



# EASTER AT AIRDFINNAN

A BRIDE QUEST STORY



# CLAIRE DELACROIX

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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## **Easter at Airdfinnan**

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## THE BRIDE QUEST

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## EASTER AT AIRDFINNAN

THE BRIDE QUEST SERIES #8

Six years after the end of **The Temptress**, the family have all been invited to Airdfinnan to celebrate Easter, as well as the knighting of Jacqueline and Angus' oldest son Fergus. There's also a betrothal planned between their oldest daughter, Annelise, and Rowan's son, Nicholas. An arranged marriage between the pair might make sense, but more than one person in attendance is keeping quiet about their doubts. The mysterious vine that bloomed during Bayard's courtship of Esmeraude is growing again, though, seemingly determined to ensure that the path of true love succeeds. Will Nicholas make a love match instead of an arranged marriage?

*This novella and epilogue to the Bride Quest II is available in ebook on its own, and is included in the new mass market paperback and hard cover editions of **The Temptress**.*



## DEAR READER

*2023 is the 25th anniversary of the original publication of **The Princess**, book one of my **Bride Quest** series of medieval romances. I'm not sure where the time went but anniversaries need to be celebrated!*

*I commissioned a new cover illustration of the lead couple for each of the six books in the series and there are two new editions available for each book, using that illustration. The new hard cover editions have a similar design on the dust jacket to the existing trade paperbacks, and the new illustration on the case laminate. The new mass market paperback editions use the illustration on the cover. I just love these new images!*

*I revealed the new covers in a Kickstarter campaign in June 2023, offering advance copies of the new editions to backers. Those backers also had early access to two new stories set in the **Bride Quest** world. **Christmas at Tullymullagh** is the new epilogue to the **Bride Quest I**, and takes place five years after the end of **The Heiress**. **Easter at Airdfinnan** is the new epilogue to the **Bride Quest II**, and takes place six years after the end of **The Temptress**. Both of these new stories are available in digital editions.*

*In addition, **Christmas at Tullymullagh** is included in the new hard cover and mass market print editions of **The Heiress**, while **Easter at Airdfinnan** is included in the new hard cover and mass market editions of **The Temptress**. I really enjoyed visiting these characters again and hope you do, too.*

You can see the new illustrations and new editions on the *Bride Quest* pages on my website. Here are links to those pages:

***The Princess***

***The Damsel***

***The Heiress***

***The Countess***

***The Beauty***

***The Temptress***

To learn about my new releases and get additional content available only to subscribers, please subscribe to my newsletter. ***Knights & Rogues*** is the newsletter for my Claire Delacroix historical romances.

Until next time, I hope you are well and have plenty of good books to read.

All my best,

Claire

<http://delacroix.net>





## PROLOGUE



*Airdfinnan Castle – April 1200*

“**S**he is too young,” Jacqueline protested yet again. She stood in the solar of Airdfinnan, confronting her stubborn spouse.

He flicked a glance at her as he drew on his boot. It was early in the morning, the birds chattering in the gardens below and the breeze cool through the shutters. They had not yet descended to the hall to break their fast, and the keep was yet quiet. Spring had been cool and sunny at Airdfinnan, and though they were overdue for rain, the trees in the forest around the keep were verdant green. Two foals had been born in the stables and another was due, and all was a-bustle with preparations for the upcoming celebration. “She desires it,” he said simply.

“She is too young to know what she desires in truth.”

“Annelise has seen fourteen summers,” Angus explained one more time. “Your sister Mhairi wed at fourteen and is content.”

“That was different.”

“How is it different?” Angus raised a hand. “Annelise is as lovely and confident a maiden as Mhairi was at her age.”

“More so.”

“And she has known Nicholas all her life, just as Mhairi knew Finlay all her life. Annelise and Nicholas have always been fond of each other, as well, just as Mhairi and Finlay were.” He shrugged, the conclusion perfectly clear to him—as it was not to Jacqueline.

“They do not know each other in truth,” Jacqueline argued. “Mhairi and Finlay were constant companions. Annelise has seen Nicholas only a few times, and is in awe of him.”

“That is not a bad thing in a wife,” Angus jested but Jacqueline did not smile.

In truth, she felt there was little to defend her view but her own instinctive dislike of the choice. She knew that Angus had need of more logical evidence than her intuition.

Even if she trusted it utterly.

Indeed, she had trusted her instinctive trust of Angus himself when he had stolen her away, and that matter had concluded in a most satisfactory way.

She frowned. “And there is the difference in their ages.”

“Thirteen years is not so much more than the eleven between you and me.”

It felt infinitely greater to Jacqueline, but she knew her beloved would not be convinced. He was a practical man, concerned with alliance and ensuring the future security of all their children. She understood that well and admired it.

She also understood what ’twas like to be a prize, a woman desired for her beauty or family alliances, not for her wits or her own desires. She suspected that Annelise had not begun to consider what she might wish to call her own in her life. She guessed that her daughter was flattered that an older, handsome, affluent knight had offered for her hand. Who would not be?

That did not mean the match would bring Annelise joy.

“And the moment is ideal,” Angus continued. “Burke, Rowan and Nicholas accompany our Fergus from his training with Burke and to witness the granting of his spurs. All will be gathered here, at our abode, and to celebrate the betrothal at the same moment will only bring joy to all.”

Jacqueline went to the window of the solar and looked down. The mighty river Finnan flowed around the fortress built by Angus’ kin upon an island. The stone walls rose high from the water, surrounding a perfect sanctuary that she had called home for seventeen years.

Though truly, ’twas not the castle that made it a home. ’Twas the knight who was laird whose love and very presence made Airdfinnan the sole place Jacqueline desired to be.

That man came to her and gathered her into his arms, and as ever, she melted into his embrace, familiar desire stirring deep within her. Was it so wrong that she wished for her oldest daughter to find such contentment in marriage as she herself knew?

“You fret overmuch,” he murmured to her, his fingertip on her cheek. “Perhaps because she is our oldest daughter and the first to wed.”

Jacqueline’s heart squeezed at the truth in that. Doubtless Fergus would depart once he gained his spurs, and she knew ’twould not be long before her youngest, Ewen, would embark upon his own knightly training. He had seen only six summers but at eight, she knew Angus would ensure that he was tutored by a knight, perhaps also by Burke.

How had they grown so quickly? It seemed only a moment before that she had held Fergus in her arms for the first time.

“Be happy for her good fortune,” Angus advised.

“She will be distant, to be sure.”

“All will be well,” her husband insisted. “Nicholas is a fine knight with a large legacy. Annelise will lack for naught at Château Montvieux.”

“Save her close kin.”

“It is a good match, Jacqueline.”

“I know.” There was little joy in her voice, though, and Angus pulled back to look into her eyes. He smiled, then placed a hand over his heart. “I pledge to you that we will visit for the christening of their first child and you will be able to assess the magnificence of Montvieux for yourself.” He raised his brows. “Perhaps you will decide to remain there, in greater comfort that can be offered here. Margaux de Montvieux always insisted ’twas the finest holding in all of Christendom and you know she could not bear to be mistaken.”

They both crossed each other in memory of that formidable woman, gone these six years, then Jacqueline poked her spouse. “You jest overmuch.”

“I would see you smile again, my Jacqueline.”

The lady sighed. “I would go sooner,” she said. “Many women die in childbirth.”

Angus lifted his hands skyward. “She is not even betrothed and you fear for her death in the delivery of a child!”

Jacqueline frowned, still discontent.

“What troubles you in truth?” he asked gently.

“I sense ’tis the wrong choice for her, but I cannot explain why.”

Angus nodded understanding. “This is solely a betrothal, Jacqueline. Should either party change their view before the nuptial vows are exchanged a year hence, then naught will be lost. And all have begun their journey to us by this point. Let us gather and be joyous. I vow to you that if Annelise does not desire the match a year hence, I will defend her choice to my dying breath.”

Jacqueline smiled. “I know you will. Never was there a more doting father.”

He chuckled and she moved into his arms again, reassured. “And there is the smile I sought, though ’tis yet a small one. If you appear to have doubts, that may keep Annelise from grasping her own desire. She loves you so well, Jacqueline, that she would do naught to disappoint you. Do not influence her

unduly.”

Jacqueline leaned on his broad chest, welcoming the thunder of his heartbeat beneath her ear. He was so confident, and she wished only that she could share his conviction. “It feels too soon to me.”

“They will always be your babes,” Angus murmured into her ear. “No matter how tall they grow or how many children they bring to light.”

Jacqueline smiled against his tabard, knowing it was true. She raised her lips for his kiss and he lifted her in his arms, sweeping her off her feet as so often he did. His kiss sent a welcome surety through her, heating her with familiar desire and she could only kiss him back with equal ardor. How was it that love could always grow greater? ’Twas a gift beyond expectation.

And Jacqueline could have no quibble with that.

## CHAPTER 1



They had all lost their wits.

Margaret MacCormac was utterly convinced that her family was mad. There could be no other explanation for the folly of a planned betrothal between her cousin Annelise and the fiend Nicholas de Montvieux. 'Twas clear that she alone had eyes to see the truth. Perhaps she also would be the sole one with the audacity to say as much.

An arranged marriage! For the prettiest and sweetest maiden Margaret had ever known! And arranged by people who had *all* wed for love.

Surely if any soul of her acquaintance was destined to win a man's heart with a glance, 'twas Annelise, but at fourteen summers of age, she had scarce had a chance to do as much.

Worse, Annelise was to wed Nicholas de Montvieux, of all men. If ever there was a rogue and a scoundrel who treated maidens poorly, 'twas Nicholas. Margaret herself knew firsthand what a knave that knight could be. She knew better than to have any aspirations with regard to that knight and nobleman, but she would not stand by in silence while Annelise was betrothed to *him*. There could be no worse match.

Margaret rode to Airdfinnan, the home of her aunt Jacqueline and that lady's husband Angus MacGillivray, Laird of Airdfinnan, for the celebration of Easter. Their oldest son and Airdfinnan's heir, Fergus, was to be knighted,

while the couple's oldest daughter, Annelise, was to be betrothed. Nicholas de Montvieux was one of the knights who had trained Fergus and would accompany Fergus home from France to be invested with his spurs.

Nicholas. Margaret almost sighed at the very thought of him, proof again that her heart could not be relied upon. He was more than handsome, tall, and broad-shouldered, a man who spoke little but whose gaze implied a wealth of meaning. His hair was a deep auburn and wavy, his eyes a clear green that reminded her of a turbulent sea.

Such was a man to fill a maiden's dreams.

Her cheeks heated in acknowledgement of how he had filled her own dreams these three years. She was said to be keen of wit, but she had been deceived by Nicholas. If she could not keep herself from dreaming of him, she might ensure that Annelise was not similarly disappointed.

She had surrendered all to Nicholas, trusting her heart and taking a chance upon a shared future—but that surrender had only been followed by three years of silence. Doubtless Nicholas had forgotten her. Doubtless, he had thought their union less than remarkable. Doubtless he had gained the sole prize he had sought.

How else could he even consider betrothing himself to another?

Still, Margaret could not deny herself the opportunity to look upon him once again. Curiosity was healthy, and knowing the fiend was pledged to another—or better yet, that he no longer held any sway over her heart—would be even better.

“I should not have allowed you to join the party,” her father Iain said in a gruff undertone.

Margaret cast a glance at her father. “You could not have left me behind. I must deliver my commission, after all.” To be sure, there was work to be delivered, for Margaret worked as a silversmith alongside her father. Angus had commissioned two pieces as gifts to mark his son's knighthood, a brooch from Margaret and a chalice from Iain.

Her father snorted, convincing her that he knew her true reason for making the journey. “’Twill break your heart,” Iain said grimly. “Though it should have been broken and healed by now. You always were a stubborn lass.”

Margaret lifted her chin and kept silent with an effort. She wanted to declare that love was not readily set aside, but ’twas evident that she was the sole one who had felt more than earthly desire.

She had been a fool and seeing Nicholas again might finally convince her that her unruly heart had erred.

“What is this matter you two whisper about?” Eglantine asked, her tone both indulgent and teasing. “What schemes do you hatch so early in the day?”

Though Eglantine was not Margaret’s grandmother by blood, the older woman might as well have been so. Margaret’s mother, Alienor, had been the oldest daughter of Eglantine’s first husband and four years of age when those wedding vows had been exchanged. Eglantine had always treated Alienor as one of her own daughters and thus, Alienor’s children might have been the oldest of Eglantine’s grandchildren.

Margaret admired Eglantine beyond all. The lady was forthright, reliable, keen of wit and beautiful, even as her hair turned to silver. ’Twas no wonder Duncan had lost his heart with a glimpse. The tale of his efforts to claim that lady’s heart always made Margaret smile. The pair were proof that love conquered all in the end, one of her favorite sayings.

Aye, Margaret yearned for the day that such a love would fill her heart and her life. She ached that she had been so mistaken about Nicholas.

“En route to a betrothal, Father would remind me to wed,” Margaret said, for it was a common topic between them and better than sharing the truth.

Iain did not dispute her words. “At one-and-twenty summers, lass, you should choose the man while you yet have the chance.”

“I was eight-and-twenty when I found Duncan,” Eglantine said.



“You found me?” that man demanded with a smile. “’Tis not how I remember the event.”

“There you were, obstructing my course to my own holding,” Eglantine said with a laugh. “I arrived in Scotland and *found* you in my way.”

“Ah, but I was the one to discover a great lady and a great love,” Duncan said, his warm tone prompting Eglantine’s flush. The pair exchanged affectionate glances.

Margaret sighed with appreciation. Who could wonder that she desired such a match herself? Still she could not understand why a match had been arranged for Annelise—much less why no one protested.

Before she could ask, though, Duncan spoke. “This will be a bittersweet journey for you, Iain,” he said and Margaret frowned in confusion.

Her father looked discomfited, which was no good sign to her thinking. “Not so much,” he said, as if he would change the topic.

“Why should it be so?” Margaret asked, looking between them.

“’Tis the last journey Iain intends to take,” Duncan provided. “One last trip before he settles with Alienor for the duration. You cannot have forgotten, Margaret.”

She could not forget what she had never heard.

Her father evaded her gaze, which meant ’twas no accident she did not know.

Duncan chuckled, unaware that he was revealing a secret. “I am curious how you two fare together after so many years of your regular absence at the fairs in Champagne.”

Margaret reined in her pony so that Eglantine and Duncan rode ahead. Her father might have continued with them, but she reached for the reins of his mount. “What is this?” she asked in a whisper. “We depart in a month for the hot fair in St. Jean. Surely you have not forgotten?”

Iain flicked a glance at her, one that seemed filled with guilt. “Nay, not this year,” he confessed. “Indeed, not ever again.”

Margaret was astonished. "Why?"

"For nigh twenty-five years, I have traveled to Champagne for the fairs, to sell my work and buy silver and gemstones." He shook his head. "You know I have tired too readily in recent years, Margaret. The entire reason for your heartbreak is mine."

He fell silent, checking his words, though Margaret knew what he would have said. They had lingered at Château Montvieux three years before because her father had fallen ill at the fair. He had developed a cough that would not be shaken, and Nicholas had insisted upon them remaining a few days. Doubtless, it had fit well with that fiend's scheme to seduce her.

"I cannot make the journey again," Iain continued with resolve. "'Tis done. Your mother and I have decided."

Margaret could not hide her dismay. "Nay!"

"Perhaps I will visit London one last time, or Edinburgh, but never again to Champagne."

"Then I will go to the fair and sell your wares in your stead."

Her father regarded her with horror. "You will not!"

"But 'tis my trade as well!" Margaret protested. "I have clients in Champagne. I have orders and I have need of supplies each year."

"You cannot travel so far alone and you know it well," her father said sternly. "'Twould not be prudent."

*Prudent.* Prudent choices had never been Margaret's strength.

Indeed, though she understood her father's reasoning, she was outraged that his decision should so impact her. She had a trade and a livelihood, and her father had simply decided to cast it aside.

"When did you intend to tell me?" she demanded.

"You can continue your craft," Iain said, his tone soothing. "I would not halt you in that, for you are a skilled silversmith. There are many who pass through Ceinne-beithe, by Duncan's design."

Margaret would not be soothed. She sold a dozen pieces at the hot fair for

every one she sold while at home. “But I have little custom here. I *must* go to Champagne each year.”

Her father’s brows rose. “Why do you think I have reminded you so often that you might wed? Take a husband and he can protect you on your annual journey.”

“You know that I have no desire to wed until I can wed for love.”

Her father granted her a very blue look. “And you now know your choice. Find satisfaction in compromise, Margaret. Choose a man, wed, and continue your trade, or remain unwed and continue your trade at Ceinn-beithe.”

Compromise was nigh as unlikely for Margaret as prudence. “I have spent more than a decade honing my skills, learning all I could, refining my abilities and now I should simply discard it all and wed *someone* because you do not wish to travel to Champagne any longer?”

“You sound as if you find this unjust.”

“Of course, I find it unjust!” she said, her voice rising. “I vowed long ago that I would never wed for convenience or convention. You of all men should know the merit of a great love!”

“I do, but time passes, Margaret. I must be blunt. You are not so young or alluring as once you were. Most your age have two or even three children.”

“Not the Fitzgavin grandchildren. None are wed as yet and I am younger than both Eva and Therese. Isolde and Ismay are but a year younger than me and unmarried, as well.”

“Do not look to Montvieux for *ought*.” Her father clicked his tongue as Margaret flushed. “And they are affluent, as we are not, the spawn of aristocrats with great holdings. ’Tis not the same for those of our ilk. Indeed, that is why Annelise will be betrothed. Fortunes and alliances must be secured. You know we have none.”

“One of my grandfathers was a count and the other a chieftain.”

“The current count denies even the existence of your mother, his own blood sister, while Duncan has inherited the chieftainship. Situations change

and ours have become more humble. 'Tis the price of loving the work."

"But love..."

"Does not always conquer all, no matter how oft we engrave it upon a ring."

"I do not believe it."

"Lass, I thought that if I took you to Champagne, you might meet a merchant or trader of merit. I know you always yearned for more than Ceinn-beithe, but truly, we have made this journey six times together with no such result. I cannot endure it again." Iain nodded with a satisfaction Margaret did not share. "'Twill be Ceinn-beithe for you. Erik is a fine lad."

Margaret ground her teeth, unable to even respond to the suggestion that she should wed Erik, a fisherman fifteen years her senior who had half as much wit as she. Oh, aye, she knew of his admiration for her, but 'twas not returned. "Someone else could accompany me to Champagne each year," she suggested. "I could hire a man..."

"A man not pledged to you? I think not, daughter mine." Her father drew himself taller in the saddle. "If Champagne is of such import to you, then choose a spouse to accompany you thence. I will not even demand a wedding. A handfast will suffice for me, if not for your mother." Iain granted her one last look, a quelling one that told her he would not be swayed, and Margaret did not challenge him further.

She knew a lost cause when presented with one.

Unless she could find a solution—or a man to wed with haste—she would not journey to Champagne for the hot fair this year. The date of their habitual departure was little more than a month away, which did not allow much time.

Airdfinnan came into view ahead of them and she eyed the stone structure, anticipating the man she might glimpse again. Perhaps her heart would be indifferent to the sight of him, now that she knew his true nature.

Margaret could only hope.



NICHOLAS DE MONTVIEUX rode to Airdfinnan alone with a single squire, too discontent with his situation to have joined the party from Villonne.

He needed to think upon his course, and that was best done alone.

While others might have said he possessed every advantage, Nicholas felt the lack of some detail in his life that would unify all in a grand purpose. He loved Montvieux and was protective of that holding, but though he often held the seal, 'twas not wholly his own. His father had a tendency to interfere at intervals, usually for some good purpose or other.

This betrothal was a perfect example. His father had seized the letter from Angus MacGillivray and orchestrated the details, then had sailed to Sicily. Nicholas was not enamored of the notion of wedding Annelise, but he had no specific objections to make. 'Twas his nature to remain silent, unless his comments would be acted upon, and in this case, he suspected he would only sound ungrateful, if not churlish. An alliance between their two houses was an excellent thing, so his father insisted, and no one could complain about the nature or the beauty of Annelise.

She was a gem, he had been assured, and he was beyond fortunate in this.

But Nicholas did not feel fortunate at all.

He felt cornered.

He could not help but think of Margaret MacCormac. She had been the one to advise him to insist that his father cease such meddling, and her counsel had been good. "Twas only in this matter of marriage that Rowan had insisted on creating a change in his son's life. Nicholas did not know whether to hope to see Margaret at Airdfinnan or dread the possibility.

He had been intrigued by her five years before, when she and her father had escorted Fergus to Villonne. She had been as vibrant and vital as a live flame, unpredictable, outspoken and utterly intriguing. He had never encountered a maiden like her and she fascinated him.

Three years before, she and her father had paused at Montvieux after taking their wares to the hot fair at Champagne, and Nicholas had hoped 'twas not coincidence. He had seized the opportunity of Iain's illness to insist that they linger—which allowed him to spend each day with Margaret. He showed her Montvieux. He told her of its history. They went riding and hawking together. They talked and talked. His parents had been in Paris with his sisters and it seemed the sun shone on his courtship of this remarkable maiden. Nicholas had expected his interest in Margaret to diminish with closer acquaintance, but instead his fascination grew.

Iain had remained abed for three days, pampered by Nicholas' castellan and cook. Conversation had flowed so readily between himself and Margaret that Nicholas had been half-certain that interval was bewitched. Had there ever been three days of such perfect accord? They had not agreed on every matter, but there had been a harmony beyond his association with any other person.

Perhaps he had been beguiled. Nicholas had never felt such an accord with another, such an ability to agree and disagree on myriad subjects, yet still feel his admiration grow. To be sure, Margaret was a beauty, with her sparkling blue eyes and flowing raven tresses, but it was her confidence in her views, her laughter and her teasing that had entranced him. She had been unafraid to challenge him or his words, or to present an alternate view. Aye, she had enchanted him truly.

Her kiss had stolen his heart forever.

The wine had flowed on their last evening together, to be sure, and what had followed might have been inevitable.

But remarkable all the same.

He had been startled by her innocence, delighted by her playfulness and passion, protective of this maiden who had impulsively trusted him completely. That Nicholas had remained awake all night afterward, too thrilled to close his eyes, had been anything but inevitable. He had been

certain of his future that night, and had finally fallen asleep at dawn. When he awakened, Margaret and her father were gone, with no word save their polite gratitude for the night's accommodation.

He had expected a missive, a word, some communication, but none came. He sent word himself to Ceinn-beithe—not once, not twice—to resounding silence.

Nicholas knew they came to hot fair every year, but they had not stopped at Château Montvieux again. In desperation, he had ridden to Champagne himself a year before to seek them out, only to learn that they had left the fair early. He had hastened back to Montvieux, certain to find them awaiting him, but once again they had not paused at his holding.

He sent a missive to Ceinn-beithe again, but had no reply.

Margaret's disregard could not be more clear.

Or more disappointing.

The offer from Angus had arrived shortly after that and, believing that his affection was not returned, Nicholas had agreed to his father's urging. What difference who he wed if his beloved did not desire him?

The fact was that Nicholas was missing his opinionated grandmother. He supposed he was one of a very small company who lamented the passing of Margaux de Montvieux, but Nicholas had always respected her resolve to speak plainly in all matters. There had been no subterfuge with Margaux, not even diplomacy or tact, but one had always known where one stood.

Nicholas missed that surety.

Margaux also had possessed an understanding of people that gave her clear insight to their thoughts and the reasons for their choices. In the quest of choosing a bride, he tired of the platitudes and encouragement, and yearned for his grandmother's blunt assessments of the various candidates.

He missed her counsel.

If Margaux had told him to wed Annelise, Nicholas would have done so readily, trusting in his grandmother's astute eye. But she, of course, could not

do as much.

Nicholas supposed that Annelise could have no secret objectives, unlike many of the other maidens presented to him in France. Her father had no aspiration to hold Montvieux; her older brother would inherit Airdfinnan, undoubtedly, while the younger had seen only six summers, so there was no threat to his inheritance from her siblings. She herself was said to be sweet and compliant—he had no recollection of her—and he imagined she would make a pleasant and predictable partner.

And there was the detail that chafed. Nicholas had spent his life in the company of his parents, two strong-willed individuals who shared a love so sweeping that he knew either would die for the other's survival. Annelise, he suspected, would do as she was bidden, no more and no less. There would be naught but cordiality between them. She would do her duty and he would do his.

Was it so wrong to hope for more?

He thought of Margaret and the spark of her company, the way he had felt alive in her presence, and told himself it might have been novelty, no more and no less.

But Nicholas de Montvieux was not convinced.



AIRDFINNAN OCCUPIED an island in the midst of a mighty river, its stone walls rising from the water's edge to soar high overhead. There was a wooden bridge across the river to the gates, and there stood the laird and lady to greet Nicholas.

The maiden destined to be his intended was ideal to every appearance. Annelise was modest and pretty, well-wrought and demure. She stood between her parents, garbed in a kirtle of sapphire that favored the hue of her eyes. Her lips were rosy and ripe, her cheeks were pink, her fair hair was



braided into a coronet that gleamed like gold. She might have been a princess in a tale come to life.

Yet Nicholas felt only indifference. She might have been a doll.

He crossed the bridge alone, leaving his destrier on the bank with his squire. Annelise offered her hand and Nicholas bowed over it, touching his lips to the back of it as she lowered her gaze meekly. He felt her tremble, much to his own impatience. How could she fear him at a glance?

“Are you content with the match, my lady?” he asked, hoping she might have found some fault with him. Her gaze flicked to his, as if she was fearful of making the wrong reply. She was young, indeed, almost a decade younger than his sisters—who both yet remained unwed. He could not remember either of them being so demure.

Annelise glanced toward her father and then her mother. “Of course, my lord,” she replied with no passion whatsoever.

“Why?” Nicholas asked, feeling the surprise of her parents that he should be so blunt.

Her lips parted and then closed, her expression becoming troubled.

“Why would I not be?” she whispered finally.

“Perhaps you would prefer to make a choice,” another woman said, her tone tart and Nicholas felt his heart soar. He glanced over his shoulder to see a woman marching along the bank toward the bridge. Satisfaction surged through him at the sight of Alienor and Iain MacCormac’s outspoken daughter, Margaret. He would have known her anywhere with her black hair and her flashing blue eyes.

How could she be even more beautiful and forthright than he recalled?

How dared she decline to reply to him? Nicholas found himself smiling as she approached, anticipating an argument that would make his blood thrum.

Margaret’s dark hair was wavy, he knew, though it had been braided into a long plait that gleamed as it hung over her shoulder. She wore a kirtle of

sturdy brown wool, a laced leather jerkin and a green cloak that fell to her knees. Her boots were tall and sturdy, wrought like those of a man, but her waist was narrow and her feminine curves evident. Her hands were lightly tanned and he loved that her lashes were thick and dark. She wore no adornment herself, though her skill as a silversmith was remarkable. There was a knife at her belt and he knew there was another in her boot. Nicholas would not have been surprised to learn that she had a third blade hidden on her person. Her very presence made his foolish heart leap for joy.

He reminded himself that she had ignored him, perhaps forgotten him, and could not care overmuch. To look upon her was a reward in itself.

“Perhaps you should be afraid, cousin, to place your future and your fate into the grasp of a man you barely know,” she continued boldly, avoiding Nicholas’ gaze so completely that it could not be an accident. “He might be a villain in disguise, one who means to ensure that you vanish into the shadows of France, never to return.” She snapped her fingers at this. She crossed the bridge, dropping her voice. “He might be a fiend who captures unwary maidens and secures them within Château Montvieux, ensuring they are never seen again.”

Annelise’s eyes widened in alarm.

Nicholas chuckled, his expectation of his visit to Airdfinnan much improved.

“He might be dull,” Margaret said. “He might indulge overmuch in the wine. He might have a mistress in his bed already. He might despoil innocents and abandon them.” She granted him a hot glance at that, though Nicholas would have argued that she had seduced and abandoned him. “You know naught of him but what his father has told your father, and what man would tell a father the fullness of an unwelcome truth?”

Annelise retreated a step but Nicholas could not look away from Margaret. She was glorious, more lovely even than when he had seen her last. His memories had not done her credit.

And the effect of her presence upon him was not diminished.

Indeed, it seemed redoubled.

“How did you learn the truth of my nature then?” he demanded cheerfully and Margaret, to his satisfaction, fought her smile.

A look passed between them, one that fired his blood and filled him with hope.

“Perhaps I heard tell of it on my travels with Father,” she said, bracing a hand upon her hip. “Perhaps the inns of France echo with tales of nefarious doings at the esteemed hall of Montvieux.” She lowered her voice, her gaze locking with his. “Perhaps I simply remember...what I have been told.”

Nicholas could not take a breath.

Then he realized she accused him, and he was not the guilty party.

“Margaret,” Jacqueline chided but the younger woman continued.

“Perhaps he has need of a foreign bride because those in the vicinity of his home fear to accept him. Perhaps his reputation is so well known that no maiden of sense will put her hand in his.” She surveyed him, her gaze bright. “Truly, why else would a man with so many advantages need to have his marriage arranged to a stranger?”

“You speak nonsense, Margaret,” Angus said heartily. “As is so oft the case.”

“Perhaps I was spurned by the lady I desired above all others,” Nicholas retorted and saw Margaret’s fleeting surprise.

“Spurned by a lady with all your advantages?” she scoffed. “Perhaps you entertain us with a tale, sir, to show yourself to advantage when there is none.”

How could she say as much when she had received his missives?

Margaret turned to Angus and Jacqueline and Nicholas felt bereft without her attention upon him. “You cannot deny that Annelise knows as little of her intended as he does of her,” she continued. “What games does your intended favor, Annelise?” The maiden in question looked blank. Margaret turned to

him. “What songs does she admire, sir?” He could only shrug. He knew Margaret favored ballads but she turned to Annelise again. “How does he spend his coin and how does he administer his holding?” Annelise’s expression became one of concern. “What fripperies and treats does she treasure most?” She demanded of Nicholas.

He could only recall how much Margaret had enjoyed the plums in the garden of Montvieux. He recalled slicing them for her, feeding them to her, kissing the juice from her lips...

Margaret lifted a brow, which gave her a mischievous look that Nicholas recalled all too well.

Oh, she was beguiling and had no regard for convention. This was no maiden who would be meek and demure. Here was a lady who would greet each day with gusto and never lapse into predictability. Here was one unafraid to speak her mind or challenge what she perceived as nonsense.

Their one night together had been a revelation, a symphony of pleasure given and received, a tribute to a woman innocent until that night but welcoming of satisfaction—and fearless in requesting what she desired most. Nicholas burned for her all over again.

What if he yet had a chance to win her for his bride?

## CHAPTER 2



Annalise, for her part, would have retreated if not for her father's hand at the back of her waist. Angus glared at Margaret more ferociously than one might have expected a man to manage who had lost an eye. Perhaps the patch made him look more fearsome to some, but Margaret lifted her chin. "You try to frighten her apurpose," he said sternly. "And for no good cause."

"I endeavor to encourage all of you to see sense! If Annalise weds this man, she will be alone in a foreign land, far from all those she knows and relies upon, dependent upon a virtual stranger." She considered Nicholas again. "One who might not be as honorable and reliable as others would have her believe."

Something had gone awry and Nicholas was resolved to repair it.

"'Tis always thus when women wed," Angus said.

"Nay, 'tis not," Margaret retorted. "Jacqueline wed for love, to be sure." Angus dropped his gaze. She turned upon the party waiting on the far bank. "As did you." She braced her hands upon her hips to challenge Eglantine. "Indeed, I thought you came to Scotland to grant your daughter Jacqueline the chance to choose."

Eglantine nodded at that. "It cannot be disputed, Margaret." Her gaze slid to Jacqueline, who turned her attention to the tips of her shoes, but she said

no more.

“Nor can it be argued that the matter ended happily,” Duncan said.

Margaret threw out her hands. “Why then, in this company of those smitten with their spouses is there a sudden desire to arrange a match, particularly for a maiden so lovely that an army of knights will lose their hearts to her on sight? She is but fourteen summers of age. What is the cause of such haste?”

“What is the root of this protest, Margaret?” Angus demanded lightly.

“Perhaps she would prefer to wed this reputed knave herself and tame him,” Nicholas said, earning himself a sweeping glance from the lady in question. Margaret flushed, though, a hint that the notion was not so troubling.

“I think not,” she said, her tone icy.

Nicholas smiled.

“Are you vexed that no one has arranged a match for you?” Angus demanded.

Margaret laughed, but the sound was not merry to Nicholas’ ears. “Someone might have *offered*.”

“’Twould be futile,” Angus said heartily. “For you would have had great satisfaction in declining whatever match was suggested to you. None of us would put any man at such disadvantage.”

“Do you not wish to wed, Margaret?” Annelise asked shyly. “For I do.”

“I will wed only for a love that sears my soul and lights my darkness,” Margaret said with a proud lift of her chin and Nicholas almost applauded that sentiment, for he shared it. “There is no other reason for a woman to bind herself to a man forever, save that they two cannot bear to be apart.” She smiled at Annelise, who frowned a little. “I would not be in your shoes, cousin, to be bought and sold like a prize gelding, with no say in the result myself. Perhaps I should give thanks that I was born neither a beauty nor the daughter of a laird, that I shall never be *chattel*.”

Jacqueline caught her breath at that. Eglantine cleared her throat and those two eyed each other as silence fell on the small company.

“Margaret,” Iain said in a warning tone.

The maiden was undeterred. “And you,” she said, turning back to Nicholas. He could barely hide his satisfaction to have her attention. “I expected more of a man with every advantage to his hand.”

Their gazes locked for a potent moment and Nicholas knew naught with Margaret would ever be easy or predictable. He also knew that the sole way to defend oneself against her sharp tongue was to reply in kind.

He folded his arms across his chest and smiled at her, knowing his easy manner would vex her. Sure enough, Margaret bristled, fire lighting in her eyes.

“The sole advantage that eludes me is a love as potent as the one you seek,” he said lightly. “But I have failed in that quest, not for lack of effort, and have been advised that there is a moment for compromise. I am told to trust in the judgement of others.”

Margaret snorted. “As am I, sir. As am I, but I do not accept such counsel readily. Alas, I fear I was not wrought for compromise.” There was a sadness in her tone and he wondered what—or who—had disappointed her. He would flay any man alive who had dared to break her heart.

Surely he was not the knave responsible?

He tried to coax her smile again. “What tales have you heard of Montvieux and the dark repute of its lord, Margaret? I am certain all would be gratified to know the root of your warning. You might entertain the company this night with your fanciful tales.”

“I have no tales to share in this company,” she said flatly. “I merely ask why my cousin must be betrothed with such haste.”

“Because I chose it to be so,” Angus said firmly, offering his hand to Nicholas. “Cease to make trouble, Margaret, though ’tis your wont.” He smiled. “Had you a spouse, I wager you would be happy for Annelise. Do not

let jealousy color your view.”

“Jealousy?” Margaret echoed and her eyes flashed anew. “That is the least of my concerns, sir, but I see my concern for my cousin’s happiness is unwelcome.” She surveyed Angus and her tone softened. “Is it so difficult to believe that she might prefer to make her own choice, as *all* of you have done?”

With that, Margaret retreated across the bridge to fetch her pony, clearly anticipating that Angus would have no reply. It seemed to Nicholas that she was avoiding him and his gaze, a choice that gave him more encouragement.

This was his opportunity to learn what had gone amiss—and repair it.

Meanwhile, the new arrivals were welcomed into the bailey. Grooms hastened to and fro as greetings were exchanged, but Margaret, Nicholas noticed, did not participate in the merriment. She had seized the reins of her pony and led that creature to the stables herself.

Hope burned anew in his heart. Could Margaret have remained away from Montvieux because she was convinced of his disinterest?

Indeed, his own vehement reaction to her appearance meant he had to ensure he had no prospect with her before he pledged to another.

He had to speak with Margaret alone.

Nicholas bowed to his host and family, indicated to his squire to see to the destrier, and strode after the departing demoiselle with purpose.

And it must be said, a hearty measure of anticipation.



MARGARET CHASTISED herself in the darkness of the stables as she led her pony to a stall. Artemis grazed contentedly upon the horse bread made by Airdfinnan’s ostler, always a favorite of hers, as Margaret removed the saddle and seized the brush. Why was she so incapable of keeping her views to herself? She had not even managed to pass through the gates before



expressing her doubts about Annelise's match.

'Twas due to Nicholas. One look from that man unsettled her completely. Nay, the sight of him unsettled her. He awakened her. His very presence rekindled her desire, reminded her of a wondrous night, made her ache with yearning for more. She was a fool and then some. Why should he be as alluring as ever? How could his presence be so disruptive to her resolve? She *knew* his nature. She should have been able to guard herself against his appeal. She should have known better.

Yet, the man's very presence turned her into a witless fool. He did not even need to utter a sound. She should have forgotten her attraction to him. She should have been oblivious of him, but alas, she was not. Time had only worsened her malady.

She savored the detail that he had been wearing the brooch she had wrought. That he had chosen that adornment for his cloak on this day when they might meet, the one that he had selected from her wares on *that* night, the one he had insisted upon buying, could not be coincidence.

'Twas a fine pin, one of the best Margaret had ever made, a circular Celtic braid surrounding a piece of amber of a deep golden hue, the braids so intricate that they had taken her half of forever to weave. It was large, too, as big as a man's palm, a cloak pin more substantial than most. The weight of it had deterred many an admirer, as well as its price. She had been determined never to discount the price, not until Nicholas admired it.

She would have given it to him, just to see his smile.

He had insisted upon paying the full price, declaring that he would see her smile.

That man. He might have a heart as black as night, but his words were gilded with silver and stardust, and when he spoke, Margaret was charmed. She sighed.

She was glad that Nicholas still possessed the brooch, and thrilled that he chose to wear it, that he favored it—but she told herself not to make much of

little. Perhaps he had forgotten that she had made it. She told herself 'twas enough that he cherished the pin.

'Twas not.

She had no cause to hope for aught from him and she knew it well, but she had forgotten all she knew in his presence.

If that was not good cause to avoid him, Margaret could not think of another.

She shook her head and rounded Artemis to find the man in question not two steps away, his gaze locked upon her. Her heart jumped. How had Nicholas approached so quietly?

And why?

Her heart stopped, skipped, then plummeted to her toes as she stared back at him. Indeed, she nearly dropped the brush. A single glance should have been enough to remind her of the folly of her yearning. His tabard, cut of fine cloth and richly embroidered likely had cost more than all the garb she wore in total. His hauberk gleamed beneath it, a veritable fortune in steel, and his boots were finest leather, the like of which she would never afford. He likely had three pair or more. His destrier was worth a dozen of a pony like Artemis, and he did not tend his steed himself. The pin wrought by her own hands gleamed upon his shoulder, holding the long full dark cloak, seemingly wrought of ells of the best wool from Flanders. Even it was lined with fur, as hers never would be.

He might as well have been a king. Her gaze dropped to the signet ring on his right hand, the sign of his legacy and birthright of Montvieux. That holding was beyond all Margaret knew. A veritable king indeed.

Nicholas did not speak. He simply studied her with that steady green gaze, as calm as she was agitated. The man had a stillness about him, a watchfulness that unsettled her. Of all the people she knew, Margaret believed that only Nicholas paid attention to what passed around himself.

Including whatever she said. Her cheeks heated as she recalled that time

in his company, hours with his undivided attention, and she knew she had never enjoyed an interval more. The hunting and hawking, the walking and talking, the laughter and the tales—and the night of newfound pleasures. Margaret caught her breath.

Curses. She was a fool.

“I did not think you capable of silence,” Nicholas said easily. He smiled. “I might have concluded the Margaret MacCormac known to me had a secret twin.” While she endeavored to decide whether this was criticism or praise, he pulled an apple from his tabard and offered it to Artemis, who bit into the gift with satisfaction.

She thought of plums, warm from the cut, heavy with juice, sweet on her tongue. She thought of the brush of a man’s fingertips across her chin, the sparkle of green eyes in sunlight, the taste of a first kiss. Her heart fluttered.

“Another lady charmed,” Margaret could not help but comment.

“Would that your favor was so easily gained.” His smile was too fleeting, for Margaret liked how it softened his features.

“Alas for you, sir, it is not.”

She would not be charmed again. Aye, she could guess his desire on this day. He wished for another ride before his betrothal. He would not have sought her out, but she was here, just as she had been at Montvieux. She was convenient to his pleasure, and Margaret had never desired to be convenient for any soul.

Nicholas wanted another kiss, and likely even more than that, before he pledged to Annelise. She knew many men were not faithful to their wives. She knew that those who savored pleasures abed seldom stirred themselves to seek out specific ladies. They seized whatever opportunity presented itself—or herself.

’Twas not love that had sent him after her.

Disappointed despite herself, Margaret turned back to her labor. The silence pressed upon her, making her keenly aware that Nicholas had not

departed, and that he was oh-so-very close. A wretched part of her clamored for another kiss, insisting that only such a test would prove that his hold over her was banished.

She could not even trust her own thoughts in his presence. The race of her pulse certainly was sufficient to make her dizzy.

“I believe you are vexed with me,” he said finally, his voice so low and confident that she caught her breath.

“Me? Why should I be so?” Margaret brushed the horse with gusto.

“You should let the grooms tend Artemis, lest you flay her alive.”

Wretched man! He even recalled the name of her pony.

“I always tend Artemis myself,” she replied, her tone a little sharp. “We solitary females must rely upon each other.” She ducked around the pony, putting the creature between them.

Nicholas shook his head. “She relies upon you. You rely upon no one, Margaret.” He followed her around the horse and she was trapped between the pony’s rump, Nicholas and the end of the stall. He had tucked his gloves into his belt and now offered his hand, palm up.

Margaret looked at his hand, not comprehending, then met his gaze.

“The ring,” he said. “Where is the ring?”

And Margaret’s anger flared. “The *ring*? What ring? You granted no ring to me, sir, of that I am utterly confident.”

“The ring was included with the third missive.”

She turned to confront him, surprised that he would lie outright to her. “You sent no missive to me, let alone three, let alone one with a ring.”

“I sent each with a reliable courier,” he insisted, his lips tight.

“Impossible!” One missive might go awry, a second could fail to arrive at its destination, but three missives could not have all gone missing. He strove to beguile her. “If you tell the truth, then your courier deceived you.”

“Impossible,” he said, his voice low and silky. “Do not lie to me, Margaret. If you do not desire the ring, then simply return it to me.”

“You sent me no ring!”

They stared at each other and she was tempted to believe him, even knowing she should not. He seemed utterly convinced of his view, but there had been no missives.

What had he written to her?

Would his words have made a difference?

“Three missives and you ignored them all.” Nicholas shook his head. “And then I made a fool of myself by racing to St. Jean last August, hoping to find you there.”

That was a lie, to be sure. Margaret and her father were readily found. There was a lane of silversmiths and they were well known among their number. “Why would you do as much?”

His eyes flashed with uncharacteristic annoyance. “To speak to you, of course, though I should have given credence to your choice.”

“Which choice?”

“To not reply. To not visit Montvieux. To show your disdain by avoiding me.”

He could not believe that *she* was the disinterested party.

He had to be striving to earn her goodwill for his satisfaction on this night and no more.

“I did not avoid you,” Margaret retorted. “There was no missive to which I might reply, let alone three, because you did not send one. There was no ring sent to me. I do not believe you rode all the way to St. Jean in search of me. Nay, you jest at my expense, sir, in pursuit of one prize only. You lie to win my favor again, but you will not have it.” She turned to the pony again, her thoughts spinning.

There was a long silence, one that Margaret feared would never end.

“At least you admit that night was a prize,” Nicholas said softly and she flushed clear to her toes.

She could not summon a word to her lips, yet still he did not leave.

Finally, Nicholas lifted the brush from her hands, coming far too close for her pulse to slow.

“You thought I forgot,” he whispered, his breath fanning her ear, then began to brush the pony’s flank.

Margaret caught her breath and stared. In this confined space, she was keenly aware that Nicholas was taller than her. She watched his hands, inhaled deeply to catch the scent of his skin, and yearned for something that could never be hers again.

Belatedly, she recalled his words. “Not that.”

“What then?”

She folded her arms across her chest, wishing she could leave the stall and end their conversation. The man was determined, she would grant him that. Nicholas had anticipated her impulse, though, and made it impossible for her to do as much. He saw too much and clearly intended to have his say. She would not surrender to him again, no matter how charming he might be, no matter how tempted she was to share such delights one more time.

She lifted her chin. “’Twas irrelevant and you have seen the truth of the matter.”

Nicholas almost laughed. “Irrelevant?” He turned to stare at her, his eyes alight. “A night that shook me to my very marrow could never be irrelevant, nor could it be forgotten.”

“It should never have happened,” Margaret said hastily even as she felt delight at his words.

“But it *did* happen, Margaret,” he said, a welcome heat behind his words. “And then you left me to simmer in your absence. How long would you have compelled me to wait to see you again? Did you intend ever to see me again?” There was a delicious edge to his tone, one almost of desperation, and Margaret was intrigued.

Could he feign such fervor?

“We should not have halted at Montvieux,” she said.

“And I was never so glad to see anyone stricken with an illness as your father that day,” he said with such conviction that she almost believed him.

“For you were alone and without...entertainment.”

“For I yearned to know more of you from the first time we met.” He surveyed her. “You must know that you are the most intriguing maiden of my acquaintance.” His gaze danced over her features, his expression one of wonder. Margaret could not keep herself from flushing.

“I am no longer a maiden, sir,” she said tartly.

“That is of little import. You are unlike any woman I have ever known, Margaret,” he continued, undeterred.

“I would be more than a novelty to any man.”

Nicholas smiled and his gaze heated. “Aye. I anticipated that.”

Margaret drew herself taller. “I have naught more to surrender to your curiosity.”

“Ah, but I believe you do.” He spoke with heat and she knew she had accurately guessed his intentions, then he leaned closer. Those eyes! So bright and so green, so filled with conviction and surety. Margaret could have stared into them forever—and believed whatever he confided in her.

She frowned, called herself a fool again, and brushed the pony. She had no claim upon Nicholas de Montvieux, nor should she desire one. He was to be betrothed to Annelise.

“What would you have of me, then?” she asked, breathless. “Make your demand so I can decline and the matter will be done.”

“A confession,” Nicholas said, to her surprise.

Margaret looked up and was snared by the intensity of his gaze.

She turned her back upon him again, her heart thundering, both wishing he would leave and desperate for him to linger.

“Tell me that you do not recall the wonder of our kisses,” Nicholas whispered, the heat behind her revealing that he was treacherously close. All Margaret had to do was turn around to be in his embrace and she was more

sorely tempted than she knew she should be. "Tell me that you have forgotten that night, or that it was of no merit whatsoever. Swear to me that your heart did not leap at the prospect of meeting again."

"What if I do?"

"Then I will walk out of this stable and pledge to Annelise, bending my every will to ensuring her happiness. I will speak to you no more. I would be certain, though, of your indifference before I pledge myself to another."

That sounded as if he desired more of her than one night's satisfaction. Margaret looked over her shoulder, for she could do naught else. Nicholas' gaze was locked upon her, his expression intent.

He lifted a brow. "But do not lie to me, Margaret."

She opened her mouth and closed it again. That he understood her well enough to know that she would do any deed, even swear to a falsehood, rather than take anything from her cousin, was sobering. Yet, she dared not tell him the truth of her own heart, for fear that he wanted no more than her surrender.

Vexing man!

She seized the brush from his grip, their hands brushing in the exchange. "Do it," she said, despite the lump in her throat. "Do it and without delay."

"You did not swear as much."

"I do not have to answer to your will, sir." Even she could see that her hands were shaking as she brushed the pony. Why did it have to be this man who so discomfited her?

Why did she have to desire a man who only sought her for his pleasure?

"But you must convince me," Nicholas said, his voice fairly a purr. "Otherwise, I will not abandon you. Those are the terms, Margaret." Her name was a caress upon his tongue. His fingertip landed upon her arm and Margaret fought the urge to shiver with delight. "Perhaps you have forgotten the potency of that kiss in the orchard."

Forgotten? It haunted her. She could not so much as look at a piece of



fruit without recalling the sunlight, the plum, the man...

"I owe you naught," she said, her words low and fast. "I gave you all."

"I gave unto you in return," Nicholas murmured. "'Twas a willing match, Margaret. Do not suggest otherwise, for you are a poor liar."

"We savored too much of the wine that night," she said with haste. "All is forgotten."

Nicholas shook his head slowly. "Not by me," he confessed with fervor. "That night haunts me, as does every moment of those few short days. Why did you leave with such haste the following morning?"

"'Tis only fitting that the whore leaves her lord's bed before the servants see the truth of it." Margaret would not think of her father's stormy expression when she met him in the hall before the dawn that morning. Iain had pointed to the stables, without saying a word, and they had journeyed all the way to LeHavre before he spoke to her again.

Nicholas' hand landed on her shoulder. "You were no whore, but a maiden come willingly unto me, a lady I admired above all others." She winced at the reminder that he had claimed her innocence. "I thought there was allure between us. I thought we began an adventure together, not that it would end so abruptly."

She might have found herself ripe with child and alone. That had been the reason for her father's ire, but Margaret had been fortunate in that.

She might yet be in such circumstance if she allowed Nicholas to charm her now.

"And you were mistaken, sir, as was I," she said with all the conviction she could summon. "'Tis done. Go pledge yourself to my cousin, but ensure her happiness, sir, or I will demand a reckoning."

"A reckoning," Nicholas echoed. "I should like to demand a reckoning in this very moment." She made the error of glancing up and was snared again by the intensity of his gaze. "One kiss, Margaret, is my demand. One kiss to prove that you do not hold me in regard. One kiss, granted freely and devoid

of desire, a kiss as might be exchanged between brother and sister. That alone can convince me that my hopes are misplaced.”

’Twas an offer she dared not decline.

Aye, she could do this.

Margaret spun and kissed Nicholas on impulse, deliberately touching her lips to the corner of his mouth. She had a moment to believe in her own success, that her true desire was hidden, that she could retreat, then Nicholas turned slightly.

His mouth brushed across hers, slowly, sweetly, and she froze in place, heart in her throat. When she did not move away, she felt him smile—then his mouth closed over hers with the persuasive ease that filled her dreams. Heat flooded through her from his gentle yet potent kiss, awakening a desire that could not be put aside.

Margaret could not deny herself one last taste, for she was weak. She sighed as his hands locked around her waist and she surrendered as he deepened his kiss, wanting only one more taste of perfection.



FERGUS WAS content to return home slowly and savor every detail of the holding he had missed for more than five years. He felt that he had changed utterly in his absence, and was relieved to see that Airdfinnan remained much the same.

Bayard had confessed to the party just after they set foot in England that Esmeraude was with child again. The couple had offered to fall behind the party but his parents, Alys and Burke, had elected to slow the pace of the entire company. Little Burke, named for his grandfather and curious about all at five summers of age, rode before Bayard and the party paused often to indulge the boy’s curiosity. In the absence of Rowan and Bronwyn, their twin daughters, Isolde and Ismay, rode also with the party from Villonne. Nicholas

had chosen to journey alone for some reason of his own.

They were nigh Fergus' own family after the years he had trained with Burke, that man's precision and discipline demanding more from Fergus than he had believed he possessed. His training seemed both an eternity and the blink of an eye in passing, and he could scarce believe that he would be knighted in Airdfinnan's chapel within days.

So 'twas that they were just approaching the keep of Airdfinnan when, unbeknownst to them, Margaret and Nicholas met in the stables.

Bayard pointed to the walls of the keep as it came into view. As previously, the thorned branches of the old vine covered the walls like protective armor, but as they drew near, there was no mistaking that the vine grew again.

"Again it flourishes?" Fergus said with awe. "This cannot be to welcome me home."

"Does it not grow each spring?" Isolde asked.

Fergus shook his head. "It grew only the once. *Maman* said it has not grown again in six years."

Esmeraude smiled. "It must be that someone is in love," she said with satisfaction. "Doubtless the truth of his heart is concealed. That was why it grew the last time."

"How curious," Isolde declared.

"You must tell us the tale," Ismay insisted and Esmeraude nodded agreement.

Bayard helped Esmeraude from her saddle before the bridge over the river to the keep gates, even as Burke aided Alys. Fergus watched how Alys smiled down at Burke, the force of the love between them, as ever, filling him with joy. Burke had seen more than fifty summers and Alys near as many, their hair was threaded with silver, but Burke's aim was as true as ever and their love could not be disputed. It was much the same with Bayard and Esmeraude, though that lady was far more mischievous in manner.

How Fergus yearned to find himself a bride one day of such merit as these two. 'Twas true that his parents had found similar satisfaction in their marriage, but he had thought their situation uncommon. Now he knew that many shared their good fortune and 'twas only natural he yearned for the same. He dreamed he might travel far and wide in search of such a prize.

“Yet if the man in question remains silent, vows will be exchanged that should not be,” Burke said. “The vine must favor the course of true love.”

“How romantic a notion!” Isolde said and the twins smiled at each other. Though they resembled each other mightily, their coloring and their natures were at odds. Isolde’s hair was a fiery red and her manner bold, while Ismay’s was so fair a blonde as to be almost silver and she spoke always with temperance. Rowan called them maidens of fire and ice, and they had taken to dressing in hues that supported the jest. On this day, Isolde wore a kirtle of russet with gold trim, while Ismay’s kirtle was of deepest navy with silver embroidery. Her cloak was white and lined with ermine, while Isolde’s was crimson and lined with miniver.

Bayard raised his brows. “Indeed,” he said with a shake of his head. “That growth is uncanny, to be sure, and I wished to curse it more than once.”

“Oh? You do not mind your situation so much as that!” Esmeraude protested and her husband grinned before he kissed her soundly.

“I do not mind it in the least, but there was a time when I found the vine most vexing. It seemed determined to reveal the secrets of my heart to all and sundry.” He eyed it. “I wonder whose heart it exposes this time.”

“One can only hope it grows for Annelise and Nicholas, since they are to be betrothed,” Alys said as her husband escorted her toward the bridge.

“Fergus!” came a woman’s cry from the other side of the bridge and Fergus grinned at his first glimpse of his mother. As he bowed low before her, Jacqueline raised her hands to her mouth in delight and appeared to be blinking back tears. “You have grown tall and valiant,” she said, her voice

husky as she seized his hands and drew him to his feet. "Look at you!"

"I could not have remained a boy these five years, even if I had desired it, *Maman*."

"But you are nigh as tall as your father! And so broad." She kissed his cheeks and he felt her tears. "Oh, I have missed you, Fergus." She smiled and kissed him again, gripping his hands. "A knight in truth."

"Not yet, Jacqueline," Burke said easily. "He has one final vigil before he gains his spurs." The smile he granted Fergus was filled with both confidence and pride, and Fergus smiled back.

"I am well prepared for it, thanks to my mentor," he said heartily.

"Never did a tutor have a better pupil," Burke said, to the satisfaction of all.

"Hear, hear," Angus said, offering an outstretched hand. Fergus' father had never before greeted his oldest son like a fellow warrior, and Fergus felt his grin widen as he gripped his father's hand. "Welcome home," Angus said warmly, then pulled Fergus into a tight embrace.

"Has Nicholas arrived?" Isolde asked after all had exchanged greetings.

"Aye, he has gone to the stables," Angus said and turned to his guests.

"Yet his destrier is there, with James," Ismay said, referring to her brother's squire.

"He followed Margaret," Annelise contributed and the twin sisters exchanged a glance. The maiden looked between them, beaming with delight. "Lord Nicholas is so wondrous and handsome. And we three shall be sisters! I am certain that I must be the most fortunate soul in all of Christendom!"

"Nicholas followed Margaret?" Isolde murmured as if there was some import in that.

Annelise nodded. "She had much to say of the match. Doubtless Papa names the matter aright and she is envious of me. How could she not be?"

"Hmm," said Isolde.

"Hmm," said Ismay. Fergus scarce attended the conversation of the three

demoiselles.

Annelise smiled, her pleasure unmistakable. “And yet she is right that I know little of him. You must tell me *all* the tales of Lord Nicholas.”

“And you must tell me every word Margaret said,” Isolde invited, looping her arm though Annelise’s. “The better that I can ensure your doubts are answered.”

“I have no doubts!” Annelise insisted happily. Fergus saw the twins exchange another glance over the head of his sister, who chattered merrily. The demoiselles continued through the gates arm-in-arm, Esmeraude telling them and Alys of Airdfinnan’s merits. Burke and Bayard directed the tending of the horses, Esmeraude giving a cry of delight when she spied Eglantine at the entry to the hall.

Fergus was left at the gates with his parents and sister.

“Thank you for choosing to make your vows here, where your mother can witness them,” Angus whispered, his voice as husky as *Maman*’s had been.

“Thank you, Papa, for agreeing to the scheme.”

Angus surveyed Fergus with pride. “How could we not? We are glad to have you home.”

Home. ’Twas precisely where Fergus most wished to be.

Though now that he had left home once and returned, he could not imagine he would linger overlong this time.

A knight had adventures to pursue and a bride to seek, after all.

## CHAPTER 3



Margaret was what was lacking in Nicholas' life. One glimpse of her and Nicholas's conviction was restored that she was the sole woman who would hold his heart. Her comments on this day had given him hope—and her kiss granted him yet more. Only she could set his very soul afire, and this time, he would not be disheartened so readily. They were of one mind when it came to reasons for marriage and theirs would be a fine one.

When he broke their kiss, he savored the sight of her flushed cheeks and reddened lips. Her eyes were sparkling, as if she were as dazzled by their embrace as he, and her hands were on his shoulders.

This was right and true.

This was the lady who would reign forevermore in his heart.

“Why did you not return to Montvieux?” he asked, thinking the moment ideal for confidences.

His suggestion seemed to awaken her. Margaret pushed him away, ducking beneath his arm and around the rump of the pony. Once again, the creature was between them, doubtless by design. “And be your harlot again? I think not. 'Tis one matter to err once, but to repeat the mistake would be folly indeed.”

Artemis seemed untroubled by their dispute and continued to eat

contentedly.

Nicholas frowned. "But that was not my intention..."

"Was it not? Is it not the same in this moment?"

"I sent you a ring," he said crisply. "We would have announced a betrothal."

She stared at him, as if astonished by his words. "A betrothal?"

Nicholas lifted his hands in exasperation. "Why are you surprised? This very day you have argued the merit of wedding for love."

"You cannot love me," she scoffed. "You know naught of me."

"I know all of you that I need to know," he argued. She snatched up the brush from the floor of the stable and brushed the other flank of the pony hastily. Nicholas knew she would flee as soon as the task was completed. "You are keen of wit and sensible, Margaret..."

"I am outspoken, you mean. A virago."

Nicholas smiled. "I prefer audacity to meekness."

Her eyes flashed fire. "Perhaps 'tis merely the novelty."

"Perhaps 'tis a preference long cultivated. When people are quiet and agreeable, I suspect they hide their true views."

She laughed unwillingly, surprised into it. "I can never hide my views."

"And I admire that."

Margaret eyed him warily. "You cannot mean this pretty flattery after so much silence," she said sternly. "Do not make a jest at my expense in pursuit of your pleasure."

"I make no jest, Margaret. I speak my heart." He saw her resolve waver. "Why did you not return to Montvieux again? You had to know that I awaited your return."

"I did not," she said flatly. "And I did not welcome your attentions, of course," she added with such haste that it could not be true. Indeed, her cheeks were afire and she averted her gaze.

"That was not my impression."



She fixed him with a look. “A night is one matter, sir, but I know what you must desire now.”

“That you wear my ring.”

She inhaled sharply and bent to her task, her lips tight. “There was no ring. There is no ring, at least not for me. Do not attempt to seduce me with promises that cannot be kept.” She stood taller. “You have come to Airdfinnan to make a betrothal and not to me.”

“And I must not do as much, if you have any affection for me in your heart.” Nicholas sensed then that he had erred, though he knew not how, for she shook her head again and turned away.

“Nay, sir, you will not use me as your excuse to disappoint my cousin.”

“But...”

“Nor will I believe words uttered solely to entice me to your bed,” she said with heat. With that, she pivoted and left the stables, skirts flying in her haste to put distance between them.

Once again, Nicholas watched Margaret flee his company. He knew that she was convinced that she chose aright, just as he knew she was wrong about his intentions. What had happened to his missives? His courier was otherwise utterly reliable.

But then, if a matter would fail, it must do as much in a circumstance of great import. He suspected that of all the women in Christendom, Margaret MacCormac might be the most unlikely to ever change her view.

’Twas a sign that they were each meant for the other, to be sure, for there was naught Nicholas de Montvieux liked more than a challenge.



*THAT YOU WEAR MY RING.*

As thrilling as his words had been, what precisely did Nicholas offer? Margaret knew what she wished him to say, but he had not said it. To wear

his ring might mean only that she was his possession, his chattel, his mistress. Did he mean to pledge himself to Annelise and visit Margaret abed, too? She could not believe him so base—and yet, she did not know.

And where was this ring? He insisted he had dispatched it to her, along with three missives, and did as much with such sincerity that she would have believed him—if she had not known for certain that those messages had never arrived. Was the ring a fiction to overcome her doubts?

One matter was for certain: she would not repeat her error.

Margaret took refuge outside the keep's walls, helping to raise the tent for her family's visit to Airdfinnan, the better to keep her distance from Nicholas. She and her father worked steadily together, their habit in making a camp already well established from their years of travel together to the Champagne fairs. Eglantine and Duncan had been granted a chamber in Airdfinnan's tower, and they remained in the great hall to learn all the tidings.

She could not help but recall her first visit to Château Montvieux, her awe at the splendor of the keep and the affluence of the holding. Those four towers soaring high, their peaked roofs topped with snapping pennants. The three fleur-de-lis and lion of Montvieux's insignia gracing so many details—the pennants, the carving in the great doors, the embroidery on Nicholas' fine tabard. It had been five years and she had not forgotten a detail.

And Nicholas. She caught her breath even in recollection. She remembered the gleam of interest in his eyes, his attentiveness even on that first visit, his resolve to show her the gardens that surrounded the keep. The orchard had been enormous, the trees laden with fruit. She recalled the gardens with delight, the flowers unfamiliar to her, the brilliant colors, the birds and bees. More, she had been thrilled to be alone in his company. Never had a man been so attentive. Never had a man laughed so readily at her jests and prompted her own smile. How her heart had leapt at the brush of his fingertips across her hand. How she had loved when his voice dropped low in confidence and he murmured into her ear, sharing a tale of some flower or of

his sister's mischief.

Their first kiss had been so sweet, so potent, so much more than she had ever guessed a kiss could be. "You must return," he had urged. "I must see you again, Margaret." And his expression, so earnest, so intent, had only convinced her of his integrity. "You make all seem new and filled with marvel."

"I only ask questions."

"But I see possibilities when you do. Already I know how I will miss you when you depart. Promise me, Margaret, that you will return and speak with me again."

She had kissed him again for that entreaty, her heart filling with a hope she dared not name.

She had made that vow, though she had not been able to return to Montvieux for two years. Her father had been told that the northern route was shorter, so they had returned home via Calais that year. She had regretted how it had meant no visit to Montvieux. The following year, he insisted upon trying yet another route, and she had teased him about his quest for efficiency. 'Twas only when he began to cough that she had made the choice to return to their customary route, where she knew the innkeepers and the daily distance, and her father had been in no condition to argue.

Montvieux had not diminished in the least. She had not made it grander in her memory, nor had she overlooked a fault. And Nicholas—her first glimpse of him had made her heart soar, and his evident satisfaction to see her again had set her tingling.

She could not think of his delighted reception, his solicitude to her father, his obvious pleasure in her company. She would not think of days walking hand-in-hand, sweet kisses that lasted through forever, the plums in the orchard or the glow in his eyes. She would not think of what had transpired their last night together, though in truth, she had nigh worn the memory thin these past years.

She ached anew with disappointment, her wounded heart bleeding yet again just from seeing him again.

The potency of his kiss had not diminished either. She closed her eyes, savoring the taste of him upon her lips, the scent of him on her hands. But those years of silence could not be denied—nor what seemed to be his attempt to deceive her on this day. How could Margaret be certain of his intentions?

How could she watch him swear himself to Annelise?

How could she cheat her cousin of any joy?

How could she be so foolish as to hope once again for what she would never possess?



THE SILENCE between father and daughter was greater than was customary, and Margaret knew her father was choosing his words. She guessed that he pondered them overmuch because she would not like what he had to say.

When the round tent was raised and staked, Margaret bade her father join the others.

“I will finish,” she said firmly. “You have need of a rest and a cup of ale.”

“You are a hearty lass, Margaret, to be sure,” Iain said, pushing his hand through his hair. “Doubtless you have a new design to ponder.”

“Doubtless,” she agreed with a smile, willing to let him believe any tale other than the truth. She wished to avoid Nicholas at all costs, for temptation held her in its grasp.

She would *not* betray her cousin, Annelise.

Her father was visibly tired, a detail she noticed more often and one that concerned her. His hair had turned silver years before but she had always thought him strong and vital. Now she recalled his words of earlier in the day.

He studied her then, and she knew him well enough to understand why he hesitated to leave.

“Tell me what you would,” she invited. “I wager you have counsel to offer but think I will not welcome it.”

Iain braced his hands upon his hips and dropped his voice. “’Tis simple enough, lass. I would remind you that they are not like us,” he said with quiet heat. “They are aristocrats. We are artisans. The gap betwixt us is as wide as the Channel, no matter how well we have come to know each other by grace of marriage and association. We labor. They fight, feast and spend. You *know* this, yet you persist in ignoring that truth. Of course, you are fond of Annelise, but she may cast all asunder with your advice, which is not apt for her.”

Margaret sighed. “I should not have uttered my doubts.”

“Nay, you should not have done.” Iain was firm. “And you should not have let Lord Nicholas follow you to the stables. ’Twas unseemly.”

“How could I have halted him?”

“You could have left him there,” her father said. “He may endeavor to charm you, indeed, I wager he already has—” Margaret felt her cheeks heat “—but there can be *naught* between you. He will not accept you as more than a mistress, and you are too clever to be so used. With noblemen, the coin and the coffers cannot be ignored! ’Tis his responsibility to wed well!”

Margaret did not think that artisans ignored their coin overmuch, but she appreciated her father’s point. “Angus wishes to ensure Annelise’s future.”

“And you intervene. We are of an age, Angus and I. I well understand his desire to see his daughter settled.” Iain sat down on a trunk with a weary sigh. “Surely there is *some* man you would have, in Ceinn-beithe perhaps, who will see you defended, at home and abroad. There must be one whose company you could endure.”

But there was no man she desired sufficiently to make that pledge.

Save Nicholas, who was beyond her reach—as her father’s words made

clear again.

“Do not even think as you do in this moment,” her father counselled, reading her expression.

“He said...”

“He *lied*, Margaret, whatever his words may have been.” Her father was as emphatic as she had ever seen him and she knew he strove to protect her. “All aristocrats lie to see their passion satisfied. You were fortunate once. Do not tempt the Fates again.” He fixed her with a look. “Even Erik might not have you with another man’s babe in your belly.”

Margaret frowned, fighting her heart’s inclination to trust Nicholas. “But Mother welcomed you before you were wed and Finlay was the result,” she said, referring to her older brother.

“And she would not have me until I proved I could provide for her and the babe.” Iain shook his head. “We were not affluent, lass, neither of us, but your mother was sensible. I was sufficiently determined to wed her that I began to sell my wares. ’Twas utterly different from your circumstance.”

Margaret hated that she could see the good sense of his counsel.

He pushed to his feet with an effort. “If ’tis time for Annelise to wed then your sister Anna is past due. You should be wed first. Think upon it, lass.”

And with one last hard look, Iain departed for the hall, leaving Margaret to consider the dubious merit of pledging herself to Erik.



JACQUELINE KNEW HER MOTHER, Eglantine, withheld her view of the betrothal—and she knew what her mother’s opinion had to be. She felt caught herself between her husband’s determination to ensure Annelise’s future, and her own doubts of the merit of marriage at such a young age. Yet Eglantine did not speak of it. Jacqueline noted more than one sidelong glance from Duncan and knew the pair had decided upon a path. If Duncan had a say, ’twould be

one of diplomacy, Jacqueline knew. Without his counsel, her mother would have been as forthright as Margaret, if not more so.

When Nicholas requested a moment with Angus, his features set with resolve, Jacqueline hoped the entire matter would be soon resolved. Annelise would be disappointed, to be sure, but 'twould be her pride injured, not her heart. Fergus was yet with his parents and Nicholas acknowledged him with a nod.

Angus, as blind to such detail as ever, called heartily for Annelise. Jacqueline watched Nicholas' lips tighten. She did not know what to think of his sister Ismay, so fair and lovely, accompanying a very happy Annelise.

Nicholas bowed to Angus. "My lord, I thank you for your hospitality this Eastertide and the generosity of your house." He was more formal than was their wont in Scotland, as well as so impassive that his thoughts were difficult to read.

"And I welcome you to our family, Lord Nicholas."

Annelise fairly bounced in her excitement. Both men glanced at her, one with markedly more approval than the other and Jacqueline's uncertainty was banished.

Nicholas did not wish to wed Annelise.

That man spoke with conviction. "I have need of another knight in the service of Château Montvieux and I offer the post to Fergus, should he be inclined to return to France after the granting of his spurs."

Fergus' approval of that notion was more than clear, but Angus frowned. "I had thought you would remain at Airdfinnan," he said, but Fergus bowed low to his father. 'Twas clear he had considered this possibility or hoped for it.

"And I had hoped to hone my skills abroad, Papa. There is so much more to learn, and I would be gratified to accept this opportunity from Lord Nicholas. You must be gladdened to know that I might train further without joining a crusade or a company of warriors. Lord Nicholas offers noble

service, which can only be an asset to my future.”

Jacqueline felt Angus soften.

Fergus smiled with newfound confidence. “Indeed, with Annelise as lady of that holding, I could ensure that she is content there and does not yearn overmuch for home.”

“Aye, Papa!” Annelise exclaimed. “That would be a marvel!”

Jacqueline saw the glance exchanged between Nicholas and his sister and noted how that knight stood yet taller.

“I am honored by your offer, Lord Nicholas,” Angus said, and the pair bowed to each other anew. “And I accept your generosity on behalf of my son.”

“The honor is all mine, your lairdship, for Fergus is a fine knight already.”

They shook hands in agreement, then Nicholas turned to Fergus. “You might pay homage after your knighting on the morrow, and return to Montvieux with me to commence your duties.”

“I should be honored, my lord.”

“And there is a matter well concluded,” Angus said with satisfaction. “Would that all our children might be so readily settled.”

Nicholas did not retreat. “I would also have a word with you about the betrothal, my lairdship,” he said and Jacqueline knew his inclination.

“You must not heed Margaret,” Annelise said suddenly, darting to the side of the Lord de Montvieux. That man looked down at her, his expression inscrutable. “I will learn what you favor from your sisters, and by the time we are wed, you will have no cause for discontent. I will do precisely as you desire each and every day, and spare no effort to be the best wife that ever a man did have.”

Nicholas almost winced.

Jacqueline cleared her throat. “Perhaps the betrothal should be set aside for the moment,” she said and saw relief light Nicholas’ eyes. “There is so



much afoot with Fergus, it might be best to delay.”

“Nonsense,” Angus declared, placing a hand on Annelise’s shoulder. “Annelise is more than content with the arrangements, and Lord Nicholas would not deign to insult me with a refusal while a guest in my own keep.” ’Twas clear that Angus had not noticed the other man’s uncertainty, but Jacqueline could not ignore it.

“Perhaps...” she began anew only to have Angus continue.

“Perhaps you dread the departure of not one child but two, my lady,” he said, his voice warm with indulgence. “Jacqueline, we must give them leave to take their place in the world.”

“Aye, *Maman*,” Annelise insisted. “You can visit Montvieux when we have our first child.”

“Or we might journey thence for the wedding itself,” Angus said heartily, much to Annelise’s obvious satisfaction.

“Aye, Papa! Let us set the date!”

’Twas clear that the delight of father and daughter was not shared by all, but also that Nicholas heeded Angus’ jest about insulting a host. He looked as if he might speak, but changed his view. He bowed crisply, pivoted then departed, his movements brisk. His sister followed him, as if to console him or offer counsel. Jacqueline knew that she would have to speak with Angus in private, this very night when they retired together—if not before.

Sadly, she knew how resolute her crusader knight could be when he believed he chose aright.



ISOLDE WATCHED Iain enter the gates of Airdfinnan and waited until he had vanished into the hall before stepping out of the shadows. She left the keep with purpose.

To her satisfaction, the woman she sought was alone outside their tent.

“Margaret!” she called in greeting and that woman straightened from her task. She smiled and waved a welcome. “I would seek a frippery from you, if you have brought your wares,” Isolde said by way of excuse. “Ismay’s birthday approaches.”

“Then yours must as well.”

“Aye, but I will choose a better gift.” They laughed together as Margaret retrieved a small trunk. She looked distraught to Isolde’s thinking, which meant the twin’s suspicions might be correct.

Although Nicholas oft said he disliked their meddling in his affairs, on this occasion, he would be glad of it.

Margaret opened the small trunk and Isolde caught her breath at the beautiful pieces within. The silver caught the sunlight, gems glinting in their settings, and she was fascinated anew by Margaret’s skill. Each piece was a marvel and unique, this brooch surrounded by swirling knots, this pin set with polished amethyst stones, this crucifix set with elegant filigree.

But she had not truly come for a gift.

She lifted a silver ring from the trunk, turning it so it caught the sunlight. “You know my brother better than I realized,” she said, speaking so idly that she might have been commenting upon the weather.

A bit of pink touched Margaret’s cheeks, a sure sign that the sisters were right. “You must remember that I met Nicholas when we escorted Fergus to Villonne five years ago. You were there, as well.”

Isolde smiled. “You speak aright. I was that time, but not when you arrived at Montvieux three years ago.” Her brows rose. “Something happened in our absence.”

Margaret blushed. “My father was ill and Lord Nicholas insisted that we linger for his welfare. He was a most accommodating host.” Her cheeks were afire and she could not hold Isolde’s gaze.

“And my brother was a changed man upon our homecoming.”

“I cannot imagine why.”

Isolde would have wagered otherwise, but Margaret had a stubborn look. Isolde replaced the ring and considered a bracelet. "This is beautiful."

Margaret smiled. "And I thank you. I like that piece myself." They admired the entwined bands of silver together, Isolde tracing one with her fingertip as she followed its path. They chatted of silver and Margaret's work until Isolde judged her companion to be more at ease.

She put down the bracelet. "I would ask a favor of you, Margaret."

"Indeed?"

"Let us have honesty between us."

Margaret looked startled. "Do we not already?"

"What do you think of my brother?"

Margaret pushed to her feet, turning her back upon Isolde. "He is a wealthy lord and knight, of course." She took a shaking breath. "I hope that he and Annelise will be content together."

"Truly?" Isolde mused. "I am not so confident of their match."

Margaret spun to face her and she smiled.

"Honesty, Margaret, no more than that."

"Why should they not be content together?"

"Because he loves another." Isolde watched Margaret swallow. "I believe he loves you."

The other woman shook her head with such vehemence that she was not indifferent to these tidings. "He cannot. He does not." She met Isolde's gaze. "If a man cannot be relied upon to tell the truth, how can anyone place trust in him?"

Nicholas a liar? Isolde considered the jewelry again as she chose her reply. "I have never known him to be untrue."

"Know it now!" Margaret said with heat.

"Perhaps there is a misunderstanding."

"Perhaps not. He came to me, seeking affection, on the eve of his betrothal! He insisted that he sent missives by courier, none of which ever

arrived! He lies!" Margaret leaned closer, eyes flashing. "There can be no misunderstanding."

"Except 'tis not like him. He is forthright in his manner, much like you. I might say he is too honest, not deceptive."

Margaret folded her arms across her chest, her very hostility a hint of the magnitude of her regard.

"My brother is not inclined to confidences," Isolde continued mildly. "If you wish to know something of him, I might have a reply."

"I have naught to ask you," Margaret said with such haste that her claim could not be true. "All I need know is that he will wed my cousin and treat her well."

"What if I told you that he does not desire to do as much?"

"That cannot be so."

"Why not?"

Margaret frowned, then sat down opposite Isolde, lowering her voice. "I know you hold your brother in regard, and this is no small thing. But there may be a side of his nature previously hidden to you."

"There may be," Isolde allowed, curious as to what the other woman would say.

"His charm hides a tendency to deception."

Isolde could not hide her surprise.

"You doubt me," Margaret said. She toyed with the latch on the trunk, then looked up suddenly. "In honesty, I tell you that he and I...we knew each other."

"Ah!"

"'Twas folly. 'Twas impulse. 'Twas curiosity and opportunity aligned with good wine."

"We do have good wine at Montvieux," Isolde murmured. This confession explained much to her view.

"'Twas an error beyond expectation and I left. There was no word. There

was no pursuit. There was no plea that I return.” Margaret flung out her hands. “Until this day, when he declares his desire for me again. On the eve of his betrothal to my cousin!”

“Ah,” said Isolde, not wishing to interrupt the flow of words.

“He said he wrote to me, thrice, but I received no missive. Not one. He says he sent a ring and requests its return if I decline it. There was no ring! I believe he tells a tale to charm me to his bed again, that I might entertain him here on this night, but I have no patience with empty promises.” Margaret looked most resolute. “I have been impetuous and foolish, but I will not repeat that error.”

Three missives and a ring? They could not all be lost. Nicholas would have sent a message of value with one of the couriers he always used, who would have reported upon the delivery.

“I understand your doubt.” Isolde selected another bracelet, a wide band in hammered silver, even as possibilities filled her thoughts. Did Nicholas lie? Nay, she did not believe it. Had someone ensured the missives did not arrive? Who? Unless the truth could be proven, Margaret would continue to doubt. “I do know that he has been overly vigilant these past years at the gates in August. ’Tis as if he expects someone. Did you by chance make a promise of your own?”

Margaret caught her breath. “Never!”

“Last August, he rode out with all haste and little announcement. My mother said he might have been a man in love.” Isolde again eyed Margaret, noting the new gleam in her eyes. “His squire said they rode to St. Jean in Champagne, sought someone in the jeweller’s lane, then returned.”

Margaret gripped her hands together. “Then that tale was partly true, though I cannot imagine how or why he did not find us.” She straightened. “Although being untrustworthy in some matters rather than all is scarcely an improvement.”

Isolde fingered a necklace set with a garnet. “You might also be

interested to know that the missive from Angus arrived shortly thereafter. My brother was heard to say that if his beloved did not desire him, it did not matter whom he wed.”

“I do not believe you. I cannot believe you.”

But Isolde saw that Margaret wanted to believe her.

“I have no cause to deceive you. Indeed, I would make every effort to ensure my brother’s happiness.” Isolde smiled again. “My sister and I have resolved to aid in the making of matches, the better to ensure that our own are well wrought.”

“I wish you well in that endeavor, but in this instance, your efforts will be fruitless. I will not even speak with him again.”

“Will you not come to the hall for the evening meal?”

Margaret shook her head. “I will remain here.”

Isolde could not let that transpire. “But I must have this bracelet for Ismay. It will suit her so well, but I carry no coin. Could you not bring it to the hall for the evening meal and I will pay you then?”

Margaret hesitated, considering her course and Isolde held her breath. “I will,” she said then with such resolve that Isolde knew she intended to make a hasty errand.

They laughed together, even as Isolde resolved to contrive a means of encouraging Margaret to linger.

She had to confer with her twin.

## CHAPTER 4



If Nicholas had felt cornered before, he was doubly so after his interview with Laird Angus. He marched through the hall and toward the stables, waging that he would be the one to groom a horse with unnecessary vigor this time.

He could offer naught to Margaret so long as the betrothal was not broken, but he could not break it and insult his host. Though Nicholas was glad to see evidence that he did not love alone, he could not act upon it.

If he spoke to Margaret again, she would conclude that he desired only her favors, though in truth he wished for much more. 'Twas beyond belief that all three missives had gone awry when his courier had sworn to their successful delivery. The man carried treaties to the king with complete reliability!

Indeed, Nicholas had never been more vexed in his life.

His squire took one look at him and hastened to complete some task. Burke stared after him with surprise when he marched past that man with nary a word, and Bayard murmured something to his father. The two knights nodded agreement over some matter, but Nicholas did not care.

To his surprise, Ismay had followed him from the hall. Nicholas halted in the stables and turned to find her behind him. There was no one else in the shadowed space and he was aware that she saw more than he might have

preferred. His sister in her navy gown with her fair hair looked like a warrior queen, and her cool gaze could not be avoided.

She folded her arms across her chest. "Tell me," she invited.

"There is no point," he muttered through his teeth. "All is set against me and I cannot contrive a way to change matters. All will be lost and there is *naught* I can do to change the course of my fate." He might have struck the wall with his fist, so irked was he.

"You, the heart and soul of diplomacy, cannot contrive a detente," she said with a smile.

"Not against my host, who wishes only that his daughter have her desire."

"Who could fault a man for that?"

"Not me in concept—but me in truth! I do not desire that maiden."

"But Margaret instead," Ismay said softly and he nodded. "Why?"

Nicholas flung out his hands. "Because she is not meek! Because she challenges me and provokes me and asks questions that have no ready response. Because she does not let a matter be when she believes it to be wrong." He sighed. "Because she is alluring and clever and unlike any woman of my acquaintance. There is a sorcery between us, an accord that allows us to speak our very hearts, and yet a thrill in her presence that never fades."

"You love her."

"Aye." He bowed his head at the truth of it. "I thought she spurned me. I thought my regard was not returned, though I could not fathom how that might be."

"And this is why you accepted the notion of the betrothal."

"Father was much enamored of the alliance. You know how he is."

Ismay smiled. "He can be most persuasive."

"And I had no good argument against him, not in Margaret's absence and silence."

"You expected her return."



“I should have ridden to Ceinn-beithe. I should have demanded the truth from her own lips. I should have delivered those missives *myself*.”

“You might be a wedded man by now, if so.”

“And happy beyond all, to be sure, instead of miserable.” Nicholas shook his head and paced the stable, aware that the horses and his sister watched him with interest.

“I have never seen you so distraught before,” she said finally. “You are always temperate.”

“I have never been cheated of my sole desire before,” he retorted and she smiled.

He was in love, to be sure.

“And what will you do?”

“There is naught I can do! I should be a rogue!” Nicholas said with heat. “I should be a fiend who takes what he desires without any care for the opinions of others. I should...” He raised a fist and dropped it again, then pushed his hand through his hair. “There is no point in discussing the matter further, Ismay.”

“You might be surprised,” she insisted. “Tell me all of it. Your future happiness, after all, appears to be at stake.”

And Nicholas, unable to deny the truth of her words, did.



THE TWIN SISTERS, Isolde and Ismay, so often allied in purpose, had gathered information as was their habit when they embarked upon a quest. They conferred in the late afternoon with their usual economy of speech.

“She loves him,” said Isolde.

“He loves her,” agreed Ismay.

“Why do lovers always contrive such confusion? ’Tis always thus in the tales.”

“Perhaps ’tis a hazard of a love that is true.”

They considered this, shrugged and conferred anew. Isolde confided Margaret’s tale and Ismay frowned.

“She thinks he would play her false,” Isolde continued. “She thinks him a cur and a scoundrel.” The pair shook their heads that any woman could believe their honorable brother such a knave.

“Although,” Ismay granted. “If I loved a man and he meant to betroth himself to another while making sweet promises to me, I should think him a wretch.”

The sisters nodded agreement.

“He claimed her maidenhead,” Isolde continued.

Ismay gasped and turned to her sister. “When?”

“Three years past, when she and her father halted at Montvieux. Remember? We returned to learn they had visited, and he was much changed if you recall.”

Again there were nods of agreement.

“But three years! He *is* a knave if he has not offered for her yet.”

“And means to wed another,” the sisters said in unison.

“’Tis most unlike him,” Ismay said. “He has always been a man of honor.”

“I never thought so little of Nicholas as I do in this moment,” Isolde agreed.

“But.” Ismay lifted a finger for she had sought details on their brother’s side. “He says he wrote thrice to her, but had no reply.”

“Three missives cannot have gone awry.”

“He swears upon it.”

“Did he use his customary courier?”

“Aye, who pledged each was safely delivered.

The sisters in unison considered the mystery of the missing messages.

“Remember when he rode out last summer, like a man possessed by

demons?” Ismay asked. “His squire says they rode to St. Jean with all haste, spoke to every soul in the jewellers’ market, then rode for home with equal speed.”

“He sought her at the fair. Why did he not find her?”

“James says they were told that she and her father had left early. Did they?”

Isolde shook her head. “She says they were there, which is why she doubts his claim.” The sisters pondered this in silence.

“I wonder what Iain thinks of our brother,” Ismay mused finally.

“The greater matter is what shall be done now. Though I am certain he loves her, Nicholas will not utter the words aloud.”

“Because he thinks her indifferent. That he does not make a sweet confession could be the difficulty.”

“The greater matter is the betrothal. He fears to insult his host by breaking the agreement before the betrothal is made.”

“Men and their sworn words,” Ismay said wearily.

“You like it well enough when one swears to you,” Isolde noted and Ismay smiled.

“’Tis true enough, but until he denies the betrothal, Margaret cannot trust in his pledges.”

“’Tis only good sense. I do like Margaret.”

“As do I. They will suit each other well.”

Isolde watched Annelise emerge from the hall, clearly seeking someone. ’Twas simple to guess who that might be. “But Nicholas is not the sole one who can sever the agreement.”

Ismay followed her gaze. “Indeed.”

“She may have need of encouragement,” Isolde noted. “’Twould be a bold choice for a maiden to defy her father’s choice, especially after all have gathered to witness the betrothal.”

“I suspect I know who might best grant such encouragement, given a

small nudge,” Ismay agreed, and as ever, the sisters’ thoughts were as one.



AS THE SUN sank toward the horizon and the shadows drew long, Fergus was accompanied to the chapel by Burke, Bayard and Nicholas. Prayers for his future had been uttered and the candles lit. Golden light flickered in the chapel and sounds were hushed in the sanctuary. All three knights kissed Fergus’ cheeks and wished him well. He knelt before the altar alone, garbed only in a plain chemise, left to contemplate his future responsibilities. He would remain thus until the dawn.

The three knights then joined the rest of the company in Airdfinnan’s great hall.

Though Good Friday was a fast day and their meal was a simple one of smoked eels and bread, the company was noisy that evening. There was joy in the pleasure of each other’s company, and the knowledge that they had gathered for good cause. Though there would be no revels in the hall on this night, there was conversation and even laughter. Tales were exchanged of Fergus during his training and tidings were shared by all and sundry.

The chalice made by Iain was presented to Angus and admired by the laird, then passed through the ranks of the assembly to be best appreciated. The brooch made by Margaret for the new knight’s cloak was similarly admired. Burke displayed the scabbard and spurs he had ordered for Fergus and Angus revealed to all that he would give his father’s broadsword to Fergus on the morrow. Odin’s Scythe was the name of the ancient and doughty blade, which Angus carried through the hall for all to see.

Nicholas was seated at the high table with the family of Airdfinnan, while those from Villonne sat at the closest table to them. Margaret was nigh at the back of the hall with her father, mingled with the villeins come to share in the laird’s bounty for the holiday. She had delivered the bracelet to Isolde, who

had insisted she wait for the coin from Nicholas. It had been a near thing, but Margaret had remained in the hall.

Isolde and Ismay sat with the company from Villonne, their hearts united in their scheme for Nicholas' happiness. Ismay watched her brother, noting that he obviously chafed to speak with Margaret again, but he had no such opportunity. The way he looked at Angus spoke volumes to her of duty and pledges and honor.

She rose and moved to the high table, inviting herself to a place between Annelise and her grandmother Eglantine, barely noticing how her sister gave a light laugh.

"To be wed at fourteen summers," Ismay said with awe. "To be sure, I know of no one wed so young!"

"I was wed at fourteen," Eglantine admitted with some reluctance.

"Indeed? By your own choice?" Ismay demanded as if she did not know the reply.

"The match was arranged by my father." Eglantine took a sip of ale as if that would keep her from saying more.

Duncan beside her bit back a smile. "'Tis not so simple to keep one's own counsel in matters of import," he said softly, teasing his wife.

"I vowed I would say naught," Eglantine whispered to him.

"And I wagered you would fail," Duncan murmured with affection.

Eglantine shook her head. "Your parents have chosen for you, Annelise. I would not interfere." Duncan nodded, smiled and sipped his ale.

"But truly," Ismay said. "The wisdom of one's grandmother cannot be denied. If only our grandmother, Margaux de Montvieux, was yet with us, I am certain Nicholas would consult with her."

"Aye," Eglantine said. "By my understanding, no one took a breath at Montvieux without consulting Margaux first."

"Indeed, I would be glad of the opportunity to consult her in this matter myself," Ismay said. "How difficult it must be for anyone to agree to the

happy situation of one granddaughter at the expense of the joy of another.”

“What is this?” Eglantine demanded, her eyes bright.

Ismay glanced at Annelise, just as Isolde approached the laird and his lady. Eglantine dispatched the maiden to join them, then leaned closer, her eyes bright. Ismay lowered her voice and allowed herself to be pressed for details, content that her efforts would bear fruit.



MEANWHILE, Isolde also approached the high table, thanking her host and hostess prettily for their welcome to Airdfinnan. “I know ’tis not the night for entertainment,” she said with a smile. “But on such an occasion, before so many blessings, would it be so untoward to celebrate with a song?”

“A song could cause no harm,” Angus agreed and Annelise’s delight was clear.

“I would entreat Burke to share the tale he sings so well,” Isolde said, turning to that knight. “What is it called?”

“Nicolette and Aucassin,” Alys said, with a warm smile at her spouse. “Please, Burke.”

“I will not sing alone,” that man said. “Bayard must join me, and Nicholas, too.”

“Each to sing a verse!” Isolde said with delight. “Please do.”

Applause rose from the company at this prospect and she returned to her place, ignoring Margaret’s wave from the back of the hall. Nicholas might not be able to plead his case directly, but he could woo his lady with a song.

She and Ismay had done what they could. Now, Nicholas must fend for himself.



MARGARET COULD NOT RESIST A TALE, or the opportunity to hear Nicholas sing. Surely she could sit at the back of the hall, distant from him, and not be tempted to folly. 'Twas not the coin that prompted her to linger, for she trusted Ismay, but she would cite it as an excuse, if necessary.

She watched with anticipation as Burke stood, Alys radiant with approval, and began to sing. His voice was powerful and deep, so confident that he had no need of a minstrel's accompaniment.

*“Once, far afield, there lived a man  
With wealth and fortune to his hand.  
He had one son, a tall, strong man  
The handsome knight named Aucassin.”*

The assembly clapped and hooted approval. Margaret herself was fond of the tale of Aucassin and Nicolette, a couple whose love conquered the many obstacles between them. She sank down to a bench as Bayard stood to sing a verse.

*“Aucassin’s father, he did fret  
For he did want his son to wed.  
But no bride would that knight accept,  
For he loved only Nicolette.”*

He bent to claim Esmeraude's hand and lift it to his lips, much to that lady's delight. Little Burke crowed for attention, and Bayard swung the boy into the air, settling him on one hip. He then gestured to Nicholas who stood. Margaret felt her cheeks heat when Nicholas' gaze locked upon her and he began to sing.

*“Nicolette had a beauty rare,*

*With eyes of blue and raven hair.  
With but a glance she claimed his heart  
Aucassin vowed they should never part.*

*Her wits were sharp, her judgement sure  
Her nature was most pure  
He knew this maiden would be his pride  
If she would consent to be his bride.”*

Glances were exchanged as those assembled realized that Nicholas had changed the words to the familiar ballad. Margaret felt her fury rise, for he was not the wronged party in the affair. She had not denied him!

When he sat down to a murmur of confusion, she rose to her feet impulsively.

*“Aye, Aucassin was a knight with charm  
Though his flattery led Nicolette to harm  
For his vows were empty, his pledge a lie  
But one deed did this man desire.*

*A kiss, a touch, a caress of amour  
Led Nicolette to surrender more  
Than any maiden should have granted  
Before a ring was on her finger planted.”*

There were more frowns and murmurs then, and Margaret felt Angus' gaze upon her. She did not look away from Nicholas, though, whose expression was grim. He rose to his feet again to sing.

*“Aucassin found his beloved gone*



*When he awakened at the dawn  
He sought her most diligently  
Sending missives across the seas.”*

Margaret rose to her feet with indignation.

*Lies he told, this brazen knight  
Tales for his friends to believe him right  
No doubt he seduced countless maids  
With similar tales and accolades.*

*The knave, the fiend, the wretched cur,  
Despoiled the maid then abandoned her.  
For in truth, he was not good  
This man so enamored of falsehoods.*

Whispers echoed through the hall, the company looking between Nicholas and Margaret. Neither of them sat again and neither looked away from the other. The air fairly crackled between them and Margaret could not miss Nicholas' anger with her.

No doubt he disliked that she revealed his truth to others.

“I do not remember this part of the tale,” Annelise said in a loud whisper.

“Nay,” replied Angus grimly. “’Tis a new variation to my ears as well.”

Nicholas raised his hand as he sang again.

*“No fiend could deal a blow more profound  
Than a lady who denies love’s sweet demand.  
Aucassin dispatched missives three  
But she disdained his heartfelt pleas.*

*He sent a ring with his entreaty  
But silence was his sole reply.  
A man of merit could only perceive  
That her show of love had been deceit.*

The company looked between Nicholas and Margaret with open curiosity. Aye, because he was a great nobleman and lord, and she, a mere artisan, dared to deny him.

She possessed more than a measure of anger with him, to be sure. He was not the wronged party in this matter, and she did not fear to tell him so.

She sang.

*Nicolette hoped and prayed  
No missives came, though she did wait.  
Aucassin's love did not exist  
Nor did those missives, as good as mist.*

*He told falsehoods one, two, three  
To ensure his friends thought him guilt-free.  
But 'twas all a lie, from start to finish  
Poor Nicolette was the one diminished.*

Margaret snapped her fingers at that. Nicholas made a step toward her, but she had one last verse to sing. She held up a finger and he halted, gaze simmering, his arms folded across his chest.

*"The moral is that knights do lie  
To coax maidens to part their thighs.  
But once conquest is won, the truth is clear  
That no lady claimed is ever held dear.*

*And so I counsel maidens, rich or poor  
To demand a ring before granting more.”*

Margaret held up her barren left hand as applause filled the hall. The villeins had no notion that there was truth in her charge for they cheered mightily, nor did Annelise who added her approval to the clamor. Jacqueline and Angus were less enthusiastic. Burke, Bayard and Duncan looked between Margaret and Nicholas, their expressions thoughtful.

When she dared to look back at Nicholas, Margaret caught her breath for his eyes blazed. She held his gaze for a potent moment, then pivoted and left the hall, chin high, skirts swinging.

The cur would not lay the blame at her feet. He was the one who lied, not she.



THE VINE GREW with fearsome speed as the company dined in the great hall. When a woman's voice was raised in song, the vine grew with unholy vigor. The Captain of the Guard was so alarmed that he summoned the laird.

Angus stood on the parapet surveying the rampant vine as once he had before. He felt no greater approval of it this time than the last. It covered the walls, thick with fat buds, the vines so entangled that the stone beneath could barely be discerned. Even as he watched, a tendril tossed itself into the air, seeking purchase to climb higher, and waved in the wind.

He knew better than to try to cut it. The vine would turn any blade aside, if not blunt the steel.

“Twill barricade the portals and windows, and seal us within the walls,” said the Captain of the Guard, who had not been in Angus' service six years before. Godfroy was inclined to grim prognosis, but he was not far wrong in this. “It must be torn from the walls and burned, my lord, while yet we have

the chance to save ourselves.”

“It never grew over windows and doors before,” Angus said, then sighed.

“Then what is its intent, sir?”

“’Tis a vine, Godfroy,” Angus said sternly. “Where is it writ that it must have an intent?”

“Then why does it grow, sir, and why with such sudden speed?”

“Because some knight in this hall has lost his heart,” Jacqueline said softly from behind them. She slid her hand into Angus’ elbow and stood beside him, surveying the vine. Angus knew the knight she meant. That song left no doubt. “It grew once before, Godfroy, I believe to ensure that the man in question did not err.”

“Err, my lady?”

“By letting the opportunity for happiness evade him. By failing to recognize and confess his affection for the lady in time.”

Godfroy, a hardened warrior, could not hide his skepticism of this claim. “The vine grew to urge a knight to follow his heart?” he repeated.

Angus, aware that he had nearly lost Jacqueline in his own pride, put his arm around her and drew her closer. After that song, he had difficulties believing that it would be an error for Nicholas to wed Margaret. No matter what passion was between those two, it seemed they would battle more than they loved.

Annelise had followed her mother and eyed the vine with wonder, raising a hand to caress its glossy leaves. “’Tis just as before,” she said softly.

“I have never seen or heard the like,” Godfroy insisted.

To Angus’ surprise, Eglantine climbed to the parapets, appearing behind Annelise. She surveyed the growing vine and nodded at Annelise, setting her hands upon the maiden’s shoulders. “’Tis time,” she said, revealing that they had conferred about some matter. “That song left no doubt.”

The maiden nodded and turned to Angus. “I fear the vine grows because the betrothal should not be made,” she said.

Angus' heart might have broken that his daughter should be so denied, but to his surprise, she smiled at him before he could protest.

"In truth, Papa, I had my doubts of the scheme from the first but did not wish to displease you. I know you were annoyed with Margaret earlier, but she voiced the doubts of my own heart when I did not dare to do as much." She took a deep breath. "I do not wish to be betrothed to Nicholas de Montvieux, Papa, though I have no dislike of him." She sighed. "He is most handsome, but that is not sufficient for a match to have merit."

"But," Angus began to protest, only to have Jacqueline step forward.

"*Maman*, what did you tell her?"

"I told her why we came to Scotland," Eglantine confessed, her chin high as she locked gazes with Jacqueline. "I told her that I was wed at fourteen to Robert and while a betrothal is not the same as a wedding, and thirteen years between bride and groom is not thirty, we came to this land to grant *you* the opportunity to choose. I cannot believe you would place her in the same circumstance."

"Nicholas is not Reynaud," Jacqueline replied with heat, though Angus knew she had shared these reservations. "He is a man of honor and much closer to her age..."

"And you defend my choice," Angus said, interrupting her. "You need do as much no longer, Jacqueline. I have erred and I know it well."

Eglantine nodded approval. "As Margaret says, there will be armies of knights who lose their hearts to this maiden. Let Annelise decide which one to wed."

Angus nodded agreement. "I cede," he said, smiling at the obvious pleasure of the three ladies at his words. "I cede to the wisdom of my daughter, my wife and my wife's mother." With those words, Annelise cast herself into his embrace and he caught her close, hoping to his marrow that a worthy man would win his daughter's heart in truth.

Then Annelise gasped. "Listen!" she said and they all stilled.

The vine had ceased its rustling. It had stopped growing completely, though sharp thorns still gleamed beneath the verdant leaves. Angus recalled it doing as much once before and hoped it would not bloom again.

“Leave the vine be.” He commanded Godfroy. “Its warning has been received.”

Then he descended to the hall again in search of Nicholas that the betrothal might be set aside.



HOW SOON COULD they leave Airdfinnan?

Margaret could not wait to be away. Their commissions were delivered, but sadly, the hour was too late for them to travel in safety. Her father also argued that the ponies needed one night of rest. Margaret had to content herself with her father’s assurance that they might leave immediately after Fergus was granted his spurs the next morning. She would even cede that piece to Ismay to depart from Airdfinnan in haste.

She had returned to the tent outside the walls after the song. She was too agitated to do aught but pace. How could Nicholas have suggested that she was the one who had betrayed his trust? How could he stand before an entire company and lie about sending word to her?

He was utterly unlike the man she believed him to be, a knave and a scoundrel, a wretch who would say whatever was necessary to show himself in good light. She fought her tears and told herself that she was a fool to hold him in any esteem.

The darkness grew deeper and the stars became brighter. The air chilled as the moon rose higher. Margaret lit a small fire and stared into its depths, striving to name the merits of wedding Erik. Being able to journey to Champagne this year was the sole item on her list. She rearranged her belongings, paced, sat, and willed the time to pass with speed.

Alas, it did not.

## CHAPTER 5



When Margaret heard men's voices at the gates to Airdfinnan, she rose to her feet, unable to dismiss her sense of foreboding. It might be only her father returning to their tent. Instead, a familiar figure left the keep and strode toward her with purpose. Margaret's heart clenched and she feared her own weakness when she recognized Nicholas. Even knowing all she did, she thrilled to see him again. He hastened toward her, calling her name with such enthusiasm that they might have been good friends.

Did he come to tell her falsehoods again? To defend his supposed virtue? To assault her own?

Margaret raised a hand before herself. "Do not imagine that you will join me this night, sir."

He halted and smiled, the sight melting her resistance with treacherous speed. "I would speak with you, Margaret."

"There is naught you can say that I will heed."

He braced his hands upon his hips. "Do you not wish to know what tidings I come to share?"

Curse him, she did. "What tidings are these?"

"The vine has ceased to grow."

"Then the course of love runs true. You have my congratulations." She



could not keep the bitterness from her tone when she inclined her head to him.

Nicholas, the wretch, only smiled more broadly, looking like a man with a secret he could not wait to share. Either that or he savored her misery. “Invite me closer, Margaret, and I will tell you.” He turned and gestured to the gates. “Or we could return to the hall together to confer.”

Margaret did not know whether it would be better to be in company with him or not. What tidings could there be? No messenger had arrived and her cursed curiosity insisted that she learn whatever he had to share. “Speak from where you stand. You need come no closer.”

He took a step. “I would not shout such tidings as these. They are too merry.” His eyes were dancing and she fought the urge to smile at him. “They should be whispered in your ear, and only once *you* know of them should they be announced from the ramparts by the heralds.”

Margaret felt her eyes narrow. He was merry, indeed, though she had not expected him to be so cruel. “Why me?”

“The tidings are of import to you and I.”

She caught her breath as he took another step. “Vow that you will come no closer.”

That dangerous smile curved his lips, tempting her to close the distance between them, to touch her fingertip to his mouth, to stretch up and taste his kiss again. “I swear it, Margaret, though you have naught to fear from me.” His voice was low and confident, so sure that she might have trusted him with her all again. “I will approach only when you invite me to do as much.”

“You need not hope for such a circumstance, for ’twill not occur.”

His smile turned wicked. “We could make a wager upon it.”

Margaret did not doubt that he would contrive a wager she would lose. “I thought you came to share tidings.”

“I did, though truly, I expected you to be more inquisitive.”

“Tell me!”

“Ah, there is the Margaret I recognize!”

“Tell me,” she demanded again and he smiled.

“Annelise has broken the betrothal. She swears she will not have me.” Nicholas lifted a finger, not looking discontent in the least. “*That* is why the vine has ceased to grow.”

“Oh!” Margaret raised her hands to her mouth in dismay. “This is my fault. I ruined all with my blunt speech.” She made for the gate, hoping she could set matters to rights, but Nicholas seized her arm as she drew alongside him.

“’Tis your fault only because I would wed you and not Annelise.” His voice was low, his manner resolute yet Margaret could not believe him. “Annelise declares that you uttered her thoughts aloud. It seems she feared to defy her father.”

“But you agreed to the betrothal. Do not tell me that you had no desire for it. Your father would not have compelled you to make a match.”

“Nay, but I thought you had no regard for me. I could not believe it mattered who I wed if you did not desire me.”

“Oh.” Margaret said, utterly at a loss for words. She looked at him, unable to deny the sincerity in his expression.

“Oh,” Nicholas echoed, then smiled. “’Tis not like you, my Margaret, to have so little to say.”

“But I thought you wished for only one thing of me...”

“Be my wife, Margaret,” he said with heat, interrupting her protest. “Exchange vows with me here at Airdfinnan and we will return to Montvieux wed. That is what I desire of you, no less than that you spend all your days and nights by my side.”

“Oh.” Margaret had no complaint with that solution, in truth. “Annelise does not mind?”

“Annelise is relieved, to my thinking, as will I be, if you accept me.”

She considered him. “Tell me why I should,” she demanded and Nicholas

chuckled.

“Because I love you, Margaret MacCormac, and I always will.”

Margaret felt her lips part in astonishment.

“That night would never have occurred otherwise,” he said, making her heart leap with joy. “These three years have proven that even in absence, your hold over my heart will not be diminished.”

“Then I will wed you,” she agreed.

Nicholas hooted with joy and caught her in his arms, swinging her around so that she laughed aloud. He held her close then and kissed her sweetly and soundly, his caress as satisfying as his words had been.

When finally they parted, Margaret leaned her cheek upon his chest, savoring the strength of his arms around her, certain she had never been so happy in all her days. Her thoughts flew as she considered the details of their immediate future, for she could not wait to embark upon it.

“We must visit Ceinn-beithe before traveling to Montvieux,” she said.

“Aye, you must have belongings to gather, and you will wish to say farewell to some there,” Nicholas agreed, his tone indulgent.

“And my mother will wish to have a look at you,” Margaret teased.

He chuckled and she smiled at the vibration beneath her cheek. “I hope she will be satisfied.”

She pulled back to consider him, “I wager she might be.”

Nicholas kissed her again, making the embrace more leisurely and thorough, leaving her heart thundering when he lifted his head.

Margaret smiled up at him. “And we shall not have to hasten to arrive at St. Jean in time.”

“St. Jean?” Nicholas frowned as he looked down at her. “Why should we go to St. Jean?”

“For the hot fair,” Margaret said, thinking he had forgotten the dates. “At the end of July and into August. ’Tis only April, so even with a pause at Ceinn-beithe, we will not need to rush...”

“But why would we go to the hot fair?” he asked, as if the matter was not obvious.

Margaret considered him, wondering if he had lost his wits. “Because I always go to the hot fair. You know this.”

“But, but surely you will not go there any longer?”

Margaret stepped away from him, her doubts rising. “Where else should I buy silver and gemstones? Where else should I sell my wares?”

Nicholas frowned. “But surely you will abandon your trade? There is much for the Lady of Montvieux to attend...”

“Surely not!” Margaret said, putting several paces between them. She braced her hands upon her hips to glare at him. “You cannot imagine that I will be content to simply be a wife?”

“You will not simply be a *wife*,” Nicholas retorted, bracing his hands upon his own hips to confront her. “You will be my wife and my lady. You will be lady of a great estate...”

“One expected to bear children and no more.”

“There is much more to be done than that! My mother concerns herself with charity in the village...”

“I have a trade!”

“Surely you will cease that.”

“Surely not! You said you admired my work.”

“I do. You are beyond skilled, but you cannot intend to continue to sell your wares. ’Twould not be fitting.”

“Fitting for whom? ’Tis what I *do*!”

“You can still do as much, but there is no need for you to go to the hot fair.”

“To what purpose? Why else should I create new work if not to sell it?”

He faltered for a reply, but ’twas clear to Margaret that they had very different expectations of what her life might be as his lady wife.

And she did not like his view in the least.

“You imagine I should content myself in making gifts for your sisters,” she said, her tone harsh. “Or perhaps give away my work to the poor as alms. They will be finely garbed at Montvieux indeed if the lady bestows silver pins and rings on all, simply for the asking!”

Nicholas pushed a hand through his hair, clearly exasperated. “Margaret! Think upon the matter. You cannot continue to work as a tradeswoman.”

“I cannot surrender part of my soul, simply to make you content.”

“You will not even do this for me?”

“Especially not for you,” she snapped. “If you love me as you confess you do, then you should love all of me, which includes my work and all that gives me joy.”

“Is my admiration of your work not sufficient?”

“Not if you would take it from me!” They glared at each other, each as convinced of their view as the other.

“’Tis impossible,” he said, his words crisp. “You must see as much.”

“What you demand is impossible,” she retorted. “You must see as much. Why would you wish to wed me and make me miserable?”

“I would share your happiness!”

“And there will be far less of it if I abandon my trade.”

Again, they eyed each other and she saw that he would not relent. “We cannot wed,” Margaret said with surety then, though her heart twisted at Nicholas’ obvious dismay.

“You love your trade more than me,” he accused and she dropped her gaze.

“I cannot cease to be what I am to please you,” she said. “And truly, I am wounded that you ask it of me.”

The air crackled between them, but neither stepped forward to compromise.

Finally, Nicholas swore and pivoted. “So be it, then,” he said, his tone savage, and marched back to the keep.

Margaret turned her back upon him and willed her tears to keep from falling. They spilled over her cheeks all the same, but she clenched her fists and made not a sound.

He did not love her after all, 'twas clear.



“I FEARED 'TWOULD BE THUS,” was Iain’s sole comment when he learned why Margaret was weeping upon his return. “I know how you love your trade, Margaret, and so you should. I feared that he would demand this of you.”

“’Tis unfair!”

“’Tis indeed,” Iain agreed. “And evidence that a professed love can be mere words from some. Any who loved you in truth would wish to see you happy.”

Margaret hated that she agreed.

“Better you know the truth of it now,” he said and she nodded. “We need not remain for the knighting,” Iain continued. “Sleep now if you can and we will ride out at first light.”

“Thank you, Father.” Margaret embraced Iain, fighting against her tears, glad beyond all that she had her family to rely upon.

“Perhaps I might manage one final trip to St. Jean,” he said when he released her. “You might make arrangements to buy your silver in London with a merchant.”

Margaret managed to smile. “In case Erik will not have me,” she said, trying to make a jest of it.

“You shall have to convince your mother to allow one last journey, but perhaps she would make it with us.”

“Thank you, Father,” Margaret said and hugged him again.

“Let me fetch the ponies before they secure the gates,” Iain said, patting

her shoulder and Margaret released him. “That way, there will be no delay in the morning.”

She watched him stroll to the gates and her heart ached that she had believed herself so close to winning her desire.

For years she had believed that Nicholas was the man for her. She had erred in truth, but perhaps knowing as much meant that she would find a love that was true.



“THEY ARE LEAVING,” Isolde said, shaking Ismay to wakefulness.

Ismay sat up, momentarily disoriented as she had been sound asleep. Their chamber was still dark and she was certain that the cockerel had not yet considered the possibility of heralding the dawn.

Isolde sat on the side of the bed and whispered in her sister’s ear, showing no such sleepiness. “I was at the window. Margaret and her father are leaving.”

That awakened Ismay. “*Before* the knighting?”

“Before the *dawn*.”

Ismay shivered, then lifted the coverlets and Isolde slid beneath them beside her. Her feet were already like ice. “Where is he?”

Isolde sighed. “I wager he is still asleep. He drank far too much ale last night.”

“They must have argued.”

“The path of true love is never straight.”

“How fortunate that they have us.” Ismay rose to peer through the shutters. Sure enough, Margaret and her father were packing their tent and the sky was barely touched with pink. Their ponies were already saddled.

There was not a moment to lose.

She cast a look across the chamber and their discarded garments, then fell

upon a silver pin. Her father had bought matching pins from Margaret five years before, one for each of the twins.

“Light a candle,” she instructed Isolde, who quickly followed her instruction. There was a pale green peridot snared in the middle of her brooch, while Isolde’s was graced by a garnet. Ismay held the brooch over the candle to heat the silver, then plunged it into the flame. The silver darkened immediately and she nigh singed her fingers, but when the metal was warm, she jammed the blade of her knife under the stone. She wrenched it hard, the silver snapped, and the stone fell to the floor with a clatter.

“God in heaven,” Isolde whispered. “You have ruined it.”

But Ismay had run to the window. She flung open the shutters and shouted with all her might. “Margaret! You cannot leave as yet!” She waved the damaged pin, uncertain its glint could be seen from such distance. “I have need of your aid! I entreat you.”

Margaret looked up, her hood falling back from her hair. She exchanged a glance with her father, then made a beckoning gesture.

“We must dress with haste,” Ismay said. “I will ensure that Margaret does not leave and you must rouse him, wherever he is.” She snapped her fingers. “I have need of coin to pay Margaret. That should make him hasten.”



How COULD she deny him for her trade?

Nicholas had not been able to comprehend it, but then Duncan had commented that Margaret had nearly secured her desire.

Her desire, apparently, was to find a husband that she might journey to the hot fair in her father’s absence. They had argued about it on the journey to Airdfinnan.

Too late, Nicholas realized that Margaret had never confessed to loving him.



As a result of that and the ale, he did not sleep. His thoughts churned all the night long as he sought a solution. He knew the duties required of the Lady de Montvieux and he was convinced that Margaret would excel at each and every one. She would be gracious and kind. She would insist upon the welfare of his villeins and argue for improvements in the village at every turn. She would sit at his side when he held court, and accompany him when he visited other great lords. She would be admired by all, dressed in riches, his partner by his side. Their hearts and minds would be as one and their marriage would be the envy of all. He did not care how many children she bore to him. He wanted only to be with Margaret.

He did not even care, Nicholas realized, if she did not love him as he loved her. If she was sufficiently fond of him to accept him, that could suffice.

But her trade. 'Twas unfitting for a great lady to sully her hands with such labor. She could not go to the Champagne fairs as a tradesperson and merchant, not once she was his wife. It could not be done. It would not be suitable. She could not desire to do as much.

It burned that she chose her trade over him.

It was evidence that she did not love him in truth.

Perhaps she had sought only access to his wealth to fund her trade. Perhaps she wanted only his connections to sell her wares. Perhaps it all had been a lie. Nicholas could not believe it, but he feared that possibility.

Why else would she deny him?

He tossed and turned all the night, haunted by the surety of what he would lose, and rose early to dress for the knighting. He halted to admire the brooch Margaret had wrought with her own hands.

It was a marvel of fine workmanship.

It reminded Nicholas of that last night in the hall, when they had dined together and lingered to talk. He remembered how Margaret's eyes lit when she talked of her work. He had encouraged her, fascinated by her passion.

She had unpacked the remaining pieces, the ones that had not sold at St. Jean, and shown them to him, explaining what was unique about each one. She told him how each had been wrought, showed him the marvel of each stone she had chosen, described the craft of working the silver.

She told him of the fair at St. Jean, of the many traders who gathered there, of the wool and the silk and the textiles. She described the fur from north and south, the precious stones from the east, the perfumes and spices. She talked of the different hues of amber, the merit of silver from different mines, the gold and copper she had seen, and the gems she wished she could afford. She described the work of other jewellers so vividly that he could nigh see it himself, and her tales made him yearn to travel with her.

This brooch had snared his attention at first, for both its beauty and its size. She had shown him the ant trapped in the amber, holding it to the candlelight, explaining its rarity. They had talked of amber looking like honey, of silver shining like a stream in sunlight, of the way she felt when the metal turned beneath her hands precisely as she desired.

He ran his thumb across the amber stone now, remembering how he had been compelled to acquire this piece, her finest work. She had offered to give it to him, but Nicholas would not hear of it. When she had confessed that she was glad for it to be in his keeping, his heart had thundered with satisfaction.

That kiss had been hotter, longer, sweeter.

It had ended in his bed, only to give way to more kisses and a night that still kindled a heat within him.

*Margaret.*

Isolde knocked upon the door of his chamber in that moment, not hesitating to enter before he replied. "You must come," she said with urgency. "And with haste."

"But..."

"Margaret and her father intend to leave. We must stop them and you must help. How else will you have the opportunity to change her view?" She

halted in the act of leaving the chamber. “Oh, and bring coin.”

“She will not be bribed to wed me!”

“Nay.” Isolde smiled. “Of course not. She is keener of wit than that.”

Nicholas fastened the pin to his cloak, ensured that his boots were polished, and went to persuade Margaret to his view.

He did not expect an easy conquest, to be sure, but the reward would be worth the price.



MARGARET TURNED Ismay’s brooch in her hands, shocked that it should be so damaged. “How did this happen?” she asked again.

“I do not know,” Ismay confessed. “It was fine and now it is not.”

Margaret sensed that she was being told only an increment of the tale. “It most assuredly is not.” She plucked the peridot from her outstretched palm. “At least you saved the stone.”

“Can you repair it?”

“Not readily. The silver has been worked too hard and too much. ’Twill not hold the gem again. I will have to replace the silver setting and that will take time.” Margaret frowned. “If I were going to the fair at St. Jean this year, I could take it home, repair it and return it then.”

“We had best linger while you repair it now,” Iain said with resolve and she wished he might have decided otherwise. “A day is not so much delay.” With a nod, he headed for the keep, undoubtedly to witness Fergus’ knighting.

“He would keep you from Montvieux at any price,” Ismay said softly.

“Nay, that is not it,” Margaret protested, though she wondered.

Then she saw Nicholas pass her father. He bowed to Iain, who hesitated, looking back at Margaret as if doubting whether he should continue. Then Isolde appeared, seizing Nicholas’ arm and urging him in the opposite

direction, and Iain chose to continue into the keep. Once he had vanished through the gates, Isolde and Nicholas turned their steps toward Margaret and Ismay.

Margaret strove to ignore the leap of her heart. Instead, she bent her attention upon setting up her small forge and kindling a fire within it. She fetched her leather apron, glad she had brought her tools, and made a plan for the repair of the brooch, keenly aware that the three siblings watched her closely.

Then she lost herself in the task and almost—but not quite—forgot that Nicholas was so near.



NICHOLAS WAS SO FASCINATED that he did not want to leave. He watched Margaret at her work, admiring her grace and confidence. Her movements were economical and precise, her surety of how to fix the piece complete.

And he knew as he watched her that he could not ask her to surrender this work, which not only meant a great deal to her but was a part of her. Margaret without her forge would become only a shadow of herself.

He could not do that to her.

He would not ask such a great sacrifice of her, not now that he understood its magnitude.

In another place and time, they might have allied. If he had not been Lord de Montvieux, they might have labored together in some village or town. He could have joined her life, but he would and could not sacrifice his own responsibilities. He had inherited a title and a holding requiring his attention. Like Margaret, he had trained for years to fulfill his duties, and it could not be cast aside. Montvieux was as much a part of him as Margaret's trade was of her.

They were ill-fated lovers, to be sure, each committed to their own path

despite of the affection between them. Though they could not be together, he would wish her every good fortune.

He heard the bells from the chapel summoning him to his duties, took one last long look at the lady he would always love, and returned to his duties as Lord de Montvieux.

He wondered, yet again, what had happened to the ring he had sent to Ceinn-beithe.

Nicholas supposed he would never know.



HE SIMPLY LEFT.

If Margaret had hoped that Nicholas would entreat her to change her view, she was disappointed yet again. In fact, she had feared his plea, for she was uncertain that she could deny him again and refuse his offer once more.

She did not doubt that Ismay had contrived this labor for her, to ensure her delay, for both sisters looked after Nicholas with dejection when he returned to the keep. At their urging, Margaret set aside her labor and secured her tools, then accompanied them to the chapel. She had never witnessed the dubbing of a knight before, though she had heard of it.

She knew that was but an excuse, and not the real reason for her curiosity, but she would never see Nicholas again after this day.

Fergus had spent all night praying in the chapel alone. When the three demoiselles arrived, he was no longer in the chapel. Angus and Jacqueline stood before the altar, the priest before them, their other children standing on either side of them. Eglantine and Duncan were present, as were Esmeraude and Alys with little Burke between them. The chapel smelled of incense and the beeswax from the candles that burned on all sides. The shadows were cool, just a bit of light coming through the open doors to the bailey.

“Bayard has taken him to bathe and dress,” Isolde said in a whisper. “As

the younger knight from Fergus' training, he will be as his squire, while Burke, the senior, will knight him."

Burke entered the chapel then, carrying a sword in a scabbard. He wore his hauberk, polished to a gleam, and a tabard with the unicorn rampant that was the insignia of Villonne. Two squires followed him in his colors, one bearing a cushion with Fergus' new spurs, the other with a jewelled dagger on a cushion.

"The sponsor contributes the sword and spurs to the knight, as custom," Ismay whispered to Margaret. "But as Fergus will bear his father's blade, Burke grants him a dagger."

Margaret nodded.

Nicholas followed them, carrying a jeweled scabbard for the sword. He too wore his armor and the tabard graced with his insignia, though he also wore his cloak with the pin Margaret had crafted. She could not quell her response to the sight of him, though he frowned slightly and did not glance her way.

Burke laid the sword upon the altar and Margaret saw that it was the weapon Angus had shown them the evening before. Odin's Scythe was aptly named for the steel blade gleamed, looking lethal even from Margaret's position, and 'twas clear the sword was weighty. Burke stepped back and his squires placed the spurs and dagger alongside the sword. Nicholas placed the scabbard on the altar.

The knights turned then to the portal and a ripple passed through the assembly. Fergus stood framed there, the morning light behind him, the sun touching the gold of his hair. He looked older and larger, more formidable than Margaret remembered and solemn, too. He wore a hauberk that gleamed in the light, though no tabard as yet. Bayard accompanied him, also in the colors of Villonne, escorting him to the altar. There was an audible gasp as Fergus realized which blade would be presented to him and Margaret saw Angus straighten with pride.

Fergus knelt, Bayard on one side and Burke on the other, Nicholas standing to the right and Burke's squires to the left as the priest raised his hands.

"Hearken, we beseech thee, o Lord, to our prayers and deign to bless with the right hand of thy majesty this sword with which this Thy servant desires to be girded, that it may be a defence of churches, widows, orphans and all thy servants against the courage of the pagans, that it may be the terror and dread of other evildoers, and that it may be just both in attack and defence."

Nicholas stepped forward then. Bayard placed the sword in the scabbard, then Nicholas girded the weapon to a new belt fastened about Fergus' waist. Burke stepped forward to face Fergus, granting him the dagger. Fergus placed the weapon in its scabbard in his belt on the other side, and Burke gave him the kiss of peace on both cheeks. Bayard did the same and finally Nicholas. Fergus then drew the sword and brandished it three times, turning so all could see him. Jacqueline could be heard to sniffle.

When he sheathed the blade again, Burke stepped forward again and raised his hand.

"The traditional *colée*," Ismay whispered to Margaret who did not understand.

"A ceremonial blow," Isolde explained, just as Burke gave Fergus a light slap to the face.

"Awaken from evil dreams and keep watch, faithful in Christ and praiseworthy in fame," Burke said and Fergus bowed his head in agreement. At Burke's gesture, his squires fastened the spurs to Fergus' boots, and the new knight knelt before Nicholas to swear homage to Montvieux.

Margaret watched as Nicholas held Fergus' hands within his own, and Fergus pledged to serve the Lord de Montvieux above all others. Once he had sworn his alliance and kissed Nicholas' signet ring, Nicholas urged Fergus to his feet and kissed his cheeks. She realized then the responsibility of Nicholas' position. She had thought a nobleman of his stature was simply

wealthy and could do as he willed, but he had duties and responsibilities to fulfill. She wagered his wife would have an equal measure of them, and that his concerns were justified.

Nicholas then granted Fergus a pair of gloves, the leather dyed to deep blue and the cuffs embellished with gold embroidery. Fergus donned them, then Nicholas presented him to the company.

The newly made knight was beaming, his delight clear, even before his parents stepped forward with their gifts. Jacqueline placed a dark cloak, cut full and lined with fur, around her son's shoulders. It swirled around him, the hem below his knees. Angus pinned the brooch commissioned from Margaret to his son's shoulder, fastening the cloak there, then kissed his cheeks as well. Margaret could not suppress her smile at Fergus' evident pride. He might have been a hand taller in his finery than just moments before.

"Let us pray," said the priest, raising his hands, then began to sing the mass.



## CHAPTER 6



Airdfinnan was filled with revelry that afternoon, but Margaret returned to her small forge to work. It took far longer than she had hoped to repair the brooch and reset the stone. Her father even came out in the afternoon to check on her and she sought his advice as to how best to proceed. Ultimately, she fashioned a new setting for the stone, though it took some effort to attach it where the other had been broken. It was falling dark when she finished and all were being summoned to the hall. She decided to join the others briefly at the feast before retiring.

But Ismay must have been watching for her, for she fairly pounced upon Margaret at the portal to the hall. Isolde appeared as if by magic on Margaret's other side and the pair, chattering all the while, ushered Margaret to a place at the table with those from Villonne. They spoke of gems and her work, admired the repaired piece, and generally ensured that Margaret could not readily excuse herself. The knights conferred with Angus in some other part of the keep, her father was lost in the cheerful assembly, and when Ismay pushed a cup of wine into her hand, Margaret drank it.

She remembered emptying the cup and the rich unfamiliar taste of the wine. She remembered the roast venison and the lively conversation that swirled around her, neither of which diminished the fire of the wine in her empty belly. She remembered the minstrels becoming lively and Fergus

leading Annelise to dance. She had a vague recollection of her father insisting that they retire and the feel of the cool evening air upon her face.

Beyond that, Margaret recalled naught but blissful sleep.



THERE HAD BEEN no opportunity to speak with Margaret.

Nicholas had never known an interval of such vexation as these days at Airdfinnan. He knew what he wished to say to her, but obligations kept him from doing as much. Angus would confer about the defenses of Airdfinnan. Burke would ensure Angus' approval of Nicholas' plans for Fergus' future training. All would discuss endlessly the details of their return to France. The meal had been more formal and he had been constrained by his seating. At least his sisters had waylaid Margaret.

The meal had been long as well, course after course served and many toasts made to Fergus, his father and the knights from France. The hour was late when the dancing began and there was the usual confusion as tables were moved out of the way. Nicholas knew he had to dance with his hostess, but thought his sisters would understand if he danced next with Margaret. It might be the soonest opportunity to confer with her.

But when the dancing began and he looked, Margaret had vanished.

Ismay pointed to the gates at his glance and Isolde shrugged, evidence that they had not been able to detain her. Doubtless Iain would keep him from speaking to her alone. He suspected, though, that father and daughter would leave at first light if not before. This night might be his sole chance to persuade her to grant him a chance. Then Jacqueline was at his elbow and he bowed to her, leading her to the dance.

At first opportunity, Nicholas strode from the hall. The night was cool and clear, a relief from the heat and noise of the hall. He spoke to the gatekeeper then crossed the bridge, noting immediately how quiet all

appeared on the other bank. The tent flaps were down and secured for the night, all belongings packed away. He approached the tent and walked around it, hearing the soft sounds of someone sleeping.

Did he dare to hope it was Iain who slept?

“Margaret?” he asked quietly but there was no reply.

Nicholas looked back at the keep, the high walls adorned with the growth of that vine, and knew this was his sole opportunity to change his lady’s thinking.

“Margaret, I know you are vexed with me and with good cause,” he began softly, making no effort to disguise his feelings. “I should have ridden myself to Ceinn-beithe to beg for your hand, instead of sending a courier. And worse, I should have recognized the import of your labor to you. You have such skill! On this day, I witnessed what I should have understood sooner, that your talent in shaping the silver is part of what makes you the marvel that you are. It is why you are different from other women I have known, why you are intriguing, why you challenge and fascinate me. ’Tis why I love you.”

He thought this last might elicit a response and he waited, wondering whether he imagined that someone caught their breath inside the tent.

Nicholas bowed his head and continued. “’Twas folly to suggest for a moment that you should surrender ought to become my wife. I love you and you alone, Margaret, *vous et nul autre*, and I cannot desire to be without you. Though I know not how best to combine my responsibilities and your trade, I believe that we will find a balance together. That will be part of our adventure and I suspect it may make our marriage the envy of all. We are neither of us content with what gives satisfaction to others. I would have you be all that you wish to become, and I would lay my every resource at your feet to make it so.” He paused, waiting for a sign, but there was none. “Grant us the opportunity to find joy together, Margaret. Wed me, my beloved, and I vow to do whatsoever I can to ensure your happiness. I love you. Do me the

honor of becoming my wife.”

Naught.

Nicholas tipped his head back and considered the stars overhead. He could not think of one more thing to say on his own behalf. He endeavored to compromise, but Margaret had said herself that she had no taste for compromise.

She also said she would wed only for a great love.

Nicholas could only conclude that his admiration was not returned.

He sighed and turned from the tent, knowing he would ride out at first light and never look back. He would not return to Scotland ever, but neither would he forget the woman who had claimed his heart forever.

Montvieux would have to be sufficient. He was aware as he approached the gates that something had changed, then he smelled the flowers. The vine was bursting into bloom, large red flowers opening from the buds. They might have been wrought of crimson velvet, so deep was their hue and so lush their appearance. And the scent was a marvel, sweet and potent, a scent that turned his thoughts to pleasure.

He would dream of that night with Margaret, Nicholas knew it well, and his morning would taste of regret. But for this one night, he would savor that memory.

Though it was the sum of all he would have from Margaret, ’twas not nearly enough.



IAIN REMAINED ON HIS PALLET, staring at the roof of the tent. Never in all his days would he have expected a knight and nobleman to make such a concession to any woman—but then, if there was a woman to defy expectation, ’twas his oldest daughter. He reviewed Nicholas’ words again and again, fearful he had missed some telling detail, but he had not. And the

man's sincerity was as clear as his love for Margaret.

But she had not heard his words.

Iain listened to the soft rhythm of her breathing. He knew his daughter's heart and her desire. He knew she loved Nicholas, but could not surrender so much for his sake. That Nicholas had recognized the merit of Margaret as she was, that he was prepared to do whatever was necessary to have her by his side and happy, changed all for Iain.

Iain would not stand in the way of his daughter's happiness.

He rose silently and retrieved a satchel hidden in his belongings. He could not say why he had brought the bundle this time, but he was glad to have it in this moment.

'Twas time these missives were finally delivered.



ON EASTER MORNING, Margaret awakened early. She could hear the birds and the flow of the river and savored the sweet dreams that had warmed her all the night long. She kept her eyes closed, savoring the potent memories of Nicholas and their night together, of his sweet caress and the desire that had kindled between them. She recalled his chamber with its great bed, the softness of the mattress, the weight of his strength atop her, the glow of his eyes as he watched her attain her satisfaction.

She had to find him this morning. She had to convince him that they could compromise. She sat up and winced, recalling the wine and its power.

She then realized that there was a satchel beside her pallet which had not been there the night before.

The satchel was leather, stained a deep red and beautifully wrought. On its front was an insignia Margaret recognized well—the three fleur-de-lis and lion of Montvieux—and her heart gave a little skip at the sight. She opened it to find that there were two more smaller satchels inside, each adorned with

the same seal, a letter inside each one and a letter in the greater pouch. At the bottom, something small and hard was secured in a cloth bag. The three letters were written in the same hand, each adorned with the seal of Montvieux.

Nicholas' missives. Margaret stared at them for long moments without reading them. Her heart skipped that he had not deceived her, but where had they been? How had they reached her hands only now?

She guessed the moment before her father spoke.

"I apologize, Margaret," Iain said softly and she glanced up to find him watching her from his pallet. "I erred, though I thought I chose rightly for you."

"He did write," she whispered, her fingers tracing the impression of his insignia in the wax seal. The letters, she realized, had been opened.

Her father sighed. "And he came to Champagne last year to seek you. I saw him first and ensured you did not glimpse him, then asked the others to tell him we were gone."

Margaret felt as if her heart had been torn from her breast. How could her father have so betrayed her?

"I told them that he sought only your surrender, and you know they are protective of you."

Aye, the other jewellers might have been her uncles for their care of her. Margaret stroked the leather, knowing all had meant well but that their choices might have cost her all.

"I believed he would demand that you surrender your trade," Iain admitted when she did not speak. "I could not bear the prospect, Margaret, that you should be compelled to abandon what you have loved most, what you do best, in order to secure a spouse. I knew he would desire convention and tradition, given his lineage, and I wished better for you."

"He did indeed ask that of me," Margaret said softly, hating that her father had been right.

“And I feared that you would surrender to him, given the power of your love.”

Margaret nodded, knowing the truth of it.

“But ’twould not have given you joy in the end, lass.”

She bowed her head, fearing that her father was right. She was not wrought for compromise, after all.

“You must know that he came last night,” Iain continued and Margaret looked up. “You were asleep but he did not know as much. He confessed his ardor for you and vowed to do whatever was necessary to bring you joy, and to convince you to place your hand in his.”

She knew that her surprise showed for Iain chuckled. “He loves you in truth, lass. I am sorry that I did not recognize as much sooner.”

“I cannot bear to live without him.”

“Then make haste, lass, for he was disappointed that you gave no reply.”

Margaret dressed with haste and pushed her feet into her boots. She seized the satchel and raced to the bridge to Airdfinnan, breaking into a run at the last. She arrived at the gates breathless, only to find that a certain knight argued with the gatekeeper about opening the portal before the Laird of Airdfinnan gave word to do as much.

“Nicholas!” she cried and he looked up. He was pale, she saw immediately, and his expression was guarded. She saw, though, that he was both grim and resolute. He was also garbed for travel, seated upon his destrier, wearing his cloak and his hauberk. “You cannot be leaving.”

“I cannot remain,” he countered. “I can endure it no longer, Margaret. You must follow your heart, but mine cannot bear to be so close to you and yet estranged.” He lifted his chin and held her regard through the portcullis. “You need not ever fear to see me again. I will trouble you no longer and will never return to Scotland.”

The words were like a blow to her heart. “But you cannot leave without me,” she said, seeing that he was startled. “I was asleep last night when you

came to our tent,” she added and his gaze brightened with sudden avidity. She raised the satchel. “My father waylaid these, fearing for my future if I put my hand in yours.”

Nicholas’ jaw tightened.

“He ensured I did not see you last year in Champagne. He believed I would be unhappy as your wife, for he believed you would have me surrender my trade.”

“And I did, fool that I was.”

“He was wrong, so he says, for he heard your appeal last night.” She smiled. “Would you repeat your plea, sir, that I might hear it as well?”

Nicholas smiled slowly, the expression lighting his features and his eyes. “Aye, I can believe that you would have me entreat you anew.”

Margaret laughed. “I suspect that I will find whatever you say compelling, sir, as I had resolved during the night that I did not wish to be without you, regardless of the price.”

“Margaret!”

The gatekeeper, being a man of some wit, ceased to listen so avidly to their exchange and chose to open the portcullis in that moment. Margaret lunged through the portal as Nicholas swung out of his saddle, and Nicholas caught her close, lifting her from the ground and holding her captive against his chest. The gatekeeper retreated to his small chamber as if less interested in proceedings than he was.

“You do not jest with me,” Nicholas asked, his gaze searching hers.

“Tell me,” she urged and he smiled again.

“I love you, Margaret, with all that is within me. I would be honored beyond all if you would be my wife. We shall find a means of ensuring all our responsibilities are fulfilled, I vow it to you, for we will do as much together.”

Margaret shook her head as her tears of joy blurred her vision. “I will wed you,” she said. “For I love you with all my heart, Nicholas de Montvieux, and



there can be no other man for me.”

Nicholas kissed her and she tasted sweet relief in his embrace. She loved how his arms tightened around her, as if he would never let her go.

“You claimed my heart three years ago,” he confessed. “After placing your mark upon it two years before that. Though ’twould be unconventional, I cannot ask you to surrender your trade and I was a fool to ever ask as much. I would have you do what you do best and can argue only that you surprised me yesterday.” He smiled down at her. “I imagine that ’twill not be the last time you do as much, though I will not decide against you so quickly in future.”

“Then we shall both be happier together if naught must be surrendered at all.”

After another thorough kiss, Margaret was flushed and happy. She laughed and glanced down at the satchels. “I am curious to know what you wrote, to be sure.”

“I suppose ’twill be trite in the reading.”

“I will cherish them all,” she insisted.

Nicholas frowned a little. “There is something you might cherish more than words,” he said and reached into the larger bag. He smiled as he removed the small sack within it, then he surrendered it to her and bade her open it. Margaret stood within the circle of his arms and unwound the wrappings, revealing a wide gold ring set with a glorious round garnet.

“*Vous e nul autre,*” she read, then met Nicholas’ gaze. “You and no other.”

“’Twas my grandmother’s ring, she who always could be relied upon to utter the truth.”

“You sent it to me,” she said with awe, knowing he had sworn the truth to her.

“This is the ring I would have you wear, Margaret, and I would have you wear it as my lady wife. I meant to grant it to you that morning, but you were

gone.” He lifted a brow. “Wed me.”

Margaret wondered whether ’twas possible to die of happiness. “I will, but not because you are Lord de Montvieux and not because you are a knight and not even because you are the finest man I have ever seen.”

He smiled. “Why then?”

“Because I always said I would wed only for a great love.”

Nicholas framed her face in his hands, his eyes glowing with a love she would never doubt again. “I am glad, my Margaret, that neither of us was wrought for compromise,” he said. “My grandmother would heartily approve.” Before she could laugh, he kissed her soundly. She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him back, offering her all.

Their embrace was of short duration, though, for no sooner had Margaret melted against Nicholas in surrender than his sisters appeared.

“That shall have to wait,” decreed Isolde, resplendent in a copper hued kirtle.

“We are to wed.” Nicholas lifted the ring in protest, but Ismay planted a hand in the middle of his chest and pushed him back a step. She wore a glorious kirtle of icy blue.

“You may kiss her after you place it on her finger,” she said.

“In the chapel,” Isolde added.

“This very morning,” the sisters declared in unison.

Nicholas smiled, winking at Margaret. She smiled back at him, as content as he to cede to his sisters’ scheme, whatever it might be.

“The Lord de Montvieux cannot exchange his marital vows in a bailey like a peasant,” Ismay said, scolding Nicholas with a twinkle in her eyes.

“And she destined to be the Lady de Montvieux cannot exchange her wedding vows in the chemise and kirtle she wears each day,” Isolde continued, tugging Margaret’s elbow.

“’Tis clear how you have become accustomed to outspoken women,” Margaret said to her beloved and Nicholas laughed.

“But no such ever captured my heart as securely as you,” he said, kissing his fingertips as they were drawn apart.

“We shall fetch the priest,” Ismay said, obviously intent upon taking Nicholas with her.

“We shall meet you at the chapel,” Isolde agreed, and Margaret was swept back into Airdfinnan’s hall, laughing at the enthusiasm of Nicholas’ sisters and glad of their hearty approval.

Had she ever known such joy? Never—and yet she knew ’twas but a taste of what their future held, together.



ANNELISE PEEKED into the chamber that had been shared by the sisters from Montvieux. Before her very eyes, Margaret was changed from the cousin she adored to a lady so beautiful that she did not dare to address her.

Isolde had emptied her trunk and that of her sister, casting garments across the chamber with abandon as she sought the perfect choice. A bath had been summoned in the meantime, and Margaret bathed, her anticipation clear in the sparkle of her eyes. Annelise watched Isolde surrender a chemise of linen as white as snow, the cloth woven so fine that ’twas almost sheer. She tied the front as Margaret marveled at the garment, ignoring that woman’s protests.

Next, she chose a kirtle of crimson wool, a hue as rich as that of garnets and one that favored Margaret mightily. There was no embroidery on the cuffs and hems, but the cloth was so fine that it needed no adornment. That did not stop Isolde from adding an embroidered girdle of cloth of gold, one that fit perfectly around Margaret’s slender waist. She urged Margaret to a stool and offered her sheer stockings, garters and a pair of red leather slippers, even as she moved behind the bride to dress her hair.

“We have need of some ribbons,” she said to Annelise, proving that she

had known the maiden to be there all along. "If you would add to your cousin's finery, perhaps you have a few to share."

Annelise was glad of the opportunity to contribute. She retrieved several from her own chamber, both gold and red ones, as well as a plain circlet of gold. Margaret's dark hair was braided into a coronet by the time she returned and shyly offered them.

"You need not," Margaret said, her gaze kindly.

"I wish to," Annelise said, her words husky. "I would have love between us again, Margaret."

"It never was lost," the older maiden said and tugged Annelise into a tight hug. "I thank you for surrendering your betrothal."

"I wish only to know a love such as yours. You made me realize how merry a match might be."

"Then you must come to Montvieux, next summer perhaps. You might visit Fergus and I will take you to the Champagne fair."

"Truly?" Annelise could not imagine a greater delight.

Margaret laughed. "Truly. And Nicholas will introduce you to every knight of repute of his acquaintance." She dropped her voice to a mischievous whisper. "And I shall have time to verify their good characters before you arrive."

Annelise cast herself at her cousin for another heartfelt hug.

"The ribbon," Isolde said and Annelise straightened, handing over each one dutifully as Isolde arranged Margaret's hair. The circlet was settled over the braids, a sheer veil over it that was no more than a wisp of golden silk.

"Beautiful," Isolde pronounced.

"Beautiful," Annelise echoed, then the three of them left the chamber for the chapel. Everyone was gathered in the bailey to await the bride and witness the ceremony, and Annelise sighed with longing when Nicholas turned to Margaret. His eyes lit with such pleasure that she knew she could never wed a man who regarded her with less adoration than Nicholas clearly

felt for Margaret.

And when she stole a glance at Margaret, she knew that affection was returned.

This was what marriage ought to be, and Annelise would never forget as much.



NICHOLAS CAUGHT his breath at the sight of Margaret when she appeared in the bailey. Her kirtle was as red as the garnet in the ring he held and she looked like a queen as she walked toward him. His sisters had clearly conspired over her finery, though Nicholas would not have cared what she wore.

She was queen of his heart and there would never be another.

She smiled at him, her eyes sparkling with delight, as she placed her hand in his, and his heart leapt at her proximity, just as always it had. He suspected it always would. He closed his fingers over hers and turned to the priest, liking how her arm brushed against his own. He could smell the sweetness of her skin and was filled with a sense of surety that he only felt with Margaret by his side. They would not be a conventional lord and lady, but Montvieux had been built by those who chose their own path.

He felt the presence of his grandmother when he lifted the gold and garnet ring, remembering suddenly the day she had given it to him. He had been only ten or twelve years of age and had visited her in her chamber. Her knuckles had been swollen and she had removed her rings that day to rub an ointment into her hands. The garnet had snared the light and he had picked it up to look at it.

“*Vous e nul autre,*” she had said with approval even as he read the inscription himself.

“You and no other,” he said and she nodded.

“One day, Nicholas, there will be a lady. She might be a maiden. She might be a widow. But you will know with a glance that she is the lady who must be by your side forevermore. Woo her. Win her. Put this ring upon her finger and be happy, for there is no joy like that which is born of love.”

And he had kept the ring from that day forth, at her instruction. He had intended to put it upon Margaret’s finger that morning, three years ago, the day that she had vanished from Montvieux. He had thought it lost when he sent it to Margaret and had no reply. And here ’twas, restored to him on the very day he had need of it.

Which could only mean that Margaux approved of his match.

He repeated the vows uttered by the priest, then turned to Margaret with the ring between his finger and thumb. “In the name of the father,” he said, putting it on her smallest finger. “In the name of the son,” he continued, moving it to her next finger. “And in the name of the holy ghost, I take thee, Margaret, to be my wedded wife.” And he pushed the ring onto her finger, warming it beneath his grasp for a moment as he stared into her eyes.

“And I take you, Nicholas, to be my wedded husband,” she said, stretching up to touch her lips to his. The priest tut-tutted, but Nicholas could not refuse a kiss from this lady. Indeed, he caught her close and deepened their embrace, slanting his mouth over hers in a kiss that sealed them together, heart and soul, forevermore.



“WHY DOES the venison always taste better in Scotland?” Ismay demanded of Isolde as the sisters walked arm-in-arm to the great hall after the mass. The bells were ringing and the bailey was filled with villeins and guests, all in the merriest of moods. The air was redolent of the food being prepared for the feast at midday, roast meats and gravies, fresh bread, eggs and tarts and all manner of good things. Ismay’s stomach grumbled in anticipation.

Isolde smiled at Margaret and Nicholas who walked ahead of them, so obviously besotted with each other that she could only be glad of her efforts to aid in this happy resolution. “Because joy is the best sauce,” she said with confidence.

Ismay turned to look at her. “I thought hunger was the best sauce.”

“But surely, ’tis cause for joy to have one’s hunger satisfied.”

Ismay laughed. “Perhaps hunger makes the first bite taste better, while joy augments the flavor of all subsequent bites.”

“I could not have contrived a better explanation, sister.”

“Then let us partake of the meal, for both the satisfaction of our hunger and the celebration of our joy.”

“Let us, indeed.”



*TO CELEBRATE the 25th anniversary of the original publication of **The Princess**, I’ve commissioned new cover illustrations for each of the six books in the Bride Quest series, which appear on new hardcover and mass market editions, all publishing in November 2023. There are also two new Bride Quest stories: **Christmas at Tullymullagh**, a short story, and **Easter at Airdfinnan**, a novella. These stories are available in ebook and are also included in the new print editions: (**Christmas at Tullymullagh** is in the new print editions of **The Heiress**, while **Easter at Airdfinnan** is in the new print editions of **The Temptress**). The links below will take you to my website to learn more!*

**[See the new cover illustrations.](#)**

**[Learn more about the new mass market editions.](#)**

*Learn more about the new hardcover editions.*

*Learn more about Christmas at Tullymullagh.*





## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The fairs in Champagne were regular events in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, providing scheduled opportunities for merchants and traders to buy and sell goods. Though the Hot Fair (held at St. Jean in July and August each year) and the Cold Fair (held at St. Remy in October and November) are best known, there were six annual fairs, each with its own schedule and location. Every “host” town was located near a river and an old Roman road, allowing for easy transportation. The towns provided warehouses for the vendors, while the Counts of Champagne governed the fairs, providing protection and guaranteeing contracts, as well as means of settling disputes.

There were typically a number of days at the beginning of the fair for setting up booths and stalls, then periods focussed on specific commodities—cloth, leather and furs, spices and *avoirdupois* (or goods sold by weight)—then a closing period when accounts were settled. Wool and linen cloth was brought from Flanders, silk from the south and east, silver from Bohemia, amber from the Baltic, gems like rubies from the east, etc. etc. I love the idea of people gathering from so many points with such diverse goods to mingle and trade. Of course, more was exchanged than commodities: the spread of Gothic architecture and some development of banking practices are attributed to the gathering of people at these fairs.

The origins of knighthood and its ceremonies are a bit murky before the

thirteenth century and it is unclear how widespread certain later traditions (like the *colée*) were at any given time or location. Knighthood flourished first in France, at holdings associated with the courts of the French and Norman kings, so I've taken the liberty of letting Burke be at the forefront of an institution that was still evolving ca. 1200.

Until the eleventh century, warriors were often knighted by their fathers and there was much less formality about the event. "Be thou a knight!" was the salutation. By the fourteenth century, warfare was more complicated and it was typical for a young man to be entrusted to training at the age of eight to a male relation who was already a knight. This was often a maternal uncle. After eight years or so of training, the successful candidate would be girded with a sword, granted his spurs and dubbed a knight.

The blessing of the sword is one of the earliest known elements of the service. It was recorded in the mid-tenth century, showing the involvement of the Church in the creation of knights. The order of the service for Fergus' knighting is taken from the Pontifical of Guillaume Durand, Bishop of Mende, from about 1295. It is a later source than the setting of the book, but we needed a little pomp and ceremony. This was more or less the form of the service thereafter. Easter and Whitsunday were the most common choices of date for the knighting ceremony, the festivities being combined with other celebrations on those days.

The *colée* is found only in England and France before 1350, and does not appear to have been widespread. It is mentioned in a late twelfth century poem called *L'ordene de chevalerie*, which made it fair game for our story. We know that the Brothers Fitzgavin will always listen to a troubadour's tale or epic poem.

If you'd like to read more about medieval knighthood, Richard Barber's *The Knight and Chivalry* is a good source, as is Georges Duby's *The Knight, the Lady and The Priest*, which also addresses the changing notions of marriage and gender roles. *The Medieval Knight* by Christopher Gravett is a

more recent publication including many wonderful illustrations by Graham Turner. Information about the Champagne fairs may be more readily found by researching a specific item of trade, like woollen cloth—or maybe a visit to Provins, one of the fair towns, where a medieval warehouse remains.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Cooke sold her first book in 1992, a medieval romance called **Romance of the Rose** published under her pseudonym Claire Delacroix. Since then, she has published over fifty novels in a wide variety of sub-genres, including historical romance, contemporary romance, paranormal romance, fantasy romance, time-travel romance, women's fiction, paranormal young adult and fantasy with romantic elements. She has published under the names Claire Delacroix, Claire Cross and Deborah Cooke. **The Beauty**, part of her successful Bride Quest series of historical romances, was her first title to land on the *New York Times* List of Bestselling Books. Her books routinely appear on other bestseller lists and have won numerous awards. In 2009, she was the writer-in-residence at the Toronto Public Library, the first time the library has hosted a residency focused on the romance genre. In 2012, she was honored to receive the Romance Writers of America's Mentor of the Year Award.

Currently, she writes contemporary romances and paranormal romances under the name Deborah Cooke. She also writes medieval romances as Claire Delacroix. Deborah lives in Canada with her husband and family, as well as far too many unfinished knitting projects.

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