge, and follow the glen below where they expected to find deer grazing on fresh, spring grass. The three men would leave the guards to watch over the womenfolk.

Gillebride found it hard to concentrate on the ins and outs of the hunting. His thoughts were straying and he found himself growing anxious the longer the lasses were absent.

The thought of leaving Arya tomorrow did not sit well with him. Their hasty escape from Iona was still too fresh in his mind for him to believe Anrias MacQuarrie and his henchmen would have given up on their hunt for her. He was known in the tavern, and it would not be long before Beolin revealed Gillebride MacThomas was the man who had aided in her escape from Baile Mòr.

Could they be tracked here? The lodge was on MacKinnon land but their

neighbours were not known for honoring the boundaries between the two clans.

“We’ll be dining on venison before many days have passed,” Errol was saying, eagerly. But Gillebride’s thoughts were with Arya and he found it difficult to share the others’ enthusiasm for the hunt.

CHAPTER TEN

“*T*omorrow me brothers and Gilly are going hunting,” Hannah announced.

Arya, who had taken off her shoes so she could dip her toes in the loch, was walking barefoot beside her. She let out a joyous yelp.

“*Hunting.* I used tae ride in the hills with me brothers when they were hunting in the lands near our home. It was one of me greatest delights,” She laughed softly as the memories came flooding in. She could almost feel the wind in her hair and the strength of the horse beneath her. “They taught me tae shoot arrows, but I simply preferred riding beside them.” Her voice grew wistful. “It is so long since I’ve been with them.”

Hannah sighed. “Aye. It seems I’ve been parted from me darling Taveon fer so long.”

They continued along the path, Arya growing thoughtful as she splashed her feet in the icy water. “Dae ye think Blaine would let me accompany them?” She turned to Hannah, grasping her arm. “Can ye help? Please, pretty please.

Make him agree.”

“If ye wish tae go with the men tomorrow then ye must put yer case tae me brother yerself. I’m certain Blaine willnae listen tae me, Arya.” Hannah said, shaking her head. “Once he makes up his mind he will never shift. Mayhap ye’ll find him in a mellow mood and he’ll agree. But ‘tis ye who must ask him.”

Arya nodded; her pulse had quickened at the thought. “That is wise advice. I shall ask him after supper when he’s filled his belly with good fare and ale.”

“A fine idea. I wish ye luck,” Hanna responded, smiling. “I’d love tae ride with ye, but lately I’ve been feeling so tired I doubt if I could stay the distance over the hills and through the glen.”

The right moment arrived after supper when they were all seated around the fire.

Blaine had been telling the twins a story about when there were bears still living in Scotland, and the girls had been laughing and clapping their hands. He was in a fine good humour as they kissed him goodnight. They waved to everyone as Ivy took their hands and led them off to the bedchamber.

Arya moved closer to the fire, warming her hands, before turning to him.

“I was hoping I could ride with ye tomorrow. I used tae accompany me brothers when they hunted and tae be riding in the wild hills and glens again

would bring great joy tae me heart.” She held her breath, waiting, while he contemplated her request.

At least he was still smiling.

“What dae ye say Gillebride?” he said turning to Gilly. “Ye’ve been charged with the care of this lass. Should she ride with us?”

Arya sucked in a breath, hoping against hope Gilly would agree.

Gillebride looked up meeting her eyes with his own soot-black gaze. A river of fire ran through her as their eyes met. As much as she wished for the chance to ride again, she was longing to be with him.

“I’ve nae problem with the wee lass’s company,” he said quietly. “What I’ve learned of her is that she can dae whatever she sets her mind tae. If she wishes tae ride alongside us then I’ve nae objections.”

Blaine grinned. “Well, Gilly, I’ll take ye at yer word. But, remember, ‘tis ye who must keep her safe.”

Gillebride laughed. “It will be me pleasure.”

“In that case, I’ve nae choice but tae grant yer wish, lass.” Blaine said.

“Oh, thank ye so much melord, I am indeed grateful.” She held out her skirt and made a low curtsy to Blaine, before turning to Gilly, beaming. “And I’m thankful fer yer faith in me too Gillebride. I will dae me best tae live up tae yer kind words.”

A small cheer reverberated through the group. Hannah looked especially pleased.

“Now ye’ve got yer wish,” she whispered, “ye’d best sleep well this night as they’ll be off at daybreak.”

Errol, who had been seated beside Blaine, rose to his feet holding out his hand to Edina. “Come wife,” he said, “’Tis time fer us tae take our rest, if I’m tae be off hunting on the morrow.”

Blaine chuckled as he, too, stood. “Enjoy yer night together young lovers,” he said jokingly.

This was the signal for the others to say their goodnights and move off to their respective sleeping quarters.

Hannah and Edina’s sisters Margaret and Skye shared a chamber on the floor above, Ivy and Blaine were together with the twins and Errol and Edina had a room to themselves. Arya had been allocated a small, plain room under the stairs at some distance from the others.

Holding a candle aloft, she was finding her way along the passage to her

bedchamber when she was surprised to meet Gillebride coming from the opposite direction.

“Arya?” he said, looking as startled as she felt.

“Me bedchamber is here somewhere,” she said by way of explanation in case, somehow, he got the idea she had followed him here.

He laughed. “So is mine. Ivy has allocated me a small room like a cupboard just behind the stairs.”

“Why,” she said, stifling a giggle. “That’s where I’m supposed tae find me room.”

“You dinnae think... Ivy wouldnae... put us together in the same bedchamber?”

She laughed out loud. “Nae, Gilly, but mayhap she’s placed ye near tae keep your eye on me and see that I dinnae stray.”

Now he was chuckling. “Mayhap ye’re right. But I’d prefer tae think she’s wanting me tae keep ye safe from the dark and nameless things that may stalk us in our dreams or lurk under our beds.”

“Oh Gilly,” she said, clutching his arm, “ye ken I have enough waking dreams of me own sins that keep me from a night’s peaceful sleep.”

He blew out his candle and slipped his arm around her waist. “Are ye afeared in the night, lass?”

She leaned into him, liking the feel of his strong arm around her and the mysterious man-scent of him, a combination of leather and horses and the fresh, earthy scent of Spring. “I admit, these nights, I dinnae care fer the darkness.”

He pulled her closer, whispering, “Would it help ye sleep easier if we went outside and walked together fer a bit?”

He was close enough for her to feel his breath in her hair and the rise and fall of his chest and his heart beating near to hers.

“Aye, I dae fancy a walk. The moon is bright as day and we can easily find our way.”

“And there’s the danger of the wolf that scared yer horse, remember.”

She laughed, recalling the story they’d told about the reason for her absence from Castle Ardtun.

“Yes, I dae recall. I told a most wicked lie tae keep secret how ye and I actually met.”

Her heart was hammering at his closeness and the thought of walking with him in the moonlight.

“And since the night we met I’ve vowed tae keep ye safe. It wouldna dae fer me tae let ye walk alone by the loch at night.”

He took her hand and together they scrambled back along the passage and quietly took their leave of the lodge.

The path outside was brightly lit and easy to find their way. She led the way toward the loch.

“It is very beautiful in the daylight, but even lovelier by night,” she whispered as their steps took them along the grassy track and along a rocky outcropping. Here there was nothing but the sound of gentle waves lapping against the shore and the heaviness of their own breathing.

They strolled along the shore and Arya slipped off her shoes as she’d done this afternoon. The light of the moon and stars cast a silvery light over the water of the loch and around them the grass was alight with the magic of a thousand glow worms.

Arya gasped. “Thank ye Gilly fer bringing me tae see such a beautiful sight as this.”

“I hope it eases yer mind so that when ye take tae yer bed ye have naught but

the sweetest of thoughts and sleep comes easily.”

She smiled up at him. In the moonlight she could see the sharp planes of his high cheekbones and his dark beard. There was something reassuring about his face with its straight nose, his dark eyes and brows and the strong cut of his jaw.

They walked a little further, Arya splashing her toes in the loch, Gilly keeping close enough.

“We should go back now,” he said.

“Must we?” she said, reluctant to break the spell of this enchanted scene.

“Aye. We must. If our absence is discovered they’ll be mad with worry fer us both. Besides, if ye dinnae care about a good sleep before a day of hunting, I relish the thought of it.”

As they turned to go, she brushed against him, and for a heartbeat she was close against him. Without a thought she raised her face to his, parting her lips, wanting his kiss. She heard the sharp intake of his breath as his arms came up to encircle her. He pulled her close, his lips brushing her forehead before laying a path of tiny kisses in her hair.

She sighed, closing her eyes, waiting for his lips to join hers.

All at once he withdrew from her, pulling his hands beside him.

“It’s past time we were back at the lodge,” he muttered gruffly, lengthening his stride across the pebbly beach, heading back the way they’d come. “I shouldnae have brought ye here. It was wrong of me.”

Heart sinking, she struggled to catch up with him. “Nae. Dinnae fash, Gilly,” she whispered, desperate to let him see there was nothing wrong with them being together like this. “I like being in yer company and I ken ye like mine also.”

He kept his gaze fixed straight ahead as she trotted along beside him. It was clear to her there was no reaching him now.

After he’d escorted her up the steps and they’d re-entered the lodge, he lit another candle and took her along the passage to her wee chamber.

“Goodnight lass,” he said brusquely. Before she had so much as a chance to wish him the same, he was on his heel and headed along the corridor to wherever his miserable room was located.

She flung herself onto the bed, her thoughts in turmoil. One minute she wanted to wring Gilly’s neck for being so obstinate. She was certain he was just as attracted to her as she was to him but he was determined not to show his feelings, albeit there were moments when a look or a touch exposed him.

Lying in a tight little ball on the bed, biting her lip against the threatening

tears, she puzzled over everything that had taken place between them

Why had he asked her to join him for a walk by the loch if he didn't enjoy being with her wanting them to be alone? But when exactly the right moment for a kiss had presented itself, he'd decided it was time to return to the lodge. He was cold and distant on the walk back. What a contrast to his earlier laughs and teasing.

Damn the man. He is tying me in knots.

But, the next minute her heart was melting as she remembered how he'd vowed to look out for her. And when she thought of his dark eyes gazing into hers with that special glint, she could swear her legs started trembling.

All up, she decided, Gillebride MacThomas was a most bedeviling creature. Hot one minute, and so cold the next, it felt like a polar wind was blowing over her.

She gave a deep sigh, pulled off her kirtle and dived into bed in her underskirt and blouse.

Her heart lifted as she reminded herself that tomorrow she'd be joining them for the hunt and Gilly would be there as her protector. Mayhap...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A serving-maid woke her well before dawn, bringing her a bowl of porridge and a glass of sweet chamomile tea.

Her pulse thrummed at the prospect of a day's riding, and a delicious feeling that was not quite excitement, but something else, trickled through her at the prospect of being in Gillebride's company for many hours.

Once out of bed, she was scratching her head over what would be suitable items to wear for a day in the saddle, riding heaven-kent-where among the crags and glens of the Isle of Mull. She looked askance at the linen tunics and kirtles she'd brought with her. They were all very well for the sedate life of the castle, and with the addition of a stout canvas apron were fine for her work in the garden. But not for hunting and riding astride all day.

About to slip on the oldest and most worn of her assembled garments, she was interrupted by a hearty knock on the door. She eased it open a crack, hesitant about flinging it wide half-dressed as she was. She spied a maidservant waiting there and opened the door for her to enter.

The maid proffered a neatly folded bundle of clothing. “Melady, the Lord MacThomas sent these. He said these are fer ye tae wear fer the... *hunting* this day.” She threw Arya a wide-eyed, astonished look, as if the very idea of going hunting with the men was beyond her comprehension.

Arya grinned as she unfolded the bundle. So, she *had* been on Gillebride’s mind after all. If nothing else, he was at least thinking of suitable clothing for her day out.

“Why, thank ye. Please convey me gratitude tae Lord MacThomas.” She looked wonderingly at the small set of britches and a rough cotton shirt that looked to be a suitable size. “But where did these come from?”

The maid raised her nose in the air disapprovingly. “I believe he prevailed upon one of the squires tae part with his clothes. The poor wee lad now has naught but a tunic tae cover him. But dinna fash,” she added quickly, “these were laundered fer ye last evening and set tae dry on the rack over the big stove in the kitchen.”

Arya nodded politely. “Please thank the laundress and the wee lad on me behalf. I am most grateful.”

The maid turned on her heel and scuttled off, as if she was scared to be in the presence of someone as crazy as Arya obviously was.

Save for a slight tightness over her rounded bottom, the britches were a surprisingly good fit. The shirt was loose and comfortable and perfect for riding.

She brushed out her hair and tied it at her nape with one of her blue ribbons. With the addition of her leather boots and stockings, her blue and gray plaid woolen cloak fastened at her neck, she was ready and eager to set out when one of the grooms knocked softly at her door and advised her that the men were waiting at the stables for her.

Striding across the cobbled yard she was aware of one or two curious glances from the grooms. She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin, doing her level best to hide her self-consciousness by adopting a nonchalant stride. Outside the stables she greeted Errol, Blaine and Gillebride with a smile and a carefree nod of her head.

“Good morning melords,” she gave a small bow. “This is a fine morning fer us tae be setting out.”

Blaine grinned at her. “Why melody Arya, I see ye are most fittingly clad fer this day’s outing.”

Errol chimed in. “And, I must say, ye look very fine in yer new apparel.”

She laughed. “I rather like it. Mayhap I’ll take tae wearing it more often.”

Gillebride said nothing, but as he handed her the reins of her palfrey she felt his gaze on her and, when he looked up, he noted his darkening eyes on her. To her utmost annoyance she felt a flush of warmth to her cheeks.

As the men mounted, aware there were several pairs of interested eyes observing her, she sprang lightly into the saddle, sitting astride as if that was the most natural way in the world to ride. Which, of course, in her view, it was.

They set off along the narrow path in single file, Blaine in the lead, then Errol, Arya and Gillebride bringing up the rear. One of the guards accompanied them for a mile or so, scouting ahead to ensure the path was clear. When there was no sign of any other presence along the track, he wheeled his horse, dipped his leather helmet to his laird, bade them safe journey, and continued back to the lodge.

Watching the guard depart Arya experienced a brief sense of foreboding, of vulnerability, even fear. But then commonsense righted itself and she rid herself of such foolishness with a stern reminder that she was in the company of three battle-hardened warriors. They would be more than a match for any cutthroat ruffians they might meet along the way.

As the sun rose, the water was bathed in a golden glow and the clouds brushed with pink and gold. But as they continued along the rocky shore, the sun's rays grew uncomfortably hot and she unfastened the cloak. Allowing it to fall from her shoulders she rolled the soft woolen fabric and placed it behind her.

Gillebride drew his horse alongside offering her a draft of water from the leather gourd he had attached to his saddle.

She took it gratefully, raising it for a long swig. "Thank ye," She handed him the gourd, curving her soft lips in a smile.

He grinned, soaking in the warmth of it, then leaned over, gave her horse a gentle tap on its rear and they were on their way again.

Not long after, they left the rocky shoreline and began ascending along a narrow, bracken-edged path leading into the towering hills. From there she could view the distant, craggy, cliffs where silvery waterfalls tumbled into the sea and myriads of seabirds wheeled, shrieking and calling. Far below, giant waves crashed savagely against the rocks, sending white spray into the sky.

Blaine waived his hand for them to come to a standstill and pointed ahead to where the path forked, signalling they should take the right-hand path.

Continuing upwards, they turned off, skirting, the pinnacle of the mountain they were climbing and followed a path curving downward.

Gillebride came alongside of her. “The glen we’re seeking lies in that direction,” he said, giving a rueful chuckle. He indicated a distance that was nothing more than a white wall of encroaching mist.

“That’s the way tae the glen where we’d expected tae discover the deer,” he muttered. “We’ve hunted here many times and there’s usually fine grazing on fresh grass below. A wee burn runs through the glen and it’s there ye could ride yer heart out along the grassy banks.” He shrugged his broad shoulders, grinning ruefully. “If only we could see it.”

The mist was rising and in only moments it swirled around them, consuming them in a mesterious white cloud. “Can we continue on?” Arya asked. “Or is

there somewhere else we can find the deer.”

“Nay lass. This is where we intended but I cannae take ye through the mist. There’s nae telling what lies ahead.”

They rode on, the white mist growing steadily thicker, making it almost impossible to see where the horses could safely put their feet.

Pressing on, cautiously, it was only a short time before they reached Blaine and Errol who had dismounted and were waiting where a sizeable space had widened beside the track.

“What say ye?” Blaine asked as he and Arya slipped off their horses.

“I’m all fer pushing ahead,” Errol said, sounding optimistic. “Oft time, the mist only closes over the tops of the mountains, and once ye’ve walked lower, ‘tis clear. Why nae continue down the path fer a distance and let’s see fer ourselves?”

“Ye’re right. It may well be clear below us.” Gilly said, after some thought. “But ‘tis so damned thick hereabouts it makes it difficult tae go further.”

“Aye,” said Blaine, giving a sharp laugh. “*Cernunnos* is most often with us, but he seems tae be on the side of the deer today.”

Errol grunted in disgust. “Aye, the mighty god of the hunt is nae favoring us

this day.”

“What say we wait here a while and see if the sun burns off the mist?” Gilly suggested.

“Good idea,” Errol responded. “I’ve an appetite on me. Why dinnae we take our time now, sustain ourselves with what the kitchen have prepared fer us, and make a final decision after that.”

While the others nodded, Arya said nothing. The thought of attempting to walk the treacherous path down the mountain without being able to see her hand in front of her face made her quail, yet she bit her tongue at the thought of showing fear and risk spoiling the day for the others.

Gillebride turned to her. “Are ye hungry lass?”

She nodded, grateful for his thoughtfulness.

He turned to the others. “I’m in agreement with that plan.” He turned and spread his cloak on the damp ground. “Dae ye care tae sit?”

The other two spread their cloaks and Blaine knelt while Errol handed out the repast of cold sausages, chicken and boiled eggs accompanied by bannocks and oat bread.

They ate in silence. As far as Arya could tell, the thick, white blanket

swirling around them was growing more impenetrable by the minute. She held onto the hope that they would forego Errol's idea of progressing down the mountain to see if the mist was diminishing.

Ultimately, after washing their meal down with a quaff of ale from Errol's gourd, they were ready to make a decision about whether to progress or return to the lodge.

For Blaine and Errol there would be no possibility of returning without having tested the limits of the fog.

"I vote tae press ahead fer aways." Errol said firmly. "I dinnae wish tae return without something tae show fer our day of hunting."

Gilly laughed. "Especially after ye bragged tae Edina that ye were the best hunter of us all."

Errol huffed indignantly at that, but grinned all the same.

"Aye. I'll go with ye, brother." Blaine turned to Gilly and Arya. "What say ye two?"

Before Arya could reluctantly agree, Gillebride spoke. "We've hunted here many times and the three of us ken the path like the back of our hands. But Arya is new tae the island pathways and the trip down the mountain is nae an easy one. I'll say nae tae the idea of pressing on."

Arya clutched at Gillebride's sleeve fearing he'd regret agreeing to her accompanying them if it meant he was forced to stay glued by her side and miss out on the hunting.

"Oh please, Gilly, I dinnae wish tae deny ye the enjoyment of the hunt." She gritted her teeth. "I'll go with ye. I'm certain the horses will ken the way."

Gillebride shook his head. "Nae lass. It's too dangerous. If these two foolish lads wish tae risk their necks then 'tis up tae them."

She bit her lip. "Ye should go, I can stay here and wait until ye return."

"Nae lass, I'm nae leaving ye," he said softly. Turning he addressed his next remarks to the others. "We'll wait back along the track while ye go and investigate. If ye dinnae return soon enough, I'll guide the lass back the way we've come and, with luck, we'll all meet together when ye return tae the lodge."

Blaine and Errol were already remounting. "Ye keep Arya safe, mind. We'll be back if the fog lifts before we've gone far and ye can join us. If nae, we'll make our way down the path in the mist, dae our hunting without ye, and meet up again at the lodge." With a light nudge Blaine urged his horse forward. "Fare ye well," he called, following Errol down the track.

With that, the brothers were swallowed up by the mist and only their horses' hooves and the jingle of their bridles could be heard before they were muffled by the wall of white.

“Come lass,” Gilly said, collecting Arya’s cloak and handing it to her. She swung it across her shoulders and mounted her palfrey, waiting until Gillebride was ready so she could follow him back the way they had come. Hoping he wouldn’t end up regretting his decision, her heart was racing at the thought of being alone with him.

She slanted him a sly smile, but his face was impassive as he pushed ahead of her along the track. It was annoyingly impossible to tell whether he was cross at being with her or not.

They continued, the mist growing thinner until it had faded altogether by the time they arrived at the place where the path divided in two.

Next to the path was a giant outcropping of rock and it was here Gillebride drew his horse to a halt. There was space enough for the two of them to retreat under cover of the cave-like rock should it rain and they need shelter. Or, if they chose to remain in a patch of sunlight, they could sit high on the rock and observe the part of countryside that was not swathed in white.

“I’d like tae sit above,” Arya declared, and Gillebride lent a hand as she clambered up the rocky space beside the overhang, to reach the ledge. Despite the sun beaming down, the stiff breeze blowing up the mountain held a chill, so she pulled her cloak around her and took her seat, cross-legged where she could look out over the dramatic view.

After unbuckling his sword and swinging his bow and the quiver of arrows off his shoulder Gillebride placed them on the rock beside them and settled himself next to her.

Glancing at him beside her she marveled – not for the first time – at his bearlike size and the strength in his muscular arms. But his face, with its arrogant profile, the tilt of his head and the glossy black hair pushed back off his forehead simply turned him into the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

Reluctantly she turned her gaze away from him and looked out over the splendid sight of the forest-clad mountains to the rugged cliffs and out over the silver sea stretching beyond. It was almost as if she could see forever.

“Is that Iona?” She pointed to a dark slash on the horizon.

“Aye, it is.” Gillebride said, nodding.

She shuddered as the cruel reminders of that place came flooding in.

“Dinnae fret, lass,” He reached across, enveloping her shoulders in his strong arm and she found herself leaning into him. The sense of protection she always felt when he was near, washed over her, chasing away the ugly thoughts threatening the tranquility of their mountain eerie. Perhaps he wasn't so disappointed at missing the hunt, after all.

“Ye always ken what's on me mind, Gilly,” she said. “Ye kent what I was thinking at the sight of the Isle of Iona out there on the horizon. And ye kent I was afeared of making the trek down the mountain in the mist.”

He nodded. “’Twas nae hard tae guess, lass. Yer wee eyes had turned into saucers.”

She laughed, revelling in his warmth.

“Mayhap Blaine and Errol willnae return fer some time,” she said, half-hoping they’d be blessed with time alone together.

“I dinna care if they dae,” he said, grinning mischievously. “I’m finding this spot tae be very comfortable.”

“Aye” she said, wriggling a tad closer, hearing his sigh.

“I have tae admit tae admiring ye in yer squire’s outfit,” he said, adding in a low voice. “The sight of yer pretty derrière bouncing on the horse in front of me eyes was a pleasant sight.”

Her cheeks burning with the kind of heat that trickled right through her, she giggled. “I like it too. It makes riding so much easier. I can understand why ye men like tae wear britches as well as a tunic.” His flirting was playing havoc with her sensibilities, and she gave him a wicked glance. “But there is one problem I can see.”

“Oh, and what would that be?”

“Well, as a maid, I’d have tae take off the britches if I’m tae relieve meself, while ye lads can simply undo the string and let yer manhood free. And when I’m wearing me kirtle I have nae problem at all in lifting me skirts.”

He threw back his head and laughed at her indelicate thinking. “Ye’re right, lass. Ye’ll have tae design some britches specially tailored fer the lasses tae remedy that problem.”

There. She was flirting with him. Whatever was she thinking? But hadn’t he started it with his cheeky remarks about looking at her round bottom on the horse?

She felt a delicious fizzing inside her that went all the way through her, tingling her nipples and causing a delicious ache to start up between her thighs. And once again, she was seized with a notion to lean in and kiss him on the lips.

CHAPTER TWELVE

This is the sweetest torture.

Being close enough to inhale the drift of Arya's rose fragrance, feeling the curves of her soft body against him, his arm strung across her shoulders holding her, Gilly was fit to fall to pieces for wanting her.

Christ!

All day he'd done his best to keep his distance. Even when she'd sauntered boldly out this morning, clad in those tight britches that outlined her shapely bottom so perfectly, making his head swirl with longing for her and instantly starting up that betraying tightness in his groin. He'd gritted his teeth and hidden his roiling desire.

Now she was beside him, her glorious mane of red hair flying in the breeze, smiling with delight, cornflower-blue eyes sparkling as she took in the splendid scenery. There was no one else here but the two of them, nothing to disturb them if he took her in his arms.

He was finding it more difficult than he ever could have imagined to keep his hands from cupping her enticingly round backside and hauling her against him, leaning in, lavishing kisses along her creamy neck and crushing those plush lips with his.

What kind of bastard am I? He'd been charged with keeping the lass safe, trusted to protect her. And he could think of nothing but ravishing her lusciously enticing mouth, ripping off those damned britches, pulling her onto his knee, opening her wide and plunging his stiff member inside her.

He groaned and she glanced round at him, her eyes fixated on his mouth.

Was it his imagination or did she lean in closer, shifting slightly to change her position on the rock? He ran troubled fingers through his hair as he gazed into her blue eyes. *Holy hell*, was she parting those enticing lips as if she was waiting for his kiss?

When her pink tongue emerged and moistened her lower lip, *by all saints who'd fallen tae the devil*, it was too much.

He scrambled to his feet, hoping against hope she wouldn't notice the strain across the front of his britches.

Managing to grunt something along the lines of "Going tae relieve meself," he clambered down from the rock and strode up the brae and out of sight. He was furious with himself and inwardly railing at the good Lord for having brought him into the world far too soon to be a match for the lass he'd lost his

heart to.

She seemed to care nothing for the fact that he was of an age where he could be her father. Or that her brothers would kill him. Yet, no matter what she thought, it did not sit well with him.

More than that, the fire that had claimed the life of his young wife and their babe so many years ago, when he was but a young lad himself, had left something inside him broken into a million pieces. Pieces he could never imagine putting back together to make him whole again.

There were times when the dreams woke him, sweating and ranting, ready to kill and maim whoever was close by. He'd learned to rule his strange moods, taking himself out riding or swimming in an ice-cold loch until his breathing steadied and his heart beat came back to its usual rhythm.

Ever since the fire two days ago he'd tried to avoid being near her. He was on a seesaw that took him at one moment to raging, where he was a vile mass of hatred for whoever had lit the fire, and the next he was cold as ice, avoiding everyone, his mind taking him somewhere to a distant place where the pain was not so great.

He shook his head. No, he had no right to lust after a young innocent like Arya, no matter how willing she seemed and how much pleasure it brought him to be in her company.

She could never be his.

Dear God. She was the sister of a laird, meant to marry and build an alliance between her clan and whoever was fortunate enough to be a chosen mate. While he was a nothing more than a lowly warrior, merely an advisor to the Laird of Ardtun. He was not a nobleman in his own right, despite there once having been a time in his youth when he was heir to the cursed father he'd come to hate and disavow. After discovering that it was his father who'd ordered the fire, he'd refused to acknowledge his kinship and abandoned his homeland never to return.

Pushing all thoughts of his own hated family from his mind he looked around. He'd walked far enough. After gulping a series of deep breaths, slowly blowing them out, and giving himself this stern reminder, he was ready to return to Arya.

He was slipping and sliding down the rocky pathway when he heard her scream.

Heart pounding, he surged forward, taking the mountainside with giant strides toward the rock where he'd left her. As her screams became louder, he cursed himself, with every step, for having left her alone.

The scene that greeted him when he at last drew near the spot where he'd left Arya permitted him no time for dwelling on tactics or strategies. It was a case of swoop in and fight like the devil.

There were three men assailing the lass. Two of them had her arms and the third was trying to capture her flailing legs.

“Ye murdering little wildcat, I’ll see ye burning at the stake,” the man bellowed as she kicked out determinedly, landing a blow on his belly.

“Take yer filthy hands off me, ye fat pig,” she yelled, her flailing feet connecting blow after blow on arm, hand, shoulder, chin as he attempted to take hold of her.

Recognizing one man’s distinctive ochre and green tartan, his mouth was washed with bile. It was those arseholes of the MacQuarries. They’d somehow tracked her down and, now, they clearly intended to take her prisoner.

With a roar, he leaped from the side of the hill onto the rock, crouched low, snarling. A grey wolf defending his pack. Snatching up his sword from where it had been kicked aside, he launched himself at the man clutching at Arya’s legs. The man turned away from her to face the fierce enemy coming at him.

Before the man had a chance to unsheathe his dirk, Gillebride laid him out with a mighty blow from the flat of his sword. Without so much as a grunt, the man fell like a sack of barley at his feet.

The other two men had released Arya’s arms and now were brandishing their swords.

“Run, Arya,” he shouted. “Get out of the way of these bastards.” Breathing heavily, he placed himself between her and the men.

“But Gilly, I cannae leave ye,” she cried out.

“Make haste intae the trees, lass.” His voice was rasping, urgent. “Dinnae tarry here. I’ll come fer ye.”

He heard her scrambling away but did not turn to see her go. He could only hope she’d put as much distance between her and her would-be kidnappers as fast as she could. If he should be overcome, he could only hope she was at least distant enough that they would have no chance of finding her. If she could evade them long enough, Errol and Blaine would be returning sooner or later.

He kept both men on the defensive with his sword play but little by little, he became aware that one of the men was steadily moving to the side. While he was kept busy with one man, the other was opening up a space between them where after one more thrust of his sword, the man would be out of reach.

Focusing his attention on the man directly in front of him he made a swift lunge, catching the man off guard. He caught the man with a blow to his side and watched as a gash opened up, spilling blood on the rock. The man’s foot slid in his own blood and he went down, groaning and clutching his side. Gilly swiftly turned his attention to the other man.

He was too late. The man was already behind him, his sword raised. Swivelling, it took all his skill to evade the killing strike as the man came at him. The sword whizzed past his ear, slicing the shoulder of his sword arm as it descended.

He snatched his sword into his left hand, but the blow to his shoulder had left him unbalanced, slowing his reflexes as he brought up his sword. The man raised his arm again as Gillebride feinted, trying to distract him and throw off his aim.

The sword was aimed straight at his heart. He flinched, half waiting for the blow that would end his life. It was then he heard the thwack of an arrow. The man uttered a hoarse scream and threw up his arms, slowly falling forward. An arrow protruded from between his shoulder blades.

Thinking for a moment that Blaine and Errol had returned, Gilly pivoted to track the arrow's source. His stunned gaze landed on Arya. He almost laughed at the glorious sight she made. Standing above them, feet apart, a majestic warrior woman, holding the bow in a practiced grip, another arrow poised, ready for her to draw back and fire.

She must have grabbed his bow and arrows when he'd bade her flee. His heart did something like a somersault against his rib cage as he realized that, instead of thinking of her own safety and running into the forest as he'd urged, she'd saved his life.

He gave a slight shake of his head and, her face creasing in a smile, she lowered the bow to her side.

"Ye'll live," Gillebride said contemptuously to the man lying at his feet, shoving him with the toe of his boot. The leather jerkin the man wore had softened the arrow's flight blocking it from going deep enough to pierce his heart. Gilly uttered a sharp, disdainful laugh and the groaning man stared up at him malevolently.

Meanwhile the first man had dragged himself into a sitting position and was rocking back and forth, moaning and holding his head. The second man was feverishly attempting to use his shirt to stanch the flow of blood from the gaping wound in his side.

“Get up ye, mangy dogs,” Gilly said, his voice spiced with fury. “Ye’ll mayhap nae die this day. But if ye mess with me again or try tae harm this wee lass, I’ll nae spare yer lives.”

Wailing wretchedly, the men slowly staggered to their feet. Gilly stood by, watching, as they half-crawled down from the rocky overhang to their horses where, with a great deal of difficulty they managed to hoist themselves into their saddles.

As the horses bounced off down the mountain path, Gillebride shouted contemptuously in their wake. “Take a message back tae yer master that the lass is under the protection of Gillebride MacThomas. If Anrias MacQuarrie wants tae claim her, he’ll first need tae fight me tae the death.”

Snorting a laugh, he turned to find Arya by his side, laughing with him, gazing up at him with eyes that held a wild, intoxicating light.

Together, they’d prevailed against the MacQuarries. His death had stared at him, mere inches away, and this glorious, beautiful lass with her hair shining like a golden sunset, had saved him. There was no way of containing his elation. He seized her in his arms and swung her around him so that her feet left the ground and her hair flew in an unkempt cloud of tangled red-gold about her shoulders. She squealed in delight.

Placing her on her feet he held her close. They were both breathing heavily, chests heaving, his heart was pounding and he could feel her fast-beating heart against his.

There could be no holding back.

He took her mouth with his, and she wound her arms around him, her hands in his hair, her lips parting enabling their tongues to join. They tasted each other greedily, eagerly exploring and searching, delving deeper, discovering and reveling in their mutual passion.

He cupped her bottom, the cheeks of her firm buttocks fitting neatly into each of his giant hands, and drew her urgently against his rock-hard cock. She gasped and writhed against him, taking his lust higher still.

He moaned. It was heaven and hell, pleasure and pain.

Then his hands found her breast and he shoved her shirt over her shoulder, exposing the satin-smooth skin. She did not object, but clutched him all the tighter to her. Too far gone to think about what he was doing, he wrenched aside her shirt, pulling it down to expose her rounded breast. Her nipples were hard against his hands and she groaned at the touch.

He rolled the nipple between finger and thumb, making her cry out and squeal with the unexpected pleasure of it.

Lifting his head from their kissing he took one of the hard buds in his mouth,

suckling, drawing it into his mouth. It was pure nectar. He tasted roses, sweat, blood, and breathed in the musky floral scent of her, mad with his passion.

She threw back her head, moaning, calling his name, her fingers tangling tight amid his hair as if her life depended on it.

He was reaching to untie the strings holding her britches when, beside them, their horses nickered and whinnied.

Groaning, he raised his head, opening his eyes.

“Dinnae stop, Gilly,” Arya cried, holding him tight.

Cursing, he slammed a hand to his forehead. “I’m a damned fool. What in the name of the saints am I thinking?” He reluctantly inched away trying to steady his ragged breathing, leaving Arya gasping. “Those bastards might nae have been alone. There could be another bunch of MacQuarrie’s men upon us at any minute.”

He glanced around. *Tae say nothing of the possibility of Blaine and Errol returning and catching us.*

She was nodding, breathing heavily, pulling the shirt back over her shoulder.

Had there ever been a more beautiful sight? With her wild, sparkling, blue

eyes, her cheeks flushed, lips red and pouting from their kisses, breasts heaving, her nipples pebbled against her shirt, her hair an abandoned tangle, she robbed him of all breath.

He grabbed her again. But, this time, he merely brushed her forehead with a chaste kiss. Before he released her he briefly squeezed her in a giant bear-hug.

“Ye saved me life, lass, and I’ll nae ferget.”

Smiling, she returned the hug. “So now I only owe ye one more. Ye’ve saved me life twice, remember.” She moved arms’ length away and, for him, it was if a light had gone out, dimming the world.

“I dinna think ‘tis wise fer us tae tarry here any longer. As long as we wait here, we’re in danger. We risk the MacQuarrie’s coming upon us again.”

Arya gave this some thought. “Ye think we should make our way down the other side through the mist?”

He nodded, “Aye lass. We dinnae ken if the MacQuarries are lying in wait fer us on the way back tae the lodge. Meeting up with Blaine and Errol is our best option.”

As he went to assist her into the saddle he winced, aware for the first time of the cut he’d received from the man’s misdirected sword. His shirt was soaking in his blood.

Arya looked up in time to catch his grimace. “I should bind that fer ye. ‘Tis still bleeding.”

“Nae lass, tis naught but a scratch.

She huffed at that, half-amused. “Gilly, ‘tis true ye’re a warrior. A survivor of many battles. But that doesnae mean ye should ignore a cut from a sword. Let me see tae it now, and once we’ve returned tae the lodge I’ll make a healing poultice fer it tae prevent a fever.”

He stood meekly while she took his dirk out of its sheath on his belt. Biting her lip, she shook her head at his blood flowing too freely from the slash to his shoulder. After cutting through his sleeve and quickly removing it, she sliced it along the seam and made a bandage. With deft fingers she bound it tightly around the wound, cutting a tie and binding it off.

“There, if it doesnae stanch the wound altogether, that should at least slow the flow of blood.”

“Thank ye lass. ‘Tis more the pity there are nae lasses like yerself on the battlefield tae dress the wounds of the lads where they fall. There’d be many lives saved if that were so.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Arya breathed in deeply, steeling herself against the prospect of facing the tortuous descent through the mist to the glen below.

There was no other choice.

Gilly's arm was oozing blood and, skilled swordsman though he was, it was unlikely he'd be able to wield his sword again today should they be attacked again. While she was proud of her own skill with a bow and arrows, the thought of another skirmish made her stomach turn in fear. They'd stand little chance against a fresh party of armed MacQuarrie men.

She gritted her teeth, shivering at the idea of what her fate would be if the MacQuarries were to take her prisoner. If Gillebride had not heard her screams and come rushing to her rescue when he did, those men would have taken her to their laird. She would expect no mercy, or even hope for a quick death, should Anrias MacQuarrie have her in his clutches.

Straightening her spine and tilting her head up, she urged her horse around. "I'm ready tae take me chances with the mist rather than risk another

encounter with MacQuarrie's men."

"Good lass," Gilly said, favouring her with the grimmest of smiles.

One they'd reached the point where the mist turned into a swirling white curtain, Gilly dismounted. "We'll walk our horses from here on." He grunted a laugh. "'Tis slower, but we'll have slightly less chance of losing our footing and flying off the mountain."

Once Arya had heaved herself off the horse, Gillebride reached for her hand and took the reins of both horses in his other hand.

Just feeling his big hand enveloping hers gave her a sense of reassurance that seemed to guide her feet more confidently, building a measure of strength that helped to keep her plodding downward.

"At least we can see where our feet are going," she sighed. Even the need for every ounce of her concentration on the slippery track could not distract her from the tingling warmth surging through her from his work-hardened grip or stop her thoughts straying to the wonderful memories of Gillebride's smooth, delicious lips on hers.

The path was just wide enough for them to walk side by side, the horses strung out behind them. Here and there, they encountered small landslips where the edge of the path had slid down the mountain. These ragged edges made her even more glad to be on foot, walking with caution. She clutched Gillebride's hand all the tighter as a clod of earth and a few pebbles flew out from under her feet.

When the mist finally thinned enough for them to see further ahead than arm's length, she peered over the edge of the steep path, seeing for the first time the precipitous drop below. Her stomach lurched and she breathed yet another sigh of relief that Gilly had been prepared to take it slow for her sake.

She prayed the mist would have cleared when it came time for them to retrace their steps.

At the bottom of their descent, they at last emerged into sparkling, sunlight. Over head the sky was a clear blue, here and there punctuated with fluffy white clouds.

Arya caught her breath as the expanse of the glen opened out before them. It was a lush meadow, with yellow and white wildflowers scattered like little dots of colour among the green, surrounded on all sides by thickly wooded mountains. At its heart, a rushing burn burred on its untroubled way, its crystal waters sparkling in the sunshine.

They refilled their leather gourds with fresh water and sat on the grassy banks, granting the horses plenty of time to drink their fill and graze for a while in the warm, still atmosphere. There was no sign of Blaine or Errol, and Gillebride surmised they may have made their way into the lower slopes further along the glen in search of the deer.

Arya reclined on the grass. "Let us wait here for them. They must pass this place before they tackle the mountain path. If we wait here, we cannae miss them."

Gilly bent his knees and found a comfortable spot to rest beside her. “I think we can both dae with some quiet space,” he said with a wry chuckle.

Lying on his back, his hands folded under his head, he looks utterly calm and unperturbed. Does he even spare a thought fer our kiss?

Arya was doing her best to slow her racing heart. The day had already held more adventures than she had encountered in half a lifetime. Riding in men’s britches, being attacked by the MacQuarries and making the alarming descent to the glen were all enough to twist her gut. But it was Gillebride’s kisses and the touch of his hands on her body that set her heart to fluttering like a trapped bird in her chest.

She felt her cheeks burning at the memory and, looking up, she caught him gazing at her, his eyes darker than soot. She wished to heaven he’d say something about what had happened between them, but after a brief glance he turned away, his eyes scanning the glen. Mayhap it was something to keep for another time. There was too much between them to ignore, but right now it was clear Gillebride was preoccupied with keeping her safe. She wasn’t foolish enough to think he’d relinquish his sworn role as her protector.

In the meantime, it was peaceful here. Now that the immediate dangers had passed, she felt her eyelids drooping, a blessed lethargy creeping over her, and she drifted into a hazy sleep.

His gentle touch on her shoulder brought her back to wakefulness. The shadows in the glen were lengthening.

“Have I slept fer very long?” she asked. “I’m sorry.”

“Ye’ve naught tae be sorry for, lass. Ye slept because ye were tired. Today has been a trial fer us both.” His eyes softened as he looked at her. “Fer ye more than me.”

She placed a hand on his sleeve, wanting him beside her, a bulwark against her nightmares and her terror of Anrias MacQuarrie and his clansmen.

“I owe ye so much, Gilly. And I havenae thanked ye fer coming tae me rescue. Neither have I given ye me thanks fer guiding me down the treacherous path.”

“Dinnae thank me yet,” lass, he said grinning. “We’ve yet tae make it tae the top again and then find our way back tae the lodge.

She ran a hand through her tangled curls, squinting into the late afternoon sun. “Can ye see the brothers?” she asked hopefully, already quaking inside at the prospect of attempting the mountain path in the gathering twilight.

Gillebride was standing, his hand shading his eyes as he stared at two tiny dots in the far distance.

“I’ve been watching those two and I swear they’re getting bigger. I believe it’s our brave hunters returning.”

Jumping to her feet Arya peered closely in the direction he was pointing. Sure enough, the two dots materialized before her eyes into two mounted horsemen, still a long way off but coming closer.

“Come,” he said, holding out his hand.” We’ll ride across tae the path and meet them there.”

She took the hand he offered and swung into the saddle, noting the bloodied and tattered sleeve where she’d produced the makeshift bandage. She wondered how he’d go about explaining that to Errol and Blaine. Mayhap the time had come for them to learn the truth about her wickedness and the fact that Anrias MacQuarrie had placed a price on her head.

He caught her gaze and glanced down at his arm.

“Mayhap ‘tis time taetell Blaine and Errol everything,” she said.

“If you agree, I’ll tell them yer story this night, after we’ve had supper. Now the MacQuarrie’s have dared tae venture so boldly into MacKinnon lands, there may be nay hiding the truth. I wish tae guard against putting all me friends in danger.”

She nodded dolefully, her mouth curving downward. She knew he spoke sense, and the last thing she wished was to endanger the MacKinnons, who had been so generous and caring in the hospitality they’d bestowed on her. But her heart sank at the thought of the condemnation that would surely be her lot once they were aware of her crime.

“Will they send me away?” Her voice shook, and she drew in a shaky breath, tears burning behind her eyes.

He shook his head. “They’ll take nay action that will put ye at risk. Sending ye home while yer brothers are away, even with a guard, would be tantamount to inviting the MacQuarries tae come after ye.”

She gave him a watery smile, nodding. She had long dreaded the possibility of being returned to her home and the perils that would face her on the road. Gillebride’s certainty went some way to settling her peace of mind.

But, all the same, ever since they’d been attacked, she’d been wondering how it was that the MacQuarries seemed to know exactly where to find them.

“Dae ye think they came upon us by accident?”

“Nay, lass. I wish I could say that, but nae accident would have brought them through miles of MacKinnon land tae the wee spot they found us. Me guess is they had been tracking us from the lodge.”

“And that means...?” She screwed up her nose against the idea that was forming in her mind.

“Aye. It means someone in the MacKinnon household is a traitor who told them where we would be this day.”

Arya shuddered at the thought that someone they had trusted could betray them to their enemy. Gillebride reached a reassuring hand to give her arm a squeeze. “Dinnae fash, wee lass. Ye’re safe with the MacKinnons.”

For once Arya found it difficult to be reassured by Gillebride’s words, given the possibility that someone close to them might be in league with the enemy. Both Arya and Gilly were in a sombre mood as Blaine and Errol rode up, all smiles, a young stag draped across Errol’s saddle in front of him evidence of their success.

“Ah, well done,” Blaine said, smiling at Arya, as he pulled his horse up beside them. “Ye made it down the pass.”

“And well done tae ye, Errol.” Gilly indicated the prime stag lying limp across his saddle. “I’ll look forward tae dining on venison tomorrow.” He looked up. “But first we’ve tae negotiate that precarious path again. At least the damned mist has finally cleared.”

Without further delay, they began the steep climb out of the glen.

Much to Arya’s relief, the journey to the top, this time on horseback, was nowhere as perilous as the downhill walk had been. To start, they could see where they were going, and she trusted the horse she was riding. The little mare was sure-footed and confident, taking it in her stride without wavering. It seemed no time before the path flattened out and the ground under their feet felt solid at last.

A little further on they arrived at the spot where they’d been attacked by the

MacQuarries. Blaine's sharp eye was immediately drawn to the clear signs of a scuffle. There was blood on the rock and blood beside the trail.

"Hmm. There's been a few horses here recently," he said, examining the scuffed turf and the muddy hoof prints near the rocky overhang. "Five sets of hoofprints by the looks of it."

"And brother," he said pointedly to Gillebride with a nod toward his shoulder. "I didnae say a word earlier about the bloody sleeve tied around yer arm but 'tis time I asked ye. Did ye meet misadventure in this place?"

Gilly nodded. "We did indeed, melord. And once we've made it back tae the comfort and safety of the lodge there'll be time tae relate the story of what happened tae us here."

Blaine's eyes flashed. "Fer pity's sake man. If there's trouble abroad ye should tell us now." Bending to look more closely at the injury he raised his head, an eyebrow arched questioningly. "A sword slash?"

Arya gasped in a breath, almost a laugh. It had been a ridiculously vain hope that Blaine would overlook what was so obviously a wound.

Gillebride gave a short dismissive laugh. "Aye, that it is. But I'd rather make haste out of here than waste time with explanations now if ye can curb yer impatience. The tale I have tae tell will take quite some time." He glanced at Arya who was watching helplessly, her mind racing, while a cold little stone formed in her chest, making it difficult to breathe.

To her great relief, Blaine grunted his assent, offering a cynical smile. “All the same, I’d like tae know if I’m likely tae meet trouble on the way.”

“Mayhap we should keep our wits about us on the ride,” Gilly said tersely.

Arya observed the knowing nods passing between Blaine and Errol. It was clear they understood well enough that the threat of an ambush was at the top of Gilly’s mind, and they were taking heed.

Holding herself stiffly, her senses tuned to the sights and sounds of the forest as they rode. She could scarcely breathe for fear of making a sound that might mask the crackling of leaves or the breaking of a wee twig that would serve as a warning.

It was then she recalled the note left to her by Eleonor. They had arranged to meet tomorrow in the forest. She must alert her to the danger. The MacQuarries were here and they were hot on her trail. They could be waiting in the forest, or by the loch or even, heaven help her, they could storm the lodge to seek her out. It was not safe for Eleonor to be anywhere nearby.

She made her mind up that as soon as she had a moment to herself tomorrow, she’d venture out to warn the other lass. She could only hope she wasn’t too late.

They rode on in grim silence, giving no mind to the beauty of the cliffs and waterfalls or the sea birds’ cries. The forest that had seemed so magical this morning was now a place of menace where, at any moment, the trees and bushes could give way and a band of warriors could spring forth, all of them

hell-bent on turning her into a forlorn and helpless prisoner awaiting a terrible punishment to be meted out.

When, at last, they came in sight of the hunting lodge and there was no sign of their foe, she allowed herself a brief respite to draw in a long breath and fill her lungs. Her terror made the pure sweet air all the more precious. Her shoulders sagged as the tension she'd been holding in gave way.

Beside her, Gillebride reached over and gave her hand a squeeze. "We're safe now, lass. Dinnae fash."

She forced her lips to curve into a smile. "Aye, safe now. But dinnae forget ye've promised we'll tell Laird MacKinnon the full story of me crime and the MacQuarries' bid fer vengeance."

"Blaine's a good man, Arya," he said, melting her heart with the kind light in his eye. "He's nae one tae condemn a body without good reason. Nae matter what, he'll give ye a fair hearing."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Supper was an awkward affair.

Gilly wasn't at all surprised when Arya showed little interest in her meal, picking it over with her fork before excusing herself, claiming to be overly tired from the exertions of the day and wishing to retreat at once to her small bedchamber. One look at her pale face and the dark crescents beneath her blue eyes told him all he needed to know. He could hardly blame her for being terrified at confronting Blaine and revealing the truth of her terrible secret.

While the usual friendly back and forth exchanges took place during supper, Gillebride couldn't bring himself to jest with the others as he normally would.

"Why so serious tonight, Gilly?" Blaine enquired.

Attempting a grin, Gilly shook his head, and raised his tankard of ale. "Tae yer good health, me laird," he muttered, ignoring Blaine's puzzled

expression.

He quaffed the ale, lost in thought.

Blaine would never go back on the vow he'd made to Arya's brothers to shelter her from harm under the MacKinnon roof at Ardtun Castle. Gillebride was utterly confident this was a matter of honor that his laird would not break. But, once Blain was made aware of the full horror of Arya's misdeed – the killing of Alasdair MacQuarrie – the subsequent price on her head and their narrow escape from Iona with the MacQuarries hot on their heels, he'd be faced with the dilemma of keeping his vow to the MacDonells or standing for the alliance with the MacQuarries.

Gillebride moaned inwardly. *By all-the-fallen-saints-in-Christendom.* There could be no easy answer to the problem, yet he was certain that, when faced with a terrible choice, Blaine would declare himself for Arya, just as Gillebride had done. Surrendering the lass to the inevitable torture and death that would be meted out by Anrias MacQuarrie was unthinkable.

Yet, Blaine's protection of Arya from a vengeful Anrias MacKinnon would bring the fragile alliance between the MacKinnons and the MacQuarries crashing to an end.

There had long been clashes between the two clans, mostly stemming from disputes over territory, but once the MacQuarrie laird learned that Blaine was protecting the lass he believed had murdered his son in cold blood, nothing would stop war from breaking out between them.

The truth could even threaten the MacQuarrie's commitment to King Robert's cause; a precious allegiance Gillebride and Blaine had worked long and hard to negotiate and which Gilly was at pains to preserve.

Once supper was finally done with and the scullery maids were clearing the dishes and platters, Blaine rose to his feet with Errol by his side. He beckoned to Gillebride.

"Care tae join me in me study fer a wee dram? I'm looking forward tae the story ye promised us." He sounded cordial enough. If he was in a benevolent mood, that was a good place to start an unpleasant conversation.

Gillebride rose to his feet and sauntered behind the others, nodding to several of the assembled guards on his way out of the hall.

It had been easier than he expected to make up his mind. There was only one solution to the problem he faced. He would take Arya away from the Isle of Mull. As long as she was sheltered under the protection of the MacKinnons they were all at risk. But he knew well enough that if Blaine knew the danger Arya was in, he'd insist on keeping her at Ardtun under his clan's protection.

Even though it went against everything he thought of as honorable, he'd make sure he kept the truth of the threat facing them all from Blaine this night.

Mayhap, once the alliance King Robert and the MacQuarrie clan was secure and he'd taken Arya a long way from MacKinnon territory, it would be time to break the dreaded news to Blaine and allow him to decide how he wished

to deal with it.

But for now he just had to come up with a plan that would take Arya out of harm's way and still preserve the alliance.

When he entered the room Blaine used as a study while they remained at the lodge, Errol and Blaine were already seated at the table in the center of the chamber. Despite not being at the castle, important matters still had to be dealt with, and the room, although much sparser than his study at Ardtun, had a formal, even austere atmosphere. There was a chill in the air even though a small fire burned merrily in the grate.

Gillebride lowered himself into his place across from the others with a nod to Blaine. He opened his mouth to speak but Blaine put up a hand.

“One moment, we need tae fortify ourselves before we hear ye out.” He poured them each a measure of whisky and handed it around. “Now,” he said, taking a sip and leaning forward to hear Gilly's story.

“As ye ken, while ye two made your descent through the mist, I chose tae keep me eye on Arya instead of tackling the mountain path.” He huffed regretfully. “Would we'd chosen tae accompany ye. Yet we were nae tae ken what was in store. While we loitered there, pleasantly enough, we were set upon by three men.” He tapped the table, wishing to make his point.

“The bandits found ye out?” Errol queried in alarm.

Gillebride shook his head, his eyes narrowing, experiencing again the icy stab of fear in his gut as he remembered Arya's piercing screams and pictured the warriors rough manhandling.

God's blood. It had been far too close fer comfort. I could have lost her.

"Nay Errol." He shook his head slanting them a wry smile. "These men were nae mere cutthroats seizing a chance opportunity. They were seasoned warriors and armed tae the teeth."

"Warriors?"

"There was nae mistaking the blue and orange plaid."

Blain exploded. "By God's blood. Those cursed MacQuarries. What were those wee bastards doing so deep in MacKinnon lands? And why, in the name of all that's holy, would they attack us?"

He leaped to his feet and paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, hands clenched in fists behind his back.

He looked up. "Well?"

Gillebride sucked in a deep breath, and blew it out noisily. "I had a... er... a... disagreement with some of the MacQuarrie lads in the tavern in *Baile Mòr*. A fight broke out. Seems they're holding a grudge."

He slid his gaze over Blaine and then Errol, noting the alarm on their faces.

“Ye’re a damned fool MacThomas,” Blain bawled. “Ye ken what this means? Ye’re hasty action has placed our alliance with the MacQuarries at risk. I ken those slinking cowards well enough. They’ll lie in wait until they can get hold of ye in another ambush. Nay one here will be safe while they’re at large.”

Gillebride said nothing. Blaine’s words cut deep. He had always valued his ability to negotiate with clan leaders without arousing any ire yet now Blaine laid all the blame for the so-called quarrel at his feet. Still, Blaine’s wrath was a small price to pay if it meant keeping Arya safe.

Blaine paced some more, his face as black as thunder. “Is there nae way ye and this lad Beolin can make peace with each other?”

Gillebride folded his arms across his chest and shook his head. Now he’d told the story – omitting the details about Arya and making the quarrel between himself and the MacQuarries – he still had to avoid the full truth.

“I had hoped that might be so. But today blood was spilled, there can be nay peace talks between us now.”

Blaine groaned, ran his fingers through his hair and regained his seat at the table. “Then what dae ye suggest, friend? We cannae allow this feud tae continue. There is too much at stake.”

“It occurred tae me that I should make meself scarce until this blows over.”

Blaine stroked his beard thoughtfully. “I dinnae fancy the idea of ye nae here at Ardtun. Ye’ve duties and I value having ye with us. But this matter concerns the wellbeing of the whole clan. Yer idea has merit. If ye’re away then there willnae be any cause fer a quarrel here on MacKinnon lands.”

Frowning, Gillebride nodded. His mind was racing. At least Blaine had agreed to the idea of his departure, but how the devil could he find a way tae take Arya with him?

Tossing back the last of his whisky he got to his feet. “I’ll talk on it further tomorrow. Meanwhile I’ll order the guards tae keep a close watch. If there are any sightings of the MacQuarrie tartan, or any suspicious characters, I’ll make sure they bring them tae me at once.”

Blaine nodded, looking far from satisfied with Gillebride’s response. He shrugged his broad shoulders resignedly. “Fer now, that seems the best solution,” he reached for the whisky decanter and poured another splash of the golden liquid into his cup. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

Gilly strode from the room wishing he could meet with Arya. He wanted to set her mind at rest and confide the lie he’d told Blaine and Errol. She was blameless as far as they were concerned and there could be no question of her being handed over to Anrias MacQuarrie, while he could set out tomorrow with his squire if needed be. Nevertheless, he had to find a way for her to accompany him without arousing suspicions.

So preoccupied was he with his tumultuous thoughts he hardly noticed that his steps took him along the path leading to the rocky foreshore. Was it only a day since he'd been here in the moonlight with Arya? Tonight, the moon was lost behind clouds and the night was dark.

He paced, allowing his thoughts to wander, but he was floundering. Lost between the strength of his duty to his laird, Blaine MacKinnon, and the lass who was stealing his heart. His head was still swimming from the unabashed kisses they'd shared. He'd tried and, no doubt, failed miserably in his efforts to remain aloof towards the powerful attraction she held for him and, in the aftermath of the furious battle with the MacQuarries, the power of their elation had banished every restraint he'd been clinging to.

His thoughts rambled over the sheer joy he'd experienced in her arms, remembering the drift of her flower-scented hair against his cheeks, those plush lips pressed against him, her moist tongue joining unstintingly with his. He groaned as sense memory took him back to the feel of her satin skin under his fingers and the sheer bliss of her breasts against his lips.

Yet, no matter his desire, he would stay true to his vow to do everything in his power to keep Arya from harm. And if that meant he must ruthlessly stamp out his passion, then so be it. Nothing should put her at risk – even his own burning desire for her.

He turned back, preparing to retrace his steps to the lodge. The solitary walk had helped him clarify what was most important. He set great value on carrying out his duties to Clan MacKinnon, he owed them an enormous debt that could never be repaid. However, he well knew there were others, Errol MacKinnon not least among them, who could fulfill his tasks at the castle, supervising the young squires, or staying by Blaine's side as an advisor. While he was the only one who would risk his life to keep Arya safe.

But, dammit, she was a headstrong lass. Once she realised the danger her actions had brought to the MacKinnons, it would perhaps even take persuasion on his part to keep her from giving herself up to Anrias MacQuarrie.

He was halfway along the darkness of the path when he caught a faint movement out of the corner of his eye. He froze, listening.

There is someone else moving through the forest.

Crouching low, he made his stealthy way from the path into the trees. Again, he saw a flash of something light, almost indistinguishable among the shadows, heading in the direction of the loch. He followed at a distance, not wanting to alert the figure to his presence with crackling twigs or rustling leaves while making sure he kept the figure in sight.

As he'd thought, the person – man or woman, he could not tell – was not making for the hunting lodge but was heading toward the pebbly shore of the loch.

Once they reached the edge of the water it became clear to Gillebride that the figure was indeed that of a woman. She moved swiftly through the darkness, a white-clad, wraithlike figure and he could barely make out her hair streaming behind her.

Fascinated, he followed as the lass moved along the beach.

It was then that the sound of her crying drifted to him on the breeze.

He hesitated. Tears always brought him undone. His first impulse was to dash forward and offer solace, but he held back.

Perhaps this was the *glaistig*, the mythological green lady of great sadness, a goddess of the hunt, whose heartrending cries and wails were sometimes heard after hunters had wrongly taken a doe or a fawn from her herd.

Was she mourning the young stag Errol had claimed today?

He bowed his head in silent thanks to the unearthly *glaistig* – if that was she – for the gift of one of her precious creatures.

When he looked up, the sound of crying had ceased. Racing forward to the spot where he'd last spied the lass, his legs suddenly heavy and slow, he saw the dainty figure ahead of him toss aside her cloak, raise her arms and wrench off the white gown she was clad in.

To his utter amazement he saw now that the fae figure was none other than Arya and as he stood frozen in amazement, she danced naked into the gentle waves of the loch.

Lord, what is the lass thinking? It is far too cold tae be venturing out tae swim in the loch. Arya should be asleep in her bed by now. Didnae she realise it was dangerous fer her tae be abroad this time of night? Why, those cursed MacQuarries can be anywhere, just waiting fer an opportunity like

this tae seize her and take her prisoner.

He shuddered, imagining himself waking tomorrow to find no trace of the sweet lass and all the household in an uproar.

“Arya,” he roared, holding his hands to his mouth in an effort to make the sound of his voice reach out to her across the water. But tonight, whatever he gave voice to was carried away on the wind. “Arya,” he called vainly.

Goddammit. I will have tae go in after her.

Hastily tearing off his boots he stripped off his jacket and shirt and, naked to the waist, stepped into the loch and dived under the water.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The icy water cut like a sharp blade on her skin. It helped her to think straight even though she could hardly bear to face her thoughts.

A plan was forming in her mind. It had begun hatching soon after the attack by the MacQuarries this afternoon. It was a slow dawning of the understanding that as long as she remained at Ardtun, she was placing them all at risk.

As well as she knew her own heart-beat, she knew Gillebride was prepared to give up his life in her defence. She could never allow that. Seeing the blood streaming from his arm resulting from the brutal slash from the warrior's sword had brought that home to her as nothing else could do.

The knowledge that her crime could put others' lives in jeopardy was unbearable.

Diving under the water, holding her breath, she knew what she must do. Before morning she would take one of the horses from the stables, saddle up and be on her way. Where she would go, she had no idea. Perhaps she could

go home to the MacDonell Castle and hide there with Maggie, her dearly loved housekeeper, to shelter her. And it was probably not a good idea anyhow while her brothers were still away.

She quailed at the prospect of travelling alone through the woods, sleeping when she could and then making it across the sea to Oban. But once she was away, it would keep the others from harm. After that, whatever became of her was whatever the fates decreed.

Her heart was breaking at the thought of leaving without even saying a fleeting goodbye to Gillebride.

Her aching lungs forced her back to the surface. Her eyes flew open as she felt the water slide over her like a cold but gentle caress.

“Arya,” Gilly’s rough shout broke through the gloom of her preoccupation, bringing her back to the present with a jolt. Before she could set out for the shore or even catch her breath, he was beside her. She felt rather than saw him in the velvety darkness, as he seized her in his iron grip, circling her waist with his two hands, hauling her slippery form tightly against him.

He was frantically kissing her mouth, her eyelids, her brows, her cheeks, warming her half-frozen body with the heat of his passion.

“Oh God, Arya,” he whispered, moaning softly. “I was afraid something had happened tae ye. That ye had disappeared under the water of the loch and I’d never see ye again.”

He hoisted her into his arms and without any thought, she wound her arms around his neck, and clung to him, closing her eyes and losing herself in the strength of his arms. She threw back her head, her long hair trailing against his naked back into the water. There was no longer anything but the feel of his naked skin next to hers, his breath in her hair, the feel of his heart beating hard and fast to the same rhythm as her own.

Without any further ado he strode with her to the shore.

He lowered her slowly and gently to the rough pebbles and released her.

Although she trembled, she clutched him to her nakedness, pulling his head down to hers, her lips already opening as his mouth found hers. Their tongues flickered together. Softly, at first, then more urgently. She opened her mouth wider, her heart pounding hard against her ribcage. With a sound that was somewhere between a rumble and a growl he slid his tongue into her mouth.

The world spun at dizzying speed, catching her and twirling her into the stars. She still clung to his nape, her fingers twined in his dark hair as she pressed her breasts against him, reveling in the feel of with his bare skin beneath her fingers and his hard body against hers.

He'd warmed her with his passion when he'd first held her but now her own molten core was a slow fire bursting into flames. She'd never thought she could feel like this. This desperate need was new, something that had been ignited between them on the mountain and was now like a forest fire, burning out of control.

He broke from their kiss, groaning. “We must nae,” he said and then lowered his head for another kiss that robbed her of all her senses, replacing them with the taste, the touch, the scent of him. She felt the roughness of his big hands as they closed around her buttocks, pulling her closer, and she pressed against his hardness, aching with want for him.

Her longing for him flared into desperation.

“Gilly, touch me,” she cried out hoarsely.

His touch made everything all right. There was no space for the thoughts that plagued her, no questions without answers, no fears, as long as he was holding her in his strong arms.

She slid her still wet body against his, her fingers flicking through the smattering of coarse hair on his chest. She stroked him, fingering a ridged scar near his nipple, guessing this was something he’d earned in one of the many battles he’d fought beside the MacKinnons.

He placed an arm at her shoulder, angling her so that his hand could find her breast. He pebbled her nipple between his thumb and finger and a burst of heat surged between her thighs as he took her mouth again in another breathtaking kiss.

Taking his hand from her breast he slid it lower, exploring and stroking her skin around her navel. She moved her hips awkwardly against his teasing hand, her need for him intensifying.

Then, all at once, he pulled back. “I cannae. This is wrong of me.”

“What? Why?” She managed, unable to stifle a moan as space opened between them.

He was moaning too, resting his chin in her hair, and still she held him tight.

“I wish ye tae take me as a man takes a woman,” she whispered, feeling him trembling against her. “And I ken ye want me as I want ye.”

“Aye.” He sighed, a deep, heartfelt sound. “I’ve never wanted any lass the way I want ye, Arya. But what I want is of nae matter. Ye deserve a better man than I am.”

She barked a short laugh. “I’m a murderess, Gilly. I dinna deserve a good man at all.”

He reached a solid arm around her again, pulling her back into his chest, giving a soft chuckle. “I dinna think of ye like that. Tae me ye’re the most...” he left the words hanging.

She nuzzled against him, letting her fingers linger across his chest, now taking his nipple with her fingers, as he’d done with hers. Determined to play havoc with his resolve.

“We could have both died today at the hands of the MacQuarries.” She

touched his still bandaged shoulder lightly. “Ye have the wound as proof I speak the truth. With a price on me head, me time on this earth could come to an end sooner rather than later. I dinna wish tae save me maidenhood fer a day that may never come.”

Her hand strayed lower to the hardness of his shaft straining against his wet britches. He gasped and moaned again.

“And there’s nae point anyhow in ye telling me I should save me maidenhood fer a better man. Because I ken, with certainty, Gillebride MacThomas, that there is nae better man than ye.”



He gave a moan of surrender and turned her, angling her so that her face was raised to his.

“May the good Lord forgive me Arya MacDonell, but I cannae resist ye.” His voice was nothing more than a low, primeval growl. He leaned in meeting her eager lips with his, and the world was lost to him.

They kissed again, his tongue plunging deep, and he lifted her once more into his arms and took her further up the beach to a place where soft grasses and sand replaced the harsh pebbles where they’d been. Then he lay her, naked, on the grass.

She stretched herself, her arms above her head, her body a soft blur of white in the darkness save for the dark patch between her thighs, fully exposed to him.

He took a moment to gaze on her, his heart pumping wildly in his chest, his breathing heavy, all thought banished save for his need and the wanting that coursed through his veins rushing heat through every fiber of his body.

Once he'd slipped off his britches the stiff iron rod sprang out from his groin.

Jesus Christ. He moaned. Surely this thing between his legs was too big to fit inside this dainty creature lying before him. But his hesitation was only for an instant, there was no stopping the rushing lust and desire that was sweeping him along as surely as the waterfall he'd glimpsed today, surging from the cliff top in a wild spray to the rocks below.

“Come tae me Gilly,” she whispered, her voice husky with longing.

He lowered himself to place his body over the length of her, supporting himself on his elbows to take the weight from her fragile form. But she reached up impatiently, dragging his head down to her, the strength of her embrace making him catch his breath.

She laughed softly, writhing her body against his, entangling her legs around him, holding him to her. “I’m nae fragile flower, melord. I want yer body on mine. I want tae feel yer strong arms around me,” she whispered. “I long fer ye tae take me. Dinnae waste more time Gilly. Make me yours without any more foolish delay.”

Who am I tae disobey such a compelling demand?

His muscles straining with restraint, he lowered his hips to hers. Rolling her slightly to his side, he took one finger and slid it around her hardened nub, slipping it between her swollen, wet folds.

She cried out as his large finger slipped inside her, bucking into his hand, her every breath turning into a gasp of pleasure.

Placing the tip of his rod to her opening, he made space for it with his fingers, opening her slick folds as he moved it inside her. He bit hard on his lower lip to hold back the impulse to thrust wildly and plunge deep, with no more restraint.

Moaning she lifted her thighs urging him on. “Please, please, Gilly.”

Still taking it slow, he pushed slowly inside her, gritting his teeth as he felt the velvety walls closing around him. This was pure torture. But the kind of torture he was built to delight in.

Raising herself she took the last of him inside her, moaning and thrashing, crying his name so loudly he was afeared they’d come running, alarmed, from the lodge expecting an invasion by the MacQuarries.

His restraint was gone as he withdrew and thrust inside her again. She joined his rhythm, raising her hips to pull him deep inside her with every grunting lunge he made.

He couldn’t last. Once he felt her tightening around his shaft the inevitable

rush of sensation began. He flew higher and higher with every thrust until everything of the world was gone and there was only his manhood and the feel of her under him and the bliss and extravagant pleasure that made him roar and cry out triumphantly.

He grunted, groaning as he was swept away in sensation, spilling himself inside her, scarcely aware of Arya clenching, her nails digging into his back, flying into an orgasm that met his in a soaring ecstasy of liberation.

“Gilly.” The sound of her voice brought him slowly back to earth.

She was stroking his hair as he lay, his head on her shoulder, his hardness still half alive inside her. One move from her and he'd be hard again, taking her one more time.

She wriggled slightly, pushing her hips against him. His manhood stirred into life, springing into rock-hardness in an instant. He groaned again, pushing into her and she met his slow thrust with her own pressure.

This time the urgency was less. He could take her on a slow ride, moving with deliberate, leisurely, easy strokes, taking her nipple in his mouth, drawing it deep, suckling, licking, savoring the salty taste of her and the sound of her moans and cries as they moved together in perfect time.

As his pleasure built, he held himself in check, waiting for her to join him as he thrust and withdrew slowly, taking her with him with every beat. He felt her tightening around his staff, gripping him, taking him higher. Then, when he could hold back no longer and she was moaning his name and calling on

the Almighty, he allowed the pleasure to take him in glorious waves of sheer bliss, until he was bellowing and roaring her name like an avenging god. “Arya!”

He was spent, done, lost at sea.

Raising himself he gazed at her in wonder as she gazed at him, her eyes reflecting the light from the stars.

He lowered his head to her shoulder. “Me God Arya. I never kent such sensations were possible.”

Stroking his hair, she giggled softly. “Nor did I. I wanted ye but I had nae idea of what it was I wanted.”

“We should find our clothes,” he muttered, “afore we catch our death, lying here naked in the cold of morning.”

Grey light was striping the clouds as they reluctantly hauled themselves to their feet. He hastened to the spot where her night-shift lay, seized it and her cloak, stopping briefly to collect his shirt and pick up his damp britches and the boots where he’d flung them off.

He smiled to himself as he pulled on his boots. This night had not gone the way he’d expected and, for a few short hours, he’d avoided any thought of what he must prepare for this day.

“We must leave here today, Arya.”

She pulled her cloak around her. “I’ve already given thought tae that, Gilly. I ken I must leave Ardtun tae ensure the MacKinnons are nae caught up in the vengeance Anrias MacQuarrie is seeking. Today’s attack was a lesson. Nae one is safe while I bide here.” She lowered her eyes, her voice breaking in distress.

“Ye’ll nae be alone, sweet lass.” He took her hand in his. “Dinnae fash. I’ve nae mentioned anything tae the Blaine about the price on yer head. He believes the men were seeking me. I’ve told him I’ll leave today and he agreed that was the best solution fer now.” Briefly contemplating what was ahead for them, he sighed deeply. “I’ll be with ye. It’s me duty before God tae keep ye safe and I’ll nae resile from that.”

She sniffed back tears. “I’m nae asking it of ye, Gillebride MacThomas. I release ye from that vow.”

He laughed softly. “Truth tae tell lass, it’s nae only the vow that keeps me close tae ye, but other, deeper reasons that I have nae right tae disclose tae ye.”

She tilted head, “But...?”

“Nae lass. Mayhap one day I’ll tell ye me story, but this morning we must make our way back tae the lodge before our absence is discovered and all hell breaks loose.” He gave a wry chuckle, taking her hand and leading her along the path toward the lodge.

—
—
—

*M*y dear reader,

I apologize for the interruption...

But you just stumbled upon a SECRET GIFT!

And if you [download this book](#) for free, you'll get a ONCE ONLY opportunity to join my ARC group.

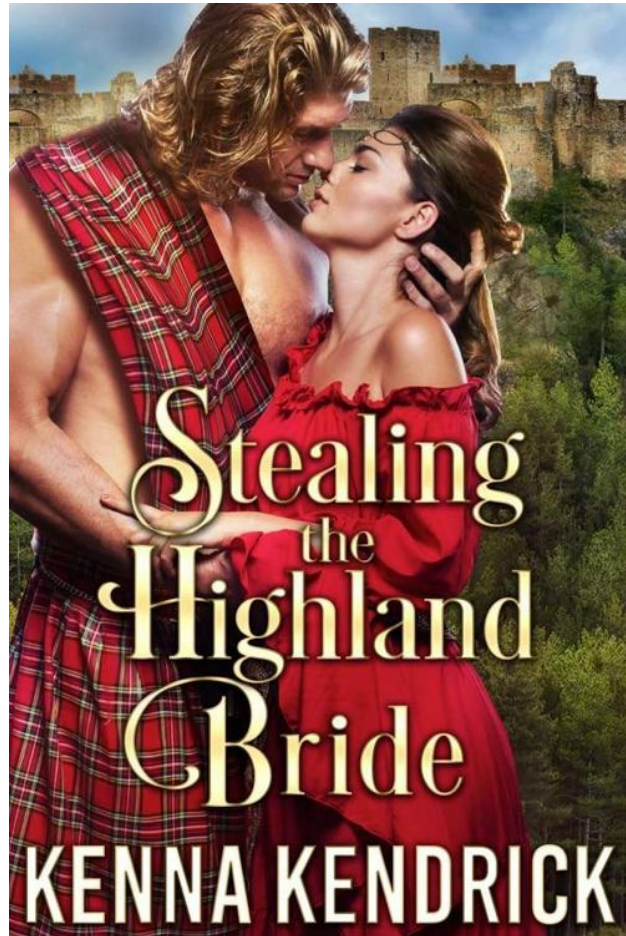
This means MORE GIFTS! Because you'll be getting books of mine and other authors of the genre one week ahead of release and for FREE.

The only thing you need to do is use the link below and download the book!

I'll reply in your inbox to let you know the details.

So, what do you think? Will you join me on this reading adventure? The clock is ticking...

Just [click on the link!](#)



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*A*fter only the briefest of time sleeping in her bedchamber, Arya was awake, her heart hammering at the prospect of what the day might have in store.

She and Gilly would be leaving together. They had agreed that after being told by Gilly that he was leaving, Arya had begged him to take her home tae Castle MacDonell. Whether Blaine would agree tae that was uncertain. There was the problem of her travelling alone with Gilly and his squire, unchaperoned, that had the potential to ruin her reputation and brand her at least, as unsuitable for polite company.

She cared not a fig for her reputation. What use was a good reputation for a lass if she was branded a murderess and strung high by the neck on a gibbet or burnt at the stake.

Still, with Blaine unaware of the true nature of the MacQuarries pursuit, he would more than likely be fussing at the prospect of her reputation in tatters.

She dressed quickly in a clean kirtle, underskirt and blouse. They had

planned to set off before midday, giving Gilly sufficient time to pack, arrange for a spare horse and alert his squire, young Colin MacIver, that they would be on the road and heading north as soon as they could make ready.

After break-fast she was ready to hurry out to the forest as she'd planned, for the arranged meeting with Eleonor and, on her return, she was already bracing herself, setting her mind to face a meeting with Blaine.

She ate a hasty bowl of porridge and honey, brushed her hair and braided it, before setting off along the path through the forest. Lost in her thoughts of what was in store for her later today, Arya was hoping against hope that Eleonor was not in some sort of trouble requiring her assistance.

The loch was shining in silver ripples in the bright morning sunshine and her heart leapt as the memories of last night with Gilly at the water's edge. Despite all the troubles assailing her, she kept last night tucked like a warm glow in her heart.

Well may Blaine fash over her reputation. What did the foolishness of a sullied honor matter to her when she'd already given her heart to Gillebride MacThomas? She knew with an abiding certainty that there'd never be any other man for her.

At the entrance to the lodge, she came upon Ivy and her daughters Mirin and Alba. The girls ran over and grabbed at her skirts.

"Och can we join ye in a walk in the woods," Mirin said, while her sister added, "The wildflowers are popping up everywhere. Please can we go and

pick some fer our chamber?”

Ivy laughed. “Ye must leave Arya in peace. None of us are leaving the lodge this morning. Yer father the laird has bid us tae say inside.”

Ignoring the girl’s pouts, she swiveled to Arya.

“Me apology if the twins are somewhat boisterous today. They are feeling very sad as Blaine has decreed, we are all tae bide in the lodge. ‘Tis nae longer safe here.”

Arya took a deep breath. “Oh, that is sad,” she said giving the wee girls a dejected, mouth turned-down- look in sympathy. Of course, Blaine would have seen at once there was danger after he’d heard of the MacQuarries attacking her and Gilly yesterday on the mountain. Now everyone was deprived of their pleasures.

Thank the Lord they dinnae realize it is all me fault.

“Come children,” Ivy said, leading the girls away from the doors. She turned to Arya. “Perhaps ye might like tae join us in the garden? The servants are packing and we’ll be away back tae the castle later today.”

Arya’s thoughts raced. How was she to go out to the forest and meet with Eleonor if Blaine had ordered them to stay at the lodge?

“Excuse me, Ivy,” she muttered, “I need tae return tae me bedchamber, I forgot something I need.” She smiled and headed back the way she’d come, leaving Ivy to take her daughters in the direction of the walled garden.

She waited out of sight for a few moments, then peeked out of the passage. They were gone. With no one in sight, Arya, hied up her skirts and hurried out the door and along the path to the meeting place in the forest.

It was not long before she came upon the clearing where they’d agreed to catch up.

Looking around she saw no tethered horse, but on peering further, she made out a flash of blue amongst the green of the surrounding trees. Only moments later Eleonor came into view, a smile breaking out on her face as she caught sight of Arya.

The two embraced. Arya holding Eleonor tight, remembering the terrible circumstances that had brought them together all those months ago.

When they broke apart, still smiling, Arya said, “I’m so happy tae see you are all right lass. I’ve been fearful of yer safety.” She looked Eleonor up and down, noting her amethyst eardrops and the fine velvet of her cloak. “Ye look well, has the world been treating ye kindly.”

Eleonor nodded excitedly. “I’m happy tae see ye also.”

Arya led her friend to a fallen log. “Let us sit here, I have little time tae chat

I'm afraid."

"Oh?" Eleonor arched one perfect dark brow questioningly.

"Aye. I'm leaving today. Hoping tae make me way back tae Castle MacDonell. 'Tis time I returned tae me own family.

Eleonor looked puzzled. "I thought... that is... I heard... that one of MacKinnon's men had taken ye tae safety from the tavern in *Baile Mòr*, and that ye were at Ardtun. Ye never told me yer name, so I assumed ye must be one of the MacKinnon clan.

Arya shook her head, wondering how it was that Eleonor had heard so much about her. Reminding herself that there were always many wagging tongues abroad and that information was always there for the telling, she quashed her misgivings. All the same, she held back on mentioning to Eleonor that she was a MacDonell.

It seemed her whereabouts were well known to the MacQuarries also. Gilly was right. It was not before time that she was leaving Ardtun.

"When I got yer message I was afeared ye were in trouble, Eleonor," Arya said, "Is all going well with ye? Does nae one suspect ye were near when Alasdair MacQuarrie met his fate?"

She glanced at Eleonor's fine clothes and jewelry and the thought flashed into her mind that there must be someone who had decked her out in all this

finery. Was Eleonor a courtesan, a rich man's toy? She'd often wondered what had passed between Eleonor and Alasdair that night that had made him so wild with rage that he was ready to take her life.

Eleonor shook her head, keeping tidy her hair coiffed in numerous tiny braids wrapped about her head.

Clearly, while there were many questions about Eleonor that remained unanswered, today there was no time for them. Arya rose to her feet. "I must return tae the lodge. We are forbidden tae walk in the forest fer fear the MacQuarries may be near." She looked closely at Eleonor, but the expected fearful reaction at the mention of the name MacQuarrie did not bring any reaction.

"Now that I ken ye're well and in nae danger Eleonor, I am content tae take me leave and wish ye well. I doubt we shall meet again, as I will be far away."

The two lassies hugged briefly and then Arya turned and walked back toward the lodge while Eleonor returned in the direction she'd come from.

For some reason, as Arya headed along the path, she had a feeling of disquiet. It struck her that Eleonor was not at all what she seemed, and moreover she didn't breathe a word about why she had sent Arya the letter.

She'd not gone far before she heard Gilly's voice ringing out through the trees.

“Arya, fer the love of God...” He came dashing toward her, frowning, his face twisted in concern. “What the devil are ye doing out here in the woods? There’s danger everywhere. Have ye lost yer mind?”

She took his arm. “Dinnae fash, Gilly. I’m sorry, I forgot tae tell ye I had arranged a meeting with Eleonor, she sent me a note. I had tae speak with her in case there was trouble and she had come tae warn me about the MacQuarries.”

“And...?” he asked.

Arya shrugged. “There was naught. It was as she said in the note she sent. She was visiting someone in the village and took the opportunity tae meet with me.” She said nothing to him about Eleonor’s fine clothes. The lass was certainly not dressed as a village lass.

He shook his head vehemently. “Regardless. Ye shouldna put yerself at risk. MacQuarrie’s men may well be lurking in these woods.”

She gave a gloomy nod. “I didnae think those bastards would dare come so close tae the house of the MacKinnons.”

Gilly huffed. “I’d put naught at all past those brutes. They havenae brains tae think. Vengeance is all they ken.”

Shivering, she clutched his arm tighter. “Am I tae meet with Blaine on me return tae the lodge? Ivy told me the servants are packing up now and they

are returning tae the castle post haste, fearing further attacks by the MacQuarries.”

He took the opportunity of putting his arm around her shoulders and giving her a quick squeeze. “Aye. Ye’ll be meeting with Blaine. But I’ve good news.”

Hunkering into his side, reveling in the stolen moment of closeness, she glanced up.

“Good news?”

His face lost its stern expression and his mouth widened in a grin. “It’s yer brothers, Taveon and Payton. They’ve arrived from their meeting with King Robert. Ye’ll be returning home with them. Hannah will be with us, and I’ll be riding with ye.”

She gasped, her face lighting up with amazement.

“I cannae believe it. They’ve come at exactly the right moment. Now Blaine will have nae objection at all tae me leaving. And ye’ll be able tae join me brothers as part of the protection that rides with us.” She clapped her hands and reached up to give his broad cheek a swift kiss.

He was smiling with her. “And there’ll be little risk from the MacQuarries as we travel. Yer brothers have a contingent of MacDonell warriors accompanying them who will defend ye tae the death should Anrias

MacQuarrie attempt tae take ye.”

Arya’s spirits were bubbling over as she walked with Gilly through the forest. The fears that had been dogging her since yesterday had been immediately dispelled by his wonderful news.

Returning to the lodge, hoping their short disappearance would be unobserved, luck was on their side. The arrival of Arya’s brothers had caused such an uproar that their absences went unnoticed in the throng of horses and men in the lodge courtyard.

Inside there was much hurrying to and fro as servants prepared for the MacKinnons’ departure.

Entering the great hall, Arya immediately caught sight of her brothers, along with Payton’s second in command, Chief Dugald MacDonell, seated at the long refectory table, deep in conversation with Blaine and Errol.

Hannah was there too, seated quietly beside Taveon, looking her sweetest in a dark blue and red striped kirtle in finest silk, her braids twisted over her head in the style of a married woman. Arya hurried over and took a seat beside the beaming Hannah who leaned over to give her a brief kiss on her cheek and brush a red curl behind her ear.

Arya wondered how joyous it must be for Hannah and Taveon to be in each other’s arms again after such a long absence and felt a tiny stab of envy. Could there ever be a time in her life when she would be at peace in her lover’s arms without the black cloud that hung suspended over her life like a

curse on any prospect of future happiness?

Dismissing such dark thoughts, she immersed herself in the rejoicing all around her. She took a deep breath. This was the greatest stroke of luck imaginable. She would soon be leaving Ardtun, sparing the MacKinnons from a possible war with the MacQuarrie clan. She'd be back in the lands of her own clan before too long where, if the luck held, she'd be safe. At least for the time being.

And, best of all, Gilly would be with her.

They dined on fish and oysters from the loch and quaffed mead and ale, before, replete, Payton turned to Blaine to thank him for the MacKinnons' hospitality.

"Ye've done us proud, MacKinnon," he said, dipping his head. "And I thank ye fer the safekeeping of me wee sister, Arya, over these past months."

Blaine smiled a response. "'Tis a pleasure. Ye sister is held very dear by all of us and I'm happy that me own sweet sister, Hannah, will be in such agreeable and pleasant company when she takes up her new life with yer family at Castle MacDonell."

Hannah squeezed Arya's hand under the table. "I'm so happy ye'll be coming with us," she said. Although she would be happily reunited with Taveon, Arya knew that Hannah would miss her own family. She hoped there would not be too much longer to wait before Hannah and Taveon were blessed with a family of their own. Something, she knew, Hannah had been longing for.

Now that the formalities were done with, and the MacDonells had confided their news of the royal court and the king's plans for battle against the English, it was not long before they Payton ordered them to be readied for their journey back to Castle MacDonell.

But not before arrangements were made for the remainder of Hannah's and Arya's belongings to be packed and brought from the Castle Ardtun without delay.

Arya's herb pots were to be packed along with her supply of seeds. Morag was to be given some of the seeds along with instructions for their preservation, and last but not least, Grimalkin would be placed in his own travelling box to make the long journey from Ardtun to Castle MacDonell.

Payton's vessels were at anchor at Ardtun and he was keen to be sailing while the tide favored them, so they bade their farewells to the lodge and the retinue took off with no further delay.

It was late in the day before every man, woman and horse including Arya's and Hannah's palfreys and the men's destriers, were loaded onto the cogs and *birlins* in the bay.

The tide was turning as the *birlin* holding Hannah and Arya slipped from its mooring into the deep water. The red and white sail was unfurled as the men laid their backs to the oars, and soon they were skimming past the headland on their way to the open sea.

Gilly came alongside the rail where they were standing, Hannah, teary eyed, watching the hills and the castle towers, lighted by the golden glow of the setting sun, growing smaller in the distance.

Arya couldn't help but but secretly wish that Hannah was not with them and she and Gilly could risk a few moments together and chance a kiss.

He ruffled Hannah's hair. "Dinnae fash, wee lass. Ye'll be able tae come here tae visit yer kin and there'll be nae keeping Ivy, Edina, and the other lasses from making the journey to Castle MacDonell tae keep ye company.

Hannah grinned, looking up at him with tear-stained eyes. "Aye, Gilly. But it is a hard thing all the same tae leave the ones ye love and travel tae other lands."

Arya clasped her friend's hand. "It is that, but mayhap it helps tae think ye're going home now, with the husband ye love, rather than leaving yer home."

"Och Arya," Hanna responded, squeezing her hand, "ye're right. When I look at things that way I can dry me eyes and look tae the north where me new home is waiting fer me."

Once they had passed the Island of Iona and the coastline of Mull was lost to view, Arya's heart grew full. The sturdy ship sailed on, unperturbed by the waves, the breeze filling the sails so that the men could rest on their oars. Against all odds, she'd made her escape. Instead of travelling alone, on horseback, risking her life among the bandits and perils of the wild lands, she was with Gilly, guarded by her brothers and their troops.

The MacQuarries would never know where that murdering, red-haired lass whose portrait was painted on the wanted poster in the tavern at *Baile Mòr*, had disappeared to.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gilly was never far away from Arya on the first part of their voyage that took them west at first, then around the Isle of Iona and across to the mainland. As darkness fell, the captain of their birlinn ordered the sails furled, the anchor lowered and Arya and Hannah, accompanied by Gilly, Taveon, Payton and Dugald, were rowed onto shore, where they would spend the night.

They found a small village a short walk inland. While there were only a few fishermen in the scattered cottages along the edge of the sea, there was a thriving tavern, already filled with travelers. When they entered there was a cheerful noisy atmosphere that was nothing like the fetid interior of the tavern at *Baile Mòr* she remembered. No one took any notice of them as the small party slipped inside.

The innkeeper, an old acquaintance of Gilly's, was quick to greet them, and before long they were arranged at a table by a roaring fire, with platters of his best cheeses, a roast chicken, salmon and sausages.

The night passed comfortably enough, with Hannah and Arya sharing a bed, while the innkeeper allocated another, smaller, bedchamber to the menfolk. While it seemed peaceful enough, Gilly ensured that a contingent of their

soldiers were on guard outside throughout the night.

When Arya glanced at him with worried brows, alarmed at the presence of the soldiers, he grinned and whispered, “Just making sure we keep ye safe.” Reassured, she returned his smile and breathed her own, quiet sigh of relief.

All the same, for Arya the night was troubled. She awoke once, gasping, convinced there was a dark shape in the corner of the room. She lay frozen, afraid of waking Hannah in her panic, until her eyes at last adjusted sufficiently to make out the large cupboard against the wall and allowing her ragged breathing to return to something like its usual rhythm and her heart beat to steady itself.

As dawn broke, they were up and dressed, hands and faces washed in the bowls of warm water the landlord provided, and they broke their fast with honeyed porridge. After leaving the inn, they pulled their woolen cloaks around them against the cold breeze blowing up from the sea and made their way back to the shore, where the captain waited to whisk them across to Payton’s birlinn.

The sight of the loch, shining silver and gold in the first light of morning with its backdrop of snow-capped mountains took Arya’s breath away and drew a series of admiring ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs’ from Hannah. Gilly was beside them, naming each of the distant mountains.

“There’s *Sgùrr Dhomhnull*,” he leaned close and pointed over her shoulder at the majestic peaks. “And *Garbh Bheinn*, the rough mountain. And there’s *Beinn Odhar*,”

“Beautiful,” she breathed, her heart racing at his closeness. “Ye ken them well?”

His eyes held a faraway expression as he turned to her. “Aye. Me home was once nae far from the shores of this loch and I passed by the shadows of those crags many times in me boyhood.”

“Ah, I would like tae hear stories of yer boyhood, Gilly.”

Hearing the catch in his throat as he spoke of his past, she ached to touch him, to kiss his lips again. But with Hannah only inches away and her brothers nearby, she curbed her impulse and, instead, smiled up at him, her eyes sparkling as she looked into his.

Hannah gave a squeal, diverting Arya’s attention to a small grouping of seals basking on rocks along the shore. They also glimpsed otters playing in the shallows and, here and there, a pod of dolphins following in their wake.

To their dismay, as the day wore, on the sunshine disappeared and dark clouds rolled in.

“I’m afraid we’re in fer a bit of a drenching,” the captain informed them unnecessarily, as they’d all been watching the ominous clouds gathering.

The rain came as a cold drizzle at first, the kind of misty wetness that went right through their clothes, chilling them to the bone. They sheltered as best they could under a small wooden shelf in the broad stern of the boat, but

when the heavy rain came on, lashed by a strident wind, they simply had no choice but to succumb to the predicted drenching.

Huddled together, shivering, under the makeshift shelter, Arya refused to let the weather cause her spirits to sink. With every stroke the oarsmen made and with every gust of wind in the sails she was further away from MacDonell territory and closer to the security of her home. Cold and wet, it made no difference to her slow-growing peace of mind

Gilly approached. “Are ye all right lass?”

She nodded, teeth chattering, rain dripping from her curls. His big presence always warmed her heart and she managed a smile at the sight of his burly figure.

It was almost nightfall by the time they reached their destination, thoroughly wet, cold and hungry.

While the others busied themselves unloading the goods from the birlinns and cogs, and taking the horses, pigs and crates of chickens ashore, Gilly guided Hannah and Arya along the shore and up a rocky path to a small inn, where they were at last able to take refuge.

Warming their icy hands by the fire and sipping a cup of warm mead, it was not long before they began to thaw. The innkeeper plied them with another jug of his excellent mead and when Payton and the others arrived, stomping their feet against the cold and spraying their dampness around as they pulled off their cloaks, the landlord provided a hearty steak and turnip pie which

they all tucked into with gusto.

But the day's journey was not yet over.

Hannah was tired and reluctant to travel further, and Taveon looked at her anxiously. Her eyelids were drooping and the dark crescents beneath her eyes were a stark contrast to her pallor.

“We’ve a distance tae travel yet, sweet one,” he said, “but it’s nae safe fer us tae bid here any longer than is necessary.”

He swiveled at the sound of Arya’s gasp of alarm. “Never fear, Arya, we’ll be on our way before we rouse any trouble.”

Gilly joined in. “We cannae bide here,” he said. “We’re too near the stronghold of Red Comyn, lass. The man’s a sworn enemy of King Robert. I spent time last summer at his castle in a bid tae persuade him tae the side of the true king. But he firmly believes that he himself is the man who should be King of Scotland, and he’ll stop at nothing tae achieve his aim.”

“And he well kens we’ve given our allegiance tae The Bruce. Although he tolerates us passing through his territory, if we linger his soldiers will be on our heels,” Taveon added. “Our hosts this night are our cousins the Camerons, Aymer and Euan, two more braw lads ye’d never find. They’ll have ye in a feather bed fer the night.”

Hannah nodded with a sigh. “I understand Taveon. In a few more moments

before this wee fire, I'll have me strength again.”

Arya took Hannah's cold hand and squeezed it. “We've nae much further tae go now. Our day's journey will soon be over.”

Warmed, and partially dry, with food in their bellies, they were ready to tackle the final few miles of their travels for that day. By the following day they expected to be in MacDonell territory once again.

The horses were waiting for them outside the inn, eager to stretch their legs again after having been confined for so long on board the ship. Once they were in the saddle, they followed a steep rutted path winding its way to a small castle strategically place at the crest of a hill. From here they had a perfect view of the loch, the mountains beyond and along the shores to the mouth of a nearby river.

As they neared the castle, two men mounted on fine grey horses galloped to meet them.

Their broad faces split with grins and they waved a cheerful greeting. “Halò” they cried as they came abreast reaching from their horses to embrace Taveon and Payton.

Payton indicated Gilly and the two lasses.

“May I present me sister Arya, Taveon's wee wifey Hannah MacKinnon, and our good friend Gillebride MacThomas.”

The first of the two Camerons dipped his head to the two lasses in acknowledgement. “I am the Laird, Aymer Cameron, and this is me brother, Euan,” he said, indicating the second man, who had the same broad shoulders and fiery red hair as Aymer.

“*Ciamar a tha thu?*” he said turning back to Payton. “Ye’re all well? Ye met with nae trouble on yer way here?”

“*Tha gu math, tapadh leat,*” acknowledged Payton, “we are all well and our voyage was pleasantly uneventful.”

Aymer looked relieved at that. “Good news then. I’ve heard rumblings there is tae be great conflict between The Bruce and Red Comyn.”

Payton nodded, growing serious. “I appreciate yer hospitality cousin, but we’ll leave ye at daybreak so as to make sure we dinnae cause any concern tae the Comyns with our presence here.”

They entered the castle keep to be greeted there by Aymer’s charming French wife, Adèle.

“I was sent tae France as a squire and came back five years later as a Laird, with a beautiful French wife,” Aymer said proudly.

Once they were introduced all round, the men departed to the study, while

petite and dark-haired Adèle escorted Arya and Hannah through the castle, pointing out the solar and inviting them to join her after supper. They continued up a grand stone staircase to the bedchamber the two of them would share for the night.

Arya marveled at the beauty of the castle. Although smaller than Castle Ardtun and her own home, Castle MacDonell, it was plastered and painted throughout with beautiful designs of flowers and patterns in an array of colors. The walls were hung with precious silk tapestries. French Arya surmised, gazing at the elaborate embroideries depicting scenes of troubadours and ladies and noble knights on horseback.

Adèle too, was dressed in silk, in a more elaborate gown than the usual tunics and kirtles Arya was used to. The lady was small in stature, slender, with long elegant arms. Her head was held high and she had an imperious look and a fine, long nose that heightened her haughty expression, which Arya put down to her French background. But her dark eyes, as black as currants, sparkled with warmth.

She guided them to their chamber, a large room with a carved oak four-poster bed at its center, surrounded by gilded and tasseled velvet drapes. A fur coverlet was thrown over the bed which was piled high with feather pillows covered in delicately embroidered soft pink and blue linen.

All of it was far grander than Castle MacDonell and even, in places, more elegant and richer than Castle Ardtun.

“Here is yer room,” Adele said in her French accent. “I hope ye will be comfortable. If ye desire it, I shall send up the maids from the kitchen after supper with hot water and a tub fer ye tae bathe in.”

Hannah smiled gratefully. “Oh yes, a bath would be truly wonderful after all our travels.”

“And when ye’re done, please give yer clothes tae the maid. She’ll see tae laundering and drying them overnight so ye have clean and dry dresses fer the rest of your journey.” She gestured to a stout wooden door in the outside wall. “The garderobe fer your convenience. There is water in the ewer and a bowl and cloths fer washing. Is there aught else ye require now?”

“Oh nae. This is wonderful,” Arya said looking around.

“When ye’re ready, mayhap ye could make yer way tae the solar so I may escort ye both tae take yer supper in the great hall.”

Once they were alone, Hannah yawned and rubbed her back. She flung herself on the sumptuous bed. “This is so comfortable, I wish I could lie here and nae bother with me supper.”

“If ye’re too tired, I can make your excuses fer ye and have the supper sent up.”

Hannah looked at her imploringly. “If ye could dae so, I’d be happy.”

Once Arya had relieved herself and washed up, refreshing herself with a splash of water on her face and a dab of sweet-scented rosewater, she left

Hannah half asleep on the giant bed and made her way downstairs to the solar.

“Of course, poor Hannah must be exhausted. The wee lass looked so tired,” Adèle said understandingly after Arya explained. Before they headed to the great hall for their supper, she left instructions for a meal to be taken up and for hot water for a bath to be prepared.

“The Highlands are nae place fer ladies tae travel,” she confided to Arya. “The roads are so rough and hours in the saddle leave us sore and bruised.”

Arya nodded, smiling to herself. She was well used to riding and she did not suffer for it. Her more delicate parts must have been made of sterner stuff than those of this winsome French lass.

She was seated beside Adèle in the hall for supper and Gilly was a distance away at the far end of the long oak table. She looked up at him longingly, admiring his strong profile and his glossy, midnight-dark hair, tied with a leather thong at his nape. Once or twice, she looked up to catch his gaze on her, and her heartbeat sprang alive alarmingly as she met his eyes.

They dined well on a series of dishes, baked salmon, rabbit stew, roasted wild boar from the nearby forest, all of it delicious and cooked with a variety of spices and flavors Arya was unfamiliar with. For dessert they were served raspberries and cream and a lavish French custard that Arya had never tasted before.

Once the meal was finished, Arya excused herself. After the last two days

spent curled in her cloak on the hard, creaking boards of Payton's birlinn, she was more than ready to lay her head on the soft pillows and curl up beneath the velvet drapes alongside Hannah.

Gilly rose to his feet as she left the table and accompanied her up the stairs.

"Are ye well, lass?" he whispered as they came to a halt outside her bedchamber, "Ye smell as sweet as any rose."

She chuckled, breathing in his special masculine scent of horses, leather and sweat. "And ye smell like a big brown bear."

"Me apologies melady," he said, looking at her with sooty eyes. "So I'm certain ye'd have nae wish tae grant a kiss tae this stinking beast."

She looked up at him through her long lashes, her heart hammering. Raising a hand, she stroked across his brow and down his cheek, her fingers lingering in the soft whiskers of his beard, and coming to rest on his perfectly formed lower lip.

"Ah. Mayhap I could force meself tae land a fleeting kiss on that fierce mouth," she said.

Capturing her in his arms, he made a muffled groan and lowered his lips to hers.

It was a kiss of desperation, filled with heartache and longing as well as joy and tenderness. They clung to each other for only a brief moment before they parted.

“Och dear Lord I want ye, lass. I dream of ye at night and thoughts of ye fill me days.” He groaned, whispering into her hair. She pressed her soft breasts tight against his chest and drew her hips closer, feeling his manhood growing hard against her thigh.

They stayed together, motionless, breathing heavily as each drank their fill of the other. Quivering with need, Arya sighed, reluctantly releasing him, pulling slowly away, out of his encircling arms.

“I want ye too Gilly. We must find some time tae be together when we are at the castle,” she whispered. “But now we must part before someone comes scurrying along this passageway and finds us together.”

He leaned in, brushing her lips with his one more time. “*Oidhche mhath mo chridhe*. Goodnight me sweetheart.”

She watched him walk away before swinging open the door of the bedchamber. Her heart was heavy as she tiptoed across the room to the sound of Hannah’s gentle snoring issuing from under the canopy of the great bed.

Gilly’s parting words flowed like warm honey through her veins.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*I*t was shortly before dawn the next morning when they gathered in the keep to bid the Camerons their farewells.

Arya seized Adèle in a quick hug, breathing in the fragrance of cinnamon and myrrh drifting in her dark hair. It seemed the very essence of French to Arya.

“Ye are me cousin, Madame Cameron. *Je suis contente d’avoir fait ta connaissance.*”

“And I am very happy tae have made yer acquaintance also Arya, *ma cousine petite.*”

Arya bent in a curtsy. “I thank ye fer the hospitality of your table and yer chambers. I dae hope ye will come visit us at Castle MacDonell sometime soon.”

A smiling Adèle nodded her agreement. “I look forward tae that very much.”

After retracing their path down the unsteady road leading from the castle, it was not long before they passed through the small village nearby and were heading east toward the glen that would lead them to Castle MacDonell.

Arya turned to Hannah riding beside her. “In the distance I see the first peaks of the mountains of me home. It is only now that I fully understand how much I have sorely missed it in me long months away.”

“I understand how much ye love yer own country,” Hannah said “I am sad at leaving Ardtun, but proud tae be the wife of Taveon MacDonell and longing tae make me home among yer braes and glens as much as ye were able tae dae when you bided with us at Ardtun.”

With a sigh, Arya leaned over and gave her friend’s hand a squeeze. “Ye’ll soon be at home here. Never forget, as Payton is nae yet wed, ye’ll be the mistress of Castle MacDonell.”

Hannah laughed at that. “I shall depend on ye tae help me with it all.”

“Never fear. We have the best housekeeper there is in Maggie. She’s always ready tae see tae whatever is required.”

Soon enough, all the tiredness and the aches and pains of the last days of travel faded as they rode into the wildflower strewn glen. Passing familiar landmarks – a crofter’s old cottage, the grove of pine trees , the burn snaking its way beside them, the chirruping of song birds, all of it so dear to her heart – Arya’s spirits lifted, her fears and worries slipping away, disappearing

among the puff of white clouds in the blue sky overhead.

Gilly brought his horse alongside and she turned to him with a broad, bright smile.

He grinned back. “Happy tae be in your own lands at last?”

She threw her head back and sucked in a deep breath of cool, clear air.

“It is truly sweet tae be here, Gilly,” she said, “And it’s sweeter still that ye’re riding beside me.”

“Aye, and ’tis me heart’s desire tae be by yer side, melody.”

Her heart quivered at the deep rumble of his voice beside her.

A rousing cheer went up at the first glimpse of the castle, standing proud and high on its crest in the far distance, majestically overlooking the glen and the village below.

Excitement rippled through the entire contingent of weary soldiers who, like Arya, had been absent from their home fires since they’d set off for the court of King Robert, not long after Christmas day.

When, at last, they trotted through the raised portcullis into the cobbled keep it was clear the word must have gone up from the sentries on the battlements that their party had been sighted. The MacDonell banner flying would have alerted the guards, and the word had been passed on.

All the servants were waiting for them, assembled in the keep. Maggie dashed forward as Arya and Hannah were being helped from their steeds, her face wreathed in smiles.

She hugged Arya fiercely. "It is such a joy tae see ye, child. Back at last, safe and sound." She turned to Hannah with a deep curtsy. "Welcome tae yer home, melody. We've all been waiting fer this day tae come, when our new mistress would join us again."

Hannah dipped her head. "I thank ye from the bottom of me heart, Maggie. I will be ever so grateful fer yer guidance and help as I take on me new duties."

"Ye'll find everything awaiting ye. The fires are lit, and the kitchen is preparing a feast fer this night. We've been making ready since the word reached us days ago that ye would soon be here," Maggie said. She looked around, surprised at the few belongings being unloaded from the pack horse. "Ye've brought very little with ye?"

Hannah shook her head. "We left very suddenly. Once Payton and Taveon arrived they bade we leave at once, giving us nay time tae pack. Never fear, Maggie, there is still a load tae follow us from Castle Ardtun. I anticipate it will be here within days.

They followed Maggie into the solar, where a hearty fire blazed in the hearth.

“One of the scullery maids will bring ye food and drink in a wee while,” said Maggie as reached for their cloaks.

Arya gave her another quick hug. “That will be wonderful, Maggie, I’m so hungry and I’m sure Hannah is too.”

Maggie looked at Hannah with some concern. “Ye’re looking pale, lass.”

Hannah settled herself in front of the fire in a big, padded leather chair. “I’ve been a trifle unwell these last days, Maggie, mayhap the cook could send some chicken broth as I fancy little else.”

Maggie nodded, “Aye, melady, I’ll see tae it.”

“I’d love a walk in me garden,” Arya said to Hannah. “Me legs are in sore need of stretching after being so confined these past days. Dae ye wish tae join me?”

Hannah shook her head. “I feel in need of a rest here by the fire. But ye must nae venture out tae the garden alone. Remember what happened last time?”

Crestfallen, Arya nodded. The attack on them by Sir William de Coughran’s as they walked in the garden, and the arrow that Hannah had taken in her stead, were still as sharp as ever in her mind.

“Mayhap Gilly would accompany ye. He’s bound tae protect ye so, even if he has nae interest in the spring flowers blooming, he has a duty tae walk with ye.”

Arya rolled her eyes as if this was the last thing she wanted.

“Why Hannah, of course.” She turned to Maggie, who was about to leave the solar. “Dear Maggie, could ye please send one of the servants tae find melord MacThomas? I think he’ll be with the laird, and most likely making sure the horses are taken care of.”

“Of course, Arya, I’ll send someone at once so that ye can take a turn in the garden without fear.”

Arya was seated before the fire, her pulse thrumming at the delightful prospect of a stroll in the garden with Gilly, when the door opened and he strode in, frowning, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

“Are ye all right meladies?” he enquired. “A boy came tae tell me I was needed urgently in the solar. It sounded dire.” He looked around at the two grinning faces and shook his head. “Ah. I see there is nae grim fate awaiting ye.” He bowed stiffly. “How can I be of service tae ye fine lassies?”

Arya reached out and threaded her arm through his. “I wish ye tae escort me tae the garden, melord. Me mistress Hannah assures me that it isnae safe fer me tae walk there alone.”

Gilly, having heard the story of how Hannah had been injured by an arrow meant for Arya, nodded, tucking her arm into his side. “Indeed, melody. Ye should nae be walking alone there or even in company with only melody Hannah, until we’ve consulted with the guards and ascertained there is nay danger lurking nearby.”

Leaving Hannah dozing by the fireside, Arya guided Gilly outside to the walled garden where she’d whiled away many happy hours tending to her favorite roses. Today the air held the fragrance of early roses in bloom and Arya breathed in their scent with a happy sigh.

She led Gilly to a wooden loveseat under an arbor where roses entwined around a timber arch. After plumping up the cushions, she invited him to sit.

“After ye, melord?” she said, smiling as he awkwardly lowered his brawny body onto the seat.

Without further ado, instead of taking her place beside him, she scrambled onto his knee, where she perched, wriggling to make herself fit comfortably on his lap and wound her arms around his neck.

Taken aback at first, he spluttered. “God’s blood, Arya, what are ye thinking. Dae ye wish yer brothers tae find us?”

“Och Gilly,” she said, laughing at his restraint. “Me brothers would never dream of coming into this garden. It is fer weans and lassies only. While ye men must wage war and plunder, we are busy here with our gentle arts,

accompanied by flowers and butterflies.” She wriggled closer, weaving her fingers in his long hair. “Now. We must nae waste our precious time. Dinnae protest. Just put yer arms around me.”

“Ye’re a bold lass,” he said, laughing. “But a bonny one. A poor wee lad such as meself is nae match fer yer wicked wiles.”

She chuckled. “Good. Now ye must dae as I tell ye.”

Despite her protestations, there was always a faint chance her brothers might come this way if they were searching for Gilly. However, it was a chance she was willing to take. She’d been lost with yearning to feel his arms around her ever since the night of their passion at the loch. No matter what her brothers might say, she had given her heart to Gilly and it was only in his arms that she could contemplate a life without nights filled with terror and dreams of a cruel and deadly fate.

Knowing what destiny could have in store for her should she fall into the hands of Anrias MacQuarrie emboldened her. She threw caution to the winds. There might be only one opportunity for a brief interlude with this man who had raised such a storm in her blood before the fates intervened and robbed her of any chance of happiness she might once have hoped for.

Her breathing heavy, her heart beating a crazy rhythm against her ribcage, she raised her face for his kiss.

All resistance gone, to her melting delight, he took her in his arms, crushing her firm breasts against his chest, feeling the rapid beat of her heart and her

soft sigh as he lowered his mouth to hers.

She was dizzy with the fragrance of the garden and the feel and taste of him. Then the garden, the world itself, disappeared leaving only Gilly. His breath the only sound she heard, the feel of his strong arms holding her, his touch on her and her hand brushing his chest the only things she felt. Her body was on fire, tingling, wet, desperate for him.

If only this kiss could last forever.

Without warning, he jolted his head back, leaving her gasping, her fingers curling in his hair.

“What is it Gilly?” She looked around, her heart racing, half-expecting to see one or both of her brothers approaching. But they were still alone. “What’s wrong?” she asked, suddenly fearful.

“Lass. I have tae ken something.”

She pulled her head back, her eyes seeking his. His face was serious, his eyes were dark as ever and his manhood was rock-hard against her thighs, but there was something in the way he lifted his head, that told this was not the time for any answer to him that was not heartfelt.

She nodded soberly. “What is it ye wish tae ken, Gilly?”

“Answer me true Arya. Dae ye only want me because ye’re afeared of meeting yer death at the hands of the MacQuarrie? Are ye toying with me because ye’re convinced nae man would want ye if they understood a price was on yer head?”

She took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He was asking a question she’d only dared skirt around in her own mind. If there were no price on her head, if she were in no need of protection, if she could choose any other man, would she still yearn for Gilly the way she did? Would she want him above all other men?

The answer came slowly but simply. “There’s nae doubting. Nae matter what, Gillebride MacThomas, ye’re the man who holds me heart.”

He moaned softly and buried his head in her hair, breathing tiny kisses against her curls.

“Och lass,” he said despairingly, “ye dinnae ken what ye’re saying. Ye ken aught about me. Yer brothers would never approve a match between us.”

She pshawed loudly. “If ye wish tae excuse yerself on the grounds that ye’re too old, I’ll nae accept that, Gilly.” Matches between men who’d lost their wives at even a great age were considered suitable husbands fer lasses much younger than she was.

“After all, ye’re nae a grizzled ancient of seven-score such as the old Laird of the Munroe clan who, I heard, is tae marry a lass of only sixteen years.”

He gave a sharp laugh, the light in his dark eyes fading to sadness, and shook his head.

“Nothing would stand in the way of us being wed if I had a fortune tae me name, or I was in possession of lands and property. Or even a penniless nobleman. But I’ve naught tae me name, save fer me sword and dirk and me years of service tae the MacKinnons.”

Gilly’s words took her to the edge of a deep, dark chasm. For her, the prospect of a wedding, a home that was hers to run, a family, weans, all this could never be more than a beautiful idea. For a brief time, she had allowed herself to dream of a future for herself with dear Gilly, but she was every bit as unsuitable a match as Gilly proclaimed himself to be.

How could I ever contemplate a life in which I am little more than an outlaw?

A woman with a price on her head could never be a suitable bride for even the lowliest crofter.

“The MacKinnons must recompense ye fer the half a lifetime of service ye’ve given them and the times ye’ve saved their lives. Can they nae grant ye some acres on the Isle of Mull?”

He laughed bitterly. “The lands belong tae the MacKinnon clan. They’re nae theirs tae give.”

She took his hand and pressed it to her lips. “And what of yer lands, Gilly?”

Ye've never told me where yer home was. All I ken it was somewhere far away in the mists of the Western Isles." She shrugged. "Fer all I ken, ye could be a wee *silkie* who's come ashore tae find his place among the human-kind."

"Arya, I ken ye're right. I owe it tae ye tae understand all there is tae ken about me. And I've nae told ye about me life before I took up with Blaine MacKinnon."

"Aye. Ye dae owe me a story and I wish with all me heart ye'd tell me."

"Ah, but once ye ken it, ye'll see I'm nae the man fer ye."

"Nonsense, ye're..." she stopped abruptly as the tranquility of the garden was broken by a voice calling her. It was Hannah.

"Where are ye, Arya?"

In a flash Arya was off Gilly's knee and they had both leaped to their feet, Gilly doing his best to hide the unmistakable bulge straining the front of his britches.

"We're here," Arya called, straightening her skirt and pushing a curl behind her ear.

Hannah scurried around the corner and hastened over to where they stood.

“Oh, there ye are,” she said, giving them both a slightly troubled, bemused look. “Payton came by looking fer Gilly.”

“Thank ye Hannah. Where will I find him?”

“He said he’d be in his study. The castle soldiers and the guard are with him to discuss what’s been happening while they’ve been away.”

Gilly strode off at once and Hannah turned to go. “Oh, and the kitchen maid brought a meal fer ye Arya, and it’s getting cold.”

A few minutes later, back in the solar, tucking into the soup and bannocks the kitchen had provided, Arya looked up to see Hannah studying her with an odd expression on her sweet features.

“There’s something between ye and Gilly. I can tell,” she muttered, offering Arya a sly smile.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Gilly was deep in thought as he made his way to Payton's study.

He had no idea what Blaine had told them about his so-called quarrel with the MacQuarries and the supposed reason for him leaving Ardtun. At least, for a short time, it was unlikely they would find their way here in pursuit of Arya but, given the likelihood there was a spy in the MacKinnon camp who was well aware of their comings and goings, it was only a matter of time before the word reached Anrias MacQuarrie that the lass he sought for the murder of his son was now residing with her family at MacDonell Castle.

Even if the spy didn't directly report Arya's whereabouts, it would not take much for Anrias to become aware that a party had departed Ardtun for the MacDonell clan lands. He would likely send scouts to seek her out.

For that matter, if he was certain Arya was here, the laird might even come himself with a troop of soldiers to capture her.

Gilly shuddered once more as his mind worked through all the possibilities.

He'd managed to keep her safe so far, but it was impossible to keep her under guard all hours of the day and night. Sooner or later their luck would run out. And, he had no doubt, once word reached Anrias MacQuarrie – as it inevitably would – that Arya was here, he'd come seeking her to punish her for his son's murder.

As he entered Payton's study, he was still toying with the idea of revealing Arya's story to her brothers. Unless they were aware of the danger facing their sister, they'd hardly be likely to take adequate steps to keep her safe. But it was her story to tell. She'd been able to avoid revealing anything to the MacKinnons and he could fully understand her reluctance. But now that she was relatively safe in her own home, things were different. He made up his mind to prevail on her to reveal the full story to her brothers and ask for their protection.

Payton welcomed him into his study and gestured toward a seat at the long table where roughly a dozen men were already seated. He nodded to Taveon and Dugald and took his place beside the others.

A tankard of ale was placed in front of him and he took a long draft before placing the half empty tankard on the table again.

Once Payton had introduced Gilly to the men seated around the table, he asked for the most senior man to rise and give an account of what had occurred during Payton's absence at the court of King Bruce.

With the departure for Castle Lochnell of Fyfe de Coughran following his brief confinement with the MacDonells, there'd been fear of reprisals from his father Sir William to avenge his son's captivity. The soldiers had carried out daily patrols around the castle, extending all the way to the bridge over

the river that marked the furthest southern reach of Clan MacDonell lands. There'd been no sign of de Coughran's men and, apart from the occasional tinker hoping to sell their wares at the castle or the nearby village, there had been no sign of any intruders from the south.

“Ah. This is good news.” Payton said, lifting his tankard. “I thank ye all fer yer vigilance. Once me lads have had a chance tae catch their breath and rest in the arms of their wives and lovers, they can return tae duty and relieve ye fer a few days from yer patrols and then we can resume our full strength.”

A cheer went up from the assembly and the men quaffed their ale and, laughing, hammered on the table with their tankards. The maids hurried in with ewers of ale to refill the empty vessels.

Blaine turned to Gilly. “What say ye. I ken ye are a highly valued member of Laird MacKinnon's guard. Should we grant the lads a day of freedom?”

Gilly gave them a smiling nod. “I've always believed that men are more likely tae have their wits about them and fight better when they've been given a day or two tae rest their tired bones and enjoy the comforts of their fireside and the arms of their lassies.”

Another cheer went up at his words and the men raised their tankards once more. A warm glow settled over Gilly at their approval. It was no small thing to gain the trust and approval of men at arms. Although this was only the first step, it boded well for his sojourn with Arya's brothers at Castle MacDonell.

As the men rose to take their leave, one giant of a man, bearded with long

yellow braids clad in a great kilt of the MacDonell plaid, leaned over and gave Gilly's shoulder a solid pat with his giant hand. "Magnus MacDonell at yer service. Good fer ye lad. I ken ye're a good leader. Our guard will be all the better fer having ye join us."

Gilly nodded. "Pleased tae meet ye Magnus MacDonell."

Once the soldiers had made their noisy departure, Payton gestured to his brother, Gilly and Dugald to join him in the armchairs in front of the fire.

He poured them each a dram of whisky and handed them around before settling into the comfortable chair.

Payton wasted no time. "What of the MacQuarries?" he asked, startling Gilly with his bluntness.

What in the devil's name had Blaine told Payton about the so-called quarrel between him and the MacQuarries?

"Aye. They're allies now, the MacQuarries have sworn their allegiance tae King Robert. Nonetheless, there's always been bad blood between them and the MacKinnons," he said, "Why dae ye enquire?"

"I had a few words with Blaine before we left Ardtun. He sang yer praises tae the sky, lad, never fear. But he confided there was some kind of quarrel between ye and one of Anrias MacQuarrie's advisors. He didnae ken what happened between ye, but it seems there's some kind of unresolved injury

that the MacQuarries wish tae avenge.” He turned to Gilly. “What of this quarrel, MacThomas? Is it something me men should ken? Are we likely tae have a visit from the blood lusting Macquarrie clan before long?”

Gilly took in a deep breath and blew it out. He was facing a dilemma. On one hand, if he downplayed the seriousness of the supposed quarrel the guards would not be aware of danger. On the other, if he alerted his hosts to the grave danger they may be facing without telling them about the price on Arya’s head, it would seem *he* was responsible for any reprisals they should guard against.

“Let me think on it,” he muttered. To his relief Payton nodded agreeably and waved his hand, dismissing the need for any further discussion. At least until tomorrow.

Gilly made up his mind. He must tell them about the danger Arya was facing and ensure the patrols were alert to any potential threat from the MacQuarries. He’d find a moment to catch her alone and ask her permission to reveal her darkest secret to her brothers.

“And I need tae thank ye Gillebride,” Payton was saying.

Gilly looked up. “Oh?” He grinned. If Payton wished to thank him that was a good sign.

“I owe ye a debt, fer the care ye’ve taken tae keep me wee sister safe.”

Taveon chimed in. “Hannah has told me how she always looked on ye as her big brother and how ye looked out fer her when she was only a wee slip of a lass. And it seems ye’ve done the same fer our wee sister Arya. We’re both very grateful.”

“Aye. Hannah is like a wee sister tae me, ’tis sure. I’m happy tae keep me eye on Arya and makes sure she bides safely, just as I did with Hannah.”

Payton went on. “The wee lass has begged us tae allow her tae go fishing. We used tae take her with us when she was younger, but we’ve little time tae spare nowadays. And...” he paused, looking sheepish.

“What me brother is asking, Gilly, is whether ye’d see fit tae escort Arya tomorrow. She’s keen tae catch us a salmon fer our supper. She asked if we could request ye tae escort her. And,” he flashed a rueful grin, “she’s insistent that she doesnae want Maggie with her tae chaperone.”

Gilly laughed. With her canny scheming she’d have known it was impossible to refuse the request if it came from her brothers. “It would be me pleasure tae accompany her,” he said, feeling a pang of guilt as neither Payton nor Taveon suspected that a chaperone would be a very good idea.

Little dae the MacDonell lads realize I dinnae view Arya as me wee sister.

By the time the men had finished their discussions, allocated duties and quaffed numerous ales and whiskies, it was supper time.

Gilly left the meeting well pleased. His years of battle-hardened experience as a warrior and his reputation as an expert swordsman and archer were acknowledged by both Payton and Taveon. They were keen for him to take on the training of the squires as he'd done at Ardtun, although it seemed to him that, at first, Dugald had been reluctant to share his responsibilities. But by the time they parted company his smiles were as warm as those of the MacDonell brothers'.

He looked into the solar on his way back to the great hall, but the chamber was empty. He guessed the lasses had retired early and were taking supper in their room. He'd considered Hannah was almost alarmingly pale when he'd seen her last and, although Arya was blooming, it had been a long journey from Ardtun.

By the time they'd all finished their supper he was looking forward to his bed. When, at long last, he stripped off, washed away the dust and sweat of the day, he was eager to close his eyes hoping sleep would come once he climbed into his bed in the new bedchamber Maggie had so kindly arranged for him.

He was ready to place his groaning body beneath the sheets when he heard a tap at his door.

Damn. Who was daring to disturb his rest? Had Payton recalled another task needed doing in the morning first thing that required his instructions at midnight?

He hauled on his cloak again and lumbered to the door scowling. If Payton was thinking he could call on him at this hour, unless it was a dire emergency and the castle was on fire or being attacked, he'd let him know in no

uncertain terms that this was something he didn't wish to see continue between them.

Payton might be the laird of the MacDonells but he was not the master of Gillebride MacThomas.

He flung open the door, the scowl vanishing at the sight of Arya standing before him.

She was smiling up at him. Her hair loose and tumbling across down her back, her eyes sparkling in the firelight and the thinnest silk night shift covering her body but impudently displaying every one of her luscious curves caused an instant tightening in his groin.

He groaned inwardly, shaking his head. "Arya, what in the name of all the saints in Christendom are ye thinking lass? Ye should be abed at this time of the night."

He glanced up and down the passage way as Arya stood there, jiggling from one foot to the other impatiently.

"If ye're worried someone might see me standing here, Gilly, I suggest ye invite me in tae sit by yer fireplace."

He huffed as she slipped past him into the chamber. "By God, lass, I should put ye over me knee and spank ye. If yer brothers find ye in me chamber there'll be the devil tae pay."

She gave an infuriating giggle. “Me brother Payton will be snoring in his bed by now, and Taveon will be lost in the arms of his beloved Hannah. I dinna think they’ll be bothering ye this night.”

He gestured to the second armchair at the hearth and seated himself in the larger of the two.

“Then ye may sit with me fer a few moments lass and tell me what mission it is that brings ye tae me chamber when ye too should be snoring into yer pillow.”

She tossed her head at that. “I dinnae snore, Gilly. Ye must have heard yer own snorting and snuffling in the night when ye were in me company.”

He laughed, his mind going back to the first night she’d spent in his arms when they were escaping from the MacQuarries on the Iona. That night, she’d whimpered with fear in her sleep.

“Aye lass,” he said gently. “I daresay ye’re right.”

Gilly pulled her toward him and slid her onto his lap and she wound her arms around his neck, tangling her fingers in his hair.

Her lips were close enough for him to feel her soft breath on his mouth and the temptation to take her in his arms and continue the kissing they’d started

this afternoon in the garden almost overwhelmed him.

Struggling to maintain his sanity, he lazed his elbows onto the padded arms of his chair.

“If I kiss ye now, lass, I’ll never be able tae let ye go. And tomorrow I’ll waken with me arms tight around ye.”

“And would that be so terrible, Gilly?”

He groaned, feeling his manhood hardening under his nightshift. He brushed a lock of hair back from her shoulder and the feel of her satiny skin under his fingers sent another lightning bolt through his shaft. He shifted, trying to keep his hardness from the plump bottom that was perching on his knee.

“Ye ken ye brothers are nae ready tae learn what there is between us,” he said. “They ken little of me, but I ken they already deem me as nae a fit match fer their precious wee sister. Ye must give us time tae find a way we can put things before them. But first, ye must confront them with the truth.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “Ye mean I must tell them there’s a price on me head.”

“Aye. They must understand the danger and we must all work out how tae keep ye safe. Mayhap yer brothers will have tae arrange a meeting with the MacQuarries and see if there are terms that might satisfy him.”

She issued a deep sigh clinging to him all the more tightly and laid her head on her chest.

“I understand. I dinnae wish tae cause trouble fer me brothers.” She looked up at him and he saw tears glistening in her eyes. “But ye ken the man. He’ll never give up on the vengeance he’s seeking fer what happened tae his son.”

Gilly nodded. “We’ve still tae learn why Alasdair MacQuarrie was threatening the life of yer friend Eleonor and yers when he came tae her assistance.”

She stared into the fire, blinking away the tears.

“But ye must seek yer own bed now me sweet Arya. I understand me duty fer tomorrow is tae escort ye tae the burn where ye intend tae fish fer salmon fer our supper.” He put his two hands on her waist, tenderly lifted her off his knee and placed her in front of him.

With the firelight behind her, the shift became altogether transparent, sparing no end to his torment as the vision of her body outlined under the soft silken folds seared itself into his brain.

She pouted prettily, making his heart thrum. “All right, Gilly. I will leave ye now. But dinnae forget, tomorrow we’ll be together, riding in the glen and by the burn. I will fill me dreams with thoughts of us together there.”

He pulled his cloak around him in an effort to disguise the outline of his

hardness jutting from the front of his nightshift and walked her to the door.

On tiptoe, she planted a brief kiss on his lips, turned on her heel, and with a short “I’ll see ye on the morrow,” was gone.

He watched her disappearing from view along the torchlit passageway, before he closed the door and made his way to his bed.

During the night he awoke sweating and gasping from tormenting dreams of a murderous and incessant fire that blazed around him while he stood, helpless, hearing screams. In the dream he was reaching for the hem of Arya’s nightshift but, try as desperately as he might, he was unable to pull it from the flames.

He swung his legs out of bed and stood, bracing his arms, breathing deeply, waiting for his heart to slow and take on its usual rhythm. He hauled on his cloak with shaking hands, poured himself a cup of water and sat by the glowing embers of his fire. How could he ever contemplate being with Arya? Even though, he knew by now she had captured his heart and he would always be hers.

CHAPTER TWENTY

She found him in the stables next morning as he was checking Bayard's hooves.

Turning to the groom, he handed him the great horse's reins before dismissing him, to then greet her where she stood, her lips drawn in an impatient line and a tiny frown drawing her brows together.

"Greetings, tae ye, melady," he said, taking in the mischievous twinkle in her blue eyes. "How can I be of service tae ye?"

"Why, melord," she said sweetly, the frown disappearing. "I understand ye are tae escort me tae the burn so I can catch some fish for our supper."

"Oh? Is that so? I ken nothing of this," he teased. She looked delectable in a blue shirt that matched her eyes, her hair tumbling over her shoulders. There was no one in sight. It would have been so easy to lean in and place a kiss on those lush lips of her.

She huffed. The frown was back.

“Gilly, ye mustnae tease me. Me brother Payton told me ye’d agreed tae me request.”

He scratched his head. “Why, I thought yer brother Payton asked me tae see tae the squires this morning.”

“Nay.” She stamped her foot, her frown deepening. He chortled silently. Was that a tear welling in the corner of her eye? He found it impossible to resist catching her in his arms and squeezing her to his chest.

“I’ll throw all me duties tae the wind and let ye take me tae the burn.”

She leaned in to him and he let his senses revel in her warmth and the delicate scent of roses drifting in her hair for a few seconds until she reared back and punched him fair on his bicep.

“Ye’re laughing. Ye big brute. Ye were teasing me all along,” she huffed with indignation. “I kent it.”

“I’ll take ye catching fishes if ye dae one thing fer me.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

“Go ask Maggie if she can find ye a freshly laundered pair of britches. Then I want ye tae pull them on over that pretty round bottom of yers. I’ll need tae feast me eyes while ye catch the poor wee fishies.”

She twirled in front of him, her skirt and petticoat flying out. “And then ye’ll take me?”

“By the time ye’ve dressed yerself, I’ll be here with yer mare ready and waiting tae ride.”

On tiptoe, she reached up to give him a tiny kiss on his lips, and was gone and racing across the keep before he could recover his breath.

He was ready with the horses, the fishing net, the lines and hooks, and the lures when she boldly paraded herself across the keep, in her britches. Still clad in the blue shirt but wearing a short woolen jacket over it. His fingers itched at the sight of her, wanting to cup that perfectly rounded derrière and kiss those smiling lips.

“Dinnae look so surprised,” she said, laughing as he gaped at her like a loon. “I’ve dressed like a squire many times tae ride out with me brothers. As ye ken, they often allowed me to join in their hunting and fishing.”

“But ye’re a lady now Arya,” Gilly said, half disapproving and half exhilarated by the sight of her. “Ye’ve grown up and left the days of yer boyhood behind.”

She sighed. “Aye. But those days will never be gone fer good.” She fixed him with a penetrating gaze. “Would ye nae permit me tae ride astride if I were wed with ye? Would ye insist I keep me hair constrained under a wimple and nets? Would ye insist I wear naught but kirtles and tunics and never permit me the comfort of britches?”

He laughed. “If I were wed with ye, I’d be longing tae ride with ye and see that curvaceous part of ye outlined so perfectly in yer britches. I’d wish tae see ye with that wild red mane streaming over yer shoulders.” He set his hands to help her into the saddle. “And I’d never withhold me permission from anything ye set yer heart’s desire on.” He looked at her with longing in his eyes at the thought of such a beautiful dream. “Within reason of course.”

Once they’d ridden through the portcullis and quit the castle grounds and were clear of the village, he let her take the lead and followed her along the glen to a point where a track veered off into a grassy woodland. Following the track they soon found themselves at a grassy clearing beside the burn.

The morning sun was streaming through the trees in bright shafts of silver and gold, the air was sweet, and the grass was a green carpet scattered with blue, white, pink and yellow wildflowers. The air rang with birdsong and the gentle sound of the waters of the stream burbling on its cheerful way.

He looked around, breathing in the crisp air. “This is a wee slice of paradise ye’ve brought me tae.”

She grinned across at him as her mare nibbled the grass. “This was always me favorite place. I’ve only been able tae come here on few occasions, never alone. Today, now, being here with you is very special tae me, Gilly.”

He dismounted and reached a hand to assist her off the little mare. As she slid to the ground she came alongside him, hesitating, close enough for him to feel the warmth of her body and feel her breath on his chest.

The rose scent of her perfume assailing his senses proved to be too much for his resolve and without thought, his arms came around her, holding her tight against him.

She sighed. "Ah Gilly," she whispered, raising her head, parting those lips in such a way that he could think of nothing but tasting and feasting on her mouth.

"A taste, melody. May I help meself tae a wee taste of yer sweet lips?" His voice came out hoarse, gravelly, almost a growl.

"Finally."

Stretching up she wound her arms around his neck and undid the leather thong that tied his hair at his nape. She ruffled her fingers through the glossy dark locks, placing her hands behind his head and without further ado, gently pulled his head down so that their lips could meet in a searing kiss.

He groaned, his manhood hardening against the pressure of her thighs. He stroked the hair back from her forehead and gazed into her eyes, seeing the blue of the sky reflected there.

"I want ye lass. Me body is yers tae play with as ye see fit."

She gave a delighted laugh. “And me body is yers Gilly. I want ye tae play and show how much pleasure ye can bring me.”

He laughed with her. “And, if we should be discovered here in the midst of our play, I daresay yer brothers would be happy tae each skewer me with his sword and his dirk.”

She put her fingers to his lips, “Shush that kind of talk. They’ll nae come here. I doubt if they would even ken where tae find this place.”

He tethered the horses nearby and found a pleasant, shady spot where they could spread their cloaks.

Sitting, he pulled her down beside her and they kissed again, rolling together in a wild tangle of legs, clutching each other. They drew apart to catch their breath and kicked off their boots, then he propped himself on one elbow and looked down on her where she lay. Her eyes were closed, her long dark lashes curling on her alabaster cheeks. He thought he’d burst with wanting her.

“If I’m tae grant yer wishes melody, and make ye moan with pleasure, I’d best be undoing these britches and taking them off ye, so I can take care of all parts of ye that need some attention.”

Squirming, she squealed, her breath hitching in her throat. “Aye, ye must... undo...” She gasped.

His fingers were already busy untying the string at her waist. He reefed on the pants and she lifted her hips slightly so he could pull them down over her legs and toss them aside. Then he pulled off his jacket and hauled off his shirt so he could feel her nakedness against his own.

“Now,” he said, laying a hand on her belly and bending to kiss her navel. He pushed up her shirt and chemise laying bare her rounded breasts with their pink nipples. He took his time to gaze at the sight, his manhood now painfully hard, confined in his britches.

But it was her pleasure he wished for and willed himself to let his own release wait until he’d all but satisfied her desire.

Only then would he find his own way to paradise.

He leaned over her and cupped her breast, tweaking the nipple between his thumb and finger. She shifted slightly, raising herself to meet his hand. He bent and took the hardened nipple into his mouth, suckling hard enough to force a tiny cry to escape her lips. He swirled his tongue around the nub while his hand sought her other breast, where he stroked and fingered it more softly so that she pushed against his hand.

“Harder,” she whispered, and he plied himself to rolling one rosy nub in his hand, while his mouth suckled and nipped the other.

It was not long before his ministrations caused her to wriggle her hips, opening her thighs, her knees falling apart revealing her glistening wet folds.

He kissed her again, her eager tongue meeting his as he went deeper. She grunted as his fingers trailed from her nipples, tracing a line to her navel and slowly slipping over her hip.

“Is this the kind of play ye had in mind, melody?” He whispered into their kiss as he cupped the mound between her thighs.

“Mmm... aye, something like it,” she managed. Now she was holding him, raising her hips to meet his hand.

He stroked his fingers through the damp curls. “Is this better?”

She groaned. “Getting close, Gilly, just a little further.”

He slid his finger softly at first, between her wetness, stroking, circling her hard little core. “Like this?”

She groaned, roiling her hips, pressing against his hand in a kind of desperation.

He slipped one finger insider her, and then another, stretching her.

When she was almost at breaking point, her breath coming hard and fast, her moans turning to cries, he pulled his hand away, and bending, took her folds

between his lips. His tongue laved her, licking, sucking, sliding up, down, circling her core. His tongue and then his fingers entered her as she cried out and thrashed against him, her head thrown back, eyes closed. Her cries were incoherent, sounding almost delirious as he drove her higher and higher still.

Then, she screamed his name, clutching him tight, raking the flesh of his back, biting at his shoulder, spasming against him, her walls tightening around his fingers.

They lay together while Arya gathered her wits and Gilly progressively lost his, the ache in his groin growingly steadily with each passing moment until his wanting registered as an impossible-to-ignore pain between his thighs.

Arya stretched a hand to run it over the straining bulge in his britches.

He groaned. "Lass... take care, there's a monster under yer gentle fingers. If ye let it free there's nae saying what it might dae tae ye."

She laughed. "I ken exactly what is under me fingers Gilly, and I fancy that monster inside me."

He shook his head, gritting his teeth against the touch of her fingers stroking up and down through the rough weave of his britches.

"Nae lass. 'Tis nae wise. Much as I'd enjoy spilling me seed inside ye. I dinna ken ye're safe here, even so close tae the castle. This is nae time fer me tae be losing me senses altogether."

She reached for the tie at the front of his britches and pulled it undone and spread the fabric releasing him.

The long, solid expanse of his shaft sprang free, and she wrapped her hand around its girth. When he groaned and did not protest or make any effort to take her hand away, she began stroking up and down the rocklike length of him.

He groaned again. But this time he closed his eyes, allowing the pleasure of his desire to flow over him like a stream of heated Spanish molasses. Her eyes were on him, dark and wicked.

“Ye played with me, Gillebride, now it’s me turn tae play with ye.”

Surrendering, he gave an almighty groan and lay back, his hands under his head, closing his eyes as she took him in her mouth, her lips closing softly around the tip of his hardness her tongue swirling and licking around the sensitive velvety skin, her fingers continuing their stroking.

“Lass, lass,” he muttered, lifting his hips to her rhythm. “Can ye... suck...?”

She plied her mouth to the task with gusto, suckling him in much the same way as he’d done with her.

“...harder...?” he managed, drawing in a series of rapid, deep breaths.

She increased the tempo, sucking, bringing him deeper into her mouth, her lips wrapping his tip, her hands wet and slippery, sliding to his hilt.

He stiffened, his balls tightening, as a wave of pleasure consumed him, blocking out the world.

The MacQuarries could have emerged from the woods, swords raised, shouting their war cry to the heavens and he'd not have given a gypsy's curse. He rammed himself against her mouth, vaguely registering her gasp as she increased her rhythm in time with his thrusting.

Then, in a rush of joyous release he came with an almighty roar. Spasming as she lifted her head, his seed spilling against his bare belly in a series of wild, jerking spasms that left him gasping like a beached cod.

Taking a deep slow breath, he opened his eyes. She raised her head, her cheeks flushing deep pink, her eyes dark, her lips quirked in a smile of utter triumph.

He couldn't help but chuckle. "Thank ye, lass."

"'Tis me pleasure milord," she muttered, giving him a cheeky smile that left him bedazzled.

They lay together in the afterglow of their lovemaking, Arya's head on his

shoulder, one of his hands toying with her bright curls, her fingers idling with the dark hairs scattered across his broad chest, only the steady chatter of the burn and the songbirds intruding in on their contented silence.

Lying so quiet and still in the balmy afternoon sunlight, Gilly wished he could find peace like this every day.

Arya's voice broke into his reverie, expressing the same thoughts aloud.

"I wish we could be like this always."

He laughed softly, rolling over and getting to his feet. "Aye. But methinks the world will nae permit us such rest."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gillebride gathered her clothes and handed them to her and, while Arya was dressing, he pulled on his shirt and fastened his britches. He watched her tucking in her shirt, regretting the need to cover their nakedness. But the knowledge that their joy could last for only a short time for fear of discovery chased away the foolish thought that they could find true peace here. He issued a sigh, loud enough for Arya to hear.

She gave him a penetrating look.

“Ye ken full well what haunts me, Gilly, but ye’ve said aught tae me of yer story. I’ve long wished tae hear why ye believe ye are nae fit tae wed with me.” She raised a finger to his lips, hushing him. “And I dinnae wish tae hear ye tell me ye’re an old man because ye’ve just proved tae me ye’re a red-blooded and vigorous, lusty man nae an ancient dried-up wretch.”

He smiled at her pleasing words. “I cannae argue with that when ye’ve seen the proof of it.”

She found a comfortable spot on the grass and sat, pulling her knees to her

chin. “Come sit beside me. He lowered his long body beside her, steeling himself for the story he knew he must tell her. If nothing else, she deserved to know the truth of him so she could understand better that he was not a man to wed.

She leaned against him. “So, can ye now reveal yer story tae me. I’ve seen the sadness in yer eyes and I ken fire plays a part in it.”

He grunted and closed his eyes. Immediately he saw flames rising up and the cruel memories threatened to take hold. His eyes snapped open and he shifted uneasily. Arya placed a hand on his knee, stroking gently, calming him.

“Ye said ye spent yer boyhood near the great loch. Was it a happy time fer ye? ‘Tis certainly a bonny place.”

“Aye, it is that.”

“So, what occurred that made ye leave yer own people and take up with the MacKinnons?”

“‘Tis a long story, lass. Are ye sure ye wish tae hear it?”

She grinned. “I’m more than ready fer a long story, Gilly. We’ve many hours tae while away in this bonny spot by the burn.”

He hauled in a deep breath, letting it out slowly as his mind retraced the years

back to his youth.

“Like so many, I lost me mother when I was but a wee lad. She had a fever and the healers could nae help her.”

Arya put her hand on his knee. “I hope that when I’ve fully learned the healing arts, I’ll be someone who can help save a life such as yer mother’s.”

He covered her hand with his, drawing comfort from her soft touch.

“After me mother was gone, I saw little of me father. Me nursemaid and the other women of the castle raised me as best they could. Me companions were the children of our servants and the village families. I trained as a squire when I was but a lad, learning swordsmanship when I was too small tae take the weapon in one hand.” He gave a short laugh, recalling the determination he’d had to master the skill even though he could barely hold the sword.

“And then?” she asked.

“Me father was a chief, an ambitious man. We belonged tae the MacKintosh clan in those days, and me father wished fer independence from the laird. He and the MacThomas clan moved away under the command of me father and settled in new lands.”

“It was only when he saw I was growing into a man that me father took notice of me. He wanted me tae take me place in the company of nobles, tae bend tae his will after all the years I’d been running wild. But I didnae wish

tae follow his demands.

“So ye fought with yer father?”

“Aye. We fought. But I grew bigger and stronger than he was, making it difficult fer him tae keep me under his fierce control. He didnae even ken, or care, that I’d lived me life separate tae his.”

She nodded, understanding what it was like to be neglected and unloved by a father who cared little about being a parent.

“He had nae idea that I’d taken up with a village lass and fancied meself in love. A young pup, wanting to sow his wild oats.”

“And the lass? What was her name?”

“She was called Beatie,” he said, biting his lip.

“Did Beatie love ye too?”

He shook his head. “I dinnae ken. We called it love, but now... I... see that love means something more than rutting and playing games.”

“Och?” she raised a quizzical eyebrow.

He cast her a doleful smile. “Aye. I’m a grown man now. I see the world – and love – very differently. I’ve come tae see it’s nae always possible tae have things turn out as ye wish. I see now, that what I thought of as love when I was that foolish lad, was more tae dae with defying me father’s wishes than true commitment.”

“And what happened?”

“There was a babe.”

She sucked in a breath. “Ye have a child?”

He shook his head. “I did, fer a short while. Beatie named her Claray. She was a wee black-haired lass, growing into a bold wee soul.”

Blinking away tears he let his memory play with the few scant memories he held.

“I confess I was nae much of a father. I went only once a week or so tae the cottage Beatie shared with her old mother. All the same, I did what I could tae care fer them all.” He dipped his head, angry with himself at the memory.

“I have nae excuse, save that I was a mere lad meself. Me father still held me reins, much as I tried tae free meself of his command. He held the purse strings too and I had little tae give me wee family, save fer me own

scavenging from me father's kitchen.

There was a long silence as Gilly's mind roamed over those long-ago times. Anger roiled in his belly at his own behavior and the hatred he still held toward his father.

"I hardly dare ask ye what happened tae Beatie and wee Claray," Arya whispered.

He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close. "Me father's plan was tae wed me tae the daughter of the Mackintosh. Consolidating his place with the powerful clans, making sure he could take his place at the high table simply because his son was wed tae a laird's lass."

"Och, Gilly," she muttered, "such a sad dilemma fer ye. What did ye dae?"

He huffed. "Ye'd guess by now that me father's plan did nae come tae pass. Tae thwart him, I wed Beatie in secret and told me father I couldnae wed the Mackintosh lass as I already had a wife." He shrugged; his lips held in a tight line."

"Och Lord, he must have been furious with ye."

"At first he laughed when I told him I'd wed the daughter of a crofter's widow. It was just a game tae him. He was unconcerned, thinking it would be an easy annulment with the priest on his side."

“But ye couldnae annul the marriage, could ye, with a wean between ye?”

Gilly shook his head, unwittingly clenching his fists. “When he learned about Claray, there was nae containing his rage at the way I’d foiled his plan. He lashed me with a whip, called his guards tae hold me down while he dealt me the cutting blows. Then he locked me in the castle dungeon.”

He buried his head in his hands. “Och Arya, I hate tae tell ye this story. I ken ye will think as badly of me as I dae meself. What he did still haunts me dreams and robs me of sleep.”

“The fire?”

“Aye. He was a demon in human form, me father. I hate tae think I sprang from such evil loins. He let me sit without food and water in his cursed dungeon fer two days and nights. Then he came tae me and laughed in me face, telling me tae run tae Beatie’s cottage fer it was set alight by his men.”

Arya groaned. “Och me God, Gilly,” tears coursed down her cheeks and she clutched his hand tightly, sharing his pain.

“I ran but I was too late. The flames were consuming the wee cottage by the time I got there. I head the screaming. It will stay with me forever.” He turned his head to her shoulder and buried it against her tumbling curls.

“Wee Claray would be almost yer age if she’d survived.” A sob escaped him and Arya squeezed his hand tighter.

“Ah. I see now what it was that drove ye from yer home all those years ago.”

“Aye. I was gone before the day was done, cursing me father intae the wind as I rode. I never set eyes on him again.”

“Was it then ye met up with MacKinnon?”

“Nae, I met Blaine MacKinnon some years later. But before that I put as much distance between me and me father as I could. I fled tae France and fought there. At first, I didnae care if I lived or died. Nae caring which French noble I was fighting fer. I was a young, reckless fool.” He shrugged. “’Tis a wonder that I survived when I so longed fer death. I threw meself into harm’s way so many times, always at the front of any battle, risking meself over and over again.”

“And when did ye meet MacKinnon?”

“I returned from France tae fight fer Wallace. Something in me had changed, and the cause of Scotland’s freedom was something I could, at last, believe in. It was then I met Blaine.” He smiled at the memory. “He saved me life and I saved his and we bonded as brothers from then on.”

“And ye found a family that ye could truly care for. One that cares fer ye.”

He nodded, the pain in his eyes softening. “Even so, Blaine kens little of me

story. Ye're the only soul I've ever told." He groaned. "Me shame was too great tae relate the tale before today."

He squeezed her hand. "There's great pain in revisiting the horror. But now I've told it tae ye I feel a load I've been carrying a long time has come off me shoulders.

She pondered this, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I am honored that ye trust me with such a tragic story, Gilly."

"I dae trust ye, lass," he said softly. "Just as ye've trusted me with yer own sad tale."

"I understand now why ye think ye're unsuitable tae wed. But, Gilly, ye must realize what happened was yer father's doing. Ye could never have kent he would take his revenge the way he did."

He took a deep breath, nodding slowly. "It haunts me, Arya."

"Just as me deed haunts me, Gilly," she said soberly.

"It's time ye unburdened yerself tae yer brothers, lass. Ye cannae keep yer secret now that ye're home. They deserve tae ken the truth so they can protect ye."

Sucking in a breath she puffed it out noisily. "Aye. I ken I must confess tae

Payton and Taveon. And tae Hannah also. You're right, it is wrong of me tae put all of us at risk. I'll make it me business tae tell them everything tomorrow. Thank ye fer helping me see that it is fer the best."

Gilly nodded, breathing a sigh of relief. He'd already made his mind up that, if Arya was not prepared to tell her brothers, he would be forced to reveal her story to them himself.

"I'm certain ye'll feel better once ye've shared your troubles with them."

"Ye and meself are more alike than ye ken."

"Nae lass. Ye're some kind of angel and I'm the spawn of the devil."

She gave a soft laugh. "I'm nae angel, Gilly, and I cannae understand where ye would get such a foolish idea from. And ye're nae devil. I ken yer a good man and I love ye with all me heart.'

He leaned in and planted a gentle kiss on her lips. It was nothing like their wild yearning of before. Her soft lips opened to him and he gained solace from the joining together of their mouths and tongues. Breathing in her scent of roses, feeling her soft body against his, there was a real sense for him of coming home. His heart hammered in his ribcage. She'd spoken of love but, for all he felt for her, he still couldn't bring himself to believe he was deserving of it

He reluctantly released her.

“Well, lass. We’ve dallied enough fer now. It’s time we did the task ye’ve set us. If we return tae the castle with an empty basket, yer brothers will be wondering how we’ve spent our afternoon.”

She flicked him a cheeky grin. “And that, we will never reveal.”

He smiled to himself as he walked back to his horse to collect the equipment he’d gathered for their fishing venture. They walked hand in hand to a grassy bank where they had a good view of the fast running, clear water.

“I trust ye’ll find enough salmon tae feed the castle this night,” he said cheerfully, as they set to work preparing the lines and the lures.

Arya kicked off her boots and rolled up her britches, wading into the burn up to her knees before she tossed out her line with an expertise that took Gilly by surprise.

“I see ye’re nae stranger tae fishing, lass.”

She shook her head. “I’ve been coming tae this very spot since I was a wee lass and me brothers had nay thought of chaperones, or such.” Laughing, she added, “I think they mistook me for a wee brother most of their time.”

He looked her up and down, grinning. “With or without yer britches, there’s nae mistaking ye’re a lass nowadays,” he said admiringly, “and a bonny one

at that.”

His grin broadened at the sight of the deep pink flushing her cheeks.

The afternoon wore on and the basket they'd brought was slowly filled with the silvery fish, each one of a size to feed ten men. By the time the basket was full and they were ready to go, the shadows were lengthening and the sun was creeping lower in the sky. Even so, it would be quite a while before darkness fell.

They walked their horses through the gloaming, content with each other's company, until they were within sight of the castle. Then they urged their mounts to a brisk pace.

As they approached the portcullis, he turned to her. “With every mouthful of me supper this night I'll be thinking of the magic we made together this afternoon.”

She favored him with a shy smile. “I will keep the memories of our time together beside the burn, in me heart forever,” she said. “And Gilly,” her voice was soft, “thank ye fer sharing yer story with me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Once they were inside the castle, Arya hurried to her room, while Gilly was tasked with carrying the heavy basket of fish to the kitchen. Cook took the haul with a broad grin on her face. She handed the basket to one of the kitchen hands.

“Take this outside and clean the fish. Give the guts over tae the dogs and any stray cats ye happen upon. Wash the stones clean and hasten back tae me.” She turned to Gilly with a look of satisfaction. “We all fancy poached salmon fer our supper. Ye?”

Gilly chuckled. “’Tis one of me favorites. And if it comes with a tasty sauce and some pickles ’tis a dish fit fer a king.”

He wandered off, his heart warmed after the day he’d spent with Arya. He’d not gone far when he almost collided with Chief Dugald who was striding toward the entrance to the great hall.

“Gilly,” the man said breathlessly. “Just the lad I’ve been searching fer. Where’ve ye been lad?”

“Did ye ferget? I was tasked with guarding the Lady Arya this day.”

“Oh, aye. Did slip me mind.”

“What’s the problem? Ye seem a wee bit out of sorts.”

“I’ll need tae meet with the Laird and with Taveon too.” He said, changing direction. “Mayhap we’ll find Payton in his study.”

The two headed off with brisk strides to the study, where, as luck would have it, they found both Taveon and Payton enjoying a dram of whisky by the fire.

Payton leaped to his feet as the two men hastened in. His welcoming smile faded as he took in the scowl on Dugald’s face.

“Can I ask ye what’s the problem, lad?”

Dugald took a deep breath, placing the rolled-up bundle he’d been carrying on the floor at his feet. “I’m seeking yer advice melord. Our guards have come back from a day’s scouting with a wee prisoner in tow.”

“Sit down,” Payton said, pouring them each a dram before regaining his seat.

“Now, ye can tell us what happened.”

“They spotted two men, not far from the bridge,” the chief began, “When the scouts rode toward them, intending to enquire their names and what they were doing entering MacDonell lands, the two lads rode off. One of them was too fast for our scouts and was across the bridge and along the road before they could catch him. But they caught up with the other lad before he made it to the bridge.”

“And?” Payton said calmly, taking a sip from his glass.

“Well, they brought the lad here when he couldn’t give them a satisfactory answer to why he was here. Told them some cock-and-bull story about chasing down a hare they fancied for their supper and hadnae noticed they’d crossed the bridge.”

Taveon pshawed. “A tall story, that. Impossible tae cross the narrow bridge without noticing ye were doing so.”

“And the upshot of all this?”

“They’ve brought the lad here and he’s been locked in the dungeon.”

Payton nodded. “And is there a problem wi’ that? We can let him go in the morning with a warning. He’ll be away with his tail between his legs and nae bother us again.”

“I think ye’d best chat tae him, milord. He’s threatening all kinds of mayhem. Swears he’s the youngest son of a laird and that keeping him prisoner will bring every kind of trouble down on our heads.”

Payton took some time thinking this over. “Dammit,” he said, finally. The last thing we need is trouble with another clan. Just when we’re doing everything, we can tae unite us all in the fight fer King Robert. Does he speak the truth? What is the name of this impudent lad?”

“He wouldna tell us his clan, swears he’ll only talk tae ye as the laird.”

At that, Payton huffed indignantly. “So, this young pup sees fit tae give orders tae us, does he? Fer that I’ll let him cool his heels overnight in the hospitality of our best dungeon room.”

There was a chuckle from Dugald. “Aye. Mayhap in the morning he’ll be ready tae tell us the truth.” He turned to Gilly. “I’d like ye tae join us tomorrow as we’ll take every man we can tae spread out across the clan lands. The lad we’ve captured would tell us nothing, but we cannae be certain he and his friend who escaped were the only ones in their party. I need tae be certain there are nae other miscreants lurking further along the glen.”

Gilly nodded. This talk of mysterious intruders was making him exceedingly uneasy.

“Have ye nae clue as tae who these lads could be?”

Dugald bent and picked up the bundle he'd placed on the floor. He unrolled it, displaying a plaid woolen cloak. "We took this from him. The tartan is foreign tae me." He glanced around. "Mayhap one of ye recognizes this? Gilly?" He held the cloak aloft.

Gilly froze. There was no doubting it. He recognized the plaid. It was the all too familiar ochre and green of the MacQuarries.

Payton must have caught the flicker of recognition in his eyes because he immediately asked, "What is it Gilly? Have ye seen this plaid before? I ken ye've traveled widely and met with many clan chiefs in yer quest tae rally support fer The Bruce. Is this one ye ken?"

Gilly nodded reluctantly. "Aye," he muttered. "There's nae mistaking those colors. It's the plaid belonging tae the MacQuarries. They're neighbours tae the MacKinnons on Mull and have lands on some of the other isles."

"Then, if their home is so far away, what in the devil's name are MacQuarrie lads doing here?"

Gilly hesitated, his thoughts racing. Arya had promised to reveal her story to Payton and Taveon tomorrow. It was her story to tell, yet now he was presented with a question he could answer, he wasn't prepared to lie to Payton.

Before he could reply, Payton shook his head. "Never mind. I'll quiz the lad first thing in the morning and get tae the truth of the matter."

Gilly spoke up. "One thing I can tell ye. He isnae the eldest son of the laird, Anrias MacQuarrie. The laird's eldest son, Alasdair, was murdered several months ago."

At his words the others exchanged looks.

"Was the murderer brought tae justice?" Payton asked.

When Gilly shook his head, Payton grew thoughtful. "Could these lads be the killers, running from justice?"

Groaning inwardly, Gilly shook his head. He was setting the stage for Arya's revelation. Now he must prevail on her to tell Payton the truth before he questioned the prisoner on the morrow. He should learn the truth from his own sister before he listened to whatever tale the lad would tell him.

"Thank ye, Gilly. I'll keep this in mind when I question the lad in the morning." He got to his feet, "Now I have another matter I wish tae discuss with ye." He strode across to the table and poured a few fingers of whisky into each glass and handed them around.

He settled himself comfortably back in his chair as they each took a sip of the golden liquid.

"I wish tae discuss an important matter with ye, concerning me sister," he said. "Taveon and I have been discussing it. It's time the lass was wed."

Gilly spluttered over the mouthful he was attempting to swallow. He wiped his sleeve across his beard and took another solid gulp of his whisky, his heart meeting his boots with an almighty thud. *Arya tae be married!* God's blood, this was something neither of them had contemplated.

Taveon went on. "We're searching fer an advantageous marriage. One that will hold a clan alliance of the greatest advantage fer the MacDonells. With yer recent travels, Gilly, ye'd have good knowledge of the clans and who among the chiefs and lairds is in need of a wife."

"What say ye, Gilly? In yer opinion is there anyone ye can name who'd be a suitable husband fer the lass?"

Gilly spluttered again, coughing. In his travels he'd come across quite a few aged chiefs who had lost a wife and would welcome a young lass tae warm their bed. These were men who were many, many years older than he was. *Yet I'd thought meself too old fer her.*

The prospect of those old men's bony hands on Arya's body made him shudder.

Once he'd pulled himself together, he cleared his throat. "Sweet Jesus, melords. Ye're talking of yer sister, Arya, as if she's naught but a cow and ye're seeking a prize breeding bull tae improve yer stock." His chest heaved. He couldn't sit quietly in such a discussion. *They were asking him tae help find a husband fer the lass he loved.*

Payton glanced at Gilly one eyebrow raised. "Ye're very vehement, lad. Isnae

this the way all marriages are arranged between the clans?”

Gilly gave a bitter laugh. His heart was thundering in his chest. “Aye. Mayhap in many cases marriage is nae a love match but a convenient way of forming advantage through alliances.” He swiveled to fix his gaze on Taveon. “But ye married the lass ye fell in love with, if I’m nae mistaken. Ye kidnapped yer bride. Hannah’s brothers would never have agreed fer ye two tae wed if they’d nae believed ye’d come tae love each other truly.”

Taveon nodded, favoring them with a wry smile. “Aye. But I daresay there’s nae one willing tae kidnap me sister who would fall in love with her.” He gave a short laugh. “Or fer that matter, that she’d come tae love. She’s got a fierce will of her own, as ye may have already kent.”

Gilly gritted his teeth. There was so much standing against the possibility of marriage between him and Arya, yet this talk of her marriage struck him like a blade to the heart. For all his own professions to her to find a better lad tae wed, he could *never* stand by and see her wed to another without speaking up.

She was his. He knew this in his heart.

“Aye, she has a fierce will there’s nae doubt of that. Why dae ye nae ask the lass herself what she wants. Mayhap there’s already a lad she fancies.”

Payton chuckled. “I cannae imagine Arya fancying any mere lad. She’s a lass who’d demand nothing short of a handsome prince, or an angel come tae earth. And she’s nae likely tae find one of those at Castle MacDonell.”

Something sharp pierced Gilly's heart. Could it never even occur to these two that their beloved wee sister could give her heart to a man such as himself?

Payton turned his attention to Gilly. "If ye can present me with a list of lads or ancients ye consider could make a suitable match with me sister, I'd appreciate it. She's already nineteen and could have been wed at sixteen." He shrugged. "But that was a difficult time fer us, with Taveon called tae dae the business of Sir William de Coughran and the entire estate groaning under the weight of me father's debts. Now that we've cleared what was owed and have made our allegiance tae the true king, a further alliance can be made with the wedding of our sister."

He issued a regretful sigh. "But ye're right Gilly. I'll first ask me sister fer her thoughts on the matter."

Payton rose to his feet. The subject was closed.

Gilly was a few paces behind the others as they made their way to the great hall. His mind was in turmoil. He must see and talk with Arya. Tonight.

He watched her as the supper was served. She was laughing, chatting to Hannah beside her, passing small dishes and bowls to the others as if she had not a care in the world.

Payton stood and raised his cup of mead. "Let us say our thanks fer this meal we sup on this night. We've already said our thanks to the good Lord above before we sat down to eat. But we owe this small feast tae me sister, Arya."

A rumble of ‘thank ye’ went around the assembly, and Arya smiled prettily, raising her own cup. She rose to her feet, her face flushed pink. “And I wish tae thank Gillebride MacThomas who stayed by me side at the burn this afternoon lending me his assistance.”

Laughing, the others all raised their cups, “Tae Gilly.”

Gilly looked up and caught Payton’s shrewd eye on him. He glanced again at Arya’s sparkling eyes and blushing cheeks, seeing them as Payton must have observed them. Did her brother suspect they were lovers?

Tomorrow Arya would relate her story. Payton would learn of all that had occurred when he believed his sister was safely ensconced with the sisters at Iona. He would hear of her bravery in defending the lass whose life was threatened by Alasdair MacQuarrie. And he’d learn how Arya courageously put herself in harm’s way, risking her own life into the bargain.

Next, he would learn how Gilly had come to her rescue when she was attacked in the tavern and how he’d brought her to a safe return to Ardtun.

And he’d learn that Gilly had vowed – on his own life – to keep Arya safe.

Once they had finished supper, the entire company, along with Dugald and Maggie, retreated to the solar. It was the first time they had all been together since the brothers’ return from their sojourn with King Robert, and they spent a pleasant hour together listening to tales of the King’s court and the journeys they’d made.

Gilly smiled grimly to himself. Little did the brothers know just what had been going on in their absence. That while they believed their sister was safely tucked away in the castle at Ardtun during their absence, she had become a hunted murderer with a price on her head. If his guess was right, it seemed that somehow the MacQuarries had learned she was here. Why else would the guards have discovered two clan members intruding into MacDonell territory?

And that made it all the more urgent for him to talk with Arya. He made up his mind to go to her chamber once the others were in their beds and tell her what he'd learned.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*A*s the rest of the evening progressed, and the conversations slowly wound their way to an end, he managed to catch Arya's attention at a moment when no one else had their eye on him. He mouthed the word "Later" and she gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Once the company had finally gone their separate ways for the night, he made his way to his bedchamber after noting that Arya had left shortly before he took his leave.

Instead of stripping and preparing for bed, he remained fully clothed. He chuckled to himself. If he was to creep along the passage to the chamber where Arya slept, he'd have a better chance of explaining himself if he someone should come upon him than he would if he were to be in his nightshift and robe.

He paced in front of the fire in his hearth. If Arya agreed with his plan, he would need to catch Payton before he went to the dungeon to speak to the prisoner. As he was required to ride with Chief Dugald and the other guards on their scouting trip, he would be leaving the castle at dawn and he'd not be available to join with her when she told her story to Payton and Taveon.

Judging that most of the castle would be fast asleep in their beds by now he ventured out into the passageway. Only one torch flared in its wall-sconce to light his way but the dim light suited his purposes. He had no interest in being discovered on his way to Arya's bedchamber.

Gillebride tapped gently on her door and she opened quickly. Once he was inside the room and she'd firmly closed the door behind him, she threw her arms around his neck and pulled his head down so her lips could meet his.

Holding her tight, he could not resist the invitation of her kiss but within seconds he'd pulled himself back. No matter what may come, he needed to alert her to the developments of this afternoon.

She gasped. "Nay kiss?" Her eyes were downcast and it was all he could do not to enfold her close against him and deepen the kiss. Instead, he took both her hands in his.

"Nay lass. It's nae fer nae wanting ye. I dae, with every part of me." He walked her across to the small fire that was glowing in the grate and gestured for her to sit. "But I have important messages I need tae impart tae ye and, if we should be interrupted, I must make certain ye ken what I learned this afternoon at the meeting I attended with yer brothers and Dugald."

She sucked in a breath. "Wha...What... is it Gilly? Ye look so glum. I thought ye were wanting us tae be together as we were at the burn this day."

He took the hard wooden chair next to her armchair. "I wish that was why I

was here, but I've news that cannae wait until morning."

Arya frowned, looking at him in dismay. "I ken this willnae be something I wish tae hear."

He huffed. "I daresay it willnae. But ye must hear it all the same."

"All right," she dipped her head. "Tell me what I must ken that I dinnae wish tae."

Where tae begin? He chose to begin at the beginning of his conversation with Payton. He gave her a brief outline of what he'd first heard. That there was a prisoner in the dungeon that Payton would interrogate in the morning.

She nodded, grasping his hand, looking up at him with troubled eyes. "It isnae good news that there are intruders. Mayhap Payton will learn more when he talks with them."

Giving him a tiny smile, she heaved her chest in a relieved sigh. "Is that all, Gilly? Ye have a grim cast tae yer eyes."

He shook his head. "I wish that were all there was tae tell ye. But Dugald had the man's cloak," he said slowly, finding it difficult to break the news to her. "It was the plaid belonging tae the MacQuarrie clan."

"Och, me dear God," she said, moaning, clutching her arms around herself.

“The MacQuarries have found me?”

“Aye lass. I believe they have tracked us here. I’ve given the matter a great deal of thought and I cannae fer the life of me think of any other reason why they’d be here, at such a great distance from their own lands.” He shook his head. “Our lands are at the end of the glen. There’s nae reason fer any horseman tae pass through here.”

She jumped to her feet and paced the room. “What can I dae?” she wailed.

He followed and put an arm around her shoulders. Guiding her back to the fire he took her chair and pulled her onto his knee, stroking her hair, murmuring to her.

“Ye must be calm and think about this carefully.” He still had not told her of Payton and Taveon’s plans to seek a husband for her and that, too, was weighing heavily on him. She curled up like a kitten, resting her head on his shoulder, still clutching his hand.

“And tomorrow, if ye’re correct, Payton will be told a story of a murderess and the tragic murder of the Laird’s son.”

“Aye, he will hear that and his mind will be clouded with that story. God alone kens what evil will be laid at yer door lass.”

The tears were pouring down her cheeks now and she turned her head into him, sobbing.

“Nae tears, lass. ‘Tis time fer us tae use our heads.”

She gave a shuddering half-sob. “I ken it. But what can I say tae Payton?”

“Ye’ve never told me the full story, only the final moments.”

“I can hardly bear tae revisit me story, Gilly. I see the man’s dead eyes and smell the blood and feel it sticky on me hands. It haunts me dreams. Whenever I let meself, I’m back there again and it’s happening all over again.”

He stroked her cheek tenderly, wiping away the tears. “I ken. It is the same fer me when I let in the memories of the fire that took the lives of Beatie and Claray that day. It’s like I’m there and it’s happening before me all over again.”

“What must I tell Payton?”

“Ye must tell him all the story. That ye were in the forest that night because ye were hoping tae return home. Then you heard the woman’s cries and the man’s shouts.”

“Aye,” she said, recalling that night. “There was something between them that had caused a quarrel.”

“But this was more than a lovers’ quarrel? The man – Alasdair MacQuarrie – was raging fit tae kill her. This lass, Eleonor whose life ye saved. What did she tell ye?”

Arya’s shoulders slumped. “Once we saw him lying there lifeless, we ran. We didnae speak other than fer me tae ask her name.”

He thought this through. “So, ye have nae idea what had made him so angry he was ready tae kill the lass. Had she been with another man? Had she stolen something from him? Had she injured him in some way?”

Arya moaned. “I’m such a fool. I have nae idea what caused the quarrel. I supposed they were lovers, but I dinnae ken what had brought them tae that terrible place, or what had put him in such a state of rage.”

Gilly nodded. “I believe we need tae ken the truth of it. If ye kent what was behind his anger, it might help ye.”

“How could that be?” she asked, shaking her head.

“If they kent what aroused such a killing rage, they might understand better that he intended tae kill her.”

She looked up, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. “Aye. Until now it has been me only defense, that he was ready tae kill, but it is me word only. Mayhap if I sent word tae the village of Ardtun that I wish tae meet with Eleonor again, we could get tae the bottom of her story.”

“Aye lass,” Gillebride said, hope flaring in his heart. “If yer brother is tae meet with Anrias MacQuarrie he needs tae ken the whole story.”

She slumped against him, and he felt her heart beating fast against his chest.

“There is something else, Arya.”

She groaned. “Nae more, please.”

He ran his fingers through his hair. She needed to hear of her brothers’ plans to find her a husband.

“Payton asked me tae make up a list of all the chiefs and lairds who were single men in need of a wife. They wish tae find ye a suitable husband, one that will make fer a strong alliance with the MacDonells.”

“Nay,” she shrieked. “Nay, never.” She looked at him to ascertain he was telling her the truth. “I cannae believe it. They want tae marry me off tae someone ancient who is without a wife? Or, just as bad, tae some lad who is still tied tae his mother’s apron strings?”

“Whatever they wish fer ye,” Gillebride said, giving a sharp laugh, “once Payton realizes there’s a price on yer head and ye’re wanted fer the murder of a clan chief’s son, yer suitability as a bride will be disappear in a puff of smoke. Alliance or nae.”

Arya laughed with him. “Well, mayhap there is a bright side tae being a murderess after all.”

He was shaking his head. “I wish I could be with ye when ye face Payton. Tae make sure ye tell him all yer story. Ye must make him understand the danger ye and this other lass were in.”

Lifting her chin, Arya shook her head. “Never fear, Gilly. I ken what ye’re saying and I will tell Payton everything. Even though I ken it will break his heart and crush his hopes fer a marriage that will increase his power and reach.”

It went rushing through Gillebride’s mind that he must tell her brother that he loved Arya. He was the son of a chief after all, even though he’d long ago disavowed any claim to the lands his father held. At least he was not low-born and, mayhap, even though he was haunted by the demons of his past, he could offer himself as a suitor for a lass with a price on her head. A lass whose heart had been torn apart by a deed that condemned her as a sinner.

But before he could offer for Arya’s hand, she must tell her story and he must honor his commitment to join the soldiers tomorrow under Chief Dugald’s command and search the glen in case the MacQuarries were lying in wait.

As he suspected they were.

Arya wove her arms around his neck and pressed her damp cheek against his.

“Now, Gillebride MacThomas, ye’re here in me bedchamber, and methinks we’d be amiss if we didnae take advantage of finding ourselves in this situation.”

He almost chuckled. “If ye’re suggesting we repeat our exertions of this afternoon, I’ll need tae remind ye that we’ve both tae be up with the sparrows come tomorrow. Have ye forgotten that I’m tae go with Chief Dugald and his men at first light, scouring the country fer any traces of the MacQuarries. And ye...” He reached up and gave her a small kiss on the tip of her nose. “Ye must make yer way tae Payton, before he has a chance tae speak with the MacQuarrie lad.”

She made a little moué of disappointment with her and his resistance fell away.

“Lass,” he muttered and issued a deep sigh. “I dinnae ken what ye dae tae me. Ye take away all me will. It’s impossible tae resist yer magic.” She was intoxicating him with her rose-scent, her soft curls against his face, her sweet lips so close and lush.

She giggled. “Then ye should kiss me Gillebride MacThomas. Make me forget all the troubles awaiting us tomorrow.”

She squirmed on his lap so that her firm breasts in her thin linen shirt were pressed close against him and he did as she bade him, bending his head to crush her delectable lips against his.

After the bliss of connection and the acute stirring in his loins he pulled apart from her.

“Nay lass,” he said, finding it difficult to breathe. “Much as me body bids me stay here with ye and let ye bend me tae yer wicked ways, I think it unwise.” They came apart. “If yer brothers should discover us together, it wouldnae go well fer us.”

Chest heaving, she sat back, hair in disarray, her eyes sparkling in the firelight. He groaned at the beguiling sight. “I dinnae wish tae arouse yer brothers’ ire at what there is between ye and meself before ye’ve even told them about the price on yer head.” He gave a sharp laugh picturing Payton’s expression if he found them together. “They’re still of a mind tae wed ye tae an old laird, so finding ye with me would likely drive Payton mad.”

She giggled at his words, and he couldn’t contain his own laughter.

“Ye’re right, Gilly. One shock at a time is quite enough fer Payton tae endure.” She got to her feet. “Ye must leave me. I dinnae wish tae risk driving me brothers tae madness.”

He stood, shaking his head. “Whether ye wish it or nae, Arya, I fear there will be madness in store when they learn the truth.”

She nodded and trailed him to the door looking up soulfully, into his eyes as he turned to bid her goodnight.

Her delicate rose-scent drifted around him, her hair floating over her shoulders and down her back and tiny ringlets outlining the oval of her face. Her beauty in the soft light bewitched him.

He was already hard, and resisting her was testing all of his willpower.

Standing on tiptoe she reached up. “A kiss goodnight, Gilly, surely that cannae dae us any harm?”

She pressed her soft, plush lips to his, her tongue flicking briefly across his lower lip. At her touch, it was as if a flash of pure lightning passed through him.

He groaned. He couldn't resist her wiles and, of course, she knew he was nothing more than a weak man who would succumb immediately at the touch and taste of her. Her fragrance filling his nostrils, his head spinning, his breath becoming increasingly difficult. He moaned.

“Och sweet Jesus, Arya MacDonell, I'm a weak helpless sinner, never repentant where ye're concerned.”

She laughed softly, pressing herself closer. “Aye, Gilly, and yer sin is me delight.”

Surrendering, he scooped her into his arms, lowering his head to meet her luscious mouth in a tortured kiss. He raised his head and kissed her neck, slipping the nightshift over the irresistible satin skin of her shoulders and

down to her waist.

He cupped her breasts, his mouth seeking her rosy nipple. It was hard and ready as he took it in like a starving man, so that his teeth scraped roughly against her sensitive tautness. She gave a sharp gasp, grinding her hips against him.

The nightshift slid to the floor and she stood naked before him, her hands playing with the fastening on his britches so that they gaped open and his manhood sprang free. She took it in her hand and pushed against him.

Lowering his hand he stroked lower, pressing her mound, his fingers seeking between the lushness of her folds, circling her hard nub.

By the saints, she was so wet and ready for him. It would take nothing to press her closer, lift her higher and plunge the hard length of him into that restless, swollen womanhood.

With a groan, he lifted her so that her legs circled his waist, opening her to him. Her fists closed tightly in his hair and she threw her head back.

“Gilly, take me. Now,” she commanded breathlessly.

He pressed her against the wall and, with an urgency that took him by surprise, he thrust inside her.

She cried out as he thrust higher, harder and faster still, holding the smooth globes of her buttocks in his two giant hands, his fingers digging into her flesh.

She made a rasping, guttural sound deep in her throat, driving his passion higher.

“Gilly... Gilly...” She gasped loudly and he pressed his mouth against hers to silence her. This was a wild kiss, teeth, tongues, lips. He was desperate to have all of her and more. Her response held the same danger and need.

Grunting, thrusting hard, he took her forcefully, hard and rough. All his restraint was gone and the passion roared inside him. Tomorrow he'd face the fates. Mayhap death awaited him, but his heart and his life belonged to Arya, and tonight was theirs.

She stiffened against him, and he felt her spasms as she came, howling and clawing at him like a wildcat.

All too soon he felt his own tightening, the inevitable building of fierce intensity from which there was no turning back. He bucked against her, growling and roaring, his hips jerking with each wild convulsion, sending his seed deep inside her.

Then, inch by inch, he returned from the heavens and slumped against her, holding her tight while she clutched her arms around his shoulders, his manhood slowly softening inside her. Gradually, their breathing slowed until he reluctantly slid her to the floor and fastened his britches.

She bent and collected her nightshift and pulled it over her head. She looked up, grinning.

His heart was soaring with love as he stepped to the doorway once again, to make his departure.

Beside him now, she reached up and planted a chaste kiss on his whiskery cheek. Her hair was an even wilder tangle than before, her eyes burning with the reflected firelight, her lips red and swollen from their kisses.

“Good night tae ye, me dearest Gilly. Think of me on the morrow, and ride safely.”

He could hardly bear to leave her, the taste of her still on his lips, but he smiled as he turned to go. “And ye, take care and keep yer wits about ye.”

Leaving Arya’s chamber, Gilly held his breath but, fortunately, there was no one in the passageway as he made his way back to his own bedchamber. He wished fervently he could be with her when she revealed her terrible story to Payton and the seriousness of her situation became clear.

How would her brothers deal with Anrias MacQuarrie? It was unthinkable that Arya should be handed over to the rough-justice of his clan. But surely risking war with the MacQuarries was the last option. There had to be another way. Negotiation? The payment of a bounty, perhaps?

At least, he told himself grimly, Arya's revelation meant that Payton and Taveon would be forced to give up their quest for a suitable husband for their sister.

So, where did that leave him? He knew only too well that what had passed between them must lead to their marriage. But all his old doubts about himself clung to him like thorny weeds.

All the same, he had no doubt he must approach the MacDonells and ask for the hand of the beautiful Arya MacDonell, no matter what a poor bargain that would turn out to be for her family. But, perhaps, once Payton learned her story, he might look kindly on Gillebride's request.

He tossed in his bed half the night, those thoughts giving him no peace. It was not long before dawn when he finally slept.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When he joined the other bleary-eyed horsemen clattering across the keep and through the portcullis, the dawn was nothing more than a pale grey streak across a dark sky. Gillebride was addled from lack of sleep, his mind still tangling with his fears for Arya and his hopes she'd be able to speak with Payton before he made his way to the dungeon to speak with the MacQuarrie lad.

Chief Dugald rode alongside. "One group will ride back toward the bridge, keeping a close eye fer any signs of intruders, crushed bracken, horse droppings, anything that would indicate there'd been men riding there."

Gillebride nodded, focusing his mind on the task in hand. He was the only one who had the faintest inkling of why the MacQuarries would be here, undercover in MacDonell land. It was normal practice and respected courtesy when entering lands belonging to another clan that respects would be paid to the laird and permission to peacefully cross his lands would be sought.

The very fact that the MacQuarrie men had crossed the bridge into MacDonell lands and then fled when they were first approached was in itself great cause for concern. These were not the actions of a friend as Payton, Taveon and Dugald were well aware.

They reined in their horses as Dugald selected the men who would ride south. “Fan out, check the woodlands near the bridge,” he instructed.

They watched the men ride off before turning to the north where they would trace the length of the glen and comb the forests that clad the peaks stretching as far as they could see.

Gillebride held little hope that there’d been anything to show. If there was a party of MacQuarrie warriors seeking Arya, he was certain Laird Anrias would have selected only his best warriors for the task.

War-hardened men well understood how to move with stealth. After all, their lives frequently depended on their ability to conceal themselves. They knew how to disappear into the forest, to merge unseen with the rocks and trees, keeping out of sight. But, eagle-eyes who knew what to look for could pick up the faint drift of smoke from the remains of a campfire, a footprint in the soft earth near a burn, an overhead broken branch. These were all signs there was a presence lurking somewhere, staying hidden.

As they commenced their ride north, Gillebride spoke again to Dugald. He had his own ideas of what the MacQuarries might do and where they may have concealed themselves, but he could say nothing as yet. After Payton had spoken with the prisoner and Arya had made her confession, the urgency of their search was likely to take them in a different direction.

“I’d like tae take two good men with me and explore the forests and the hills nearest the castle. If there are men hiding thereabouts fer whatever reason, it’s clear they have nae wish tae be seen by us.”

Dugald nodded. “Aye. But I dinnae ken ye’ll find anyone so near the castle or the village. If it’s poaching they have in mind, they’ll be seeking the best places fer a hunt. There are wild boar in the forests and deer in the glen. That’s where I’ll take the rest of the men.”

Gillebride hesitated, reluctant to argue with the chief. On the other hand, if there were MacQuarrie men here, they’d not likely be stalking deer or boar, but would have their sights on a human quarry. The red-haired lass with a price on her head.

He calculated that if there were such men here, they’d not be far from the castle. Mayhap waiting a chance tae attack, or to seize her if she were tae ride out. If they were sufficiently bold and determined, they might even attempt to enter the castle unseen and snatch her from under the noses of her brothers. The price on her head would be incentive enough for many men to risk such a bold move.

He sucked in a breath. Yesterday, when he’d laid with Arya by the burn, they may have had a narrow escape. He said a silent prayer of thanks that they’d made it safely back to the castle.

He nodded to Dugald. “Aye, it may well be an unlikely place tae flush out our quarry. But we dinnae ken why they are here trespassing on MacDonell country. They may well have their minds set on something other than poaching.”

“Ye mean an attack on the castle itself?”

Gillebride nodded. This brought a smile to Dugald's lips.

“Perhaps they've nae heard that Sir William de Coughran has already stripped the castle of any riches it once had. If the MacQuarries did invade, intent on looting, they'd find slim pickings indeed and likely take their leave, tails between their legs from the beatings they'd received at the hands of our men.”

When Gillebride did not respond, Dugald nodded. “But, I cannae with all conscience discount yer concerns. It would be more than me life's worth if the bastards attacked the castle and I'd nae let ye search.”

“Ye're a wise man,” was Gilly's only comment.

After Dugald's group had headed off along the rutted track that would lead them deeper into the glen and further from the castle, Gillebride turned into the almost invisible track leading to the burn that he and Arya had taken yesterday. While MacQuarrie's men were unlikely to be hunting bigger animals, they may have visited the burn to try for one of the plentiful salmon for their supper.

It came as no surprise, but brought a sinking feeling to his gut, when, after they'd not gone far, he spotted the telltale remains of a small fire close to the place he and Arya had occupied yesterday. Although dirt had been roughly kicked over the ash and embers, it still smoldered, and the faintest hint of smoke lingered in the air. He looked around and saw several places where the bracken had been broken, suggesting there'd been someone resting there. It looked as if had been flattened and then someone had attempted to straighten

it again.

Close to the burn he found a spot where the stones were smeared red. He guessed they'd caught their fish and gutted it here, then thrown the offal into the burn.

Once thing was clear, whoever had spent the night here was experienced at hiding their tracks. That suggested these miscreants were seasoned warriors. If he'd had any doubts about the intruders' evil intentions, seeing their efforts to remain unseen told him all he needed to know.

He and the two soldiers accompanying him, Callum and David, dismounted and drew their swords, crept through the surrounding woods, stopping every few paces to listen for any faint sound that could give away the presence of an enemy. Once they were satisfied that whoever had been here was now gone, they slowly retraced their steps back to the path, watching for any other signs of intrusion.

"Seems the bastards have spent the night by the burn, filled their bellies and taken off up the hill," Callum called, indicating a hoof print in the soft earth beside the track.

Gillebride followed Callum's pointing finger, his heart sinking. The path upward weaved through a steep, heavily wooded hillside where tall Scotch pines lay close beside the track. Anyone who made their way to the summit would be able to find a hundred hiding-places among rocky outcroppings, small caves, peaks and troughs where, unless they stood boldly, making themselves visible, they could stay concealed from discovery forever.

It seemed that stumbling upon the hiding place by sheer good luck, would be the only way they could hope to find someone intent on remaining concealed in this rugged place.

As they climbed higher Gillebride halted, finding a vantage point on a large outcropping that would provide him with a good view across the forest below and over the glen.

The three of them clambered up, Gillebride passing around his flask of water.

Callum took a swig, while David gulped a mouthful and pulled a disgusted face. “Nae ale?” he said, grinning.

In the distance Gillebride could make out Chief Dugald’s party. Some of them had stayed on the track, no doubt searching for any signs of the intruders, while others were fanning out among the woodlands that lined the path. Further along he saw the spread of the glen where it widened into grasslands where deer were grazing.

He saw no signs of another party’s presence. No thin spirals of smoke rising from a campfire and, no sign from the calmly grazing deer that they sensed the threat of hunters.

Either these MacQuarries were like ghosts, fading into nothingness when anyone came near, or they simply hadn’t gone in that direction. Eyeing Dugald’s fruitless progress into the glen, strengthened Gillebride’s fear that the men they hunted were not poachers but were rather seeking to capture Arya – or worse – and were hiding somewhere close to the castle.

He and his men continued up the hill, the sun high now, gathering heat. Observing the men sweating under their hauberks Gillebride was pleased he'd stayed with his leather jacket and trappings and not donned his armor.

Finding a shady spot, Gillebride reined them in. They quaffed the water, David eager to quench his thirst this time. To satisfy their growing hunger Gillebride handed them bannocks and cheese he'd carried with him from the kitchen.

They were only halfway up the hill, and above them was a rough crag. Along the side of the crag another path wound itself out of sight.

“What’s there? Dae either of ye lads ken?”

Callum nodded. “Aye. There was a crofter’s cottage further along. We went there often when I was a wean. Me mam used tae bring food tae they old pair that lived there. They kept a few goats and sheep as I recall. They grew healing and strewing herbs and exchanged them fer morsels of food. Some of the villagers claimed they were witches.”

“What became of the old folk?”

“They’ve been gone these many years,” Callum said, adding, “I daresay they passed away in peace. I dinnae ken.”

“So, the cottage is empty now?”

Callum nodded. "I've nae heard aught else."

Gillebride wheeled his horse, turning onto the second path. "All right. We'll soon find out."

They'd not progressed far along the rocky track when they came upon the old cottage. While the door was partly overgrown with vines and many of the stones were moss-covered, there was still a small clearing around it.

They dismounted, leaving their horses along the path and continued stealthily on foot. There was no sign of anyone as Gilly pushed open the creaking door and stepped inside. A few weeds had risen up through cracks in the hard earthen floor, but there was little to hint that the place had been occupied by anything other than squirrels and mice.

One wall had all but crumbled away, the stones piled in a heap in the corner, and the timbered roof under the thatch had come down in one spot, leaving still-damp traces where rain had poured in. Yet there remained enough sheltering space for several men to sleep there in preference to the forest.

Davie wandered around the tiny room, pausing at the fireplace.

"Someone lit a fire here, nae so long ago," he muttered.

Gillebride strode over. The hearth was cold, but there were the remains of an

unburnt log lying in the grate that looked freshly cut. He stooped to examine it, feeling the fresh sap in the cut. It was not much to go on, but it was enough to get his hackles up.

“I dinnae think there’s been a group of soldiers through here. Mayhap there was a wee traveller here or a poacher or two a few days ago.” He gave a short laugh. “Or even a courting couple from the village sneaking away fer their own delights.”

He made a mental note to keep his eye on the cottage. He’d make sure when they patrolled again tomorrow that he’d find his way up here.

Turning, he walked back to push through the old door. “Let’s go.” There was something about the place that made him uneasy. The feeling someone was watching him.

They continued back along the rough track and up to the crag. Again, Gillebride surveyed the surrounding country. There was nothing untoward, no birds were surging up from the woodland, disturbed. There were no sounds save for the breeze rustling the branches, the jingle-jangle of their horses’ bridles.

Still there was that uneasy feeling.

They separated on the way down, each taking a different route through the dense forest. It was slow going and by the time they met up again on the track below, it was close to dusk. It had been a long day and, save for the marks they’d found earlier, there had been no real sign that could pinpoint the

presence of intruders.

Nevertheless, Gillebride was convinced there were men waiting not far away waiting to seize an opportunity to make Arya their prisoner. And he was ready to give his life to prevent that from happening.

They made their way slowly back to the castle, veering off the main path at intervals to follow small tracks that opened up here and there but led nowhere, most likely made some time before by animals.

When his horse finally trotted through the portcullis and clattered across the cobbled keep, Gillebride was unsure whether he should be pleased or anxious at the result of their fruitless day's search. They'd found aught but a hoof print, a smoldering fire, and a fresh-cut log, but the questions still tormenting him were whether the MacQuarries were still out there, hiding securely, waiting for the right moment to pounce, or had they left the area altogether?

He feared they were still out there waiting for their opportunity. He could not believe Anrias MacQuarrie would come all this way, or send his men, risking clan warfare, for anything less than the capture of the lass he believed had cold-bloodedly killed his son.

He dismounted and handed over the reins of his horse to the groom. "Give him a good rub-down and an extra serving of oats," he commanded before he headed into the castle.

Now it was time to learn how Arya had fared when she related her story to her brothers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

*A*rya was awake before dawn and dressing hastily around the same time as Gillebride and the other troops were heading out on patrol.

She splashed her face with water and quickly brushed and combed her hair without taking the time to braid it as she usually did. Hastily dressing in a kirtle and tunic, she slid her feet into slippers and headed along the passageway and up the stairs to Payton's bedchamber.

Her stomach was churning. What was she going to tell him? Last night she'd made her mind up to start at the very beginning of her tale, when she was sent against her will to the sisters at Iona. It was a long story and she could only pray that Payton would grant her the time to tell it in full.

It was important, too, that he understood the part Gillebride had played in helping her to evade capture and bringing her safely back to Castle Ardtun.

Her heart skipped a beat at the memory of how he'd appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and risked his life to keep her from harm. She almost smiled as she recalled how she'd fought him, believing he planned to ravish her.

After knocking at Payton's door, she waited, smoothing her skirts and tucking loose strands of her bright hair behind her ears.

Nothing.

She knocked again, slightly louder this time.

Still nothing.

Och Lord, has he already gone tae the dungeon? Was she too late to put her story before him? She turned, flew along the corridor and headed down the stairs to the great hall.

To her relief she saw him breaking his fast with Taveon by his side. She guessed Hannah was still in her bed, as she'd been so tired of late.

Arya scuttled down the hall, registering the look of surprise in her brothers' eyes as they looked up and saw her hurrying toward them. She was slightly breathless, and her heart was pounding so hard against her ribcage as she stood before them, she half-expected they would hear it.

"Sit down lass, join us tae break yer fast," Taveon said mildly, just as a serving-maid appeared with a bowl of porridge, honey, and cream and placed it on the table in front of her.

Payton rose. "I'd like tae stay and sup with ye lass, but I have urgent business I must see to. I'm certain Taveon will keep ye amused in me stead."

"Nay. Nay." She jumped to her feet. "I must speak with ye."

Payton shook his head and went to step away from the table. "Apologies, sister, me business cannae wait."

She reached out and grabbed his sleeve. "Nay. 'Tis a matter of great importance I must discuss with ye. It has great bearing on the MacQuarrie man secured in our dungeon."

Payton shook his sleeve free, frowning. "Well. If ye insist it has bearing on our prisoner I cannae refuse ye. I'll bide a while in me study and see ye there when ye've finished yer porridge."

Arya glanced at the bowl and shook her head. "I've nay appetite, brother. I'll join ye in the study now."

"Is what ye're concerned with fer the ears of our brother?"

"Aye." She nodded. "I wish Taveon tae ken me story as well."

Taveon got to his feet, his face creasing in a frown. "I'll join you then," he said.

A scowling Payton strode out of the hall, Arya scurrying to keep up with him and Taveon bringing up the rear. Payton held the door of his study wide for them to enter and bade them be seated at his table.

Once they were settled, he wasted no time in addressing Arya, who was by this time sitting in trembling silence opposite.

“Well?” Payton said as he looked at her. “If ye’ve a story I’m tae hear, please speak sister. I have many things I must attend tae this day.”

“This concerns the MacQuarrie clan,” she began, nervously twisting her skirt between her fingers. “In particular, Anrias MacQuarrie.”

Both Payton and Taveon tilted their chins up at this. “Go on, lass.” Taveon, said, not unkindly. “Ye have our full attention.”

She started her story at the moment she had been banished from her home, when her life was put at risk by Sir William, and for her own safekeeping her brothers decided she should be sent to the protection of the sisters at the abbey on the Isle of Iona.

Payton tapped his fingers. It seemed to Arya that he had no wish to hear of her unhappiness there and her desire to return to her home. This was not a story that would bring him any pleasant thoughts. She straightened her shoulders and lengthened her spine. It was important she make them both understand.

“So, I made up me mind tae flee from what seemed tae me a prison.”

They nodded.

“Continue, lass,” Taveon muttered, encouraging her to continue.

She described how, after slipping out unseen from the Priory, she’d followed the path with the intention of reaching the small village of *Baile Mòr* and persuading a fisherman to take her across to Mull.

“I kent I’d find sanctuary there with the MacKinnons. I thought that once I was safe there, I could find me way home.”

Payton nodded. “Ye shouldnae have considered travelling alone. But it was a wise enough plan tae shelter with the MacKinnons.”

“But all me carefully laid plans fell apart when I heard the screams of a woman in fear fer her life.”

Taveon looked up. “A woman was being attacked in the woods by bandits?” She knew of Hannah’s attack and rescue by Taveon and wondered if that had entered his mind at her words.

Arya shook her head. “I didnae ken what was happening. It all happened very fast. One minute I was scurrying along the track, me thoughts intent on finding passaged across tae Mull and the next me blood was running cold

with fear at the screams of someone in terror for their life.”

Payton got to his feet and paced in front of the fire. “So, Arya, what did ye dae then?”

“I saw a man laying waste tae a woman, using his fists and his open palms, while she screamed in pain and pleaded for her life.”

Taveon drew in a sharp breath. “The bastard,” he exclaimed.

“And this lass? Did she have nae companions who could come tae her aid?”

“Nay. She was all alone and there were nae cottages anywhere in sight.”

Both men fell silent, breathing quietly, waiting for Arya to go on.

Tears were streaming down her face as she spoke, the terrible memories flooding back. “Then the man raised his dirk, threatening tae take her life. He was in such a rage I had nae doubt he was intent on killing her.” She shuddered.

Payton rubbed his hands by the fire, shaking his head.

When she told her brothers how she’d taken up a rock and struck the first

blow on the man's head, Payton grunted. "Good fer ye," he said softly.

"But then the man came at me with the dirk. He let go of the lass's arm and turned tae me with murder in his eye."

Both Payton and Taveon groaned.

"Sweet Jesus, sister. Why've ye never told us this story? I cannae believe ye were in such peril when we both believed we'd sent ye tae a place where ye'd be safe."

Payton leveled his gaze at her. "So, lass, how did ye escape the killing blow from this swine's dirk?"

Sobbing, she managed to blurt out the truth. "I dodged the blow and rose up tae strike him a blow on his temple."

"And?" Taveon asked, and passed her one of his kerchiefs so she could dab at the tears rushing down her cheeks.

She drew in a long, deep breath, releasing it slowly. "I killed him."

Payton took her in his arms while Taveon stroked her hair and wiped her eyes.

“Arya, dinnae regret that. Ye saved two lives from this scum.”

Now she was sobbing and couldn't stop. They waited until bit by bit she brought herself back. Payton poured a measure of whisky into a cup and handed it to her.

“’Tis early in the day fer a dram, but take a mouthful or two tae steady ye.”

She gulped the whisky, gasping as it burnt her throat as she swallowed. But the fiery liquid running through her veins restored her courage and she was able to tell them how she'd made her way back to the abbey and how the abbess, recognizing the scrap of tartan fabric as the tartan of the MacQuarries and the brooch caught on her kirtle, had helped her by returning the gold brooch to the MacQuarries.

Both men breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“Say ye're safe, lass, the nuns would never disclose yer identity tae the MacQuarries.”

She ground her teeth. “I wish with all me heart it were so, Payton.” she muttered, shaking her head. “Save fer the man's dead eyes haunting me nightmares, I believed I had been saved from retribution, but it wasnae tae be.”

“So, there's more tae this tale yet tae be told?”

“Aye,” she said, lowering her eyes, her hands clenched tight in her lap.

They all returned to their seats and Payton poured another splash of whisky into her now empty cup and poured a wee dram for both himself and Taveon.

She sipped some more of the whisky and gained the strength to continue her story, relating of the message that had come many months later from Eleonor and how she’d gone from Ardtun to Iona to meet her in the tavern at *Baile Mòr*.

Taveon gave a horrified splutter. “God’s blood, sister, did ye nae understand ye were venturing into one of the most evil places in all Scotland?”

She shook her head. “Nae, I didnae ken that. Until...” She related what had occurred when she arrived at the tavern, how she’d seen herself on the poster with a price on her head, and when she tried to dash out of the inn, she’d gained the attention of a group of cutthroats seated there.

“The men who had me would surely have ravished me if Gilly hadnae come tae me rescue at that moment.”

“*Gilly* rescued ye?” her brothers said in unison.

“What in the name of the little-green-man was Gillebride MacThomas doing at that nest of ruffians in *Baile Mòr*?” Payton asked.

“He was there at the request of Blaine MacKinnon, meeting one of MacQuarrie’s men tae discuss the clan’s alliance with the MacKinnons.”

“And when these men grabbed ye, *Gilly* fought them off?” Both her brothers were leaning forward, looking horrified, but eager to hear the rest of her story.

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears at the memory. “I thank the Lord he was there by chance that night. He fought off all three at great risk tae himself and carried me upstairs. I was sore afeared, mind ye, and when *Gilly* rescued me, I fought him too, thinking he was another intending rape. But I soon discovered he was there tae save me from harm.”

“Ye never said... We never kent that *Gilly* had put his life at risk fer ye.”

She shook her head. “He risked it again that night when we fled from the inn with MacQuarrie men in hot pursuit. He found a tiny cave and watched over me in the night when I slept. The next day his boatman took us from the west of Iona back tae Ardtun.”

Payton was shaking his head. “And what did Blaine say about the situation?”

“We never told them what had happened. I was too afraid, and *Gilly* did as I asked and lied about it being all his fault when Blaine understood there were issues with the MacQuarries. I thought I was safe, and that there was no one who kent me name.”

“Someone betrayed ye, sister,” Payton said, his eyes flashing with anger.

Taveon went tae the table and filled a cup with water from the ewer and brought it to her. “Drink this, Arya,” he said, passing her the cup. “When he first saved ye, did Gilly ken ye were wanted by the MacQuarries?”

“Aye,” she paused, gulping the water. “He’d seen the poster and recognized me. But he’d learned more from the man he was meeting.” This was the hardest part of the telling so far and she hesitated before she could let out the words.

“It was only then that I learned the man I’d killed was Alasdair MacQuarrie. The son and heir of the Laird, Anrias MacQuarrie.”

Taveon groaned and slapped a hand against his forehead, while Payton turned to stare into the fire.

He turned back to Arya, scowling. “So, sister, now I ken why the MacQuarries are trespassing on our lands. Somehow, they’ve found ye’re here, and they’ve come fer ye. With a price on yer head there’ll be many lads eager tae win the prize and take ye back fer Anrias tae deal out his punishment.”

Arya shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself, her tears flowing freely. “And I ken there is only one possible punishment Anrias MacQuarrie will countenance. That will be me death. The only doubt is how he plans tae carry it out.” Her breath hitched in her throat and bitter bile rose up as a heavy sickness roiled over her.

Taveon moved over to place a strong arm at her shoulder.

“Dinne fash, sister, ye’re safe here now.”

“Aye,” Payton said, his face set in tight, grim lines. “We’ll keep ye safe, dinnae worry. We’ll never let anyone dae ye any harm.” He gestured to the big chair by the fire. “Sit down lass, ye’re white as a winter snow and swaying on yer feet, I’m afraid ye’ll pass out.”

Taveon helped her to the seat.

“There’s something more I should tell ye.”

Payton ran long fingers through his dark hair. “God’s blood, what more have ye tae tell?”

Arya looked up, wiped her eyes and sniffled. “There’s nae old laird or young warrior who’d have me as a bride, nae when I’m hunted as a murderess.” She looked up, studying their puzzled faces. “Ye ken what I’m saying?”

The brothers exchanged glances and Payton shook his head and gave a deep sigh. “Ye’re right lass. There will be nae lad willing tae wed ye now kenning they might get entangled in the feud with the MacQuarries.”

“And that suits me very well, as I’ve nae wish tae wed any of them,” she said, sparking up. “And besides,” a faint smile quirked her lips, “there’s only one man I’ll ever give me heart to.”

Her brothers waited, saying nothing, frowns creasing their foreheads. She found it impossible to gauge whether she had their sympathies, and whether they would approve of what she was bound to tell them.

“I’m in love with Gillebride MacThomas.”

Payton nodded slowly. “I ken little of him other than he has the trust of the Laird of the MacKinnons and he is renowned as a great warrior.” He turned to Arya. “Does Gillebride wish tae wed ye, lass? Does he return your feelings?”

She shook her head. “I dinnae ken. I ken only me own heart.”

A silence fell over the room and Arya held her breath. She’d given her brothers a great deal tae think about and, no doubt it would take some time for them to grapple with her revelations.

“I wish tae take me leave,” she said, breaking the silence.

“Aye sister, ye’ve given us much to discuss. Leave us now. When Gilly returns from patrolling this evening we’ll talk further with him,” Payton said quietly and kissed her on the brow before moving to sit behind his desk.

It was clear to Arya that her brothers would at least allow the possibility of Gillebride as a match for her. Whether Gilly would consider, was an altogether different matter.

She curtseyed to her brothers, leaving them by the fire and continued on her way to the solar in search of Hannah.

Now that the story was out, she needed to speak with her dear friend and unburden her heart to her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*H*annah was in the solar, busy with embroidery and stitching her linen with colourful flowers on a background of tall green pine trees. She looked up with a smile when Arya walked in.

“I was looking fer you earlier,” she said. “I was in the rose garden filling me basket and I thought you’d enjoy it.”

“Ah, I would have loved that,” Arya said, sinking into a chair next to her. Her own embroidery hoop and silks were on a little table next to the chair but she had no mind for such a gentle pursuit with her heart in such turmoil.

“I had tae talk with Payton and Taveon.”

“But so early?” Hannah gave a surprised chuckle.

“I needed tae talk with Payton before he saw the prisoner.” Her stomach was still churning from the morning’s conversation with her brothers. Much as she wished she could put it all behind her, she owed it to Hannah to hear the

full story from her lips, not second-hand via Taveon.

Hannah nodded vaguely, her interest seeming to be elsewhere. Arya thought this over. Of course, a prisoner waiting to be interrogated was not something that would likely capture her interest.

“I had a long and terrible story tae tell Payton and Taveon, Hannah, and now I wish tae tell you much the same.”

At that, Hannah sat up straight in her chair, leaning forward. She placed her embroidery on the table and fixed her gaze on Arya.

“Ye must tell me what ails ye, Arya. Pull your chair closer.” Reaching over as Arya shuffled close, she took Arya’s hand and held it in hers.

“Yer hands are so cold. I fear telling yer story tae yer brothers has taken a toll.”

Arya nodded, miserably. “It is nae easy me dear sister, but I must tell it.”

While Hannah sat, all ears, she began the story.

“I ken how wretched that felt,” Hannah muttered, when Arya described her attempt to escape from the Priory. “Me brothers sent me tae a nunnery when I was alone and they were away fighting, and I was very lonely. I would have loved tae have made me escape as ye did.”

She gasped soon after with horror as Arya described the events that unfolded as she hurried through the night. Her hands tightened around Arya's. As the story went on, tears sprang into Hannah's eyes.

"If only you had confided in me," she said, "instead of having to carry such a terrible secret by yourself."

"I didnae want tae admit it tae anyone," Arya confessed. "I hoped that somehow I would forget and it would all be lost in the past."

"But that wasnae tae be."

Arya shook her head, giving a rueful laugh. "It was the exact opposite as I discovered when I returned tae Iona a few months past."

Hannah groaned. "Oh nay! Ye went back?"

"I thought the lass whose life I'd saved was in danger and needed me help," Arya went on, describing the events that befell her in the tavern.

"Och, me goodness, yer portrait was on the wall. With a price on your head," she clutched Arya's hands even tighter.

“But I was rescued, Hannah, by yer very own Gilly.”

When Arya described how she and Gillebride had escaped from Iona, Hannah gave her a piercing look.

“So, Gilly rescued ye, and brought ye safely back tae Ardtun,” she huffed. “Ye never said a word. We believed ye’d spent the night in the forest after a wolf had frightened yer horse.”

Arya sighed. “I’m sorry. I shouldnae have lied, but I was afraid tae tell ye me story. I believed I was safe and they’d never discover who I was.”

“There’s a sparkle in yer eyes when ye speak of our dearest Gillebride,” Hannah said. “I dae believe ye have fallen in love with him.”

Arya sighed. “He is such a good, kind, brave man.”

“But is that all?” Hannah looked a little worried. “He is all that, but... dae ye wish... him tae kiss ye?”

“Kiss...?”

Hannah’s cheeks flushed a deep shade of pink. “Why yes. Ye need tae love a man with all yerself: yer heart and yer body.”

Arya couldn't restrain a giggle. She felt her cheeks burn, picturing them turning an even deeper red than Hannah's.

"Kisses, yes. Many kisses."

Hannah squealed. "I can hardly believe it. I cannae think of Gilly *kissing someone.*"

"Mmm," Arya mumbled, her mind rushing over the last time she had kissed him. And the afternoon they'd whiled away in the glorious sunshine beside the burn.

"More than kissing?" Hannah persisted.

Arya called a halt to the questioning. She had no wish for anyone, Hannah included, to know what passed between her and Gilly. Furthermore, she had no wish to arouse her brothers' ire any further than she'd already done. If they had an inkling of the intimacy she'd shared with him, their fury at her dishonor would demand he marry their sister without any delay.

And, while the idea of marriage with Gillebride was her dearest wish, she hated the idea of him being forced to wed. He'd made it clear that he was not a man who would make a good husband. If he was to change his mind, she wished him to come to the decision by himself.

Hannah shook her head. "I've heard Gilly say more times that I can count, that marriage isnae fer him."

“Aye, he’s said that. And he’s told me he’s too old tae wed me.”

That last brought a loud “pshaw” from Hannah. “That’s nonsense. Why Payton would wed ye tae a man twice Gilly’s age if he thought it was an advantage tae the clan.”

“But he owns nae land or fortune. Or so he says. Dae ye ken anything about Gilly’s family? His father?”

“Hmm,” Hannah grew pensive. “I ken very little. Gilly’s nae one fer talking about his past, but I suppose ye already ken that. All I ken is that he comes from the land around Badenoch.”

Arya straightened up at that. “So, if we sent a messenger tae Badenoch, which isnae more than a day’s ride from here, they’d be able tae bring us news of the MacThomas clan.”

“That’s a good idea. It shouldna take long tae bring the news back tae us here.”

Arya clapped her hands, while Hannah called for Maggie Drummond, the housekeeper and Arya’s old nursemaid.

“Aye, melady,” Maggie said when Arya and Hannah had told her what they required.

The sprightly, grey-haired woman's face split in a wide grin. "Ye're seeking information about Gillebride MacThomas?"

"Yes," Arya said, surprised. "How did ye ken that Maggie?"

"I ken the MacThomas Clan. I came from not far from Badenoch way meself when I was a young lass, before I sought service at the castle here. I kent where Gillebride was from once I heard his name."

"Then we must send someone tae find out more about Gilly," Hannah said, pleased with the way things were turning out. "But we'll say aught about it tae him."

"Hmm, I think Gilly would nay approve of our meddling," Arya said nervously.

"Pshaw," Hannah said. "I'll tell him it was about time we kent more about him."

Maggie nodded. "I'll send me cousin, one of the grooms. He possesses a good fast pony of his own and he'll be there and back before they've scarcely noticed he'd gone."

"Thank ye, Maggie," Arya said gleefully. "Can ye ask him tae set off at once? Please let the head groom ken the lad is taking a message fer me and

that he's tae say aught tae me brothers or Gilly."

Only moments after Maggie had hastened off, a scullery-maid appeared bearing some food fer them on a large wooden tray. Hannah gave Arya an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. I've been avoiding the dining hall. The smells seem tae make me queasy. Most days they bring me meals here."

The maid lay out a fine repast of soup, fish, slices of wild boar, cheese, bannocks and sliced oat bread.

"I understand," Arya said. "I've had nae stomach fer food meself these past days."

"Ye must eat, lass," Hannah said, passing her a bowl of soup and a bannock. "Ye'll need all yer strength if ye're tae stand up tae the MacQuarries."

Arya shuddered. "I'd almost forgotten them with all this talk of Gilly. I'm awaiting news from Payton tae find out what the prisoner has told them."

"So, with a MacQuarrie locked fast in our dungeon, it seems certain that somehow they've found out ye're here, and they've come in search of ye."

"I cannae fer the life of me think of any other reason why they'd trespass into MacDonell lands."

After they'd finished their repast, Arya accompanied Hannah upstairs.

Hannah, needing a rest and Arya welcoming the quiet time in her room, nibbling her fingernails, waiting for the summons she knew would come from Payton once he'd spoken with the prisoner.

It was close to supper time and Arya was dozing pleasantly in front of the fire, succumbing at last to tiredness, when there was a harsh rap at her door. She hurried over, her heart plummeting, to find her brothers waiting there, both their faces etched with deep worry lines.

It was all too clear they weren't bearing good news.

Swinging the door wide she took a step back to allow her brothers to enter the room.

"Dae sit," she indicated the two armchairs by the fire. Once they were seated, she positioned herself on the padded stool facing them.

Payton leaned forward, elbows on his knees, cupping his chin with his large hands.

He looked up, shaking his head and she was alarmed at how pale he was.

"I've spent the better part of the day in conversation with Ranulf MacQuarrie, the only living son of Anrias MacQuarrie. He seems a reasonable lad. It was his older brother that ye killed."

Hanna drew in a sharp breath at that.

Payton gave a wry smile. “Seems there was nae love lost between the brothers. Alasdair, being the older, was a bully. But as he was his father’s favorite, young Ranulf always got the worst of it. “

“It took a long time before I could get the truth from the boy. If I’d nae heard yer story, I might have believed the lies he told us. Mayhap I’d have believed him when he said he and the companion who escaped us had lost their way, that they were hungry, searching for game, and came into our lands unsuspecting.”

Taveon snorted a laugh. “Did ye ask why he didnae make himself kent tae us before seeking his quarry on our lands?”

“Yes, yes, of course I asked him,” Payton said impatient with his brother’s interruption. “He had a good answer fer every question I asked him. He sounded believable. It wasnae impossible he and his companion could have lost their way. It’s nae easy when ye’ve nae lived here all yer life. And possible they didnae ken they were in our lands.”

Taveon crossed his arms and sat quietly as Payton continued.

“I let him talk and think he’d fooled me with his lies. I shared a cup of mead with him, made him think I was his friend. When at last I introduced the story of his brother’s death, he gave himself away. He told me he and the other boy were sent ahead tae scout fer our patrols. Nae doubt, the other lad has since returned tae the inn where Anrias and his men are waiting fer news.”

He glanced at Arya who sat upright, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, keeping her eyes fixed on his face.

“Ye were quite correct in yer assumption that the MacQuarries were here in search of ye, sister.”

The cold hard lump descended in Arya’s chest. This was exactly what she’d feared. Her heart was pounding. She was fearful of what Payton may have agreed to. She took a deep breath before speaking.

“Was he so persuasive and believable that he convinced ye tae hand me over tae his father fer a fair trial?” She gave a short laugh, knowing how unlikely a fair trial would be.

Payton shook his head, reaching out a hand to squeeze her shoulder.

“Nae lass. I’m nae fool enough tae consider such a thing.”

“What will happen now?” Taveon asked. “Once the word is out that ye’re holding his son captive in our dungeon.”

“The boy was of the opinion that his father will bring his men tae the castle and demand his son’s release and that he’ll likely threaten us with war.”

“And when is this likely tae happen?”

“He thinks it will take his father two days tae assemble his men and ride tae our castle.”

“Good,” said Taveon. “That gives us some time tae consult with Gillebride and Dugald and make our preparations.”

A gurgling noise issued from Arya and she clutched her stomach.

“Are ye all right, lass?” Payton asked kindly.

She wailed. “I dinnae wish tae be the cause of war between the clans. I cannae bear the thought of blood being shed on me behalf.”

“Dinnae fash, wee sister, I have a plan. When Anrias comes here, I’ll propose a bargain with him. We’ll release his son on condition he swears he’ll take nae vengeance on ye. I’ll get him tae sign a contract of agreement.”

Arya hauled in a deep shuddery breath. “He’ll never agree tae that. I’ve heard Gillebride speak of the man. Only me blood will satisfy him.”

Payton shook his head. “He’ll be heavily outnumbered. According tae Ranulf he’ll be relying on a surprise attack. He’ll feign an agreement, sign it, and once we’ve released his son, he and his men will return under cover, attacking the castle and taking ye prisoner.”

Arya was horrified. “But... ye’ll... never let him trick ye that way?”

Payton put out his hand to reassure her, shaking his head. “Nay. Thanks tae Ranulf, we’ll be ready and waiting fer him. If it’s a fight he wants, our men will give him exactly what he’s asking fer. With Gillebride and Dugald in command, I have nae doubt we’ll prevail and send him packing.”

“So, it seems we have a day or so before we can expect Laird Anrias tae be at our gate with his men?” Taveon said.

Payton nodded. “I’ll speak with the men when they return from their patrols. They can make preparations tomorrow fer a possible battle tae come. The laird will nae take us by surprise.”

He turned to Arya. “Now, wee sister, yer wellbeing and safety are of utmost importance tae me and our brother. While we are making plans in preparation fer an attack on the castle, I wish ye and the lady Hannah tae keep tae yer chambers.”

Arya gasped, rolling her eyes to the heavens. Being kept in her room felt like a prison sentence already. She turned to her brothers.

“I understand,” she said meekly. “It is because of me that all these precautions must be taken. Because of me that men of our clan may be putting their lives at risk. I’ll dae as ye say and keep meself tae me chamber until ye tell me it is safe again.”

After her brothers were gone, Arya attempted to settle her thoughts, and take stock of her situation. She was glad she'd finally revealed her story to her brothers and Hannah. The secret had weighed heavily on her these long months, and their reaction was better than she had ever dreamed of.

While Gillebride had known the truth, she had been afraid of facing her brothers with it. She'd long imagined herself as a burden they had to bear as a duty. Today for the first time she saw how precious she was to them, that they would risk everything to keep her safe.

There was no certainty of victory against the MacQuarries with their terrible reputation for violence and cruelty. But Payton and Taveon had never wavered. They would give their lives to keep her out of the clutches of the MacQuarries.

She managed to eat a bowl of broth and drink a little mead for her supper, but she did not wish to eat. Her stomach churned and she jumped at the slightest sound. She wished she could see Gillebride, she wanted to talk with him, wanted his arms around her, comforting her, reassuring her, making her feel safe. But she knew he'd be in Payton's study with the other men, deep into the night, going over their strategies, making preparations for war.

It wasn't until she was almost ready for bed that she noticed a small square of white on the floor just inside the door to her chamber.

It was a note. From Eleonor.

“Please meet me in the morning. I’ll be in the woods just outside the portcullis. I have important news that will keep ye safe. Tell nae one.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The midnight bells had rung long before Gillebride and the other men, Payton, Taveon and Dugald, had finished their discussions.

Dugald still wished to maintain his patrols, with even more men being brought in. But now he'd heard from Payton, his plan was to change the direction of their search and refocus on the lands between the castle and the bridge.

Of course, that made sense if, as Ranulf MacQuarrie had said, Anrias and his men were waiting some distance beyond the bridge. Payton and Taveon agreed with Dugald, believing there'd be no movement from Anrias MacQuarrie until Ranulf reported.

Gillebride was not so certain. He had seen the pure vengeance in the eyes of the MacQuarries at *Baile Mòr* and he knew them as a bloodthirsty, ruthless clan, who could not be trusted. He believed Anrias would stop at nothing to take his revenge for the killing of his son, Alasdair.

As for the lad, Ranulf, he was his father's son. So unlike Payton, Gillebride

refused to put any faith in him. He may have spoken the truth, but Anrias could simply have lied to the boy so that, if he was captured, he would mislead his captors.

For all these reasons, Gillebride made his own decision. Contrarily to what he was being ordered by Dugald, he was still convinced the MacQuarries were already close. The few signs he'd seen on patrol yesterday told him there were a few men – not a large company, but a small group – who were close by. Watching and waiting.

He made up his mind he'd stick to the same route he'd followed yesterday. Searching the burn, then following the track up the craggy hillside where he could survey the surrounding countryside. He'd return to the old crofter's cottage and see if there were any further signs of occupancy.

It was a good plan, but one he knew would not be approved of by Dugald. So, he said nothing, planning to slip away from the main troop unobserved. He was counting on Dugald to divide his men into smaller groups as he'd done yesterday, giving Gilly his chance to set out on his own without drawing attention to his absence.

As the men rose to their feet, the long meeting finally coming to an end, Payton signaled to Gillebride to remain behind in his study.

From the grim set of his features, Gilly deduced that Arya had told him her tale of their escape from Iona.

He stood before Payton, keeping his breathing steady, unable to glean

anything from Payton's closed expression.

"I owe ye me thanks, Gillebride," Payton said, taking Gilly by surprise.

He shook his head. "When I rescued the lass I didnae ken she was yer sister," he said, "So ye've nae need tae thank me. It was thanks enough fer me that she was safe and out of the clutches of the MacQuarries."

Payton allowed a tiny smile to quirk the edges of his mouth. "Ye're a good man, Gilly. I'm grateful fer this opportunity tae get tae ken ye. Dugald speaks highly of yer skills."

When Gilly said nothing, merely acknowledging the praise with a slight nod, Payton continued.

"We spoke with ye about marriage fer me sister and finding a suitable match fer her."

"Aye, that we did. Ye asked me tae name potential suitors fer yer sister's hand. I daresay now that ye understand the truth of her situation ye may have changed yer mind on that subject."

"Ye're right. I ken there'd be nae man prepared tae marry me wee sister. She's a self-confessed murderess and has a price on her head." He looked up and his smile had widened a little, causing Gillebride to breathe easier.

Perhaps, after all, Payton was not going to skewer him with his dirk for dishonoring his sister.

“Sit down, man.” Payton gestured toward the chair next to his and Gillebride dutifully sat, waiting to hear what Payton would have to say next.

“Under the extreme circumstances we’re facing now, I can take readily tae the idea of me sister remaining unmarried. As things stand between us and the MacQuarries, I’ll be grateful if Arya remains alive and with her limbs intact. Nothing more.”

Gillebride nodded. A wash of sadness flooded over him at the thought of Arya growing old and lonely, without a man by her side to love and protect her and no weans in her arms or by her side. He pictured the fresh bloom in her cheeks fading, her glorious bright hair turning white, the sadness in her blue eyes.

It was a forlorn picture. He wished for so much more for her.

“Aye. Now is nae the time fer wishing her wed,” he mumbled. Payton was right, what was most important was keeping Arya safe.

He started to stand and take his leave when Payton waved him back into the chair.

“If there was a man who loved me sister with all his heart, enough tae accept her fer the sinner she is, I would look favorably on that man making a match

with her. Even if he had nae lands tae his name. As long as the man was honest and trustworthy, I would ask nae more fer me sister.”

A long silence passed between the two men. Gillebride kept his eyes on the flickering fire, his mind reeling from Payton’s words. Could it be that he would approve of a marriage between himself and Arya?

After much thought, he turned to Payton. “I am a man who loves yer sister with all his heart. But I am nae match. As a mere lad, I was once wed and had a wean, a wee daughter. A bonny wee soul.” He heaved a sigh. Staring into the fire he sensed Payton stiffening beside him.

“Ye’re already married?” Payton said.

“That was many years ago and I lost both lassies in a fire. The wean, if she’d lived, would be almost the same age as Arya is now. I cannae think of wedding a lass so young.”

“Nonsense,” Payton said brusquely. “Ye’re still a strong, healthy man. Her age is nae barrier tae wedding me sister if ye wish it. And if me sister wishes it also.”

Gilly’s heart was hammering against his ribcage. He could scarcely believe what Payton was saying. *Was it possible that he could, one day, wed the lass who already owned his heart and soul?*

“Ye may think me a suitable man tae wed yer sister, Payton. But I was

broken by the death of me daughter. I dinnae ken if I can be the man ye wish fer Arya.”

Payton rose from his chair and placed a hand on Gilly’s shoulder.

“We all carry our demons. Dinnae think I’m nae haunted by me own horrors. But I’ve seen enough of ye tae ken ye’re steadfast, good-hearted and courageous. I could ask nae more fer me sister,” he said firmly. “Now, give the matter some thought. Mayhap we can speak again tomorrow.”

He walked a bemused Gillebride to the door where they bade each other goodnight.

Gilly strode up the stairs and along the passageway, lost in thought. He was sorely tempted to rap on Arya’s door and rouse her so they could talk about what he’d learned from Payton. But it was late. She needed her rest just as he needed slumber. He’d be up soon enough to set off on patrol.



Arya spent a restless night filled with fitful sleep and terrifying dreams where she was being pursued in a darkened alleyway by a relentless, silhouetted figure. She awakened trembling and gasping for breath, her heart pounding.

Lying still for a moment, she waited for her ragged breathing to regain its usual rhythm, her thoughts on the note from Eleonor she was certain had contributed to her nightmares.

She went over it again and again. What did Eleonor want? Did she wish to warn her? Arya was already aware she was in peril, but was there some secret about the MacQuarrie plan that Eleonor would be able to reveal that would be of help to Gilly and the others? Did she know when and how an attack would come?

After splashing her face with water and drying off, she dressed hastily, her fingers trembling as she attempted to tie the laces on her shirt and braid her hair.

Yesterday, when she'd told Payton she wished to forage for herbs in the woodland near the castle gate, Payton had forbidden her to even stray those few yards away from the portcullis. But now, a plan was forming in her mind.

She'd wait until mid-morning when all the troops had left on their patrol and then convince the guards at the gate to let her through. After all, the patrol would already have ascertained that the woods near the castle were safe. Furthermore, even the vengeful Anrias MacQuarrie would keep his distance, staying well away from the watchful eyes of the soldiers on guard duty.

After joining Hannah in the solar, where they broke their fast together with bowls of honey-sweetened porridge, she made the excuse that she required the privy and left Hannah to her embroidery.

Instead of heading back to her own garde-robe as she'd said, she collected her basket, threw on her blue cloak and tied her lace cap under her chin. Then she headed purposefully down the stairs and through the archway leading to the keep.

Once there, she strolled through the gathering of farmers and villagers trading their wares with the kitchen staff. The cook, known to drive a hard bargain, was locked in negotiation with a man who had a fine pair of ducks in his cart and failed to notice Arya slipping through the throng. Taking care to avoid Nicol Robertson, the seneschal, who was supervising the trading, Arya made her way to the gate, falling in beside a pair of farmers' wives who, having emptied their baskets of carrots and turnips, were returning home.

Once clear of the gate, she left her new companions, veering off to the narrow track into the woods she'd taken many times before on her foraging trips.

She'd not gone far when she came to a place where the trees thinned slightly. Not exactly a clearing in the dense forest, but a place where she'd often found mushrooms and sweet-smelling herbs growing in profusion and where she expected she'd find Eleonor.

Looking around, her attention was immediately drawn to a myriad of tiny white flowers growing plentifully on a thicket of goldenseal. As there was no sign of Eleonor she bent to collect the plants. She could use the leaves to make tea and poultices and dry the roots to make a powder. These would all be put to good use in the infirmary for many different ailments.

Busy with her unexpected harvest, she failed to hear the sudden rustling of leaves and the stealthy crackling of twigs signalling approaching footsteps.

Too late, she looked up as two men descended on her. A rough hand stifled the scream in her throat as her arms were wrenched behind her. The little basket fell to the ground, spilling her precious herbs, and with her hands and feet quickly bound and a cloth tied tightly around her mouth, she was flung over an enormous shoulder as easily as the sacks of barley the farmers had

unloaded in the keep only minutes before.

The man who had captured her and his companion took off through the trees on foot. Not far along the track they came upon two tethered horses. Arya found herself brutally tossed over a saddle, head down, barely able to make out where they were going as the man leaped up behind her and urged the horse forward.

She tried to struggle, but she was bound head to toe and all she could do was wriggle helplessly in the iron grip of her captor. She tried to scream but, with the greasy rag tied tightly around her mouth, all she could do was gurgle and grunt.

At first, she'd hoped they'd head for the bridge leading away from MacDonell territory, but it soon became clear from the smattering of conversation between them, that they were much too wily to make a mistake that would likely take them straight into a patrol.

Instead, they were heading up into the hills.

Her heart sank and a cold sweat broke out all over her body. No one had any idea where she was. The men had left the castle at daybreak and from what Hannah had told her, they were patrolling the land between the castle and the bridge. None of them would be searching the hills.

The men wasted no time, urging their horses along the rough track so that Arya bounced and jolted against the saddle so fiercely she could hardly draw breath into her lungs.

Inside she was screaming, but no sound issued from her mouth.

Her mind raced, trying to think of something, anything, she could do to free herself. In a wave of despair, she realized that escape was impossible and she could only find strength enough to be able to face whatever cruel fate awaited her at the end of this harsh journey.

The horses slowed as they began their unsteady climb over the uneven track leading into the hills, small pebbles rolling under their hooves. Once or twice the horse she was on stumbled and almost fell. They were travelling way too fast.

The man swore loudly, growled at the animal as it recovered its footing and plowed on.

She heard the word “cottage” and knew, immediately, that they were heading for the only cottage on the hillside. It had once belonged to old John and his wife Grisell. She remembered them from her childhood, when she’d often come to visit with Maggie Drummond, who brought them food in exchange for the herbal cures and potions made by Grisell.

In those days, she’d been fascinated by the endless bundles of dried herbs hanging in rows from the beams. Now, as she was being shaken as if her head was being rattled from her shoulders, it occurred to her that her interest in herbs and healing had sprung to life in one of her visits to the old crofters’ cottage.

She blinked away hot tears, closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, focusing on the feel of the horse and the strong breeze in her face, refusing to contemplate what lay in store for her at the end of this seemingly interminable ride.

The men slowed, wheeling their horses to the side along another, narrower track where the going was even rougher than before.

This was the track to the cottage. It would not be long now before she met her nemesis face-to-face. She had no doubt Laird Anrias MacQuarrie was waiting for her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

*I*t took little effort for Gilly to remove himself from the patrol. Dugald had given him six men and once he'd directed them to the areas he wished them to patrol, he retraced his steps. It would be hours before his absence was noted.

He headed back along the track to the burn where he'd whiled away the afternoon with Arya. Was it only two days ago? The world had been turned upside down since then.

Leaving his horse tethered, he set off on foot as quietly as he could. Fortunately, the breeze was howling in the trees and the sound of the burn rushing over the stones masked his footsteps.

As he neared the place where he'd noticed the flattened bracken yesterday, a slight movement caught his eye. He slipped quickly and silently behind the broad trunk of a nearby tree, hardly daring to breathe.

He listened, hearing nothing for the space of two slow breaths in and out. Then he heard it. The crackle of leaves underfoot as someone moved

stealthily through the trees to his left.

Peering around the trunk, he caught a movement some yards away. There was a man, a hauberk covering his shoulders to his waist, and leather gauntlets. As far as Gilly could make out, the man was heavily armed with a long and short sword sheathed at his waist and a bow and quiver slung over his shoulder. No doubt he had a dirk concealed in his high leather boots. Despite the impressive weaponry, at this moment, the man was at a disadvantage as his hands were full with two large leather flasks. No doubt he'd been filling the flasks with water from the burn.

He stalked the man for several yards down the path and followed as he took an almost invisible track to where a horse was tethered.

Certain the man was alone, Gillebride drew closer and, as the man reached up to his saddle clutching a flask in each hand, he leaped forward and seized him, his arm in a choking grip around his neck. The man, dropping his flasks, flailed wildly as Gilly's strong arm tightened around his neck. He clawed helplessly at Gillebride's arms for a few brief moments but Gilly's grip didn't loosen and the man quickly succumbed, slipping semi-conscious to the ground beside his horse.

He woke to find Gillebride straddling his chest and a dirk at his throat.

“Speak, and be quick about it afore I cut yer throat. I'll nae waste me time with the likes of ye. Before I've taken one breath in and out, if ye dinnae tell me what ye're doing here, wearing MacQuarrie tartan, hiding in the woods on MacDonell lands, then ye'll soon be breathing yer last.”

The man was gasping and choking, still finding it difficult to breathe, but he sucked in enough air to blurt what Gillebride wished to know.

“I... we... the men... with our laird... Anrias,” he croaked.

“Here?”

The man attempted to nod. “Aye.”

Gillebride’s heart gave a jump. This was exactly as he feared. The men were here already, while Dugald and all his troop had gone in the opposite direction to guard the bridge.

Gillebride dug the knife a little deeper, nicking the skin, so that a thin trickle of blood ran down the man’s throat.

“How many men, and where will I find them?”

The man hesitated and Gillebride pressed his dirk deeper.

“Ow, ow. Stop. I’ll tell ye what ye wish tae ken.”

“I’ll stop when I hear what I wish tae hear,” Gillebride growled.

“Old cottage... two guards are taking the lass there.”

Gillebride froze. “The lass...?”

“Aye. The MacDonell lass. By now the lads will have captured her...”

That was all Gillebride needed to hear. He slammed his fist into the man’s jaw and leaped to his feet leaving the now unconscious man on the ground, his two spilled flasks beside him.

Untying the tethered horse’s reins, he slapped it on its rump and sent it careering down the track. He set off at a run behind it to the spot where he’d left Bayard.

He mounted quickly and set off at a gallop.

So Anrias is at the old cottage after all. With only two men tae guard him. If only I can get there before the bastards lay their filthy hands on Arya.

Gillebride smiled grimly to himself.



The horses came to a halt.

Arya looked around as best she could as her captor dragged her off the horse and slung her over his shoulder.

She was right. This was the old cottage, just as she'd feared. Her heart sank. This place had been deserted for years, the only visitors being the wild animals from the forest and the mice that had made the thatched roof their home.

No one would pass by. She could scream to her heart's content and there'd be no one to come to her aid. While she was familiar enough with the surrounding hills, knowing many hiding places nearby, she calculated her chances of being able to run and hide while she was trussed up as she was, were non-existent.

She took a deep breath as the men entered the cottage through the creaky wooden door and, finally, placed her on her feet.

Wobbling, hardly able to stand, her hands and feet tied, her eyes unaccustomed to the dim light, she was unable to make out the figures standing nearby. She shivered, feeling vulnerable and exposed. Although, in her heart she had no doubt she was facing Anrias MacQuarrie and one other.

She heard a short, menacing laugh and her blood ran cold.

"Me thanks lads," a voice said. The two men turned and went back outside.

Slowly her vision was restored she was able to take in her surroundings.

She looked defiantly into the face of the man standing in front of her.

He was tall, big and broad, almost as big as Gilly, white-bearded, with long grey hair descending to his shoulders. Clad in a shining hauberk and a kilt of the MacQuarrie tartan he looked every inch the imposing laird. Yet, unlike Blaine MacKinnon and her brother Payton, both lairds in their own right, there was something evil and twisted in this man's face that bespoke of great cruelty and ruthlessness.

His thick dark brows were drawn in a scowl and his eyes held thunder and lightning as he stared her down.

He reached an open hand and slapped her face hard.

She reeled back, falling to her knees at his feet, biting down on her lip, refusing to cry out in pain.

“Lift her,” Anrias snarled.

It was then his companion came into the light and Arya gasped.

Eleonor!

Eleonor reached a hand and placed it at Arya's elbow, lifting her to her feet.

For a fleeting moment Arya's spirits lifted. *Her friend was here. She would help her.*

But one glance at Eleonor told a different story.

The lass standing by the side of Anrias in her fine clothes was grinning, smug. It was clear to Arya that the lass whose life she'd saved was nothing more than Anrias MacQuarrie's whore.

"How could ye?" she spat at Eleonor.

Now it was Eleonor's turn to slap Arya. She raked her nails callously across Arya's face.

"Have ye forgotten, ye ungrateful doxy, that I saved yer life?" Arya said through gritted teeth.

Eleonor leaned in, her snarling face close to Arya's. "Ye lie, ye killed young Alasdair and I was lucky tae escape ye when ye came at me with yer knife."

At that precise moment, the words she'd heard when she first came upon Alasdair MacDonell arguing with Eleonor came to Arya in a blinding flash.

The words he'd screamed at her were "rutting with me father." At the time, they'd made no sense to Arya and she'd forgotten them completely. Until now.

She straightened her spine as best she could with her hands tied behind her back, lifted her chin defiantly and spoke to Eleonor.

“I saved yer life. The man ye were with was yer lover. He was going tae kill you because ye’d been unfaithful. Ye’d been in his father’s bed.”

Arya turned to Anrias. “Ye’re an old fool. This lass was cheating on ye with yer own son. Once he found out, he flew into a jealous rage and wished tae kill her fer her faithlessness. And I daresay he would have done so if I hadnae intervened. I saved her life at the expense of yer son’s. It was because of her that he died.”

Eleonor shrieked, turning to Anrias. “She lies. Alasdair never touched me, I swear.”

“I speak the truth Eleonor, and ye ken it.” Arya shouted. “Why else would ye have been in the forest that night with Alasdair?”

Anrias’s hand came down on Eleonor’s face even harder than it had on Arya’s.

The girl staggered back, her hand on her cheek where a bright red handprint was already blooming.

She screeched loudly at Arya. “Why ye smarmy little wench, with yer sweet

nun's face, thinking ye were an angel who'd come tae me rescue."

She laid into Arya with her fists, knocking her off her feet so that she huddled on the floor, her knees drawn up to her chest, shielding herself as best she could from blows to her back and sides from Eleonor's wild kicks.

Anrias seized Eleonor's arm. "What is this, lass? Why has this little cow raised yer ire?" He made a guttural, threatening sound in his throat and twisted her arm behind her back.

Eleonor cried out in pain as he wrenched her arm higher. "Speak the truth!"

"I swear it's only been ye I've bedded, melord." He twisted harder and she screamed.

"Please... let... me... go... and... I'll... tell... ye," Eleonor managed, her teeth clenched against the pain.

Anrias flung her aside and, gasping, she tumbled to the floor next to where Arya lay. The big man stood over her and delivered an almighty kick to her belly. She clutched herself, doubled in pain.

Eleonor lifted her head to scream again at Anrias. "Ye're a brute. A devil. Just like yer ugly son." She gave a vicious laugh and Arya saw she was bleeding from her nose and mouth from the blow Anrias had given her. "There was nae telling ye apart in bed. Stinking, rutting pigs, both of ye."

“Enough,” Anrias roared. “I’ll kill ye meself.”

Looking around wildly for some means of escape, Arya tried to shut her ears to the roaring and screaming. With her feet drawn up it might be possible, if she strained and twisted, to bring her arms under and up to her front. If she could do that and roll closer to the hearth where there was an old iron poker, she might have a weapon.

Then she realized.

There were embers still burning in the fireplace and half the cottage was stacked with kindling.

The entire place served as a tinder box. One spark would start a conflagration that would take down what was left of the cottage.

She watched in horror, as the rage-filled Anrias strode to the fire and seized a thin branch from the embers. He blew on it, bringing it to a flame, brandishing it like a torch.

It took only an instant for the kindling to flare up into fire.

As the flames licked higher, Anrias turned on his heel and strode toward the door. “Ye’ll perish here as the punishment ye both deserve in bringing about the death of me son.”

He slammed the door behind him.

Screaming, Eleonor scrambled to her feet, her skirt already catching fire. She rushed to the door and tried to push it open, but it remained firmly shut. She beat on it with her fists, screaming, “Open the door. Let me out. Let me out.”

A flood of panic rushed through Arya’s veins and she rolled over, coughing as smoke filled the room, frantically attempting to reach the door. Keeping her head low, close to the floor where the smoke had not reached, she recalled the fire at Ardtun when Gilly had rescued her. She moaned, knowing there was no Gilly coming to her rescue today.

Had she escaped the fire that day, only to perish here in the old cottage?



Gilly was pushing his horse hard, its flanks lathered with sweat and its breath a loud panting, but still he urged it faster up the steep hillside. The enemy was close and every one of his senses was on high alert. Aware that Anrias had two guards with him, he made a quick plan.

Familiar now with the location of the cottage, as he approached along the narrow track he dismounted, leaving his horse, and made his way on foot, all the better to ambush the guards.

He’d not gone far when he picked up the trace of smoke drifting in the air. As he watched he saw a dark plume of smoke billowing up a hundred yards from where he crouched.

God Almighty! The cottage was on fire.

In that instant he heard rapid hoof beats coming his way. He shrugged the bow from off his back, wrenched an arrow from the quiver and placed it in the bow, drawing the string tight.

Whoever was coming his way would be in his direct sights as they rounded the bend.

Moments later two men galloped toward him. Aiming for the first man's belly, he let fly with the arrow. It hit its mark with a loud 'thwack' and the man, screaming, fell off his horse onto the path of the second horse.

The second rider attempted to pull his horse up, but it was too late. The horse shied, bringing its hooves down on the prone form of the first man and unseated its rider. A second arrow quickly dispensed with the remaining guard who joined his unconscious comrade on the ground. The two horses took off in fright, galloping past the spot where Gilly lay in wait.

But where was Anrias MacQuarrie?

As it turned out, the MacQuarrie was not far behind his two guards and while Gillebride stood over the bodies of the men, Anrias came galloping around the bend in the track.

Gillebride drew his sword, waiting. As his enemy approached, he crouched, ready to spring up as the horse came alongside. Anrias swore loudly as he

caught sight of the two bodies lying in a jumble on the track in front of him and he reined in his horse.

Gilly was ready as the man dismounted, drawing his sword to face him.

“The lass. What have ye done with the MacDonell lass?” he shouted.

MacQuarrie sneered, “The flames have taken her now,” he said.

The distant sounds of screams assailed Gillebride’s ears as he descended on his foe, a battle cry escaping his lips.

“Swine,” he shouted as he raised his sword. The warrior’s red mist of battle had descended over him and with the desperate screams ringing in his ears, Anrias MacQuarrie could not stand against him.

Although the man fought fiercely, and with great skill, he was no match for Gilly’s height and weight and the fierceness that drove him on with every bloodcurdling scream from the cottage that rent the air.

He was there again, in the midst of his old nightmare, battling to save his love from the flames.

Only this time, the nightmare was real.

He dealt a blow to his enemy's side and the man went down on one knee.

Raising his hands in supplication he begged Gillebride for mercy. "Please, spare me. I'll reward ye."

"Reward," Gillebride snarled. "Me reward will be yer death. I'll show ye the same mercy ye showed Arya MacDonell."

With those few words he plunged his two-handed sword through the chain mail on the man's chest into his heart.

The man fell at his Gillebride's feet without another sound.

He wrenched his sword free of Anrias MacQuarrie's lifeless body and took off at a run, praying he was not too late to save Arya.

The heat was intense and he could hear the flames crackling and the fire roaring as he slammed himself against the door of the cottage, but there was something heavy pressing against it, holding it shut.

Without wasting another second, he hacked at it with his sword, breaking through the wood, leaving only the door frame in place.

He stepped into the cottage, the flames leaping high and he saw it was a woman's body pressed against the door that was holding it shut.

Fire and ice flooded his veins simultaneously.

But then he glanced up and saw Arya, curled in a tight ball a few feet away, her face to the floor.

He leaped through the remains of the door, stepping over the woman's body and scooped Arya into his arms. As the flames licked at her kirtle he pushed the other woman's body away, wrenched the door open and rushed out.

He wrapped her in his cloak, smothering the flames edging her skirt, and placed her on the ground, a terrible feeling of dread swamping him as he looked at her still body. Then, to his great joy, she moaned, coughing violently as she inhaled the fresh air. He felt for her heart beat, and although it was faint, it strengthened beat after beat under his hands.

Before any further delay, he unbound her feet and hands, chaffing her hands in his to return the flow of blood. He loosened her blouse, brushed the hair back from her face. Waiting. Praying she'd open her eyes.

He poured water from his flask onto his kerchief and wiped her cracked lips gently, trickling a few drops into her parched mouth. To his enormous relief, he saw her throat moving as she swallowed.

"Me love, ye must live," he whispered, "I cannae imagine me life without ye."

She moaned again, her eyes flickering open briefly and his heart leaped.

Then he scooped her into his arms and walked carefully along the track to the place where his horse was waiting, holding her to his chest. He draped her limp form on a grassy outcropping, then he mounted his horse and, keeping his feet in his stirrups, leaned in to lift her and place her tenderly on the saddle in front of him, her head on his chest.

She coughed and moaned a little, as he rode with her in his arms, traversing the narrow track down the hill and then all the way back to castle MacDonell.

The tears poured in rivulets down his cheeks and he let them flow.

This time, by God's good graces, he'd been able to save the one he loved from the flames.

EPILOGUE

One week later

Arya bent her head, breathing in the scent of chamomile and sage in the steam Maggie had prepared. She coughed. It had been a week since Gilly had brought her back to the castle in his arms and today she was planning to venture into the rose garden with Hannah for the first time.

She'd spent a night in the infirmary with Sister Margaret ministering her poultices for the burn on her leg while Maggie and Gillebride saw to the steaming, which helped sooth the raw edges in her throat and settle the coughing that racked her. The whole time she was in the infirmary, she was aware of Gilly by her side.

Sister Margaret confided to her before she left, that Gillebride had refused to leave her, and had remained there, sleeping by her side on the hard floor, until she was well enough to return to her own chamber.

Hearing that, knowing he'd risked his life to save her from the fire, gladdened her sad heart and gave her hope that she could convince her brothers to allow them to wed.

That is, if Gillebride agreed.

Once it was clear that she was out of danger, both Payton and Taveon had

given her a severe scolding for her foolishness in venturing outside the castle despite the warnings that the MacQuarries were seeking her. She saw in their eyes the love they had for her and understood it was a demonstration of how deep their concern for her had been.

After she'd made her apologies, hanging her head in remorse for the trouble she'd caused, her brothers were all smiles.

"We owe everything tae Gillebride," Payton said.

Taveon nodded. "If nae fer all his warrior's instincts and skill we'd have lost our dear sister."

Arya's heart leaped at their words. Surely, they couldn't refuse their match now. She could hardly wait to see Gillebride again and feel his arms around her.

Hannah had told her that Gillebride had related the story of her rescue to her brothers and chief Dugald, and Arya realised he had omitted some of the details of his fight to death with Anrias MacQuarrie. He'd merely said the man had "met with a fatal accident" in a fire, and left it for others to make whatever assumptions they wished.

Today she was clad in a fine new linen kirtle and tunic in blue and white striped linen that had been stitched for her while she lay ill. Maggie was there to help her dress and brush out her hair and fasten it in ribboned braids around her head.

"Ye're looking well, lass. The colour has returned tae yer cheeks."

There came a tap on the door.

"Come in," she called, and Gillebride strode into the room.

She ran to him and flung her arms around his neck.

“Lass,” he said, laughing, “I like yer enjoyment at seeing me, but I’ve come tae take ye tae Payton’s study. He’s commanded we stand before him, together.”

She looked up at him in sudden disquiet.

Why on earth does Payton wish tae see us now?

Her brothers had said nothing to her about their search for a suitable husband and she’d taken that to mean they had changed their mind, but they’d never told her in so many words.

As Gilly accompanied her out of her chamber, her heart was pounding at the thought of confronting Payton and Taveon again.

She was surprised to see Hannah when they entered Payton’s study, but her smiling face was reassuring.

Pasting on a smile, she curtsayed to her oldest brother and greeted both him and Taveon.

They arranged themselves around Payton’s table. He took the place at the head of the table with Taveon on his right and Gillebride on his left. A still smiling Hannah sat next to Taveon while Arya seated herself next to Gilly.

Their hands met under the table and he darted a smile at her.

“I have much tae discuss with ye this fine morning,” Payton said. Although he wasn’t smiling, his voice was light and cheerful, relieving some of Arya’s fears.

The first thing I need tae tell ye is that young Ranulf MacQuarrie, who has been enjoying the hospitality of our dungeon this past week, following the death of his father is now the Laird of the MacQuarries.”

Arya gasped. She raised her hand to speak. Payton paused. “What is it lass?”

“If he’s free, will he demand vengeance fer his father’s death?”

“I was getting tae that,” Payton said a little impatiently and Arya subsided into her seat. Her head was swimming at the thought of the MacQuarries now hell bent on punishing both her *and* Gilly.

But Payton was shaking his head. “I believe there was nae love lost between Ranulf and his father who, it seems, had nae care that Ranulf had been taken prisoner. I’ve discussed this with him and as the new Laird, he has the power tae call off the hunt fer Arya and remove the price on her head. He has agreed tae this as a condition of his release from the dungeon.” At last, a smile broke out on Payton’s face as he gave her the news. “A written agreement is being prepared and he will sign it.”

Arya cried out as a huge wave of relief washed through her. She could hardly believe it. After so long as a hunted woman, she was finally free.

She turned, beaming, to Gilly. Although she would never let go of her own horror, she would no longer live her life burdened by the fear of being captured and put to death.

“Further,” Payton was saying. “Ranulf has accepted that his father was killed in battle, that he was in the wrong fer intruding into MacDonell lands without permission. The new laird has no wish fer a quarrel between our clans.” He turned to Gilly. “There’ll be nae blame attached tae ye fer the death of Anrias MacQuarrie.”

Tears of happiness were rushing down Arya’s cheeks.

“Och, thank ye, Payton. I cannae tell ye how much it means. I was so afeared Gilly would be pursued fer revenge, just as I was.”

Under the table Gillebride squeezed her hand. She glanced sideways at him

and saw he was smiling.

“There is another matter that Hannah has brought tae me attention.”

Arya held her breath. *What more can there be?*

Hanna unfurled a parchment and laid it on the table in front of her.

“Ye may recall sending a messenger tae Badenoch tae seek out information about the MacThomas clan.”

Arya nodded, feeling Gillebride stir on the bench beside her.

“Ye didnae tell me ye’d done this,” he whispered. It was impossible to tell whether he was offended or not.

“Word has come back and we have learned something of ye, Gilly. Dae ye wish me tae continue?”

An unsmiling Gillebride grunted his assent. Arya held her breath, half-afraid of what Hannah would reveal.

“This news was brought tae me by Maggie Drummond. She was anxious I should pass it on tae yer brothers without delay. At the time ye were nae well enough tae be concerned so, once I learned what yer messenger had found, I took it upon meself tae relay the information tae Payton.”

Gilly took in a deep breath, blowing it out in a huff. “Well, lass, ye’d better tell me what ye ken as it seems yer brothers ken more now about me clan than I do.”

Hannah read from the parchment.

After his only son departed, leaving clan lands, his father Laird MacThomas

was penitent and regretted his cruelty toward his son. He hoped the lad would return but that was nae tae be. When he died some years later from a flaming arrow during a battle, the castle and all its lands were meant fer the son, Gillebride MacThomas.

An effort was made tae locate the missing heir but all that was kent was that he was a soldier in France and unlikely tae return. The inheritance was then claimed by the late laird's nephew, Angus MacThomas, and the lairdship was bestowed on him by the clan.

Arya clutched Gilly's hand tightly as Hannah folded the parchment. This was extraordinary news.

Payton spoke again "I hope this will nae change yer situation Gillebride. If ye decide tae return tae yer lands and contest yer cousin's claim, that is yer decision. But Taveon and meself wish ye tae ken there is a home fer ye with us. Just as there is a home fer ye with the MacKinnons. But, if ye should wed me sister..."

He paused and looked from Arya to Gillebride. Beside her she felt Gilly stiffen, his hand tightening even more around hers.

"We will grant ye lands along the glen where ye can build yer own castle if ye wish it. We will be forever grateful fer everything ye've done tae save our wee sister from certain death more than once. We value ye greatly and give our blessing tae a match between ye and Arya."

Gillebride released her hand and got to his feet. He bowed from the waist to Payton.

"Me laird, ye have given me much tae think on this day. I am grateful fer yer offer of land but, as ye would understand, I need some time tae take in all that I've learned." He turned to Arya who was smiling up at him, almost bouncing from her seat with all that had been said. "I am grateful fer the blessings ye would convey on a union between meself and yer beloved sister. But I have yet tae ask the lass if she is prepared tae wed with me."

“Well then,” Payton said, “I think it is time ye did so. Why nae ride out together where there’s none tae hear what ye have tae say, where ye and our sister can lay out the truth of yer hearts?”



They came to the little clearing beside the burn and dismounted there, just as they’d done only a few short days ago. Only now his heart was beating like a gong. He’d barely been able to take in the revelations Hannah had laid out. But one thing stood out, occupying his thoughts ever since the meeting in Payton’s study.

Her brothers have given their blessing tae a marriage between me and Arya.

It was more than he’d ever hoped. For so long he’d believed himself either too old for her, or simply too broken and incapable of love. Arya had shown him how foolish those thoughts were.

After they’d left Payton’s study, they’d hardly said a word. He’d simply taken Arya’s hand and walked her to the stables. He’d saddled Bayard and then drawn her up before him, to sit aside as he held her in his arms.

Now they were together beside the burn, his thoughts tumbling through his head, memories, both distant and recent, crowding in. He still dreamed of flames, but his dreams no longer left him with the familiar dreaded sense of failure and hopelessness. Now they left him with hope.

He helped Arya descend from Bayard’s sturdy back. She was still clad in the bonny blue and white kirtle, her glorious bright hair unbound, tumbling down her back, and her blue eyes sparkled with love as she looked up at him.

Could such a bonny lass find it in her heart to love him? Could she wish tae spend the remainder of her days on this green earth with him? Could she contemplate bearing his children? If nothing else, at this moment, he knew his own heart. It overflowed with love for Arya and the overriding need to

protect her and keep her safe from any kind of harm.

He never wished to see a tear glisten in those blue eyes, but as he spread his cloak and knelt before her, he saw a tear trickling down the roses blooming in her cheeks.

Arranging himself on one knee he looked up, strengthened by the smile dancing across her lips.

“Ye’re tae ask me something, Gilly?” she said teasing him.

“Why else would I be on me knee in front of ye,” he said, pretending to be cross, while all the time his heart was singing for joy.

Taking her hand in one of his, he placed the other hand across his heart, growing serious as she met his ardent gaze.

“Melady Arya,” he said, and went on, gladdened by her deep sigh, “will ye give me the greatest honor ye can bestow and consent tae wed with me? I might nae be the most handsome or easy man tae marry. But I promise ye there is nae one in this world that can love ye more than I dae.”

She squealed, giggled, then laughed out loud, a loud joy-filled sound.

“Oh yes, Gilly. Yes. A thousand times, yes. Ye ken I’ve loved ye almost from the start and wished fer nothing else but tae be yer wife.” She tugged at his hand. “Please stand up so I can hug ye properly.”

He wasted no time at all getting to his feet and throwing his arms around her. Holding her tight, her sweet curves melding against him, it felt as if his heart would burst from his chest.

Never had he believed he could experience such happiness. He’d so long believed that all joy was forever denied him.

Yet, the hunger for her was there, unabated. He bent to kiss her as she raised her lips to his and they held on tight to each other as if they would never let the other go. All the years of sadness and loneliness fell away, all the yearning and hopeless longing were gone, replaced by a glorious sense of perfect fulfilment that left him half stunned by the intense rapture of it.

As her hands twined in his hair, he spun her off her feet, and twirled her around him. She threw her head back, laughing delightedly, her curls flying wildly around her head.

Then, when they were both dizzy and laughing, he lowered her onto his cloak and took his place beside her.

He gazed down at her where she lay, worshipping her with his eyes. Her lush lips curved in a sweet smile, her blue eyes sparkled as she met his tender gaze, her shining, sun-kissed hair spread around her in sweet, perfumed waves. He took a handful of curls in his fist and pressed his face to them, losing himself in the heady scent of her.

With a groan, he plied his fingers to the laces on her tunic. He tugged them so that the cloth fell apart exposing her satiny shoulders and the alabaster skin of her breasts with their puckered, pink nipples.

He gasped with pleasure at the sight of her and pushed her tunic lower, releasing her arms so that her tunic was around her waist and she was bare to him. With a sigh Arya reached her hands up to his bring his head down, their lips meeting in a kiss that scorched through him, fanning the flames of passion that already rose high in his blood.

His fingers traced the delicate curve of her throat, stroking across the silk and satin of her shoulders to the fullness of her creamy breasts. Gillebride groaned at the look and feel of her as she arched against him, and bent to take her nipple in his mouth, swirling his tongue around the hard nub, licking, tasting.

The little sound in Arya's throat as he suckled her drove him higher and his

already steel-hard member confined in his britches hardened even further, causing him great discomfort.

He pulled his mouth away, hearing her soft sigh as he lifted his head.

“Me manhood needs setting free, lass,” he muttered. “Can ye...”

She chuckled, turning her attention to the strings that tied his britches. Once they were open, she pulled his trows down around his hips so that his shaft sprang free, standing proud in the thicket of dark curls at its base.

He grinned at the sound of her pleased gasp, and then groaned loudly as she took him in her hand and stroked him, moistening him with the drop of wetness at his tip.

“Ye feel so good, me love,” she whispered marveling, her grip moving up and down.

He sat up, wrenched of the britches and flung them aside. Then he eased down her tunic and skirts and she raised her hips to accommodate him.

With their clothes no longer a barrier, they stroked each other’s bodies in wonderment, reveling in the freedom they’d never experienced before.

At long last they were together, and Gillebride could show her with his body, exactly how passionately he was in love.

He layered her breasts with kisses and then, adjusting his position, he slid himself alongside where he could taste all of her. His tongue rimmed her navel and she moaned, raising her knees slightly. He took his kisses lower, all the way to the mound of red curls between her thighs.

Cupping it, he pressed her gently, encircling her with his palm, so that she groaned and thrashed against his hand, all the while still grasping his manhood.

He took her mouth again in a savage kiss, crushing her lips, exploring her with his tongue, offering a taste of what was to come as he pulled back, lowering his mouth to her thighs and the slick folds beneath her mound.

“Lass. The taste of ye...”

“Ah Gilly,” was her only response as he set his tongue to the most sensitive place between her thighs, kissing and suckling.

She cried out over and over as he licked and tasted, teasing her. His tongue laved the length of her folds, circling her nub, pushing inside her until he felt her bucking fiercely against him. She was groaning, crying out indecipherable words as her passion took her higher, and his two fingers were inside her, thrusting, stretching, feeling her spasm against him.

He watched her in amazement as she lay spent, her eyelids flickering, closing. She was his, at last, and he could scarcely believe it.

Then she shook her head, opening her eyes wide, reflecting the blue of the sky above.

“I didnae ken there could be such joy this side of heaven,” she said, smiling up at him with lips red and swollen from their kissing.

He chuckled. “This is heaven tae me, lass, I dinnae ken if there could be more.”

She wrapped her fingers around his hard, engorged manhood. “Ye deserve tae find yer own slice of heaven now,” she said, moving her fingers up and down his rod.

He lay back. “Ye’re giving it to me, me love. And tae feel yer bliss as ye come under me lips and hands increases the delight I take in ye.” He hesitated, groaned, then went on, his voice husky with desire. “But I’ll nae last long with yer touches.” He groaned again, more loudly this time as she

leaned in, taking the head of his shaft in her mouth.

“Nae lass,” he reached to stop her. “When I come, I want me manhood tae be inside ye. I wish tae feel meself held so tightly inside ye. I want the wet sleekness of yer velvet surrounding me.”

She made a sound that was almost a giggle. “Why love, I’m only tae happy tae oblige ye.”

Emboldened by his words, she rolled onto her back and dropped her knees apart, exposing the slick, pink folds of her to his gaze. She shivered as his eyes raked her body, his breathing coming hard and fast.

A fierce growl issued from somewhere deep inside him and then all his restraint was ripped away.

Positioning himself over her, he brought himself to the perfect place that awaited him and, without further thought or hesitation, plunged himself between her wet inviting folds. He pushed deep, so that all of him was buried inside her.

He groaned as she reached between them, adding pressure to his member. He thrust hard, finding his rhythm, losing himself in the joyous pleasure of every fierce touch.

She rose her hips in time with his, locking her eyes with his, clutching her hands to his shoulders. He felt her nails scouring his flesh, her teeth biting into his shoulder, and reveled in the way the pain mixed with the sheer rapture coursing through every part of him.

Their rhythm grew faster, more desperate, then she was arching against him, her head thrown back, as ecstasy poured through them both. He felt her bucking hard, heard her cry his name. She spasmed, tightening around his cock. Then he was lost to the world, flying amongst the stars, transported by his own ferocious fervor. His primal roars joined with the sounds of the forest

and the bubbling water of the burn as he convulsed inside her, filling her with his seed, robbed of all thought, knowing nothing but Arya and the taste, touch and scent of her.

It was a slow, rapturous return to earth where they lay, tangled together in their nakedness, savoring the glorious afterglow of their lovemaking.

He stroked the hair back from her damp brow and kissed her eyelids.

“I will love ye with me body, me heart and me soul forever, Arya MacDonell,” he said softly.

Her response came like a sigh. “And I ye, Gillebride MacThomas.”

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Eager to learn what the future holds for **Gillebride & Arya**?

Then you may enjoy this **extended epilogue**.

Simply [tap here](#) and you can read it for **FREE**, or use this **link**:

<https://www.kennakendrick.com/qfb8>

Or if you're reading this on a Kindle device, you can scan this QR code with your phone...



AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading my novel, **Night with a Highlander**. I really hope you enjoyed it! If you did, could you please be so kind to [write a review HERE?](#)

It is **very important for me to read your thoughts** about my book, in order to get better at writing.

Please use the link below:

<https://www.kennakendrick.com/p5ir>

SPARKS AND TARTANS: THE MACKINNON CLAN'S ROMANCE

Book#1

[The Laird's Reluctant Bride](#)



Book#2

[The English Beauty and the Highland Beast](#)



Book#3

[Marrying a Highland Outlaw](#)



Book#4 (this book)

A Night with a Highlander



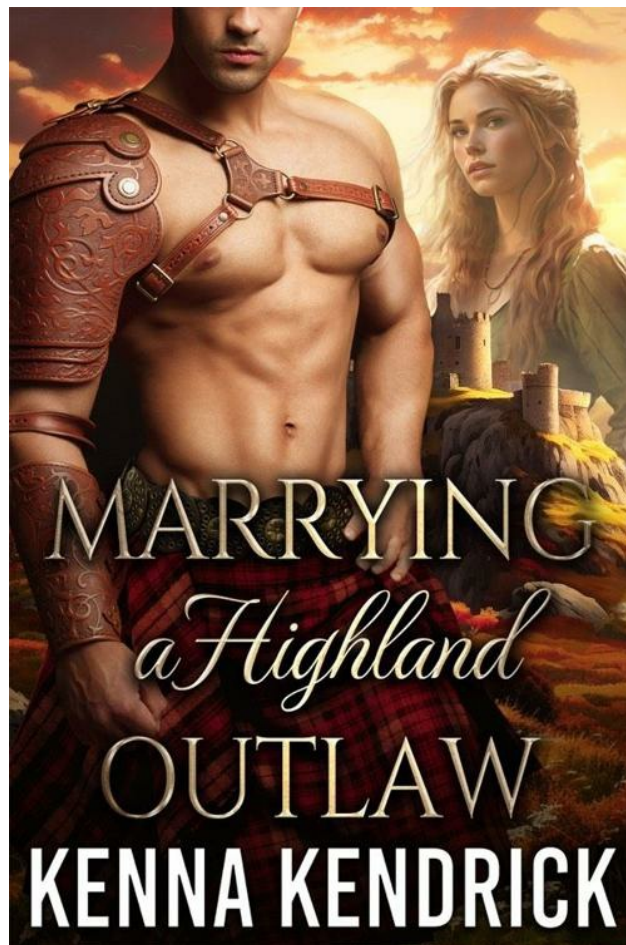
DO YOU WANT MORE ROMANCE?

If you're a true fan of the Scottish romance genre, here are the first chapters of my previous best-selling novel: **Marrying a Highland Outlaw**

Desperate to protect his family, Taveon MacDonnell embraces the role of a traitor. When tasked with abducting a lass for ransom, his world changes as he discovers a darker plan—she'll be forced into marriage against her will. Unable to stand by and watch this happen, Taveon's heart becomes entangled with the spirited and brave Hannah MacKinnon's, as he faces a heart-wrenching struggle between love and duty. Because saving her means to face his family's downfall...



MARRYING A HIGHLAND OUTLAW



CHAPTER ONE

E dinburgh, Scotland

May 1304

Shivering slightly, Taveon Macdonell wrapped his heavy woolen cloak tighter across his shoulders as he entered the tavern. The oak door slammed shut behind him and he looked around. He blinked, half-blinded by the sudden near blackness. He could scarcely make out more than dull shapes in the smoky, noise-filled interior.

He cursed inwardly as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. He was bone-weary, fatigued by his life as a hunted man, sick and tired of the distance he'd been forced to keep from his home in the Highlands. And oh-so-fed-up with seeing a stranger reflected back at him whenever he glanced in a looking-glass. He scarcely recognized himself – his hair darkened, his jaw shaved, his clothes shabby and nondescript. All he wanted was to cast aside this damned disguise and get his life back.

His heart cried out to be able to return to Macdonell Castle, to his brother Payton and his precious little sister Arya.

His gaze fell upon the two men who awaited him, seated at the rear of the room. On heavy, aching limbs he slowly made his way to their corner table. As he approached, one of the men rose menacingly, a dirk grasped in his hand.

The man, grey-haired and grey-bearded and burly, snarled. “Who the devil are ye? Ye’re nae Taveon Macdonell.”

Taveon scowled for he knew this man. His name was Tal Macintyre and if Tal didn’t know him, at least he could be assured his disguise was doing its job.

“Ye stupid arse, Macintyre,” Taveon countered. “Of course I’m Taveon Macdonell. Have ye nae eyes tae see?”

The man grunted. He was half a head taller, looming over Taveon. “I remember ye as fair-haired and bearded.”

“I once was. But blessed be walnut juice for dyeing my hair and this sharp knife for keeping my beard trimmed.” He placed his hand on the hilt of the sharp dagger sheathed at his waist, making no bones about his own ability to fight, if this meeting turned out badly.

“The password.” The seated man spoke abruptly. He was the younger of the

two, his light-brown, greasy hair, tied at his nape, his shirt and britches of fine cloth.

Taveon spat the word. "*Gaisgeach.*"

The man laughed. "Ah yes, the Scot's word for warrior." He spoke with an English accent. "Name's John Sykes, at your service." He indicated a space at the table. "Join us Taveon Macdonell."

As Taveon pulled up a chair, Sykes signaled to the tavern keeper, who hurried over at once.

"Three tankards of yer best ale," Sykes said smiling affably. Once the man had departed, he turned his attention back to Taveon, his smile fading. "Are ye ready and willing to do our bidding Macdonell?"

Taveon leaned back in his chair folding his arms across his chest, biting his tongue on an angry retort. He spoke his answer in measured tones. "I've done all that was asked of me. Made meself a traitor tae Scotland tae suit William de Coughran's blasted cause. And all tae keep me wee sister safe. I've nothing more tae give of meself." He shook his head, a determined glint in his green eyes.

"There's yet a month before I'm due in Carlisle tae deliver the details of the Scots' battle plans tae yer English masters and I've sworn tae complete me mission. Ye cannae command more from me."

The man gave him a tight-lipped smile. “You’ll do as you’re told Macdonell. That is, if you wish to see your family again.”

Shaking his head, Taveon went to rise, but Macintyre’s hand shot out, grabbing his arm in an iron grip, forcing him to stay in his seat. Gone was any pretense at civility.

“Ye’ll sit and listen tae what we have tae say, Macdonell, and ye’ll keep yer blasted mouth shut.”

Taveon drew in a deep breath, filling his lungs with the smoky air, steadying himself, holding back the torrent of rage building inside him.

So, this is what it has come tae.

He was nothing more than a pawn in the traitors’ games, helping the English against his own countrymen.

But he reminded himself that, after his mother’s death giving birth to his baby sister Arya and his father’s decline into drink and gambling ending in his murder by the hand of William de Coughran’s men, he and his brother had made a sacred pact, one they had kept without faltering. The older brother, Payton, would fulfill his duties to the clan, while Taveon would be responsible for his family. It was Taveon’s sworn duty to keep his sister and brother safe from De Coughran, who was his father’s creditor and had vowed to make them pay for their father’s sins. If his actions were to save his kin from harm, he had no choice but to abide by whatever was asked of him now by his enemies.

“Go on, then,” he said, gritting his teeth as Macintyre twisted his wrist and pressed his hand to the table. Before Taveon had a chance to pull free, the man brought down the sharp point of his dirk, piercing the flesh between Taveon’s first and middle fingers, pinning him to the table, trapping him.

He watched, stunned, as a bubble of blood welled and trickled onto the worn oak table-top.

Sucking in a breath, ignoring the pain in his hand, he met John Sykes’s gaze front on. The man’s gray eyes flicked over him, lingering on Taveon’s bleeding hand for a moment, his lips spreading into an ugly grin.

“You may recall Castle Ardtun,” he said, clearly amused at Taveon’s plight. When he received no response other than a thunderous scowl, he continued.

“The MacKinnon Clan’s seat, the home of Laird Blaine MacKinnon? Surely, you recall the family.” Sykes gave a sharp laugh. “I am sure you have not forgotten your long months of incarceration there, waiting for the hangman to put a noose around your neck.”

Taveon’s mind shot back to the time he’d spent imprisoned on the Isle of Mull after he’d been captured on his way to the English. He’d been treated well, better than he had deserved, eventually making his escape with the assistance of a sweet young woman. He’d heard, later, that she’d wed the laird’s younger brother. He had forgotten her name, but he recalled her gentle, anguished words before she’d freed him from the dungeon. Her quest to free him resembled his own, a vow to protect her siblings. He wondered if she hated herself as much as he loathed himself while doing so.

“I remember it very well, Sykes. Although I cannae see it’s any of yer treacherous business whether my memory serves me well or nae.”

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong.” Sykes swilled another mouthful of ale. “Your memory of the MacKinnons is exactly what my business is with you today. We have in mind a fitting punishment to be dealt to the MacKinnons. They must be taught a lesson and made to understand we will not be interfered with. We need reprisal for your imprisonment, something that will cut deep, cause pain. Something that will bring down a hail of nightmares, prevent them from sleeping.”

“I dinna follow yer train of thought, Sykes. Castle Ardtun is well guarded. Sir Michael Wemyss attacked and tried tae take the castle, but his men were nae match for the MacKinnons and their clansmen. Ye’ll find great resistance if ye attempt another raid.”

Sykes pshawed loudly. “No, Macdonell, we’ve nothing so clumsy in mind. We’re counting on your knowledge of the castle and the country surrounding it. We’ve an altogether different and far more painful retribution in mind.”

He leaned forward, a sneer on his bloated features, his beery, rancid breath assailing Taveon’s nostrils. “You are to return to Ardtun and there you will whisk the laird’s younger sister out from under his nose. Once you’ve captured her, you’re to take her to Sir William at Castle Lochnell. If MacKinnon wants his sister safe back home with him in Castle Ardtun, he’ll have to pay a bounty to the English, in exchange.”

“Ye can count me out, ye lying bunch of bastards.” Taveon’s voice rose.

“I’ve done what I was asked and that’s it. Nae more. I was told that once I’d delivered the Scots’ plans tae the English ye would leave me family alone. Me father’s debts would be overlooked and we could live our lives in peace.”

“You forget yourself, boy. You’re impertinent. Let me remind you that you’ve still to fulfill your side of our bargain. The plans have not yet reached the English commanders.”

Taveon slumped in his seat. His hand was throbbing steadily now, and a pulse beat in his forehead ached like the devil. Would he never be free?

“Ye ask too much of me. I was promised my actions would nae bring harm to any soul directly. My task was tae steal the plans and take them tae the English side. Nae more than that.”

Sykes cackled gleefully. “And were you such a prize fool Macdonell, that ye believed you’d be harming no one by giving the plans to the Scots’ enemies? The Scots will be slaughtered once the plans reach the army. And that will be on your head.”

Taveon shuddered. Of course, the man spoke the truth.

“So, if you want to keep your family safe, you know what is required of you.”

Taveon gave a weary nod. He could see no way out for himself but to accept this cursed new mission.

“I’ll do what ye want,” he said, his green eyes fixed on Sykes. “But I want your sworn word on one thing. Nay harm will come to Hannah MacKinnon while she’s held captive. She’ll be returned to her brother as soon as he pays the ransom.”

Sykes flicked his forefinger finger at Macintyre who ripped away his dirk, freeing Taveon.

“Of course,” Sykes said smoothly, as Taveon rose to his feet, blood still welling from his injured hand. “You have my sacred word on it. No harm will come to the girl and she’ll be returned, unscathed, to the heart of her family in due course.”

CHAPTER TWO

*C*astle Ardtun, Mull

May, 1304

Peeping through the leaves in the hedge, Hannah could just make out little Mirin half-hidden behind one of the shrubs in the garden. Mirin's twin sister, Alba, stood in the middle of the lawn, eyes closed, counting to ten.

It was a golden day of sunshine. Apart from a few puffy white clouds, the sky was blue, perfect for a fun game of hide 'n seek with her nieces. Spring was all around, daffodils were blooming and Hannah's favourite tree, the crabapple, was covered in buds, soon to be bursting into a mass of fragrant pink flowers.

Pulling up her kirtle, she hugged her knees. The girls would never find her in this spot. It was a hollowed-out space between the hedges, perhaps made by an animal sheltering over the winter, but it made for a perfect place to stay hidden, even though the girls were hardly more than an arm's length away.

Squeals and giggles indicated that Alba had discovered Mirin's hiding place. Now both twins were searching for her.

"Hannah, Hannah. Come out." Alba called.

"She's nae here," Mirin whispered.

"Perhaps the little people have taken her," Alba said, her voice suddenly fearful.

"Hannah, please come out," pleaded Mirin.

Hannah could stand it no longer. The game was only fun if no one was scared by it. She leaped to her feet. It was at the moment that she heard the sound of men's voices entering the garden. The girls swirled around and took off.

"*Athair*," they cried in unison.

Hannah's heart did a flip. It was their father, Blaine. Her brother. Straightening her kirtle and brushing leaves out of her hair she ventured out of her hiding place. It was unusual for Blaine to be in the garden. This was the place where the women came to chat, to embroider, or attend to their mending. It was her favourite place within the castle walls. She often came here with the twins and her sister-in-law Edina's sisters Margaret and Skye, who were around her age.

Here in the garden, they could chat and make as much noise as they liked without an angry face appearing at their door telling them that girls should be seen and not heard. She also frequently came alone, just to sit and enjoy the birds and butterflies and the flowers coming into bloom. It was a peaceful place, a respite from the duties and busyness of the castle.

Now, disturbing the gentle harmony of the place, was her brother.

Whatever does Blaine want?

She stepped hurriedly out of the hedge, feeling foolish and off-kilter under the watchful presence of her brother. Her foot caught on a protruding tree root as she hastened forward, sending her head over heels. She squealed, putting out her hands to break her fall. But despite her best efforts, she landed face down on the grass.

Mirin and Alba raced over, giggling as Hannah struggled to a sitting position, her hands muddied and her kirtle covered in grass.

Alba tugged at her aunt's braids. "Oh wait, Auntie Hannah, ye've a ladybird in yer hair," she shrieked, gently removing the little insect.

Blaine stood watching them, his mouth screwed in lines of disapproval, his eyes narrowed.

It was not until Hannah had finally risen to her feet, and was brushing her

tangled skirts and neatening her hair, that he spoke.

“I regret intruding intae yer area, sister, but it seems ye pay nae heed tae my requests for yer presence. Thus, ye give me nae other option but tae come here in search of ye.”

His displeasure was rolling off him in waves, and Hannah noted with dismay that the vein in the middle of his forehead was prominent. Always a sign he was in a rage, but containing it.

Her stomach lurched. She *had* received his summons but the time seemed to have flown and she’d lost track of when she was to have the meeting with him.

“I’m so sorry brother. Please forgive me. I was nae heedless of yer message, but simply unaware of the time passing.” She looked around. Gillebride had taken the twins by the hand and was leading them out of the garden.

It was only then that Hannah saw Errol, her other brother, standing quietly at the entrance to the garden, another man at his side. Her heart sank as she became conscious of her dishevelled state, her muddy hands, grubby kirtle and messy braids. Her forehead was stinging and she was afraid she may have scratched it when she fell, bringing further disharmony to her appearance.

She gripped Blaine’s sleeve. “What is it? Please tell me what’s going on. Who is that man and why is he looking at me like that? Are we in danger?”

The man had stepped forward, taking his place beside Errol and was now standing in the sunlight where she could observe him fully. He was tall, possibly around Blaine's age, with well-coiffed dark hair and blue eyes.

Blaine made the introduction. "May I present my sister Hannah?" The man nodded in Hannah's direction, favouring her with a haughty smile, his eyes mocking her.

"This is a dear friend of mine, Duncan Buchanan."

Taking an instant dislike to him, despite his handsome profile and fine clothes, Hannah bobbed a curtsy and offered the man her most dazzling smile.

"I am so very pleased tae make yer acquaintance, my laird," she responded as graciously as possible.

Inwardly she was heaping a mountain of curses on Blaine for putting her in such an unenviable position with a stranger. And why had her brother, the Laird, seen fit to bring this strange man to invade this private space?

"Would ye excuse me, sir, tae have a few words with me brother?"

The man nodded politely, turned on his heel and walked off with Errol.

Hannah turned to Blaine, her brows drawn in a frown.

“I dinna like yer Duncan Buchanan,” she hissed once the two men were out of earshot.

Blaine sighed. “Ye dinna understand, Hannah.”

Glaring, she placed her hands on her hips defiantly. “Well, then, brother, please do go ahead and explain what all this is about.”

“Ye’ve told us often enough of yer longing tae find a husband and be wed,” he began.

She huffed impatiently. “Yes. I’ve envied my brothers their happiness. Ye know I wish for nothing more than tae find a man tae love and tae have me own family. Like ye with Ivy, and Errol with Edina.” Her eyes misted as memories came flooding in. “After our parents died, ye two were everything to me, ye were me entire family.” She gazed up at him, trying to gauge his reaction to her words. Would he understand how much this meant? “But now ye have families of yer own, and I’m a little lost. It’s as if I dinna belong anywhere, nowadays.”

Blaine nodded, reaching a hand to squeeze her arm gently. “Well, yer brother and I have talked with the Council of Chiefs. Ye’re nineteen, old enough tae wed. It’s been decided we dae our best tae grant yer wish.”

Hannah’s blue eyes lit up. “Blaine, ye mean... ye’ve agreed tae allow me tae wed?”

He laughed softly. “Aye lass. It’s what ye want.” His eyes grew serious. “I want tae know ye’ve a man tae protect ye when the battles come again, and I cannae keep ye close forever, nae matter how much I’d love tae have ye in me sight.”

She frowned up at him. “Do ye think the English will attack?”

He shook his head. “I dinna ken, luv. All I ken is that a war is raging, that the traitor Taveon is still abroad with our battle plans, and sooner or later it will come tae our doorstep. And when it does, I want ye safe and – Heaven forbid, should something happen tae me and Errol – under the protection of a powerful family.”

She clutched his sleeve again. “If battle’s where yer thoughts take ye, I must tell ye this my dear brother. The man I’ll wed must be a true Scot. One who’s nay traitor tae the rightful king. Never a man the likes of that traitor Macdonell Edina helped escape from yer dungeon.”

“Aye. we have all forgiven Edina for the heartache she caused. I ken why she took such a great risk and almost broke Errol’s heart. Tae keep her sisters safe. I’d have done the same if I had been her.” Her eyes flashed. “But I’ll nae forgive Macdonell for his wicked treachery.”

Blaine smiled fondly at her determination and loyalty. “Never fear, sweet lass, the man ye wed will be one who takes an oath of allegiance to our Liege Lord, King Robert.” He gave her a wry smile. “Someone like Duncan Buchanan, the next Laird of the Buchanans.”

Hannah gasped, raising a hand to her mouth. “Och, my dear Lord. Are ye telling me that man is me suitor?”

Again, Blaine chuckled. “Dinna worry, lass, he’s nae the only one. Ye’ll be kept busy all through the summer. There are lads lining up tae ask for yer hand. Buchanan is only the first.”

Beaming, she glanced up at him.

“Methinks he’s the first, but by nay means will he be the last.”

“The first of many,” Blaine said, pulling her into his arms for a great bear-hug. “Ye’ll be wed before winter is upon us, wee sister.”

CHAPTER THREE

*A*rdtun, Isle of Mull

Midsummer, 1304

The heavily-laden woodsman's cart rattled its way up to the castle gate.

"Whoah," said the cloaked figure, pulling on the reins. The strong cart-horse came to a standstill as the two guards nodded toward the woodsman.

"It's Euan, bringing another load for the castle fires," the guard called. Moments later the gate into the keep was slowly raised, allowing the cart's entry. The man on the cart gave a brief salute as the cart rumbled through the gate and across the cobblestones.

He circled around the back of the castle and pulled up beside the servants' quarters near the kitchen, where he tethered the horse and set about unloading the timber logs and kindling.

Some of the heaviest wood he carried on his shoulders, muscles straining, to stack on the covered wood-pile beyond the kitchen while several servants filled baskets from his smaller choppings to be used in the great kitchen fires.

He filled a basket and carried it through to the great hall where he was relieved of the weight by the serving-man, whose sole job it was to ensure there was sufficient fuel for the roaring fires that warmed the castle.

The man they called Euan had been carrying out these tasks for the past weeks, coming and going through the castle's iron gates with nary a glance from the guards, all the while taking care to keep his cloak wrapped securely and his hood shadowing his face.

Taveon hated his disguise almost as much as he hated being here. His memories of the dungeon were still fresh enough in his mind to make him shudder, even though it had been months since he'd found his freedom. Yet, it had been simple enough to find a way to enter the castle. He'd paid a handsome bounty to borrow Euan's cart with its load of wood and take his place three times a week when he took the timber load to Castle Ardtun.

In his woodsman's guise, Taveon had been able to make his way through the castle unhampered. On the rare occasions he'd been questioned, he'd simply shown his basket of trimmed logs and been waved on.

Now that his plan was coming to fruition, he had high hopes he'd be able to overwhelm the laird's sister unnoticed. He'd capture her swiftly, putting miles between the two of them and the MacKinnons, before her disappearance was discovered and the alarm was raised. If his luck held, her

absence would not be noticed until morning.

In the weeks he'd been surveilling the castle, he'd become aware of the small garden frequented by the women. The first time he'd been there he'd been casting his eyes around, taking in his surroundings, when a young woman and two little girls burst through the entry way. Before they could catch sight of him, he'd quickly crouched in the hedge, finding a space there where he could observe them.

The wee girls' innocent play put him in mind of his sister Arya when she was a bairn. That memory was like a knife between his ribs.

He heard them call "Hannah," and his heart jumped.

She was beautiful. Tall, slender, her golden hair falling in waves to her slim waistline. He hadn't counted on her loveliness, or on the feelings that stirred inside him as he observed her – hair flying, skirts tucked up, long legs on display. He watched, enthralled, as she laughed with the wee girls, playing catch-me-if-you-can and skipping a rope. The ache in his groin and the urge to seize her and bury his face in that glorious mane of hair, to hold her soft curves against him, to crush her lips to his was, suddenly, almost unbearable.

It had been many years since a lass had made his heart beat faster. He'd been leading a monk's life for too long.

He was suddenly assailed with doubt. This lovely creature did not deserve the fate that lay in store for her. The MacKinnons had treated him well while he was their captive. They'd given him good food and ale and despite knowing

him as a traitor who threatened the lives of their clansmen, he'd not known cruelty at their hands.

To inflict the pain he knew was in store for them went against everything he believed was right in the world.

Conscious that such feelings were dangerous, threatening the cold-heart required for his mission, he steeled himself with the knowledge of the fate awaiting his own kin should he not succeed.

On several further occasions, when the weather was good, he'd snuck into the garden, observing the women chatting and laughing at their needlework or frolicking with the bairns.

Hannah spent more time there than the others. More often than not she was alone, sitting quietly, sometimes with her eyes closed, peacefully breathing in the perfumed air. He knew it was only a matter of time before he came upon her when there was no one around to come to her aid.

Tonight, after carrying out his usual duties with the firewood, Taveon slipped away from watchful eyes, making his way, unseen, to the little garden. The cart was empty, save for a sack containing his tools, and he'd drawn it as close as he could to the doorway near the kitchen. At this time of the evening, he could count on the servants being too busy serving the laird and his family to be coming and going through the door.

The evening was still warm in the long twilight, and Taveon had high hopes Hannah would come here, as she did so frequently, to take in the air before

retiring to her bedchamber.

Once he reached the empty garden, he found his way to the space in the hedge where he could observe whatever was taking place there. His heart was pounding and the blood thundering in his veins. If he was caught now there'd be no mercy, hanging or beheading would be his certain fate.

As minutes turned into hours of waiting, his legs stiffened and he rubbed his calves, keeping them pliant, aware that any stumbling misstep could be his last.

His mind meandered idly over thoughts of Hannah, imagining her looking at him with glowing eyes, her lips opening tenderly...

He froze, straining his ears at the sudden intrusion of voices, groaning inwardly. One of the voices was Hannah's, but the other voice belonged to a man.

God's teeth!



Hannah flew out of the great hall, aware that Hendrie was following on her heels.

“Hannah, wait,” he said plaintively. “I have something I want tae say tae ye.” He was like a young puppy; all sad eyes, floppy hair and gangly legs. She didn't lessen her stride, heading straight for the Ladies' Garden. Surely the

boy wouldn't be so foolish as to follow her to that private spot.

No. He had no time for such niceties. Entering the garden, he scooted alongside her and clutched her hand. Ugh. His hand was limp and sweaty.

Oh dear! What was Blaine thinking?

All smiles this afternoon, he'd presented her with young Hendrie Davidson, the son of one of his oldest friends. In the space of two months, Hendrie was the eleventh offering her brother had trotted out for her approval as a prospective suitor. *Eleventh.*

But, by all the saints in Christendom, this lad was scarcely out of the nursery. Still wet behind the ears. He was sweet enough, eager to please, but not yet bearded, with aught but peach-fuzz on his chin. She'd wager he was not a day over seventeen. Why, she stood at least a head taller than him, for goodness' sake!

Was this Blaine's plot to force her to agree to marry the next man that actually *looked* like a full-grown man? At least one with a beard.

Hendrie was clinging to her hand like a limpet. She plonked her bottom on the bench at the far end of the garden, spreading her skirts in the faint hope he'd realize there was no space for him to sit beside her.

Not in the least deterred, he flung himself on one knee on the grass in front of her.

“Fair lady, please let me recite the poem I’ve written for ye,” he begged.

She huffed indignantly.

Blaine must secretly hate me. Otherwise, he’d never keep beleaguering me with unsuitable, unappealing, impossible lads.

“All right. I’ll listen tae yer poem. But, afterwards, ye must promise tae take yer leave. I wish tae enjoy the evening air *by meself*,” she said sternly.

Hendrie took a deep breath, issuing a sigh. “I shall, melady. I shall leave ye once ye’ve heard me out.” He took a parchment from the pocket in his britches and unfolded it.

After clearing his throat, he began. “Fairest Jennifer,” he read.

“My name’s Hannah” she said, her lips quirking in a smile. Why, this buffoon had not written the poem for her at all.

“Oh...” he gasped.

“Methinks ye should stand, Hendrie. I’ve changed me mind. I nay longer wish tae hear yer verses.” She reached a hand to help him up.

Suddenly, he switched his eyes from her face, to the small creature that was climbing on the bench beside her. A spotted, brown, scaly creature.

“Ye gods. A monster,” he shrieked, losing his balance and, hands flailing, landing bottom-first on the grass.

In fright, Hannah heaped to her feet, her skirt tangling her feet, bringing her down to land beside him.

Pointing with a shaking finger, his ashen face washed of all color, he squeaked, “There. It’s a deadly, poisonous, serpent”

Scrambling to her feet, Hannah looked around.

“Hendrie. Get up.” She snapped. “While there are some shy snakes here on Mull that are poisonous, that’s nae snake. It’s a wee *lizard*. They are common here and that one visits me often in the garden.”

She savagely brushed at her skirt with one hand, fluffing grass and leaves out of her hair with the other.

“Now,” Her voice was unusually sharp. “I believe it’s time ye left me.” She lifted her chin in haughty dismissal. The boy stumbled to his feet, swiveled without a word, and hastily made his departure, leaving Hannah alone in the gathering twilight.

“At last,” she breathed aloud.

Leaning over the lizard, she whispered her thanks.

“Mr. Lizard.” She said, breathlessly. “I do so appreciate yer help in chasing that boy away. I was beginning tae fear he’d never go.” She laughed.

Then came a whispered voice in response, “Happy to be of service melady. I could see he was nae the man for ye. Ye deserve a strong, handsome fellow tae set ye tae rights.”

For one fleeting second it seemed as if the lizard was speaking to her, and she giggled. But then it dawned.

Someone was there, unseen, beside her in the garden.

She drew in a breath, filling her lungs, ready to scream bloody murder.

But, before she had a chance to let out an awe-inspiring shriek, a tall figure leaped from the shadow of the hedges and clamped a ruthless hand over her mouth.

Struggling furiously, she raked the hand with her nails, kicking out as best she could, although hampered by her long skirts. She heard a rough swear word as she tore at the man’s hand, but his other hand clamped her waist and she was hauled unceremoniously into the hedge, landing a hundred tiny

scratches on her face and bare arms.

Before any further ado, a heavy cloth was wrapped around her mouth and fastened, her hands were seized in a strong grip and tied tightly behind her back with string. Throwing her head back she tried to butt against the man's chin, but he was too quick for her. He dodged sideways, grabbing her hair, twisting it painfully around his hand.

“Dinna try anything, lass. It’ll go badly for ye if ye dae,” he breathed into her ear. “Stop struggling and ye’ll nae be hurt.”

Then the world went dark as a sack was thrown over her head and pulled down over her body to her feet. She felt the man fastening a binding like a belt at her waist, securing the rough hessian sack, and another binding her ankles.

Bound hand and foot, her mouth gagged so that her screams were stifled, she felt herself being hoisted over the man's shoulder as if she was nothing more than a sack of chaff.

“If ye make a sound, if ye try and wriggle, I’ll run ye through with my dirk,” he said in a low, gravelly voice that shot terror straight to her heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

This was the moment of peril.

Taveon's heart was pounding, the blood rushing in his veins. He pressed his dirk hard against the lass he had slung over his shoulder. His life depended on her keeping quiet and still as he made his way back to the cart. He passed like a shadow through the castle passages, seeing no one. Hearing the babble of voices and the clatter of pans he crept on tiptoe down the narrow passage alongside the kitchen, holding his breath. At last, he reached the servants' door near to where the cart waited with the patient horse.

After checking that he was alone, he ventured outside and lowered the anonymous bundle containing Hannah MacKinnon onto the cart's tray, next to the similar-looking bundle that held the woodcutter's axe and saws.

He slowly exhaled. So far so good. Now it was only the guards on the gate he had to pass by.

"Keep silent lass, if ye dinna want tae feel the steel of me dirk pierce yer

neck,” he hissed.

The response was a muffled grunt, but there was no hint of movement from the sack as he mounted the cart, swinging the horse around so it could retrace its deliberately slow progress toward the gate.

It was dusk now, the shadows splayed over the keep were long, and the guards were at the end of their shift. As the cart approached, they paid no heed to it, or to the hooded figure holding the reins. No doubt they were eager to make the exchange and head to their cosy homes after the long hours on duty, and the lowly woodcutter’s journey was of no interest to them.

They hauled up the gate, waiting with bored expressions as the cart lumbered through.

In minutes the gate had been lowered behind them and Taveon felt a flood of relief surge through his gut. He could breathe again. The most difficult part of his mission had been completed. Now he could only pray the lass’s disappearance would go unnoticed until he’d widened a lengthy gap between the two of them and Castle Ardtun.

There was no still no movement from the sack, and he wondered if she was aware they had passed out of the castle and there was not a soul about who could come to her aid.

He glanced over his shoulder at the castle growing smaller in the distance, his mind flashing back to the night he’d made his escape from the MacKinnons’ dungeon. It had been a tortuous departure. He was weak and desperate, with

no plan. On foot, determined to escape capture, he'd scrambled through the nearby woods terrified by the sound of men, horses and dogs hunting him like a wild animal.

But he'd prevailed. He'd travelled northwest while his pursuers had followed a false trail southeast. After weeks, with only the aid of kindhearted villagers who were unaware of who he was, and fisherfolk who'd helped him reach another island, he'd finally made it back to the mainland.

Tonight, he'd arranged for good, fast horses to be waiting. They'd travel some distance to the little cove where they'd meet with a man who would sail them across in his cog to the closest point on the mainland. There Taveon would take fresh horses again, and accompanied by Sir William's men, he'd ride with Hannah to meet with de Coughran at Lochnell Castle.

Then, damn their eyes, he'd part ways with de Coughran. This hateful mission would be done with. He'd hand over Hannah to the waiting men and be on his way to Carlisle to deliver the Scots' battle plans to the English.

He pulled on the reins to turn the horse into the woodland track where he had pledged to meet old Euan the woodcutter. As he did so, he became aware of a surge of pain in his hand. Looking down he was startled to see blood flowing freely from a large tear where that bastard Macintyre had pierced his hand. In the struggle with Hannah, she must have ripped his wound, opening it and tearing it deeper.

He reached into his satchel under the seat and pulled out a cloth to bind his hand and staunch the bleeding. He huffed, wincing against the pain. *By God, the girl was a wild one.* He gave a soft admiring laugh thinking how strongly she'd struggled before he'd managed to subdue her. One scream would have

brought guards and her menfolk running to her aid.

He issued up a silent prayer of thanks for the luck that had been with him, enabling his escape.

It was tempting to let her know she had nothing to fear from him. But he quashed that moment of madness. It was necessary she fear him. They had a long journey ahead and he needed her meek and submissive.

They progressed along the narrow track for half a mile or so before they came to the clearing where Euan awaited them. Taveon's horses were tethered nearby and once he'd handed over the cart and the old woodcutter was out of sight; he and Hannah would be on their way.

He was aware that he'd need to unbind her so she could mount the horse, but he was counting on the isolation of their surroundings to prevent her attempting to escape.

"Thank ye lad," Euan said, as Taveon jumped down and handed over the reins. He was used to Taveon's thrice weekly comings and goings, believing he was visiting his sweetheart, one of the serving-maids who lived in the castle. He had no inkling of Taveon's real purpose. When it came to a search for the missing lass, if suspicions regarding Hannah's disappearance should fall on the woodsman, his ignorance would be his savior.

Taveon grunted, hefting his bundle out of the cart and laying Hannah on the ground. The old man scarcely glanced in the direction of Taveon's load, no doubt assuming it was just a package of his belongings and tools.

“Aye. I’ll be on me way, Euan.” Taveon muttered as the cart jolted off. He’d paid Euan handsomely for the use of his cart, and for his silence, and the woodsman had no idea this would be the last time he’d set eyes on Taveon.

He waited until Euan was certain to be out of earshot before carrying Hannah over to a stout tree and propping her against its trunk.

First, he undid the belts from around her ankles and waist and raised the sack. He pulled it slowly over her head. She glared at him, her chest heaving indignantly.

He reached a reluctant hand to unfasten the binding around her mouth.

Instantly, she let fly with the screams that had, no doubt, been building inside her all this time. She was drawing breath to let go another ear-splitting howl, when Taveon pressed a hand to her mouth.

“Silence, lass. Ye’re wasting yer precious breath. There’s none nearby tae hear ye.”

He took his hand away from her mouth and she bellowed loudly.

“All right,” he said, almost laughing at her determination. “If ye want tae frighten the birds and the badgers, go right ahead. Yer yelling is lost on me.”

“Ye sniveling bastard,” she spat the words. “My brothers will gut ye like a fish when they catch up with ye. Dinna think ye’ll get away with this... this... whatever it is ye’re planning tae dae with me.”

Her eyes filled with angry tears and she shook her head vigorously from side to side.

“Take me back tae the castle this minute,” she demanded imperiously, stamping her foot. “Ye’ve nae right tae take me from me home.”

He responded with a soft laugh. “Nay lass. I didnae risk my skin just tae return ye straight away tae yer lodgings.”

Her blue eyes narrowed. Changing her approach, she spoke more softly. “Please, take me home. Me brother is the laird, he’ll pay ye well for me return. If ye’re being paid by one of me stupid suitors tae abduct me, me brother, will pay ye twice as much. I promise ye.”

Taveon laughed. “Nay lass. There’s nae suitor so mad for ye that he’d pay someone like me tae bring ye tae him. Ye’ve been spending too much time listening tae the old stories of besotted lads driven mad for love.”

She huffed again. “Why ye swine, what would the likes of ye ken of love?”

“Well, lass, there’s one thing I can say for sure. Ye’ll nae be finding out what I ken about love. Although, I venture tae say I ken a mite more about it than ye dae.” He laughed again. “If that wee dandy who was down on one knee

before ye is anything tae go by.”

Infuriated, she kicked out, landing a glancing blow on his shin. Her fine brows were drawn, her eyes blazing with dark flames, her cheeks reddened. She tossed her head and a cloud of yellow hair floated over her shoulders.

Taveon was enchanted. He’d never seen anyone so beautiful. Too bad this talk of love would take him nowhere. He was so close he could smell her wildflower scent and feel the warmth of her breath on his cheek. A sudden urge washed him with lust and he pictured himself rolling naked with her on the forest floor, wild and mad with passion.

He blinked twice, reluctantly shutting down this beguiling fantasy. They’d best be on their way without further delay. There was no telling how soon her disappearance would bring down the hounds of the MacKinnons on his head. He well knew what that was like.

Gripping her arm, he half dragged her to where he’d tethered the horses. She dug her heels in, resisting vainly, but, as his was the greater strength by far, he succeeded in wrestling her to stand beside the horse. Gritting his teeth, keeping her in his grip, he looked her up and down.

“Ye’ll come with me, lass. Resisting willnae aid ye. Ye’re in me power and ye’d best day as I say.”

She glanced at the horses. “Ye’re expecting me tae ride with ye?”

“Aye, we’ll ride tae the coast this night and be on the mainland in the morning.”

She gasped. “Nae. Ye cannae dae this. It’s a wicked thing tae steal me away.”

“It may be so, melady. But there’s nay way out for either of us.”

“Where are you taking me? What will happen tae me?” Her voice quavered and, for the first time since he’d taken her prisoner, he registered her fear. “My brother will pay ye well if ye return me tae the castle.”

He shook his head. “I cannae answer ye. All I can promise is that nae harm will come tae ye. I’ve made a vow that I’ll see ye safe.”

She took a deep breath and lifted her chin. “Well, if that is so, ye’d best untie me hands. For I’ll nae be able tae ride with me hands behind me back.”

He sighed. She spoke sense. They’d be riding fast, and the lass would never be able to stay on the horse without her hands tae steady her.

He stepped over, holding his dirk. “I’ll tie yer hands in front of ye, then,” he said, slicing through the rough twine binding her.

Her hands came free and, in a trice, she’d raised them and given him an almighty shove backwards. He lost his footing and went down. In the moments it took for him to scramble to his feet she’d seized the saddle, thrust

her foot into the stirrup and heaved herself up. She was already swinging her second leg over the horse's back when he managed to grab her skirts.

She kicked out, still scrabbling to mount the horse.

“Och, nay ye dinna,” he yelled as she pushed at his face, her nails sharp against his cheek. It took all his strength to drag her from the saddle, grunting and hurling curses at him, and bring her down. She plunged from the horse, arms akimbo, with Taveon still hanging on grimly to her leg. They went down together in a heap, him on his back, her on top of him, struggling and flailing her arms mightily, landing a flurry of blows to his head.

He grunted, every scrap of air violently expelled from his lungs, as they rolled together on the ground. He clutched her, holding on tight, while she beat hard against his chest, pushing him, fiercely bringing her knee up between his thighs. Her elbows and hands flew at him as he gasped in a breath. Gripping her shoulders, he managed to hold her at arm's length, keeping his distance from her fists.

Making an effort to roll on top of her, he tried to pin her under him, squirming and wriggling, desperate to free herself.

The delicate silk of her dress gave way and, for an instant, his hands were on her bare skin. But this was the farthest thing from the wild passion he'd pictured only minutes ago. Instead, it was a do-or-die effort by Hannah, determined not to allow him to abduct her, at least not without an almighty struggle.

“Ow, ow,” she shrieked suddenly. “Somethin’ is stinging me.”

A second later he felt the same stinging on his hands and face. God’s blood. They were rolling in a vast bed of nettles.

Now, each faced with an even greater foe, they ended their struggle in a flash. Taveon hauled himself to his feet, keeping a tight grip on Hannah’s arm, helping her to scramble up, a series of red welts clearly visible on her neck and chest. The bare skin at her waist was already marked with tiny blisters.

“Aargh!” she moaned, rubbing herself frantically with her free hand. “Let me go, I cannae stand this stinging and burning feeling. It’s horrible.” She danced from foot to foot, her face scrunched in anguish.

Taveon was also feeling the flaming effect of the nettles, it was as if a thousand tiny fires were burning on his skin and all he wanted to do was to rub the pain away. Instead, he seized the reins of the two horses.

“Lass, calm yerself and come with me. We’re near enough tae the shores of Loch Scridain. We can walk down tae the water, dip our burning bodies there and soothe away the pain of the nettles.”

“Aye, aye,” she cried, eagerly. “Anything to stop this feeling.”

He took a length of rope that was wound to the saddle of the first horse, and tied it around Hannah’s waist. “This will keep ye close,” he said with a chuckle. “Just in case ye were entertaining the idea of escaping.”

She glared at him, saying nothing.

Retaining his grip on her arm, Taveon led the way down the rocky path, holding the reins in his other hand so the horses could follow. Although the sun had set, in the long summer twilight he could see his way clearly. Within minutes they had arrived at the shore where small waves lapped enticingly. The water was crisp and cold. He could hardly wait to disrobe and let the icy balm spread across his skin.

“Come lass. Strip off yer clothes. If ye want tae soothe yer blistering skin ye’ll have tae share the loch with me.”

She turned away dismissively. “Ye cannae command me. I’m the MacKinnon’s sister. Ye may be holding me captive but I’ll nae disrobe ‘afore ye. Turn away. I’ll swim in the loch on me own.”

Taveon huffed with impatience. “Nay. I’m as keen as ye tae enter the water. I’ll nae wait while ye take yer time. If ye’re too proud tae disrobe ye can stay here and itch tae yer foolish heart’s content.” He took the end of the rope, tethering her to the same tree he’d tied the horses to. “Ye can bide here with our mounts while I dip mesel’ in the cool waters.”

He pulled off his cloak and tossed it over a tree branch, untied the fastenings on his shirt and shrugged it off and was starting on the ties around his braies when she finally found her tongue to speak.

“Nay. I’ll do as ye say. I cannae stand this any longer. If it means bathing

beside ye then it's a price I'm prepared tae pay."

"Sensible lass," he said, giving the ties a final tug. He was about to slide the braies down but glanced up to see she was standing stock still, staring at him.

"Have ye nae seen a naked man?" he said, not unkindly and watched a bright pink flush rise on her cheeks, almost as red as the welts the damned nettles had left.

She shook her head. "I've nae seen a man naked, as ye say. Except me brothers as lads when we'd all swim together in the loch." She brushed a hand across her cheeks at the memory. "It's just that..."

"Aye lass. What's bothering ye now?"

She gestured at herself. "I cannae undae my stays. I have a maid who helps me dress and undress."

Despite the fiery itching he managed a laugh. "So, ye want me tae act the part of yer maid?"

She glanced down at her once fine silk gown, now stained and torn. "I was dressed today tae meet wee Hendrie, the lad ye saw in the garden. My brother insists I dress like a laird's sister whenever a suitor comes calling."

He took in her gown, which was altogether too revealing and, as her chest

heaved, he was treated to a tantalizing glimpse of smooth, pale skin, and the rising of two small but firm breasts. His groin twitched at the tasty sight. But now was not the time to be thinking lusty thoughts. First, he'd have to rid himself of the cursed stinging itch that was driving him crazy.

He dropped his britches, aware that he was growing hard.

“Turn yer head lass, and I’ll unfasten yer dress for ye,” he said, his voice nothing more than a low growl.

CHAPTER FIVE

*H*annah turned her back so that Taveon could gain access to the fastening on her corset. Now her cheeks were burning almost as fiercely as the marks where the nettles had stung her. She released her arms from the sleeves and let the tattered remnants of her gown and chemise slip to her waist.

“Ye willnae look at me whilst I am undressed, will ye?” she said in a small voice.

“Ye realize ye have way too many conditions for a lass who has been abducted, arenae ye?” He chuckled softly. “Nae lass. I’ll nae peep at ye.”

She felt his fingers fumbling with the laces for a few minutes, then her stays came loose. Holding them in place she turned to face him, a horrified gasp passing her lips as her eyes took in the tall length of him without a stitch on to cover him.

“Close yer eyes lass, if ye cannae bear the sight of me. I dinna want yer gaze on me, but I’ll nae let ye free all the same. If ye want tae ease the nettles from

yer skin, ye best stay behind me where ye'll nae have tae see me manhood."

He waited, eyes turned toward the loch, while she slipped her skirt and petticoats down her legs and stepped out of them.

"I'm ready now," she whispered, naked as the day she was born, following close on his heels, marvelling at the muscles rippling in his back, the width of his shoulders, and the glorious tightness of his well-formed derriere.

Not that she had expertise in such matters, but to her eyes he was a fine figure of a man.

He dove into the water, disappearing momentarily into the depths, before surfacing a few feet away at the furthest extension of the rope. With his back to her, he tugged on the knot at her waist, and she slid into the icy water with a gasp, submerging up to her chin.

Ah, the blessed relief.

Smiling, she closed her eyes and sucked in a long slow breath as the soothing balm quenched the fire blazing across her skin.

When she opened her eyes, she saw with a start that his gaze was fixed on her. Looking down she realized that, although her chest and shoulders were below the surface, the water was crystal clear, and the pale outlines of her rounded breasts with their pink nipples were rather visible.

Flinging her arms across her chest she let out a little squeal. “Ye lied. Ye said ye’d nae peep at me.”

He grinned, turning his gaze to the sky. “I’m nae looking at ye lass.”

She swept a hand across the water’s surface and splashed him, the way she’d did when frolicking in the loch with the twins. “Keep yer eyes tae yerself.”

It was impossible not to laugh at the sight of him, water gurgling over his head, pouring down his face, dripping from his hair. He spluttered, spurting a mouthful of water.

“Why, ye little vixen...” he proclaimed, sending a tidal wave in her direction.

Now it was her turn to splutter as her hair was drenched through.

They splashed back and forth for a few minutes, laughing. Forgetting for those few short seconds that she was this man’s captive, Hannah was having fun. As the game went on, they drew closer, until they were almost standing nose to nose. She looked into his eyes and studied his laughing face. He was more handsome than any of the suitors Blaine had paraded before her over the past months. As their gazes locked, a feeling both divine and luscious darted through her, leaving her body indescribably sensitive.

Her awareness of another kind of red-hot sensation starting up between her thighs brought their game to an abrupt end and she hugged her arms around herself.

“I’m cold,” she mumbled, for want of something to say. “I need tae leave the water and find me clothes.”

The sudden overriding need to have his hands touching her, gliding over her breasts to stroke her rosy nubs, and to somehow relieve this new aching at her core, seemed to aggravate her neediness. She moaned inwardly. It was a mysterious feeling in the depths of her body she’d never experienced before. It was delicious, but scary at the same time.

When he turned to her again and she saw his green eyes darken, her breath rose high in her chest, hitching in her throat. He leaned in, stroking strands of hair back from her face and for one wild instant it seemed he might kiss her on the lips.

“Ye’re lovely, Hannah McKinnon,” he said, before turning abruptly away, leaving her bereft and strangely lonely.

Emerging from the icy, healing waters of the loch, they headed up the rock-strewn path to the place where they’d abandoned their clothing, near the tethered horses. Walking close behind him, averting her eyes from his nakedness as he strode ahead of her, she struggled to make sense of her body’s mysterious reactions to him.

She could make no sense of it at all. Recalling Ivy long ago revealing what occurred between a man and a woman once they were wed, and that it was pleasurable, she wondered if the feelings she’d experienced for her captor were, in some way, connected. But surely, that could not be possible?

After pulling her chemise over her head, she fumbled with the knotted rope at her waist.

“If I’m tae don my clothes again, ye’ll need tae release this confounded rope from my waist.”

Now clad in his britches, his chest bare, he reached around her, standing close enough for her to feel his breath in her hair as he undid the knot. Again, she felt the strange sensation – a swift hot dart in her belly – and the even more puzzling sense that she wanted his kiss.

Half closing her eyes, without thinking she raised her face to his. Their eyes met for a long moment before he slowly pulled himself away.

She gave her head a sound shaking.

What madness was this? The man is a ruffian, a villain. He doesn’t have seduction on his mind.

Her cheeks flushing pink at her own wayward thinking, she scrambled into her clothes, tossing aside the offending stays. Her torn dress was shameful, and she pulled her chemise down over her waist hoping to hide the exposed bare skin the damage revealed.

Observing her, her captor chuckled. “Lass, ye were naked only minutes ago and now ye’re embarrassed by a wee square of yer belly on display.”

She tossed her head. “Ye’re a rude, crude man tae speak tae me that way.”

He laughed all the harder. “Dinna fash. The horse willnae peep, and I’ve seen all of ye already so a patch of yer skin is of nay moment tae me.”

She huffed at him, but couldn’t help a smile quirking her lips.

“Ye should put on yer shirt then lad, ye’re nae fit tae be in the presence of a lady as ye are, half naked.” Her eyes roamed across his flexing muscles, the broad width of his chest and his slim waist. Oh yes, he was a handsome one all right. But she’d keep her head on her shoulders and not allow herself to succumb to his good looks.

He grabbed his shirt and pulled it over his head. “I dinna wish tae offend, melady, I’ve done enough tae enrage ye already,” he teased, grinning cheekily.

“Well...” Searching for a name to call him by, she pulled up short. Who in Christendom was this man? “I dinna ken how tae address ye. I dinna ken yer name.”

His grin faded. “Mayhap it’s best ye dinna ken who I am.”

“Whoever ye are, tell me why it is that ye cannae take me back tae my home? If it’s money ye’re tae gain from making me yer prisoner, my brother will pay ye more. It’s obvious ye dinna wish tae harm me or ye would have done so already.”

“I’ve already said. It’s nae money I want. I’m discharging my obligations tae... someone... whose name must remain unsaid between us.”

“But if ye take me back tae Ardtun, my brother can help ye with this obligation ye have.”

He shook his head. “Believe me, melody, I wish nothing more than tae never see the face of yer brother again.”

She studied him thoughtfully. “Ye speak as if ye ken my brother. Were ye once his friend?”

He gave a wry laugh. “I’ve made his acquaintance. But we’re the opposite of friends.”

“Ye’re my brother’s enemy?”

Pulling on his boots he paused, meeting her gaze. “Aye. Fate has placed us on opposing sides.”

Mulling his words, she recalled Edina telling her about the prisoner whose freedom she’d granted. Something about an obligation to *his* family that was similar to the obligation she bore to her sisters. A dark and terrifying thought flashed into her head.

“Are ye the traitor? The man my brother’s wife helped escape from the MacKinnon dungeon?”

He sucked in a breath, turning his head away, his jaw clenching. She held her breath, a river of ice replacing the blood in her veins.

Could this be the man she’d come to regard as the devil himself. Was he taking his revenge on the MacKinnons by making her his captive?

Her words hung in the air between them, stretching into a long silence, until, at last, he turned his gaze back to her.

“Aye lass,” he muttered avoiding her eyes.

She gulped. “Ye’re Taveon Macdonell?” Her heart hammered against her ribcage. She’d long hated the very sound of this man’s name. Now, dear God, here she was. His captive. Worse still, only moments ago she’d contemplated what it would be like to feel his lips on hers in a passionate kiss.

Escaping had suddenly become even more urgent.

She lifted her head haughtily. “If ye’ve nae intention of returning me tae me home then *Taveon Macdonell*, we’d best be on our way tae the destination. I cannae wait until I’ve tae spend nae more time in yer company.”

Taveon took the horses reins and led them up the path toward to track they’d

been following. She trailed in their wake.

It was now almost dark and, as they regained the track, she made out the glow of a campfire in the woods not all that far away. Her belly lurched. *Someone was there.* Someone who might come to her rescue her and help her to get back home.

It was her one chance to escape.

While Taveon's attention was momentarily distracted by the horses, she called to him "I need tae relieve myself. I'll go intae the woods." This would buy her time enough to make good with her escape before he came looking for her.

"Aye, lass," he said absently, tightening the saddle girth without looking up. "It's nae like ye have anywhere tae escape if I have the steeds."

She crossed the main track and entered the woods. The instant she was out of Taveon's sight, she scooped up her skirts above her knees in one hand and darted into the thicket of trees, heading towards the glow of firelight as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Hannah." She heard Taveon's distant voice. "Dinna venture too far from me, lass. It's nae safe. Ye may come tae harm."

Deaf to his words of warning, she flung herself headlong through the trees and bushes in the direction of the firelight.

It was minutes before she heard him calling her name again, followed some moments later by the faint sounds of his footsteps crackling through the woods behind her. She had a good lead, and if she could only keep running ahead as she was, her chances of escape were good.

Somehow, she found more speed, lifting her pace in a mad flight toward the distant murmuring of voices and the plume of smoke rising into the air.

As the small clearing finally came into view beyond the trees, she could just make out a group of coarse-looking men seated on the ground before a campfire. She screamed for someone, anyone, to come to her aid. Alas, she'd misjudged the distance. They were further away than she'd calculated and her voice was lost among the trees, the men paying her not a sliver of attention.

Her foot caught on a protruding rock, tripping her, making her stumble, and she went down on one knee with a crack. Scrambling hastily to her feet the sound of Taveon growing closer drove her onward, her dress catching on sharp twigs as she ran, tearing her skirt. She pulled free, leaving a square of silk attached to the low hanging branch.

Taveon was still a way off, and she kept going, despite the pain in her knee, hobbling, desperate to get close enough to the fire for the men to be able to hear her cries. She was certain that once she told them she'd escaped from a kidnapper and that he was now in close pursuit, they would rush to her aid.

She'd be safe. She'd promise the men a reward for her return to Castle Ardtun and they'd take her home without delay. Her side was aching and she could scarcely draw breath by the time she finally broke out of the woods

into the clearing. Despite the lack of air in her lungs she was able to scream out the word “Help.”

Bending double, she staggered forward clutching her sides, gasping air into her searing lungs. She was hardly aware of the men jumping up from the fire and running toward her. A rush of jubilation swept through her as the first of the men reached her and hoisted her into his arms.

Laughing, he called to his companions. “A beautiful young lass.”

The other men gathered around as the first man carried Hannah back to the campfire, one of them offering her a drinking gourd filled with ale.

“Ye’re a bonny lass,” the man said, holding the vessel to her lips, while she drank greedily.

“Thank heavens I’ve found ye,” she said gratefully.

The man laughed, his hand shooting under her skirt. “Aye lass. Ye’ve something that we’ll all have fun with.”

She squirmed. “What? Nay, stop that,” she yelled, feeling his calloused hands on her bare thighs. “Take yer hand away, nay! Please!”

He guffawed, pulling up her skirt. “Nae lass. Ye’ll do for us, now that ye’ve stumbled intae our camp. We’ve nae had fun with a woman for weeks. And

ye're a juicy one."

One of the others pawed at her top, roughly pulling her dress down from her shoulders.

The man carrying her flung her roughly to the ground at their feet, where she lay, momentarily stunned. What she felt now was a far worse terror than she'd experienced only hours before in her garden at the castle, when Taveon had seized her.

The men were burly ruffians, their big hands all over her body, one hauling up her skirts, another ripping her already-torn dress, exposing her breasts. Harsh fingers pinched a nipple between finger and thumb. It was nothing like Taveon. Yes, he did kidnap her but he was not so rude or hadn't scared her for even a minute once he had revealed himself. She didn't know if it was because of his orders or because of the kind of man he was, but he wouldn't hurt her in any way. Yet, these men...

She frantically clutched her tattered dress around herself and kicked out with all her might, trying to dislodge the hands that were grabbing her legs.

The sound of their rough laughter was her worst nightmare.

"I'll have her first," said the man who had picked her up at the edge of the clearing, already untying the strings of his britches.

She struggled into a sitting position. "Nay, nay," she shrieked in horror,

batting away a pair of encroaching hands. “Take yer hands off me. I’ll have aught tae dae with ye.”

“Hold her down lads,” the man bellowed. “I like me lassies tae keep still while I’m rogering them”

Strong and able as she was, Hannah was no match for the four burly brigands, and within moments two of them had grabbed her knees and spread her legs, holding her tight while the third man grasped her arms and held them above her head.

At last able to gasp in enough air, Hanna filled her lungs and screamed loud and long with everything she had, praying that Taveon would be able to find her.

CHAPTER SIX

*T*aveon had watched Hannah walking away, his heart torn at the sight of her slender figure disappearing among the trees. His instinct was to accompany her, to keep her under his surveillance where she couldn't escape, but he couldn't find it in himself to deny her the requested moment of privacy without being under his watchful gaze.

The moments they'd spent in the loch had taken him back to the time before his father's murder, when he and his brother had had few cares. His moments with Hannah had been bittersweet, taking him back to a happier time that was lost to him forever. His body had reacted to Hannah's naked beauty in a way that he'd also believed was lost to him.

Now, with the blood still hammering in his veins, he couldn't tear his mind away from his need to hold her again, to gaze upon her beauty and be close enough to her to feel the warmth of her breath and the touch of her hair on his cheek.

He scrubbed his hand through his hair and looked at it in dismay. It was stained brown. Had he, without thinking, washed the walnut-dye from his hair? Dammit. Much as he despised his disguise, until he was well clear of Castle Ardtun, his fair hair could lead to him being recognised. He frowned,

irritated by his own thoughtlessness.

They must make every effort to be on the road without further delay.

Minutes had slipped by since Hannah had left him, and he began to sense something was not right. She'd been gone for too long. Hell. He groaned. Surely, she wasn't attempting to escape in the middle of nowhere without a horse? He quickly slipped the horses' reins over a small branch, and took off, jogging in the direction she'd taken. Hurrying through the dense forest he cast around for a glimpse of her.

Where in hell had she disappeared to?

He paused, listening for the crunch of footsteps. It was then that he saw the distant plume of smoke rising above the forest. Seconds later he caught the faint sound of her shrieks.

God's bones!

His heart leaped as the realization of danger dawned on him. She must have blundered on a party of brigands, the lawless ruffians with nothing but mayhem on their minds who camped in the forest, waiting for unwary travellers to ambush and rob.

Heart thumping, he took off, racing in the direction of Hannah's screams. He offered a silent prayer that he'd be in time to save her from harm.

As the trees thinned out, he saw he was approaching a clearing, but the sounds falling on his ears froze his blood. Alongside Hannah's terrified screams he heard the sound of men's loud voices and cruel laughter.

He drew his sword from its scabbard and crept forward.

A horrifying scene met his eyes. In the centre of the clearing, close to a blazing campfire, he saw Hannah being roughly manhandled by a group of four cutthroats. Their laughter enraged him, their blatant amusement at her terrified cries of distress filling him with a murderous rage.

He flung himself out of the woods, quickly sizing up the situation. The men were simple brutes who would kill without a thought, but despite their number they would be no match for the skills of a trained warrior. The sight of them abusing Hannah, violating her with their rough hands, brought a red mist down over his eyes. He felt the rising tide of rage washing over him.

They deserve to die.

Brandishing his sword he tore across the clearing, descending with a roar on the man who was preparing to ravish Hannah MacKinnon.

At the sound of Taveon's wild roar, the man turned to face him, and pulling a long dirk from his boot, he raised his arm, his brutish features twisted in a snarl. But Taveon granted him no more time on this earth. He raised the sword and the man's life ended before he had time to bring down his blade, or utter so much as a scream.

One of the men who'd been kneeling, laughing as he grasped Hannah's knee, ducked to his feet, knife in hand, charging at Taveon even as his comrade dropped lifeless at his feet.

Taveon turned, lightning fast, and landed a savage kick with a sickening thud under the man's chin throwing the man's head back. Grunting, half stunned, the brigand dropped his knife, rolling backwards. He landed in the campfire, screaming as the scorching flames leapt onto his clothing. In seconds, his clothes and hair were alight and burning fiercely as he fought to put out the blaze.

"Get behind me," Taveon gritted, as a stricken Hannah struggled to her feet, grappling with one of the men who was attempting to use her as a shield against Taveon's force.

With one move he ran his sword through the man's shoulder. The man screamed in pain, the hand that was gripping Hannah slipped away and he dropped to the ground, moaning, blood spurting from his shoulder.

Taveon swept his arm around Hannah's waist, positioning her at his back as he turned to face the remaining man.

The man took one look at the bold warrior confronting him and yelled for mercy.

He went down on one knee. "Nay, nay, dinna kill me, master," he begged, holding out hands steepled in prayer.

Taveon took a contemptuous look at the terror in the man's eyes, his trembling chin. "Get out of me sight," he snarled. The man turned in a flash and began running without looking back.

"I'll nae waste me time on such a craven coward," he said, turning to Hannah who still clung to him, tears tumbling down her cheeks.

He steadied his breathing, all his attention now on Hannah. Holding her close he soothed her, stroking her hair. "Ye're safe with me now lass," he said, his conscience biting him hard as he held her trembling body against him. "Dinna be afeared. I'll nae let harm come tae ye."

But it was *his* fault she'd ended up in this situation. If he hadn't kidnapped her in the first place she would never have been in the forest, nor would she have needed to approach the men's camp seeking help.

He sighed, deeply troubled, fearing she was neither altogether safe with his plan to deliver her to de Coughran. He consoled himself, recalling John Sykes's promise that she'd not be harmed but would rather be returned to her brother as soon as the ransom was paid. Although it was difficult to trust his enemy, he *was* prepared to believe this. Villains though they were, they had nothing to gain by harming Hannah.

Stepping over the prone body of the man he had killed, now laying in a pool of his own blood where he'd fallen, Taveon scooped a sobbing Hannah into his arms pressing on through the forest until they reached the place where he'd left the tethered horses.

“I should have warned ye lass.” He said, tenderly placing her on her feet to stand beside the horse. “These woods are well-kent as being a dangerous place. The brigands lie in wait for passing travellers, ambushing them, robbing them and more often than nae injuring or even leaving them for dead.”

She leaned into him; her eyes downcast. “I tried tae escape. I didnae heed yer warning.”

He clasped her to him, drying her tears. “I’ll nae blame ye for trying tae escape, but from now on ye’ll ride on my horse, in front of me on the saddle, so I can keep ye safe. I have nae choice but tae do what I have tae dae and I cannae risk ye running off.”

Looking into his eyes, she shook her hair despairingly. “If ye had even a mite of concern for my wellbeing ye would take me back tae me home, Taveon.” When he didn’t respond to her pleading, she continued. “Ye could take me as far as the village without risking capture yeself. I’ll be safe there. I ken the villagers. They are good people who would keep me safe and escort me back tae the castle in the morn’.”

“Nay lass,” he muttered, his voice sharp with regret. “I cannae dae what ye ask. My mission is nae my own. I’ve others’ lives depending on me. I understand how much ye want tae be back in yer home, but yer fate is with me now.”

He took the reins of the other horse, tying them to his saddle. After rummaging through his saddle bag, he withdrew a roughly woven cloak which he wrapped around her shoulders, then he offered his flagon of water and she drank before passing it back to him. He took her hand and helped her

up.

“I cannae let ye out me my sight,” he said, although a small part of him that he was loath to acknowledge, relished the thought of her body pressed against his as they rode through the night.

He put his foot in the stirrup and rose into the saddle holding tight to now her rigid form, sensing that whatever sweetness there’d been between them and however grateful she might be for him coming to rescue her from the brigands, she still believed him to be her enemy.

They rode through the night, putting miles between them and Castle Ardtun, exactly as Taveon intended. But he was aware that Hannah’s eyes kept closing and her skin was alarmingly cold. He feared the aftermath of the brigands’ ferocious assault on her may have taken too great a toll.

His heart went out to her. Despite her unwavering defiance and her fervent struggles against him, in the end she was but a lass, and no match for his superior male strength. The final straw was the cruel assault inflicted on her by the brigands. Although she had no visible injuries, save for a surfeit of bruises that would mark her fair skin for days to come, he knew the terror she had endured and the violent assault had inflicted a serious blow to her spirits.

He cradled her in his arms as she dozed and wakened with a jolt only minutes later.

He brought the horses to a halt. Hannah lifted her head and looked around blearily. “Where are we? This isnae the sea. There’s nae boat waiting tae take

us tae the mainland.”

“Nay lass. But it’s time we rested. Ye’ve been shaken and bruised, and ye need a peaceful sleep for a few hours before we travel further.”

She looked up at him, her eyes shining with gratitude. “Oh, thank God. I’m nae certain I could go on without taking some rest now.”

“It’s fine. We’ll bide here until first light. We’ve nae great distance tae ride before we reach the water and my man will wait for us there.”

“Dae we have far tae go, Macdonell? I’m nae certain I can bear a long day in the saddle tomorrow.”

He gave a faint laugh. “I understand. Once we cross tae the mainland it’s mayhap half a day’s ride. We’ll rest again if ye need tae.”

He gathered some bracken to make a warm cushion for her and she slumped down, leaning her back against the boulder, keeping her eyes on him as he built a small fire and lit it.

“I ken ye’re used tae being a fugitive,” she said. “Ye ken how tae live wild like this. But I’ve never spent a night away from a warm bed in me life.”

He shrugged. “Mayhap tomorrow night ye’ll sleep between soft sheets with a warming pan at yer feet and yer belly filled with fine feasting.” Unwrapping a

small package, he offered her a piece of cheese. “Until then, ye’ll need tae make do with the food of simple folk such as meself”.

She looked him up and down. “I ken ye are nae simple folk, Macdonell. All the same, ye may keep yer cheese. I’m nae hungry.”

He put down the package and took out another parcel containing a circle of sausage. “Will ye nae try some of this sausage. It’s good. There’s a wee wifey in the village of Ardtun makes it. They say it’s the best in all Scotland.”

Putting out her hand she pushed the meat away. “Leave me be. I’ve said I’m nae hungry. Have ye nae ears on ye Macdonell?” She sounded irritated.

“Ye must eat, lass.”

Turning away, she pulled the cloak tighter, hunching her shoulders, pressing her lips together.

He scoffed at her feeble act of defiance. “Ye’re acting like a sulky wean who’s refusing her supper. Ye’ll nae be able tae keep going without food in yer belly.”

“I dinna care tae keep going. Ye’re taking me from me home. Why should I eat tae give me the strength tae keep goin’?”

“It will be me head that rolls if my prisoner is too weak tae travel, lass,” he said, half-joking.

Hannah shrugged. “Why should I care if ye lose yer head?”

Now, he laughed. “Why, indeed. But I’m afraid I shall have tae insist ye take some nourishment.”

She turned away again without another word, dismissing him with silence.

He reached an arm around her shoulders and turned her back to face him. “Nay, melady, ye’ll dae as I tell ye,” he said as he pulled his dirk from his belt and pressed it against her chin so that she could feel the sharp point of it. “Take the piece and place it in yer mouth. I’m trying tae be good tae ye Hannah, but I’m yer abductor and ye willnae behave like a spoiled brat with me.”

She gasped, raising a hand to pull his arm away but he tensed his muscles and her tugging made no more impact on him than an ant would on the boulder beside her.

“Now, Hannah MacKinnon, ye’ll partake of yer supper without another word.”

Glaring at him, she picked up the sausage and nibbled it. He kept his dirk close, waiting until both sausage and cheese had been consumed before he returned it to its sheath.

“Ye win, this time, Macdonell,” she said, but a tiny grin was quirking the edge of her lips. “Just wait. I’ll bide me time.”

Pleased that she’d finally eaten, he slanted her a cheeky grin. “Ah lass, once ye finally come tae learn the lesson that I’ll protect ye from harm, ye’re obedience tae me will grow.”

She huffed. “I’ll nae obey ye. The only man I’ll give my obedience tae will be my lawful husband.” She looked up at him through her long-lashed green eyes, melting his fierce heart, robbing his breath. “And I’ll nae be wed tae the likes of ye, Macdonell.”

Something like regret stabbed him and he took a deep breath. He had no right to regret. No right to allow himself so much as a fanciful moment picturing Hannah MacKinnon in his arms. No right to imagine her sweet lips crushed beneath his mouth, his hands roaming her perfect body. No right at all to imagine her beside him like this for the rest of his days.

He was an outlaw. A traitor. Hateful to Hannah and all her clan. To all Scots in fact.

For all that, those forbidden images still came to him, whether he allowed space for them or not.

He ignored her comment, refusing to fall into her baited trap.

“It’s time ye slept. We’ve few enough hours before morning.” He injected ice into his tone. No way would she ever know how deeply her words had cut him.

Clenching his jaw, he leaned over her, retying the rope that still loosely bound them together. One end of the rope was fastened to his waist and he pulled in the slack. They would sleep close enough so that he’d feel her move if she made any attempt to escape.

As he fumbled with the knots, he was near enough to feel her warmth and inhale her delicate scent. His lips hovered over hers, and the temptation to claim her mouth was almost more than he could bear. She lifted her chin, bringing them closer.

She sighed and he felt her soft breath on his cheek and was lost.

CHAPTER SEVEN

*H*annah closed her eyes. Taveon was so close, there was only a finger's breadth between them. If she leaned a tiny bit closer, those perfect lips of his would meet with hers. She inclined her head slightly and heard him suck in a startled breath.

She didn't pull away as their lips touched but instinctively opened her mouth slightly. She wanted the feel of his arms around her, holding her tight, just as he'd done when they rode on the horse together.

If he'd only deepen the kiss...

Instead, he groaned softly and pulled away.

Oh, dear saints in heaven, what had she been thinking? Had she given him the idea she'd *wanted* him to kiss her? Of course not. That could never be. This was the man she'd been hating ever since she had heard Blaine was holding a traitor prisoner in the Castle Ardtun dungeon. He had *abducted* her. Yet, he had also saved her from the men who almost took her against her will. *God's teeth!*

In a fluster, she gave a tiny whimper, jolting her head away. “How dare ye!” she wailed, landing a slap on his cheek.

He reeled back, holding his cheek with his hand, a surprised expression in his green eyes. Immediately she regretted what she’d done, but it was too late. He pulled away from her, his eyes narrowed.

She was horrified by the awareness that she’d wanted his kiss. In fact, if she was honest with herself, she couldn’t wait to taste him and feel his lips on hers. But how could she be so stupid? This was Taveon Macdonell, not one of the tame suitors her brother had trotted out for her to assess as if they were prize cattle.

She’d seen him kill a man with scarcely a thought. The memory of what had occurred in the clearing this afternoon made her shudder. He was dangerous. He was her captor, and she had no idea where he was taking her. She was completely in his power.

“Apologies melody,” he muttered. “I forgot meself for an instant. Yer beauty overcame me, catching me off guard. I promise ye I’ll nae let such a grave error occur again.”

He flung a blanket over her and threw himself down on the bracken, his back turned toward her. “It’s time for us tae sleep.”

Lying beside him her head buzzed with all that had happened. Although her limbs were aching with tiredness, her swirling thoughts kept sleep at bay.

He'd called her beautiful. He had wanted to kiss her, just as she'd wanted him.

After a while, Taveon's breathing grew slow and even, and he slept. He shifted briefly without waking, turning his face toward her, lit by a shaft of moonlight streaming between the trees where they were camped. She gazed at him, marveling at the planes of his broad forehead, the long lashes revealed by his closed eyelids, the perfectly sculpted cheek bones, the strong, chiseled, outline of his jaw and the perfectly formed lips that had so nearly claimed hers.

It was strange the way she'd come to imagine the prisoner she'd heard the men discussing over the months he'd been incarcerated at the castle. To her mind, such a man, a traitor, could be no more than half-human. She'd pictured a huge ogre-ish creature, with swollen, twisted features, his skin pock-marked, his hair like hay, his teeth rotten. And stinking to high heaven. He wouldn't speak, merely grunt and slobber, incapable of making any sense.

But the real flesh-and-blood Taveon was nothing like she'd pictured. He was as tall and as broad as her brother Errol, his fine hair just touching his shoulders in such a way that tempted her fingers to feel its silkiness and tousle it playfully. His rare smiles displayed white even teeth, and she could gaze forever into his sea-green eyes.

And despite kidnapping her and making her his prisoner, he hadn't hesitated to risk his life by coming to her rescue. He'd treated her with kindness. She hugged the blanket he'd spread across her, leaving himself without a warm covering.

She shook herself, scrunching her eyes shut. There was no point in admiring him. He was Taveon Macdonell, the last man on earth that Blaine or the clan chiefs would ever approve of as a suitor for her hand.



It seemed as if no time had passed but, when she opened her eyes, she saw the sun was well on its way across the sky and Taveon was shaking her awake.

“We cannae bide here any longer lass, we must reach Lochnell Castle before dusk this night.”

Lochnell Castle. So, that was their destination. She recalled this was the seat of the powerful Clan Cochran and the home of their Laird, Sir William de Coughran. If she remembered right, he was a well-known English sympathizer, and that made him an enemy of the MacKinnons.

Was it Sir William who was commanding Taveon?

With a stern warning that she was not to wander or delay, he untied the rope from her waist and she took a few quiet moments out of sight in the forest, to relieve herself. When she returned, Taveon was kicking dirt onto the last embers of the fire that had warmed them through the night. Without any argument, she accepted the cheese and oatcakes he insisted she eat, and took a draught of water from the flask he offered. Wetting her kerchief, she cleaned her face and wiped the sleep from her eyes.

Taveon said little. There was nothing of the sweet camaraderie they'd shared

last night and she guessed he regretted their almost-kiss as much as she did. Save for occasionally issuing a brief instruction, he maintained a cool distance as she helped bundle their things into the saddle bags.

Once they were ready to depart, he gently assisted her onto his horse, to sit sideways in the saddle while he mounted behind her. They took off, riding at a steady pace on a picturesque track in view of the sea. She smiled to herself at the way he'd treated her. As if he was afraid she could harm herself just by climbing onto the horse.

Because she'd lost her parents when she was but a child and had been raised by two fearless older brothers, she could ride astride Blaine's fastest horses without a care. Many a time, when she was younger, she'd galloped through the Ardtun forest, joining with them to hunt through the mighty Glen. But today she thought it prudent to maintain the pretense she was a maid who could only perch uneasily aside a horse for the sake of propriety.

Despite all her resolve, however, being held so close as the horse jogged on its way, lulled her again into strange longings and a restless need to succumb to the warmth of his body and his strong arms. She straightened and, with a sigh, felt him do the same. The intimacy building between them was instantly severed.

"We've nae distance between us and the coast, lass." He gave a short laugh. "I didnae think tae ask if ye can swim?"

She huffed. "Why, are ye saying ye'll be asking me tae swim all the way across tae Oban?"

“Mayhap. It’s nae unknown for the sails on a cog tae tip its passengers intae the water and make them swim for the shore.”

“Is that how ye managed tae escape from Ardtun? Did ye swim tae safety?”

“Nay. A kindly fisherman took me first across tae Ulva, and I made me way from there, while yer brother’s men were searching in the opposite direction.”

Hannah grew thoughtful, her mind picturing the months Taveon had spent as a fugitive.

“It’s a marvel that ye made yer way back tae Castle Ardtun again. Were ye nae afeared of me brother’s men? There’s still a watch being kept for ye.”

“The very last place I wanted tae travel tae. But, needs must.”

“Ye said it wasnae money that ye’re seeking, Macdonell? What brought ye tae risk yer neck tae kidnap me? Was yer hatred of the MacKinnons so great?”

Her question was greeted with silence and she glanced at him, her gaze roaming over his features as she tried to glean some understanding of who he was behind this cold exterior. She’d seen enough to know there was more to him.

His eyes were fixed ahead, but she detected a tic in his jaw that made her

think the question had struck a nerve. This made her all the more curious. Whatever had driven him to make such a desperate move? Even though she'd been in his company for less than a day, his manners and his gentle treatment of her were at odds with the picture of the cruel-hearted, ruthless traitor she'd believed him to be.

Within moments the path opened out and in front of them was a small, sandy cove where a cog was bobbing at anchor, close to the shore. Two men who'd been huddled over a small fire in the sand rose to their feet as Taveon and Hannah appeared through the trees.

"Whoa," Taveon pulled the horses to a halt and the men came forward to greet him. One man took the reins while Taveon untied his bags from the saddle. He held out his hand to assist Hannah as she alighted.

"Ye took yer time Macdonell," said the other man, a craggy fellow, wearing the rough-hewn garb of a fisherman, "We were about tae give ye up as lost."

"We met some trouble on the way that caused a delay." Taveon muttered by way of explanation and the man grunted an acknowledgement.

The man turned to Hannah and gave a slight bow. "Davie Curran at yer service melady. It's me wee boat that will take ye across tae the mainland."

She glanced at Taveon who was busy with the other man at the horse. "Do ye ken who I am?" she asked. Perhaps if this man understood her plight, he'd refuse to take her against her will.

Davie nodded. “Aye lass. I ken ye’re the laird’s sister.”

Her heart sank. He knew who she was but he clearly had no remorse or hesitation in providing aid to Taveon. “Are ye nae afeared of helping the man who’s taking me from me home?”

“Sure, lass. I’m afeared of the laird, but I’m more afeared of de Coughran’s men and the English. Yer brother is kent as a fair man, but there’s nae hope for any man who crosses de Coughran.”

Observing the man’s bleak expression, she nodded reluctantly. “I understand ye cannae help me.” She lowered her voice. “If me brothers should come searching for me, will ye let them ken I’m bound for Lochnell Castle?”

“Aye lass, that I will,” he muttered giving her a nod, as Taveon approached.

Davie hitched up his trousers. “If ye like, I’ll carry the lass out tae the cog.”

Taveon laughed. “Nae, thank ye for the offer, but I’ll take melody.” Taveon handed the bulging leather bags to Davie and turned to her.

“Ye’d best keep yer skirts high lass if ye dinna wish tae be drenched.” He paused for a moment, giving her time to hitch up her bedraggled skirt and petticoat and wind the cloak about her shoulders. Then he hoisted her in his arms as if she weighed nae more than a bird.

He splashed through the waves for the few yards out to the boat, holding her above the water. Registering the strength of his arms, a tiny thrill rippled through her. He passed her over the bow to David who helped her to her feet and settled her on the plank that served as a seat, while Taveon hauled himself on board.

Although the sun was still shining in a blue sky, there was a stiff breeze coming across the water, whipping up waves, bringing with it a faintly fishy, salty tang. Gulls wheeled noisily overhead until they were well clear of the shore. Hannah shivered and wrapped herself tighter in the cloak, wishing with all her heart that she could change her human form into that of a seagull and fly back to Ardtun, never to face up to whatever lay in store for her once they reached Castle Lochnell.

But the sails of the little craft caught the breeze and, under Davie's skilled hands, they skimmed over the waves with a speed that took Hannah's breath away. Before long, he was guiding them into another hidden cove, this one on the mainland, where a party of a dozen or so men and horses were waiting.

Hannah gasped. The men were warriors. Wearing hauberks, they were all well-armed, some carrying war-axes along with their swords, "Who are those men? Surely they mean us harm."

Taveon placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Nae, Hannah. Nae harm will come tae us from those men. They are Sir William de Coughran's men come tae escort us safely tae Castle Lochnell."

Hannah snorted in disgust. "I dinna trust them, they are my enemies, supporters of the English." She widened her eyes, "Why, many may, themselves, be the cursed English."

She clung to his arm as Davie brought the cog into the shallows and when Taveon took her in his arms and carried her ashore she didn't protest.

One of the men rode forward, leading two horses, one horse clearly meant for her as it bore a saddle that would enable her to sit with both her legs to the side. After Taveon helped her up, he took hold of the reins of her horse and mounted his own steed. Although she was no longer seated on the saddle in front of Taveon, she had no control of the horse she rode, and could only follow helplessly where he led.

Curling her small hands into fists, she kept her murderous thoughts to herself. If only she had a sword and a horse, she could break free of these strangers.

After stopping briefly for the men to relieve themselves and to partake of a small meal, washed down by a flask of ale, they were on their way again.

"It's nae distance from here tae Lochnell." Taveon told her. "There ye'll be well looked after. Sir William's men swore tae me that nae harm would come tae ye. Once yer brother pays the ransom, ye'll be swiftly returned tae Ardtun."

Was that a wistful note she heard in Taveon's voice. Did he think of her with kindness after all?

She looked up, her heart sinking at the sight of the vast castle in the distance.

What did it matter if he cared or not?

DO YOU WANT TO READ MORE?

To read more, click on the link below!

<https://www.kennakendrick.com/pljv>

NEVER MISS A THING

If you truly want to follow all my releases and see what others had to say about my books, you may...



Follow me on BookBub

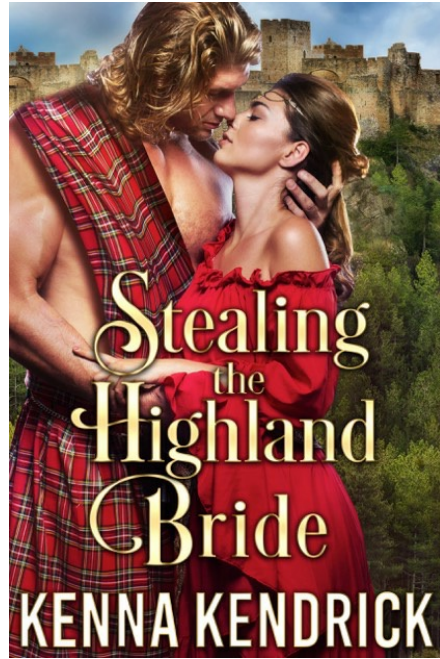
THANK YOU

I want to personally thank you for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me. It's a blessing to have the opportunity to share with you, my passion for writing, through my stories.

As a **FREE GIFT**, I am giving you a link to my first novel. It has **more than 300 reviews**, with an **average rating of 4.5 out of 5**

It is called "[Stealing the Highland Bride](#)", and you can get it for FREE.

Please note that this story is only available for **YOU** as a subscriber and **hasn't been published anywhere else**.



Please click on the cover to download the book

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenna Kendrick is an American based author of Historical Scottish Romance living in Austin Texas with her husband and three children. Her more than 25-year-old experience as an English Teacher has brought her close to the literary world, growing her love for fictional stories.

Her love for literature was also strong because of her father John who used to write crime-stories. While she tried following on her father's footsteps, a trip to Scotland sealed the deal for as she fell in love with the Celtic myths and the bleak Highlands.



Note from Kenna

If you want to know when my next book will come out, please [subscribe to my newsletter and get my first book for free](#), and you will always be the first to know about my newest Scottish novel.

Thank you.

Your friend,

Kenna ♥



If you want to keep in touch...

[Tap to Follow me on BookBub](#)

Also, you can follow me on Social Media:

