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CLAN ROSS OF THE HEBRIDES



THE BEAR

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Clan Ross of Skye is under attack. In order to save his clan from perishing, **Cynden Ross** must travel to see The Lion, laird of the largest clan on the Hebrides, and **ask for help**. He has a secret weapon—one he hopes not to use—the truth about his birth. When he crosses paths with a beautiful woman things become even more complicated.

When **Ainslie MacNeil** is sent to her aunt's home in an effort to cure her melancholy, she meets a man who has an uncanny resemblance to her recently deceased betrothed. To make matters worse, they are heading to the same place. **Does she fall in love with him, or is she hoping to replace her lost love?**

A man with two destinies, and a woman who stands in the center.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

On the Isle of Skye, up until the 16th century, the southwestern area around Tarskavaig and Tokavaig were subjected to feuds between the MacLeod and MacDonald clans. It was not until the 17th century (Charter of 1617) that the MacDonalds finally established control of the area and the clan chief settled at Armadale castle.

The portion of the story on the Isle of Skye will take place in what is now Tokavaig, on the most southern peninsula called Sleat. The fictitious Ross Keep is where the ruins of Dunscaith castle remain. For the purposes of this work of fiction, I am substituting the MacDonalds with Clan Ross and the MacLeods with Clan MacKinnon.

CHAPTER ONE

1607, Near Tokavaig, Isle of Skye

RIGHT ARM HANGING at an unnatural angle, throngs of pains shot through Cynden Ross each time he moved. Unfortunately, in the midst of battle, there was no choice but to continue fighting or die. Wielding the heavy sword in his left hand, he blocked a downward strike by his opponent, grunting loudly as the action caused even more pain to the injured arm.

“Give up,” his opponent called out, a triumphant expression across the man’s dirty bearded face. “Ye cannot possibly win now—” The swift slice of a sword across the huge man’s throat registered. The warrior’s shock lasted only a moment before his legs gave out and he collapsed face-first onto the muddy ground.

The clanging of swords all around continued as warriors from Clan Ross clashed against Clan MacKinnon’s guardsmen.

That they fought over something unimportant didn’t deter the MacKinnons. Their laird seemed to find a reason—no matter how inconsequential—to start a fight. This time, they’d attacked members of Clan Ross claiming a lad had snatched a lass.

Whether true or not, it certainly was not enough of a reason for a battle. A meeting between the parents would have solved it. There was no reason for someone to die over it. However, just as bloodthirsty as their laird, the MacKinnon warriors seemed to find glee in attacking the smaller clans around them.

Outnumbered at the moment, Clan Ross was in trouble. Better trained, they fought valiantly, but it was obvious the Ross warrior’s strength was waning. Himself, barely able to remain standing, Cynden hobbled to a nearby tree in hopes of

being able to face an opponent without worry someone else would come at him from behind. Upon nearing the tree, a chilly wind blew across the open field as he searched for his brothers. All three fought. Each holding their own.

At the sound of approaching horses, Cynden saw a horseman flanked by warriors appear on the horizon. Laird MacKinnon sat upright on his steed and lifted his hand. The signal was followed by the sound of yells and the MacKinnon warriors retreated, rushing to their own horses and subsequently joining their leader.

With an expression of fury, Cynden's oldest brother, Alexander, jumped onto his horse and rode toward the opposing laird.

Unprepared for their leader's actions, the Ross warriors scrambled to do the same. Most of them bloody—and like him—with visible injuries. They formed a less-than-threatening front as they approached the enemy.

“Ye bastard!” Alexander screamed. “Ye violated our truce. Why the fuck did yer men attack innocent people?” Spittle flew from his mouth with every word. He shook with rage. “Explain to me why this had to happen?”

The old man looked to his right, to a warrior with rivulets of blood trickling down his face. “It was nothing more than a misunderstanding between two families.” The man shrugged as if they'd done nothing worse than steal a cow. “My men were quick to come to the defense and ensure our clan is not overtaken.”

The older laird had the audacity to shake his head and roll his eyes, lips curving. “We should meet and talk. Bring yer family to dine at my keep.”

“I would rather dine with dogs.” Alexander held up his sword to emphasize his point. “Ye and I are enemies.”

Not waiting for a reply, Alexander swung his huge warhorse around and rode to where Cynden remained leaning on a tree holding his arm against his side. The laird's gaze

traveled over him as he dismounted and motioned to a pair of guards. "Hold him still."

Knowing what came next, Cynden began to sweat, his teeth chattering as he bit down in hope he could keep from screaming.

When Alexander placed a hand flat on his shoulder then took his arm and twisted it into place, it was as if a hot iron went through him. Cynden groaned loudly somehow managing to keep from screaming, which in his eyes was a triumph.

"Ye fought well brother," Alexander said patting him on the other shoulder.

Cynden blew out a breath. "Why would ye declare us enemies? They have more warriors than us. We cannot survive a war against them."

Across the way, several MacKinnons lingered, waiting for permission to retrieve the injured and the dead. The battle had taken place on Ross lands, so it was up to Alexander as to whether he ordered the survivors to be killed or not.

Wagons approached from the nearby village with local Ross clan's people arriving to help in the aftermath. The Ross warriors lifted the injured and dead onto carts so they could be taken to their families, for either burial or healing.

"There will be mourning again today," their second born brother Munro said. "Everyone grows tired of it."

"That is why we should nae have declared to be enemies," Cynden insisted. The pain had receded some, but he still felt unsteady. "We do not have the resources, or enough men to fight them."

"They want to know if they can come for their men?" their cousin, Knox Ross, who was still mounted, asked looking toward the MacKinnons with ill-concealed disgust. "I say we leave them to rot."

However, it seemed his brother had seen enough bloodshed for the day, and he waved to the remaining Ross warriors to retreat. The MacKinnons wasted no time in retrieving their men. Two injured. Two dead.

And for what? Cynden couldn't help but think about the wasted lives.

“We will talk once we get ye back to the keep. Ye look pale.”

Irritated at Alexander's concern in front of the warriors, Cynden managed to get to his horse and mounted, not wanting to look weak. “I am well enough.”

“Get down and climb onto a wagon,” Alexander ordered, pinning him with a concerned look.

Just the act of shaking his head made the ground under the horse shift, but he was stubborn. “I am well enough to ride home.” He'd barely finished the statement when Cynden's vision blurred, and he gripped the reins in a vain attempt to remain mounted. Just as he slid sideways, he heard his brother grunt with annoyance.

“Somebody catch him before the idiot hurts himself worse.”

“YE GAVE ME quite a scare,” his mother, Rose's, high-pitched voice permeated through the haze of his muddled head, as Cynden tried to open his eyes. “Ye must not jostle. It will cause harm to yer arm.”

Opening his eyes to see her proved almost impossible, it was as if someone had placed rocks upon his eyelids. “Mother?”

“Aye, son. I am here. Try to rest. The healer gave ye some tonic to keep ye still.” Whatever he'd been given made his tongue thick and dry. Although he could tell to be in his bedroom. Why was he propped up on the bed like a virgin waiting to be deflowered?

All the coddling was infuriating.

“Water,” Cynden croaked, and his mother lifted a cup to his lips. He drank greedily and was finally able to open his eyes. “It was only an arm out of its socket. Alex fixed it.”

“Ye fainted,” his mother said as if that explained why he’d been carried up and put to bed.

“I did nae faint.”

The throbbing pain in his head a foreshadowing of how much more it would hurt if he stirred. Whatever the healer had concocted was worse than his injury.

Heavy footfalls sounded and moments later Alexander walked into the room. His brother was a towering man with massive wide shoulders, a broad chest, and thick muscular arms. That he was handsome did not distract from the power he exuded, in fact, it seemed to add to it. As the emerald green gaze studied Cynden, there was a tick along his strong jawline, his full lips pressed together, and the ever-present scowl between his brows.

“Everyone was impressed with yer fighting abilities today. But ye could have been killed.”

Cynden lifted a brow. “I would be dead, if not for ye almost slicing the head clean off my opponent’s shoulders.”

The emerald gaze darkened. “It is my duty to defend this family as well as the clan.”

Their mother paled and gave them an alarmed look. “Oh dear, I best go see about last meal.” She hurried from the room.

Gavin, the youngest brother, walked in, clothes still bloody, a dark bruise on his jaw. Despite his obvious injury, he grinned at Cynden. “Ah, the wee one awakens.” Gavin was usually in a good mood, finding humor in even the darkest times. Although older than him by two years, thirty-year-old Gavin looked to be younger. He had an archer’s build, slender with wide shoulders, light brown hair, and sparkling light green eyes.

It was always best to ignore any reference to Cynden being the youngest because if he showed it annoyed him, his brothers would pounce and continue the jests. “Ye should go jump in the loch,” he said to Gavin.

His brother shrugged. “I will. Just had to be sure ye were alive.”

“It was only my shoulder. I passed out, happens to everyone. Not sure why ye are all acting as if I was cut through.”

Both brothers looked in the direction their mother had gone, no further explanation was required.

He lifted up, ignoring the throbs of protest from both his head and his shoulder and swung both legs to the side. The pain forced him to hesitate for a moment.

“Why did ye declare to be enemies to the MacKinnon? It means more battles, death and suffering for our clan’s people. We’ve had more than our share. Ye must meet with the MacKinnon and reinstate the truce.”

Alexander seemed to consider Cynden’s question before replying. “That is what he expects. That they can attack without retribution because we are a smaller clan. In truth, our clan is much greater.”

“Not here. Not on Skye,” Cynden replied.

Their cousins, who lived on the Isle of South Uist, had a huge army. They ruled the entire isle easily, due to their sheer size. Despite having an enormous army, the Ross clan was kept busy fighting off threats from other clans who lived on or near Uist and encroachers coming via ships hoping to overtake.

Alexander lowered to the chair his mother had vacated. The piece of furniture groaned under the weight of not only his brother’s bulk, but the weaponry strapped across his back and to his sides.

“I will send an emissary to Uist to speak to Darach. We will need their help to finally bring an end to this,” he said referring to their cousin and Laird of Clan Ross on Uist.

Although Cynden didn't agree with his brother's declaration of war, it was understandable. The MacKinnon's had never held to their truces. Time and time again, the clan had overstepped. Bringing clashes and battles against Clan Ross.

Their father had died after a battle just a pair of years earlier. His heart giving out after fighting against the damn MacKinnons. Alexander had taken over as laird and assumed all the responsibilities that came with it. Although their clan was a good size, rarely did huge issue arise requiring Alexander's intervention. Their people were mostly fishermen and merchants living in the small village of Tokavaig. The main issue was the constant danger from the MacKinnons restricting the ability for their clan's people to move about the land freely. The people were understandably fearful, as often the MacKinnons would encroach on their land and attack people for coin or livestock.

“Send me,” Cynden stated. “I can leave as soon as tomorrow.”

“No.” Alexander's tone was sharp. It made Cynden narrow his eyes.

“Aye I must go.” He stalked to the window and peered out at the cloudy sky. Strange how it seemed as if days had past, when in reality it was only hours. Across the lush landscape, the village houses came to view. His chest tightened at the thought that several families mourned that day.

“Who died?” He asked, not really wanting to hear the reply.

“Kier MacTavish and Aran Brown.” Alexander's voice was hollow. “Shame that Keir's bairn will be born soon, never to know his da.”

Cynden lowered to a chair thankful his injured arm did not hurt. "Why not me? Send me to Uist."

"I will send Munro," Alexander said. "He and Knox can go."

Cynden had always wanted to leave the isle, a wish that he'd never been able to fulfill. First because of his youth, then because his mother had always argued against it. After a while, their father had stopped fighting her on it and Cynden always remained behind while his brothers traveled.

The last time his parents had gone to Uist for his uncle, the laird's, funeral Cynden was already an adult. Still his mother had insisted that he remain behind.

He'd been too furious to argue and had stayed on Skye, sulking for days on end. "I wish to finally get off this isle and see more. There is no reason for me not to go."

It made sense that he go. With the recent injury, he wouldn't be much help in the battlefield. If anything, he was a hindrance.

"I am injured. If the MacKinnon's return I would not be able to fight effectively. Ye need both Gavin and Munro here."

Alexander seemed unable to find a reason to deny the request. It was strange that he hesitated, his green gaze searching Cynden's hazel one. "I cannot allow ye to travel to Uist injured. Ye could meet with danger and would be unable to defend yerself."

"There is no one else who can go. 'Tis only reasonable that I be the one to go to see our cousins on Uist."

There was a clatter and crashing of breaking dishes, and their mother stood just inside the doorway, the tray she'd been carrying next to her feet. She lifted an unsteady hand toward Cynden. "Ye will not go."

He'd had enough. It was one thing to be coddled as the youngest son, but to be treated like that now as a warrior was beyond reasonable.

“It only makes sense that I go Mother,” Cynden said pinning his mother with a direct look. “Explain to me why do ye fret so?”

She seemed unable to form words. Instead, she frowned down at him. “The sea between the isles is deep. What if ye are tossed into the depths of the frigid water? With an injured arm ye are unable to swim.”

This time Cynden wanted to roll his eyes. He refrained only because his fiery-haired mother had a quick temper. She’d been a very young bride to their father—and remained quite beautiful—but she had never been one to keep her tongue.

“Mother, in my entire life, not one boat has sunk going to and from the other isles. That I am aware no one has been tossed into the sea as of late.”

“Do nae jest. My word is final.” Her bright emerald eyes—that matched Alexander’s—flared and she turned on her heel, stepped over the spilled food, and stalked away.

It was beyond ridiculous, both he and Alexander knew it was best that he was the one to travel. His brother had only refused to send him in the past because of his mother’s constant refusal to allow Cynden to travel from Skye. Especially not to Uist. For his entire life, no matter how much he’d tried, his requests to go had been declined by his father.

Now it seemed Alexander would follow in their patriarch’s footsteps and not stand up to their mother. Cynden persisted, “Ye know I am right. It should be me who goes.”

For a long moment, the steely emerald eyes fell on him. “Very well, ye will go. I will speak to Mother.”

As the warrior stood and went to the doorway, he turned sideways to allow for his shoulders and looked back at him. “Prepare to leave the day after tomorrow. I wish ye to have at least one day to heal before the justling of a vessel at sea.”

Moments later a pair of maids appeared. They’d no doubt been sent by his mother to clean the mess and bring him food.

A part of him wanted to send the meal back, but it was best not to anger his mother further. Once she realized he'd be leaving, there would be quite a bit to deal with. It was best to keep up his strength.

“Do ye require anything else?” The pretty maid pursed her lips, her gaze scanning over him.

He'd lain with her several times, each time worried the lass would come to be with bairn. As the months passed without consequences of laying with her, the relief had been strong. It had been several months since the last time, and he eyed her midsection noting it was flat. “I am not in need of anything,” he told her noting an expression of disappointment.

“Have I done something to displease ye?” she asked, nearing and sliding the back of her hand down the side of his face. “I only wish to be with ye again.”

Despite his resolve, it had been a long time since he'd been with a woman, his body's reaction was immediate. With his left hand, he took her hand away from his face. “Ye have done nothing wrong. As ye can see, I am injured. Moreover, I do not wish to lead ye into believing there could be more between us.”

This time her face fell. “Why? Yer cousin, Tavis, married a serving wench.”

“It has nothing to do with yer place in this household. It is just that I do not feel strongly for ye.”

“Are ye going to help me?” the other maid snapped as she mopped up the spilled soup. “Allow Mister Cynden to eat in peace.”

The pretty maid gave him one last lingering look, her eyes shining with unshed tears, then went about her duties.

As he ate the warm soup, dunking the crusty bread into it, his mind whirled with the adventure that awaited. For the first time in his life, he would leave Skye and see another place. Although according to his brothers, the Isle of Uist was almost identical to Skye, he wanted to see it with his own eyes.

It was hard to explain why, but something about going there had always tugged at him. It was as if there was something there, a quest of sorts. It was silly to believe Uist called to him. If anything it was the excitement of finally leaving the isle and meeting new people that excited him the most. It would be hard to wait, but he had no other choice.

After washing down the last of the meal with ale, he stood and walked over to peer out the window once again. Below, in the inner courtyard, people hurried about. Some drew water from the well, others added kindling to fires that would keep those who sought shelter within the keep warm that night.

For the most part, the clan's people who came daily would join the family in the great hall for last meal. Currently, the families seeking shelter were those who'd been affected by the latest clashes. Some lost homes. Others livestock. The ones who broke his heart were the families of fallen warriors. The widows and their bairns who came to the keep finding safety and to mourn with each other. A small percentage who sought shelter were farmers and shepherders, as they did not have the protection of living in the more occupied villages.

He looked past the horse stables to the oversized corals filled with baying sheep, who were loudly demanding their freedom. Preferring to graze on the green hills beyond and eat the dry hay while being held in a confined space.

Cynden understood how the hapless animals felt. Most of those in the keep would gladly release the smelly herd, but it would mean the opposing clan could steal them.

"I shall go with ye," Knox said as he entered the room, moments later. "I have not been to Uist in a pair of summers."

"As ye are well aware, I have never been," Cynden informed him. "Has Alex decided that ye will accompany me?"

"Nay, but he will," Knox stated with a sharp nod. "I am the clear choice as I know the way to the Dún Láidir," he said referring to the Ross keep.

His cousin Knox lived there as a young lad, since losing both parents in an attack on their home. Someone had started a fire while he and his family slept, and Knox had lost both parents and two siblings. The only reason he'd survived was that his father had thrown him out a window onto some very dense bushes. The man had perished while going back to try and save the others.

Too young to ask for help, Knox had wandered alone for several days, until warriors who spotted the smoke arrived and discovered what had occurred. They'd been the ones to bring the orphaned lad to Dún Scaith.

Though no one knew for sure who was responsible for the fire, yet everyone suspected a MacKinnon because their home was on the edge of Ross and MacKinnon lands.

"I would like it if ye went with me," Cynden told Knox. "We should prepare. Tomorrow we have much to do."

That night, Cynden went to bed early, exhausted after a day of fighting. More than anything he wanted the next day to hurry by so he could finally go to Uist.

A fog-like haze wrapped eerily around the tall man's black boots. The footfalls were heavy, moving closer and closer.

A thick beard and mustache left little of the man's face bare enough to see his features. However, it was the eyes, so clear, so sharp, and so focused on him that were branded in his memory.

"So this is him," the harsh deep voice stated. "My bastard son."

The callousness of the man's tone made the little boy scared and his small hands gripped the woman's clothing. The longer the man studied him the greater his fear became until the boy shook so hard his teeth chattered.

"There, there," his mother picked him up and whispered into his ear. Even his mother's soft reassurance and pats on his back had no effect against the sheer menace of the man who towered over them.

“Leave us be. Ye will never have him. He is mine.” The woman’s voice shook with a mixture of fear and fury.

The man’s laughter was harsh. “Why would I want him? Ye have a husband who is too stupid to know he is nae the father.”

“Never speak of it again,” his mother whispered, a sob escaping. “I beg of ye.”

Once again, the man glared at him, and the boy began to cry. He was terrified and squeezed his eyes shut.

It was only a short reprieve because moments later a painful grip on his arm made his eyes fly open and he cried harder.

“Ye will never be my son, but ye are a Ross,” the man said shaking him. His rank whiskey breath hot on his tears.

No matter how hard he struggled, the iron grip remained in place. “Never come to me for anything, do ye understand? Never.”

“He is but a bairn, he does nae understand what ye say,” his mother said pulling away. “Let him go, ye are hurting him.”

“Aye, he does. I can see it in his eyes. He understands he’ll never be more than the son of a whore.”

“And the son of a bastard,” the woman said hugging him against her breast.

Cynden jolted awake, sitting up and staring wide-eyed into the darkness. The familiar dream did not surprise him as much as the fact that it had returned after so many years.

Although he understood it to be his imagination; the conversation, the sensations, had always been so real and always exactly the same.

“Just a dream,” he murmured and fell back to sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

HER KNEES BUCKLED and Ainslie MacNeil slid down the back of the bedchamber door until she landed on the floor. Tears streamed down her face, and she fell sideways onto the hard cold surface as a dark emptiness overtook her.

Nothing would ever be the same again. How would she continue?

No one seemed to understand that the depth of her emotions was paralyzing. Before collapsing in her bedchamber, she had walked in on her parents and siblings laughing. They'd found joy in something and had dared to laugh loudly. Not one of them had seemed at all discomfited when she'd stood in the doorway gaping at their audacity.

She'd lost her betrothed. Her one true love. And they were enjoying the day as if it were any other.

How could they?

How dare they?

Before this loss, she'd never known how much heartbreak could hurt. The heaviness on her chest was so great she had to fight to breathe. At the same time, she wanted to stop fighting so she could die—just like the man she loved. Her chest heaved as she released a long moan, the sound seeming to ease the pain enough that she could breathe. If not for the fact she didn't wish for eternal damnation, Ainslie yearned to end her life. There was no purpose in living. It would be much easier to die than to continue the cruel and horrible existence that was without merit.

“Ainslie, darling.” The doorknob rattled as her mother attempted to open the door, but she was in the way. “Please dear, allow me to open the door.”

Her eyelids were so swollen, she could barely lift them. It had been a pair of months since Thomas died, yet it felt as if she'd lost him just the day before, her despair so great. The only man she had—and would—ever love.

Since his death, Ainslie had rarely left her bedchamber, and that day she'd yearned for normalcy. However when she'd been met with her parents and siblings sitting in the parlor drinking ale and laughing as if all was right in the world it felt so wrong.

“Go away.” Her words were hoarse, and she bit back the urge to follow the comment with a harsh curse. “Leave me be.”

Her mother did not give up, would not give up, until the door opened. But she refused to budge. “If ye do not open the door, I will summon yer brother to tear it down. Then ye will be without a door at all.”

Unwilling to live without her much-treasured privacy, she pulled herself to her feet and turned the key. The door's creak sounded loud to her sensitive ears as it opened to reveal her lovely mother.

“Come.” Her mother opened her arms and Ainslie rushed into the embrace, once again sobs erupting.

“I was to marry him. He was to be with me forever. How will I live?”

In silence, her mother held her, for a long time, before leading her toward the bed, so they could sit together. “Thomas was very sick darling. He knew he would not live long. We all knew. It was only ye just refused to accept it.”

She took the handkerchief her mother held out and mopped her face. “He could have healed. There was always hope.”

“Aye, very true,” her mother replied. “There is always hope. We all prayed that he be healed, but it was his fate not to remain with us.”

“He is—was... much too young.” Just picturing his face brought an ache that seemed to fill her. “My Thomas.”

“Ye require fresh air,” her mother said. She stood and went to the window and threw it open. Instantly light, air, and birdsong filled the space, along with the aroma of spring flowers from the garden below. Despite her grief, Ainslie inhaled the sweet perfume. The fragrance reminding her of the many hours she spent with Thomas in the garden at his home as he found it more and more difficult to walk. They’d been limited to the grounds around his family home for the last pair of years.

“Now, how about something to eat?” Her mother turned to face her. “Ye must strive to keep yer strength. If dear Thomas taught us anything, it was not to take life for granted.”

Several times during his last days, Thomas had made Ainslie promise to make the best of every day. To live each day to its fullest and to love again. And she’d agreed, not accepting that he would be gone. In her mind, they would marry, have children, and grow old together. Ainslie never accepted the truth. Even as he faded before her eyes more and more each day.

THE NEXT MORNING, Ainslie decided to join her family for breakfast. She’d managed to sleep most of the night without crying and now felt refreshed. Once she dressed and brushed her hair into a simple braid, she went to the dining room. The only ones there were her sister, Therese, and her mother.

“How are ye faring?” Therese asked.

Ainslie ignored her. Unable to forgive how soon Therese seemed to forget Thomas.

“Ye are being unfair,” Therese, stated.

Her mother studied the meager portions Ainslie had placed on her plate but said nothing.

Ainslie met her sister’s gaze. “Ye were his friend even before I was.”

On some level, it was understandable that her entire household would not be in deep mourning. And despite her hurt feelings, Ainslie knew they did care for Thomas.

Both of their parents and the subsequent children had all grown up there on the Isle of Barra. A small tight-knit community in which everyone knew everyone and that meant the loss of any member was felt throughout.

“I am sorry,” Therese finally said, her pretty blue eyes downcast. “I am very sad about Thomas, but we all knew he would die and in the end, he was so very ill. It was almost a relief that he would no longer be in pain.”

All Ainslie could do was nod. He had been barely able to breathe, at times it was as if he did not. At the very end, he’d moaned in pain, unable to keep the tears at bay. At his bedside day after day, she and Thomas’ mother felt his agony whilst holding vigil, not wanting to be away even for a second.

She pushed the food around her plate. “I am aware and yet I held on to the hope that somehow he would recover. I do nae understand why he had to die.” Ainslie let out a long breath.

At the sound of approaching horses outside, her mother turned to the windows. “Strange that someone would come to visit so early in the day. I best go see who it is.”

“I should go to my room. I am in no mood for visitors.” Ainslie didn’t care about whatever the reason was for the visit. Perhaps in time—months, possibly years—she’d be able to get past her sadness enough to participate in such trivial things as hosting people.

Therese continued eating, her gaze moving from Ainslie to the doorway.

The sound of conversation at the entrance meant she had to wait until whoever it was either went away or was invited in. Either way, it meant walking past where the visitors were.

A couple walked into the dining room with her mother and with her father, who had apparently joined them. The way her

mother stole glances at her, put Ainslie on edge. Something was afoot.

The visitors were part of the clan. The laird's brother, who was her father's cousin, and his wife, Cara.

"Please sit." Her mother invited with a warm smile. "Would ye like some food?" The couple joined Ainslie and Therese at the table and were served ale. "I am so glad to see ye, Cara. I am anxious to know about yer travel plans."

"We ate before leaving," Cara explained. "I will have a bit of ale, but nothing else."

Cara reached and patted Ainslie's hand. "I am so very sorry to hear that your Thomas died."

Ainslie had always liked Cara and did nae wish to be rude, but scared to cry, all she could do was nod.

The people around her drank and ate, all the while the couple made small talk with her parents. Despite wishing to leave the room, Ainslie remained. She was curious as to what had brought them to visit so early in the day, unannounced.

"So soon," her mother stated. "I was under the impression ye would not go for another sennight at least."

Cara, a pretty brunette with dark brown eyes shook her head. "Darryl and I wish to be at the Ross keep for the summer festival. It is most grand. I do not wish to miss a single thing, so we must leave earlier than planned."

Finally, her mother turned to her. "Ainslie, I told Cara about yer great sadness. Yer father and I think that ye need a change. That being somewhere different, around other people, would be helpful. Cara and her husband have graciously invited ye to travel with them to Uist. To Dún Láidir."

Whatever her mother was saying didn't make sense. It took a few moments for Ainslie to realize that they'd planned a trip and it meant she was to travel. To go away.

"When?" Was the only question she could form. Saying no would be a tremendous insult to the laird's family. Honestly,

she doubted she could say no without her parents insisting. Besides what did it matter? Like everything else that occurred around her, it meant little. Whether she remained or traveled away, it would not change the depth of her sorrow. Misery would be her constant companion.

“On the morrow,” her mother replied while studying her with interest. “Ye must leave with them this very day, so to be shoreside for the first birlinns in the morning.”

Leaving so soon was unexpected. She looked from her mother to Lady Cara then to her father, who continued speaking with the laird’s brother, not listening to what the women discussed.

Ainslie met Lady Cara’s gaze. “I appreciate yer invitation but am nae sure to be good company.”

The woman smiled warmly and nodded. “I understand and do not blame ye in the least. Having recently gone through loss myself, I sincerely believe a trip will prove helpful to us both.”

It wasn’t the time to ask what had occurred. What the woman’s loss had been. She was sure Cara would tell her if the subject arose. At the moment, Ainslie’s mind was awlirl with what she would pack. Whether or not she had time to visit Thomas’ family and bid farewell.

She finally stammered. “I-I do not have anything packed or prepared.”

“Yer trunk is being seen to. Go and ensure any items ye feel ye will need for the season are packed.” Her mother’s response was quick, the tone left no room for argument. “See about helping her Therese.”

An entire season away from home, unable to visit Thomas’ grave or see his family. Ainslie wasn’t sure she was prepared for something like that so soon. She managed a weak smile.

“Lady Cara, I cannot possibly be good company for ye. I have barely managed to come down for meals. I would hate

for ye to go through all this trouble and regret it at my lack of enthusiasm.”

The woman smiled gently. “More than most, I understand grief at the moment. I’ve had a few losses in my life recently. My mother died unexpectedly just a few months ago. It is the reason why I wish to go to Uist. I believe it will do us both well.”

“Go on darling,” her mother urged motioning for Therese to go with her.

“I wish I were going,” Therese said as they walked down the corridor. “Everyone talks about the Ross clansmen. It is said all are braw and handsome beyond belief. I would be sure to find a husband if I went to Uist.”

“I do nae believe it. It is doubtful every single man on the Isle of Uist is handsome,” Ainslie huffed. “If not for the visitors being here, I would have suggested ye go in my stead. However, it would have been insulting to do so in front of them.”

They walked into Ainslie’s bedchamber to find a maid was busily packing a trunk. Therese handed the young lass a shawl and then a robe so that the items could be added. It was followed by a large leather satchel in which her sister packed a nightshift, a comb, ribbons, and slippers. “For tonight,” she informed Ainslie.

“Where do ye suppose I will spend the night?” Ainslie went to the window and peered down at the handsome carriage. “The MacNeil keep?”

“Ye will stay at an inn not too far from the shore. It will be lovely, I am sure,” her mother said walking briskly into the room with a pair of lads behind. “Take the trunk and satchel to the carriage. Ensure it is properly set so it does not fall off.” Then she went to Ainslie and hugged her in a tight embrace. “My sweet lass. I pray this trip will help ease yer sorrow.”

New tears sprung stinging Ainslie’s swollen eyes. “I do not wish to go Mother.”

“I know. I do not blame ye. I had hoped to have time to discuss it so ye would have plenty of time to prepare. However, it seems there is to be a festival at the Ross keep and Cara wishes to attend. They wish to get there before other clan’s people begin to arrive and they end up without a proper place to sleep.”

As they talked, her mother shepherded her to the door and down the corridor where the visitors and her father were already making their way out.

With a concerned expression, her father held up Ainslie’s cloak. “It is a bit heavy for the weather, but travel by sea can be colder.” As he wrapped it around her, he pressed a quick kiss to her temple. “All will be well lass. Do nae let yer sorrow steal what fate brings yer way.”

It was rare that her Da showed any kind of affection. That he kissed her temple made Ainslie hesitate. Before he could step away, she threw herself against his broad chest, wrapping her arms around him. “I will try Da.” He patted her back awkwardly as she let out a string of long sighs.

After hugs from her sister and nods from her two brothers—both warriors and even less demonstrative than her father—she was hustled out and into the carriage.

The ride was comfortable and not as awkward as Ainslie would have expected. Lady Cara kept Ainslie’s mind from sorrow by telling her what to expect in Uist. Both the couple and Ainslie’s family were kin to Laird Ross’ mother. The invitation had come for them to visit for the festival and games. From what Lady Cara explained, it was to be a rather large affair with several hundred visitors coming from near and far.

The more Ainslie heard about the days ahead, the more she looked forward to the experience. Several times, she had to hold back from becoming excited. Expecting to enjoy something was a betrayal of Thomas’ recent passing. Despite his asking that she move forward and to live life to the fullest, Ainslie couldn’t fathom it.

The ride to the shore was a pleasant one, they'd stopped midway to rest the horses and picnicked on the side of the road. It was late in the day by the time they arrived at the bustling fishing village with several shops, a tavern, and an inn.

The driver went off to pay for rooms at the inn, where they would stay as the last birlinns had already departed. They'd continue their travel to Uist first thing the following morning.

Despite her sadness, Ainslie was taken by the new surroundings. It had been a long time since she'd traveled north. Sea birds flew around fishing boats, diving gracefully in circles hoping for a morsel of whatever had been caught in the nets. Fishermen called out to each other loudly so they could be heard over the sounds of the waves, the birds, and the peddlers.

In the distance boats bobbed on the seas' gentle waves. There was a strange rhythm to the scene. A mixture that called to every sense. The salty air, the brisk wind and sound of gulls flying overhead all combined with the movement of waves and people.

"It is quite different is it not?" Cara asked with a smile. "Ye will love the flavorful fish stew the innkeeper's wife makes."

They walked into the dimness of the small inn as the sun began to set. The innkeeper's hearty greeting made Ainslie feel welcome as he ushered them to a table. "So pleased to see ye, milady," he enthused with a wide grin. "My Elva has made yer favorite." The man was slight but made up for it with a large personality.

"We are glad ya and yer pretty lass are here today," He exclaimed. "The sea has been calm and will be so on the morrow I am sure."

He hurried away and moments later returned with a basket of warm bread and a stout bowl of what he proclaimed to be freshly churned butter.

The steaming hot fish stew was indeed flavorful, brimming with chunks of fish, carrots and potatoes.

After Ainslie's second bowl of fish stew was done away with, she sat back with a satisfied sigh. "That was indeed the most delicious stew I've ever had," she admitted, much to Cara's delight.

"The rooms are prepared," the innkeeper's wife, a round short woman said, motioning to the stairs. Cara and Ainslie followed her to the second floor to two separate small, but tidy rooms.

More than ready for time alone with her thoughts, Ainslie bid her companion a good night. After so many days of barely leaving her bedchamber, the travel and a full belly, she was exhausted, and the plush bedding beckoned to her.

The next day she'd be far from her home. The mother of the laird of Clan Ross, was a MacNeil and her family were always welcome to visit Dún Láidir, however only her father and brothers had visited. In the last pair of years, her mother and sister had wished to go to the festival and games but had remained because Ainslie had refused to leave Thomas' side.

As soon as she settled into the bed, her eyes became heavy. Surely sleep would come easily. But guilt overwhelmed every ounce of her being. Why had she not fought to go say goodbye to Thomas' family? Why had she not fought to visit Thomas' grave one more time? Why had she not fought against traveling anywhere at all?

Whatever distractions happened during the day would not change that every night, when alone, grief would become her only companion. Somehow she would have to carry on.

"Promise me ye will strive for happiness. Promise that ye will find love, marry and form a family. I will nae rest thinking that ye are not happy." Thomas had made her promise almost daily during his last days. Adamant that she repeat the words while promising. His last words had been. "Promise me."

It had always been hard to deny him anything, especially when looking into his eyes. He had the most beautiful eyes, like a field of greens and golds. He had been a handsome man, with the fairest skin and hair like spun gold.

Never had she met a man as beautiful as Thomas—nor would she. Of that she was certain. Even as the illness progressed and his skin became gray and his eyes became dull, he was beautiful, almost ethereal.

A picture formed of a day in the garden.

“Promise me to enjoy yer life. Do nae mourn for me,” he’d insisted.

Ainslie had scoffed and shaken her head. “Do nae speak of dying. Ye and I will marry and one day it could be ye mourning me.”

His gaze had not wavered from her face. “Ainslie, I am dying. Ye must marry and have bairns. I hope to be able to watch ye from wherever it is I will go. Make me smile with yer happiness.”

It became hard to breathe. Ainslie sat up and looked around the tiny darkened room. It didn’t matter where she went, the fact was he would always be with her. At least she was fulfilling her promise to move forward, to enjoy life, even if only partially. Enjoyment would come one day, she was not so naïve as to think it was gone forever. But at the moment, it seemed impossible.

Outside an owl’s sad call made her wonder at the lateness of the hour and she lay back on the pillows.

In her mind, she pictured Thomas’ face. His full lips, heavily lashed eyes, sharp eyebrows, and straight nose. His hair was cropped short as he spent more time abed. However, when she’d met him, it had flowed to his shoulders. The wind-tussled tresses as wild and carefree as him.

She wondered if not for the illness, if he would have been muscular and broad of shoulder like his father. Instead, he was slender and had stooped forward a bit.

It seemed only scant seconds later that the morning sun shined through the window and onto her face. It was to be a day of adventure, traversing the sea to another isle. Unable to keep from it, she climbed from the bed and hurried to the window to peer out at a breathtaking view.

The sea stretched far and wide, gentle waves lapping on the shoreline. To the right was a hill dotted with fishing shacks. To the front a line of birlinns bobbed on the water, waiting to take passengers to other isles.

Already there was plenty of activity. People preparing to sail or at stalls grabbing meat pies for the day. Dogs scurried in circles with tails wagging as they begged for morsels. She smiled when a man tripped and dropped his pie, and it was quickly devoured. He looked on and began laughing before heading back to the stall to purchase another.

When she pushed open the window and breathed deeply, she realized how very different the sea air was to that at her home. There was a different kind of freshness to it. A brisk breeze carried the scent of the water to her. Thankfully her father had the forethought to wrap the heavier cloak around her shoulders. She would definitely need it.

Lady Cara had told her they'd leave first thing that morning, so Ainslie dressed quickly then combed her waist-length, burnished red hair and braided it with practiced fingers. Then she wrapped the braid around her head, pinning it into place.

After stuffing her nightshift and the other items into her bag, Ainslie pulled the cloak on and went down a short corridor to the stairs that led to a small dining room.

The room had a low ceiling with long wood planks across it. There were three tables with chairs and a sideboard where platters of food held the morning's offerings.

At a long wooden table sat her hosts along with their driver. Lady Cara motioned for her to come closer and slid sideways so Ainslie could sit next to her on the bench.

“I pray ye slept well lass,” she said with a warm look. “It wasn’t until late that I was finally able to fall asleep. The noise kept me awake. Until the wee hours, we could hear the fiddles and loud laughter.”

“I did nae hear it as much,” Ainslie admitted. “Perhaps because yer chamber was closer to the stairs. I slept well.” In actuality once she did fall asleep, she’d stayed asleep until the sun woke her.

The innkeeper’s wife gave them a shy smile as she neared and slid a tray with a bowl of porridge, thick crusted bread, and a cup of ale in front of Ainslie.

“I know from now on I will ensure to have a room away from the main hall,” Lady Cara stated. “I hope this night will be peaceful.”

Her husband looked across the table at Lady Cara, his expression softening. “I will ensure ye rest tonight.” The tender exchange of looks made Ainslie’s stomach tighten. She and Thomas had exchanged such looks.

It was not much longer that a man walked in announcing that it was time for them to head to the birlinns.

As they made their way to the shore, men carried their trunks and sellers approached constantly with offerings of food, pottery, and other items they claimed were only available in Barra.

A peddler held up an intricately decorated wineskin. “Only on Barra.”

Ainslie wondered if it was true. It was hard to believe they’d not have a wineskin anywhere else. Surely there were cows on Uist.

“Are ye sure they do not make wineskins on Uist?” she asked the man, considering that indeed it would be a grand gift for someone who’d never seen one.

“Aye, lass. They are not as civilized as we are on Barra,” the man boasted.

“Come along Ainslie,” Lady Cara called out.

The man grabbed the coin from Ainslie’s hand pushing a wineskin into it in return as she turned and hurried after her companions.

Since they traveled with the laird’s brother, they were given their own birlinn, for which Ainslie was glad. The vessel was long with a huge mast that was down at the moment. The long plank to climb onboard was easy to traverse, although several times Ainslie hesitated as it seemed to move side to side. Finally onboard the birlinn, she chose a bench, lowered to it, and wrapped her cloak around herself. Lady Cara and her husband came aboard next.

Cara came to sit beside her, and her husband went to the front to speak to whoever would direct the boat.

The last time she’d traveled via birlinn, it had been a crowded uncomfortable event. At one point she’d lost sight of her mother and being only nine, she’d panicked.

Admittedly, now ten years later, there was little need to worry about losing sight of whoever she traveled with. Still, the memory of that trip made her nervous.

This trip was wonderful that sunny day. The sea was calm and the wind not as cold as she’d expected. Ainslie was even bold enough to stand and look across the sea, enjoying the feel of the salty air across her face.

CHAPTER THREE

UPON ARRIVING ASHORE, Cynden looked around taking in the area, a bit disappointed that indeed the isle of Uist did look a lot like Skye. The air smelled the same, the wind as brisk. However, he was determined to explore Uist and take in the differences between this isle and his home.

Knox informed him that there was a contingent of Ross warriors nearby where they could borrow horses to take to the keep.

At the shore, there was a lot of activity. People bustled about carrying bundled goods, women sold food from large baskets they carried and hired men carried the heavier trunks to waiting wagons, carts, and carriages.

He and his party only brought leather sacks with the few clothes, which they tossed over one shoulder, their swords across their backs, and at their hip, either daggers or a shorter sword.

Across his broad chest, Cynden wore a strap with slashed cuts into which four daggers had been secured. He was used to the feel of thick leather strap that not only provided protection but often gave him an advantage of easy access to a weapon during hand-to-hand combat.

When they walked across from their boat toward where they'd hire a wagon to take them to the Ross guards he spotted a woman walking with a couple in his direction.

Her hair had come loose from its bindings, the long auburn tresses flowing behind her like banners. She wore a thick cloak and carried a large bag. He could not see the color of her eyes, yet her beauty that caused him to hesitate and watch.

As they walked closer she didn't seem to notice him or Knox, her gaze moving across the area. She seemed as eager

as him to explore the new surroundings and he almost smiled at her curious expression.

“There’s a wagon,” Knox said pointing.

Cynden turned to look to where Knox pointed and then back toward the woman. As if in a trance, she moved toward him, with every step the woman’s eyes grew larger and larger. When she was close enough that he could reach out and touch her, she covered her mouth, with an expression of horror.

“It is not possible. How can this be?” She dropped her bag and stumbled backward.

“What is wrong?” he asked, moving closer to retrieve the bag. “Are ye unwell lass?” The woman traveled with her hurried toward them.

“Thomas? It is ye.” The beauty reached for his face, her trembling hand stopping midair. “Is it ye?”

Cynden shook his head. “Nae, I am Cynden Ross, cousin to Laird Ross. I do not know a Thomas.”

“Oh, dear,” the woman who approached exclaimed, taking him in and then looking to the younger woman. “Come, Ainslie, ye are confused.”

The beauty’s eyes rolled back, and she swayed like a young tree caught by a heavy wind. Cynden was close enough to catch her with his healthy arm before she hit the ground.

Ignoring the pain in his shoulder, he managed to lift and carry the limp woman and deposit her into the waiting carriage.

“What happened?” the man who was traveling with the two women asked as they approached. He had not seen what had occurred as he’d headed to the waiting carriage.

“Ainslie fainted,” the woman explained motioning to Cynden. “Thankfully, this young man was close enough to catch her.”

The man took the limp Ainslie from Cynden and with the help of the driver, she was loaded onto the carriage.

He turned to Cynden. "Thank ye. The lass could have been injured if she'd fallen to the ground."

The man held out his hand. "I am Darryl MacNeil, brother to Laird MacNeil. We head to Dún Láidir."

"I am Cynden Ross and that man over there waving for me to hurry is my cousin Knox Ross. We are cousins to Laird Ross of Uist. My brother is Alexander Ross, Laird of Ross Clan of Skye."

They shook hands.

Apart from two guards, the MacNeil's did not bring a large escort, which spoke to the influence of his cousin's clan over the entire isle. People could travel with little fear of being accosted.

"Since we are going in the same direction, would ye and yer men like to travel with us?" Darryl asked. The man had an easygoing manner, which Cynden found extraordinary. There had been little time for the Ross clan's people to be at peace. As a result of the constant strife, most were on edge, always alert and suspicious.

"Aye, I would like that," Cynden replied, shaking the man's hand. "We will catch up with ye once we retrieve horses."



IT WAS A short ride to where they'd ask for mounts for the trip to the Ross keep. After identifying themselves, the men at the guard post near the shore lent them horses for the ride to the keep.

As he and Knox rode north on a well-traveled path, the differences between Skye and this isle became more obvious. There were more travelers. Several times they passed groups of riders, both men on horseback and peddlers with wagons. They rode past a large village, bustling with activity. In the distance on hillsides, herds of sheep and cows grazed. There

were several farms, with men working with teams of oxen, dredging the soil.

Despite the activity, he noted that the landscape of the isle was much Skye. The only difference perhaps was the proximity of living areas. On Skye, a village was surrounded by vast lands and no other population close by.

His mount swung its huge head and attempted to sniff the grasses below. He turned to Knox. "We should have fed and watered the horses before traveling forth. They are hungry."

"Aye," his cousin said running his hand over the back of the mount's neck.

Cynden prodded his horse into a faster trot until he could peer in through the coach's window. A quick scan showed that the woman whom he'd caught in his arms seemed to be asleep. The man, Daryl, looked to him.

"We are going to the nearby village to water and feed the horses. We will catch up."

With that, he and Knox rode the short distance to a village they discovered was called Taernsby.

At dismounting near a horse stable, Cynden searched for someone to ask for feed. He whirled around when a man came up behind and clapped a huge hand on his shoulder. "Ye must be here for the games," the man, who turned out to be a large red-haired warrior said in a booming jovial voice.

"I am called Brock," he added at their confused looks.

"I am Cynden, this is Knox, we are both Clan Ross from Skye. We are headed to see our cousin, Darach."

The man looked him over. "What do ye compete in?"

"We've not had games on Skye for many years."

The man's eyes bulged. "What happens there? We invite many clans to come, Skye has always been represented."

"I came last year. Did nae fare well in the stone toss," Knox said with a shake of his head.

Brock shrugged. "Well, this time ye will."

Thanks to the jovial man, they were able to procure feed and water for the horses in short order. While the mounts were being looked after, they followed Brock to a large tavern where they drank a tankard each.

"I will see ye at the keep," Brock said by way of parting as they walked out of the tavern.

Knox looked over his shoulder to the tavern and then to Cynden. "Does it not seem so different here, that so many people to be in good spirits?"

"I am not sure how to be comfortable around it." Cynden grunted in agreement.

Soon they were on horseback heading to where they would catch up with the coach.

Knox frowned. "I wonder if the games will affect Darach's decision to help us? I am sure the men will nae be happy to be taken away to fight instead of spending days at a fete."

"I would be angry," Cynden said. "We will have to see what happens. I am sure he will send men. Perhaps they will be so annoyed at being dragged from their enjoyment it will make them more aggressive on the battlefield."

Before them the coach continued at a good pace. According to Knox, they would arrive before sundown. It was a pleasant enough day, so the thought of a day's ride did not perturb Cynden. It would give him the opportunity to see more of Uist.

"What did the lass say to ye?" Knox asked when they caught up and followed behind the rambling coach.

"She called me Thomas," Cynden replied. "It was as if she thought to know me."

"Was probably seasick and delusional." Knox chuckled.

He thought about the young woman who'd stared up at him with the prettiest eyes he'd ever seen. They were like a

stormy sea, a mixture of blue and gray. Despite her distress, he'd not been immune to how beautiful she was. With long fiery hair, that had been pulled away to display plush lips and a pert nose, she'd immediately caught his attention.

When lifting her into his arms, she was curvy in a way that drove a man senseless. Frowning in the direction of the tree line, Cynden made a mental note to do his best to stay away from the lass once they arrived at the keep. The last thing he needed was any kind of distraction that would affect how he dealt with his cousin.

It had been a pair of years at least since he'd last seen Darach, the golden maned laird called *The Lion*. Darach had traveled to Skye to spend time with Cynden's father, asking for advice and learning what he could about being a laird.

Unlike Darach's father, Cynden's father had been a well-liked and respected laird, which Darach stated to wish to emulate.

Cynden had taken to Darach immediately. They had gotten along well, spending hours together discussing all types of things. Despite his brothers being older, it was he that Darach had sought out several times to eat with and ride with. It had been a short visit, just a sennight, but it had impacted Cynden in a way that was hard to explain.

He'd felt a strong connection to his cousin and now he was glad to be the one to come and speak to him.

AS THE SUN sunk below the horizon, they arrived at the enormous Dún Láidir *silver castle*. The impressive gates were so tall that Cynden had to crane his neck back to take it all in. Guards atop the thick stone walls called down to the driver of the carriage and whatever the man said seemed enough to give them entrance.

The guards then called down to them. Knox lifted a hand. "We are Cynden and Knox Ross, cousins to yer laird."

Two guards exchanged looks, one seemed to recognize Knox and waved back. "Aye I remember ye. Ye may enter."

The coach, two guards as well as Cynden and Knox all passed through the gates and into a courtyard so large, an entire village could be moved to within the walls.

Immediately they were approached by guardsmen and stable hands. Horses were led away, as the newly arrived were greeted.

A pair of warriors approached Cynden and party, the steady gazes moving over them. They each met Cynden's gaze and nodded in acknowledgement. "Ye are a Ross."

Knox grunted. "So am I."

"Oh, aye," the guard said. "It is just that he looks much like our laird."

Cynden chuckled. "True, Knox looks more like a MacLeod. His mother's family."

The guards walked away seeming to think he knew which way to go. Instead of waiting to ask, he walked toward the entrance of the building.

The doorways were arched and wide. He and Knox walked through into the great room. Inside people sat at long tables filling their trenchers from trays loaded with food. Servants threaded through the people stopping every so often to pour from the pitchers they held, refilling cups with well-practiced efficiency.

At the high board sat the laird, one of his brothers, and several others. Cynden took in his cousin, his chest swelling with pride at being part of the powerful clan.

It was but a moment later that Darach's gaze moved from whomever he spoke to scan the room. That his senses were so honed was no doubt a product of his warrior background. Cynden decided to wait and see how long it would be before his cousin found him.

He didn't have to wait long. Just as he finished the thought, he looked up to clash gazes with *The Lion*. His cousin

jumped to his feet and rushed over, bringing the entire room to a hushed silence.

“Cyn, ye are the last person I expected to see today.” They embraced and then Darach did the same with Knox. Cynden grinned like a loon, excited at seeing his cousin again.

Servants were summoned and people were moved so that Cynden and Knox could sit near the family. It seemed that because of the games, all of the laird’s brothers were in attendance, some he’d met, others he looked forward to getting to know. The Ross siblings had similar builds and features to his own brothers, making him immediately feel at home.

By the way several warriors acknowledged Knox, it was evident the warrior had been there several times and had gotten to know them. Cynden was envious of his cousin’s easy rapport with the others at the table.

Throughout the meal, everything was overwhelming, and he did his best to listen to the conversations between the men, while at the same time taking everything in.

The couple whom they’d escorted to the keep and their ward had not yet appeared. The women would probably wish to rest and were being found accommodations. A short time later, Darryl MacNeil appeared and was acknowledged by Darach.

Musicians entered the great room moments and began playing, making the din of the conversations rise. The atmosphere was festive and for a moment Cynden allowed himself to enjoy it. However, soon the reason for his visit and thoughts about what occurred back at Skye put a stop to it.

Highland tradition mandated that a visitor spend time with the family and be entertained before seeking to speak to the laird. However, Cynden didn’t feel he could wait.

“May I speak with ye,” Cynden said to Darach as the laird walked from the high board. “It is important; otherwise, I would not be so discourteous.”

At his words, Darach motioned to a man who, by his resemblance, had to be another Ross. "Let us go somewhere quieter," Darach said. "Knox, Ewan join us."

Ewan had dark hair and piercing hazel eyes. He joined them as they walked into what looked to be a study. The room was of a good size, with a long table down the center and another at the head of the room. Along one wall was a sideboard upon which glass decanters of different shapes were lined up. Each had a different amount of what Cynden guessed to be whiskey. He'd not thought to bring a token. Whiskey would have made a good gift.

Cynden barely remembered Ewan. They'd only met once, and it had been at least ten years since. The man's features and hair color reminded Cynden of his brothers.

The hazel eyes searched his. "It has been many years. When did ye come here last?"

"I have nae been here before," Cynden replied. "Have never left Skye in my life."

Ewan gave him an incredulous look. "In truth?"

"Aye," Knox answered for him. "The only reason he is here now is the injury keeps him from fighting."

Cynden could barely keep his excitement contained. It was good to be there, at the keep he'd heard so much about. "I have wished to come for a long time."

Turning to the laird, Cynden spoke again. "Ye are a heroic man, cousin. Much is said about how ye took over the clan and have made it great."

Something akin to pride flickered in the man's expression. "I am glad ye are here."

Ewan lifted his hand. "I am the best archer in the isles. I am sure ye must have heard."

"Unless Stuart is about," Darach stated with a grin. "If ye spend any length of time with us, ye will be witness to my brothers competing. It is not something ye wish to miss."

Knox shook his head and chuckled. “At the last competition, they brawled and ended up being disqualified.”

Cynden pictured it. “I am afraid my visit cannot be prolonged so that I can be here for the games. Nor could I participate.” He motioned to his arm.

“What happened?” Darach eyed his right arm, which was hurting quite badly after he’d been stupid enough to carry the woman and then ride without a sling. He wore the sling now to keep the throbbing arm tucked against his body.

“We are at war,” Knox answered for him. “Our opponents, the MacKinnons, are not a huge clan; however, their warriors outnumber ours by almost double. We only have thirty men.”

Ewan put down the glass he was about to fill. “I thought there was a truce in place.”

“There was,” Cynden replied. “However, the bastards find any reason to cause harm and overstep. This last time, they attacked a family, leaving everyone, including a young bairn dead.”

Darach’s expression hardened. His hazel eyes turning a stormy hue as he took Cynden in. “What was their reasoning for doing it?”

Instinctively Cynden knew his reply would influence his cousin’s decision as to how quickly to help them. He met the man’s gaze hoping to match the intensity.

“The family died because two young people fell in love.” His face twisted into a sneer. “Last time it was border territory. Before that it was sheep. Our kin have died over a pair of fecking sheep.”

A blond warrior came to the door and Darach invited him to enter. “This is Ian, my second-in-command.”

Cynden waited as Darach told Ian what occurred on Skye. The warrior stood stock still his expression impassive.

The laird held out a half-filled glass to Cynden. His gaze fell and then he lifted it to look to his brother and Ian, who

Cynden gathered was often sought out for council as all of Darach's brothers lived on their own lands. It was good to see that his cousin did not make decisions in haste and relied on others for assistance. Alexander was the same way, up to a point. Munro was his second-in-command.

"This could bring war back to our doorstep," Darach said. "I will have to consult with my brothers."

"I ask that ye take into consideration that we are family," Cynden replied, not taking the proffered glass. "Ye can nae leave us to die."

Ewan frowned at the floor and then looked to his brother. "He speaks the truth. We are family and because of it, we will help. We do not go to war alongside other clans, but they are our clan and our family."

When Darach didn't say anything Ewan continued, "There is no need to ponder or discuss. We must help them."

"I agree," Ian said.

Darach blew out a breath of acquiescence. "It is hard for me to send men away from their homes to fight. I almost died away from here and it was more painful than any wound."

Cynden had no way of knowing, but he imagined that dying away from home was a cruel fate. "I cannot imagine it."

Darach met Cynden's gaze for a long moment, it was as if he saw more than just flesh and bones, but into his soul. There was a deepness to the man's expression that lulled one into a place of solitude and silence. "Ye look a lot like Ewan and Stuart. It is almost as if ye are our brother."

"I have been told that before," Cynden replied. Now that they'd agreed to help, he felt lighter and anxious to return to Skye.

"Tonight ye rest and tomorrow we will gather the men. Ye must understand that most were looking forward to the games and will not be in good spirits having to head to war instead," Ewan explained.

Darach shook his head. “There is never a good time for it, I suppose.” Once again he held up the glass and this time Cynden accepted it.

“I will go,” Ewan said not seeming to notice Darach and Ian exchanging looks.

“Nay, I think I should go,” Ian said.

“Ye have a wee one on the way,” Ewan countered. “I already have a troupe of bairns. Returning to them gives me a reason to fight harder. I know the MacKinnons, they are a bunch of daft idiots,” Ewan explained.

“How do ye know them?” Darach asked.

Ewan’s expression darkened. “They are cheaters and thieves. Met a group of them when I traveled.”

The laird turned to Cynden and placed a hand on his shoulder. “We have nae welcomed ye properly. Welcome to Dún Láidir. Ye are always welcome here.”

“Thank ye,” Cynden stated. “I am glad to have finally been able to come despite my mother’s protestations.”

Ewan’s eyes narrowed. “What was the explanation for it?”

“I do nae know,” Cynden shrugged. “Could be the coddled youngest.”

Everyone except Darach, who continued to study him, chuckled.

The laird motioned to the door. “I will make the announcement tonight. That way the men can begin to prepare mentally for what is to come.”

The huge blond man met Cynden’s gaze. “We will send two hundred back with ye and Ian.” Ewan rolled his eyes but didn’t argue.

“T-two...hundred?” Cynden stuttered. “That will do quite well. Aye. The MacKinnons do not amount to that many.” A lightness filled his chest. Finally, Clan Ross of Skye could

hope to live in peace.” Returning home with the large contingency could be enough to dissuade the MacKinnons.

Darach looked to him. “I am surprised the MacKinnon dared to attack. He is well aware of our might.”

“No one has ever stood up to him,” Knox said in a quiet voice behind them. “They think themselves untouchable.”

“Ye should have asked for help sooner,” Ewan said to Knox.

Cynden agreed. “Alex is a proud man, he hoped to be able to negotiate a truce.”



HE WOKE EARLY the next morning after collapsing with exhaustion quite early the night before.

Despite the silence of the keep, there seemed to be a vibrancy to it. As if the building itself was a living creature. Cynden had never been to a place like it.

Deciding to explore the surroundings while there was little activity, he dressed quickly and set off. Outside the bedchamber was a long corridor, he went to the right instead of the left that led back to the great room and down a stairwell.

The sounds of women’s voices, the clattering of pans, and the smells of food being prepared met him before he made it to the doorway of an impressive kitchen. Everyone was busy preparing the first meal, so he managed to walk past unnoticed.

Next, down a shorter passage was a room from which the smell of lye told it was a laundering area. He walked past quickly to a doorway that led outside to a large green area where targets for archery were set up. There were benches for spectators. Opposite the targets was another area, he assumed it was for sword practice.

He went back inside and retraced his steps then headed past the great room and down another corridor. This one led

past a row of smaller bedchambers where he'd been told visitors and some family slept.

There was a short stairwell, where he found a water closet and an alcove. A small window gave a view of the forest and loch beyond. Continuing on to another stairwell, he found himself on the second floor where the family lived.

Not wishing to intrude, he continued forward hoping to find a stairwell back down to the great room.

Upon finding the stairs, he rushed down the twisting stairwell only to find himself in a different area. Here there were more bedchambers and what looked to be a parlor that included a set of windows overlooking the inlet.

Unable to keep from it, he went inside to look at the breathtaking view. Never in his life did he imagine such a beautiful place to live.

Movement out of the corner of his eye got his attention. Intuitively he knew who it was, so he kept from looking at her.

The last thing he needed was for the lass to faint again. He did not wish to have to lift her and hurt his arm again.

“Who are ye?” she whispered in a tone of awe.

Cynden turned to face her, and she gasped, her grayish-blue gaze taking him in. “I told ye yesterday. I am Cynden Ross, cousin to the laird.”

As if in a trance, she moved closer. “It is astonishing,” she whispered. “I can nae believe it.”

“I look like someone ye know?” Cynden was becoming a bit annoyed that the pretty lass was only looking at him that way because he looked like someone else. Unlike her, he'd never seen such a stunning woman who moved with such grace.

Her plump lips pursed as she took him in. And her gaze was like a caress as it moved over his body. Then seeming to realize what she did, a soft rose colored her cheeks. “I

apologize for my forwardness.” She covered her cheeks with both hands.

“I have told ye my name twice and ye have yet to tell me yers,” he said by way of distracting her. He knew her name, but wanted to hear her say it.

“I am Ainslie MacNeil. From Barra. I have come with Laird MacNeil’s brother and his wife to participate in the festivities.” Her voice had a singsong quality to it that made him wish to hear more.

“I am told it is a huge affair.”

She regarded Cynden and then focused somewhere past him. “What are ye competing in?”

“I will not compete. I am here to seek help from my cousin. I am from the Isle of Skye.”

She smiled softly. “I have never been. I hear it is quite beautiful.”

He supposed it was. “Open fields of green as far as the eye can see,” he said picturing the lands he knew like the back of his hand.

“Why do ye need help?”

This time he stared out the window at the land and water while imagining his home in the distance. “We are at war.”

Her intake of breath made him look back at her just as she seemed to notice his injured arm. “I am sorry.”

Cynden nodded. “I am as well. People are dying for no other reason than a man’s desire to overtake what is not his. It is horrible.”

“So ye will nae remain then?” She seemed almost sad while asking, her eyes searching his.

He was glad to have run into her. Despite his wish to have no distractions, having met the beauty was well worth it. When her cheeks pinkened, Cynden realized he’d been staring at her.

“What were ye doing before I walked in?”

She looked back to the now empty cushioned settee. “I was reading a bit.”

At a loss for words, both looked back out to the view. Cynden fought for what to say to her to prolong the moment, but nothing came to mind.

“I best get back to my guardians. Lady Cara will wonder where I’m off to.” She turned to walk away.

“Who is Thomas?”

Her stricken look made him wish he’d not asked the question.

“The man I love.”

“I see,” Cynden replied, feeling an unjust bit of jealousy that someone had captured the heart of such a beautiful creature before he had the chance to meet her.

When she turned to face him, unruly curls escaped her simple hairstyle, the ringlets bouncing on her shoulders. “I wish ye Godspeed and triumph,” she told him her gaze once again taking him in. “Perhaps one day we will see each other again.”

As she went to leave, he took her in. What an extraordinary woman she was.

“Wait, I require yer help,” Cynden said as she reached the doorway. He didn’t want her to leave. He wished they could spend the entire morning there. However, it was the day he would head back to Skye with an army that would bring peace to his clan.

“How can I possibly help ye?” Her brows furrowed.

Cynden smiled at her. “I am lost. Could ye help me find the great room?”

The corners of her lips twitched. “I will do my best. I have nae been here before, so we may become lost together.”

If only.

CHAPTER FOUR

Isle of Skye

One Year Later

HIS ARM FELT heavy as stone as he swung it against the formidable opponent. It wasn't the first time Cynden wondered if he'd live past that day.

After months of relative peace, once again the enemy had surged against them, this time with help. They'd joined with the nearby clan Black against them.

They were evenly matched as a small contingency of warriors from Clan Ross of Uist remained to keep the peace; however, after this new affront, it meant they were no closer to that peace.

Clan MacKinnon needed no good reason to fight. For the most part, it seemed the ailing senile laird wished to witness battle in his ever-growing fear of death. Perhaps witnessing people fight for life made him feel more alive.

If only someone would get through the man's guards and finish him off, perhaps his successor, and eldest son, would have other things on his mind than constant battle and strife.

A horn sounded in the distance announcing more fighters, the momentary distraction giving Cynden an upper hand against his opponent and he thrust his sword into the man's midsection. The warrior fell to his knees on the muddy ground and Cynden withdrew his blade.

The downed man glared up at him. "Bastard."

Cynden leaned closer. "Be grateful ye will live idiot." The man fell sideways, and he stepped over the downed man. Glad for the welcome sight of more Ross warriors approaching.

Their opponents instantly withdrew, hurrying away, carrying and dragging the wounded. The Ross warriors were too exhausted to do more than watch them leave.

Alexander came to where Cynden was, bent over gasping for breath.

“Are ye injured?” His brother patted him down. “Cynden answer me.”

He shrugged away. “I am unscathed. I can strip all my clothes off for ye to continue yer search.” His hard breathing did not take away from the irritation in his voice.

Although he knew his brothers cared for him. At times he wished not to be the youngest. His aggravation grew when Munro and Gavin rushed over to also inspect him. Three sets of eyes looking him over with worried expressions.

“Leave me be,” Cynden snapped. “Ye are bleeding.” He pointed at Munro. “Everyone look, our brother is bleeding to death.”

It was then that Munro realized he was injured. He stumbled backward, hands clutched at his side, and fell straight back like a fallen tree.

Instantly they rushed to their unconscious brother.

“I did nae mean what I said,” Cynden spoke into Munro’s ear. “Wake up.”

Thick and muscular, it wouldn’t be easy to pick Munro up. The warrior spent most days at swordplay and training for battle, making him a formidable foe.

“Get away from me,” Munro muttered. “Yer closeness is taking all the air.”

Ignoring his remarks, the brothers took Munro by the arms and hoisted him up to stand. Munro swayed a bit, his gaze unfocused. He didn’t resist when Gavin and Alexander helped him hobble to a wagon that would take him back to the keep.

Cynden went to where the newly arrived Ross warriors had dismounted. Among them was Ian. The blond warrior had gone to Uist for a fortnight and returned with fifty men who would exchange places with men who were currently there.

“I see ye fared well. We missed the fight,” Ian said. The gruff warrior patted Cynden’s shoulder.

Since the first time he came to Skye, he and Ian had formed a bond. The archer was always close by whenever they’d battled. Every doubt of an archer being able to fight hand to hand had disappeared after the first battle when Ian had taken on two opponents at once. He was a formidable combatant.

Many a night, they’d stayed up talking. Cynden told him about life on Skye and Ian shared what it was like growing up in different places since his father had no allegiance to any clan.

Cynden was close to his brothers and couldn’t imagine growing up without an alliance or family. Munro and Gavin, who were but eleven months apart were always together. He usually had Knox’s company and they were as close as brothers. Alexander had the weight of the clan on his shoulders and spent most of his days conferring with the clan elders, but always made time for family.

“I bring news,” Ian said as they walked their steeds to allow the animals to rest. “Darach wishes for ye to return with the fifty we replace. I will discuss it with Alexander.”

“Why?” Cynden asked, becoming excited at the prospect of returning to Dún Láidir.

“To train with our warriors and teach them about Skye warrior tactics. It is important for our men to be more prepared as these bouts continue.”

Despite his wish to go, he worried his mother would stop it. After his trip the year prior, she’d been distraught. Making Alexander promise he’d not go back.

Their mother's behavior had been strange since the warriors from Uist came to help. It was as if she was on edge, not wishing for much interaction between the men. It was inevitable, so she'd stopped asking that he and his brothers keep a distance.

Finally one day Alexander had asked her to explain her seeming dislike for their cousins and she'd screamed that they'd never understand before rushing from the room in tears.

"Allow me to present the idea to Alex myself," Cynden said. "I wish to keep it between us for now."

The archer frowned. "Is yer mother still against ye traveling to Uist?"

"Aye," he said nodding. "I do nae understand why. We have tried to ask many times, but she refuses to speak about it."

Ian shook his head. "Women are hard to understand."

"I agree," Cynden said then wanted to laugh as his knowledge of women was very limited. He didn't have any sisters and the only women he'd been intimate with were the butcher's daughter, when he was five and ten, and the servant, Orla. He'd not lain with Orla in over a year, not wishing to give her expectations. The household female servants often got his attention with their high-pitched chatter and giggles. However, it was best to keep any intimacy away from the household in his opinion.

THAT EVENING AFTER speaking to Alexander and his brother seeking council with Ian, it was decided that Cynden would indeed go to Uist for an indefinite length of time.

They would not be leaving for a few days, and already Cynden had become restless. He went to visit Munro, who was resting in his bedchamber.

Upon entering, his brother gave him a look of relief. "The healer will nae allow me to do more than lay in bed." He hit the bedding with his fist for emphasis. "I would nae except for the fact Mother was here when he said it."

Since their father's death, the brothers did their best to keep their mother from distress. A hard task given the current state of affairs on the isle.

"Darach asked for me to go to Dún Láidir to train with their warriors," Cynden said lowering to a chair. "Alexander has agreed. I worry about how Mother will take it."

Munro shifted in the bed groaning. It was apparent he was in a great deal of pain. Otherwise, he would not have remained in the room, no matter what the healer had said.

"Ye should go Cyn. Each of us has a calling. Ye are the best trainer, and it will do the Uist warriors good to come prepared for how men fight here."

"Alex said he will speak to Mother; however, I will go no matter what she says. I am a warrior, not a bairn to be kept safe."

Munro shook his head and then cocked it to the side. "I remember the times mother and father fought when she refused to go to Uist and demanded ye remain here with her. Father demanded an explanation."

This was news to him, so Cynden leaned forward. "What explanation did she give?"

"That ye were in danger from fate."

"What?"

"I do nae know," Munro said. "I thought it odd, so I asked grandmother later. She said it was nothing of importance, that our mother had a dream that ye would drown at sea when ye was a bairn."

It made sense when he was younger, but not now that he was a man. Cynden suspected there was another reason. If his mother raised an issue about him not going, then he would demand to know the real reason.

Upon leaving Munro's bedchamber, Cynden went to find his mother. She normally spent the afternoon in her sitting room upstairs praying for their safe return. Upon the warrior's

return, she would have food brought and spend the rest of the day with her embroidery. Rarely did she share a meal in the great room unless there were visitors. And with the ongoing battles, no one came to visit.

Just as he was to knock, his brother's voice brought Cynden to a stop. Obviously, Alexander had beaten him there. Now it sounded as if he and their mother argued.

“Why must ye constantly bring this matter up? I have told ye. Cynden should nae go to Uist. I will nae allow it.”

“Ye never give a reason, Mother. He is a warrior and is the best one to train the men to help ensure more lives are not lost while we continue this senseless war.” It was good to hear the strength in Alexander's voice, which meant he had made up his mind.

“I will speak to Cynden and talk him out of it,” their mother said. “It is best for ye to send someone else. Why do those men need training? They are great warriors, ye've said it yerself.”

“Mother, it is only a courtesy that I tell ye. I am not asking yer permission, only that ye do not cause a scene in front of our cousin's men.”

“A scene.” His mother's voice rose to a shrill level. “I have stated that I will nae allow it and ye must obey me.”

“I am laird,” Alexander spoke in a louder tone than he usually used with their mother. “What I say will happen. That is the end of it. Cynden will go to Uist and stay for as long as he must. At least an entire season.”

“No,” his mother wailed. “Promise me not to send him.”

“Stop it, Mother,” Alexander said, his tone softer. “Please. Stop treating him like a child.”

“He will nae return once there. The truth will come out and he will choose to remain there forever.”

At this point, it was obvious that Alexander had lost his patience. “What truth? Stop speaking in riddles. Tell me what

ye are talking about.”

Sounds of sobbing came next, then a pause.

“Cynden is not only yer brother. He is their brother as well.”

Whatever it meant, Cynden wasn't sure. How could he be brother to both? They shared the same mother and father, but he did not with his cousins on Uist.

“What do ye mean?” Alexander asked, his voice incredulous. “Have ye gone mad?”

“No!” his mother screamed. “I am not mad. I was taken against my will, by that bastard. By yer father's brother. He forced me to lay with him. It was the last time I visited Uist. Cynden is the result.”

To hear over the thundering of his heart, he leaned into the half-open doorway.

“How can ye be sure he is not my father's son?”

This time their mother spoke in an empty tone. “Yer father and I had been distant. Issues over nonconsequential things. I had just had my courses before going. But not again after... There was no doubt.” She began to cry. “After two months without bleeding. Yer father and I...” She hiccupped. “I let yer father believe Cynden was his. He never knew.”

“They do not know on Uist. What harm can come from him going?”

“What if... he told his wife? What if she knows and tells Cynden? I cannot bear to lose yer brother. I cannot bear to lose my son.”

It was strange to hear Alex chuckle. “Mother, he is nae a bairn. Ye have raised him, and he loves ye. This is his place. He will always return home.”

Cynden walked away, not needing to hear anymore. Did it truly matter who sired him? His own father had never known the truth of it. And perhaps it would have been best if he

himself had not learned the truth. That he was the result of his mother being taken by force. At the same time, it was comforting that all his life, his mother loved him unconditionally.

When birds squawked overhead, he realized he had gone outside. Quickly, he scanned the surroundings, ensuring not to be in danger, as many times the MacKinnons had tried to sneak close to their keep.

“I am nae full brother to anyone,” he whispered.

“There ye are,” Alexander walked toward him, his gaze searching Cynden’s face. “Ye will go.”

He suspected that Alex had not backed down. “I am glad. I will seek Mother in the morning and appease her as much as possible.”

His brother—no, his *half*-brother—laughed. “Ye will be disappointed. She is still set on forbidding that ye go.”

When Alexander neared, put an arm around his shoulder, and pulled him against his chest, Cynden fought against the knot that formed in his throat. “I love ye brother,” Alex said. “I expect ye to return unscathed.”

It was not the first time that he or any of his brothers embraced, but Cynden was glad for his oldest brother’s assurance.

“And I love ye brother,” he replied as they separated. “I look forward to helping the warriors. I will worry about ye, Munro, and Gavin fighting while I am away.”

“No need. We have nae lost any men since our cousin sent men.”



THE FOLLOWING DAY Cynden steeled himself and went to speak to his mother. He preferred her not to know what he’d overheard, and he prayed that she’d not suspect.

She looked up from her embroidery, her expression softening upon seeing him. She remained an attractive woman

and he'd often wondered if she'd remarry. He hoped she would and not be left alone after they all married. Although she would always have a home at the keep, in Cynden's opinion, she was much too young to remain without a husband.

"Cyn, come darling," She held out her arms and he kneeled before her, accepting the tight embrace. She kissed his temples and leaned back to look at him. "What is this I hear about ye wishing to go away from me?"

"'Tis only for a short time Mother," he replied with a smile. "I am looking forward to exploring the isle."

Her gaze took him in. "And yer cousins? Ye enjoy time with them as well?"

"I am nae going for a visit, but for a duty that my brother has given me. Once it is done, I will return with haste as I am sure to miss ye and home greatly."

His mother hugged him again. "It makes me glad to hear ye say that. I will miss ye greatly."

"Come with me," Cynden said, meaning it. Perhaps if she accompanied him she'd realize that the travel was not perilous.

"I cannot," she replied abruptly. "Yer brothers will continue to fight, I must be here to pray and ensure they return daily."

He agreed. Before sitting down, he pulled a chair closer then lowered into it.

They sat in silence as she looked across the room to a small window. "Why must men insist on war? There is so much more to life than strife and wrath."

"The MacKinnon is weak and dying. He wishes to live a legacy, one that makes little sense." Cynden let out a breath. "It will end soon, I pray his son brings all this to an end."

His mother shook her head. "He will not unless we beat them. The son is no doubt building resentment and bitterness from the loss of men who he grew up with. If anything, the

MacKinnon has raised a successor to be even more cruel than him.”

He'd fought against MacKinnon's son. The older warrior fought without mercy. Like a demon possessed, he'd demolished anyone in his path. It was normally only Munro or Alexander who stood a chance against him in battle.



TWO DAYS LATER as the birlinns neared the shores of Uist, Cynden peered across the water to what would be his home for months and wondered what changes would come.

The calmness of the water had made the trip uneventful. There were several birlinns on which men and war horses traveled. The animals, used to accompanying their masters, kept silent as if resting after months of battle. The resilient brave animals instinctively remained balanced while sailing across the water to their homeland.

Cynden looked across to the nearest birlinn, on which Ewan stood, feet set apart prepared to reach down to grab ropes from smaller flat boats that neared to take them to land. Their gazes met for a moment and Cynden wondered if any of the Ross from Uist would suspect they were brothers. There really wasn't a reason for them to think it, after all, they were kin. Cynden hoped to leave well enough alone.

Not that anyone finding out would bring any issues. Perhaps in the past, painful secrets would have caused strife, but now that the elder brothers were dead, his parentage mattered little.

In his mind, the man he'd known since birth was who he would always consider to be his father. Not the faceless cruel man who'd taken his own brother's wife against her will. It was a good thing the man was dead, else he would have had a hard time not killing him.

CHAPTER FIVE

“**H**OW FARE YE today?” Lady Mariel Ross, the laird’s mother, took Ainslie’s attention from her journal. She peered across the sitting area to the woman, who’d given her a sanctuary for a year now. Lady Ross was a MacNeil and distant cousin to Ainslie, which made her prolonging her visit there not feel like an intrusion.

Each time she’d considered returning to Barra, she’d been scared of going back to the shell of a person she’d become after Thomas’ death. At the Ross keep, away from the memories, and constant reminders of him, she’d found a sort of calm. It was not happiness, but more of a peaceful existence. There were constant distractions and always much to do, the keep was a busy place filled with people, celebrations, and outings.

“I must once again thank ye for allowing me to remain. I am enjoying it here very much.” Ainslie noted that outside the sun was high in the sky. “Are we still going to the village today?”

As if summoned, Isobel, the laird’s pretty wife entered the room. Ainslie had taken an immediate liking to her, she was just a pair of years older than her and had a serene personality that made one comfortable. In Ainslie’s opinion, the main reason for Darach Ross’ success as laird, was that he had Isobel by his side.

“The horse and carriage are ready. Come along, ladies.” She smiled warmly at her mother-in-law. “I know ye wish to wear a hat, so I had one as well as a light shawl brought down.”

Lady Mariel laughed. “Ye must be anxious to be away.”

“Aye, the bairns are asleep. I wish to go before they awaken, and I feel too guilty to leave them behind.”

It was but a matter of moments before the three women were on their way. It was indeed a beautiful day. Only a smattering of clouds in the sky and a light breeze that made the sunny day even more pleasant.

As they rode past a field of heather—each stalk bursting with blooms—the sweet perfume surrounded them. Ainslie took a deep breath. “It smells wonderful.”

“We shall stop to pick some heather then,” Lady Mariel announced. “We can make perfumed oil and sachets for clothing trunks.”

“We can sprinkle some in the guards’ quarters. It is foul over there,” Isobel added with a wrinkled nose.

Lady Mariel nodded and chuckled. “For that task, we would need a wagon load.”

“Why do they not get their quarters swept and mopped?” Ainslie asked.

“They usually keep their area clean. Since traveling back and forth to Skye, they’ve become lazy about it,” Lady Mariel informed her.

Isobel huffed. “I tried to send maids to do the task, but they raced back in tears. The men would not let them be. If they wish to live like swine, let them.”

The older woman let out a breath. “To be fair, cook told me they’ve made brooms and have asked for lye.”

“Good,” Isobel said then looked to Ainslie. “When ye marry—which I am sure will be soon—ye will learn that there is so much more to managing a household than ye would ever think.”

“I doubt to ever marry,” Ainslie replied. “Although, I do wish to love again. It hurts horribly when something happens to them.”

Her companions exchanged knowing looks, and Isobel patted Ainslie’s hand. “Ye are much too young to be done with

love. I am sure another man will come along and perhaps not replace yer lost love but fill yer heart just the same.”

She doubted it but decided not to comment. It was the same thing her mother had told her once and it was repeated by Lady Cara before she left to return to Barra. The woman had pulled her aside to tell her it was a good opportunity, being there at Keep Ross. With so many eligible men coming and going, perhaps she would meet her destiny.

It wasn't a coincidence that the women all thought the same thing. As reluctant as she was to the possibility of love, Ainslie was intelligent enough to know fate had a way of changing lives. A woman on the isles was doomed to a sad and lonely existence without a husband and bairns.

With the driver's and Isobel's daggers, they were able to cut the stalks of heather. A cloth was procured from the carriage and cut into strips that they used to tie the flowers into bundles.

“Someone arrives,” Isobel said pointing toward the sea. “They wear Ross of Skye colors.”

They climbed back onto the carriage and watched in silence as men mounted at the seashore. The local guards were already there to ensure whoever arrived did not pose a threat. On a hillside a line of warriors kept vigil atop huge intimidating warhorses.

Ainslie had always heard about the might of Clan Ross warriors. It wasn't until she lived there that she realized why they had such a reputation. Whenever she came across a warrior, their demeanor alone was enough to make a person falter.

Often, the silent men would move aside to allow her to pass. If she dared to look at them to thank them, the response was usually a grunt, or on rare times a curt *my lady*, before they went on their way.

Now lined up atop a hill, an enemy would have to be mad to attempt an attack.

“They are formidable,” she said out loud. “Do ye ever wonder what it is to go to war alongside them? Or worst against them?”

“Goodness no,” Lady Mariel replied. “I cannot fathom how any other army has stood against them.”

Isobel turned to study the warriors. “Most of them are kind and generous men. However, for some, battle has changed them. I am often shocked at how they transform when with their wives and bairns.”

A group of riders rode toward them, and Lady Mariel asked the driver to remain at a stop. She looked to Ainslie and Isobel.

“I wish to know who comes. I believe it is our men returning from Skye.”

The arrivals who rode in two rows about twenty deep neared and stopped. Two of them rode closer to the carriage.

At noting who one was, Ainslie felt her heart dip into her stomach, and she gasped. Isobel gave her a curious look but didn't say anything.

“I am glad to see ye home, Colin,” Isobel stated, assuming her role as laird's wife. “How did everyone fare?”

The gruff muscular man's face warmed when addressing Isobel. “All is well my lady. We had no casualties and only a few minor injuries. We are glad to return home.”

“I certainly hope it will soon be for good that everyone returns,” Lady Mariel remarked.

Then she spoke to the man whom Ainslie had met upon first arriving. “Welcome back to Uist, Cynden.”

Cynden's gold and green speckled gaze moved from one to the other of them. When he locked gazes with her, there was a slight narrowing of his eyes in recognition. If possible he'd become even more handsome than she remembered.

“I am glad to be here, my lady.” He bowed his head in greeting, the sun shining off the light sun-streaked brown hair. “I come to train with the men.” The deepness of his tone was like a caress and Ainslie shivered.

Isobel glanced at her. “Are ye chilled?”

Ainslie turned her head away, pretending to study the seashore. “A wee bit.”

From under her lashes, she studied Cynden. As much as he resembled her dear Thomas, everything about this man was so very different. He was healthy and strong. His body honed for battle. His skin a warm tan after days outdoors. And his eyes shined like embers, the golden flecks battling with the cool green.

A brisk wind blew his shoulder-length hair sideways into his handsome face. Frowning, he pulled a thin leather strap that was wrapped around his wrist and tied the silken tresses back.

It occurred to Ainslie that the conversation had continued, and she’d been lost in thought. The entire time gawking at Cynden. She swallowed hoping no one had noticed, but then Cynden’s right eyebrow rose, and he gave her a knowing look.

“Oh!” Ainslie’s face burned with mortification, made even worse when everyone stared at her. Thinking quickly, she glanced down. “I thought to have seen a wee spider.”

Isobel waved her hand dismissively. “Do not worry, I am sure ye are mistaken,” she continued speaking to Cynden. “I will nae have ye sleeping in the guard’s quarters. Ye are the laird’s cousin and will have a chamber in the house proper.”

Isobel then continued addressing Colin. “Yer guards have nae kept their quarters clean, the stench reaches the house. Speak to them about it.”

“They were unkind to a pair of maids we sent over to help clean. See they are aware it will nae be tolerated again,” Lady Mariel added.

Cynden slid Ainslie a look. "I did nae know ye were to remain Ainslie."

The way he said her name, in the smooth deep tone of his voice was like a caress. How was it possible? Thomas' voice had never affected her in such a way.

"Ladies Mariel and Isobel kindly invited me to remain after my travel companions left."

His gaze fell from hers down to her clutched hands. "I am pleased to see ye again."

When she was struck silent, wondering what he meant, Isobel spoke, "I am hopeful ye will remain for a season or two. It will allow us to get to know ye better as ye've never come to visit before."

"Yer husband invited me to train with the warriors here. I welcomed the idea as it is rare that I leave Skye. I am nae sure for how long."

"Ye deserve to be away from the fighting. I am glad ye accepted," Lady Mariel said.

"We best be on our way," Colin said looking away in the direction of the keep. "The men are eager for a hot meal and their own beds."

As the line of warriors continued past, Lady Mariel and Isobel looked out the window, every so often waving at men they knew. It wasn't until the entire contingency rode by that their carriage continued on.

"There is something about Cynden that brings me pause. I feel as if I've known him from before. Yet he insists never to have been here," Lady Mariel said.

"Strange that he did nae visit when the family came," Isobel stated.

The laird's mother thought about it. "His father and my husband were not close, even if brothers. It was rare that John came, rarer that he brought any of his sons."

They rode in silence for a bit longer.

“He resembles my sons more than the others, do ye not think?” It seemed Lady Mariel continued to ponder.

“He has the hazel eyes,” Isobel replied. “I believe that is why. His brothers have dark green eyes. Cynden does resemble Darach a great deal.”

Lady Mariel snapped her fingers. “Aye, that is it. The first time I saw him, it was as if seeing Darach a few years past.”

While they continued talking, Ainslie listened intently wondering how she would avoid the warrior while he was here. Although she found him attractive, he reminded her of Thomas, so it was best to avoid him. Her heart could not withstand the constant reminder. Not for one moment did she think he resembled the laird. She’d already concluded that Cynden and Thomas could have been brothers. The resemblance was uncanny.

“Lady Mariel, ye are from Barra, are ye not?” She waited for the woman to nod. “Do ye know anyone from Clan Macrae?”

“Aye, I do. Sorcha Macrae was a good friend of mine.” Her lips curved at a distant pleasant memory. “I miss her and her family.”

“Lady Sorcha had a son, his name was Thomas.” Ainslie choked out his name. “He was my late betrothed.”

Lady Mariel’s expression was compassionate, and she took Ainslie’s hand in hers. “Cara told me ye lost yer betrothed. She did nae say whose son it was. I am sad for my dear friend. What happened to him?”

“He died from illness. Nothing could be done.” It was strange to say the words without dissolving into tears. As time passed it became easier to think of him and smile when remembering their good times.

“I am so very sorry,” Lady Mariel said. “How terrible for someone so young as ye to go through this.”

“Have ye found a bit of solace here?” Isobel asked.

“Aye. I needed to leave Barra, there were memories at every turn,” Ainslie continued. “What I wanted to say is that the warrior Cynden resembles my late betrothed. The first time I saw him, I could nae breathe.”

Lady Mariel’s eyes narrowed. “There is a possibility that many men their age look like my late husband.”

She met Ainslie’s gaze. “Many a time he took a woman by force. Whether married or not, it mattered little. He was a cruel man who depended on his large army as a deterrent from revenge.”

“I have heard about him,” Ainslie admitted. “My parents would have nae allowed me to come if he were still alive.” She covered her mouth with both hands at realizing she’d just spoken ill of Lady Mariel’s husband. “Oh, dear. Please forgive me for speaking ill of—”

Lady Mariel held up a hand. “Do not apologize. He does nae deserve to be thought of kindly.”

Isobel peered out the window. “The village has come into view. I do hope the basket weaver is there.”

“Once we get back, I must see about young Cynden and ensure he has suitable accommodations.” The laird’s mother smiled at Isobel. “We must not linger overmuch.”

“Will he be sleeping on the first floor?” Ainslie asked and quickly realized it was a strange question to be asking. Fortunately, Isobel continued peering out the window and Lady Mariel did not seem to think it odd.

“Nay, he will be upstairs,” Lady Mariel replied, a finger pressed to her chin in thought. “He can have Gideon’s old room.”

“Now that yer sons are all married, there are plenty of empty rooms?” Isobel added and looked to Ainslie. “Ye are currently in the one next to that one. It used to be Stuart’s.”

It took all her strength not to groan. Being in the room next to his meant it would be doubly as hard to avoid the man.

Upon her return, she'd find a way to move into another room. Perhaps seek out the help of one of the maids. Make up an excuse.

She leaned to look out marveling at the beauty of the day and the continuity of life. It seemed unfair and at the same time it was the way of life. Some lived while others died.

"We will eat at the village tavern," Isobel said, her voice tinged with excitement. "I so love the meat pies there."



AS PROMISED THE basket weaver was quite talented and Ainslie had purchased two baskets for her bedchamber, a large one for clothes and a smaller one to place personal items in. Isobel was right about the delicious meat pies. They were stuffed with meat and finely chopped vegetables, in a flavorful sauce. The pastry was made with butter, and it had been as delectable as the fillings. They'd all eaten too much and once in the coach had to sit back with their hands across their swollen stomachs.

The sun was low in the horizon when they finally rode through the gates back into the keep courtyard.

Once they were assisted from the coach, Ainslie carried her baskets and a few other small items inside.

Inside the great room, people were enjoying the evening meal. Pipers entertained with lively tunes, as people either ate or danced. If ever there was a place to forget one's troubles, this was a perfect one.

Darach Ross walked toward them and greeted Isobel with an all-consuming embrace, his huge muscular arms surrounding the slight woman. It was as if no one else was there when they looked into each other's eyes. Ainslie almost felt like an intruder while witnessing the exchange between two people who were so obviously in love.

“Did ye enjoy the village?” Darach asked, his hazel gaze meeting hers.

“Aye, I did Laird,” Ainslie replied. “We ate too many meat pies.”

The handsome man’s lips curved, and he turned to give his wife a loving gaze. “If I hired the tavern owner’s wife to cook here, ye would never leave the keep.”

Isobel’s laughter rang out and several people turned to look, one of them Cynden Ross. A jolt traveled through Ainslie at noting him and she looked away before he noticed her looking at him.

It was quite annoying that a mere glance could have such an effect on her. Surely she was tired or perhaps in need of a bit of honeyed mead to get her thoughts under control.

They continued on into the great room, thankfully Lady Mariel interceded and stopped Ainslie from having to sit. “I am going upstairs to deposit my purchases and have a wee rest. Would ye like to join me?”

“Aye,” Ainslie practically shouted out. “I do nae wish to smell food.”

They walked up the stairs, the entire time she could feel Cynden’s gaze on her. It could have been her imagination, but she doubted it. The man had an unnatural effect on her that had to be stopped somehow.

After a light repose with Lady Mariel, Ainslie trudged to her bedchamber and placed the large basket on the floor. The bed was calling her name, and she stopped to admire it.

It would only be a matter of moments to undress and don her nightshift. Although it was much too early, she decided she could linger in bed before falling asleep.

After lifting her nightgown that hung over the foot of the bed, she went behind the screen in the corner to change. Although she had the room to herself, if someone opened the door, anyone passing by could see her changing. Humming

softly, she removed her clothes, draping each item over the screen.

The door opened and someone cleared their throat. Ainslie knew it was the maid who usually stopped by to stoke the fire and ensure nothing needed to be done. Although normally she enjoyed a light conversation with the kind woman, this night Ainslie did not wish to speak to anyone else. She let out a breath when she heard the door close.

She glanced toward the far wall and frowned wondering which room was given to Cynden. The one to her right or left. Either way, he was much too close. Somehow, she had to come up with a way to move to another bedchamber. She'd have to come up with a good excuse so as not to arouse suspicions.

In her nightshift, she rounded the screen and peered toward the window pondering if she should open it a bit for some fresh air.

Movement out of the corner of her eye got her attention and she whirled around.

Splayed sideways across her bed was a shirtless man. Not just any shirtless man.

It was Cynden Ross.

Unable to stop herself, she studied him for a scant moment. Across his well-formed chest a splay of dark hair formed a cross, the long part trailing down the center of his body to where his breeches were belted. Ainslie shook her head to stop the indulgence.

Eyes closed, he seemed to be sleeping. Surely he was not asleep as she'd only been behind the screen but a few moments.

Ainslie pressed her lips together. The gall of the man thinking that after a pair of meetings, she would allow him into her bed. Ire rose as she tiptoed toward the fireplace to grab a poker. She'd teach him a lesson or two about sneaking in without invitation. Not that she would invite him in. Ever.

With the poker in her trembling hand, she inched closer to the bed. Admittedly, she paused a few times to allow her gaze to linger on him. Despite being annoyed, she had to admit, he made a beautiful sight.

She closed the distance and swung the poker down, not hard, but it would be enough to leave a welt on his chest. Suddenly, his hands came up grabbing the poker with one and her shoulder with the other. He swung her onto the bed and came over her.

Air left her lungs when Ainslie found herself pinned under him. Her weapon clattered to the floor noisily, the only sound besides her sharp intake of breath.

For a moment they stared at one another wide-eyed.

“What are ye doing in my bedchamber,” both asked in unison.

Astounded, Ainslie couldn’t formulate another word. Did the man actually think she was in his bedchamber in her nightgown?

Cynden regarded her, his right brow lifting in question. “I am quite tired, but I may be able to manage a wee tussle.”

“Get off of me,” Ainslie retorted. “I do nae want a *wee tussle* or any kind of tussle with ye.”

When he didn’t budge, Ainslie was suddenly aware of the intimate way their bodies remained. His weight pressed over hers and his face mere inches from hers.

“A lass only comes into a man’s bedchamber for one reason.” His lips curved and she couldn’t look away from the dimples that formed on both cheeks.

Before she could reply his mouth covered hers, moving across her lips with possessiveness. It was as if he branded her as his. He released her wrist, slowly sliding his fingertips down her arm until he reached her breast. The entire time, his mouth claiming, demanding, urging.

It was the first time she'd ever felt so consumed by someone. How was it possible to be so consumed by a kiss? So overwhelmed by a touch? Every part of her wished for him to remain there kissing and touching her.

At his hand squeezing her breast, alarm bells went off in her head and she found the superhuman strength to push him off.

Ainslie jumped from the bed, her chest heaving from a combination of the effort and the fiery desire that coursed through her.

Cynden went onto his back, a look of astonishment on his handsome face. "What are ye doing?" Then his lips curved, and he gave her a sly grin. "Ye wish to be on top?"

He motioned with both hands to the rather enlarged bulge between his legs.

"God no!" Ainslie exclaimed, then ensuring to keep her voice low so as to not alert anyone that he was there. "I wish for ye to leave my bedchamber now."

Pushing himself up to rest on his elbows, he studied her. "This is yer bedchamber?"

It was difficult, but she managed a glare. In truth what she desired more than anything was to return to the bed.

To him.

She narrowed her eyes and clenched her jaw. "How dare ye take such freedoms? Ye are a pig."

To her further annoyance, he chuckled and fell back onto the bed. "I do apologize. I am quite exhausted and did nae realize to have gone into the wrong bedchamber."

"Get out." She pointed to the door.

Finally, he stood. Tall and broad. To her further annoyance, he seemed to fill the space. Now that she knew exactly what he tasted like, how he felt over her, it was hard not to take him in.

Ainslie stared straight into his chest. “Ensure not to make the mistake again.”

With tunic and boots in hand, he closed the distance between them and peered down at her. “I do apologize for my actions.”

Ainslie hated that she had to crane her neck to look up at him. “Apology not accepted.”

For whatever reason, he bent down until there was but a whisper between them. “I would say *ye* took advantage of *me*. I was in a vulnerable position, about to fall asleep.”

“What?” She pressed her hands against his chest intent on shoving him away but he barely budged. “Cynden go. And since it seems impossible for *ye* to understand where to go, *ye* should ask for another chamber.”

He let out a sigh as if bored by the situation. “Are *ye* afraid? If *ye* find it so difficult to stay away from me, then *ye* should be the one to move.”

Not caring to speak to him any longer and half fearful she’d ask him to remain, Ainslie whirled about and stomped to the door. She yanked it open and pointed to the corridor. “Out!”

His eyes grew wide. His mouth fell open. His gaze looked past her.

The man had to be the most arrogant person she’d ever met as he remained rooted to the spot.

“I said get out,” Ainslie repeated.

“Ainslie?” At hearing the voice behind her, her stomach dropped. She turned to find Lady Mariel standing in the doorway, her eyes moving from her to Cynden.

“I came because *ye* left one of *yer* wee baskets in my sitting room,” she said holding up the item. “What happened?”

“He was just leaving,” Ainslie managed to say while motioning to the half-clad infuriating man.

Cynden barked out a laugh. “I came into the wrong bedchamber and lay upon the bed, much to Miss Ainslie’s shock.”

Lady Mariel’s eyes twinkled with mirth. “Oh, dear, I can only imagine.”

“Please come in, Lady Mariel,” Ainslie managed.

While she spoke, Cynden grabbed his scabbard and walked around Lady Mariel. “Again, my apologies Miss Ainslie. I bid ye both a good night.”

“Sleep well,” Lady Mariel said with a wide smile.

Ainslie covered her face with both hands. “I suppose I was quite loud in demanding Mr. Ross leave my bedchamber. I was nae sure what to do upon seeing him in here.”

Lady Mariel looked to the floor where the poker lay. “I see.” She smiled at her. “I am sure it was not all unpleasant. He is quite bonnie, is he not?”

Fire scorched her cheeks. Could the woman tell they’d kissed? “I-I suppose.”

“Do nae fret lass. In the morning ye will find the humor in what has occurred.” Lady Mariel handed her the basket and walked away.

When the door closed, Ainslie turned around and walked to the bed where she fell face-first onto it. When she rolled over her lips curved into a wide grin. Admittedly, being kissed by a handsome half-naked man had been quite enjoyable.

Not that she’d ever admit it to him.

CHAPTER SIX

MEN STOOD IN a circle studying the map Cynden had drawn in the dirt. As he spoke about the terrain and the distances between Ross and MacKinnon lands, they listened intently. It was a matter of life and death after all, not something to be taken lightly.

One warrior, however, was not as attentive. The man slid him several angry glances then walked away, not bothering to make an excuse.

“Who is he?” Cynden asked Ewan, who watched the departing warrior who was headed toward the corrals where the horses were kept.

“Peadar. He’s been part of our guard for a pair of years. Sent here by Laird Macdonald because of trouble between him and several of the other guards. He has yet to fit in. Always angry.”

Cynden pushed thoughts of the man away and continued to instruct the remaining men. The next order of the day was swordplay until the midday meal.

The men separated into two groups, some to archery practice while he went with the warriors. Before he could find a partner, Peadar interceded in his way.

The angry man’s gaze swept over him. “It is obvious the Ross guards on Skye are not able warriors, lest ye would nae require our help.” He lifted his sword as a challenge.

The man was a good swordsman, but soon it became apparent he allowed his emotions free rein and became angry when Cynden had little trouble blocking and evading.

Before long the training became more of a fight and the others stopped practicing to watch.

“It is enough,” Cynden called out, holding his sword up with both hands to block the other man’s swing. Had he not, it would have definitely caused damage.

“Scared?” Peadar bit out, thrusting his blade forward.

This time Cynden sidestepped, took advantage of the man’s momentum and held his blade against Peadar’s throat. “I said enough.”

With a grunt, Peadar pushed away and stalked off.

“I will speak with him,” Ewan said glowering at the man.

“Nay, I will.” Cynden followed Peadar, who headed toward the guard quarters until he caught up to him.

“What do ye want?” Peadar asked, drinking from a wineskin. He looked Cynden over from head to toe. “Ye do nae belong here.”

Cynden set his jaw. “If ye do nae wish to go to Skye and fight, it is not required. The men who go volunteer.”

“And be branded a coward?”

“I do nae think that will happen.”

Peadar’s upper lip curled into a sneer. “What do ye know about the guards here? Ye know nothing. Ye come here and are put in charge, over those of us who have been here longer. It is only because ye are a Ross.”

The reason for the man’s dislike became clear. Cynden shrugged. “I am nae in charge. I am only here to train the men on our terrain and inform on our enemy. My home is on Skye.”

“That is what ye think?” Peadar expelled an annoyed breath. “I was supposed to be given a group of men to lead, but it was taken from me upon yer arrival. Now they answer to ye.”

It did little good to argue with a man whose mind was set, so Cynden decided it was best to not continue the conversation.

“Be with care!” Peadar called out as Cynden walked away. The message was clear.

IT WAS AFTER the midday meal and second training that Cynden finally allowed himself time to rest. Upon learning of a loch behind the keep, he went to find it and go for a swim.

The loch was a ten-minute walk, the shoreline far enough so he could not see the keep. Privacy was also given by trees around the far side of the loch. Cynden pondered about how things were going with his training. The Ross guards on Uist were well-trained men, who took his instructions seriously and practiced based on what they expected to happen on Skye.

His brothers continued to battle, which worried him. Instead of remaining away so long, he considered returning in a fortnight. Although Darach had sent plenty of men to defend Ross lands, one more sword hand was always needed.

After hanging his clothes on a branch, he waded into the cool water and began to swim. The entire time keeping an eye toward the shoreline. It was a habit from always having to be on guard when on Skye.

The water was cold, but refreshing, a balm to his sore muscles. A caress to his heated skin. Immediately his thoughts went to the lass he'd kissed the night before.

Despite her act when she demanded he leave her bedchamber, she'd been more than willing to accept his kisses. The way she'd kissed him back; her plush body arching under his, wanting to be closer, had been enjoyable.

Cynden waded out of the loch and lay on the warmed grass to allow the sun to dry his skin. Eyes closed, he imagined how things could have progressed the night before. Plump lips parted to his tongue's exploration, breasts pressed against his chest, fingers threading through his hair.

Taking himself in hand, stroking the length of his sex as he imagined it was her wetness surrounding it. His hips lifted as each stroke became tighter and faster. What had been loch water was soon replaced by perspiration as he pumped his

hard shaft while picturing a very naked and willing Ainslie riding him.

Heat pooled between his legs as release neared and he continued to stroke until he came, the hot seed trickling over his clenched fist.

For a long moment, he lay spent on the grass, his chest heaving, a stupid grin on his face. If the lass knew what he'd just done, no doubt she'd slap him across the face. For whatever reason, he wanted to tell her—just to see her reaction.

Knowing he could not linger as someone might come upon him—which could even be dangerous if it was that idiot Peadar—he stood and went back into the water to wash off all evidence of the personal moment. Then he waded to the shore and dressed, the clothing clinging to his wet skin.

“Did ye speak to Peadar?” Ewan asked him when Cynden walked into the great room.

“Aye, I did,” Cynden decided to keep the conversation to himself. He didn't know what occurred between the guards and their leaders and preferred to stay out of it. “He and I will never be friends.”

Ewan studied him for a moment, gave a soft nod but didn't say anything.

LAST MEAL WAS to be served and people began entering the great room. There were not as many people that day as usual as Darach had not been present. He and Isobel had gone to visit her sister, Beatrice, and his brother, Duncan, who were married and lived less than half a day's ride away.

Cynden had gone to stand near the entrance, waiting for guards to enter before choosing where to sit, when Ainslie appeared.

Dressed simply in a pale brown skirt and blouse with a darker overcoat, she still got men's attention as she walked into the great hall. Her gaze flickered to him, but then she

pretended not to notice him. Just as she walked past, he touched her forearm.

She lifted her chin to look up at him with a frown. “What is it?”

“I see ye remain cross with me,” he teased. “Can I make it up to ye with a walk in the garden?”

Ainslie looked to him as if he’d gone mad. “A walk?” Her lips parted instantly taking him back to being at the loch. “I would prefer not to.”

“Are ye afraid ye will accost me again?” It was quite enjoyable to tease the lass. She was a fiery one and it was very enticing.

A hiss emanated and she glared up at him. “Very well, I will walk with ye. Do not expect anything more than unpleasant company.” With that, she hurried away to join the laird’s mother at a round table where women sat together most evenings.

He followed her progress, watching the sway of her hips as she hurried away. It would certainly be an interesting walk.

When he sat down at the guards’ table, Peadar was already eating. The man glared at him and then looked toward Ainslie, his gaze lingering. Then he returned to eating paying Cynden no mind. As subtle as the action was, in his gut, Cynden suspected the man would continue to be a problem.

As soon as Cynden noted that Ainslie finished eating, he went to her table. She practically jumped from her seat, hurrying to the entrance. “I must fetch my shawl.”

It was only a scant moment later that she returned wearing the item around her shoulders. She met his gaze, and it was as if time stood still. He was making a mistake by seeking her out. The beautiful lass affected him too much.

The sun was below the horizon as they made their way to the large garden. From what he’d gathered, both Lady Mariel and Lady Isobel enjoyed spending hours tending to the plants.

Flowers of every color and height filled the space. Both from bushes in the ground and spilling over the sides of wooden containers.

When Ainslie bowed to sniff a rather large bloom, Cynden looked on. It was the first time in his life that he'd felt such a strong connection to a woman. Emotions toward her felt odd, it was not comfortable at all.

"Why did ye agree to walk with me?" Cynden asked watching her.

She gave him a pointed look, lips pursed. "I know ye would ask again and again. It is better to get it over with."

Her frankness made him want to chuckle, instead he nodded. "I see. Ye are right, I would have asked again. However, I believe that if ye would have refused the second time, then I would not have persisted."

"I am curious to know why ye sought me out?" Their gazes locked until she turned away.

From her rapid breaths and flushed cheeks, he realized she was as affected by him as he was in her presence. Fortunately, he was better at masking what he felt or thought.

Something told him Ainslie was not the kind of lass a man could only have once. She would leave a lasting impression and he'd be torn when it came time for his departure.

"Ye are beautiful, desirable. I enjoy being near ye."

Her eyes rounded. "Ye are bold. Should nae say such things."

"Come." Cynden took her elbow. "Just a few steps more and ye will see the loch. I went there today and swam. The water was cold, but I did nae mind."

They didn't go as far as the water's edge, but to where Ainslie could enjoy the view of the sunset reflecting on the dark blue water.

“What a wonderful sight,” Ainslie exclaimed pointing to the loch. She stopped, taking it all in whilst the gentle breeze blew loose tendrils away from her face. Cynden wished it was him doing it, but she’d never allow such a touch from him.

“We agree on something.”

She turned to look at him and let out a breath. “Very well. I must admit to enjoying this walk.”

“It pains ye to admit it,” Cynden said placing a finger to the tip of her nose.

Her lips twitched and she looked across to the loch, a wistful look on her face making him wonder what she thought of, or more to the point, who occupied her mind.

“Will ye remain here in Uist or return to Barra?” he asked by way of making conversation.

Her attention still away, she shrugged. “I do nae wish to return anytime soon.”

“I am considering returning to Skye sooner than planned,” he said. “I am needed there more than here.”

“To fight? Why would ye be in a hurry to head into danger?” Her blue gaze darkened. “It is folly.”

For a moment, he almost agreed. “I must. It is my duty. But not only that, my brothers continue battling. I can nae remain here while they fight.”

“It is understandable.” Ainslie walked down the narrow path that led toward the loch. “I overheard there have been few injuries.”

“A battle is dangerous with many opportunities for a fatal blow.” He took her elbow when she stumbled on a fallen branch.

Upon righting herself, she pulled her arm free.

Cynden was not deterred and once again took her arm. “Ye could fall.” They continued a few more steps.

Reluctantly, he removed his hand from her elbow “When we first met, ye mentioned a man, Thomas. Am I to believe we resemble?”

She swallowed visibly. “He is dead.”

Cynden had suspected as much by her reaction when first seeing him. “I look like him?”

For a long moment, she studied his face, her blue-gray gaze taking him in. “I thought so at first, but now, I do not think it as much. He resembled ye and yer cousins. Lady Mariel said...” She turned away. “Never mind.”

“What did she say?” Once again he took her arm. This time he guided her to a small clearing.

She blushed and looked toward the keep. “This has nothing to do with ye, of course—or yer cousins—since ye are all relatives. However, Thomas has an uncanny resemblance to the lot of ye. Lady Mariel told me that the late laird fathered many bairns throughout the isle. That he was a cruel man without scruples.”

The statement made his blood boil “I hope he is rotting in hell.”

“H-he was yer uncle.” Her astonishment was to be expected.

“Everyone in the clan is well aware of his cruel ways. He ruled by fear. No one was sad upon his death.” Cynden realized his tone was harsh, so he softened his voice. “It could be this Thomas of yers was my half-brother then?”

“Brother?” Her head cocked to the side.

Realizing his blunder, he shook his head. “I meant cousin.”

“Oh. Aye, it could be.”

Hoping to distract her, he lifted her chin. “Tell me lass. Did ye really not enjoy our kiss last night?”

A bright pink crept to her cheeks. For a long moment, they locked gazes, her breaths escaping past parted lips as she

looked from his eyes to his mouth. At realizing what she did, her eyes widened, and she stood. “I prefer not to speak of it. Let us forget about what occurred... the kiss I mean.”

“It was more than just a kiss. I do nae think I will be able to forget it. Will ye?” He leaned forward and then did what he’d been thinking about since the night before. What had prompted him to pleasure himself. Thoughts of having her in his arms.

Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her gently, waiting for the rejection that was sure to come.

Instead, Ainslie let out a soft sigh and responded. Her mouth opening when he prodded it with his tongue. It took all his strength to keep from becoming too aggressive as she felt so very perfect. It was as if kissing for the first time, his body responding in an unfamiliar way.

His eyelids fluttered closed as he tasted her, not wanting the kiss to ever end.

When Ainslie’s arms came around his neck, he pulled her closer nibbling on her lips and trailing kisses to the side of her throat.

It was as if someone held a torch much too close, the way his body burned for her, demanding more, needing to be fully nestled inside of her. Heated blood coursed through his veins, pooling between his legs, his staff hardening.

Her soft moan brought him out of his revelry, and he let out a breath against her mouth. “Ye are perfect.”

“We should not.” She pushed away albeit with little force and remained in the circle of his arms. “Why do ye insist on kissing me?”

When she lifted her gaze to his, Cynden could delve into the beautiful stormy pools and not care to ever surface. “I find ye irresistible.”

For a moment it was as if time stopped as they looked into each other’s eyes without speaking. A bond of sorts was

forming that he should put a stop to. He had to return to Skye and nothing—not even the perfect woman in his embrace—could keep him from it.

Ainslie pushed from him, letting out a long breath. He could not peel his gaze from her kiss-swollen lips.

“I do not know what I was thinking in agreeing to walk with ye. It is a mistake.”

“Ye feel the same way I do,” Cynden replied. “Find it hard to keep from me. Sense me when I walk into a room. Yer heartbeat quickens when our gazes meet.”

She scanned the surroundings. “I do nae know what I feel.” Her tone was not convincing in the least. It was almost as if she tried to figure out if what he said was true.

“Ainslie,” Cynden began. “I am truly glad to have met ye.”

When she walked away toward the keep. He did not follow. It was best not to. His body was on fire and the only sure way to quell it would be to take the woman fully.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AS SOON AS Ainslie stepped into the keep, she let out a long breath and leaned back onto the cold stone wall. Why had she allowed Cynden to kiss her? Of all the stupid things she'd ever done, kissing him both times had to top the list.

Something had to be done. The unfamiliar sensations that filled her were alarming. The fact that she'd lost control, been unable to think, much less stop it from occurring was something that had never happened to her before. Even then, although no longer near him, her body hummed with awareness like never before. She'd loved Thomas, and they had kissed, but not once had her body come to life like it did whenever Cynden's mouth covered hers.

Pressing against his body only made the urges stronger, a deep guttural desire that could drive one to madness had arisen. What he said was true, she did seem to sense his presence and her heartbeat thundered when he was near. Even then while considering what had just occurred, it thudded against her breast.

She pushed her hair back away from her face. Could she speak to someone? Perhaps Isobel would understand and tell her what to do to avoid any future interactions with Cynden. Though just the thought of never kissing him again made her want to weep.

"Ye give yerself freely to a man ye barely know." The male's voice permeated through the dimness of the corridor, and Ainslie whirled around to find a warrior blocking the corridor.

She didn't know him and had only caught glances of him during meals. Even then, they'd never crossed paths or spoken to one another. The few times she'd seen him, he'd had an

unpleasant disposition. He was a large man, broader and taller than Cynden.

“Ye should give me a turn.” He took a step closer.

Fully aware that unless Cynden walked through the doorway, she was trapped. Ainslie took a step backward. “I am a guest of the laird. Go away from me sir.”

Instead, he moved closer and shrugged. The curve of his lips was more menacing than when he didn’t smile. “I will take my turn. He is a nobody. Came here to take a place that is nae his.”

“I do not know what ye speak of. If ye do not allow me to pass, I will scream.” Ainslie hated that her voice shook with fright. Only a moment ago, she felt light and wistful, now fear constricted her chest. She tried to look past him, but he obstructed her view.

The man was large with wide shoulders and the thick build of a warrior. His straight dark hair that hung in an unruly mess almost to his shoulders looked unwashed and oily.

“Come now lass. Give me my fair share.” He closed the distance until she could feel the heat emanating from his body, his breath fanning over her face.

“Leave me be,” Ainslie screamed. “Help!” she yelled even louder.

Her scream had the desired effect, he took a step backward and glowered at her. “Next time ye will nae be able to yell for help.” He turned on his heel and stalked away.

It was not the first time she’d had to fend off a man. However, something about this man frightened her. He’d acted as if she’d slighted him for some reason. Not once since she’d arrived had he paid her any mind before. Why now?

Swallowing past her dry throat, Ainslie hurried to find the laird’s wife. With warrior brothers, she knew the best way to put a stop to their misconduct was to approach it through the woman that had the ear of the laird. In this case, Isobel.

“What happens?” Isobel asked upon her approaching. It occurred to Ainslie that she must have looked upset because the woman hurried to her and pulled her to sit.

“I was just accosted by a guard. He scared me.” Ainslie felt somewhat childish complaining about it. “Normally I would have dealt with it myself. But something about this man terrified me.”

Isobel’s expression hardened. “If a man is interested in a woman, he should never frighten her. Who is it?” She’d began searching the room even before Ainslie told her.

“I do nae know his name. Tall, with dark hair.” She turned to look about the room, but he was nowhere to be found. “He is nae here.”

Isobel stood and motioned to her. “Come, Ainslie. Let us find this man and inform him his advances are nae welcome.”

The woman sitting with Isobel was her younger sister, Beatrice Ross. Unlike her serious sister, Beatrice was a petite vibrant blonde with a sunny personality. “We should ask first if she is interested in him. It will help how we approach.”

“I am nae interested in that man,” Ainslie clarified. “He is an oaf.”

“Good,” Isobel said, leading them to the back of the great room, past the kitchen, and outside near the practice fields where men stood around fires to keep the chill at bay.

From a short distance, they waited for her to find him. “He is that one.” She pointed to the man, who stood silently watching the others. When he noticed her, his eyes narrowed. Then to her astonishment, he lifted his crossbow and pointed it at Cynden, who stood nearby, speaking with several men.

The message was clear. If she caused trouble for him, he would injure or worse kill Cynden.

“Or perhaps I am mistaken,” she quickly added, stopping Isobel in her tracks. “I am confused.”

Beatrice gave her a quizzical look, her intelligent gaze moving from her to where the warrior stood still glaring toward them. “If he or any guard purposely frightens ye, do nae allow them to sway ye from it.”

“Come,” Isobel said taking her arm. “Let us speak with the leader of the guardsmen.

Before she could come up with an excuse she was practically dragged to the group of men where Cynden was. If only she’d kept quiet, the embarrassing situation would not become common knowledge.

“Ian, a word,” Isobel said to a tall handsome blond man.

“Of course, my lady.” The man’s deep voice matched his impressive height and build. “What happens?”

Unfortunately, the other two men did not leave, one being Ewan, the other Cynden. Ainslie avoided looking at any of them directly.

“One of the guardsmen accosted my guest in the corridor and frightened her. I would hope that ye would speak to them and make them aware that no woman inside these walls is to be approached in that manner.”

“Who was it?” Cynden asked, his gaze boring into her. “Tell me.”

Ainslie wanted the ground to open up and swallow her alive. “It was dim. I could nae see clearly enough to be certain.”

To her astonishment, Cynden turned to look in the direction of where the man who’d scared her had been standing. He was gone now. “Are ye sure?”

Ainslie nodded, unable to keep from blinking away tears. It was the worst time to cry and yet tears managed to slip down her cheeks. “I wish to go to my chamber,” she said to no one in particular.

“I will escort her inside,” Cynden said taking her arm, not allowing for argument. “Ye should not be walking about alone

after dark,” he admonished. “There are many men about.”

She whirled to face him. “That I move about these walls as I please is not an invitation for a man to accost me. I refuse to do things differently because men cannot control their impulses.” With that, she snatched her arm away and turned to the amused Beatrice, who’d caught up.

“Well said,” the tiny blonde said. “Men can be dimwitted.” She glanced at Cynden. “Not ye, of course.”

Cynden shook his head. “Ye are right. Men should never take unwelcome liberties.” Their gazes clashed and once again the yearning filled her.

Ainslie smiled at Beatrice. “Thank ye. I best go rest.”

To her chagrin, Cynden continued to walk beside her silently. He waited until they arrived at the second floor before speaking. “Ensure to bolt yer door.”

“Be with care,” Ainslie said, wanting to warn him, but unsure of how he would react to knowing who the man was that had tried to take liberties.

His forest green and gold gaze met hers for a lingering moment. “Ye should tell me who it is. How else can we defend ye?”

“I am sure he will nae do it again,” Ainslie replied pushing the door to her bedchamber open. She peered inside, just to be sure no one was about.

“Allow me to check,” Cynden said pushing past her, his shoulder brushing against her as he passed.

While he walked around the room, first peering behind the screen, then to the side of the wardrobe until finally kneeling and looking under the bed. He straightened and gave her a soft smile. “Ye are safe in here. If anything scares ye, pound on the wall. I will come immediately.”

The offer settled her frazzled nerves. “I will. Thank ye.”

He moved to go past her and hesitated. “If ye feel I overstepped, let me know.”

Ainslie shook her head and looked up into his gaze. “Ye did nae. It was both of us that wished for it.”

It was then she made the third biggest mistake of her life, she pushed him into the bedchamber and closed the door behind them.

THIS WAS CERTAINLY unexpected, Cynden slid a cursory look about the bedchamber before closing the distance between them and sweeping Ainslie into his arms.

Just as he was about to press his lips to hers, she placed a hand over his mouth.

“Nae.” Her tone was firm, so he immediately moved back.

“What is it?” he asked, hoping she’d invite him to spend the night. She’d want it to be discreet and for him to ensure that no one would find out. He’d agree to jump from the window as long as she let him stay.

“Ye are in danger.” Ainslie pointed a finger at the center of his chest. “Ye must be with great care.”

Not exactly a romantic start.

“From whom?” He took a step closer. “Ye?”

This time she pushed him away with both hands. “I am serious. That man. The one who accosted me. He hates ye.”

That another dared to touch her immediately stopped any thought of more than finding out who the bastard was. “Who is he?”

She shook her head. “I do nae know his name. He was out there in the field. Watching ye.”

There were many out in the field just now, but he had a good idea of who it was. “Why do ye think I am in danger?”

“When I walked out with Lady Isobel, he saw me and then pointed his crossbow at ye.” Her expression hardened. “He

said ye came and took what was his. I believe he must have seen us earlier.”

“I will speak with him. Do nae worry. He is an idiot, but nae more.”

Seeming relieved, she went to the door. “Ye should go before someone sees ye here.”

“Ye wish to be rid of me so soon?” He met her gaze enjoying that her lips parted as she considered his words.

But when she squared her shoulders, it was obvious his time there had ended. “Please go. I do not trust what would happen if ye remain.”

At the door, he paused and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. “Do nae worry.”

HOPING NOT TO get caught, Peadar remained in the shadows at the end of the corridor. Guardsmen like him were not allowed on the second floor where the family and their guests slept. Unless guarding or escorting, he’d never been given the luxury.

Light spilled out when a door opened, the woman, Ainslie, framed in it. She spoke in soft tones to someone. Moments later, Cynden appeared. He kissed her forehead and whispered something.

Interesting that they parted ways with such a benign kiss after what he’d spied earlier. If anything he’d thought the man would stay until morning. Ainslie was still dressed as earlier, which meant nothing more than a conversation had occurred.

She’d warned him. That had to be the only explanation.

It wouldn’t stop him. There were ways to cause harm without anyone ever suspecting the culprit.

Peadar shrank further into the corner when Cynden paused and looked around. The warrior’s instincts were well honed. Impressive.

Once the door closed, Peadar crept past and hurried down the stairs.

“What are ye doing?” Ewan asked as he took the last step onto the first floor. “Were ye upstairs?” The archer looked up as if there would be something amiss.

“I was.” It was best to tell the truth, then add a distraction. “I was asked to bring a heavy trunk up. Had forgotten about it until just now.”

Peadar prayed the warrior didn't ask who asked because he didn't have a reply. He quickly brought up a different subject. “When will I be given my own team of men?”

The warrior shrugged. “That is up to Ian, not me. Did ye not get an answer from him?”

“Nae. When yer cousin arrived and began with the training, the men were told to follow his lead.”

“Then it is temporary. I am sure,” Ewan replied and looked to the doorway. “Ye best seek yer bed.”

Dismissed, he hurried out. The lack of care from Ewan that he'd been slighted added fuel to the fury that blazed within.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LAIRD MOTIONED for Cynden to walk with him as they went out to the courtyard. The man was imposing but had a gift for putting those around him at ease. Several times, clan's people stopped Darach to ask questions and he replied with patience, seeming to know them all by name.

Cynden had instantly admired and liked him since they first met. That Darach was his half-brother made him both proud and uncomfortable. When he was with either Ewan or Darach, it felt as if the truth would spill from his lips of its own free will.

“I am impressed with what ye’re teaching the men. It has been mentioned to me that since ye arrived, they learn more than enough to feel competent in the battlefield when on Skye.”

Cynden’s chest filled with pride. “I am glad to hear it. Ye have done so much for us. I want to ensure everyone returns home to their families.”

“Aye, that is the hope for every battle.” Darach slid a look to him. “Mother is amazed at how much we resemble each other. Ye remind me of myself ten years ago.”

“Ye are not that much older than me. I am nine and twenty. How old are ye?”

“Five and thirty,” Darach chuckled. “Yer elder.”

They both chuckled.

“One of the guardsmen, Peadar, is nae too glad that I am here. Claims I took his men. That he was to be assigned leadership until I arrived.”

The laird shook his head. “Peadar is an excellent warrior but nae a good leader. He allows his emotions free rein. I want

to repay his bravery in the battlefield, but nae by giving him men to mistreat.”

“Has he been told this? The warrior is under the impression he was promised.”

They came to the edge of the practice field and the laird took it all in. “I will ensure Ian comes up with something satisfactory. It is hard to explain to a man, he would nae be a good leader.”

Heading for archery practice first, Cynden made his way to where the archers gathered to hear the plans for the day.

The leader of the archers, Ewan spoke in a firm tone as he assigned the men their tasks. Peadar would be practicing with the swordsmen, but Cynden did not see him over where their leader, Ian, assigned tasks.

Cynden thought about Knox, who was a force to be reckoned with when he had a sword in hand. His friend was to arrive soon to inform him of what happened back home. He hoped to return with him back to Skye soon.

After several rounds of archery practice, that not only proved why the Ross archers were a united deadly force but also why he was a swordsman, Cynden accepted the good-natured ribbing from the others.

Peadar practiced against another warrior who was obviously his superior in skill. With a primal scream, Peadar charged his opponent, who sliced across not only blocking the charge but sending Peadar’s sword to the ground.

Not ready to give up, Peadar threw himself against the other man, his fists swinging. Unfortunately, it was obvious his opponent was seasoned and used the hilt of his sword to hit Peadar on the side of his head. Peadar stumbled backward, dazed from the hit.

“Enough,” Ian stood between them holding his sword in Peadar’s direction.

“With me now.” Ian motioned to Peadar.

It was hard not to feel satisfaction watching a sullen Peadar following behind the warrior, who stormed to the side of the practice field.

Seemingly used to Peadar's outbursts, the other men continued practicing. Some stopped to walk to the well, not paying any heed to what happened.

He understood why Peadar would never lead a team. Why did the man seem to think he would be a good leader?

CYNDEN FINISHED HIS tasks, helping to set up new targets for the archers and exercising the horses by taking them for a canter to the village and back. The rumbling of his stomach insisted it was time to eat when he finished brushing down the last horse. He quickly went about the task of ensuring the steeds feed was refilled and there was plenty of water before hurrying to the main house.

As he walked toward the door near the kitchens, a maid came from the vegetable garden.

“Are ye looking for something?” She was a pretty lass, with bright green eyes and a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. “Perhaps I can fetch it for ye?”

She held out a plump pear. “They are sweet, ye should have it.”

Cynden accepted the fruit. “Thank ye.”

The lass was not ready to end the conversation. “Are ye to remain here for long?”

It occurred to him, he'd not informed Darach of his desire to depart sooner than had originally been planned.

“Nay. I will leave soon.”

A frown formed between her brows. “So soon? It saddens me to hear it.” She gave him a flirty smile. “I am called Bettina.”

By the way her gaze blatantly traveled down his body, she expected to be noticed and perhaps called upon to warm his

bed. The kisses with Ainslie had set his body yearning for intimacy. And although the lass offered, he could not bring himself to accept.

“Bettina,” he repeated and smiled down at the lass. “I am Cynden.”

Just then movement caught his eye, and he noted Ainslie walking across the courtyard toward them. Had she spied him yet? Surely she had. Although, at the moment her gaze was trained on the front gates.

“Thank ye,” Cynden repeated to the lass and turned toward Ainslie who began to walk faster. She came to where he was, rounded him, and continued into the house.

“Ainslie,” he followed her inside.

“It is time for the midday meal,” she replied over her shoulder, not slowing. “Ye should go in search of yer table.”

He wanted to laugh. She was jealous. He caught up to her. “Would ye share this pear with me?”

She glanced down at the fruit in his hand. “Nay. It looks dirty.”

“I will wash it first,” he offered. “Will ye eat with me?”

“Ye have a place at the guards’ table,” she replied. “I do nae.”

The great room was not filled yet, only a few were gathered at a pair of tables. The laird had not arrived to sit on the high board.

“We have our choice of where to sit,” he insisted. “Ye can tell me why yer cross.”

Ainslie stopped walking and turned to face him. “Why would I be angry with ye?”

“Perhaps not cross, but jealous?” He loved it when her stormy eyes narrowed, her full lips pressed into a hard line.

“Ye are an arrogant man. I am nae jealous of anyone.”

“The lass, she gave me a pear and a very fetching smile.” Cynden was enjoying the banter too much to stop. The coloring of her cheeks made him want to throw her over his shoulder and take her to his bedchamber.

Ainslie huffed. “If she is so fetching, perhaps ye should go find her and ask for more pears.” She waved in the direction they’d come. “Go on then.”

“I prefer to stay with ye.”

“Ye are nae going to sit with me.” To make a point, she turned away and walked to the round table where she usually took her meals. Her eyes widened when he lowered into a chair next to hers. “Ye cannot eat here.”

“I’ve seen men sit here before.”

“Husbands or betrothed aye, but ye are neither.”

“I can be,” he grinned at her. The joviality disappeared when he realized what he’d said.

Unfortunately, Ainslie was quick and pounced at his blunder. “Are ye asking me to marry ye, Cynden Ross?” She leaned forward with a mischievous smirk. “Should I inform Lady Isobel of the development? That there is to be a wedding.”

“That is not what I meant.”

It was her turn to have fun at his expense. “Ye eluded to it. That ye would be a betrothed by sitting with me. Ye cannot go back on yer word, sir.”

He gave her a bland look. “I will sit here.”

“Ye are welcome to,” Lady Mariel neared giving him a knowing look. “As ye seem to be quite fond of each other, it would be lovely for ye to accompany Ainslie for the midday meal.”

This time they both were struck speechless. The woman had probably overheard some of their banter. It felt as if he’d swallowed a boulder.

Moments later, Lady Isobel, her sister, Beatrice, and another woman came to sit. No one seemed to think it odd that he was there. It seemed it was only Cynden who was uncomfortable. The conversation flowed easily around him, several times his opinions were even asked.

“I am glad ye came here,” Isobel stated. “My husband tells me the men are safer because of yer training. It makes me feel better about our men going to Skye.”

Her sister let out a soft huff. “I would like it better if they got rid of those pesky MacKinnon’s once and for all.”

“I agree,” Lady Mariel added. “That the son is no better than his cruel addle-headed father is sad. I feel bad for their clan’s people.”

The women began discussing past battles and what had occurred. It was intriguing how well-informed they were, and he was astonished to hear their take on how future issues should be dealt with.

As soon as he finished his meal, he excused himself and hurried from the table, almost colliding with Darach. The man looked to where he’d been sitting. “Ye look terrified.”

“I am not sure why I sat there,” Cynden admitted.

“An interesting lot are they not?”

“I must admit to being astonished at how aware they are about battles and some of their ideas were good.”

Darach nodded, his gaze warming when looking toward his wife. “I often consult with Isobel. Her insights are good, perhaps it is because women see things differently than we do. Care more about the casualties of battle, the wives and bairns.”

“Do ye have a moment?” Cynden asked.

They walked to Darach’s study, and the laird poured whiskey for them. “Is something on yer mind?”

“I should return to Skye. The battles continue and I do nae wish to be away for so long.”

Darach considered his words. “Ye have nae heard from them saying ye should return. Yer laird ordered ye to remain for a season. Ye should obey it. I am sure if ye were needed, he would send for ye.”

How could he stay? The longer he was there, the more he wanted to tell them the truth about who he was. There was also the matter of his growing attraction to Ainslie.

“My brother is overly protective.”

The laird laughed. “Ye sound like Gideon. To this day, he feels coddled. Admittedly, I do have a contingency go to where he lives regularly to ensure all is well. I do so for my brother Stuart as well. It is hard not to protect the younger ones.”

THE NEXT DAY was a repeat of the same. After an hour of swordplay, Cynden was drenched in sweat. The men there were excellent fighters, and he was learning a great deal. After the midday meal, he was to teach more on terrain and fighting on the windy hills of Skye.

Instead of heading to the great room to eat, he hurried to the kitchen and found Bettina, who gladly wrapped up some bread, meat, and cheese for him. With his meal in hand, he walked toward the loch.

The cold water was just what he needed to soothe his body from the strenuous practice. He didn't linger in the water, as he was quite hungry. After pulling on his trows, he sat on the grass to eat whilst admiring the view before him. Birds entertained him when they landed lightly near the shore to sip water, their loud chirps filling the air.

His eyelids became heavy and Cynden decided to rest for a bit. First, he'd do what the little birds did and take his fill from the loch. When he stood and stretched there was a strange shift in the wind. The birds flew away. He followed their trek then he cringed and looked down to see the tip of an arrow protruding through his left side. He ducked, but not before the second arrow struck.

CHAPTER NINE

“**H**AVE YE SEEN Cynden?” Isobel asked from the parlor door. Her gaze taking in the room.

Why did everyone assume she would keep track of the man? Something had to be done so they were not thought of as a couple. It was much too soon to consider any kind of relationship. Ainslie looked up from her journal. “I have nae seen him since earlier.”

Isobel neared the windows and peered out looking toward the inlet. “He was not at the midday meal, nor at the practice field for afternoon training. Someone asked me if I’d seen him.

Ainslie hated the thought, but she spoke anyway. “Yesterday, I saw him talking with the kitchen maid. The one with the freckles. They seemed quite friendly, perhaps...”

“I will ask her, would ye come with me?” Isobel walked to the door, not giving her an opportunity to decline.

Together they went to the kitchen, the young maid looking up from chopping vegetables upon their entrance.

“Bettina, have ye seen Mister Cynden Ross?”

The girl blushed. “Aye, I have. He came to get food. Said he was going for a swim at the loch.”

“When was this?” Ainslie asked, unsure why but suddenly an eerie feeling filled her.

“Before the midday meal,” Bettina replied. “He went alone,” she added.

Isobel thanked the maid and together they walked outside. “I will inform Ian.”

A guard came when she motioned, and Isobel asked that he fetch one of the leaders.

Moments later Ian hurried to them. Isobel informed him of what Bettina had said and soon several guards went toward the loch.

“He may have fallen asleep. It is a nice day,” Isobel said looking up at the sky. “He will be embarrassed when the men show up.” Her lips curved.

Ainslie wanted to join in the joviality, but she could not shake the ominous sensation that something was amiss.

Even after Isobel went back inside, Ainslie lingered outside. She kept looking to where the men had gone. It was a bit later that several guards rushed to get a horse and cart. Time passed excruciatingly slow until the wagon with several guards crouched over a prone body came into view. Ainslie had to clutch a nearby fence to keep from collapsing. She was sure, Cynden was dead.

“SEND FOR THE healer!” someone called out and men on horseback galloped through the gates.

The laird and a group of others emerged from the house, circling the men who lowered a bloody tartan with Cynden nestled in it.

Pushing past her fear, she walked closer to the group that carried the injured Cynden inside. They continued past the great room to the back, where she assumed the healer would care for him.

Only the laird, Ian, and those who carried him went into the room, Ainslie lingered for a bit, unsure what to do.

“He is alive, that is what counts,” Lady Mariel said in a low whisper. “I must go pray.” She turned and hurried away in the direction of the chapel, a group of women behind her.

A moment later, a furious Darach Ross stormed from the small room. His voice boomed. “I want the entire guard force in the courtyard now.”

The men who’d carried Cynden into the room walked out and followed the laird, leaving only her at the doorway. She

wanted to go inside—to ensure he breathed—but her feet refused to move past the threshold.

From where she stood, Ainslie caught a glimpse of him upon a narrow bed, his breathing seeming shallow, his face devoid of color.

It was as if she fell into a frozen lake, unable to breathe or move, every sensation gone.

“Aside my lady,” a woman ordered as she hurried into the room with a pot of hot water and two maids in her wake, including Bettina.

She recognized the woman, it was the cook.

With quick efficiency, they cleaned the wounds, careful not to jostle him. It was only then that Ainslie realized they’d kept him on his side because there were arrows protruding from his body. One on his lower left side. A second just below the left shoulder.

The room swayed and she fell sideways against the wall. How could anyone survive such injuries?

She turned to look toward the front entrance. The healer had to hurry.

It seemed like an eternity later that the healer, a tall attractive man, finally arrived. The man barely paid her any heed as he walked into the room and began giving the women orders.

“I will require a pair of men to help hold him in place,” the healer called out, and a woman raced from the room.

Just then Cynden came to and by the sound of his moans, he was in a great deal of pain. The men who were summoned arrived, and the door was firmly shut behind.

Her heart shattered at hearing Cynden’s screams when she assumed the arrows were pushed through. Then it was silent. He was so pale and had probably bled a great deal. Would he have the strength to recover?

Her head near the door, she strained to hear, but all she could make out was the healer's voice instructing the others what to do. When the kitchen maids hurried out to fetch more water, she peered inside.

Blood pooled on the floor, and Cynden's skin had turned a sallow shade of gray. Before she could step inside, the healer ordered the guards to leave and to close the door once again behind them.

She attempted to reach for the door, but her hand stopped just a scant distance from it. Ainslie clenched her fist, unable to force herself to open the door. Fear gripped her by the throat until she was sure to pass out.

Barely able to breathe, she rushed away, hurrying up the stairs and into her bedchamber. Inside the confines of the room, she gulped in air and closed her eyes. Here she was safe from everything. It was best not to know what occurred downstairs.

Suddenly, a strange calmness filled her, a shift of sorts made it easier to breathe. It was inevitable that Cynden would die. Fate was a horrible creature, teasing her with love only to snatch it away once again. She walked to the window and peered up at the sky, not wanting to look down in case the servants went to the well for more water, and she be jolted back to the present.

What happened didn't matter. She would continue on pretending nothing happened. If only madness would claim her.

A long time passed, and she remained in the comfortable silence of the bedchamber.

At knocks on the door, she called out for whomever it was to enter. She prayed they'd not come with any news. She already knew the outcome.

Isobel walked in. "Ye've not eaten, would ye like something?"

That the woman took time to check on her was kind. “I am not hungry. I will eat at last meal.”

Isobel looked past her into the room. “No news yet.”

“All will be well,” Ainslie replied in a light tone that earned her a curious look. “I am sure yer healer is excellent.”

“He is,” Isobel said, her words holding a tone of question. “How do ye feel?”

“A bit tired. I am going to lie down for a little while.” She smiled at Isobel.

The laird’s wife nodded, though she seemed unconvinced. “Very well.”

When the door closed, Ainslie did just that, went to the bed and climbed atop it. Sleep would be a welcome reprieve from reality. However, her traitorous mind refused to allow it. Pictures of Cynden’s lifeless form, blood dripping into a dark pool, the unmistakable smell of death.

With a groan of annoyance, she turned to face the wall and pulled the bedding over her head. In soft tones, she sang a childhood song. Escape had to come.

THE GREAT HALL was full when she walked down to last meal. Thankfully, Isobel and Lady Mariel saved her a seat at their table. Ainsley avoided looking at anyone as she walked to sit. Not searching for the healer or any of the Ross brothers who could give away anything by their expressions.

There was music, which made it seem as if all was well. Since she’d never lived at a laird’s keep she wasn’t sure if it was tradition to play music when someone lay dying in one of the bedchambers.

Lowering to the chair, she smiled at Isobel. “I feel much more rested. However, I am famished.”

Isobel and Lady Mariel exchanged curious looks.

“There is plenty of food. Cook has outdone herself today,” Lady Mariel stated, looking from her to the other women at

the table. "I am especially partial to parsnips."

The conversation about how best to cook parsnips started and Ainsley interjected with her own cook's recipe back at her home in Barra.

"Have ye heard how the young man fares?" an older woman asked, her worried expression and saddened face turning to Lady Mariel.

The laird's mother smiled warmly at the woman. "The healer is astonished at Cynden's quick recovery. He is sitting up and has eaten. It seems the arrows did not pierce through any dangerous places. Still weak from the injuries, he must remain abed. He remains suffering a great deal of pain."

She directed her next statement at Ainslie. "I am sure he would welcome company."

The woman who'd asked smiled warmly. "It is good to hear he will recover."

Instantly, the boulder of worry lifted from Ainslie's shoulders, and she let out a breath. "He will recover. Are ye sure?"

"Nothing is sure, lass," Lady Mariel stated. "However, the healer believes Cynden is strong and should be well once his wounds heal."

Isobel shook her head. "Now to find who the culprit is."

It had to be the man who'd accosted her. Of that, Ainslie had no doubt. However, the only person she'd told about the man pointing his crossbow was Cynden. She bit her bottom lip, unsure if she should say something. It could be, that like Cynden said, the man was only trying to intimidate her.

"I saw something," Ainslie blurted out before she lost her nerve. "The man who accosted me was out in the field when we walked out yesterday. I lied and said I was nae sure after I pointed him out because he scared me by pointing his crossbow at Cynden."

“Which one was it?” Isobel and Lady Mariel asked at once.

Isobel leaned forward and whispered. “Do ye see him in here?”

Ever so slowly, Ainsley looked around the room hesitating at the tables where the guards sat. Finally, she spotted him. He sat with his back to a corner, his gaze on the high board. In Ainslie’s opinion, he was watching to see if there was any news about Cynden.

It had to be him who shot him and was hoping to hear he died. The man had to be stopped or he could try again.

“He is sitting at the guard table closest to the entrance. The one wearing the leather strap across his chest.”

Lady Mariel held up a hand. “Do not look Isobel. I will stand and walk toward the high board to get a good look. Resume eating and talking as if nothing is amiss.”

The food in front of her had lost all appeal, but Ainslie continued to nibble on the parsnips and meat. She listened as Isobel spoke. She followed Lady Mariel’s progress, not daring to look toward where the man she’d just accused sat.

Moments later, Lady Mariel returned and brought with her a plate of pear tarts. “Darach handed these to me to distract from the real reason I walked there. The others sitting there are none-too-pleased to have lost their treat.”

Isobel giggled, looking toward the high board. “Darach must feel the same, he adores sweets.”

When the meal was ending, Ian ordered the entire contingency of guards to wait in the courtyard. Ainslie’s heart thundered at seeing the man with the leather strap walk out with the others.

“Who is he?” she asked.

“Peadar Brown,” Isobel responded. “From what I hear he has a vile temper. It is good that we did nae let on about what ye saw.”

Ainslie wasn't too sure if she was safe or not. Hopefully, they'd find a way to determine it was him who shot Cynden without her being brought forward to speak.

"I wish to see what is happening. Let us go upstairs to my balcony," Isobel said standing. "I hope they do discover who did it, whether Peadar or not. It will be hard for everyone to be at ease knowing there is a threat from within."



THE BASTARD WAS alive. Peadar wanted to find him and finish what he'd started. If not for the fear of being caught, he would have gone closer and shot a final arrow into his heart. He was sure Cynden had not seen him, no one had. There would be questions, and some would suspect him, but it was impossible to prove anything. He'd taken arrows from the training area, purposefully using different ones. There was absolutely no way to prove who'd shot Cynden.

The meal was abruptly called to an end, and the entire guard force was ordered into the courtyard. Peadar lingered finishing as much as he could. There was no way to know how long before he'd be able to enjoy another meal.

Upon exiting, it struck him how large the keep's force was. Shoulder to shoulder, warriors and archers were lined up waiting to hear what their laird would say.

His stomach dipped, but he pushed back any feelings of dread replacing them with hatred. How he hated those who considered themselves higher and more important than him.

With his back to the entrance, the laird stood with a wide stance, his arms relaxed at his side. When he lifted his right hand, everyone quieted. The silence seemed to travel to the other people in the courtyard, who instantly became interested in what would happen next.

"As some of ye may know, someone tried to kill my cousin, Cynden, this afternoon. Fortunately, he will recover."

So the man would live. Peadar looked to the doorway, he had to do something. Although he doubted Cynden had seen

him, there was always the possibility.

Beside the laird, Ian's head moved as his gaze traveled across the faces gathered.

The laird nostrils flared, and his eyes narrowed in Peadar's direction. "The leaders will be speaking to each of ye. Remain here until ye are released by either Ewan, Ian or myself. Everyone but those atop the wall are not to leave this courtyard."

The men began to grumble, Darach held up a hand again. "There is someone in our midst that attempted to kill another member of our clan. I will find out who and he will be dealt with."

This time the blood in his veins went cold and Peadar considered how fast he could get to his horse. He waited until the archers moved forward to line up and he moved back behind the warriors. If he tried to escape, it would be admitted guilt. He had to remain calm.

"Peadar, line up with the archers!" Ian called out, motioning for him to come forward.

After a nonchalant shrug, Peadar went where told. The first ones to be questioned would be the archers. He was not an archer, but he did use a crossbow. Usually, he fought with a sword, the crossbow was more of a hobby. However, that he was told to line up with the archers was worrisome.

Finally, he was called into the great room that was now devoid of visitors. At the high board Darach, Ian, Ewan, and a pair of village councilmen sat. He walked in and stood before them. Although his heart pounded, Peadar ensured not to show any emotion.

"Where were ye before midday meal?"

"I went to my quarters. I sat with Fergus and Bruce for a wee while, ye can ask them."

The laird studied him. "Did ye go anywhere before or after?"

“Nae, I took a wee nap. I was up late last night.”

“Did ye shoot my cousin?” Darach asked, his hazel gaze pinning him. Like most, Peadar was intimidated by the man. It was as if the huge man had no soul when he stared into someone’s eyes.

Peadar cleared his throat. “Of course not. I have no qualms with him.”

Silence stretched, making him uncomfortable.

“Besides he is to leave. There is no reason for me to wish him dead.”

The laird lifted his chin. “I may ask him to remain and help with leadership of the warriors.”

“Just because he is yer cousin does nae make him a good leader,” Peadar uttered. “I have served ye faithfully for much longer and have yet to be rewarded.”

“He is a natural leader. Ye are a good warrior; however, ye should know that not everyone is meant for leadership.”

Peadar fought against the fury that erupted. “May I go?”

“Yer temper is yer worst adversary,” Ian told him. “Remain in the courtyard.”

Peadar stormed from the house. The leadership was to be given to Cynden. It was what he’d been working so hard to achieve. There had to be something he could do to prove himself.

By the time Peadar was out in the courtyard, fury coursed through him like a river of fire. There was no place to be alone, the entire guard was assembled waiting to be addressed by the laird. Strangely, they were not spoken to privately like he and the archers were. Instead, they were brought in groups of three or four.

Peadar lingered along the side wall, the entire time his gaze going toward the entrance. It would be impossible to gain access to the room where Cynden was without being caught.

“Where is he?” Peadar asked an archer who seemed on the brink of falling asleep.

The man’s head jerked up. “The chamber beside the stairs.”

Finally, something went his way.

When Ian walked out, everyone looked up. “Those of ye who were gone from the keep all day and just returned stand.”

Several men stood.

“Go take the place of a wall guard and have them come inside,” Ian instructed.

The men who remained looked to one another waiting for the next instructions.

The laird’s brother Ewan emerged and stood with Ian, he scanned the men. “Those who I motion to may leave.” One by one, he chose men, who walked away, without expressions. Peadar recognized that most of them had served the laird for years and he trusted implicitly. By the time Ewan was done, only about twenty men remained.

It felt as if a belt was tightening around his chest and Peadar didn’t like it one bit especially when Darach walked out and looked to see who was left.

“Laird, it is not fair that yer guard be accused,” one of the warriors stated.

“We are loyal to ye and have fought in battle risking our lives,” another said.

A third man, a warrior asked. “Why would any one of us try to kill yer cousin?”

The laird let out a breath. “I am indebted to each of ye for what ye do. If ye are not an archer ye can go.” He waited as more men left, most of them still seeming unhappy to have been retained.

Relieved Peadar walked toward his quarters only to stop when Ian called his name. “Remain here for now. Ye do use a

bow.”

Only six men remained including Peadar. As those left were unhappy, Peadar was glad not to keep up the appearance of being unaffected. The bastard lying in the room was supposed to have died. Not only was him not dying an inconvenience, but the fact Peadar had to go through the humiliation of being one of the last released.

Ian walked to each of the archers and asked them their whereabouts. As he spoke to them one by one were sent away, leaving only Peadar and one other man.

The last archer who remained was a young man called John, who'd recently arrived. Not much was known about him except that he'd shown up asking to join the guard. When Ian walked up to him, John turned bright red and seemed on the brink of tears.

“I would nae do something like that,” he sputtered. “Never even spoke to him. Not a word.”

The laird seemed to feel badly for the lad as he neared and placed a hand on his shoulder. “We kept ye here only for one reason.”

John's eyes widened. “What is it Laird?”

“Will ye tell me what ye saw yesterday when my wife walked out to the practice field with my mother and the lass Ainsley?”

The archer turned to look at Peadar. “I am nae sure what ye mean?”

Ewan motioned to Peadar. “Did ye see him looking at the women?”

“Aye,” John slid a look to Peadar. “He lifted his crossbow in the direction of where Ian, ye, and the laird's cousin stood.”

“I did nae such thing,” Peadar said, sweat pooling at the back of his neck. “He is lying.”

The laird looked to him. “John is nae the only person who saw ye do it.”

The damn bitch had told someone. Peadar was sure of it. Now he had to come up with a reason for what he did, a way to get out of the predicament.

“I was within sight of someone the entire day. Not once did I leave the courtyard or the guard quarters, I swear it.”

They allowed the young archer to leave. He hurried past not glancing at Peadar.

“We will find the truth,” the laird neared towering over him. “Ye are remanded to yer quarters until I send for ye.”

When he turned three guards waited for him. Peadar wondered what to do. Slip away as soon as he could without being seen or remain and defend himself. That he’d pointed his crossbow proved nothing.

If he stayed close, it would be easier to exact revenge.

CHAPTER TEN

THE GUARD AT the door moved aside to allow Ainslie to pass. Her hand shook when she turned the handle and pushed the door open to enter the dimly lit bedchamber.

With only a candle in one corner of the room, there was barely enough light to see. But she could see enough to make out the bed and the form upon it.

She crossed the space, retrieved the candle, and placed it on the bedside table so she could see Cynden better.

He was asleep. His chest lifting and lowering as he took in shaky breaths. One of the arrows must have inhibited his ability to breathe normally by the way he seemed to struggle for each breath.

Although he still looked the strong warrior, with disheveled hair and a pale complexion, he seemed vulnerable. The laird was astute to place a guard at the door.

“Cynden,” she whispered as she pushed his hair away from his brow. His skin was warm, not fevered, which was a good sign. Although Ainslie had no formal teaching in healing, she’d learned a great deal from the healer in Barra. Many a day she’d spent helping to care for Thomas, watching as the healer used balms and herbs in an attempt to bring comfort to the dying man.

There were times when she’d taken it upon herself to try different things, seeking counsel from an old woman known for caring for the sick at a nearby village. Sometimes what she’d done had better results than the healer’s concoctions. Yet it was never enough.

“Ye’re here.” Cynden had opened his eyes. “Excuse my lack of standing.”

Ainslie grinned. “Ye gave everyone quite a fright.”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “Imagine how I felt when I realized someone had mistaken me for a target.” His words were staggered, as he took shallow breaths between.

For a moment Ainslie wasn’t sure what to say, or what to do. True she’d had to come up with all sorts of topics to keep Thomas entertained, but the things that came to mind to say to Cynden seemed foolish and immature. She looked about the room for inspiration.

“Are ye in pain? I can get something that will make ye sleep deeply.”

He shook his head. “Nay, I prefer not to. Whoever it was, could return.”

“There is a guard outside,” Ainslie pointed out. “I can call him in.”

Glancing past her to the door, he nodded. “Aye.”

“Guard!” Ainslie called out and the door opened almost immediately.

The warrior who stepped inside was young, but with a serious nature. His solemn gaze on Cynden, he spoke in an even tone. “How are ye faring?”

“Grateful that ye are outside the door,” Cynden replied, not answering the question.

“I do nae mind. Until we discover who did it, ye can recover in peace.”

The men regarded each other for a moment. The younger man’s gaze moving to where blood soaked through the bandages. “The laird has us changing guard several times a day so that we can stay alert.”

“Thank ye,” Cynden replied as the younger man walked out.

“Did ye speak to Darach?” he asked Ainslie.

“I did. Told him about what the man did when I walked out with Isobel and Lady Mariel. He called for all the guard to be

gathered, and I believe they were all questioned.”

“Whoever it was, Darach will find out. He is shrewd and his guardsmen are loyal,” Cynden remarked, his gaze moving to the window. “’Tis late. Ye should go get rest.”

“Lady Mariel said he is called Peadar. That is who I believe did this...” Ainslie hesitated then said with certainty, “I am sure he did this.” Ainslie took his hand with both of hers. “Are ye certain ye do not require anything?”

When his gaze moved to her lips, relief flooded her. Cynden would recover. A man on his death bed didn’t have bedsport on his mind.

A smile crept across her lips. “Perhaps some honeyed wine or ale?”

His eyes drooped and she realized he was tiring.

“I ate a bit earlier. Drank some whiskey.”

She was willing to bet the whiskey had been mixed with a strong herb. “Sleep well. I will visit ye in the morn.”

“I look forward to it.” He pinned her with a pointed look. “Do nae forget to come.”

She’d sooner forget her name than to forget to come visit him. After a quick glance to the door, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. Cynden responded, returning her gesture with the same fervor, albeit a bit weaker.

“Sleep well.” Within a few moments, his face went slack, and he fell into a deep sleep.

When she hurried up the stairs and into her bedchamber, all she could think was that once Cynden recovered, he would leave. He would return to Skye, and she would one day return to Barra. They’d never see one another again.

It made little sense for them to pursue any kind of relationship, yet it seemed to be developing on its own. The kisses. The touches. The expectations that were deeper than just friendship or a mere flirtation. She could not describe

exactly what occurred between them, but it was definitely an attachment of sorts.

Ainslie paced the bedchamber pondering what to do. They'd not have enough time to develop into a courtship. There was the chance that Cynden was not interested in one to begin with. Then there was the question of Peadar. There was little doubt in her mind that he was the one who'd injured Cynden.

The man remained a menace and something had to be done. At the moment, Cynden was much too weak to defend himself. Ainslie had trained with both daggers and a broadsword. Her father had insisted she be able to defend herself if ever she was in danger. She could protect Cynden as well as any guard.

There was much to discuss with him the following day. He had to tell his cousin that it was Peadar who did it. From the way the man had spoken to her in the darkened corridor, there was no doubt in her mind that he would not rest until got his retribution for his imagined slight.

Even if she and Cynden did not end up together, she would ensure that he survived.

THE SUN WAS bright when Ainslie woke the next morning. She'd been up half the night fretting about Cynden. One moment she considered how she felt and what she should do about the situation and the next she worried about the danger of someone wishing to kill him. At one point, she'd even considered leaving sooner rather than later. Returning home could be the answer. A way to ease her mind and think clearer. Being so close to someone who affected her so much could prove to be disastrous. Surely she could not withstand another heartbreak.

Needless to say, Ainslie woke tired. Her head sore from all the swirling thoughts and lack of sleep.

Although not hungry, she sat down with her companions and shared first meal. Already the queue of people waiting to

speak to the laird was forming, which meant it would be a day of many clan's people coming and going.

With so many about, it would be easy for whoever hurt Cynden to slip past without notice. She bit her bottom lip and scanned the room. Peadar was nowhere to be seen. Ainslie wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not. Having the man in sight would mean it was easier to track his movements.

"Have they discovered who did it?" she asked the women around the table.

Isobel leaned forward, her voice a whisper. "Peadar is restricted to guard quarters for now."

Ainslie let out a sigh of relief. "I am glad to hear it."

AFTER EATING, AINSLIE went to see Cynden as she'd promised.

Someone had already seen to his needs that morning. They'd combed his hair and helped him to sit. A rolled blanket had been placed behind his upper back. By the way his gaze met hers and warmed, he seemed to be in less pain.

"I brought yer meal," she said placing a tray on the side table. "A lass was on her way here to bring it, but I offered since I was to be here anyway."

"Did the lass happen to have freckles across her nose?"

Ainslie bristled. "I did nae notice."

While Cynden ate, he kept stealing glances to the window. Finally, he pushed the plate away. "I do nae want anymore."

"Why do ye keep looking to the window?" Ainslie asked.

He frowned. "I wish to get up and find out who did this. I do nae like to spend so much time inside. I prefer to be out there."

"I am sure ye will be able to get about. Ye just have to wait for the healer. He will no doubt ask that you be patient and allow yer wounds time to heal."

With a grunt, he sat up straighter and looked to where his boots were. “Ye can help me.”

“I will nae do such a thing.” Ainslie gave him what she hoped was a menacing look. “Ye are still much too pale and are twice the size of me.”

“True,” he admitted with a defeated sigh. “The only reason I have not tried is because it’s hard to breathe and falling could cause more harm.”

She took the tray and put it on a table. Then lowered to sit next to the bed.

CYNDEN HATED FEELING SO weak that his head swam with even the slightest of movements. It was not exactly a way to impress a woman. Yet Ainslie had returned, and he was grateful for it.

“Ainslie,” Cynden began.

She looked into his eyes, waiting for him to continue. Every action the woman did was like a song, one phrase after the other. His stomach did funny things when she was near. Especially when she looked at him.

“What is it?” she asked with a shy smile. “Why do ye look at me in that manner?”

He took her hand and kissed the back of it, loving how small it was in his larger hand. “Ye are the most beautiful woman. Exquisite. I would never tire of looking at ye.”

“Is that what ye wished to say to me?” Her voice was breathless, and he enjoyed that his words affected her thusly.

“Nae.” He chuckled. “I wanted to ask if I could kiss ye. I have nae been able to think of anything else.”

A light pink on her cheeks was endearing. She nodded. “I think of kissing ye as well. It is as if we are tied in a way.” Her gaze pinned to him, she stood and moved to stand over him. Then she leaned down and he cupped her face, bringing her mouth to his.

Her arms went around his shoulders as they kissed.

Cynden deepened the kiss, hungry to taste her. Thankfully, she responded, a sigh escaping past her lips. The lass was delectable. Her lips plump like fresh fruit, ripe to taste. When he pushed his tongue past her lips, she shyly allowed hers to tangle with his. She was so very perfect. So enticing and alluring that he was sure he'd never tire of kissing her.

Cynden trailed his right hand down her side then up to palm her breast and she let out a soft moan encouraging him to continue the caress.

Footsteps approached and by the way Ainslie continued to kiss him, she'd not heard. Cynden broke the kiss.

"Someone comes," he whispered.

She jumped to her feet, her chest lifting and lowering. The plush parted lips pinkened from his kisses. A more stunning sight he could not think of.

There was a rap on the door followed by Darach and Ewan entering. His cousin nodded at Ainslie. "I require a word with my cousin."

"Of course," Ainslie replied. Then after a quick glance at him, she walked out.

CYNDEN WAS GLAD to see his cousin although he wished it hadn't meant cutting Ainslie's visit and their kiss short.

There was concern etched on Darach's face as his gaze moved over Cynden. "Ye could have died. I would have had to answer to Alexander for it."

"It was nae anyone's fault but the man who did it."

Ewan shook his head. "That we harbor someone like that in our midst means it is on our shoulders. We will find out who is responsible, and he will be dealt with."

"What about Peadar, do ye think it was he?" Cynden asked as Knox hurried into the room his eyes moving from face to face. From his windblown look, he seemed to have just

arrived. His friend did the same as his last visitors, looking him over, being reassured.

Darach blew out an annoyed breath. "Peadar is the third son of a very good ally to our clan. Since his clan is so small, his father sent him here to train and work as a guard. I have to think things through before insulting his father. However, if it was him. That he is an ally's son will not stop his punishment."

There were so many things a laird had to consider before making any decision. Cynden understood too well the repercussions of slighting an important ally. At the same time, in his mind, there was little doubt that Peadar had tried to kill him.

"I heard what occurred. Did ye see or hear anything?" Knox asked. "Perhaps something strange caught yer attention." His friend nodded in greeting to Darach and Ewan in greeting.

"The birds went silent, which caused me to turn sideways. If not for it, the arrow would have pierced my heart."

Ewan narrowed his eyes. "Which way were ye facing and which way did ye turn?" The expert archer could ascertain things that others could not.

Closing his eyes Cynden slowed his breathing and considered what had occurred. "I was facing the loch. I'd just returned from swimming. When the birdsong stopped, I turned to the right first, then to the left, which was when the first arrow pierced my side. The pain made me flinch and lean sideways to the same side when the second arrow hit. I fell to the ground then.

"The man stood to the right of the house, on lower ground." Ewan looked up to the ceiling in thought. "He is a good archer, but one who shoots higher the second time whenever aiming at targets."

"I know that look, ye know who it is," Darach said to his brother.

Ewan shrugged. “There are two men who do it, one is Ian, who we know did not do it. The other is Peadar with his crossbow.”

“How can ye remember such detail?” Knox asked in awe.

“My brother studies archers, it is in his nature to always be better than anyone.”

The archer grinned. “It is why I *am* better than anyone.”

The laird looked to Cynden. “It seems ye are right in yer suspicions. It is left to me now to remedy the situation.”

“Once I can travel, Knox and I will return to Skye. It is for the best. I do nae wish to cause ye any rifts with other lairds.”

Darach held up a hand silencing him. “I will never tolerate a coward who shoots at a defenseless man from behind. Not just any man, but a member of the family that feeds him.” His upper lip curled in disgust. “Peadar will be dealt with immediately.”

The brothers walked out leaving Knox who stared at the door with both eyebrows raised. “I never wish to anger him.”

Cynden chuckled and cringed at the discomfort it caused. “Aye. True. He is formidable. Then again, many feel the same way about Alexander.”

“True, but we grew up with him. It makes him less terrifying,” Knox replied with a chuckle.

“I am glad to see ye,” Cynden told his cousin. “Tell me what happens on Skye.”

Knox frowned. “It seems ye got injured worse here than anyone back home. At the moment there Alexander and that idiot MacKinnon have an unsteady truce in place. Alexander wanted me to ensure to tell ye as he expect ye have been concerned about what occurs.”

“Aye I have been. I do nae wish to have him nor any one on Skye overly worried about me. I prefer they not know

about this.” Cynden motioned to his bandages. “I am to recover fully.”

WHEN AFTERNOON CAME and Ainslie had not returned Cynden was disappointed. As the hours passed, he grew bored and restless. Time passed excruciatingly slowly, and he’d finally had enough of being in bed, so he swung his legs over the side of the bed and slowly stood.

It was not as painful as he expected. The main discomfort was his ability to take a deep breath. He took a few tentative steps to the window. Outside the only thing he could see was a corner of the garden and the tops of trees in the distance.

As much as he wished to leave the bedchamber, it was best not to. In his weakened state, he would not stand a chance against an able-bodied warrior.

The door opened and Ian walked in. His gaze moving from the bed to Cynden and then to the window. “Best for ye to keep from the window.”

Cynden’s stomach sank. “He has escaped.” He clenched his jaw waiting for the reply.

It was a long moment before Ian nodded. “Aye, he slipped away. We should have placed more than one guard on him. He is wily”

“I will return to Skye soon. I can stand and should be able to withstand the ride to the shoreline soon.”

Ian paced the small room. “I am unsure as to whether or not he is mad enough to pursue ye, or if being found out scared him enough that he will stay away.”

“That is a question only he can answer,” Cynden replied. “The best thing I can do is return home.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HER FEET BARELY touched the ground as Ainslie raced back toward the keep, the herbs she'd carefully picked long forgotten.

The heavier footfalls behind her pushed her to run faster. When she came to a young fallen tree, she scampered over it, sure the slowing meant the man chasing her would catch up. But he didn't. Suddenly it was silent and upon whirling to look, there was no one behind her.

Still she didn't stop, but instead kept running until arriving at the back door to the keep. Too anxious to knock and wait for a reply, she raced around the side of the building past the garden and into the inner courtyard. It was there that she finally went inside, anxious to find someone.

The first person she saw was Knox, Cynden's friend from Skye. She hurried to him.

She must have looked a fright by the astonished expression on his face.

"Did something happen?" he asked not waiting for her to speak.

Ainslie nodded, heart pounding. "Aye, I was just chased by that madman, Peadar. He came out of nowhere while I was picking herbs." Her chest heaved as she tried to speak and breathe at the same time. "He is back there, near the loch."

A guard must have seen what happened from his post atop the wall because he was calling out to those below. Men hurried to horses, others on foot.

Someone ran past her and Knox into the house.

Moments later, guards were scurrying out the front door. Knox took her upper arm guiding Ainslie to a nearby bench. "Do not go back out. It may be best to remain indoors until he

is caught. The guards have been searching for him. I would not be surprised if he is caught very soon.”

It was time to leave Uist and return home to Barra. No matter how painful the memories were there, while that madman was on the loose, she wasn't sure she was safe at the Ross keep any longer. Ainslie wiped away angry tears.

How dare that horrible man try to attack her.

Twice.

She'd never done anything to merit his advances. She'd barely even noticed him before he'd corralled her in the corridor.

Just then Isobel and Lady Mariel hurried from the great room. “We heard what occurred,” Isobel said. “Come to the parlor. Ye need something strong to drink.”

They walked to the beautiful room with windows overlooking the inlet. Ainslie glanced to the windows glad that they did not face in the direction of the loch. A part of her wanted to go somewhere and watch the horrible man being dragged back by the guard. It would bring a feeling of safety.

“Why is the man so persistent about me?” she asked accepting a glass of honeyed mead with a trembling hand. “I do not know him in the least.”

Lady Mariel took a glass from Isobel. “It has more to do with Cynden than with ye. He hopes that in attacking ye, he will hurt Cynden.”

“He must have the idea there is more between ye than just friendship,” Isobel interjected. “It is the only explanation I can think of.”

“We kissed,” Ainslie admitted. “Out there, near the loch. By what he said when he accosted me, he watched us. There is nothing else between us. Cynden will leave as soon as he recovers and return to Skye. I will nae see him again.” She kept the other kisses to herself. There was no reason to divulge such a personal occurrence at the moment.

Her companions exchanged glances, neither saying anything for a moment. Finally Isobel gave her a pointed look. “There is nothing to stop ye and Cynden from courting. Both of ye are without an attachment to someone else.”

“Ye make a good pair and seem to get along well,” Lady Mariel added.

“I agree,” Isobel said with a wide smile. “There seems to be something more than mere friendship.”

“Oh, yes,” Lady Mariel interjected with a knowing nod. “Attraction.”

Despite herself, Ainslie couldn't help but smile. “It is just that—attraction—nothing more. I am sure he does nae feel anything stronger than that.”

“What about ye?” Lady Mariel asked. “How do ye feel about him?”

Ainslie decided to be honest. “I seem to care for him more each day. It is the reason I am preparing myself for his departure. I want to keep myself from another heartbreak. I must believe it is nothing more than a beautiful friendship. He almost died and I was terrified that it was because of me.”

“The attack has nothing at all to do with ye,” Isobel explained. “It is that Peadar is a sick man who wishes for a leadership position that will never be his. Instead of facing his own faults, he wishes to put the blame on someone else. Unfortunately, Cynden's arrival just as Peadar was once again not given the title of leader made him decide to blame Cynden for it.”

“If the man took the time to think about why he is here in the first place, he'd realize it is his own doing,” Lady Mariel added. “His father sent him here for a reason.”

Isobel shook her head. “It fell on Darach to deal with the man's ill temper. I am sure he will be dealt with in short order. Then ye can decide what to do about yerself and Cynden. Personally, I would pursue him. If ye need help...” She motioned to herself. “I will gladly help.”

Ainslie couldn't help but giggle. With the laird's wife and mother assisting, if she decided to pursue Cynden, she could not fail. However, the timing was all wrong.

He was currently injured and planning to leave. There wasn't any room in his plans for her and she had no desire to impede him in any way.

SINCE AINSLIE WAS to remain indoors, she lingered near the front door hoping to find out if there was any news about Peadar's capture. It seemed the man was adept at escaping because when she asked a passing guard, he told her they'd yet to capture him.

Annoyed, she made her way past the entrance to the great room, where people were gathered, some to seek an audience with the laird, others in hopes of being fed, as people were allowed to have last meal there as long as there was a place to sit.

The guard in front of Cynden's door leaned on the wall, but upon seeing her straightened and motioned to the door. She nodded in greeting and knocked on the door.

Cynden's voice was clear when he invited her to enter. She was shocked to see him dressed and sitting in a chair. He put a book he was reading aside upon seeing it was her.

"I hoped ye'd return," he said meeting her gaze. "I heard what happened. I wanted to come find ye, but it is best I remain here and not cause the guard more trouble."

Ainslie waved his attempt to stand away and lowered into a chair opposite him. Ensuring she left plenty of space between them. "I am not harmed. He did nae catch me. I am a fast runner." Her lips curved at Cynden smiling.

"I am glad. Have ye heard if he's been captured?"

Ainslie shook her head. "Not as yet."

Cynden blew out an annoyed breath. "How can it be so difficult? Unless the man can fly, it would be impossible for him to escape."

“From what I hear, there are caves in the forest past the outer walls. The woods go on for a long distance. The thicket makes it hard to move fast with horses. Lady Mariel informed me that many a man has gone into hiding there and later found dead.”

Clearing her throat, Ainslie pushed ahead with the question she wanted to ask. “When ye leave will ye ever return?”

For a long moment Cynden studied her. The effect of his gaze upon her was almost as if he touched every inch where his hazel gaze landed. A prickling of her skin, the need to take deep breaths, it all made it hard to keep from reaching out and touching him.

“I have been thinking about what to say to ye.” His brows lowered, as he considered the next words.

“Ye do nae have to explain to me. If Peadar is nae caught, I may have to return to Barra.”

“Do ye wish to return there?”

His eyes never moved from hers as he awaited her reply.

“Nae,” Ainslie’s voice trembled. “Neither do I wish for ye to go.”

A lightness came over his face, the sharp lines of his jawline relaxing. “I must. Skye is my home.”

“I-I wish we could have more time. I know ye may nae feel like I do. Yet, I must be honest in telling ye that I have grown to care for ye. *Deeply.*”

The words seemed to hang in the air. For a moment, Ainslie considered making as if she spoke in jest. Instead, a sense of relief fell over her. No matter if Cynden did not feel as strongly, she’d been honest with him and herself.

“Then go with me.”

“Wh-what? I can nae go to another isle with ye. It would be madness.”

“Ye will love Skye. It is beautiful. My family—my brothers and my mother—will welcome ye.”

Her mind whirled around the idea, and she blinked several times, resisting the urge to pinch herself to ensure it was not a dream. The man was clearly addled to invite her to his family home and not declare any desire for courtship or the like.

“I-I can nae go with ye.” Ainslie could not think of a way to tell him he has to ask for her hand in marriage. The only way she would go was if they were betrothed. Already she’d declared her feelings first. She was not about to ask him to marry her.

Cynden frowned. “We feel deeply for one another, it only makes sense that we be together.”

“Together?” Ainslie drew out the word, giving Cynden the opportunity to expand.

Instead, he nodded. “Aye.”

There were raps on the door and she stood, letting out a long sigh. “I will leave ye to think. We can speak tomorrow. I require some fresh air.” She hurried past Knox, who entered with a tray of food. The warrior had to jump sideways to keep Ainslie from knocking the tray from his hands.

“WHAT DID YE do?” Knox asked looking over his shoulder in the direction Ainslie went.

Cynden frowned. “I do nae know. It was as if she had to do something all of a sudden.”

His friend shrugged. “The cook here is beyond comparison. I will miss the meals once we leave.” He placed the tray on a side table and lowered into the chair Ainsley had emptied.

“I do not wish to eat. I drank some dreadful concoction the healer made and do not trust food to remain in my stomach.”

“What were ye and the pretty lass speaking of?” Knox, ever curious asked.

“She declared to care for me deeply and that she wished we had more time. I asked that she come to Skye with me. Then... well ye saw. She hurried away.”

Knox shook his head. “Ye have to say things just right. How are ye to become betrothed since her parents are on Barra?”

“Betrothed?” Cynden huffed. “There is nae time for a betrothal. It would be faster to marry.”

When Knox laughed Cynden looked to the ceiling. “Aye, I know. I nae planned to return with a wife, but neither am I willing to leave Ainslie behind. She is the woman for me.”

His friend laughed even harder. “Ye plan to marry her then?”

“Aye.”

Why was Knox being so foolish to ask the obvious when he’d just explained?

His cousin gave him an amused look. “So ye ask the lass to marry ye then? Or did ye say she was to go with ye to Skye making her think ye planned to take her there as someone to warm yer bed and nothing more?”

Cynden’s eyes rounded, and his mouth fell open at realizing his blunder. It was no wonder Ainslie reacted the way she did. The woman was in all probability a virgin and was shocked at his invitation.

“I am an idiot.”

His friend continued laughing as he ate the food that was meant for Cynden.

He looked on, grabbed a piece of bread and ate it. “When ye finish eating my meal, will ye please go and find her?”

Knox took him in, his jaw moving as he chewed. “I have a better idea.”

AINSLIE SAT IN the parlor, her gaze past the windows at the sky. In her mind she pictured life on Skye with Cynden. Seeing

him every day. Going for walks. And the kissing. More kisses like the ones they'd shared. However, it was not to be. She would not go with him without being betrothed.

Not only would her parents never allow it, but also it would be madness to go to a faraway place with a man who had no interest in marrying her.

It could be she was not meant to marry, to have a home or bairns. Thomas could have been her only chance and fate had taken him.

“Ainslie?”

Cynden's voice startled her. She whirled from the windows to find him walking slowly into the room. Behind him, Knox stood watching, ensuring he was stable.

With an arm wrapped around his midsection, he stopped midway between them, and she went to him.

“Ye should sit. Why are ye here?”

“I made a mistake and need to correct it.”

Hoping to read his expression proved fruitless. The man's gaze was flat, his face devoid of any hint of what he thought.

“What did ye do?” She wondered if he'd realized something that he'd done to cause Peadar to attack her.

The corner of his lips inched up, but then he seemed to catch himself and let out a breath. “When I asked ye to come to Skye. I did nae tell ye how... who...in what manner.”

Ainslie looked past him to Knox who rolled his eyes and then back to Cynden. “I do nae understand what ye are saying. Ye should return to bed.”

“Nae. I am well enough to stand before ye and ask ye to be my wife.”

All the air seemed to leave her lungs as she waited for him to continue. The way he looked at her, made her insides weak. “Will ye marry me Ainslie MacNeil?”

There was but one answer, and yet was she ready for what it meant. Every scenario crossed her mind. Did he love her? Was he asking because he felt obligated, or that he owed it to her for kissing her? Her head swam.

“Listed to yer heart,” Cynden whispered, his gaze searching. “I wish for nothing more than for ye as a wife.”

“Aye,” she finally managed. “I would like to very much.”

“Good,” Cynden replied. Then to her delight, he reached for her, brought her gently against him, and took her mouth with his.

Alarmed that Knox was watching, Ainslie leaned sideways to look at the door, finding it empty.

She then kissed Cynden back, losing herself in the man who would soon be hers forever.

CHAPTER TWELVE

IT WAS A fortnight later and Ainslie's parents were to arrive for the marriage ceremony. They'd come once already to speak to him. Darach had stood in for Alexander as his brother and mother were not to arrive until the day of the marriage.

Fourteen days and still Peadar had not been captured. Cynden hated it more each day that he was unable to move freely nor go and help search. Surely he could not have gone too far. It made little sense the guard had been unsuccessful in finding him.

His wounds were barely visible, but they caused him a great deal of discomfort. Still, he managed to move around more and had returned to his bedchamber on the second floor.

Now as he stood atop the keep wall, looking out toward the loch, he wondered if the man watched him. Most seemed to think that because Peadar was fairly new to the isle, he'd become lost in the thicket. Cynden didn't believe it. The man was a warrior and had the skills to hunt and survive. If anything, Peadar had left the isle and returned back to his home.

Despite preparations for the marriage and all that it entailed, he could tell that Ainslie was just as worried about the situation. Each time they'd talk, she brought up the fact Peadar had not been caught.

They'd not had the opportunity for much time alone, as his aunt, Lady Mariel, had taken it upon herself to plan every detail for the wedding and to ensure Ainslie was properly prepared with a new wardrobe meant his soon-to-be wife was gone to the village most days.

A message had also been sent to his brothers and they were due to arrive that day. It was only then that they'd been told

about what had occurred as he didn't want to distract them with worries of him whilst they were in battle.

He was sure his mother would have a great deal to say. Not only about not being informed of his injury right away, but also about his upcoming marriage. Cynden had yet to make up his mind if she was going to be concerned or happy for him. Probably a mixture of both.

For years, his mother had insisted he should court a pretty lass from a family that lived nearby. The lass was bonnie enough, but there had been no attraction between them. The lass had eyes for his older brother, who all but ignored her completely.

"Yer brothers are here," Knox said coming to stand beside him. "Alexander and Gavin, as well as yer mother."

"Munro must have stayed behind in Alex's stead." Cynden walked back toward the house. Although he was rapidly healing, it was still painful to move about and he measured his steps.

A coach entered the courtyard moments later, and Cynden went to stand next to Ainslie, who gave him a nervous smile. "My parents will arrive shortly as well. This will be a challenging day."

"Ye have no idea," Cynden murmured. "Mother will be angry that my mishap was kept from her."

"She wasn't told?" Ainslie's eyes grew wide. "Why?"

"The danger of Peadar still being about. She would have demanded to come here immediately. It would nae have been good."

They stopped speaking as the coach came to a stop.

Behind the coach, Alexander appeared, an intimidating picture atop the large warhorse he rode. His brother dismounted as the coach door opened and his mother hurried out, not waiting for assistance.

As Darach embraced Alexander then Gavin, his mother ignored them all and instead rushed to him. “I am so furious with ye right now.” Her eyes gleamed with unshed tears. “Ye could have died, and I would not have been any the wiser. How dare they keep what happened from me?”

She cupped his face. “I am shaking so badly I can barely remain upright.”

“Mother, be calm.” Cynden spoke in a composed tone. “I am sure Alex explained to ye, that it would have been too dangerous for ye to come.”

She glowered in his brother’s direction. “I would nae have cared.” He embraced his trembling mother, hating the circumstances brought on by an idiot. It was not only the injured man who suffered, but those who cared and loved them as well.

After a moment, she managed to calm enough to release him. She took shaky breaths attempting to gain her composure and gazed at Ainslie, then to him.

“This is Ainslie McNeil, my betrothed,” Cynden said motioning to Ainslie who smiled nervously. “The woman who has won my heart.”

It was as if his mother had forgotten about the wedding by the way she gave them both a quizzical look before clarity sunk in. She gave Cynden a cryptic look that sent alarm bells down his spine, then she took Ainslie in and extended her hands which Ainslie took. “Ye are quite a beauty. I am called Rose.”

“I am pleased to meet ye.” Ainslie gave Cynden’s mother a tentative smile. “I am looking forward to meeting everyone and also to moving to Skye.”

Rose gave Cynden a questioning look. “Ye decided to marry quite quickly. Is there to be a bairn soon?”

At the implication, Ainslie gasped. “Nae. I am. nae..”

“We should go inside. There is a repast prepared.” Lady Mariel swooped in and took his mother by the arm. “I am so glad to see ye. It has been much too long.”

The women walked away just as Alexander and Gavin made their way to them. Both his brothers gave Cynden a look warning there was something to be talked about. Alexander was courteous in greeting Ainslie but reserved. It would normally not surprise Cynden, as his brother’s personality was usually stern. However, when Gavin—usually a flirt—also greeted her with a lack of warmth, Cynden knew something was amiss.

“We must speak,” Alexander said to Cynden.

“I will be inside,” Ainslie said, then turned to find Isobel waiting. The women walked away. Just before going inside, Ainslie peered over her shoulder at him. Like him, she must have felt something was wrong.

“Not a warm greeting for my soon-to-be wife,” Cynden snapped. “What do ye need to speak about that keeps us from going inside?”

Alexander frown. “A new truce has been agreed to with the MacKinnons. The laird’s asks that his eldest daughter marry a Ross. She has chosen ye.”

After releasing a slow breath through his nostrils, Cynden looked from Gavin to Alex. “She will have to choose a different man then. I am nae going to marry a MacKinnon. I have already asked Ainslie to marry me. I’ve given my word.”

“Yer duty to the clan is more important,” Alexander replied. He looked to the keep. “We can nae keep depending on our cousins for protection. We have recruited more men, and our guard is growing. Once we are joined with the MacKinnons, our people will have peace.”

His fingers clenched into a fist, it was through sheer willpower that he did not strike Alexander. “Did ye pick me because I am nae truly yer brother?”

Gavin gaped. “What are ye talking about?”

“Tell him, Alex,” Cynden said. “Tell him I am but yer half-brother, a product of rape. Someone to be sold to the enemy, someone with little value to ye.”

With two large steps, Alex came nose-to-nose to Cynden. “Do nae ever say that. Ye are my brother. I will never see ye as anything else.”

“Then why me?” Cynden was too angry to keep his voice calm. “Why nae Gavin or Munro?”

“Explain what ye are talking about?” Gavin insisted. Pressing between them. “Now.”

Alexander turned to their brother. “Mother admitted why she never wished for Gavin to leave the isle.” He turned to look toward the keep. “Our uncle took liberties the last time she visited.”

Gavin’s eyes rounded and then he glared toward the keep. “The bastard is dead, otherwise, I would kill him. Did Da know?”

Cynden shook his head. “Nae. Mother never told him.”

All three were silent for a moment. Repeating the origin of Cynden’s birth seemed to take the fury out of them. When Alexander spoke again, he kept his voice low.

“She chose ye. The messenger insisted she would accept no other.” His brother let out a sigh. “I understand that ye would rather marry the woman of yer choosing. What would ye have me do?”

“Did ye compromise the lass?” Gavin asked wiggling his eyebrows. “She is lovely.”

“I did not,” Cynden replied. “We are to marry because I want her to come to Skye with me.”

Alexander shrugged. “Ye do nae have to marry her for that.”

“Her parents would disagree,” Cynden replied. “Besides, I want her to be my wife. Be the mother to my bairns.”

Gavin blew out a shrill long whistle and chuckled. He looked to Alexander. "I do believe our wee brother is in love."

"Do nae ask me to do this," Cynden said, his gaze pinning Alexander.

Just then a coach followed by several wagons came through the gates. It had to be Ainslie's parents.

"Let us go for a walk," Cynden said, knowing it was best not to face the arrivals until a final decision was made.

AINSLIE HURRIED FROM inside the house to greet her family. She'd been sitting in the parlor with Rose, who peppered her nonstop with questions. The woman seemed kind, but overly curious. She supposed it was natural, as she'd informed Ainslie that Cynden was to be the first of her four sons to marry.

Her brothers sat in the back of a wagon, seeming displeased about it, which made her want to laugh. They climbed down gave her quick hugs of acknowledgement and promptly went to find the Ross men.

She rushed down the steps, eager for her sister and her mother and father to alight from the coach.

Therese, was first, calling out her name with glee. "I am so happy for ye. I wish to go visit ye in Skye." Her eyes danced with excitement. "This keep is magnificent. When we approached, I lost my breath."

They hugged, and then she greeted her mother and father.

While her father didn't seem bothered by her decision to marry in haste, her mother and sister were convinced there was a reason for it.

"Are ye sure?" her mother asked, taking her in. "Why do ye look so... healthy?" When her eyes moved to Ainslie's midsection, she shook her head. "I am nae with bairn."

Therese laughed. "Mother says he is handsome. I can nae wait to meet him. Where is he?"

In her mind, there were no doubts about the step she was about to take. Cynden was the perfect man, and they were compatible. From what she'd learned about him so far, he was fair and respectful.

“Aye where is yer betrothed?” her mother asked searching those gathered. Ainslie turned and saw the laird, Isobel, Lady Mariel, and Rose were waiting to greet her family, but Cynden and his brothers were not.

During introductions, she leaned into Isobel's ear. “Where are Cynden and his brothers?”

“I do nae know,” Isobel replied, searching the courtyard. “A walk perhaps?”

When they returned to the parlor, her father insisted on going with the laird to the great room, while Ainslie and her mother kept company with the women.

The conversation turned to once again the same questions being asked. Her mother, however, seemed to understand the real reason for the marriage as she'd also married quite hastily.

A servant entered the room and spoke to Ainslie. “Miss, can ye come to the garden? Yer betrothed wishes to speak to ye in private.”

“The garden?” Ainslie glanced toward Isobel, who nodded.

“Ye should go see what it is about.”

“I can go with ye,” her mother offered. “Whatever it is, ye seem worried.”

“Nae, I best go alone.”

Following the servant, Ainslie began to feel dizzy. It was as if her body warned her not to continue forward, but to run in the opposite direction. Something was wrong. Whatever it was, she knew was not good.

It felt surreal walking out to the garden. The blossoms were beautiful, their fragrance greeting her in a wonderful

way. A stark contrast to the man who stood waiting for her. It was not Cynden, but his eldest brother, Alexander.

With hair as dark as a raven's feathers, the fearsome warrior stood straight, his lack of expression as intimidating as his size. With wide shoulders and thick muscular arms, she was sure he was a formidable opponent in battle.

Upon seeing her, his gaze moved over her, and he motioned to a bench. "Would ye care to sit?"

"Nae. I will stand." Ainslie was glad her voice was firm. Instinct told her the man before her expected her to be timid and scared of him.

"I have spoken to Cynden and informed him he can nae marry ye."

Despite her stomach dropping, she kept silent, her gaze on him.

Alexander continued. "A truce has been settled between my clan and the MacKinnons. Their one demand is that Cynden is to marry the laird's eldest daughter."

"No." Ainslie took several steps closer and glared up at him. "Make a different settlement. Tell them he and I were already wed when ye arrived. It will nae be yer fault. Cynden does nae wish to marry anyone other than me."

The laird's eyebrows shot up. "Ye are asking that I lie?"

"I am stating that yer brother will keep his vow to me. I am sure the MacKinnons wish to have a truce as much as ye do. They will gladly agree to another arrangement."

To her shock, the man chuckled. Deep dimples appeared on both cheeks, turning the intimidating man into one of the most handsome creatures she'd ever seen. He shook his head. "I will have to admit, my brother has chosen well."

Just then Cynden came running around the building with a thunderous expression. He threw himself at Alexander sending them both tumbling into the bushes.

Ainslie screamed and moments later, her father, Darach, and several guards appeared. Gavin appeared from the same direction and scrambled to break the brawling brothers apart. Unfortunately, a flying fist caught Gavin on the side of the face, and he fell backward onto the ground.

“Do something,” Ainslie screamed at the men gathered. Finally, several guardsmen were able to pull the brothers apart. It was obvious Alexander had not fought back, but instead grabbed Cynden in a bear hug. Cynden spit out blood while struggling to get free.

His brother on the other hand did not require anyone to hold him back. He wiped blood from his split lip and laughed. “Ye are going to hurt yerself. If ye would stop and listen, ye may calm down.”

A wincing and breathless Cynden walked toward her, and she slid a look sideways to her parents.

Ainslie held up a hand. “Speak to yer brother. And ye should wash up before coming inside. There are things to discuss.”

He stopped midstride, a quizzical look on his handsome face.

Isobel went to Alexander and pushed a finger into his chest. “He has nae fully recovered. Ye could have hurt him worse. Shame on ye.”

JUST BEFORE ENTERING the parlor, Cynden felt the tension in the atmosphere. The conversations stilted and Cynden understood why. Even before meeting his family, Ainslie’s had witnessed the fight between him and his brother. It would be a miracle if her father still agreed to allow his daughter to marry him.

Ainslie’s mother and his were silently studying one another. While his brother, Gavin, and Ainslie’s couldn’t seem to find a common ground to discuss. Finally, upon finding out Ainslie’s brothers participated in the games—the stone and caber toss—they found a subject they could all speak on.

The fact their brothers seemed to get along did not mean he was in the clear. When Cynden walked to them, the MacNeil brothers silently looked him over.

One, tilted his head to the side, his eyes narrowing in silent disapproval. Cynden met the man's gaze. "Yer brother told us the reason for the fight," the man stated, his gaze warming.

If he was to say something else, he stopped when Ainslie's father, Darach, and Alexander walked in.

Obviously, it would be up to the patriarch to give his approval. Not that Cynden planned to give it any credence. Although, Ainslie probably would be of a different opinion.

Darach motioned to the room. "If everyone would please sit down, let us discuss the upcoming marriage."

"Can I ask?" Ainslie's mother met Cynden's gaze. "Why such a hurry for this marriage? We could have planned a large wedding with all her family and friends in Barra. Neither of ye are from Uist and yet here we are."

Cynden and Ainslie exchanged looks and she waited for him to speak. "I am injured, and it would be difficult to travel first to Barra and then to Skye. We are hopeful that once I am fully healed, ye would host a celebration so that yer friends and family can all attend."

"Why the hurry?" His mother joined forces with Ainslie's, and he wanted to groan.

"Because," Ainslie began. "I do nae wish to be away from him. I asked that it be soon. As he plans to return to Skye."

There were no more questions on that matter, as everyone seemed satisfied.

"How will ye care for my daughter? The lass has never wanted for anything." It was the first time Ainslie's father actually spoke to him since arriving.

"I am a warrior, I work for my brother. Ainslie will live with me at the keep, where she will be safe and well cared for. She will never want for anything."

His mother frowned at the man daring to question her son. “There is never any need in our home. Like here, everyone is welcome to come and partake of a warm meal if they are hungry. We provide shelter and clothing for those in need. Our people do nae go hungry, nor do they have to fear being cold in the winter.”

“There are ongoing battles,” Ainslie’s father countered. “Something I find more worrisome than hunger at the moment.”

Just as Cynden was to speak Alexander walked closer. “The battles are coming to an end. It is one of the things I came to discuss with my cousin. Our lands are returning to a place of peace so we will nae require as many warriors as before. Only a few to help ensure that peace is kept.”

“Our family is always kept safe,” Gavin added. “Ye nae have to worry about yer daughter ever being in danger.”

It seemed to satisfy the man who took Cynden in. “If my daughter finds ye acceptable, then so do I. I welcome ye to our family.”

Cynden had to swallow past the lump that had formed in his throat. Strange how things had changed since leaving Skye. Not only would he return home scarred, but also married to a beautiful woman, and very much in love.



EVERY EYE IN the keep chapel followed Ainslie’s progress as she walked down the center to the man who would become her husband. It was hard to see past the tears pooling in her eyes, but she managed to keep her gaze on him. Cynden stood proud next to his brother Alexander. A handsome picture, wearing the Ross green and blue tartan that wrapped around him and over his shoulder pinned across his breast with a large clan crest.

Her mother had brought the gown she’d wished to wear. It was a pale blue silky creation she’d been saving for when Thomas was well enough to attend a festival with her. Now he

was fully healed in the afterlife, and she was sure he would approve of her choice of clothing. It was as if part of him accompanied her that day.

From her shoulder to her side she wore a sash—The MacNeil tartan. The black and blue with gold stripes a stark contrast to the gown. Ainslie's hair was pulled up to the crown of her head and pinned allowing for loose tendrils to frame her face and cascade down the back.

When Cynden's gaze turned from warmth to heated, she knew he approved.

They could barely look away from each other and if pressed Ainslie doubted either would remember anything that was said that day.

Afterwards, the celebration was lively, with music and heaping platters of food and plenty of ale for everyone to enjoy. It was obvious the hosting laird wished to impress the visitors, both from Skye and Barra.

As she scanned the room for her family, she wanted to weep with joy. The most important people in their lives were there to share the occasion and it made everything perfect.

It was early yet, but she kept an eye on Cynden to ensure he was not in too much pain. He caught her watching the dancers and he covered her hand. "I can nae dance but ye should join the women." He motioned to a circle of women dancing. "Enjoy yerself."

She only danced for a short while, because more than anything, she wanted to remain next to Cynden, so they could share the experience of their wedding together.

It seemed like scant moments later that her mother neared and whispered into her ear. "Ye must go and prepare to be with yer husband. His mother is afraid he is tiring."

Ainslie shot a look to Cynden, who met her gaze. He did look a bit tired.

"Very well."

“Mother is taking me to the bedchamber,” she whispered. His lips curved and he gave her a soft nod.

As they walked away, she took her mother’s arm. “I am so very glad ye are here. I do miss ye.”

“Ye are about to miss me more,” her mother grumbled. “The birlinns will become a second home as I travel back and forth to visit.”

“’Tis nae far.”

They went up the stairs and into Cynden’s room. She’d never been inside and glanced around the space noting a nightshift and robe had been placed there for her. Other than that, there were no feminine items. It was fine as her own bedchamber was just next door.

“Mother,” Ainslie began, her face warming. “I do nae think any kind of bedsport will occur. Cynden is not fully healed yet.”

Her mother shook her head. “The marriage must be consummated. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Ainslie was uncertain what would occur in the marriage bed. She’d never considered how men and women joined. Once she’d seen a horse mount a mare, perhaps that was how it was to occur.

“Will he approach me from behind?” Ainslie asked her mother as she brushed out her hair. “Should I stand and bend over?”

Her mother let out something between a snort and gasp. “Oh...no. Ye will face one another.”

“It will be a beautiful moment,” Isobel said walking in, her cheeks rosy from drinking. “Ye will kiss, and things will naturally move forward. Do nae fret. It is quite enjoyable. Allow him to show ye how wonderful it can be. Ye both should remove all yer clothing and—”

It was comical to see her mother’s mouth fall open, then close, as she moved to stand in front of Isobel.

“There, now go to the bed.” She kissed Ainslie’s forehead, grabbed Isobel’s hand, and tugged her from the room.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IT WAS MUCH later and still Cynden had yet to appear. Heart pounding, Ainslie waited. Her gaze returning to the door over and over. At hearing footsteps and voices, she took a shaky breath. What was about to happen? She wasn't sure she'd be comfortable laying with a man, especially bereft of clothes. Hopefully, he'd allow her to keep her nightshift on. Surely there was a way to do whatever they were going to do without her having to take it off.

The door opened, the men's voices louder, most of them slurring from imbibing too much. Cynden stumbled in and looked to her. His eyes were unfocused. "I sink I shrank choo mush."

Ainslie wanted to thank the heavens. "Come sit down." She led him to a chair. "I'll help ye take off yer boots."

He complied and more fell to the chair than actually sat in it. "I should nae 'ave..." He stopped talking seeming to have lost his train of thought.

After dispensing with his boots, Ainslie looked up at him. "Now let's see about yer clothes."

"Ye look beau..." His head lolled to the side, and he fell sideways off the chair onto the floor.

"Get up," Ainslie ordered. He sat up and she carefully pulled his tunic over his head. Then when they finally managed to get him to his feet, she guided him to the bed.

Moving quickly before he could fall, she untied the fastening to his breeches and pulled them off.

"Oomph!" He fell backwards onto the bed, a splendid display of him fully nude, except for the bandages around his midsection and over his shoulder. He lay exposed with his breeches around his ankles.

Ainslie stared at him, taking in every inch. There was a sprinkling of soft hair across his chest and down the center past his stomach to a thicker bit above his sex.

He let out a soft snore, which meant she could explore and gawk at her leisure. His hips were trim, which was interesting given his thick powerful thighs.

Moving closer, she peered down at his sex. It was so very different. The soft staff lay sideways the tip resting on his thigh, behind it a sack that was not very attractive.

Alarmed at her actions, she slid a look to his face. Cynden was fast asleep.

It was a struggle, but she managed to get him up to where his head rested on a pillow and covers pulled up over him.

Married life was not so very different she decided with a smile. Then she blew out the lantern, slid between the blankets, and promptly fell asleep with her back to him.

THROUGH THE HAZE of sleep, wonderful sensations overcame her. Ainslie inhaled deeply allowing the feathery caresses to flow over her. Something was pulling her closer, against warmth and she relaxed into it.

At being kissed, her eyes flew open and peered directly into Cynden's. A bit reddened from the night before, but still a mesmerizing color of gold and green flecks intermingled with light brown.

Cynden broke the kiss. "I am sorry to have fallen asleep."

Before Ainslie could reply, he kissed her again, while tugging at her nightshift. There was nothing to be done, they would consummate the marriage and she had to comply. After all it was the only way to legitimize their union.

She trembled at the feel of his fingers on her skin, wondering if he noticed. When he hesitated, she lifted her eyes to look at him. "I am a bit nervous."

Cynden nodded. "I understand. I promise to be gentle and explain things. Does that make ye feel better?"

“Aye.”

“First we must dispense with all this clothing,” he joked, pulling the long item up and over her head. Thankfully they remained under the blankets, so she didn’t feel too exposed.

“I am afraid, ye will have to do most of the maneuvering.” With a boyish grin, he chuckled. “I will make love to ye properly once I am healed.”

“Lay onto yer back,” he instructed.

When he took her mouth again, Ainslie did her best to relax. Tentatively, she slid her hand from his shoulders down his side to his back. Admittedly, his muscular body was very nice to the touch. Emboldened, she continued exploring, moving up his back to thread her fingers through his hair.

Bolder than her, Cynden cupped her breast then lowered to take the tip into his mouth. At first, she wasn’t sure what would happen, until he sucked on it.

The most pleasing sensation traveled down her body to between her legs. While continuing with his mouth over her breast, his fingers trailed down her body to her upper thigh. At this point, she didn’t care what he did as long as it didn’t stop.

“I am going to touch yer sex,” Cynden explained, pushing her thighs apart. “Ye will enjoy it.”

Of that, she had no doubt. While at the same time, it seemed so very intimate. Should he be doing it?

His finger slid between her legs, hesitating at the very core. With the gentlest of touches, he circled there, sending shooting bursts of pleasure straight through her. Unsure of what exactly happened, Ainslie tensed.

“Relax,” Cynden whispered, his mouth hovering over hers. “Allow yerself to enjoy it.”

He continued the wonderful assault, sliding his fingers through the slickness, then slipping a finger inside. All the while he kissed her mouth, trailed his lips to her jawline, and down her throat.

It was as if feeding a tiny morsel of food to someone starving. She needed more. Ainslie lifted her hips, needing more and Cynden complied, using a second finger, while his thumb continued circling her core.

Suddenly it was as if something burst within her, and she cried out. Never in her life had she known such pleasure. Ainslie could not believe how wonderful it felt.

“Come over me,” Cynden said, his breathing harsh and rapid. “It will be like my fingers. Just a bit larger.”

When he pushed the blankets away from them, Ainslie was shocked to feel that the same rod she’d seen the night before had grown. It was thicker, longer, and much harder.

Cynden guided her to straddle him. She was tentative, ensuring not to hurt him. At the same time, he looked so strong that it was hard to think of being gentle in any way.

Once she hovered over him, he took his rod in hand. “Lower yerself onto it.”

Her eyes rounded. “Oh. I thought we would stand.”

A smile split his face. “Let us try this first.”

She lowered and stopped at the sensation of the thickness prodding at her entrance. He pushed her legs apart and then held her by the hips.

What happened took all her attention, especially when he touched her. His fingers once again circling the very center of her sex as she slowly lowered. Inch by inch, he entered her while his touch drove her crazy with desire. Ainslie threw her head back her breathing coming in short gasps.

The thick rod felt intrusive, yet wonderful. Especially in that moment when she melted with want.

“It may hurt a bit. I promise it will be quick.”

When he thrust while pulling her down to take him fully, the tearing of her virginal wall burned like a cut and Ainslie

gasped. Her eyes watered and she looked down to meet Cynden's gaze.

However, the novelty of being joined won over and she wanted to remember what it was like to have her new husband inside her. Finally, they were fully husband and wife.

The realization brought tears to her eyes. In that moment, she thought about how she always believed she would be sharing this with Thomas. It wasn't fair to Cynden to have those thoughts, but she couldn't help it.

He mistook her tears to be from the pain and he kissed them away. "We will move, and it should help." He winced a bit. "Move up a bit and then down."

She did as told. Then she did it again and again.

Soon she forgot all about the pain, about Thomas, about going to a new place. The only thought was to find release once again from the raging fire within.

Everything was gone in an instant and Ainslie shattered into thousands of shards, seeming as if she'd never be whole again. Her passionate cries combined with Cynden's deep grunts filled the room. Through the haze of her release, she felt Cynden's body tense. He let out a gritty moan as he found his own release.

Isobel had been right. Bedsport was quite enjoyable.

"ARE YE IN pain?" Ainslie asked. She lay against his right uninjured side, her beautiful curves slick with perspiration. If ever there was a time to hate Peadar, this was it. While his cock demanded more, the aches through his body reminded him it would not be possible.

"A bit aye." He let out a long breath. "I wish I could do more to ensure ye enjoyed yer first time."

She lifted her head, giving her a pointed look. "If it can be more enjoyable, I do nae think to withstand it."

Pride filled him at having satisfied his wife.

“We will have to find out if that is true.” He pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose, while silently praying the throbbing on his left side was not an indication of further injury.

“When will we leave for Skye?” Ainslie asked, seeming to have lost any interest in sleep.

Her questions were a distraction from the pain. “We leave with my brothers. I believe Alexander wishes to leave within a day.”

“What will happen with Clan MacKinnon?”

“I do nae know. I suppose another arrangement will be made. The laird’s daughter may choose another of my brothers. Though I hope a different arrangement can be made. I nae wish to be tied to that clan.”

Ainslie was silent for a long moment. “It will be good to have peace. I pray our marriage will nae cause more strife.”

“Doubtful.” Cynden pulled her against him, loving the feel of her full breasts against his chest. Even with the bandages, it was wonderful.

THERE WAS A commotion outside just as they finished dressing and Cynden went to look out. In the courtyard, guards rushed to pull apart the two who were brawling. One of the fighters was Gavin.

“Is that...?” Ainslie peered down and then looked to him. “Yer brother?”

“Aye. I best go see what occurs. This brother does nae normally lose his temper.”

Alexander had pulled Gavin away, while two guards held Peadar, who looked to be passed out.

“Ye found him,” Cynden said to the men. One gave him a triumphant look. “Aye, caught him trying to flee from the forest.”

Before he could go near the man, Darach came from the house, went directly to Peadar and grabbed him by the hair

wrenching his head up.

Peadar grunted and rolled his eyes. “My da will hear of this ye and our clan will become enemies.”

“Yer da wished to be rid of ye. I gave ye a place to live and livelihood and ye repaid me by trying to kill my cousin.”

The laird pulled out a dagger and held it across Peadar’s throat. “I do nae tolerate a traitor.”

The guards held a struggling Peadar. He spit in Darach’s face and sneered. “I wish I’d killed him. Ye are all the same. Not worthy of my service.”

“I had considered sparing ye,” Darach stated. “But ye have confessed in front of all these people.” With a swift motion, the dagger sliced across Peadar’s throat and blood spurted.

Peadar fell to his knees, a look of incredulity on his face, then he fell face first onto the ground.

Next to him Ainslie gasped and pushed her face into Cynden’s shoulder, while the guards picked up Peadar’s body and dragged him away.

“Ye should have been safe here,” Darach said meeting his gaze.

Cynden nodded. “It is nae yer fault.”

“We leave today,” Alexander said and gave Cynden an apologetic look. “We must deal with the MacKinnon issue.”

His mother exited the house and searched the courtyard until she saw him. Upon reaching them, she looked at Gavin.

“What happened?” his mother asked.

Alexander replied. “The guards caught the man who tried to kill Cynden. Gavin was the first to greet him.”

Ainslie looked up at him, she was still pale from having witnessed Peadar being killed. “I believe it is best that we go.” She peered up at the house. “In a way I am glad to bid farewell

to my parents and not prolong it. I will ensure they promise to visit me soon.”

Cynden nodded. “Aye, they should.”

THE SEA WAS choppy, but with the help of the wind the travel was brisk. The sun was still up, it was midafternoon and thankfully not very cold as the birlinns traveled toward land.

Cynden pointed to the shoreline. “There is Skye.” He then motioned to a castle atop a rocky hill. “There is Dún Scaith, keep Ross on Skye.”

Perched atop a tall hill that jutted out into the sea was a fortress. The gray edifice stood proud and formidable. From what she could see, tall walls surrounded the keep. It was not until they went closer that the bridge and then the gates to the front entrance became visible.

The isle was lush and green with mountains to the north that rose high toward the sky. Small fishing huts lined part of the shoreline, not too close to the keep, but within easy walking distance.

“Is there a village nearby?” she asked her mother-in-law who looked on whilst shading her eyes from the sun.

“Aye, a small village in Tokavaig, ye can nae see it from the shore. But ’tis there.” The woman gave her a warm smile. “I pray ye will be happy here. I know it is very different from Barra. Skye has few people, but we are a warm kind.”

Tears pricked her eyes. “I will strive to be happy and make yer son happy as well.”

The woman nodded. “He seems happier already.”

There were tents near the shoreline, where guardsmen had small fires. It seemed they’d been instructed to remain there until their laird returned.

Horses were tethered as well as several wagons on which Ainslie assumed she’d be taken to the keep.

Everyone moved with efficiency and for a moment, she was at a loss over what to do, so she went and stood next to a wagon, where her mother-in-law instructed men how to load Ainslie's items and other things the woman had purchased while on Uist.

By the time they rode from the shore to the keep, Ainslie was barely able to remain still. Everything was so different. She'd caught a glimpse of the village in the distance. All the buildings were white with thick thatched roofs. Herds of sheep covered a huge expanse of land, the animals contentedly grazing on the green grasses. She'd caught glimpses of a herd of cows and people traveling toward and from the village.

Despite the excitement and knowing Cynden would ensure nothing happened to her, shivers of fear filled her whenever she saw riders in the distance. For a place with a small population, there seemed to be a great many people about.

The gates to the keep were open, probably because word had arrived that their laird had returned. They rode through the tall archway and into a sizeable courtyard. The keep was of a good size.

Once inside she finally caught a glimpse of Cynden, who dismounted and walked toward where she remained on the back of the wagon.

"Welcome home, wife." His gaze shined with pride. He helped her down and she gave him a quizzical look.

"Ye should go to the bedchamber and rest. Ye are nae yet fully healed."

He nodded. "I will ask the cook to prepare something to ease the pain."

At the top of the stairs stood a man who had to be Cynden's third brother, Munro. This brother was as tall as the others with dark hair that was cut shorter. His expression was unreadable when he greeted her, the green gaze moving to Alexander in question. There was a sort of silent

communication between them, which she guessed had to do with the MacKinnon's expectations.

The stoic brother turned to Cynden. "I am glad to see ye are well enough to travel."

"Inside with ye." Their mother motioned to the door, her gaze pinning Cynden. "Listen to yer wife."

The interior of the keep was as expected. The great room was bereft of rushes. Instead, it was swept clean. There were four long tables for meals and only one on the high board, that would seat about eight.

Only a few people milled inside, most seeming to be performing assigned tasks. Two women wiped tables and benches, while another pair swept. A trio of dogs slept in front of a fireplace, all three lifted their heads upon the group's arrival. Two got up and rushed to the brothers expecting attention, the third seemed to consider if it was worth the energy. Finally, the old dog stood and ambled closer.

"That is Ean," Cynden said patting the latecomer's head. "The other two are her pups. Ailen and Dorcha."

The younger dogs surrounded Alexander, seeming to prefer him over the others. The usually stoic man showed infinite patience taking the time to ensure each hound received attention.

Ainslie took in the tapestries that hung on every wall, most were outdoor scenes, except one with the Ross Crest upon it. She wondered why her mother-in-law had not added any other décor. The surfaces of the mantel as well as tables along one wall were bare. There were no flowers, nor what Ainslie considered *a woman's touch*.

"I know it is not as large at the keep on Uist. But we are proud of our home," Rose said walking closer.

Ainslie smiled. "It is beautiful. And there seems to be enough room for more than just the family to live here."

"True," the woman replied.

Just then she noted Cynden nearing. He met her gaze. “Come, I will introduce ye to cook, then I must go rest.”

Once out of sight of the others, Cynden pushed her against the wall and took her mouth with his, while pressing himself fully against her. “The days until I am completely healed will seem never-ending,” he whispered against her ear. “My want for ye is stronger than the pain.”

“We shall listen to the pain,” Ainslie replied with a flirty smile. “Are there ways to enjoy intimacy that will nae hurt ye?”

His eyes sparkled with mischief. “Aye. Many ways.”

A thrill went down her spine at the thought. She kissed him quickly, her gaze darting around the empty corridor. “Ye will have to show me tonight.”

Cynden laughed. “It will be very hard to wait.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TWO WEEKS LATER, the MacKinnons sent a messenger informing them the laird wished to meet. Since arriving, Cynden and his brothers had spent many an hour attempting to find a solution that would appease the MacKinnon and ensure the tentative truce remained in place. So far, they'd not been able to come up with a good compromise to present. Now the day had come.

The great room was silent, the only ones present were him, his brothers, and their uncle, Liam McCray, who was closer to Alexander's age. Liam was their mother's youngest brother.

"I say we wait to see what the MacKinnon says after we inform him ye are married," Munro said.

"Aye, perhaps he comes with a compromise himself," Gavin added. "Then problem solved."

Liam shook his head, his dark gaze pinning Cynden. "Nay, I believe he comes to ask why we have not sent a messenger to inform him ye have returned."

Alexander shrugged and motioned for a guard to come closer. "Send the messenger in."

A young archer with a bow strapped across his back and a steady gait walked in. He stood before them, his gaze moving across their faces. By the lack of expression, Cynden gathered he'd been told not to show fear, contempt, or any other emotion.

"Tell yer laird, I await his visit," Alexander stated. "Did ye eat?"

The archer nodded. "Aye." He gave them a nod and walked out.



“THEY COME,” A guard informed them the next day. “With much fanfare.”

Cynden went out and climbed the stairs to stand above the gates. In the distance, riders with banners escorted two rows with three horses each that approached at a slow pace. Behind them were about ten archers and ten warriors.

“Are they visiting or planning for battle?” A guard came to stand beside him.

Cynden frowned. “They do nae trust us. Neither do we trust them. I doubt we will ever have a true truce.”

The warrior walked back to his post and stood side by side with others over the gates. Archers went to the upper walls, bows remaining strapped to their backs. However, it would take but a moment for the weapons to be pulled, arrows set and released if there was any threat.

The party finally arrived, and the gates were opened to them. Cynden climbed down to stand with his brothers to greet the visitors.

Since there were women with the MacKinnon, his mother and Ainslie were part of the welcoming party.

The MacKinnon was older, perhaps five and forty. He had greying hair, shrewd eyes, and was short in stature. Upon dismounting, Cynden noted that Laird MacKinnon’s two brothers were taller and more menacing, both were warriors that he recognized from battle. He didn’t know—nor care to know—their names.

The door to the carriage open and three women alighted. He wasn’t sure, but he suspected two of them were the MacKinnon’s daughters. Strange that the man would take a risk by bringing the women when the truce between them was tentative at best.

By the coloring of their fiery tresses, he suspected which two were the daughters, as the brothers had the same coloring.

The third woman kept her gaze down and stood behind the others. Probably their handmaiden.

While Alexander greeted the other laird, the women remained behind, silent. Every so often their gazes would lift, and they'd study the surroundings. One of them was bolder looking directly at him, studying him as if trying to decide if he was worthy.

He assumed it was the one who'd asked to marry him. Cynden turned to look at Ainslie, who was glaring at the woman.

When Alexander turned to make introductions, Cynden went to stand next to Ainslie.

“My brothers: Gavin, Munro, and Cynden. My mother. And this is Ainslie, Cynden's wife.” Alexander didn't hesitate, moving to their uncle. “This is my uncle, Liam McCray.”

The MacKinnon exchanged a look with one of his daughters and then introduced his group. “My brothers, Jamie and Craig. My daughters, Sorcha and Penelope.” He hesitated before introducing the third woman. “This is their stepsister, Lila.”

They went into the great room where the tables were set with greenery and candles. There were platters of meat pies, cheeses, and bread. Pitchers of ale and mead were carried in by servants, who stood by waiting for everyone to sit.

There was an awkward moment where everyone figured out where it was best to sit. In the end, the women sat together at one table, whilst the men lowered to benches at the table next to it.

As the servants filled cups, the lairds exchanged pleasantries.

Cynden sat across from Jamie MacKinnon, who he knew was an archer. The man's face was set, he seemed at ease, but not about to make conversation. It suited Cynden just fine as he wasn't particularly in the mood to speak to someone against whom he'd fought.

“What is this? Yer brother marries to keep from our agreement?” the MacKinnon stated.

The bolder of the daughters, who he now knew to be called Penelope, glared at Cynden. “No loss,” she stated. “I did nae wish to marry ye either.”

“Enough, Penelope.” Her brother glowered at her. “Ye are not invited to speak, ye are only here because we were expecting a betrothal.”

Alexander cleared his throat. Although he seemed calm, the jaw muscle flexing told that he was on edge. “Cynden did nae know about the agreement until I arrived at Uist. By then it was too late.” Not exactly a lie.

“Then who do ye propose to take his place?” The MacKinnon seemed set on marrying off one of his daughters.

The two blond daughters didn’t seem as inclined to choose another, all looking at their brother with fearful expressions. The stepdaughter didn’t show any outward sign of distress. She obviously didn’t expect to be part of the bargain.

The MacKinnon continued, “There are three to choose from. Marriage is the only way, I trust that ye will keep the truce.”

“Trust?” Alexander’s tone rose. “It is yer people who break the terms over and over again. It should be us setting the terms of this truce.” He didn’t state the obvious that the MacKinnons were outmanned and if Clan Ross wished it, they could easily overtake them.

The MacKinnon waved his hand, with an arrogant sneer. “What do ye suggest then?”

Cynden wondered how his brother kept so calm. If it were him he’d already sunk at least two fists into the idiot’s face.

“An agreement should be enough. I do agree that being joined by marriage would be a strong bond, however, my clan’s people will nae be welcoming to a woman from yer

clan. Why do ye wish to put one of them in such a place?" Alexander leaned forward on his elbows. "I would nae."

The MacKinnon shrugged. "Can ye nae protect a woman?"

"What do ye want?" Munro—the least patient of the brothers—asked.

There was a long silence. Cynden looked over to where his wife sat, noting the women all watched and listened.

"That yer laird marry Penelope," the MacKinnon said, his gaze locked with Alexander's. "A proper recompense, I would say."

Gavin let out a bark of laughter. "Ye are not asking for much. Go to hell."

"I am here representing my clan and ensuring ye are nae toying with us," the MacKinnon banged his fist on the table, liquid sloshing out of several cups.

Alexander straightened then leaned forward and stared into the MacKinnon's face. "It is ye who is toying. Ye are fully aware that if I gather my clan, we can overtake ye with ease. I do nae have to agree to anything. The only reason we are speaking is because I wish for peace for my people."

A long silence followed, the MacKinnon's daughters never looking away as one of their futures was tied to whatever the outcome was.

"What is it to be then?" the MacKinnon finally acquiesced. "How are we to assure there is peace?" The man still managed to act as if he had the upper hand. In a way he did. It was obvious he didn't care about peace but acknowledged that Clan Ross was not a foe to be toyed with. There were smaller clans on the isle, which Cynden had no doubt the arrogant man had plans for.

Alexander glanced to Munro and Gavin. "One of my brothers will marry whichever of yer daughters he chooses. They will have a fortnight to get to know them. Therefore,

they must stay here. If they still cannot choose, we will have to come up with another compromise.”

The women gasped, his brothers groaned, and Cynden frowned. “Is that necessary?” he whispered to Alexander.

“Aye, it is,” he said. “We had made an agreement for marriage, and I will stand by my word.”

The MacKinnon looked from his daughters to his brothers and lastly to the Ross brothers and stood. With a bored expression, he shrugged. “I will take my leave after we discuss the terms and such privately.”

The lairds, along with one man each, left and went to Alexander’s private study, leaving the rest of them to continue in each other’s awkward company.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“WHY WOULD YER brother suggest such as thing?” Ainslie asked as they prepared for bed that night. “To make one of yer brothers miserable with a wife he does nae want?”

Cynden went to her and began untying the laces to her blouse. “As the laird’s siblings, it is expected that we marry for the betterment of the clan. I expect Alexander will also marry one day to a woman that will bring something of value.”

“Then I am glad to have found ye,” she whispered, pressing a kiss to his lips. “I could nae bear marrying for convenience.”

Although he was grateful for finding a woman he loved more than life, a part of him felt guilty that now one of his brothers would pay with a loveless marriage. He couldn’t fathom a life without his beautiful wife.

He pulled her closer, her back pressed to him, her round bottom against his hardness. “I want ye.” Cynden pushed her hair aside to give him access to her neck and licked a trail up from her shoulder to her ear, nibbling the delicate lobe as she threw her head back against his shoulder.

A quick tug of the ties and her skirts fell to a pool around her feet, followed by her blouse and shift.

It was erotic to have the naked beauty in his arms while he remained fully clothed. Thankfully, she was too enraptured by his kisses to feel abashed at her nudity. He slid a hand between her legs whilst continuing to kiss her neck, suckling and biting while he explored her sex.

“Ahhh,” Ainslie let out a low moan, her body shivering in response to his touch.

He slipped his fingers between her folds, loving that she was damp with desire. “Ye are so perfect,” he murmured into

her ear, breathing into it.

“T-take me,” Ainslie stammered.

“Not until ye come undone,” he replied, circling the nub between her nether lips. “Let yerself go, Ainslie.”

She stiffened, then writhed when he softly pinched the nub between his forefinger and thumb. Once again, he caressed her with just his fingertips teasing the little nub until she was wreathing. To his delight, she shuddered swiftly as her release came.

Quick as he could, he lifted Ainslie and carried her to the bed.

While removing his clothes, his beautiful wife lay upon the bed. Eyes closed. Arms over her head. Sex glistening. A more erotic picture he'd never seen.

Taking her by the legs, he pulled her to the edge of the bed, then guided his sex to hers.

He wanted to drive into her, seat himself fully inside, but he also wanted to prolong the pleasure that would come. Pulling her legs around his waist, he inched into her slowly.

Ainslie opened her eyes and looked to where they were joined. Her curious gaze making him harder than a stone. Damn how he loved her. How he desired her.

“I love ye,” he murmured as her wide gaze flew up to meet his. “I love ye more than my life Ainslie.”

A soft smile curved her lips, but they parted when he thrust into her. Then taking her hips, he rocked his, moving in and out in a perfect rhythm that went from slow and steady to faster.

Soon he was drenched in sweat, his body taking over. Unable to remain upright, he was leaning over her, his hands planted on both sides of her as he drove into her over and over.

Her cries were an enticement to continue as she'd already found her release and was now climbing again. Her beautiful

body shined with perspiration, her sex wet and hot from her release and wanting more.

Soon both were gasping for breath, and heat pooled at the base of his shaft.

Ainslie bucked up, her body tense as she came again, mouth wide open, she cried out his name. It was like a siren call to him, as he lost control, spilling into her. The release was so hard that everything went black, and he collapsed over her shuddering and letting out a hoarse cry.

Cynden's hips thrust forward the movements involuntary as he released into her. Ainslie floated back from the heights she'd climbed, her entire being aflame. She didn't want to move, and neither did she want Cynden to pull away, so she wrapped her legs and arms around his damp muscular body holding him in place.

The harsh breaths against her ear were a beautiful sound as were his soft moans, deep like his voice.

"Do nae move," she instructed. "I cannot withstand it if ye move."

Cynden chuckled. "What will happen? Will ye climax again?"

"Do nae jest," she replied pressing a kiss to his damp temple.

They remained in place she released her hold on him. "Ye must be uncomfortable."

Her husband withdrew from her body, his shaft soft now. He stood and pulled her further onto the bed. He straightened and Ainslie could not look away. She would never tire of seeing him without clothing. Then he slid into the bed to lay beside her, and all felt right with the world.

"I love ye, Cynden."

The hazel gaze met hers. "Are ye sure ye do nae feel that way because I look like him?"

She cupped his face with her left hand. “When I look at ye, I only see ye.”

“Good.” Cynden took her mouth with fervor, pulling her against him and Ainslie wondered if they would sleep that night.

Ainslie woke in the early morning to find Cynden was still fast asleep. Every so lightly, she traced the lines of his face with her finger.

“I do love ye more than life husband,” she whispered and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

Cynden murmured something indecipherable and pulled her against him.

There was no other place she’d rather be.



MUNRO WALKED TO the stables. It was still very early, the sun was barely up, and the courtyard was empty as most were not awake. The birds announced the new day with loud songs of joy as he guided his horse from the stables. He needed time to think and to resolve things in his own mind. If he was not to marry, it meant Gavin would have to and he wasn’t sure which of the two of them would be the wiser choice.

He had little patience for others and the last thing he wanted was to marry the enemy’s daughter. As a matter of fact, he’d never planned to marry at all but wished to remain unattached for the rest of his life. Marriage was not something he’d ever aspired to.

A figure walked from the side of the house in the direction of a small pond inside the courtyard. Wrapped in a hooded cloak, it was hard to tell who it was, but he could tell it was a woman.

Curiosity got the best of him, and he walked over to find out who it was, his horse seeming happy to comply with the early morning walk about the courtyard.

LILA LOVED MORNINGS, a time when she could be alone and not under the scrutiny of her half-siblings. When hearing of this trip to the Ross keep, she'd planned for a pair of days of solitude away from the constant chiding of her sisters.

Now, she'd not only had to travel with them, but they'd insisted on sharing a bedroom. The night before, she'd been sent to gather hot water, help bathe them, and ensure their clothes were laid out for the following day.

They acted as if she was their personal maid and Lila was tired of it. Though without any other recourse, she was forced to live with them and hopefully it would continue for many years to come. She tread carefully where her family was concerned, not wishing to be thrown out into the street where she'd most certainly perish.

“’Tis too cold to go for a swim.” A masculine voice made her jump. She turned to see it was Munro Ross, second-born brother of Laird Ross.

He was tall and broad, with the build of a warrior. His brown wind-tussled hair reached his broad shoulders, and he had a strong square jaw. Of the brothers, she found him to be the most disturbing. Or perhaps the most fascinating if she were to be honest.

“I am nae planning to swim, but wished for quiet time to think,” she replied tearing her gaze from his direct one.

“Did ye know yer brother was going to set that decree?” she asked. “That one of ye must marry one of us?”

The warrior gave a one shoulder shrug. “It was one of the things we discussed upon finding Cynden married.”

“I see,” she replied. The water’s surface was calm, and she wondered what life there at the Ross keep would be like for whomever was chosen. To meet with disdain every day would be a horrible fate. If anyone knew how it felt, it was her.

“Which of yer sisters would want to marry one of us and live here?”

His question startled her. It was as if he was giving her a choice. “Penelope wishes for the status of marrying a laird or laird’s brother. Sorcha is in love with an archer, so she would suffer.”

His green gaze studied her until she fidgeted under the scrutiny. “And ye?”

For a long moment, she considered his question. “I think living here would nae be very different from where I currently live. I do nae truly belong at either.”

“Ye would belong where yer husband is.”

She shook her head. “At the home of my family’s enemies?”

Munro had not considered that. “Why do ye not belong at yer current home?”

Long lashed brown eyes lifted to his and she cocked her head to the side. She had a serenity about her that made him want to linger. “I grew up in the village near my father’s keep until mother died and I then went to live with him. Neither my stepmother nor half-siblings have ever cared for it. I am a burden, someone that does nae matter.”

When she lifted her face to look up at the sky, her lips curved. “I have asked my brother for a small cottage away from the keep. I think he will grant it.”

Munro was enthralled. When she wiped a tear that trailed down her cheek, he wondered why she trusted him enough to talk about such things. “It would nae be safe for ye to live alone.”

When she gave him a fearful look, he tried to look less intimidating; however, when she looked about to cry even more, he figured he didn’t succeed.

“I best go inside,” she said not moving.

“Take yer time. Ye are safe here. My brother has ordered the guards to see to it.”

Once again she looked to him and nodded, then walked to lean on a short wall and studied the view of the shore.

Munro watched the beauty for a moment longer before guiding his horse away. He'd made his decision. He would ask to marry Lila MacKinnon.



AINSLIE WALKED INTO the great room surprised to find no one about but a few of the servants, who cleaned up after the midday meal.

In front of the hearth, two of the three MacKinnon daughters sat speaking in low tones. The dark-haired sister was not in the room, and she wondered why. It seemed these two didn't care much for their stepsister.

Upon her nearing they stopped talking and looked to her, neither bothering to act as if they were glad to see her. Penelope lifted a brow. "I hear yer marriage was quite sudden. I wonder if it is not but a trick to keep Cynden from marrying."

The other sister eyed her midsection. "Or perhaps ye had to marry?"

Ainslie shrugged. "Neither. If there is anything ye require, please let the servants know." She continued past hoping to find Cynden.

Upon walking outside to the garden, everyone was gathered. Ainslie hesitated wondering if they were having a private conversation. Munro looked over and nodded. "Please come and join us."

Cynden's mother looked as if she'd been crying and immediately Ainslie went to her. "Is something wrong?" She looked to the four brothers who seemed to be at a loss as to what to do.

"What happened?" Ainslie asked.

Cynden walked closer and stood in front of her and his mother. "It is about my truth. The reason I came to be."

“I do nae understand,” Ainslie said searching his face. “What truth?”

The matriarch let out a shaky breath and spoke in a low tone. “Cynden’s father is not my other sons’ father.”

Her stomach plummeted and Ainslie looked to each of Cynden’s three brothers. “Who is he then?”

Alexander’s warm gaze fell upon his mother. “It does nae matter. Not only is our mother not at fault, but to us, Cynden is no different.”

“I am glad to hear that. Is there any reason anyone else should know?” Ainslie asked.

Gavin shook his head. “We have decided not to inform anyone else. There is no reason for it. It changes nothing.” He neared and took his mother’s shoulders. “Ye must stop fretting about it. No one will ever know.”

“Is yer father, the late laird Ross of Uist?” Ainslie asked as five sets of eyes flew to her. Hurriedly, she continued, “When I was riding with Lady Mariel and Lady Isobel in the coach, she mentioned that it was possible that my late betrothed was her late husband’s offspring. That the late laird fathered many bairns. She said he was ruthless and often took women against their will.”

She took a deep breath. “The subject came up because we discussed how much ye look like Darach, er...Laird Ross.” She looked to Alexander. “The other Laird Ross.”

“So she suspects?” Rose asked, with a stricken expression.

“I do nae think so,” Ainslie replied unsure why she’d said so much. It was too late to stop. “Lady Mariel went on to say that Munro and Gavin look a lot like her sons as well.”

There seemed to be a collective sigh of relief.

“We are cousins. Of course we all look alike.” Gavin stared at Cynden for a long moment and then turned to Rose. “Mother, are ye sure it is nae me who is the half-brother? I do

nae look like any of them. I am much too handsome to be related to them.”

Ainslie laughed. How Gavin seemed to find a perfect way to lighten the mood was extraordinary.

In that moment, she felt fully part of the family.

Her family.



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Enticing. Engaging. Romance.

USA Today Bestselling Author Hildie McQueen writes strong brooding alpha Highlanders who meet their match in feisty brave heroines. If you like stories with a mixture of passion, action, drama and humor, you will love Hildie's storytelling where love wins every single time!

A fan of all things pink, Paris, and stationery, Hildie resides in eastern Georgia, USA, with her super-hero husband Kurt and three little yappy dogs.

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