

Glen Coe
Highlanders

*Highland
Beauty*

Michelle Deerwester-
Dalrymple

Highland Beauty

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BOOK 3

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Chapter One

LATE SPRING, 1691

Lord Protector and new Secretary of Scotland hung his head when his secretary bowed and announced the arrival of William Bentinck, the Earl of Portland and King William's lackey.

The man's appearance in Scotland did not bode well – only the most dire of reasons would bring the king's most diplomatic earl to Edinburgh.

Viscount John Dalrymple had recently been appointed Secretary of State of Scotland, and with it came a slew of egregious responsibilities, many of which soured his stomach

over the recent fight over the Scottish crown. Now the king's cohort was at his door, a Dutch man who had the opportune luck of being William of Orange's closest friend when William managed to usurp King James and assumed the throne. John and the earl were near in age, and John was in the unenviable position of bowing to a Hanover Earl because of the man's absurd fortune of being friends with the man who would be king – a man with more power and prestige than John had with long-term employ for the Crown.

Life was just not fair. Now he had to entertain and probably take orders from a lackey who bore his peerage like a fancy cloak for others to admire.

Not fair.

Bentinck entered the study, his blue velvet coat well cut and his dark brown hair long and loose, curling around his tight face. John scratched his hairline where his annoyingly heavy white wig met his forehead and he wondered when this man might feel the need to wear a proper wig. His smooth, loose curls were an insult to his position.

Truly, the man was insufferable.

“Lord Protector.” Bentinck beamed as he entered and dipped his head to John, who bowed deeply at the earl's boorish entrance.

“Lord Portland. What brings ye to Edinburgh this fine summer day?”

The man's deep-set, hooded eyes scanned the study before moving to the chair. Lord Portland's toothy smile did not quite reach those studious eyes, and John understood the king's man was in Scotland for something more significant than a social call.

John had not made it to the position of Secretary of State and Lord Protector of the Highlands by misreading situations.

The king was outraged that many Highland clans still supported James Stuart who had abdicated the throne, and not James's daughter or William, her husband, who presently sat on the throne as Queen and King. William was working with allied clans, the Campbells most significantly, to help encourage rogue Highland clans such as the MacDonalds to sign the Oath of Allegiance. Thus far, they had been unsuccessful.

The Earl of Portland settled into the padded chair across from John's tidy desk and crossed one woolen-hosed leg over his other knee so that his black buckled shoe caught in the early morning light. Brushing off an imagined speck of dust from the side of his shoe, Bentinck huffed out a breath.

"The king is none too pleased ye haven't found the letter, John."

Bentinck's lightly accented voice carried the weight of the crown behind it, and his face shifted to match the displeasure in his voice. Gathering his wits about him, John strode to his desk and sat in his own chair to face Lord Portland.

“The Earl of Breadalbane has assured me that he is finding the letter as we speak.”

While his words might have sounded supportive of John Campbell of Breadalbane, his mind spoke the truth about his real feelings toward the man.

Feckin’ Slippery John. Why hasn’t he done his job yet and found this silly letter?

Sweat formed under Dalrymple’s wig, and he had to force himself to fold his hands on his desk. He was not going to let Portland know that this meeting unsettled him.

“King William requested that I convince you and your Highlanders of the importance of this letter. Perchance you might convey that importance to your earl.”

Lumping John in with the wild Highlanders. Of course, Lord Portland would do that. John picked at his thumbnail.

“I have assurances that he is on track to find the letter and might even have it in his position already.”

Portland would not know, so why not twist the truth to suit John’s needs?

Bentinck’s steady gaze remained fixed on John.

“The King wants added assurances. Ye will be held personally responsible if it’s not found.”

He paused and let those words permeate John, who readily understood his livelihood, nay his very life, hung in the balance if he did not find that letter.

Feck me, John cursed to himself.

“And he’s weary of these wars and conflicts and the general instability outside of any threat the letter might pose,” Bentinck continued, as if he had not just threatened John’s life. “He has decided to bring the clans to heel and they are not accepting the Oath. They are taking this Oath requirement lightly, waiting on the abdicated James to take action.”

Lord Portland set his foot down and leaned toward John’s desk, resting his arm along the edge. “We cannot have that. As a result, the king has made a decision.”

John narrowed his eyes under the edge of his wig. “The clans know there will be reprisals if they dinna sign. The king had made that clear from the outset.”

“Yes, but the vague threat of reprisal does not seem to be creating any sense of urgency. How many oaths have you received in the past few months?” Bentinck asked, acting as though he did not know the answer.

John tried not to react. “None as of late,” he admitted.

“Yes.” The earl’s head bobbed. “And that is the problem. So the king has decided to make an example of these errant clans. Show them they cannot think themselves above the authority of the king.”

The sweat under John’s wig dried immediately, turning to ice at the veiled threat that hung in the air. There had already been so much war and bloodshed – certainly the king was not going to call for more of it, not after the bloody battle at

Killiecrankie and the religious and political Irish fiasco of a battle at the River Boyne. Surely the foreign king had learned his lesson?

Yet King William's most devout diplomat presently sat in his office. Evidently, the king was going to call for more blood to be spilled. John swallowed back the bile collecting in his throat. He swallowed hard.

"What sort of example?" he asked.

Portland sat back in his chair and folded his hand over his taut belly. "The king would prefer diplomacy first. He started soliciting rewards and amnesty for the larger Highland chiefs if they signed the Oath. Breadalbane and his Campbells, and a few other clans have signed. Now he feels that it would behoove the Crown to trickle those rewards down to the rest of the clans. The more, the better, eh? Divide and conquer."

His Dutch accent slipped out more as he spoke, and if Lord Portland knew it, John believed it would bring the composed man dismay.

An imperfection in a man who sought out perfection was John's estimation.

Dalrymple, relieved that the solution was one of money and not blood, grasped his quill and dipped the sharpened tip into his inkwell. With deft movements of his fingertips, he listed out some of the Chieftains who might benefit from this change in circumstance. The sound of the tip scratching along the parchment was the only sound in John's study.

“Yes, ‘tis a fine solution,” Lord Portland murmured as John wrote, his voice tinged with an odd tone that made John’s skin crawl and revealed that there was more to Bentinck’s news than those chieftains who might be bribed.

John stopped writing and lifted his gaze to Portland. The man had not moved, and that alone sent another chill through John.

Maniacal. That was the word that described the Hanoverian patsy. The man was maniacal.

“If there’s nothing else ...” John hoped that Portland was finished and would take his leave.

But hopes were like bubbles under King William, weak and easily burst.

“But we must have more incentive. Some chiefs just cannot be enticed, yes?”

John’s cheek twitched, but he did not respond.

“So, the king would like for you to make another list with your fine hand. The clan chiefs who are adamant about not signing, those Jacobites who are most in support of a fake pretender.”

“For levies or ...” John trailed off again, sweeping the feathered end of his quill over a blank paper.

“We know from your Earl of Breadalbane that none of the Highland chiefs, especially those in the Lochaber region, intend to keep any vow of fealty. They are waiting on the pretender. So more dire consequences are required. Write a

letter to let your colleague know that we intend to completely oust those clans.”

John set down his quill. “Oust?”

Portland dipped his chin. “Your reports and others we have read suggest the MacDonalds of the Lochaber region, Glen Coe, Glengarry, Keppoch, and Lochiel, are leaders of the Jacobites, and in close contact with the deposed James.”

John’s lips were suddenly very dry. Was this Hanoverian patsy actually suggesting declaring war on one of the largest clans in the Highlands, on Scottish soil? Nothing good could come of that. *Nothing*.

“If the MacDonalds fall, then the Dundees and Camerons and all of their lot will swear their loyalty to the king without issue.”

Portland stood quickly, and John scrambled to stand respectfully with him. In truth, he was in far too much shock to move as rapidly as the earl. His mind could not make sense of what he had just heard.

“You will see it done. Share the information with the earl whom you’ve entrusted with the letter and other Crown duties in this wasteland of a country. Have him see what the MacDonalds know and encourage them harder to sign. If this goes as planned, then no more bloodshed will be necessary and the clans, all of them, even those Highland barbarians, will come to heel.”

With a final condescending look at John, the Earl of Portland spun on his narrow heel and exited the study.

Only then could John breathe again, albeit with shaky, nervous breaths.

And he'd write the cursed letters to Breadalbane, who would relish the news, but Portland's parting statement did not sit well.

Come to heel.

Nay, John thought. *I dinna think this will bring the Highland clans to heel at all.*

He scratched absently at his itchy hairline as he stared at the partly open door.

Nay, Highlanders were not the sort to come to heel under the threat of violence at all.

This dictate all but guaranteed more bloodshed.



Chapter Two

“COME WITH ME, LASS.”

Sawny’s smooth, whispery voice sent shivers down her spine, and Adaira eagerly placed her hand in his. From his dulcet tone, she knew exactly why he wanted her to join him, and it sent a fluttering thrill of desire through her chest and low in her belly. His eyelids shadowed his lust-filled stare, and his entire dark-haired visage rivaled the devil himself.

They were supposed to be readying themselves for the celebratory feast that night, but the moment she had laid eyes on her intended as he rode into the bailey, her body trembled. It was as if he had reached out and touched her with his mere gaze, and the intensity on his face told her he felt the same.

The feast could wait.

Their privacy could not.

Sawny's rough palm was warm as he clasped her hand. Gripping her skirts in her other hand, Adaira allowed him to lead her away at a quick pace from her parents' Glenachulish stronghold. The servants and stable boys did not turn a head as they raced across the yard to the side where the tower's postern gate stood open, her hair and skirts flying behind her.

This was not their first time racing away from the safety and guardians at the MacDonald tower, and Adaira knew, it would not be their last.

Their passion for each other rivaled that of Helen and Paris of the ancient world. That ill-fated couple paled in their love when it came to Sawny and Adaira. And that same passion had started to become a most scandalous rumor in the Highlands and a bone of embarrassed contention with her family.

She was fortunate, she knew. All she had to do was look at her older brothers to know that. Reade and Maddock both had been graced with wives not of their choosing, and while they presently adored their wives and loved them dearly, it had not been so when they had first met.

As Sawny tugged her hand harder and encouraged her to run faster, she thought of the first time she had met the man who would become her betrothed. Just over a year ago at a feast at the MacDonalds of Keppoch, and their attraction had been shocking and immediate. Everything about him had enticed her, from the fire in his eyes when he gazed at her to the way

his dark hair fell across his forehead and curled at the tips in the most unruly way. Well-built with a broad chest and thick thighs that peeked out from under his kilt when he strode into her hall, all bespoke of his strength as a Keppoch MacDonald.

He had snuck her into the empty pantry later that very night, kissing her with such urgency, his full, strong lips on her mouth, her neck, even along the weight of her overly-ample bosom that heaved above her fitted bodice.

From that moment, every meeting of theirs had been one of furtive glances and stolen kisses before sneaking away for more. Always more. The more she had him, the more she wanted him, needed him. Sawny brought her impossible sensations and lifted her body to unbelievable heights. Theirs had been a meeting of bodies, of minds, of souls, of hearts.

And soon, of houses.

Not soon enough for Adaira.

Or for Sawny, it seemed, from the heated look in his hazel gaze. They breached the tree line, and once out of view of the road, Sawny thrust her against the smooth trunk of a beech tree, his burning face pressed into the curve of her neck.

“Sawny, we are too close to the keep —” she tried to protest weakly.

She grew weak every time he was near, and weaker still when his skin caressed hers — his hands, his lips, his cock.

“Then let them see,” he rasped as his lips reached her breasts.

With a light tug on her bodice, he popped her breasts from their bindings, abundantly full and round, a feast for his eyes and lips. Sawny drew his tongue across the top, then dipped his tongue to her nipple, licking and nipping at the left, then the right, making the pink tips stand rigid in his mouth.

“We are to be married,” he continued as he lifted his head. He was panting, his eyes shadowed by desire as he gazed at her face. He burned with his need for her, from his eyes to his forceful, clenching thighs. “Let them see all they wish.”

Through her own breathless lips, she smiled. He moved his lips to her smile, kissing her deeply as he lifted his kilt. She gripped her skirts, lifting them above her thighs. His knee moved, parting her willing flesh, and with a deep, vibrating groan into her mouth, he shoved his hot, eager manhood inside her.

She gasped at the sensation, digging her fingertips into his shoulders. This was everything, this moment of being joined with Sawny, of his body a part of hers, of being one with him. When his body was not completely his, nor was her body completely hers.

Then he moved, sliding in and out, making her weepy flesh sing. His lips remained on hers, panting hard as he pumped his hips, touching her everywhere between her thighs with his steadily increasing movements.

“Let them see what we have and how badly I must have ye.” His words disappeared in her breathless mouth as he ground his lips to hers.

She squirmed and writhed under his tight hold. Each time he slammed into her, she shuddered as her back slid over the tree trunk, the only piece of the world that she could hold onto as Sawny's kisses and ardent cock drew her to greater and greater heights. If she did not have the tree, surely she would have fallen off the earth itself ...

His lips slid from her mouth to her cheek, and when he spoke, his breath was hot on her cheek and mixed with the yeasty scent of mead and his own musky scent.

“Let them all watch.” His voice was little more than a harsh whisper, his breathing jagged. He was reaching his moment with her, rocking harder. “Let them see what it is when a man loves his woman with abandon, loves her more than any other, with all of his soul ...”

His words drifted off in a moan with his final thrusts, hard, deeper inside her than she thought possible. And as she opened her mouth to screech out her moment, her body quivering in waves, he crushed his mouth over hers, capturing her cries of desire as if he needed to consume them, as if letting free any moment of their joining was to waste it.

As he swallowed her gasping out his name, he surged inside her, pouring his essence into her in a few final clenches of his body.

He slid one hand off her waist and rested it against the erstwhile beech tree. When he lifted his face to look at her, it glowed in the late afternoon sun, making his ruddy cheeks and sparkling eyes even more engaging and casting him in a

golden-brown glow. Adaira cupped the stubble along his jaw, and he shifted, pulling out of her.

The sense of loss, of emptiness, a dismaying contrast to the joy of how he filled her.

God, how she loved him.

“Christ’s blood, Ada. I canna wed ye fast enough. If for naught else than to plow ye in a decent bed. My legs always quake after I take ye.”

She giggled lightly at his observation. “I canna agree more. Far too many of my kirtles have stains on the backside, and I dinna think I can make many more excuses for the state of my gowns.”

Sawny shifted to lean on his arm against the tree next to her. He traced her bodice neckline to where it disappeared underneath her bounteous breasts.

“Ye shall have all the gowns ye need once we are wed. I’d no’ have the worry of a stained gown stop me from having ye whenever and wherever we want.”

Brushing away a long lock of golden blonde hair from where it stuck along her cheek, she twisted her face to his.

“Ye might want to see about hiring more weavers then. I dinna believe there’s enough wool in all the highlands to satisfy that need.”

“Ye satisfy *my* every need,” he murmured and kissed her nose.



Chapter Three

THAT EVENING, AS THE stars began to sparkle against the navy-blue sky and after sneaking back into her chambers without any servants or, God forbid, her mother seeing her, Adaira changed out of her kirtle and set it upon her trunk.

She and Sawny might be getting married in a fortnight, but that did not mean her parents, Sorcha or Seamus, would approve of their illicit trysts.

Fortunately, this time they had remained upright as they coupled, which saved her from the work of scrubbing out yet another set of dirt and grass stains.

In nothing but her chemise and bare feet, she padded over to her tall wardrobe, a gift from her parents when she had started her monthly courses, signifying she had become a woman. Her mother, the bull of a woman that was Sorcha MacDonald, had insisted on the magnificent gift, and Seamus denied his wife nothing. A new wardrobe for the new woman.

Although, Adaira would have liked the wardrobe to have been bit shorter in construction. Sorcha might have hoped that her daughter would reach similar heights as her sons, but nay. The sons took after their tall father, while Adaira was nearly a perfect duplicate of their shorter, buxom mother.

Thus, in addition to the wardrobe, her father had also gifted her a step stool so Adaira might reach the top shelves.

Selecting a pair of soft leather shoes, a clean chemise, and a heather-purple-hued gown, Adaira set the stool in its place to the side of the wardrobe and slipped the chemise and gown over her head.

Adaira finished pinning her shiny gold hair atop her head as she waited for her mother or one of the servants to check on her and help adjust her gown and hair, because she wanted it to be perfect. Tonight was another feast, this one with more than merely her family and close kin. This feast included her soon-to-be close kin, the MacDonalds of Keppoch.

More specifically, her betrothed Sawny.

Though she had just spent a lascivious afternoon with the man, time clicked by at an agonizingly slow pace until the moment she saw him again. Time was a thief, and every

second she was not with him was another moment robbed from them. Over the past year, Sawny had become her everything.

Alexander Argyle MacDonald, whom everyone had called Sawny since he was a wee bairn, had arrived at Glenachulish with his father to discuss Highland politics with her father, Seamus MacDonald, and her uncles less than two years ago.

Neither she nor Sawny had been interested in Highland politics, rather they had been much more interested in each other.

Reade, the protective older brother he was, had tried to keep Sawny's puppy-ish eyes far from Adaira, but her voluptuous curves and sprightly character had caught him in her web, and he had been trapped ever since. Maddock, her other older brother, had slapped Reade's shoulder and laughed.

“Ye are fighting an uphill battle even ye know ye canna win. Let the lad pursue her.”

They had then spent the last year escaping over-protective eyes and in each other's arms. Her first time with Sawny had been behind the barns, on a pile of soft hay covered by a brushed plaid, and he had taken his time, making sure she enjoyed as much of the moment as he. Then he had held her under the stars and offered to ride up to the sky and steal a star for her if she wished.

“Anything ye wish,” he had said, staring deep into her eyes. ‘Twas what he always said.

Adaira smiled to herself at the memory. Anything she wished.

And thus far, he had more than delivered. She did not need stars, though. Sawny was everything she wished for.

And for the past year, Sawny had done exactly that, pursuing her with a focus and intensity she had never before seen with any man. Now, less than a fortnight until they wed, Adaira was unable to set her mind on anything else.



As Adaira stabbed the final, contrary pin into place (*why was pinning up her hair so difficult? It slid out of the pins at the least movement of air!*), one of the house servants, Grace, knocked lightly at the door before peeking her face around the edge.

“Allo, Adaira! Might I help ye dress?”

“Aye, Grace, and in a thrice if ye would!”

Grace grinned as she closed the door behind her. She, like everyone else in the keep, knew how strong and passionate the bond was between Adaira and Sawny, and she did not blame the lass for wanting to hurry downstairs to the main hall where her beloved awaited.

Adaira and Sawny were like a Highland fairy tale to the MacDonalds.

Adaira lifted her skirts as she swept down the stairs with Grace, keeping her hemline free from her feet, lest she tumble down the stairs. She had done that once as a child as she chased Reade and Maddock, and after her brothers finished laughing at her contorted state, they helped her to her feet, wiped her tears, and never let her forget her clumsy nature.

Clumsy. Ha! She had not tumbled down a single stair since. She would not give her brothers the pleasure of laughing at her again.

So they found other ways to tease her.

Holding on to the curved stone wall as she rounded the base, Adaira rushed through the archway into the main hall and searched.

He barely lifted his head to have his dusky eyes meet hers, catching her attention from under lowered lids. Like a loch at sunset, deep and intense, Sawny's gaze captured hers from across the hall, as if she was the only person he saw amongst the throng.

Adaira knew one thing for certain – Sawny was all she saw.

“About time ye joined us, lass,” a voice spoke from her side. Reluctantly tearing her eyes from Sawny's enchanting gaze, she turned her head up to Reade who stood stiffly with his arms crossed over his chest.

He was always stiff and on edge. At least when his wife, Blair, was not around. Then he turned to pudding.

But right now, Blair was nowhere to be seen and Reade's grumpy frown was fixed on the same thing her eyes had been.

Sawny.

Reade detested the rogue Keppoch MacDonald, as he did most Keppochs.

"Ye dinna have to use pins to keep your hair up," she commented dryly. "Thus, ye dinna have standing to criticize my tardiness."

Reade turned his head slightly to peer down at his little sister, as one light brown eyebrow rose on his forehead. A familiar expression. "Och, perchance if ye spent less time running off with your intended, ye'd have the time."

Adaira's lips thinned at his statement. They *had* been seen. So much for secrecy.

"Dinna tease your sister." The voice of an angel came to her rescue. Adaira looked around Reade's thick chest to find his stunning, red-haired wife on his other side. Blair slipped her arm through Reade's and his stiff stance relaxed immediately. As she had thought – pudding. "They have good reason to hide away. They are to be wed in a fortnight."

Hearing the words spoken aloud made Adaira's heart flutter. *A fortnight*, and she would be married to Sawny.

That day could not come soon enough.

Reade and Blair walked Adaira to Sawny's side, and he stood, pulling out a chair for her with a bow. Blair smiled at

the gesture, but Reade glared at the poor lad until they were both seated. Only then was Blair able to drag Reade away.

Sawny's hand, made rough from years of horsemanship, reached under the table and clasped hers in his warm grasp. She noticed he had a driving need to touch her no matter where they were or what they were doing – his hand on her back, holding her elbow, her arm threaded through his, or holding her hand out of sight as they did now.

The touch made their romance connection real. Tangible.

A swath of his dark hair fell across his forehead, partially obscuring his gaze, but she felt the intensity of his rich eyes on her face through the unruly locks. He jutted his chin upward to flick the loose locks off his face.

“Eat quickly. Because I've been away from ye too long,” he said in a low voice as he leaned toward her under the guise of placing a slice of pork on her plate.

“Ye saw me a few hours ago. A lot of me,” she whispered back, biting back a giggle.

“A single minute without ye is too long.” He nudged her with his bare knee. “Eat your meal, smile at your parents, nod to acknowledge mine, then meet me in the garden. Dinna make me wait. Please.”

They would not tuck in the garden – it was far too public for such a thing. But more than once he had skittered her off to a private alcove or the side of the barn to steal kisses and soft touches.

And how could she deny him? This was likely one of the last times she would see him before she met him at the front of the church to marry. Their fathers were both embroiled by this infamous, elusive letter that had the Highlands up in arms and it had kept Sawny and her brothers busy in the search for it.

A letter Adaira seriously doubted existed. Something so risky and significant that could topple a king? It would never be written down. Only a fool would write something like that down on a parchment that could be read by the wrong person. She saw the quest for this letter as a sure way to find one's body at the wrong end of a sword. And Adaira would do anything and everything to guarantee such a fate did not befall Sawny. She had lost one cousin to an English sympathizing clan – she would not lose Sawny as well.

She clenched Sawny's hand hard at the thought, and he gave her a sultry, curling smile, not knowing the fierce grip was more a result of her dire thoughts than agreement to his offer to sneak away to the gardens.

Well, that too. She would meet him there as soon as enough people were entertained with food and drink, and she wouldn't be missed.

Or at least, missed too much.

The festive air was a fair change from the frantic search for the Mungo Gordon letter that could potentially challenge the king. For the MacDonalds of Glen Coe, Glenachulish, and Keppoch, a feast was a rare celebration in these times. They

were using Adaira and Sawny's upcoming wedding as an opportunity to celebrate as much as possible.

For which Adaira was grateful. It allowed her the chance to spend as much time with Sawny as possible.

Her pork and jellied bannock were gone, devoured as she was deep in thought and staring at the dark visage of the man who captured her every waking thought. She had memorized each line of Sawny's face, the sharp angle of his jaw under a black scruff of day's beard growth – she shivered as she recalled its rough texture against her tender breasts. His eyes were hooded, shadowed by his thick black brows. He was everything hard and sharp, except for his full lips. Those were soft.

The reminder of how soft prompted her to move. Taking a quick drink of mead, she glanced around the hall to make sure the crowd seemed otherwise occupied. Her parents were in deep conversation with the Keppoch MacDonalds, while Reade and Maddock only had eyes for their wives. Her younger brother Conall was nowhere to be found.

There was no time like the present.

Cutting a sly gaze to Sawny, she slipped her hand from his grasp and excused herself. Taking a roundabout way toward the kitchens to make it appear she was socializing, she crept into the darkened recesses of the hall and marched directly to the rear door off the kitchens that opened to the gardens.

The corner where the main tower extended in a wing to the east was shrouded in darkness, away from the flicking torches

that alighted the yard. Lifting her skirts out of the dewy grass, she stepped lightly to that corner.

She did not worry about Sawny not seeing her or immediately following. They had escaped to this shadowy, private corner many times.

Adaira had made it past the circle of light when the kitchen door creaked behind her, and her heart leapt to her throat.

Would the excitement she felt when Sawny was near ever diminish?

God, she hoped not.

She lived for that feeling. It was her reason for waking every morning.

With a quick scan of the yard, Sawny rushed to the shadows and in that same movement, shoved her against the stone wall, wrapped her in his arms, and kissed her. Hard, crushing her lips, as though he had not seen her in months, rather than hours.

“We canna stay long, my love,” she whispered into his mouth.

He lifted his face, and she watched the subtle shift of his jaw as his gaze trailed down her cheek to her neck and paused to appreciate the buxom round globes of her breasts that surged against her bodice.

“As ye wish, my Highland beauty.”

Returning his consuming gaze to her eyes, his eyes remained fixed and burning down into her fluttering chest as his lips moved to her neck, nuzzling her skin, chasing away the chill in the air with the heat that radiated off him. He was like a continually burning fire, savoring the taste of her body as if he had never tasted anything so perfectly heavenly before.

She shuddered at his touch, at his gaze, at the sheer everything that was Sawny.

Her mind, her body, her heart, all of her, was his. And he knew it. And he returned all that was himself and more.



Chapter Four

IF THEY REMAINED ABSENT too long, it would be noticed, that Sawny knew for certain. As much as he despised letting Adaira go, time and obligation forced his hands. A few quick kisses in the dark would be all he'd have of her this night.

“Only a few days more, my love,” Sawny told her as he led her back to the kitchens. They picked their way through the burgeoning garden growth, lettuce leaves and carrot stalks lining the way. They paused near the kitchen door. “Then naught will separate us.”

That was the fantasy he longed to believe. He had been raised rough and wild, trailing his cousins as they reived and

fought among clan and enemies. The moment he met Adaira, something inside him softened, and the foundation under his feet shifted. Her deep green eyes caught him in a stare that webbed him up like the spider traps her prey, and he was smitten from then on.

Theirs was a true love match, and if their betrothal worked out according to their parents' machinations, so much the better. No arranged marriage or unrequited love for them.

Quite requited, on the contrary.

His cock flexed under his kilt at the memory of earlier that day in the woods.

Sawny could not get enough of her. He was like a man possessed.

Surely no man before him had ever loved a woman so passionately.

He glanced to his side to peer at her cherubic profile with a hidden, heated gaze.

Or been loved so passionately in return. Adaira gave all of herself to him — her body, her smile, her kind and supportive words, her whole self.

Aye, a fantasy love indeed. And he hated when they had to leave that fantasy and return to the real world of family conflicts and Highland politics.

If he had his way, he would run away with her and hide themselves from the world.

“That sounds heavenly,” she’d said when he spoke the heartfelt words aloud. No mocking, no condescending, no pandering to his foolish romantic ideas. Nay, she’d run away with him in a trice.

That was what he loved about her.

“Ye are heavenly,” he said in a heady voice as he wrapped his arm around her waist before they entered the kitchens and left this fantasy. “Ye are the light to my dark, the soft to my hardness, the calm to my wild. Ye are my heaven, right here in my arms.” Her breathing increased, pushing her ample breasts high against the flat planes of his chest. He kissed the tip of her nose. “We could go. I would take ye away now. We could. I’m sure the isles have some parts that are unexplored, where we might find a croft and live quite peaceably. Just you and me.”

She squeezed his hand lightly. “Aye. Mayhap a cow for milk and butter, and a garden.”

“I’d give ye as many cows as ye wanted. Chickens too, if ye want eggs.”

“I could find a use for them,” she replied as she bit her lip. “I can make ye a fine Scotch egg.” A slight sigh that broke the night air followed her claim.

Sawny paused, stepped in front of, and took both of her hands in his.

“What ails ye, my love?”

Adaira flicked her gaze to the side before speaking. “I fear that these dreamy words are just that, dreams. What if something happens to us?”

The worry was an odd consideration coming from someone as bright and lively as Adaira. It was not like her to let shadows gather in her mind.

“Ye mean, given the state of the Highlands, and my family’s pressing issues with the MacIntoshes? Aye, ‘tis understandable that ye worry for our safety.”

“I feel like I am constantly waiting for something to go wrong. Since Camden’s death, and the battles your family has fought as of late, I fear that all our hopes and dreams might be taken away in a heartbeat. ‘Tis like we are in this perfect bubble, and at any moment, ‘twill pop.”

Her fear was valid. Who did not have a concern for the well-being of family and kin in the Highlands as of late? Scottish politics and clan division had become dangerous things. And his clan of Keppoch MacDonalds was not known for their level-headedness.

They were renown as wild, ruthless heathens. Sawny had frankly been shocked that the austere Seamus MacDonald had permitted him to court his daughter.

Sawny leaned down until his forehead touched hers. Her worried green eyes were naught more than darkened orbs in the flickering torchlight.

“I vow to ye, Adaira, that all I say to ye is true. And I will fight to the very end to keep ye by my side. I will let naught, and I mean *naught*, stop us from being together and living this life we have. I’d stand alone before a thousand men with naught but my sword to make certain that happens.”

Then he kissed her. His excitement for her surged in his chest and groin, and he pressed his hardness against her hip.

As she slid her arms around his neck, the kitchen door squealed open, interrupting their romantic interlude. They jumped, startled to find an ornery-looking Reade peeking out of the door. His jaw was set as he glared at them.

“I thought I’d find ye here. Ye’ve had enough time alone this day. Sawny, your family is making ready to depart. Ye should join them.”

With a final snarly glare at the pair, he spun and departed, but left the kitchen door open as a reminder.

Sawny sighed. Once he left Glenachulish, he’d likely not see her again until their wedding day. He encircled her in his arms again, open door be damned.

“Christ’s blood, your brother hates me.”

Adaira grinned up at him. “Nay, my sweet. He does no’ hate ye. He hates ye are marrying me. He’s forever been the overly protective sort. And he is no’ as light-hearted about life or his family as Maddock or Conall, or even Logan. I’ve been his little sister his whole life. Now a man is taking that sister away

and doing salacious things with her. He's worried about ye breaking my heart."

Sawny's gaze locked onto Adaira's bright eyes. "He thinks that because I am from Keppoch. He should know I would sooner flay myself alive and fall on my own sword than bring any measure of heartache to ye. I would challenge even death to bring ye joy."

Her smile widened. "Of that I have no doubt."

He kissed her again, then begrudgingly pulled back.

"Och. We should go inside. I'd not prefer your brother having to come find us again. Then ending might be far less sweet."

Sawny grabbed the door handle and yanked it open for her.

Adaira giggled as she took his hand and led him back to the hall.



Sawny was slow to follow his parents away from the main hall; his gaze continued to linger on the bold, beautiful woman who was soon to be his wife.

His *wife*.

The words were at once shocking and exhilarating, making his chest swell. To be married —

Someone shoved against his shoulder, disrupting his dallying thoughts as he stumbled to the side.

Sawny turned to find Reade glowering down at him.

Only a finger-length taller, but Reade's girth and sour disposition made the man seem nearly as tall as his giant of a brother, Maddock. Reade was the sort of man who came from the womb angry at the world. Right now he seemed determined to turn that sour anger on Sawny.

"Speak with me a moment."

Reade's voice did not leave any room for argument, nor did the man's rough grasp on Sawny's shoulder.

Flipping up his hands in acquiescence and to force Reade's hand off his tunic, Sawny followed Adaira's eldest brother to an empty corner near the main door.

Sawny faced off with Reade, inhaling his own broad chest. He had encountered men far more frightening than his betrothed's brother, and he would not permit Reade to believe he cowered from him in any way. Reade was but an irritation to Sawny's eyes.

"What would ye say to me?" Sawny asked, trying not to smirk. He had a strong sense of what was causing Reade to glower.

Reade's light eyes darkened. "I tell ye this. I know ye and your family. Ye are a wild, lawless sort, and ye bring shame on the MacDonald name. My mother might fall for your charms, and my brothers are entertained by ye. What Adaira sees with

ye, however, I canna guess. Ye might have all of them fooled. But know this, if ye bring that lawlessness or shame on Adaira in any way, I shall cut your heart from your chest and feed it to ye.” Sawny noted that Reade’s hand dropped to his belt where his *sgian-dubh* was surely tucked away. “Dinna think this an idle threat. I’ve done worse for less.”

Unquestionably. Rumors of how Reade slayed a man trying to blackmail his wife had made the rounds for months. The Glenachulish MacDonalds were just as lawless as his Keppoch MacDonald clan, but because they did not have rivalries with nearby clans, their lawlessness was somehow more noble.

Sawny opened his mouth to let Reade know exactly what he thought of the threat, and then the image of Adaira caught his eye on the far side of the hall. She stood smiling with another lass, a pert blonde — Fiona, Maddock MacDonald’s wife — and he swallowed the contrary words.

“That does put a wee bit o’ a damper on our relationship,” Sawny drawled as he refocused his attention back on Reade. “I am well versed in what ye think of me and the Keppochs. Yet I am no fool. I know the gift I have in Adaira, and I would move heaven and earth to be with her. Ye need no’ fear her safety with me. Naught will keep me from her side. Not a king, not a chieftain, and not an over-protective brother.”

Reade’s lips pursed thin at his final words. Sawny grinned back, pleased that his biting words struck their target. ‘Twas obvious Reade believed no man would be worthy of his sister,

and while Sawny respected that notion, he was not going to permit idle threats to drive him from Adaira.

Sawny was made of much stronger stuff.

His father, Bruce MacDonald of Keppoch, hollered to him from outside, and Sawny gave Reade a curt bow to excuse himself.

With a final look toward his betrothed to mark her image in his mind for the next fortnight, Sawny exited the hall. He had not lied to the man, though. Reade deserved to know the truth.

Facing threats from an overbearing brother was like swatting away a fly. Sawny had told Adaira that he would face down a thousand men with but a sword for her. As a wild and lawless Keppoch MacDonald, he had squared off with more than his fair share of men and came out the victor. 'Twas why his clan was renowned as barbarians.

Barbarian or not, in truth, Sawny would face down more, a legion of demons or all the archangels in God's heaven to be with her.

And in a dozen days, Reade and Adaira's family would know that for certain.



Chapter Five

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, SAWNY rose with vigor, ready to keep himself busy for the next fortnight so the time would pass quickly. His mother, Margaret, busied herself making plans for his obligations in his marriage, but for the rest of the hours in a day, he would have to occupy them some way. Otherwise, he might go mad in the waiting.

A fortnight was a long time without a bit of quim. Especially Adaira's quim.

He had donned his plaid and just grabbed a bannock from the kitchen when his mother swept in.

The woman, her lush chestnut hair piled high on her head and covered with gold-edged kerchief that draped past her shoulders, swept into the kitchens like a queen among peasants. Her beauty in the Highlands was legend, with sharp cheekbones, smooth skin, and even teeth hidden beneath rosebud pink lips. His father called her statuesque as a compliment, and he was completely enamored with her. Theirs had been a love match on his father's side, an arranged marriage for his mother, but Bruce had vowed they would not wed unless Margaret too loved him. Then he had done everything in his power to show her his love and open her heart, and soon after she had fallen for the thick, dark-haired Keppoch MacDonald.

And he never stopped showering her with love. They were the most passionate couple Sawny had ever encountered.

Before himself and Adaira, that was. His parents had served as excellent role models for him.

Marrying a Keppoch, however, was a precarious thing — they were barely hanging onto their land, were known as reivers and thieves, and now with the concerns over King William's demand for an Oath of Allegiance from the Highland clans, the Keppoch MacDonalds were not in the best position, politically.

Yet, thieves they were, because Bruce MacDonald had stolen Margaret Ross' heart as readily as he stole a MacIntosh cow.

But then, Margaret Ross must have been a thief herself, Sawny mused, because she stole his father's heart the moment

he laid eyes on her.

Exactly like Adaira stole his. That first meeting, she had been so bold in her speech, held her chin high despite her shorter stature, and had blushed appropriately when she leaned over and displayed her ample bosom to his eyes.

Aye, Sawny might be a thief but 'twas Adaira who stole his heart that day.

“Sawny, dear, your father would have a word with ye.” His mother’s voice was loving despite the pretentious timber of her voice. Her voice was as statuesque as the rest of her.

“More politicking?” he replied with a groan.

He was so weary of Highland politics that had plagued his kin for decades.

Decades.

Longer than he had been alive.

And now, those politics encroached on his relationship with Adaira.

Sawny knew quite well that his family was overjoyed with the match, because it strengthened MacDonald power in the north.

But he did not want the dirty grip of politics to touch his love with Adaira. It was too pure to be stained by those complications. He could fight off a man – how did one fight off the auspices of politics?

Margaret cupped her son’s chin in her cool hand.

“Perchance nay. Perchance discussion about your upcoming nuptials. That we must find larger chambers for ye afore ye wed. The lass canna stay in that rat-hole ye sleep in.”

“I rather like my rat-hole,” he protested with a smile, then nodded. “Aye, ye are correct. I may no’ have a care, but I’d prefer something more appropriate for my wife.”

Margaret’s eyes crinkled at his words. “*Wife*. Och, I canna believe my oldest is to take a bride. Where has the time gone?”

“Stolen by mischief and age, dear mother,” he answered and gave her a quick kiss on her cheek.

Everything about his mother exuded cool, which is why her loving words and touches, which she gave so freely, seemed surprising no matter how often she gave them.

“Meet me after ye speak with your father, and we will investigate the chambers in the tower, aye?”

Sawny walked backward out of the kitchens. “Aye, Mother,” he said before turning toward the doorway leading to the hallway.

His father’s study was off the kitchen before the archway of the main hall, behind a low curved door across from the tower stairwell. Sawny rapped on the door.

“Enter, lad,” his father’s rich tone called out.

The giant hinges squeaked as Sawny entered his father’s surprisingly small study. For a man who was brother to Laird Coll MacDonald of Keppoch, Bruce MacDonald’s private space was little more than a glorified pantry.

Then again, Keppoch MacDonalds were not known for their studious natures.

And from the look on his father's face, anything the man might have been studying did not agree with him. Sawny groaned inwardly before putting a pleasant smile on his lips.

“Ye wanted to see me, Father?”

Bruce crumpled the parchment he held in his fist and waved his eldest son toward the threadbare chair near his desk, which was tidy to the point of spartan. Very unlike the rough man sitting behind it. For all his mother was a statuesque model of nobility, his father was a braw barbarian through and through.

His heavily bearded face lifted to Sawny, and he shook the balled-up parchment in his paw-like fist.

“Och, Lachlan MacIntosh has his head so far up Slippery John's arse, he canna breathe naught but shite.”

Sawny's jaw worked, uncertain whether to laugh at his father's turn of phrase or scowl at its meaning. As of late, he had presumed that the feud between the Keppochs and MacIntoshes over Keppoch land the MacIntoshes believed they owned had died down after the Battle of Killiecrankie. The Camerons were supposed to be a buffer between them, and other than reiving cattle and a few skirmishes that amounted to little more than scrapes and bruises, nothing had transpired in almost a year.

Sawny had liked the quiet. It gave him time to focus on Adaira, even with the lingering threat of the Oath of

Allegiance to King William and John Campbell, the Slippery John his father spoke of and Earl of Breadalbane, breathing down their necks to have the powerful MacDonalds stand down in their support of the rightful King James.

“What was in the letter?” Sawny asked, even if he did not want to hear it. He juttred his chin toward the balled-up parchment.

“’Tis a note from the Earl of Glengarry to the MacDonald chieftains. Coll sent it to me. He has suggested that if we canna find this cursed letter, and if James does no’ get off his arse and make his claim for the throne, we might have to agree to sign the feckin’ Oath.”

Bruce slammed his fist on the desk. “An oath to a feckin’ Hanoverian! Sign over our rights and powers to a usurping foreigner!”

Sawny waited several moments for his father’s face to resume its typical pale hue from the bright red that presently colored his cheeks and forehead.

“And what does this have to do with me?”

“The MacIntoshes surely already know this and will use our signing of the Oath or no’ to pursue their claim against our lands, as they have so little land to call their own.”

At this, Sawny straightened in the chair. More conflict with the MacIntoshes on the heels of his wedding? *Och, nay!* “But we have until the end of the year to sign that Oath. And if James decides to return ...”

Bruce huffed out a low growl. “*If* he ever decides. ‘Tis the problem. Alistair of Glengarry is sending missives to the king across the water to learn of his intentions in this regard. We may have to put up a guise of signing this Oath to save our own hides.” Bruce then focused his intense green gaze upon his eldest son. “Which brings me to ye. The MacIntoshes will surely use this information to their advantage, stealing crops, reiving cattle, and attacking travelers across our lands. We can hold our own — Keppoch MacDonalds always have — but I fear their reprisals may take a more serious turn.”

Sawny leaned forward. This news was tinged with excitement. Free reign against the MacIntoshes? ‘Twas like a dream come true after years of minor back-and-forth feuding.

“Take your brother, your cousins, any Keppoch kin, and patrol our borders, our roads, and our farms. We canna permit the MacIntoshes to get a toe-hold, else they will overrun us with full permission of the Campbells and the pretender King, and we will have no say in the matter.”

Sawny placed his forearm on his father’s desk and leaned in closer. “Are ye telling me I have your blessing to hunt MacIntoshes?” He tried not to speak the dark words with a smile on his face, but his lips did not obey. They curled against his cheeks and he probably looked as sinister as he felt.

Bruce pursed his lips briefly before speaking. “On our lands only. Ye canna go into their lands or Cameron or, Christ forbid, Campbell lands to give chase.” Bruce dropped the ruined parchment on his neat desk and moved his face near

Sawny's and pointed at him. "But if a single MacIntosh dog sets foot on our lands, he's fair game, aye?"

One bushy brown eyebrow rose on his father's face, and Sawny nodded.

He understood exactly.

"Aye, Father," Sawny told him and rose with a flourish to leave.

"Och, and Sawny," his father called out, and Sawny paused by the doorway. "This means your wedding to the Glen Coe MacDonalds, the Glenachulish lass, must happen. We need their support and backing more than ever, theirs and Glengarry's. Dinna get yourself killed before the wedding, aye?"

Marrying Adaira was something he would make happen, even if he had to crawl on his hands and knees from the edge of death. The smile Sawny had tried to hold back won and he grinned widely.

"Aye, Father."



The week dragged on for Sawny. His brother and cousins and kin did a fair job of keeping him occupied while they traversed the hills and moors and valleys in search of rogue MacIntoshes who might trespass. And the opportunity to take out those

aggressions on said MacIntoshes helped alleviate some of Sawny's irritations.

Some irritations, though not all of them.

For decades, the MacIntoshes contested much of the Keppoch MacDonald lands, and though the MacDonalds had won the land back outright, so many MacIntoshes believed the land still belonged to them.

As if the Highlanders did not have enough to worry about with the Campbells and the Oath hanging over their heads, the Keppochs also had to deal with MacIntosh leeches.

In fact, Sawny was so focused on his nuptials, which was only days away, and the preparations he had been coerced into making with his mother, that he did not notice the MacIntosh lads until he was right upon them.

They had been fishing in a loch on his lands – one that Sawny oft used for bathing when the weather was fine. He reined his horse back hard, and Barclay's front hooves leapt off the ground. Gripping the saddle with his thighs, Sawny spun the horse around and drew his sword. The noise of his steed and the ringing of his sword from his sheath on his back caught the attention of the lads who splashed as they jumped back from the reedy water's edge.

They were younger than he was, perchance the age of Adaira's youngest brothers, yet they were old enough to know better. Why they decided to risk their necks and venture onto his land was a mystery, but Sawny would correct their error. Yet, their dark green and red plaids were stained and

disheveled. From the smirks on their faces, they seemed to know exactly where they were and what they were doing.

Sawny would have to disabuse them of their pride.

They each drew their swords as they leapt onto their horses, ready to meet him head-on.

Fools. How did they not know any warrior worth his salt never took on a more skilled force without strategy? And not straight on. Especially young men not fully grown into manhood. They waved their swords like lads play-fighting.

“A bit lost, are ye?” he called out as he shifted in his saddle until his steed was at more of an angle to the lads.

Their arms clenched, and one of the lads, more muscled and closer to full manhood than the other by Sawny’s guess, thrust his chin forward.

“Nay. Ye are lost. These are MacIntosh lands by right.”

Sawny snorted. “By right? By thievery is more like it. Ye canna have our lands. We bested ye in no’ one but two battles on that issue.”

“Keppochs are the only thieves I know,” the older lad spat out before shifting in his saddle. His sword was loose in his grip.

Sawny tensed, ready for their move, and angled his sword tight against his side, his grip strong and ready for them. They rushed him, riding side by side directly towards his horse. Sawny figured if he attacked the older lad first, the younger would be more agreeable to leaving with his injured kin.

Kicking his heels into Barclay's haunches, the beast leaped forward and around the older lad's side. With a light sweep of his sword – enough to cut the lad's tunic and graze his skin – Sawny caught the MacIntosh lad across his sword arm.

The lad cried out and lowered his sword to favor his injured arm. The blade had sliced precisely through his tunic sleeve to his arm, and a thin trickle of blood stained the heather-colored fabric in a deep red umber. 'Twas only a flesh wound — Sawny made sure of that. Enough to scare the lads away, but the MacIntosh lad was pale and looked as though Sawny had cut him to the bone.

Och, the damage Sawny could do if he desired. The lad should consider himself lucky.

Sawny circled behind them, his dripping sword upraised.

“'Twas a warning, lads, one ye can take home to your chieftain, reminding him of what happens when MacIntoshes encroach on Keppoch lands.”

The younger lad had nudged his horse closer to his kin, his face a fretful mask of concern and embarrassed pain.

Sawny narrowed his eyes at the younger man. “Get ye gone, and be sure to tell your kin that next time they dare venture onto our lands, my sword will cut deep.”

With a sullen look back over his shoulder, the older lad nickered at his horse, reining him back east toward the MacIntosh lands, the younger lad following.

Exactly as Sawny presumed he would.

Too easy. The MacIntoshes were no warriors. They whined and complained about land or when the Keppoch MacDonalds reived MacIntosh cattle, yet caved easily when it came time to put up a fight.

Mayhap a flesh wound was just the thing to remind the sore losers what awaited them when they overstepped the boundary line.

Sawny sheathed his sword on his back and swung his horse toward home. Time to finish preparations for his wedding.



Chapter Six

RANULF AND IAN HAD arrived with their kin for the wedding, and Seamus drew them aside into his study, along with his sons. Another cramped meeting, too many of these as of late, in Seamus's estimation.

Though they might be at Glenachulish for a grand event, the conflicts in the Highlands did not take time off for anything, even a wedding.

As it was, Ranulf, Ian, and Seamus had set several men to patrol the grounds and keep a wary eye out for any Campbells or their close allies, the MacIntoshes, who might try to use the day as an opportunity to attack.

If only they had the letter. That was the eternal lament, the one thing all the MacDonalds and their allies cursed over again and again.

This mysterious letter that would give them the leverage they needed to challenge the Hanover king and set King James and the House of Stuart into his proper place on the throne.

Discussions regarding the letter and the recent discovery of Mungo Gordon's secret red box always came back to the same issue: the box had been empty but for a few grains of dirt.

If the letter was not in the cursed red box, Seamus, Ranulf, and Ian had to presume Mungo hid it elsewhere, or worse, someone else had the letter, someone with nefarious intentions to use the letter as personal blackmail or to better their own position with land and titles, and the power that came with it.

Either way, the empty box did not bode well for the MacDonalds.

Reade, Maddock, Conall, and their cousins held back in the corners of the study as their fathers spoke in hard tones.

"If a MacDonald or other Highland clan had the letter, Glengarry would have heard of it by now. Since he has no', and we are waiting with bated breath for word from James, we have to presume that a Campbell or one of their allies has found the letter," Ian argued.

"Why not tell us they found it? Call us off? Force us to sign the Oath?" Ranulf countered.

“The longer they wait, the worse we look for waiting, and the more power they have when the time comes,” Seamus answered. “They will have the upper hand and use it to their advantage against us.”

The men nodded. They had known this was a possibility when they had found the Gordon box, but given that they had been shown where the box was by a Lindsay, it was obvious the location had not been a secret to all. Mungo Gordon had not been as clandestine as he believed himself to be.

“If the Campbells or their allies have the letter, then we are lost. Unless James vows to return before the snow flies, our hands will be tied. Mayhap we should accept the king’s money, sign the Oath, and save our hides,” Ian lamented.

Seamus nodded his head in agreement. He understood Ian’s lament, as the man had lost his oldest son to a pack of Campbells just last year. The man had too much to lose and did not wish to risk the rest of his family or his clan.

Ian lifted his brown-eyed gaze. “Have ye heard from Logan about any of this?”

Seamus stiffened at the mention of his youngest son who was squiring with the King’s court at Kensington Palace. He had fought hard to have the lad returned when James absconded. Yet the foreign king and James’s daughter, Mary, had treated those squires and courtesans from the previous king well, and the lad had remained. Seamus had been working with several earls, Glengarry included, and even the Lord Protector Dalrymple himself to bring the lad home.

Yet Logan was still at William and Mary's court.

He and Sorcha would feel better when all of his chicks were under his roof, even if all his chicks were fully grown.

The family also had not seen the lad in a year. It was far past time for the lad to come home.

Seamus pushed those worrying thoughts from his head. He had other, more pressing concerns at the moment.

“Nay. I dinna know if that is a good thing or not. Mayhap ye are right, Ian, and we should take the money and sign.”

Ranulf shook his white-blond head. “No’ necessarily. They dinna know what we know. We can put up a front of still searching for the letter whilst we keep our ear to the ground for evidence of who might have possession of it. Anyone with sudden rewards or titles from the king or taking smug action will give themselves away.”

“And once we know who has it, we can take it from them,” Reade finished from the corner. He was of the same mindset as Ranulf.

Seamus pursed his lips and shifted his gaze from his kin to his sons. Then he leaned back in his chair and folded his hands on his lap.

“No’ the best plan, but ‘tis all we have. And men like that are no’ wise. They believe people are more foolish than they truly are. Keep an open ear and I’ll share this with the Glengarry and the other chieftains. If we use the information

we do have against them, we might end up with information we need, or better yet, the letter itself.”

The men in the room chuffed, some in agreement, some with uncertainty, but Seamus was in the right. At the moment, their best course of action was to wait until someone else acted, then move on that.

They had no real other options, as it was.

Seamus slapped his hands onto his desk top to support himself as he stood. Ranulf and Ian rose with him.

“Enough talk of politics. My daughter is to wed on the morn in a marriage that shall challenge the power of any earl in England or Scotland. We can resume these discussions after we have celebrated that joyful event.”

Ranulf raised an eyebrow at his brother-in-law. “And if the wedding itself forces the letter-owner to reveal themselves, the more the better, eh?”

He slapped Seamus on his upper arm, shoving the man to the side. Seamus was a large man, but Ranulf’s body reflected that of his heritage, giant Vikings of years past who defied the seas and settled in Scotland. He had quite an arm on him.

Seamus did not deny the truth of Ranulf’s suggestion. It was the same that Seamus had shared with his sons regarding the missing letter.

He nodded at Ranulf. “Aye. The more the better. The same is to be said of *uisge-beatha*. Let’s leave the more somber

conversation here and find our drink in the hall. ‘Tis time to celebrate this marriage!”



“Adaira! If ye dinna make haste, ye’ll miss your own wedding!”

Sorcha’s voice carried up the stairs as Adaira scrambled around her chambers like a storm.

The keep had been a mad flurry the morning of Adaira’s wedding. Unlike her brothers, who had married out of necessity and arrangement, her wedding was one of love and politics – joining the houses of Glen Coe with Keppoch – and her father, uncle, and grandfather could not be more pleased. Her marriage to Sawny was seen as a powerful move in the Highlands, one that their enemies, from the Campbells to the king himself, would surely take note of.

And their allies, including the exiled King James, would note their hold on the Highlands as well. Many lairds and chieftains hoped this union would be a sign to James that his authority and support in Scotland was well-established and encourage the rightful king to return.

To say the air was thick with excitement and celebration was an understatement.

But Adaira cared for none of that. All she cared about was her wedding to Sawny, the man she loved more than life itself.

Everyone else could keep their politics – she could keep Sawny.

The castle overflowed with visitors who resided in the keep, before spilling into tents and familial crofts inside and outside the walls. And with those guests came foodstuffs, breads, mead, and enough whiskey to feed the Highlands for a year.

And though it was a bright, dry, late spring day, the lit candles across the entirety of the keep made it look as if the stronghold was on fire.

The gown they had sewn for Adaira rivaled any a queen might wear. The wide, square neckline of the pale blue brocade gown was trimmed thickly in silver thread, an intricate pattern of whorls repeating along the waist, the hem, and at the draping sleeves lined with layers of lace. The color flattered Adaira's hair and made her eyes sparkle.

She and her mother had worked on it for months, taking care with each stitch and every detail, until Adaira resembled a sky-kissed fairy creature from the old stories – shiny and ethereal. The bodice was cut low enough so the full round of Adaira's upper breasts pressed nearly to her neck, over a line of rich creamy blue fabric in a ruched fringe caressing bountiful skin.

The waist was cinched tight, accentuating her abundant breasts and wide hips. Gold and cream lines braided across the front bodice, and gold braid laced up the back. The long ends of the braid fell down her backside and along the train that dragged a foot behind her, stitched with gold and silver thread and ribbon that glinted in the sunlight. The folds of the skirt

draped in smooth lines to the floor, and she had to lift the front to walk.

She both looked and felt like a princess.

As a gift (*not her lukenbooth*, as Sawny had clarified), Sawny had found a pair of leather shoes stitched with gold at a reputed cordwainer at Glenfinnan that was crafted with the most beautiful curls of golden threads that made the shoes sparkle in a shimmery glow as she walked. Sawny had said they reminded him of her hair, a golden cascade, and he could not resist. So he'd spent valuable coin on a pair of shoes.

The moment she received them, she knew she would save them for their wedding day.

“That day, and every day after, I want to see ye in these shoes,” he'd told her, then his gaze darkened in that sultry way that made her heart lurch under her breast and his voice lowered until it was husky. “And naught else. Wear only those to bed on our wedding night.”

As Adaira slid her feet into the shoes, she thought of those words and planned to remove all her clothing, except the shoes, later that evening.

A smiling Grace arrived with one of the kitchen maids, Una, and they finished pinning up Adaira's hair as Sorcha called for her again. The housemaids had such a talent with pins and ribbon, and had woven long waves of Adaira's hair with a ribbon in a loose braid at the back. Grace pulled rogue tresses free and pinned some of them up with tiny heather and

rosebuds, while the rest of her hair flowed around her shoulders.

When Adaira admired herself in the glass, she saw the flowers and ribbon in her hair complete her portrait as a golden blue fairy. It was like she was bathed in an ethereal light.

Heavenly, Sawny had told her.

She felt heavenly. Never had she felt so beautiful in all her life.

Una gasped when Adaira spun around.

“Sawny will no’ be able to wait until after the ceremony. He’ll take one look at ye and drag ye from the kirk and consummate it before the priest can say a word!”

Adaira grinned at the kind woman and blushed at her suggestive comment.

She was not *wrong*, though.

“Thank ye, Una. But I’d no’ look like this without your talented hand. Come.” She reached out a hand toward Grace and Una. “Let us head downstairs afore my mother loses her voice.”

With Una following them, Grace held out her arm so Adaira could use her as leverage while she held up her skirts as they slowly descended the stairs.

Time to head to the church and marry her Sawny.



Her parents and brothers stood at the base of the steps, all stunningly dressed in their Highland regalia tartans of deep crimsons and forest greens for the event, and they turned as one when they heard her footsteps.

The shared expression on their faces was worth the wait. Their eyes widened, and her mother smiled wider than Adaira had seen in a long time.

Pure, effused joy. That was the expression they shared.

Her family was silent until she placed a foot on the floor, then Sorcha clapped her hands and cried out.

“Och, Adaira! Ye are a vision!”

With a delicate move of her arms, her mother hugged her lightly, so as not to disturb her hair or gown.

Adaira did not care. She wrapped her arms around her mother and hugged her back fiercely. Her hair and gown could be adjusted. Adaira would never sacrifice an opportunity to show her love.

Her brothers, Reade, Maddock, and Conall stepped up next, each kissing her cheek politely. She had hoped the king might have granted permission for Logan to join them, but given the politics, she was not surprised at his absence.

Maddock continued to smile, beaming like the easy-going rake that he was, but Reade’s joyful smile had slipped. Smiling

and joy were not well acquainted with Reade, much to Adaira's dismay. She was pleased she managed to bring at least one smile to his face this day, even if it was short lived.

He pressed his cheek to hers and spoke low in her ear. "Even once ye are wed, if ye need me, all ye must do is call. I am ever there for ye."

Adaira patted his cheek and blinked back a tear. "Aye, Reade. I know this in my heart."

Then he stood and stepped back so her father could grasp her arm and kiss her cheek. His eyes shone with proud, unshed tears.

"My lass. I recall ye as a babe, and now here ye stand in your wedding gown, and I must give ye to another man." Seamus's voice wavered as he spoke.

Adaira threaded her pale blue-clothed arm through his and adjusted his dark green bonnet atop his head. "Och. I'll no' be far. I may live in another keep, but ye know how I am. I'll be here with my kin all the time." Then she looked her father straight in the eye. "And I will always be the daughter of Chieftain Seamus MacDonald."

He patted her hand and straightened as he cleared his throat. Another voice carried through the hall to where they gathered at the stairs.

"Why are ye lingering? My granddaughter better no' be changing her mind! All of the Highlands are present to see her wed!"

The Laird of Glen Coe, Alistair MacDonald and her grandfather, filled the doorway, dressed for the event in his full MacDonald of blues and reds, with his plaid thrown over his fitted coat and silver clan brooch shining proudly at his shoulder. His hard face softened when his bold amber eyes fell on her.

“Och, lass. Ye do us proud, this day. I would offer to walk ye to the kirk, but I fear my son might have my head if I rob him of that honor, so might I walk on your other side?”

Such a laurel to have her chieftain and her laird, her father and grandfather, walk her to the church, how could she say no? Adaira also adored her grandfather, so of course she wanted him to escort her down the aisle. She nodded, and Alistair joined her on her left side.

As they exited the main doors, she turned her face up to her grandfather. “Are they here yet?” She meant Sawny and his family, and Alistair nodded his understanding.

“Many of his kin have arrived. I have no’ seen the lad or his family, but I havena been to the kirk yet, and he’s probably there with his kin already, riding in a pageantry of plaid and banners.”

The short walk with her family to the church just outside Glenachulish tower walls was filled with beauty of the Highlands. With the Loch Linnie at her back, the hills before her sparkled in brilliant dark and light greens with touches of whites and purples as spring flowers and mosses flourished.

Tree buds sprouted with new leaves, and sunlight peeked through those leaves in shades of green and gold.

If anything, the scene made her feel even more like a fae creature.

A fae creature ready to marry her love.



Chapter Seven

SHE HEARD THE DIN of the crowd before she saw it. Her breath caught in her chest when the gray stone of the kirk appeared around the bend, surrounded by a throng of colorfully dressed people, as if every MacDonald in Glen Coe and beyond and their allies had arrived for this event.

Her event. Her wedding to Sawny. Their wedding that joined the daughter of the Glenachulish Glen Coe MacDonalds to the Keppoch MacDonalds – a union of the wild, fiery Keppochs to the icy cool Glen Coe MacDonalds, making the largest clan in the Highlands even more aligned.

No wonder it was seen as a strong political move. How could it be seen as anything less?

The last of the morning clouds parted, bathing Adaira and the church in a golden glow.

It was as if God himself sanctioned this wedding.

Adaira's eyes scanned the crowd. She recognized some of the attendees – most of her family and the people she knew were probably in the church, smushed together in the pews, along with Sawny's family. She did not see any of Sawny's Keppoch kin in this crowd.

If they carried any banners, they must have brought them inside.

“We go up the steps and wait at the door. The acolytes will open once the groom and the priest are in place,” her grandfather told her in a gruff voice.

She was glad for the guidance as her mind started to drift and her nerves hummed under her skin.

This was it. She was actually getting married to Sawny. Before all these people and God himself. Finally.

Her thoughts were like loose ends of a rope unraveling, and she was grateful to be surrounded by her family leading her to the altar. Her knees had grown weak and she surely would have stumbled if her father had not gripped her arm so tightly.

Her grandfather had clasped his firm fingers around her upper arm, and with her father holding her right arm, they practically lifted her up the steps to the looming narthex doors, which were highly polished and tightly sealed.

With her beloved groom on the other side.

When I see Sawny, I'll be fine, she told herself. I just need to see his face, and all my worries and nervousness will abate ...

The crowd behind her cheered and fell in behind the wedding party with the intent of clustering around the door to watch once she entered.

Everyone, it seemed, wanted to witness this union.

No one more than me, Adaira thought through the buzzing in her head.

Why hadn't the acolytes opened the door yet?

Her father and grandfather appeared unconcerned about the door and straightened next to her. The cheering behind her died down as Adaira stared at the sunlit door.

And waited.

The dying cheers died down to an uncomfortable quiet after several seconds. Her grandfather shifted from one foot to the next and her father's hold on her arm tightened.

The afternoon sun was hot on her skin, and a line of perspiration dotted her backside.

Still, they waited, and her father's grip became like iron.

Was he concerned about the closed door? Shouldn't it have opened right away? The moment she stepped up? Sawny should have been in place long before she arrived. Her already sotted mind spun wildly. Was something wrong with the church? With the priest? With Sawny's family? Where they waiting on something important?

What –?

Before she could finish the thought, her grandfather grumbled under his breath and reached for the door. Opening it only wide enough to slip through and Adaira and Seamus could not see inside, Alistair disappeared into the darkened interior.

So dark compared to the bright outside.

So dark ...

He did not return right away.

The buzzing in her head twisted and grew painful, thorny and prickling, and she felt someone close in on her from behind, shading her from the sun and the view of the crowd.

Reade. It had to be Reade, because her father stretched out his other hand to stop his son from storming the church.

Grandfather will figure it out, she told herself, using Alistair as a soothing balm for her heated mind. 'Tis a minor issue with the priest and 'twill be but a minute.

Then both doors did open, and her heart surged to the heavens, only to crash hard to her feet when she looked past her grandfather to the altar.

Which was empty.

No Sawny. No priest.

He must be to the side. Something with his parents ...

Her eyes shifted around the altar, across the transept of the sanctuary, and around the pews.

She did not see Sawny or his family anywhere.

What is happening?

The dour-faced Father Geordie joined Alistair at the doorway, no Sawny at his side.

Her mind was ringing, and the thorniness pricked harder.

What's happening?

“Seamus, a word, if ye may. Alone,” Alistair intoned, flicking his gaze to Adaira, and from the corner of her graying vision, she saw her father nod. He slipped his arm out of hers, and she faltered.

Immediately, Reade was there, taking her arm, and her mother's slender hand pressed against her back. Maddock drew up on her other side and clasped her hand.

Then the doors closed on her face and she squinted at the sun's eye-piercing reflection on the shiny wood.

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Her right leg gave out, and she sagged against Reade who stood strong and stoic at her side, supporting her when she could no longer support herself. More than once, she noticed Reade's and Maddock's eyes drift to the road leading toward the loch and back to the main road. Though it was nonsensical, her mind rationalized that if Sawny and his family were not at the church already or coming down the road, then mayhap they were taking boats across the narrow isthmus of the loch

...

Finally, she could not take it anymore. The gossipy chatter from guests slipped to her ears and drove her to move. Before Reade and Maddock could react, she lurched out of their grasp to the heavy wooden door and grabbed it, rushing inside.

Sawny should have been at the altar, standing dark and proud in his finest plaid, his wild dark brown hair brushed back in smooth waves and his deep amber eyes washing over every inch of her form as she strode down the aisle to his side.

Instead, she found her father and grandfather and uncles huddled with Father Geordie, trying to cover their shouts in shrouded whispers.

“What do ye mean the lad is no’ here yet?” Seamus barked out.

Several cousins and kin had risen from the pews and formed a loose circle around the men who shouted at the poor, distraught-looking priest who had no answers.

The entire church was in chaos.

So much for reverence in the house of God.

Then a man burst through the door. Everyone spun and Adaira’s chest swelled, expecting to find a delayed and apologetic Sawny. Her shoulders slumped when she saw Rabbie MacDonald, Sawny’s cousin, sweating and panting at the door.

Seamus rushed the man. “What’s this? Rabbie? Where is Sawny and his family?”

“’Tis Sawny,” he said, gulping air and gripping the door’s edge in a white-knuckled grasp. “He’s gone.”

It was as if all the air was swept from the church and Adaira’s mind went blank. His words made no sense.

Sorcha had followed her sons inside after Adaira and reached for her daughter, but Adaira gathered her skirts in one hand and shoved past her mother. Sorcha’s fingers caught on the filmy cloth woven into her plaited hair and ripped the translucent veil off her head as Adaira ran to the church doors.

With wide, confused eyes riveted on her, she rushed to the stair’s edge to peer down the road Sawny would have taken to arrive. Surely, she would see Sawny striding down the pathway in his kilt, resplendent in his full regalia, a broad smile on his face, ready to marry her.

Surely, he is just late. He and his family are tardy, ‘tis all!

Other than a few children chasing each other and some chickens scuttling in the dirt, the road was empty.

His cousin spoke the truth.

Sawny was nowhere to be found.



The air inside the church where the crowd was whispering and gossiping wafted over her as she lingered right outside the wide-open main doors, hot waves that made it difficult to think. What were they saying? Why were they all staring?

From behind her, right inside the narthex, she heard her father turn his fury onto poor Rabbie who was bent over, his hands on his thighs. Bright red pinpoints alighted his sweaty cheeks. His wild hair matched his windblown tunic.

He had ridden like a fury to reach them.

“What do ye mean, he’s gone? Where’s he gone?”

“’Tis just it,” the lad responded, having caught his breath. “He’s gone. No one knows where he is.”

Seamus’s confused fury faded into the background as Adaira tried to understand Rabbie’s words.

A low grumble reached Adaira’s numb ears, drowning out all other sounds. Every part of her was numb. This surely was not happening. It must be a nightmare and she’d wake from this distressing dream.

Wake up, Adaira! Wake up for your wedding day! ’Tis a dream, naught more!

The rumble broke through her clouded mind — Reade’s deep voice, commenting on the news. “I’m no’ surprise, the feckin goat’s arse.”

“Reade, that does no’ help,” Sorcha chastised him.

Reade’s insult was not part of her dream. His harsh words were reality, the truth of how he felt about Sawny.

Nay. ‘Twas no dream ...

Reade would not be silenced. “Mother, I dinna care. The man has been a lawless rogue since the day he was born, and

we trusted him with Ada's heart? Her care? The future of Highland politics? What were ye thinking?"

"Reade!" her father shouted. Now her brother would be silenced. Seamus brokered no contrary words when it came to his wife.

The fighting behind her fell again into a steady din as Adaira stared into the distance, as if she stared hard enough, she could make Sawny appear. That if she just focused long and hard, she'd see his wolfish grin and easy stride kicking up dust around his boots as he approached her.

But the dirt did not move. Nothing on the horizon. Nobody walking down the road.

The bright spring light started to gray around the edges, and the last thing she heard before the ground slid out from under her feet was her mother calling her name.



When Adaira opened her eyes, she was no longer at the church. Her wedding gown was a rumpled mess around her legs and hips where she lay.

Where was she laying?

A bed, but not her bed.

She turned her head toward the voices drifting into her slow understanding. Her vision slowly brightened. The voices were

a mix of anger and concern, and her name was mentioned more than once.

Hers and Sawny's.

Sawny!

She sat up quickly, too quickly, and her mind spun again.

Sorcha was immediately at her side, patting her mussed hair that fell around her shoulders.

“Are ye well, lass? Ye had a bit of a spill.”

Someone must have caught her, because she did not hurt or ache. Not her head or skin, at least. Every part of her insides hurt, conversely, like her insides were decaying.

“What about Sawny?” Adaira asked. “What’s happened?”

Sorcha, normally so strong, so controlled, dropped her deep green gaze to Adaira’s mussed skirts. She traced one slender blue line with her fingertip.

The rest of the voices in the room fell silent at Adaira’s question. Sorcha cleared her throat.

“Sawny canna be found anywhere. Rabbie said he headed out for a ride this early morn, supposedly for a fresh bath in a nearby loch, and he has no’ returned.”

Adaira’s face twisted. That made no sense. Why wouldn’t he have returned?

“Where is he, then? If he was swimming ... What if he’s hurt? Or drowning?”

Her voice rose in a fevered pitch.

Sorcha licked her lips and patted Adaira's hand again. "Ada, his horse was abandoned by the loch, and the Keppochs have spent the entire morn searching for the lad. What they could track, it seems the tracks ended at Loch Eli. 'Twas no sign of the lad anywhere. No' in the loch or in the surrounding glen."

Adaira twined her hands in her skirts. "He might be injured! He might have fallen!" She gripped her mother's hand. "'Tis waterfalls and stones and crevices –"

"He's gone, lass," Seamus's voice interrupted with tender authority. "He appears to have left early this morning with no intention of returning."

"Nay." Adaira shook her head wildly. "'Tis impossible. No matter what this one thinks," she tipped her head toward the brooding Reade, "Sawny would no' have left me like this. Something's wrong. We have to help him!"

Seamus sat on the other side of the bed. She was in the guest chambers on the ground floor. The bed was not as wide as her own and she sunk toward him when he sat. Seamus took her cool, shaking hand in his large, warm one.

"Lass," he said in a low, quiet tone, "his parents have confirmed the lad is completely gone. Ran off. They are already discussing the return of your dowry. He is well and truly absconded, my sweet. I am so verra sorry."

She was still shaking her head when her father kissed her forehead.

It was not possible. That was the singular thought that repeated in her head. Despite Reade's expectations of her intended, Adaira knew Sawny loved her, that it had to be something dire that was keeping him from her. Not that he ran away.

But her mother and father and Reade kept assuring her that was the case, that he used her and left her waiting at the altar.

She was the jilted lover.

Nay, a heated voice said in her head. *Nay, it canna be.*

"Ada." Her mother used her hip to shove her father out of the way. "We are going to do everything we can to find the man. But for now, ye must care for yourself. Reade and your father will escort ye to your rooms. I'll follow with a pot of tea and some oil for your temples. To help ye relax. We will hang up your dress to keep it fresh, and once we have this all figured out, we will resume your wedding."

Though her mother's words were commanding and encouraging, Adaira did not miss the shared look Sorcha gave Seamus.

She might talk about resuming her wedding, but Sorcha had not raised her to be a fool. Adaira understood what Sorcha thought about the chance of completing this wedding. It was about the same chance as Reade always believed.

As much as she did not want to let the thought enter her head, that heated voice spoke too loudly.

Sawny had left her at the altar.

Her breath caught in her chest like she was drowning. She *was* drowning — drowning in emotion and frustration and fear.

It could not be.

In her deepest heart, she knew Sawny had not left her. Something must have happened to him. It *must* have.

As her father and Reade walked her upstairs, she leaned in close to her brother.

“’Tis no’ fair, Reade,” she rasped in a down-trodden voice.

“Life is no’ fair, Ada. Anyone who says different is trying to sell ye something.”

“Reade, please,” she entreated, ignoring his callous statement. “I canna believe he has left me. Something foul must have happened.”

Reade breathed out a gruff breath to let her know what he thought of *that* idea.

“Listen, he has no’ left me, he canna have done that,” she continued. “I know ye dinna believe him to be true, but I swear to ye, he did no’ run off. Find him for me, please.”

Reade hung his head. Adaira knew her brothers well — she had been playing on their softness for years. A wide-eyed look, a soft smile, a slight plea, and they were pudding in her hands. Previously, she had always done it as a tease, as a way to get what she wanted.

This time, she spoke not as a tease or to gain something for herself. Her plea was for Sawny. For their family.

For her heart.

“Aye, my wee sister,” Reade said gruffly. “I will go out with Maddock and Conall on the morrow. If the lad is to be found, injured or nay, we will find him and bring him back to ye.”

Adaira sagged against him, grateful for his loyalty. He might not care for Sawny or the wild Keppochs, but Reade was a good brother and a fair man. He would do as he promised.

They reached her rooms and escorted her in. Sorcha and Blair soon joined them, and once the men left, the women helped Adaira undress. Blair hung the fine gown in the wardrobe, and as her mother poured the tea, Adaira noticed the dirt clinging to the silver hem, staining it.

Stained as she was stained by shock and heartache.

Wearing only her kirtle, she climbed into her soft, comfortable bed. Sorcha set the cup of tea on a low table near Adaira’s bed, pressed her cool hand lovingly against Adaira’s hot cheek, and then walked out of the chambers with Blair.

Only then did something inside Adaira finally break.

“I shall never love again,” she whispered into her pillow, before she turned to the wall and sobbed uncontrollably.



Chapter Eight

THE NEXT MORNING, MADDOCK and Conall, led by Reade, rode north toward Keppoch lands in a flurry of plaid and kicking up mud in the morning mist to see if they could search out the lecher when his family could not. Or *would* not. Reade was not unconvinced that Sawny's family was helping the lad hide.

The brothers had fought with their father and uncles the night before, wanting to leave right away and find the lecher who had shamed their sister. Seamus had kept a more level head and instructed his sons to wait until the Keppochs had a day to figure out what was going on — that they must be as

confused by Sawny's disappearance as Seamus and his family were.

Once they had a day or two, they would surely reach out, Seamus had argued.

While his words had placated Reade for the night, he rose with the damp, gray sunrise, filled with purpose.

They had no assurances that the Keppochs were going to do anything to fix or resolve this situation, nor might they admit where Sawny was, even if they did know. Reade doubted every intention the Keppochs might have.

He was not going to leave his sister's reputation to the feckin' uncivilized Keppochs.

As their horses galloped northward, Reade grumbled the whole time, making clear his belief that Sawny's family was hiding the bastard. The farther they traveled, the more certain he became of his claim.

Maddock, however, had not quite listened to their father's instructions the night before. Late that night, he and Arran had made a trip to the brothel where Gracelyn worked, much to Fiona's chagrin. Yet as he had some inside familiarity with the brothel, Mistress Esme and her girls were more than willing to share what they knew.

Which had been nothing. The ladies had heard no rumors about Sawny or his whereabouts. Maddock, true to his promise to his beloved Fiona, did not linger at the brothel and left promptly with Arran.

They did not tell their father of the visit. They did share the news with Reade, however.

Maddock's lack of news was what urged Reade to take their search to the Keppoch McDonald's themselves, where he vowed they would search every bush, barn, and croft until the reprobate was found.

"If I have to drag him kicking and screaming to the kirk," Reade had told his mother in front of Adaira before they departed, "then I will bind the man and drag him here with my bare hands. The lad canna get away with this."

It was late in the morning by the time they arrived at the edge of the land belonging to the McDonald's of Keppoch. Two, dark-red plaid clad Highlanders approached them on the road. They looked sweaty and disheveled, their faces were strained. One man was Sawny's brother, Brodie.

Maddock and Conall were unable to bite back their surprise at seeing the man, but Reade's face was as fixed as stone. He had no compunctions about beating the brother unconscious if it meant finding the rat who had left his sister embarrassed at the altar.

"I canna say I'm surprised to find ye here," the ebony-haired gentleman riding with Brodie commented flatly. Roy was a MacDonald cousin to Sawny, and as he spoke first, Reade directed questions to him.

"I should think no'. If I stood where ye did, I'd be searching for the man who embarrassed my sister. Since we cannot know for certain that ye are no' hiding the lad, my brothers and I

decided that the Glen Coe McDonald's will aid ye in your search for the man."

Sawny's brother muttered under his breath but quieted when Roy shot him a stern glare.

"If we were hiding him, why would Brodie and I be out searching for the lad now?"

One sleek eyebrow rose on Maddock's forehead. "What do ye mean, ye're searching for the lad? Ye dinna know where he is?" he asked, ignoring the furious look Reade gave the man.

Conall nudged his horse closer to Maddock. "We presumed ye to be hiding the lad," Conall explained, trying to temper his brothers' harsher approaches. As a younger brother, he had experience playing diplomat between his older brothers' squabbles.

At Conall's words, both Brodie's and Roy's faces twisted in matching masks of confusion.

"Why would we be *hiding* him?" Brodie snapped. "We're as excited about this wedding as ye, probably more. And I have never seen Sawny as happy or excited for something in all his life."

Reade snorted. "'Tis no' saying much. Your kind grow excited at the prospect of stealing a Highland cow. A wedding to the Glenachulish MacDonalds would only raise your station." Reade earned another glare from Sawny's kin at the implied insult. They lunged toward Reade.

Maddock raised his hand and waved it between them to quiet his brother. “Reade, *haut yer wheest.*” Then Maddock shifted his attention back to Sawny’s brother, eyeing him narrowly. “We presumed that this promise of a wedding was to keep the MacIntosh and Campbell’s off your back until decisions were made regarding the king across the water.”

Brodie and Roy exchanged a quick glance and their horses shifted beneath them, stomping in the muddy road.

“Aye, I can see how such a thing might seem to be the case,” Brodie explained in a strained tone. “But ye did no’ see how Sawny was whenever he spoke of your sister. ‘Twas not merely a political match. Nor an arranged marriage.” At this, Roy flicked his gaze from Reade to Maddock, making silent comment on both of their arranged marriages. The Glen Coe MacDonalds were not the only ones who could suggest insult. “This was a love match, the type that rivaled legends and myths.”

Reade snorted again at Brodie’s poetry.

Brodie dropped his chin and fiddled with his reins. He opened his mouth to speak but Roy interrupted him.

“‘Tis why the Keppoch MacDonald’s are searching all of the Highlands. Because nothing but death would keep Sawny from your sister.”

His statement mollified Reade little. His lips thinned, but he remained silent.

Both his brothers knew exactly what he was thinking. Reade rarely saw the good in anyone. And he certainly did not see it in a rakish MacDonald who had set his lofty sights on the daughter of a chieftain. His kin might think that only death would keep the man from Adaira, but Reade had other beliefs. Using his thighs, he guided his steed towards Brodie more directly.

“As we are searching for your brother, mayhap ye would accept our aid in doing the same. No matter what I believe about Sawny or his intentions or why he did no’ show up at the kirk, I canna look at myself if I came back to Adaira with no answers.”

Reade’s emotional request must have moved Brodie and Roy.

Brodie nodded curtly. “Fair enough. We will take all the aid we can. We just want to find the lad.”



That night, Seamus found Sorcha in her solar. She was not reading or sewing or doing much of anything. Her clear, sad, green gaze stared out the window at the evening sky to the stars hiding in the clouds. Her worry for her daughter wafted off her as a heavy smoke from a fire. Not that he blamed her.

Seamus’s own fury and concern rivaled that of his wife’s.

Nay, in that he was wrong. Sorcha's ire was far more furious because it was shaded with her emotional distress over Adaira's heartache. The pain the daughter felt, the mother reflected tenfold.

As such, Sorcha had spent the past day catering to Adaira, anything the lass might have wanted. Not that any of it mattered. Adaira had not spoken a word, left her chambers, or even eaten in the past day. Yet her chambers were littered with bright flowers and sweets and fruit – cheerful and overly scented.

And to no avail.

“You spoil that lass,” Seamus observed. “She is given too much, including too much of your emotion.”

Sorcha lifted her water eyes. “Should she no’? Dinna blame her for this situation. Should no’ any lass know her worth and be treated as such? Look at what happened to me when ye entered my life and swept me off my feet. Ye told me I was the grandest among women and treated me as such. And what happened?”

Seamus's eyes softened. “Ye flourished and became more than I could have imagined. More beautiful, more clever, more understanding, more powerful. More ye than when I first met ye.”

He lifted her hand and kissed it.

“Every lass should have that. If no’ from an intended or husband, then from her family who loves her. I want Adaira to

be the fullness of herself, no matter what man comes into her life. Or those who leave it. I want her to know her worth and be treated accordingly.” Sorcha’s face soured. “Especially after all this.”

Exhaling a heavy sigh, Seamus moved around his desk and placed a finger under his wife’s chin to pull her livid gaze to his. “Ye have always been a force to be reckoned with, a trait that has served me well in all aspects of our life together. I would trust ye in this more than anyone else. Fine. Spoil our daughter all ye must, but please pull her from this precipice of sorrow.”

She licked her lips and her sorrow over Adaira’s predicament emanated from her in waves that brushed against his skin, prickling it.

“Ye love too much, Sorcha. Ye love ferociously, me and our family. And I love ye all the more for it.” He glanced to the side before returning his gaze to her face. “I dinna think I ever told ye that.”

At his words, she broke, her fury crumbled into desperate sorrow, and a fat tear slid partway down her cheek before she wiped it away with the back of her hand.

Sorcha could be hard, a rock for the family, and to see her brought to tears fanned the flames of Seamus’s fury.

He wanted ten minutes alone with the lad.

Sorcha’s eyes were glazed and tired-looking when she focused again on her husband.

“Thank ye, Seamus.”

He wrapped his long arms around the wildfire that was his wife. “And we shall make sure Adaira always knows her worth. If no’ for her, then for ye.”

Sorcha crumpled into his chest, sharing her burden with him.

Which was exactly what he wanted her to do. She should not carry that weight alone. As Adaira’s father and Sorcha’s husband, it was his burden to share.

Seamus ran his finger through her loose tresses at the base of her neck in the way he knew Sorcha liked.

“Reade wants to kill him,” she said, her voice muffled by his chest.

He snorted. “Mayhap we should let him. If we ever find him, that is.”



Chapter Nine

WHEN SEAMUS'S SONS RETURNED later that evening, Seamus left Sorcha to her emotional musings and gathered them into his study. Their extended kin, Ian and Ranulf and their families, had offered their condolences before departing. Their faces showed their condolences, yet Seamus could sense their underlying feeling — gratefulness.

Grateful it was not their daughters who were left standing at the altar, shamed and embarrassed.

Rumor ran like floodwater in the Highlands, and news of Adaira's embarrassment had surely reached many already.

Now having his itinerant sons ride all over Scotland, announcing that they were searching for the man who was the cause of all this distress did not help matters at all.

Furious was not a harsh enough word to describe Seamus's anger at his lads.

"Ye disobeyed me," Seamus announced as he closed his study door.

All three of his sons protested at once.

"Father, that bastard —"

"I only tried to ask —"

"I thought we could —"

"*Haut yer wheest!*" Seamus boomed, his voice echoing off the walls.

Properly chastised, his sons fell immediately silent and dropped their gazes.

Seamus strode to his desk and leaned over it, supporting himself with one hand as he ran his fingers through his graying hair.

Grayer now, he was sure. This, whatever it was with Adaira, had certainly added more gray hairs than he cared to admit.

He was more frustrated with his sons than he cared to admit as well. When he gave a command, he expected it to be obeyed. Their behavior only compounded the fury already bubbling in Seamus's gut.

Yet his lads had ridden off first thing in the morning. Sorcha had mentioned it before he exited her solar, and it had taken all of Seamus's willpower not to punch a hole in her finely crafted door.

"I told ye no' to do anything. No' yet. I told ye to await until the Keppochs had time —"

"I knew he would do something like this. For all they are MacDonalds, ye canna trust a Keppoch," Reade bit out.

Maddock shot Reade a look, but before he could speak, his father pointed his finger at him. "And ye used it as an excuse to visit the brothel? Of all things! And ye a married man!"

Maddock had the good sense to look abashed. He knew little happened in the keep that his father did learn about.

"I went with Arran and left immediately after asking about Sawny's whereabouts. I figured they might know something, aye?" Then he flicked his gaze to Reade before returning his eyes to his father, eager to change the subject. "Sawny's family are searching for the lad, too. The Keppochs. They found his horse, but they dinna know where Sawny is."

Seamus bolted upright, fury giving way to interest. "What?"

Like Reade, Seamus had the irritating presumption the lad had changed his mind at the last minute and his family was aiding him in his endeavor.

But the lad was well and truly missing? Though he did not fully believe, the fact his family was searching for him meant they were not in on Sawny's deception.

“We met his brother Brodie and cousin Roy. They were searching for him as well.”

“They dinna know where he is? At all? Do they know where he ran off? Or disappeared from?” Seamus asked.

Conall shook his head. “Nay. From what Roy told us, Sawny rode off early on the morning of the wedding and never returned. They found his horse near the loch where he likes to bathe.”

Seamus exhaled hard. “He does no’ have his horse, so how far could he have gone? Ye did no’ find a body?”

He was now speaking in terms of the lad being dead. If he had absconded, surely he would have ridden away on his horse? Or was leaving the horse merely a diversion?

The men shook their heads.

In truth, Seamus did no’ care if the lad was dead or had run away. He was gone, and now the Glen Coe MacDonalds had a mess to clean up.

“Since ye have started on this endeavor against my wishes, ye will want to continue. We should keep looking for the lecher to rectify the shame he’s brought on Adaira, but we have larger issues to deal with. The fault of this situation lies with the Keppoch lad and the Keppoch’s themselves. Dinna blame your sister or make her feel worse about all this. Though your sister is crushed, she is a comely lass from a respectable and powerful family and will find another match, perchance even a love match. Let her mourn, but we have

more significant issues in searching for the letter. Let us hunt for that.”

As much as he hated the words as they left his lips, Seamus had to keep their more significant problems in mind. Strife and conflict were rife in the Highlands. If they needed to make another match for an alliance or in support of King James, then he’d make a match with Adaira.

His sons did not appear to agree. They grumbled but understood their father’s intent. Seamus took a deep breath before continuing.

“I will send word to the Keppochs that they should make good on this complication with Adaira’s dowry, but that we are no’ going to search too hard for their wayward son. ’Tis their dominion. Right now, we focus on consoling Adaira, supporting her, and finding that letter. We still have to figure out where that letter is.” His face then darkened enough to make the most staunch warrior quiver in their boots. “But if the lad does show his face in these lands again, bring him to me, for I shall slay him myself.”

His gaze bounced from one face to the next. “Dismissed.”



A fortnight later —

Sawny was still nowhere to be found. While the Keppoch MacDonalds had not given up on searching for the man, most

clans in the Highlands presumed him dead or drinking and whoring in France with the abdicated king.

Including the Glen Coe MacDonalds and Adaira's family at Glenachulish Tower.

Despite her father's admonitions to focus on the letter and let the concerns of Sawny's absence fall to the wayside, Adaira's brothers had continued in their searching. They did it mostly for her bruised heart, but also to take their pound of flesh from Sawny's hide for the shame he brought on their clan.

Adaira knew she should feel grateful for having such loyal and attentive brothers, but she felt nothing.

Nothing.

She had taken to spending most of her day in her chambers, in her bed to be more precise, with curtains and tapestries drawn over the lead glass windows to keep her chambers shrouded in darkness.

A darkness that permeated every corner of her life.

She had not changed her chemise since her mother had put her to bed. It was the same one she had worn on her fateful wedding day for a wedding that did not happen. To Adaira, it seemed right that this chemise that was supposed to be part of her most wonderful day was now as stained and rancidly foul as she felt.

She curled up in her bed in the ripe, stinky kirtle, but she was not crying.

Her mind and her body wanted to cry. All she had done for the past week was sob into her pillows. Yet today, nothing was left. She had nothing at all left inside, like she had been scraped empty, as if Sawny's absence was a knife that had ripped away all of her inner being until there was nothing left but the shell.

She was empty inside. Sawny had taken her heart and everything else that made her Adaira with him when he left.

Did he know? Did he realize the pain and misery he was subjecting her to, wherever he was?

That was the one thing that she kept coming back to in her dismal thoughts. That the Sawny she knew and loved would not abuse her this way. He was not the villain everyone painted him.

Was he?

The question that kept coming to her mind over the past week, once she could get a single thought to make sense, was how had this happened? Has she missed some sign from Sawny that he really did not want to get married? Had something changed his mind? Had she missed something during the preparations?

Her father had tried to make her feel better when he informed Adaira that her dowry had been returned by the Keppoch McDonald's, thankfully avoiding any further conflict between the two families.

It did not make her feel better.

In the course of dealing with these tumultuous, gut-wrenching thoughts, part of her mind continued to flick back to her brother Reade and all of his cautious comments regarding Sawny. Even on her wedding day, Reade had grumbled about him.

She recalled Reade's remark about Sawny's true intentions the last night Adaira had seen him.

The last night any of the Glenachulish MacDonalds had seen him.

Had Reade been correct in his overly cautious, albeit crass assessment of Sawny? Adaira hesitated to admit it. She despised thinking that Reade might have been right all along.

Adaira rolled over and flopped onto her back to stare at the wood-beamed ceiling.

But if that were the case, it would mean Sawny fooled not only her, but her mother and her father, who were two of the most shrew people she knew, and also his own family.

His mother, dear Margaret. Could he do that to her? To his own mother?

Was Sawny that dark? That depraved?

Did he hold so many secrets that close to his chest that no one, not even his own family, his own mother, knew Sawny's intentions?

Adaira absently brushed her tangled hair off her face. A second, larger question bloomed over all the other ones, however.

Where had he gone?

She was not prepared to believe he was dead. Adaira believed that she would feel that in her heart, like an aching bruise. Not this emptiness. If he were dead, she would know it.

Nay, she would not believe him dead.

So then where was he?

Her brothers and cousins had initially joined Sawny's family in scouring the Highlands for the man. There had been no sign of him at all. Messengers and kin had traveled to the Lowlands and into England, inquiring.

No word of the man.

Two days after her wedding, Adaira had learned from Reade that Sawny had ridden out on the morning of the wedding to possibly bathe in a small loch near Keppoch House. His brother, Brodie, had offered to accompany him, but Sawny had brushed him off, saying it was probably one of the last moments he would have to himself this day and he wanted to wash and come back ready to marry the love of his life.

Those were his brother's words to Brodie. *The love of his life*. How could someone abandon the love of their life?

Was Sawny that dark of a man to set everyone up on this path, and then walk it so convincingly, only to abandon them all at the final hour?

Adaira punched her coverlet. *Nay!*

That made *no* sense. Her mind always answered that question — he would not have done something so vile. That was not Sawny.

Yet on the heels of that thought: *then why did he leave ye on your wedding day?*

Mayhap Sawny *was* as dark as Reade had suggested.

But surely there should have been some trace of him somewhere. A piece of clothing, a torn plaid, or horse tracks through the glen leading from the loch. A message about where he was going left behind in his chambers or an off-handed statement to his brother or cousin.

Something to indicate where he went.

Rather it was like Sawny had stepped into the loch and then swam out of the existence of the world.

People did not just disappear.

When she had heard about Sawny's swim in the loch, Adaira had lost what remained of her senses. Fearing he might have drowned had driven her to rush outside in naught but her chemise, as if she had intended to run to the water's edge and search for him herself. Fortunately, her more rationally-minded mother had grabbed her before she left the yard in her indecent state of dress.

Her father had been so angry that the veins in his temple pulsed like dark blue snakes under his skin as he screamed at her.

What do ye think ye are doing? Do ye intend to run all the way to Keppoch House in your bare feet and shift?

Fortunately, Adaira's mother had been much kinder and less angry. At least she did not display her fury or irritation the way Adaira's father and brothers did. Sorcha's manner of dealing with her anger was to keep it contained until the moment she was ready, and then like a fire-fed vitriol in a closed container, she would explode her wrath upon the person who deserved it most.

Adaira actually feared for Sawny's well-being when Sorcha found him, more than she feared her father or brothers finding the man.

Maddock, Arran, and her visiting cousin Evander had not hesitated. Upon learning this news of his disappearance, they had mounted their horses in a flash and ridden hard for the loch to help search for Sawny's body.

His body.

Her blood ran cold at the mere thought of it.

When Maddock returned, sopping wet and grim, he had told her that the loch was not very large nor deep. Rather it was more of a pond with a small stream of water pouring in on one side. The depth of the water never reached above Maddock's chest, and the whole group of them searched the entirety of the small pond.

In addition to not finding Sawny's drowned body, which had sent a surge of hope flaring through Adaira, Maddock had also

said they had not found any of his clothing, tracks, nothing. It was as though Sawny had walked to the pond and simply disappeared. While she had been relieved to learn Sawny had not drowned, that news had not placated her much because that eternal, lingering question continued to rear its ugly head.

In her bed, Adaira punched her coverlet again.

Where was he?



Adaira's dreams were both a blessing and a curse.

The blessing was she could see Sawny clearly in her dreams — his devilishly dark hair falling over his forehead as his eyes, deep pools of sunset water, sparkled. The sharp line of his jaw softened when he smiled, and she took his outstretched hand.

In her dreams, that hand was smooth and warm, no calluses as he had in real life, but that touch was more real to her than anything else she could conjure in her wakened days.

She slept as often as she could, chasing that dream of Sawny so she might still be with him, even as he was gone.

In her dreams, he was here with her.

Her nightmares, on the other hand ...

She shuddered every time she thought of those nightmares.

The first time she'd had one, that glowing image of Sawny and his sly smile froze, his face contorting into a mask of horror. His dream hand released hers as he fell backward onto a sword (sometimes it was a spear, and once he had no injury but fell back off the edge of a mountain). Each time his image dispersed into the creeping mist that tangled around his body and trapped her where she stood, forcing her to watch his ghastly demise.

With those nightmares, she woke from her slumber with a scream behind her lips and sweat on her brow. She panted, clasping her coverlet, and stared into her chamber's darkness, as if she might see Sawny's spectral figure near her bed.

Yet every time she saw nothing but darkness.

Sleep became a hopeful endeavor.

She had taken to focusing on all the good in Sawny before she closed her eyes, as if she might force her mind to have only the blessed dreams, the ones where Sawny smiled and held her hand without end.

Adaira thought of his teasing smile, his loving words — so many loving words! How he described her body, worshiping her breasts, her hips, her legs, her lips. She thought of how he felt between her thighs and the first time he had placed his tongue on her woman's petals and drew a singing ecstasy from her depths. How his gaze followed her around the hall when they were entertaining kin and clan, riveted on her as if she were the only person in the room. His kindness with the MacDonald children and the stable lads. His patience in

teaching wee Flint how to tame his horse, Barclay, with a piece of apple.

Once she had all those thoughts in order, she would close her eyes and pray that those loving thoughts brought her good dreams of Sawny.

It worked often enough that she had taken to making it a routine, a mantra of sorts, to be done before she closed her eyes each night or before a nap.

Crying was exhausting work, and she tired easily from her sobbing jags.

And so she slept and dreamed.

And woke each morning with hope in her heart and sorrow in her mind.

Each time she hoped he was there, in her chambers, reaching for her as he did in her dream.

Yet with every break of morning, her chambers were empty.

And the tears began anew.

Where are ye, Sawny? Ye vowed to be with me always! Why did ye leave me?



Chapter Ten

Sawny

Och, my head.

A burning ball of fury erupted in Sawny's chest, hot enough to shove the chill away.

He was not at his wedding.

Worse, he did not know where he was, or what had happened to him.

And the unconstrained thoughts whipping around his aching head were not helping him at all.

Despite the pain, he knew he had not made it to his wedding this day.

Or had it been yesterday?

How long have I been senseless?

He peeled one eye open halfway and grimaced at the aching throb in his skull. He held his head as he glanced down at his prone body. He yet wore the clothing that he had on when he rode to the loch. Not his wedding finery or clan plaid.

That had to mean whatever happened with him and his splitting head occurred before his wedding.

Which meant he had left Adaira waiting for him at the church.

Nay, he had been *forced* to leave Adaira.

Her image came to his eyes, as clear as if it was midday, in her moss-hued gown that fitted her to perfection and showed off her full bust for his eager eyes and matched her green eyes, making them bright enough to rival the sunlit glen in spring. Her blonde hair danced in a cloud around her head, and her wide smile was warm and inviting.

At least in his mind, she was smiling.

Right now, if he *had* left her at the altar, she was probably sobbing herself sick.

Her father and brothers must be searching for him to remove his head from his body. Having left her before marriage,

Sawny knew without a doubt that they would want his head on a platter to serve to the Glenachulish daughter.

Adaira.

His mind buzzed in his head. What happened that prevented their wedding? Was that the intent of those who had forced him here, to stop the wedding? Or did these nameless men grab him because he was a Keppoch MacDonald? Or was he simply in the wrong place at the wrong time?

The image of Adaira faded, and he rubbed his throbbing face, trying to remember. His fingers brushed over a lump the size of a chicken egg above his temple, crusted with dried blood.

He pulled his fingertips away and rubbed them together, trying to think past the pain in his head.

The reason his head ached and why he could not recall what had transpired. The reason he was unconscious for what seemed to be a day or so at least.

Someone had struck him on the head.

Or had he fallen?

His thoughts slowly strung together like threads on a loom.

Nay. He was hit on the head. By a man on a horse.

MacIntosh ... the name echoed in his ringing head.

Someone had called his attacker MacIntosh.

Had he said it? Aye. Sawny had recognized the man.

An image loosely began to form in his mind.

The men. There had been more than one. Sawny had been the fool to leave his sword at home. Most of the time, his blade was ever at his side. That morning, though ... he had been bathing for his wedding at daybreak! What manner of trouble was going to find him?

Yet trouble had found him indeed. And the man who had struck him was no' the man who had spoken to him. That MacIntosh had been a diversion so a second man could ride up and strike him on the head from behind.

Sawny touched his side, which also ached and was sticky and painful to touch. A bloody wound there. Was that before or after they tried to split him open like a pig on a spit?

He closed his eyes, not that it made a difference in the dark.

After.

Because the MacIntoshes had discovered Sawny redressing at the bank of the loch and swept his dagger against Sawny's side as he dove away from the dangerously sharp hooves of the man's horse.

The MacIntosh had tried to ride him down and skewer him, and when that did not work, they knocked him out.

At least two men, mayhap more.

Which MacIntoshes, though?

Would he recognize them if he saw them again?

And why?

Because ye raided their cattle and sheep, ye feckin' fool.

The tiny voice in his head was like a scream, and it made sense. Mayhap because he had attacked a pair of MacIntoshes on his lands but a sennight ago.

Yet his present state of injury did not seem merited. He'd barely harmed the lad. Knocking Sawny out and doing ... whatever this was (his eyes burned as he tried to glance around) ... seemed a bit much in retribution.

Or was his present predicament because the Campbells wanted to send a message to the MacDonalds, encouraging them to pay homage to the pretender king, and they were using their MacIntosh allies as messenger? Were they making an example of him?

Feck me, he thought. *Any of those reasons are sound ones.*

Probably *all* of them, Sawny thought dismally.

His hands moved freely as he touched his side and head, so he was not chained. That was in his favor. Mayhap he could charge the door, or attack the guard ... He glanced around the room again, squinting. Nay, this was a cell. A dungeon.

A sinking sensation clogged Sawny's chest.

He was a prisoner.

Sawny tried to sit but his side and pounding head made his already darkened vision go gray and his stomach churn.

No sitting up yet. Nor standing.

But as soon as he could gain his feet, he was getting out of this pit.

That he vowed.

And the first place he'd go was to Adaira's side.

He hung his head.

If she would still have him.



The wracking pain wore him out until he fell asleep, and when Sawny awoke, the darkness had faded, giving way to a pale light. A thin panel of light broke through a slit near the ceiling of his stone prison across from the door. The light around the door seemed brighter as well.

Daylight.

Pale, but still painfully bright to his achy head and eyes.

He had slept through the night.

The dull light meant he could see the interior of his cell and gain a better sense of his surroundings.

The pounding in his head had lessened to an irritating headache, but his side still pained him terribly. He lifted his bloodied shirt and clenched his jaw when he saw why.

The wound was not deep, thank God and the heavens, but it was jagged, and every time he moved, he hissed as the wound re-opened and oozed. He was weak from loss of blood more than the pain, and he had to fix his side before he could contemplate attacking a guard and running for his freedom.

And Adaira, a small voice in his mind added.

Aye, Adaira.

He kept her name, her voice, and her image at the forefront of his mind to keep him pressing forward. He was not going to give up or give in to the MacIntoshes, so long as he had Adaira to return to.

She gave him something to live for, the one shining brightness in this dreary gaol.

Glancing around the room, he noticed a knotted wooden bowl and cup by the door.

Food.

His stomach growled loudly enough that he feared the guards would hear. He did not care so much if they saw him, but he was not ready for what might happen when his gaolers finally did enter.

Torture was not below the Campbells or their MacIntosh allies. In fact, they would probably enjoy it.

Moving carefully, Sawny slid over to the bowl and scooped up the cold parritch with his filthy hand. Bland, cold, but filling. Thin ale filled the cup halfway, and Sawny guzzled it down after licking the bowl clean of every last bit of parritch.

His stomach lurched, and he had to roll over on his side and wait until the cramping pains faded away. He kept the food down, and that was most important. He needed the sustenance and his wounded side would not handle it if he had rejected his breakfast.

Once his stomach calmed, he sat back up and studied his accommodations.

Four stone walls that wept from the damp. A slit at the top of the wall set into the earth, too thin and too high to reach or climb out of. Opposite that wall, a stout wooden door filled most of the wall, bolted into place from the outside. No handle, no hinges, nothing but heavy wood on the interior side.

Escape seemed futile.

But before he would let his mind consider any manner of escape, he needed to get the gaping wound in his side under control. Moving and eating had torn open the scab, and he was bleeding again. Thin parritch and weak ale were not going to be enough to keep him upright if the bleeding did not stop.

Another cursory glance around the cell revealed nothing he might use as a bandage. His tunic, already in tatters, would have to do. Using his teeth, he gnawed the bottom and ripped off a long strip, then a second. He folded the first into a pad and set it against his side. Then he wrapped the second strip around his waist and tied it in place.

Not the best bandage, but it would do, and hopefully, if he did not move around too much for the next day or so, the bleeding might stop.

Then he could regain his strength and escape.

A pile of peat was shoved into the corner of the chambers, and he used that as bedding. It did not do much, but it put a

layer between him and the cold stone, and he felt as if he might stop shivering.

He closed his eyes, briefly wondering how long before his captors made themselves known. Then he put the image of Adaira in front of him, of her light voice and brightness, and tried to sleep.

It was a fitful sleep.



Chapter Eleven

SAWNY'S BLEEDING HAD MOSTLY stopped by the time he awoke, caking the pad in a brownish, crusty stain. The pad stuck and he did not dare to pull it any farther from his skin to investigate, lest he tear the wound anew.

The sunlight had seemed to move, changing the shadows on the stones, and he guessed it was mid-afternoon or later.

He certainly did not feel any better for having slept. Though the peat had provided some measure of warmth and dryness, there was not enough of it to serve as any sort of padding, and his back ached from lying on the hard ground for so long.

At least his headache was mostly gone.

Taking care so he did not aggravate his wound, he rose on shaky feet and stumbled to the wall with the window slit. He reached up as high as he could, but his fingertips fell a few feet short of the window. Not that he might squeeze out of it – the slit was far too narrow – but at least to see where he was ...

Fortunately, he was not in a low-ceilinged cell. He had once been trapped in a crawlspace of the storage pantry when he was a boy while playing a game with his brother. He had been unable to stand upright and the walls of the pantry were so narrow that his chest had clenched. His babyish screams had brought a kitchen maid running for him, and he had never fully recovered from small spaces since.

So he had space in his favor here.

As long as they did not move him somewhere else.

But why was he here? And where was *here*, exactly?

Shuffling to the door, he took a moment to study the thick beams. Breaking through it was not an option, but the door was not flush against the wall. He leaned his ear against the gap and waited for any sound that might give a hint as to his location.

Nothing.

With a shuddering sigh, he crept back to his peat bedding and sat. He lightly pressed his wound, testing its tenderness. As long as it did not fill with pus, he might recover well.

Sawny sat in that position for a while, counting the stones and taking every moment over the past fortnight into consideration. He turned every recent encounter with a Campbell or MacIntosh over in his mind. In the end, he decided his present situation must have something to do with the two young men he had threatened a sennight ago.

Did they run home and whine to their father that night or had they waited until the following morn?

Feckin' MacIntoshes.

Still, why strike him over the head and kidnap him? To what end? This seemed far too harsh a lesson for a minor Highland skirmish.

The door creaked on its hinges, and Sawny jumped at the sound and hissed as his movement tugged on his slowly scabbing side. The sound was jarring after several days of silence. Keeping his hand on his side, Sawny rose on wary legs and steeled himself to face his captor.

Who appeared to be a young man.

Barely more than a lad and younger than Sawny, and dressed in baggy, worn tunic and braies. His loose, dark brown hair hung in limp strands, covering his face.

This canna be my captor.

“Who are ye and why am I here?” Sawny demanded.

The barefoot lad carried a platter topped with another bowl and cup. The door remained open behind him, and Sawny

tensed, ready to rush the door, until he noticed two men with swords waiting in the hall.

Guards.

Nay, he'd not escape either of those hale men in his state. Of course, this wee lad would not be coming into the dungeon alone.

Sawny's jaw tensed as he regarded the lad who set the platter by the door, removed the items, and replaced them with his morning meal dishes.

A servant lad then.

The young man rose and looked up at Sawny. He had wide eyes that seemed too large for his face, and deep purple moons under them, and did not appear in the best of health.

"I'm Addison Cameron," the young man said in a much deeper voice than Sawny expected. "I'm, uh, fostering here."

From the hesitant way the young man formed his words, Sawny presumed there was more to that tale than the lad let on.

Fostering my arse.

"And where is *here*, exactly?"

A man in the hall grumbled, and Addison looked over his shoulder. He twisted and gave Sawny a sorrowful look that sent a chill down his spine, then exited out the door.

The men in the hall slammed the door shut, sealing Sawny inside.

Sawny did not move for several minutes as he stared at the locked door.

Abducted by the Camerons?

Nay, that could not be. They were MacDonald allies and Lachlan Cameron was close with his father. And the boy had said he was fostering. That meant he did not live with his family.

And other than the Campbells, the MacIntoshes were one of the clans nearest the Camerons. Was the boy a squire? Was he training with a MacIntosh or Campbell, like Adaira's youngest brother was at court?

Or was he fostering for another reason? From the state of the lad's clothing and skin, he did not appear to be with people who cared for him overmuch.

Perchance Sawny was not the first man taken captive here.



Another night passed and this time Sawny slept hard, escaping both his weariness and his pain. His belly ached from hunger – two bowls of watery parritch and a cup of mead was not enough to sustain a bairn, let alone a full-grown man, but it was something.

The next morning, he did not wake on his own but was shocked into awareness when his door screeched open again.

He sat up gently, expecting the lad again with his morning meal.

His throat closed up when an older man entered, flanked by two Highlanders in grubby green MacIntosh plaid. The man resembled a rat, with nearly black, tiny eyes and a pointed nose. His chin was sloped to non-existent, and Sawny did not know who this man was.

The man's dark eyes assessed him, then his graying eyebrows rose on his forehead.

“I expected more from a Keppoch MacDonald.”

Considering Sawny had an open, jagged wound, lost more than a pint of blood, and was starving, he begged to differ. Yet he kept his mouth shut.

It would be foolish to respond to the man, and Sawny's father had not raised a fool.

But the man's words told Sawny much, that his captor was a MacIntosh. If he was a Campbell, the man would have merely called him *MacDonald*. Only a MacIntosh would care that he was from Keppoch House.

So, was this imprisonment retribution for the Keppochs reclaiming their land from the MacIntosh interlopers? Or was this personal, revenge for a reiving or a fight that the MacIntoshes lost again? The lads Sawny had escaped with, as he presumed?

Or something more? MacIntoshes were aligned with the Campbells and the pretender king.

No matter which, this man's presence with his boorish-looking guards did not bode well.

The MacIntosh man sniffed loudly.

"Take him," he said to the other men.

The MacIntosh moved to the door as the other two scooped Sawny under his arms and dragged him from the cell. Despite his best efforts, Sawny felt the scab on his wound pull free.

More blood loss.

Feck.

They dragged him down a dim, stone-walled hall and past two more thick doors to a torch-lit cell at the far end. This room had no window slit, and Sawny immediately understood why. Between the chains and the lashes hanging from the walls, the last thing the MacIntoshes wanted was for their prisoner's screams to be heard by others.

Or for their prisoner to escape.

Sawny worked to control the blind panic rising in his chest.

Keep your composure, no matter what they do, he commanded himself. *Keep your mind on Adaira, no matter what they do to ye.*

The men dropped him into a low-backed wooden chair, and Sawny hissed again, grabbing his side.

"Och, ye are leaking again. My man poked ye a bit harder than intended."

The MacIntosh man stated this matter-of-factly, as if to hint to Sawny that his injury was intentional.

Sawny set his jaw and lowered his eyelids. He would not let a single word the man said provoke him.

Keep your focus on Adaira. Her golden hair, her round hips

...

“Where is the letter, Sawny? We ken ye MacDonalds have it.”

The letter?

He was here because of the letter that no one could find? That everyone in the Highlands was searching for?

Not because of clan conflict or because he beat the skin off a MacIntosh man?

And why him? He *certainly* did not have it.

The Glen Coe MacDonalds had the closest thing – Mungo Gordon’s red case that once housed the mysterious letter. Why had they snatched him?

“We grabbed ye because ye were low-hanging fruit,” the MacIntosh said, as if reading his mind. “But if need be, we’ll head for Glenachulish where your betrothed’s kin has the Gordon box.”

Sawny’s heart froze in his chest. This man knew very well who Sawny was.

Nay, he thought, as if his sheer force of will could command this man. *Stay away from Adaira.*

How much did this man know? Sawny recalled what his father had said. *They dinna know what we know ...*

Yet they seemed to know more than his father had intimated. No matter what, Sawny had to keep his mouth shut. And they'd never try for Adaira. Glenachulish was centrally located in Glen Coe lands, well-fortified, and she was flanked by two older and two younger brothers, plus a wealth of cousins and uncles to protect her. Not to mention her father, or her mother Sorcha, whom Sawny could envision burning the MacIntoshes or Campbells to the ground if they even tried to hurt her daughter. That woman was probably more dangerous than all the Glenachulish men put together.

Adaira is safe.

Thus he remained silent.

He heard the slapping sound before he fully felt the smack across his cheek, and his body rocked in the chair. He did not have the energy to stop himself from toppling over, and one of the MacIntosh guards caught him and set him upright.

Sawny worked his jaw under his stinging skin and clenched his fists at his sides.

This is no' good.

He tried to keep his face hard and expressionless – all the while he had a sinking sensation that he was not leaving this dungeon anytime soon, if at all.

Sawny lifted his chin, but his eyes were still narrow as he took in the MacIntosh who sat on a stool across from him. The

man's kilt dipped between his bony legs as he leaned his forearms on his knees.

“Who are ye? Why do ye unleash your misplaced venom upon my person?” Sawny asked, his tone mocking.

He'd already been struck once. Might as well get some information from him before they beat him bloody in this torture chamber.

The man grinned, his crooked teeth glinting under his thin scruff of graying beard.

“Misplaced, och. 'Tis fresh, MacDonald. Breadalbane has requested we inquire with a MacDonald about your progress in your search for the letter,” he answered, and Sawny knew what *inquired* actually meant. Slippery John Campbell, the Earl of Breadalbane, was a staunch supporter of the Hanover king. Yet this man was *not* Slippery John.

Then who was he and why was Sawny presently the recipient of his hospitality?

“And ye are?” Sawny ventured to ask.

The man's grin remained steady. He swept his arm low and folded briefly at the waist. “Chieftain Kelso MacIntosh, at your service.”

Sawny did not miss the note of facetiousness in the chieftain's voice. He'd heard of the Kelso chieftain, nothing good. The man was one of Breadalbane's weak-spined lackeys and no one of import. His lands were minor, and his only real claim in the MacIntosh clan was through his wife's sister who

had married a Campbell. The man probably would never have owned more than a nag of a horse, let alone land, crofts, and a title if not for that relationship.

Keeping his expression stiff and unreadable, Sawny waited for the man to continue. Men like Kelso always took an opportunity to hear themselves speak and inflate their importance.

At least he now knew where he was. The next challenge was learning if his family knew where he was, or if he might escape his prison.

Had Kelso sent a message or requested a reward for Sawny's return? Given the arse-kissing grin on the man's lips, Sawny presumed 'twas a resounding *nay*.

"Thus, we are to sit here, across from each other, until ye tell me what ye know of the letter."

Something about the man's tone did not sit well with Sawny, but he could not place his finger on it. Did the man already know what the MacDonalds knew? Did he know that while Adaira's family had Mungo's box, it had held naught but spiders and dust?

Perchance. But if that were the case, why ask Sawny about it?

Or was the letter merely an excuse for this abduction, and Kelso was trying to flex his political muscle, taking his aggravations regarding land disputes and the constant conflict with the Keppoch MacDonalds out on him?

Sawny pursed his dry lips. That circumstance seemed far more likely.

And he knew Kelso was planning to do a lot more than sit patiently across from him until he talked.

Sawny leveled his gaze at the pinched-faced man. “We are men of the Highlands, Kelso. Lies dinna become us.”

Kelso was a weak MacIntosh, and the Keppoch MacDonalds had readily reived his cattle, pushed against the man’s land boundaries, and thoroughly thrashed any MacIntosh who had dared to trespass on MacDonald lands.

Of course, the man wanted his pound of flesh as a measure of revenge. He wanted more than to merely *talk*.

“Weel, we shall sit here until I bore with ye, then use other means to extract the information.”

Despite the staid expression on his face, Sawny’s chest fell into his belly.

Torture? Because the Keppochs had stepped on his toes? And obtaining information about the letter might impress the Earl of Breadalbane?

Is this what the greatness of Scotland had become?

Sawny suddenly felt completely justified in thieving this man’s sheep and cattle. The feekin’ lout deserved it.

“But we canna have ye bleeding out before ye have the chance to speak, so ...”

Before he could move, Kelso's men grabbed his hands and secured them with rough rope to the sides of the chair. Sawny fought, twisting and snapping his teeth, until one man caught his jawline with his fist. Sawny's head lolled across his shoulders as he tried to stop his head from spinning.

He heard a tearing sound and realized the MacIntosh men were tearing at his tunic.

Really? I would have taken it off ... he thought sourly. His cell was cold enough as it was without the loss of his tunic.

Then a hissing filled the room, and Sawny twisted his head toward it, his heart slamming against his ribs. One of Kelso's toadies had wrapped his hand in a cloth to remove an iron bar from the fire. Its tip glowed fiercely orange in the torchlight, and Sawny could not take in enough air. He was suffocating as he tensed, hating the knowledge of what was to come next. He thrashed against his captors.

The other man bent over him, holding Sawny's writhing head still under his arm and holding his torn shirt open.

The searing pain that followed as the man touched the iron against his bloody wound was all-consuming. Any thought or image of Adaira was shattered by the wracking pain of having his skin seared together. He shook and wailed under the second man's arm, squealing like a suckling pig as if he might expel the pain out in the surge of breath, but the waves of agony only increased and washed over him harder.

The shocking and bone-shattering pain clung with sharp claws until Sawny's shuddering body finally stilled and he

mercifully passed out.



When Sawny awoke again, he was in nearly the same position as when he woke in the dungeon the first time. The only difference was this time his jailers tried to position him on his peat pallet so he was not sleeping against the chilled stones.

Time was flimsy in his misty thoughts. He had no idea how long he had been unconscious — hell, he barely remembered what had transpired right beforehand ...

The screaming pain in his side slowly dulled to a low throb, and moving as delicately as he could, Sawny got himself up into a seated position and leaned against the stone wall. He should have been chilled, but the stones were cool against his back and his discombobulated mind briefly wondered if he was getting a fever from his injuries.

Feck, Sawny thought. A fever will take me more quickly than Kelso MacIntosh and his goons ever would.

His tunic had stuck to part of the seared wound, and he grimaced and hissed as he tugged lightly at the fabric, peeling it away. Once his skin was clear of tunic, he looked down to assess the damage.

His throat closed on him, choking him.

It was bad. There was no other way about it, no way to minimize what he was looking at. The expanse from his lower

ribs to his hip was a mess of scabs and blood and jagged, blistered tissue. Seared skin. It had the look of an injury that would never recover, but Sawny had obtained his fair share of wounds, and the human body would recover.

The monstrous scars would remain, however.

It was as his father always said. *Scars dinna show weakness, they show that ye were stronger than whatever tried to kill ye.*

But Sawny was not out of the woods yet. He did not know if Kelso planned on keeping him for any length of time, planned on killing him, or what his intentions were. But Sawny had a strong feeling that letting him go was not on Kelso's list.

He dropped his tattered tunic and pressed the back of his head against the stones. The chill helped calm his fevered head. He was going to have to come up with some sort of plot. Now that he had an idea of what Kelso wanted, even if he only said part of it aloud, Sawny knew that escape had to be at the top of his strategy.

The door rumbled open and like before, Sawny started in surprise, his entire body screaming when he did so. The hollow-eyed lad entered again, carrying a tray.

Addison. Sawny's bleary mind landed on the lad's name. *His name's Addison Cameron.*

Another bowl and another cup, but this time paired with several strips of fabric and a folded piece of cloth. Addison set the tray down on the stone floor and removed the cloth to expose hidden food. He then placed the fabric on another tray

in the corner that Sawny had not noticed. The lad must have brought the platter while he was passed out.

Addison tried to keep his gaze fixed on what was he was doing. Sawny kept his eyes riveted on the lad and noticed how he kept glancing at Sawny from the corner of his eye.

Sawny was in an ill-spirited mood and lacked the energy to speak to the lad. Yet something about Addison struck a chord in Sawny, that his fostering was not exactly to his liking, and that if Sawny needed an ally, perchance this boy would be it.

And as sick and injured and miserable as Sawny was, he was not a fool. He would not presume Addison would aid his escape by any stretch of the imagination. But Sawny would do his best to buy this time and take measure of the lad.

Once the dishes were gathered, the lad shuffled to the door which slammed shut with a groan, followed by the dreadful sound of the bar locking him in.

Remaining crouched, Sawny shifted with delicate movements to approach his meal. More bland parritch, another cup of ale (this time almost full), and next to that, linen strips atop the folded piece of cloth, presumably for his injury. They appeared freshly laundered, and Sawny would use them. Anything was better than having a filthy shirt brush against his raw skin.

Setting the strips aside, he picked up the folded cloth. Initially, he had presumed it to be a sheet or a light blanket to cover him. Instead, he found a fresh tunic. Not new exactly — obviously worn, even worse for wear actually, but in a far

better state than his present torn and stained tunic, and all in one piece. Moving his arms gingerly so as not to aggravate his already ruined wound, he removed the remains of his tattered tunic and set it to the side. Mayhap it could serve as a pillow or a poor blanket. Then he grabbed the bandages and wrapped them lightly around his suppurating skin. His skin and midsection jumped and quivered under his ministrations, no matter how gentle his fingers were.

He knew from his mother that binding certain wounds too tightly prevented the skin from healing. If he was still bleeding, the bandages would need to be tight, but if there was no blood then to wrap it lightly, more as a protection than binding. His mother's instructions on how to keep the fabric flat and smooth ran through his head, and for the first time since he entered this hell-scape, tears burned in his eyes.

Margaret. His poor mother. She must be frantic.

He wiped away the tears on the back of his hand and blinked to stop any new ones. Tears would be a distraction. Tears would not get him out of the situation and would waste what precious little energy he did have.

He would cry when he had his family and Adaira back in his arms.

Once the linen strips were in place, he took the fresh tunic and dropped it over his head. The tunic must have belonged to a much more rotund man, as it was almost as long as a kirtle when he wore it. Fortunately, the tunic's larger size gave him some measure of security, as if being covered would help

protect him. If nothing else, the over-sized tunic might keep him a wee bit warmer than his own tattered tunic had.

Bandaged and fully dressed, Sawny grabbed the bowl of oats and started eating.

And his mind worked weakly as he considered his options.



Chapter Twelve

THE FEVER SET IN by the time the sunlight disappeared from the window slit the next day.

At first, Sawny thought it was merely his mind working to solve his predicament, hot with thoughts and considerations. Then his skin, which should be cool from sitting against the chilled stones, was warm to the touch. Too warm.

Feck.

He lifted his tunic and unwound the linen from his wound. Bright red and inflamed. Worse, if he had to admit it, but that could have been from the branding itself. With such a wound, it was difficult to discern where the injury ended and damage

from the cauterization began. Sawny poked his finger against the edge of the seared cautery, and a thin line of yellowish pus escaped.

He released his tunic and dropped his head back against the wall.

Kelso MacIntosh was not going to kill him.

This inflammation was going to take his life far more quickly than that vile man could.

When the door squealed open, Sawny did not move his head. He did not have it in him.

The lad, Addison, however, had no such compunctions and appraised Sawny under the slanting light from the hall. Sawny watched the lad from under lowered lids.

Addison set his platter down, then turned to the guards loitering in the hallway. A wee bit of grumbling, then the sound of shuffling feet as they walked away.

Mayhap the guard was retrieving Kelso to inform the chieftain that his prisoner was not for long in this world.

As the lad set out his supper and placed the empty bowls on the tray, the heavy footfalls of the guard returned.

Addison stepped out, and Sawny waited for either the appearance of Kelso or for the door to slam shut and entomb him in darkness.

Neither of these things happened.

Instead, Addison returned with a torch in his slender hand. He crept toward Sawny warily, as if he were a rabid animal and not an injured man. What could the lad be afraid of? That Sawny would groan at him to death?

With a cautious hand, Addison reached for Sawny's shift. Keeping his gaze fixed on the lad, Sawny remained motionless as Addison lifted the cloth to investigate the state of Sawny's wound. The nearness of the torchlight made Sawny's already fevered body hotter, his eyes burn, and his mind swirled.

Aye, the lad had nothing to fear from Sawny. He could barely remain upright. The fever was moving quickly.

Addison dropped the fabric and stared at Sawny's face, his eyes oddly shadowed by the flickering torchlight. From under Sawny's lowered lids, however, the moons under his eyes appeared significantly darker.

He looked about as hale as Sawny felt.

Then he touched Sawny's forehead with the back of his hand, and snapped it away just as quickly.

"Am I dead yet?" Sawny managed to say.

"No' yet. Mostly dead, I'd wager."

If the lad was trying for levity, it was a wasted effort.

Muttering under his breath, Addison rose, pushed the bowl and cup closer to him, and exited.

Only then did the door shut.

With every bit of effort that Sawny could muster, he leaned forward and dragged his bowl and cup closer.

Eating did not appeal to him in the least, but if he were to fight off this fever, he needed all the sustenance he could get.

The parritch was sticky, but the ale was cool against his heated lips. Finishing his meal was the last thing he remembered before slipping into the darker netherworld.



Sawny slept fitfully and he did not know for how long. Days? A full sennight? Longer? Surely not a month ...

At some point, he was certain that Kelso came down off his pedestal long enough to venture into his dungeons and lay his pinched, sneering gaze on Sawny's broken body. To Sawny's fevered view from under slitted eyelids that fought against opening, Kelso's face was stark white and disgusted as he looked down, and he looked more like a rat under Sawny's fogged gaze.

The man was little more than a haze to Sawny, who heard him speak briefly before passing out again.

"He does us no good dead. John wants to know what they know. Bring him back to health."

The words were a jumbled mess in Sawny's mind, especially as he presumed that he was already knocking on death's door.

He spent the next several days in that bleary state. When he did wake, his vision was a blur and his entire body was on fire. His head ached so much that if he'd had the strength, he would have smashed it against the stones to hasten his painful demise.

Any thoughts of Adaira were impossible to behold – he could not retain a single thought in his head before passing out again.

Though he had cursed the cold stones upon his arrival in his cell, he now welcomed their cool embrace as a balm to his fever.

One evening in his fevered state, he saw the dim outline of Addison at his side, wiping something sticky off his body before pressing his hands against his wounded side. The lad shifted, then placed a cool rag on Sawny's forehead.

He spoke, but Sawny could not make out the words. Everything was a blur.

His fever still raged, but it released its hold on Sawny enough for him to open his eyes into narrow slits. Even the dim light ached, as if it shot sparks against his eyeballs, and he squeezed them shut.

Dinna put too much effort into me, lad, Sawny thought grimly as his thoughts swam around his congested mind. *I'm no' long for this world.*

The stones and the rag, however, were soothing, and Sawny was grateful for them. The sounds of shuffling in the cell

departed with Addison, followed by the squealing door hinges of the door sealing him in again.

Sawny did not care. He slipped back to sleep.



When he opened his eyes next, the first thing Sawny noticed was the light was not as sharp and his vision was clearer. Much of the fog was gone.

For a moment, he forgot where he was and wondered why his bedding was so hard. Had his brother played a trick on him?

Then he was able to brush away the cobwebs that had formed in his head.

Nay. No bedding. Peat and stones. I'm in a gaol. I'm Kelso's prisoner.

That was all his mind could recall, and even that made his temples throb.

The rag Addison brought him had fallen to the stones, and Sawny pressed it to his head again, wiping his face. It was damp, mostly because the stone cell itself was damp from the weeping stones, but refreshing nonetheless. He wiped at the grit in the corners of his eyes and blinked.

Still achy, but the vicious, burning pain behind his eyes was gone.

And so was his fever.

How long was I asleep?

Groaning, Sawny slowly pushed himself upright and lifted his gaze to the window slit, as if the answer could be found in the dull sun rays filtering through.

His stomach rumbled, and when he dropped his hand to his belly, he felt the wrapping around his waist.

His injury. His wound. The burn.

Inflammation and pus. That was why he'd been senseless for so long. How had that changed? How had it not killed him?

His mind flitted to the fitful memory of Addison at his side, the lad's hands on his wound.

Sawny lifted his tunic to find fresh wrappings around his waist. Delicately peeling the linen from his side, he saw the ravages of his wound and the subsequent cautery were healing. The skin surrounding the scab was clear and no longer bright, angry pink. The scab was solid, not weeping, and ... glistening. He touched his fingertip to the edges of the wound.

Sticky?

What had Addison done?

The lad's efforts had been effective, it appeared to Sawny, because the wound was actually healing.

His fingertips followed the length of the wound from his side to his back, and the entire scab felt the same. Solid, not tender, and slightly sticky.

He dropped his tunic and rested the back of his head against the wall.

Addison had healed him. It was a miracle.

But for what? More torture?

The memories of the past several days slowly unfolded in his head.

Addison had healed him so Kelso could turn around and torture him for answers Sawny did not have about a letter he knew nothing about.

Even if he was more involved with the politicking that transpired behind closed doors, Kelso had to know he was not going to reveal anything. He was a MacDonald, after all!

Sawny licked his dry, flaky lips. He intentionally did not involve himself heavily in Highland politics like his father and uncles did, or like Adaira's father, uncles, and older brother.

His breath caught in his chest.

Adaira!

He had a moment of panic, that he would not be able to recall what she looked or sounded like.

Then her image appeared, her bright blonde hair dancing in the breeze and her brilliant green eyes fixed on him. A carefree smile crossed her lips, making her surprise dimple peek from her cheek. She was reaching her hand out to him and she spoke his name.

Like an angel calling out to him.

Sawny's chest clenched and it took every ounce of will not to reach his hand out to her in return. A single touch ...

Would he ever feel her smooth skin again? Wrap his hands in her thick mane of hair? Hear her call out his name in her breathless voice?

I will. God help me, I will see her again.

He might have thought of giving up when he was fevered and his mind was not his own, but now that he was regaining his faculties, he recommitted to the vow he had made when he was first thrown into this dreary cell. He stared off into the distance as if he could see the world beyond the stone walls.

See Adaira reaching for him.

I will return for you, he promised.



Later that morning – from the lighting in his cell, Sawny presumed it was morning – Addison arrived.

The squeak of the door hinges announced his arrival, but this time, instead of setting the food on the ground and leaving, Addison closed the door almost all the way. Just open enough to grasp the edge with his fingers and pry it open.

To ensure the guards could not see or hear? Or did they believe Sawny was still sick and had sent the lad alone?

Sawny kept his expression blank as he watched Addison set to his work.

After he had set all the victuals to their proper places, Addison glanced at the door, then moved to Sawny.

He did not move as Addison gingerly lifted his tunic and tugged the linen wraps loose.

“What’s the sticky stuff?” Sawny broke the awkward silence.

Addison recoiled slightly but recovered and leaned in to poke at Sawny’s wound. That hurt a wee bit, but much less than it had days ago.

“Honey,” Addison answered, dropping the tunic so the hem fell against Sawny’s thighs. “And maggots to eat the affected skin. They do a fine job of eliminating the inflamed part of the body, and with the honey, can reverse the direction of the illness. I think it worked. I dinna see any pus.”

Maggots. Ugh. Sawny had seen them used on an older man in a nearby village when he was a lad, and it had sickened him as strange occurrences often do to children. The image of the writhing bugs burned in his brain much like the fever had, and knowing that he’d had the same treatment made his stomach lurch.

He did not notice any lingering maggots around his healing wound, so they must have finished their work, became flies, and flew away, finding their freedom through the slitted window.

Sawny was jealous of the flies.

Addison was still staring at him, and Sawny dropped his gaze to meet the lad's eyes.

“How long was I senseless?” Sawny asked.

“Ye've been hovering between life and death for about seven days or so, if ye include the night I found ye. Master MacIntosh wanted ye alive, so he tasked me with the chore.”

“Why ye? Are ye a healer of sorts?”

Addison shrugged. “Of sorts. My mother and sister had a fair hand at healing and taught me.”

The sorrow in the lad's voice at the mention of his family was unmistakable. Sawny cleared his throat and pressed his hand to his side.

“So 'tis healing, then? No more inflammation or pus?”

Addison shook his head. “No' that I can see. Ye should heal from this with naught but a savage scar as a reminder. I did no' believe so a sennight ago. I figured ye for dead and was nearly ready to look through your pockets for loose change.”

A touch of humor in the lad. Sawny's lips tugged into an appreciative smile before his eyes flicked to the door. “Do your chaperones no' await ye? Is that why ye are no' rushing to leave?”

The lad shrugged again. “Nay. They think ye yet sick and harmless and let me come on my own. A guard stands at the door leading up to the keep, so even if ye did manage to overpower me, ye'd no' get far.”

It seemed like the lad was going to say something else, but his lips closed and he was quiet again.

“What happens to me now? Do ye know?”

That was the real question. By Sawny’s estimation, he’d been in this cell for longer than a fortnight. Spring was wasting away, and summer was nipping at its heels. He was supposed to be married by now, and not for the first time, he wondered what Adaira was doing. Was she still crying over his loss? Had her parents arranged another political marriage for her already?

Adaira’s unfortunate position as the daughter of a powerful chieftain was Sawny’s most pressing concern. If he did not leave this prison soon, another marriage would be arranged for Adaira, and if he ever did escape, she would be as far out of his reach as she was now.

He would be in an entirely different type of prison, but a prison all the same – one much darker and more dismal than this, without Adaira in his life.

Addison trailed his finger along a divot in the stones. “I think he means to let ye heal more until ye are fully hale once more, then he means to break ye to extract the information he requires from ye.”

Sawny’s face twisted slightly at Addison’s reply. “Fully hale? Why? Would he no’ believe it easier to break me if I’m already weak?”

Poor Addison looked extremely uncomfortable with that presumption. He kept his eyes averted. “I think he fears that if ye are no’ fully healed, that ye might pass out or die and he’d no’ have his information.”

Addison glanced at the door and Sawny followed his gaze. The lad had been in the cell too long, and even if there was no guard outside the door, the guard at the end of the hall would surely be wondering where the lad went.

Time was not on their side.

“Do ye know why he needs this information? Seems odd that he picked me for this means of obtaining information. Why no’ someone more closely involved who would be sure to know about the letter?”

“I think ye were an opportunity. Had ye no’ been alone, I dinna think he would have tried. Ye happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And he likes that ye are a Keppoch. Fits his desire for revenge. As for why he needs it, I overheard a man shouting at him in his study. Kelso referred to the man as —”

“Slippery John,” Sawny finished for him. He might not want to play at politics, but that did not mean he had not been dragged into this game of crowns.

Addison nodded. “An insulting but apt description, from my view of the man.”

The lad rose suddenly and stepped to the door, lifting the platter from the floor as he went.

“I must go. I shall tell Kelso ye are still ill to buy ye some time, and I’ll return with your evetide meal. Perchance I will have more information for ye then. I’ll try –”

He paused and looked over his shoulder to the barely cracked-open door. Without another word, he shouldered the heavy door open and slammed it shut behind him.

Though the lad’s words had been clipped and at times puzzling, Sawny had a better understanding of what might be going on with Kelso MacIntosh.

The man appeared to be as much a prisoner as Sawny, a prisoner to the dictates of Slippery John Campbell, Earl of Breadalbane, Laird of the Highland Campbells, and staunch supporter of the Hanover pretender king. Sawny vowed to ask Addison more when he returned, but he guessed that John was demanding his chieftains find the letter or find out if the MacDonalds had it and had tired of chasing his tail.

That was dangerous. If Slippery John was going to such lengths to find the letter or information, that meant they still did not have it, and they would start threatening MacDonalds to find it.

If he escaped, he would warn the MacDonalds and all their allies to travel in groups. He’d no risk another Highlander falling into Campbell or MacIntosh hands.

Nay, *when*.

When he escaped.

Sawny looked at the sunlight window slit.

He would not let even the suggestion of expiring in this prison enter his mind.

When he escaped, he would warn the MacDonalds and wed Adaira before the sun set.



Chapter Thirteen

Adaira

“She’s still moping, then?”

Seamus came behind Sorcha and wrapped his arms around her waist as he spoke. Sorcha stood at the window that overlooked the castle yard. She had just come from Adaira’s room in a fruitless effort to encourage the lass to get some fresh air.

Adaira had left her stunning blue wedding gown in a pile on her floor, climbed into her bed, and had not left in nearly a month.

They had let her mourn for a sennight, but over the past week, they had tried in earnest to get her to leave her room. Other than racing outside in a distressed state in her mistaken belief she might rescue Sawny from drowning, she had not left her chambers.

Instead, she laid on her side and stared at the wall, or sobbed and kicked her family out. Even Maddock had tried to engage her, using his carefree grin and witty jokes to bring a smile to her face, but his humorous words had fallen on closed ears.

All the brightness that had been their Adaira was slipping away, like the sunlight in the grip of winter, pale and wan.

They were entering yet another week with no word of the missing Keppoch MacDonald, or the *feckin' bastard* as Seamus and Reade had taken to calling him. Adaira was as distraught as she had been on her wedding day.

The heart would heal, Sorcha knew. What woman hadn't had her heart broken in one way or another? It always healed, and many times for the better. Scars made one stronger.

But not yet for Adaira. Una had removed another untouched tray from Adaira's room this morning and brought it directly to Sorcha. Adaira had not taken more than a cup of tea or a nibble of a bannock in nigh three weeks. Sorcha had rushed to her daughter's room that instant and curled around the lass in her bed. She was losing weight, and her skin was dull.

Adaira had been a beautifully curved and shining bright lass, so much so that her father and brothers had to chase many men, young and old, wealthy and with position away. She was

everything a man was looking for in a wife and life partner, and when she fell in love with a Keppoch MacDonald, Seamus saw it as a blessing and a curse.

“Perfect for an alliance in the Highlands, but with a clan known for lechers,” he had commented wearily.

“And thieves and reivers,” Reade had added.

Sorcha did not care. Under the banner of Sawny’s love, Adaira had bloomed even more. She had become impossibly beautiful, so much so that Sorcha’s heart trembled when she looked at her daughter. Striking beauty in such an unbearable world. Mayhap they had all been too prideful in that beauty and what came with it.

Now that the banner of Sawny was absent, Adaira was withering like a flower without sun, and Adaira’s pain was a knife in Sorcha’s heart. Her beautiful and charming daughter, brought low by a lecherous Keppoch.

Feckin’ bastard, indeed.

Adaira had ignored Sorcha’s pleas to leave the room, perchance to bathe or take a bite to eat, to no avail. Sorcha dropped her head and shuffled out of the room, nearly as despondent as her daughter.

What would happen to the poor lass now?

And worse, given the politics and Glenachulish’s status in the Highlands, their unmarried daughter could not remain unmarried long.

Sorcha could not face her duties for the day, not until she gathered her wits and emotions, so she had paused at the window and let the wash of late spring sunlight cleanse her of her dismal sadness for her daughter.

That was where Seamus had found her.

Sorcha leaned back into her husband's warm and supportive embrace.

"Aye," Sorcha answered. "She's lost more weight. She's barely skin and bones. I dinna know what to do to get her to eat anything."

Seamus leaned forward and rested his chin atop his wife's blond head where her hair was pinned at the crown.

"We have larger concerns," he said with a sigh.

Sorcha's chest deflated. From his tone, she could tell she was not going to care for Seamus's next words.

"Word of Adaira's predicament has run rampant throughout the Highlands."

Sorcha huffed. "Rumors run like deer through the woods here."

"Faster," Seamus agreed. "And we've had offers for her already. Some were less than appealing, suggesting our lass is tainted goods —"

He did not even finish the word before Sorcha spun around to face him. Her face burned hot with her fury at such an insult to the daughter of the Glenachulish MacDonalds.

“Tainted! Any man in all of Scotland would be privileged to have her to wife! They –”

Seamus grasped her flying hands in his and brought her close to his chest.

“Aye, my love. Ye are quite correct. But the rumors are what they are.”

Sorcha sagged against him, trying to keep her frustrated tears from falling. “Why are ye telling me this? Surely ye have no’ promised our lass to anyone. She’s still mourning!”

Seamus kissed her warm forehead. Her fury and sorrow burned off her like a fire.

“Aye, but the wolves hunt the weakest prey, and right now, Ada is about as weak as she will ever be. And the wolves are circling.”

“Surely ye canna think to betroth her to any of them?”

“As much as I would love to form another alliance, perchance an even stronger one, I would never know if ‘twas for the Highlands alone or for Adaira that they offered marriage. I will no’ shackle my only lass to a man set on abusing her for her position.” He exhaled and dropped his chin. “As much as I despise admitting it, at least until he disappeared, Sawny seemed to love Adaira wildly and for her. He cared naught for the politics or issues of the Highlands.”

Until he disappeared ...

Those words rang in Sorcha’s head. While Seamus and Reade had their doubts for months, Sorcha had seen who

Sawny and Adaira were when they were together. No lechery, no politicking, just two people who loved each other in a way rarely seen in this world.

And she would have argued anyone who spoke differently, until he disappeared.

“I’ve told Reade, Maddock, and Conall to keep the wolves away,” Seamus continued. “Reade, of course, is taking his role seriously. Maddock, surprisingly, engaged Arran to assist, and they are guarding the road, the gate, and the yard against anyone who might be drooling over a chance at Adaira. Despite all this, she will have to wed, and ‘twill have to be sooner rather than later.”

Sorcha pressed her cheek against her husband’s broad chest where the steady beat of his heart provided her a measure of soothing balm.

“I fear ye are right, and we shall have to act soon, with or without her voice in the matter.” Sorcha sighed heavily. “What will we do with our Adaira?”



“Conall, might I ask a favor of ye?”

Her brother’s pleasant face tightened and his eyes widened in surprise at Adaira’s appearance in the yard by the stables. He flicked his hazel green eyes to the tower, as if checking to see if she should even be out of her chambers. With the flat of

his hand, he wiped his damp, light brown locks back over his forehead. It was a nervous habit of his, one Adaira had seen her poor brother make more than once.

Compared to his two older, bold brothers, Conall came off as a nervous lad.

Nay, not a lad anymore. He was a full man, but still trying to find himself, a difficult task with two bold characters that were his older brothers.

She looked at him pleadingly. He was not going to like her request but would do it anyway.

He was her brother, after all.

“Aye, Ada. Whatever ye need.”

Those were her father’s words in her brother’s mouth. Adaira was certain Seamus had told the family to cater to her every whim until she recovered.

As if she could *ever* recover.

She glanced down and picked at her plaid skirts as she entered the stables to join him. It had taken much out of her to get even get dressed and she could not bear to look at herself in her mirror. She hoped she did not appear too disheveled.

“I feel that I should visit Margaret, Sawny’s mother. Inasmuch as I have lost a betrothed,” (*and the love of my being!*), “she has lost a son. I would offer my sympathies and see how she fares.”

Conall's lips thinned as he stiffened. Several breaths passed before he answered, and for a moment, she believed he might deny her request.

“No one better than ye, I suppose,” he finally responded.

Adaira nodded, a wave of warm relief washing over her that he agreed with her intentions. “Aye, none better, and probably much worse.” She lifted her arm that held a small, cloth-covered basket. “I’ve procured some fruit and preserves from the pantry. ‘Tis a paltry gift to assuage the burden of sorrow, but frankly, I have naught else and dinna know –”

“Aye, lass,” Conall interrupted, reaching for the basket. She was rambling, fighting off tears, and evidently, it was apparent enough for Conall to recognize her personal distress. “Let me carry that for ye. She will appreciate the sentiment, to be sure. I shall get ye on Rionnag. She’s freshly brushed.”

Conall moved quickly, hanging the basket on his horse’s saddle before readying Rionnag for the long ride to the Keppoch MacDonalds. Mostly north, past Glen Coe and Kinlochleven, and riding slowly with Adaira, their travels would take a couple of hours. But Adaira was adamant, and Conall had the horse bridled and saddled quickly and led out to the yard.

And their mother had expressed more than once that Adaira needed to leave her chambers. A ride in the fresh air might be just the thing she needed.

“Does Mother know where ye’re going?” he asked as he boosted her up in the saddle.

Adaira shook her head. “Nay. I dinna think she would care for me making such a trip in my state. I thought it better to ask for forgiveness rather than permission.”

Conall mounted his steed and turned to Adaira. “Careful, ye sound like Maddock. But I disagree. The ride, the sunlight, what it is, and the fresh air will do ye well. Mother would agree.”

He gave her a slight smile before nickering his horse past the yard and out of the gate, Adaira and Rionnag plodding along behind him.



The gray skies promised rain but did not deliver on that promise, so their ride was an easy one. When they approached Keppoch House, a guard met them at the gate.

No' open as it had been in the past, Adaira mused. Not that she was surprised. Having lost a son of the clan, the family was not taking any more chances.

The clansman recognized Adaira and welcomed them inside, sending a young lad working in the dirt running inside to announce their arrival.

A stable lad with protuberant ears and freckles met them and took their horse bridles, and Conall assisted Adaira down before handing her the small basket. It was her gift, after all.

They walked up the stone steps to the main doors of the keep and pressed their way inside.

Margaret was already present, standing near the hearth, her pale hands clasped against her breast. She wore a loose-fitting, dark brown gown with a black cape.

Mourning clothing. Adaira's heart wrenched and she nearly burst into tears.

Thinking about Margaret's sorrow was one thing, but to see it real, painted in somber colors with her thin, pale skin decrying her pain was quite another.

"Good day to ye, lass." Margaret's voice was hoarse and worn. Adaira recognized it immediately. It was the rawness of a body wracked with sobbing. "I've been thinking about ye. I was no' certain I'd see ye any time soon."

Adaira stepped to her and held out the basket. "'Tis no' much, a token of my condolences, but ..."

She drifted off. What else did she have to say? This woman in her pain was a mirror to Adaira, and from the woman's softening gaze, Margaret realized their shared sorrow as well.

"Ye did no' need to bring anything, but I thank ye all the same." She took the proffered basket and set it on a nearby table. Then she turned to Adaira and clasped her fingers in her own long, cold ones.

Bony. That was the word to describe Margaret. Adaira was not the only Highland beauty stricken to the point of starvation

at the loss of Sawny, and Margaret was older and had far less to lose.

She had become a skeleton covered in skin.

A tear slipped from the corner of Adaira's eye. *This poor woman ...*

“How fare ye, considering?” Adaira asked hesitantly. It was a foolish question, as she knew what this woman was feeling. She could *see* how the woman was feeling.

Her thin lips attempted to smile. “As best as can be, considering. And what of ye? I have heard your brothers joined my nephew in his searches. Have they had any word?”

Adaira had heard only rumors that her brothers, Conall included, were digging into every corner of the Highlands, searching for Sawny. She had not missed how Conall shifted his stance at Margaret's question. But she would have to be completely daft to not hear the rumblings of Reade's threats to drag Sawny to the church, kicking and screaming if need be.

“Nary a word, I fear,” Adaira said.

Margaret nodded. “Aye. ‘Tis as I have feared. I wear mourning clothes, ye ken? Everyone says he ran off, but I know this.” She leaned forward until her nose was inches from Adaira's. “I know my son loved ye like no other. I know that he would have fought off the devil himself he if tried to keep my Sawny from marrying ye. So I know something must have happened to my lad. Everyone tells me I am wrong, but a

mother knows when her child is in danger. *I* know. My son did no' just run away. Sawny never ran from anything in his life."

Adaira stiffened. "Do ye think he's dead?" she whispered harshly.

Surely a mother had to keep all hope?

"Nay." Margaret shook her head with a shudder. "Nay, no' dead, but no' well, and no' run away. I dinna know where he is or what he is doing, but he would have returned to ye if he were able. Nay dead, but no' able to come home. I will mourn in his absence until I learn the truth."

More tears slipped from Adaira's eyes. A fountain of tears when she thought she had none left. Margaret embraced her, pulling Adaira in close to her bony chest.

"What shall I do?" Adaira asked, her voice muffled by the brown velvet bodice.

"We mourn," Margaret answered. "We hope for his return, but in the meantime, we must get on with our lives. No matter how sorrowful or desperate those lives are. Even if the worst has happened, Sawny would no' want us to pine away. He would want us to be stronger than that."

Adaira lifted her head slightly and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Ye seem to be pining, Lady Margaret."

Margaret snorted under her breath. "I'm a Keppoch. We have never taken instruction well from anyone. Sawny would also tell ye that." Margaret wiped her hand across Adaira's cheek, brushing away the stain of tears. "Now, let us see what ye have

brought and enjoy a midday snack. I fear we both could use a wee bite.”



The ride back to Glenachulish was just as gray but somehow less dismal. Conall had kept quiet and out of the way for much of the visit. During their conversations, Margaret had turned most of her words back to Sawny, and for the first time in weeks, Adaira felt like she had a kindred spirit in Margaret, someone who grieved for Sawny as much as she did.

Margaret’s words, however, lingered longer than the shared bannocks and preserves. The statement about not pining away, about living her life — she hated them as much as she realized their import. It was time for her to stop hiding away in her chambers. At least a little bit. Her own mother had to be as worried for Adaira’s health as Adaira was for Margaret’s, more even. Sorcha did not deserve to worry that her daughter might pine away.

And the rest of her family, her kin, and her cousins had been so kind and patient. The least she could do was try.

Even if it was just a little bit. Leaving her rooms – that would be a fine start.

She cleared her throat. “Conall?”

Her brother twisted in his saddle to her. Concern alighted on his handsome, youthful face. “Aye, Ada. Do ye need

something?

“Aye. I need to say thank ye.”

He waved a hand at her dismissively. “Och, lass. ‘Tis a fine ride on a fine Scottish day. Ye have nay need to thank me for that.”

“I do. I do need to thank ye for that. And for being patient with me. Ye and Mother and the rest. Thank ye.”

Conall slowed his horse until he was riding right next to her. His amber-green eyes blazed in the gray sunlight.

“Anything for ye, Adaira.”



Chapter Fourteen

SORCHA, BLAIR, AND FIONA convinced Adaira to leave her room the next day. Sorcha immediately sent in a housemaid to air out the stuffy chambers and change the odorous bedding.

It was as Margaret had said, life had to continue on. Sawny would want her to do that, no matter how much guilt and sorrow Adaira felt with the effort.

From the kitchens, Una swept into the main hall, a platter of Adaira's favorites in her hands. Dried, honeyed apples, late spring berries, candied carrots, bacon, and bannocks coated in preserves. Everything sweet and savory that Adaira adored. A pot of tea and a dainty green and white teacup at the platter's

edge awaited sipping. Thus far, tea was about all Adaira had consumed in the past month, and Una, along with everyone else in the house, was stricken at how much of Adaira had wasted away in that time.

In the clear light of the main hall, her appearance was even more disheartening. Deep purple moons under her eyes seemed to take over her entire face. Her full bright smile was a thin line beneath her gaunt cheeks. Her lustrous hair was flat and stringing against her dull skin.

It was as if a light had gone out in her, a light no one believed could ever be extinguished.

But she did pick at her food, and Sorcha shared a satisfied look with Blair and Fiona. Heartache was no stranger to the Highlands, but each had to walk that stony path their own way. Though Adaira had stumbled in her walk, perchance she would now gain her footing and reach the end of this sorrowful trail.

Conall entered the main hall in a hard stride and approached Sorcha, drawing her to the side.

“We have a visitor,” he prefaced.

Sorcha’s heart dropped to her stomach. “Nay Sawny?”

He shook his head. “Nay. The goldsmith from Ballachulish is here. He has something for Adaira. I thought ye might want to inquire as to what he’s delivering.”

Sorcha patted Conall’s cheek. As a man, he might still be in the shadow of his brothers, but he was a loving, dutiful son

and loyal brother, and Sorcha loved that about him. He led her to the double doors where a portly man with a shaved jaw and surprisingly long fingers awaited, a plaid bonnet in one hand and a small box clasped in the other.

“What do ye have for my daughter?” Sorcha inquired. The box was too small to be anything of consequence. Why was he here?

Wordlessly, he lifted the lid to expose the gift nestled within.

A shiny gold band, impossibly shiny, and etched with the delicate outline of a Scots bluebell. Adaira’s favorite flower.

Sorcha’s already rented heart wrenched and her breath caught in her throat. The ring was a work of art by the skilled goldsmith. Something to be proud of under any other circumstance.

A gift for her lass, but from whom?

“Who sent this?” Sorcha asked.

Footfalls sounded behind her, and Sorcha did not have to turn around to know that Adaira had come to investigate with Fiona and Blair in tow.

“What is it, Mother?” Adaira’s throaty voice asked.

The goldsmith’s eyes flicked from Sorcha to Adaira and back.

“’Twas commissioned over a month ago. For the lassie’s wedding. But ‘twas never picked up on her wedding day by her man.”

Adaira pushed past her mother, her ghostly visage peering in the box. Her hands opened and closed as she silently studied the gift.

She did not need to say anything. They all understood what it was.

Adaira's wedding ring. One that Sawny was to pick up, or have a family member pick up, on the wedding day.

For once in her life, Sorcha was at a loss. Should she send the goldsmith away with the ring? Take the ring and hide it? Pull Adaira away before the sight of the ring brought back memories of that horrendous day and sent her retreating to her rooms once more?

Thankfully, Blair, the diplomat that she was, reacted.

“Why don't we take this and put it aside? We can send it back to the Keppochs –”

Something inside Adaira seemed to break, as if everything she had been dealing with in a tempestuous storm suddenly blew itself out and her shoulders sagged.

“Nay, I'll keep it safe. For when he returns. If he returns.”

Sorcha cut her eyes to Fiona, whose own ice-blue eyes were perfectly round. For Adaira to admit that *if* – to realize that Sawny might truly be gone – was a gigantic step for her. If Adaira caught their shared looks, she ignored it.

With a confident hand, Adaira scooped the box from the goldsmith. Then she swept past Fiona, back into the main hall.

They watched as she grabbed the bacon and bannock from her tray and made her way back up the stairs.

Though the shock of seeing the ring might have disturbed Adaira, she had taken food with her in her retreat.

Sorcha considered that a good sign. She twisted toward the goldsmith.

“How much for the ring?”

The man had the good sense to appear contrite. “Milady, I canna in good conscience take payment for the cursed thing. We all have heard of your lass’s troubles, and I would no’ add to them. I was paid a deposit, and I’ll take the loss on the labor. For your daughter.”

Sorcha felt Blair’s cool hand grip hers, a moment of support during this emotional upheaval. The man’s tactful words and offer struck her to her core.

“Thank ye. And know that Glenachulish MacDonalds will patronize your smithy when we have a need.”

The goldsmith gave Sorcha a curt nod, placed his bonnet back on his head, and made his way back down the front steps.

Blair shifted her stunned gaze from the goldsmith to Sorcha. “Do ye think she took that well?”

They all turned to the stairs where Adaira had disappeared.

“I think ‘tis a good start.”



Once Adaira was in the privacy of her rooms, she released the pained breath she'd been holding and gasped.

She set her food on the table by her door and placed her hand on her panting chest.

Her parents and family might believe she was doing well, and she was not crying nearly as much in the past few days, but her heart ...

Her heart ached as much today as it did the day of her doomed wedding.

That was what she couldn't convey to her family. She could not put into words the pain that wracked her chest from morning until night or how it woke her from sleep with chest-throbbing nightmares.

Most of her nightmares were of Sawny. In some, he was kidnapped. In others, her brothers found his broken body.

But the worst ones were when she looked him in his dark, intense eyes, and with a lingering look, he turned his back to her and walked away. In those dreams, she was screaming and reaching for him as he disappeared into the mist.

She did not tell anyone of those dreams. Their pitying looks and sorrowful words were too much for her to bear as it was.

Today had been a bit different, though. Her dreams were not as pained or vivid, and her pillow was not damp from tears. To

appease her family and see if she was ready to leave her chambers, Adaira joined her mother in the main hall.

And it had been fine – she felt almost, well, normal.

Until the goldsmith had arrived.

Truthfully, she was proud of how she had handled the situation. Instead of breaking down or sobbing at the sight of the ring or the reminder of the day Sawny had plucked a bluebell and traced the lines of her face with its tender petals, she had stood tall. Rather than feeling wracked with sadness, her body shivered lightly at the memory. Something about her change in reaction struck her hard.

Because as she looked at that ring, she knew in her heart that Sawny had not left her of his own volition. He had not used her for sport or politics. He had loved her and adored her. The certainty of his absence pained her, aye. 'Twas why she presently hid in her rooms. But in a way, it settled a part of her mind that had questioned his intentions, questioned everything she believed to be true about Sawny and their relationship.

Seeing the ring, she knew that their love had been true, a meeting of hearts and souls, and that if he was gone, it meant he was not coming back.

She could mourn him, but she would never let his memory go. It was a true memory, an honest and fiery love, and she would hold onto that for the rest of her life.

They may call her a fool, but she would cling to his memory and his love, especially since something so tangible yet

remained.

Dead or alive, Sawny would always have her heart.



Chapter Fifteen

UNBEKNOWN TO HIS PARENTS, Reade continued to send several MacDonalld men into the outskirts of the MacDonalld lands and into nearby clans to seek out any information regarding the missing Keppoch fool. He, Maddock, and Conall, and some of Sawny's kin even took their fair share of the duty, riding as far as they could daily through the Highlands and into the Lowlands.

Thus far, naught had come of the endeavor, but Reade was not ready to give up. His father might be worried about the letter, but Reade was yet worried about Adaira. She had made some progress, but she was slipping away before their eyes.

His bold, beautiful sister.

Reade dug his heels in and told his men to keep looking.

He'd have that lecher's head on a platter if it was the last thing he did.

To make matters worse, new suitors had started to arrive, seeking an opportunity to make a match with a daughter of Glen Coe and garner a rise in their station with it.

It sickened him.

Over the past few days, along with Maddock and Arran, Reade and his parents had turned away every manner of man. These hopefuls panted after his sister like dogs in heat. Even Maddock's usual smile had turned into a sour line as they commanded yet another man, this one a cousin to a Stewart chieftain, to turn around and leave. The man had protested, even going so far as to lay his hand atop his sword hilt.

Arran did not give the man a chance to finish his sentence before his own Lochaber axe was at the man's neck.

"Dinna think of it. Reade told ye to leave."

The Stewart man took several hasty steps backward, placing distance between himself and the threatening axe, then glared at the men.

"Ye are fools, all of ye. The lass will have to wed. Glengarry will demand it. Ye canna protect her from everyone."

Reade shrugged one shoulder. "I dinna have to protect her from everyone. Right now, I only need to protect her from ye. Ye should get used to disappointment."

Giving Reade a final hard stare, the Stewart spun on his toe and left, his dull black and red kilt swinging as he disappeared around the palisade wall.

Maddock exhaled loudly behind them.

“The man’s not wrong, Reade. The marriage to Sawny was both a romantic and political match. Though ‘tis only been a month, things are escalating in the Highlands. The king is pressing the issue of the Oath of Allegiance. The clan chiefs have discussed signing the Oath if they can agree on how to split the reward. We are at a precipice, and Adaira has become political fodder.”

Reade pinched the skin between his eyes. Earlier that week, he had laid in bed with Blair and told her what had transpired regarding those same events.

Seamus had met with his father, Alistair MacDonald, other MacDonald lairds, and the chiefs of Cameron and MacGregor clans, regarding a declaration to accept the Oath of Allegiance to the pretender king. The reward was a way to secure their loyalty, but those agreements were in early discussion. Glengarry had hoped to bring the declaration to a conclusion by summer, but as of yet, the clans could not agree on anything.

And the clans had not received word from King James regarding the matter, which only complicated the arguments about oath-taking. Several chieftains did not want to sign, arguing that they should challenge the foreign king. Seamus

and his father had pointed out that the best way to do that was with this letter they still could not locate.

Glengarry had sagely noted that any uprising must wait upon word from King James. If the king across the water in France could raise his army, then they would fight in whatever way necessary for James to reclaim his throne. But they had to wait until a message arrived from the king.

The waiting was trying all their patience.

Joining his sister to one of those clans would alleviate so much of that present consternation.

“I saw her eyes when she took the ring,” Blair had said as she joined Reade in bed. She had told him about the goldsmith’s visit. “She does no’ believe he left her. She believes he’s dead. Her heart is scarred, and I have the sense she is no’ eager to find love again, if she thinks she can at all. The man your father picks to marry her, no matter when that happens, may well find himself in a loveless marriage.”

Reade snorted. “I had thought to have that with ye. A loveless marriage, aye?”

Blair had rolled atop him, her russet red hair curtaining around their faces. “Aye, but I came to ye a stranger. ‘Twas our problem. Your sister is heartbroken, and while time heals all wounds, often the heart does no’ heal the same, and the fire that burned there for Sawny may never be fully extinguished. Whoever your father picks to fill that role will have to be aware of that.”

Reade had nodded and kissed her nose, setting his worries about his kin and clan aside to kiss his wife's rosebud mouth. She eagerly returned his kisses, igniting a raw need in his groin. His lips slid down her jaw to her pink-tipped breasts, and his hands shifted on her hips, drawing her up to his engorged cock that throbbed for her.

Blair sat up tall, her hair falling around her shoulders. She moved upward until his manhood was at her ready opening. Reade groaned as his need for her drove a heat through his entire body.

"Ride me, my love," he had demanded, and she slid down his length, sighing at the sensation of joining and drawing a long, throaty moan from Reade's chest.

He wanted to grab her hips and slam her up and down on his shaft until he exploded inside her, but that night, Blair was the one riding him, and she was in charge.

"I'll ride ye until ye canna control yourself," she whispered. Blair ground her woman's mound against the hilt of his root, driving him as deep as he could go. Her fingers gripped his chest, digging into his skin and marking him.

"Too late," he had said as his hips clenched to drive himself up as she came back down. "I canna control myself around ye at all."

They had moved together in unison, rising and thrusting until Blair shuddered and gasped. Watching her find her release was enough to send Reade to the edge, and clutching her fleshy hips, he slammed her against his cock as his hips

rose to meet her body. His movements were wild, her sheath gripping his manhood tight as he slid in and out.

The heat and dragging against his length had been too much. A quivering erupted in his ballocks and coursed through his body. He clenched hard, holding her on his cock as he poured his essence into her.

Once his hands released her hips, she leaned forward and dropped her head to his chest. They both panted wildly, and he wiped a light sheen of sweat from his forehead.

Normally he tried to draw out their joinings, but Blair knew what he needed that night, her body and her sex helping him forget his worries.

And it had worked. They had fallen asleep with their bodies entwined, and he had not thought about Highland politics or his sister again until the next morning.

Now, days later in the full light of the sun, Highland politics appeared on his doorstep, and Adaira was going to be the one to suffer.

Again.

No' on my watch, he thought tersely as he left Maddock to stare at the rebuffed Stewart man who scrambled away.

There had to be another solution. They just could not see it, yet.



The next day, Reade and Maddock rode to the village tavern to meet with Sawny's cousin Roy and share any news of what they might have found regarding the missing Keppoch man. The trio had taken to swapping information regularly in search of new leads, but to date, Reade and Maddock had nothing.

No new information. No updates. No sightings.

Together, the brothers hoped Roy or Brodie had heard rumor or gossip lately, anything that might lead to Sawny.

They grumbled together as they entered the Stag and Stone tavern in Ballachulish, their disappointment weighing heavy on their shoulders, a cloak of despair that neither wanted to wear.

Roy was already in the tavern, nursing a mug of flat ale, his long hair hanging limply in his face. He looked about as pleased as Reade felt, which did not bode well.

As they joined Roy at the table in the center of the room, a buxom, blonde serving wench sashayed over with two more mugs of the same watery ale. Reade flipped her a silver coin, and she winked at him before swaying off. Reade took a long sip of his libation and wiped his damp hair off his forehead as he set the mug down. The day had been misty and their searches had taken them on paths farther south before heading to the tavern.

While Reade doubted Sawny would head south, as escaping an unwanted marriage to the far north seemed much more likely, they did not want to leave any stone unturned.

Thus far, it was as though Sawny disappeared into the air, like he walked to his bathing loch and out of the world.

Maddock and Roy mused solemnly with their drinks. Even Maddock, who typically wore a smile on his face as casually as a man wears his plaid, was as hard-faced as his stern brother. Sawny's cousin comparatively, appeared more distressed than angry. He pushed his half-full cup towards the middle of the table.

"I dinna know what I will tell my auntie Margaret." His voice was ragged and his sorrow as palatable as the ale before them. "She is stricken over his disappearance and fears a dire fate has befallen him, though she will not bring herself to believe him dead. If I cannot bring word of having found him, I worry what will happen to that good woman."

Reade and Maddock shared a knowing look. They had seen how devastated their sister was, and she had not even become his wife yet. Adaira had even met with Sawny's mother in commiseration, according to Conall, and they both bore the weight of their sorrow on their faces and bodies. Conall had commented that Sawny's disappearance had aged Margaret in a way time had not. What would Sorcha had done if any of her sons had gone missing? She would have set fire to every town, croft, and farm until her son was discovered, Reade knew. He could not begin to imagine the pain that Sawny's disappearance was causing his mother.

A sour thought came at the tail end of his first one. Sawny would have much more to answer for in causing his mother

this pain, if he had contributed to it intentionally. What manner of man caused such pain to his mother?

Yet as much as Reade hated to admit it, since they had not found any lick of the lad, the chance that he had befallen a deadly fate was seeming more likely than his running away from a marriage.

Poor Margaret.

Maddock cleared his throat. "If the lad is anywhere in the Highlands, we will find him."

His reassurances rang hollow.

They were so involved in their own dour thoughts that it was only when the rumbling in the corners of the tavern grew loud enough that the noise interrupted those thoughts. Reade was unsure of what he had heard and twisted this chair towards the group of men at a corner table, dressed in plain, weather-worn clothing. They hid in the shadows, and Reade could not make out their identity. He could not even be certain that they were MacDonalds or their allies. God save them if these men were Campbells.

But Reade could smell them and wrinkled his nose. They must have spent the afternoon deep in their cups.

"Do ye have something ye wanted to say?" Reade asked in a tone immediately recognizable by Maddock, who dropped his hand to his sword at his side. It was Reade's volatile tone, and Maddock readied himself for the fight in the bar room he knew was forthcoming.

“I said I’m no’ surprised the Keppoch lad is hiding as he is,” the most ragged of the three men replied. They had leaned forward slightly, bringing their faces and shoulders into the circle of torchlight. Reade still did not know them. “If I was busy tugging the chieftain’s daughter, I’d run for the hills, too.”

There was not even a breath between the end of the man’s words and Reade’s explosive movement. Reade was out of his chair and his brawny fist landed hard on the man’s face in the blink of an eye.

Within the next second, both Maddock and Roy were on their feet, leaping into the fracas to join Reade. The fight was a three-on-three that spilled from the corner into the main area of the tavern. Instead of trying to break up the fight, the patrons, many of them also well into their cups this late in the afternoon, cheered on the combatants. Some of the crowd were familiar to Reade and Maddock and shared the Glen Coe MacDonald name. Others must have favored the strangers, cheering whenever the haggard man swung.

The man’s nose was bloodied and he was unsteady on his feet. He hay-baled, swinging his arms wildly. His punch went wild as Reade ducked and spun, then came up, popping the man in the perfect spot along his jawline. The strike was hard enough to render the man unconscious, and he fell like a sack of turnips on his fat backside.

Then he spun on the ball of his foot to Maddock. The second stranger had rammed Maddock low, clasping him around the

waist and keeping his head down. Maddock pounded on the man's back and shoulders, but to no avail.

Reade reached out and grasped the man's stringy hair and yanked. His entire body followed, driving him backward and giving Maddock the opening he needed. With a one-two set of punches, he first struck the man in the belly, and when he gasped and tried to bow over, Maddock swung his powerful left, catching the man in the temple, and he joined his friend on the floor.

Panting, they turned together to aid Roy, but it was an unnecessary effort. Sawny's cousin lived up to the wild Keppoch reputation and was dominating the last stranger. Fighting was a way of life for the Keppochs.

The large man Roy faced off against tried to punch his smirking face, but missed again. His nose and cheek were bloody, and he leaped at Roy in a wild move. Roy easily sidestepped the man, and as the stranger tried to correct and come at him again, Roy's long arms reached for his head.

Grasping his hair, Roy brought the stranger's head down at the same time he brought his bare knee up. The man's face made sickening contact with his knee and thrust the man backward into their table. He knocked their ale mugs to the ground as he crashed against the tabletop. The table skittered away under the man's weight, dumping the man onto the floor next to the mug pieces.

Roy glared at the man, challenging him to get up for another round. The groaning man's better sense won the day and the

man remained where he was.

Then Roy lifted his face to the brothers, flipping several damp locks of dark hair off his forehead. A euphoric grin spread on his face, the first anyone had seen in weeks. He wiped his hand across the back of his lips, but it did not erase the smile.

Feck, these Keppoch kin are savage, Reade thought.

“That felt good,” Roy breathed out in a rush. “I have no’ felt this alive in a long time!”

Sometimes rumors were true, Reade mused, and the Keppoch MacDonalds were little better than uncivilized barbarians, as evidenced by Roy.

Roy scanned the room before lifting an eyebrow to Reade. “Anyone else?”

Reade’s gaze did the same, touching on each oogling man in the tavern. “Does anyone else have anything to say about my sister or her missing betrothed? Anything at all?”

Those in the tavern who had been so eager to cheer on their favorites fell silent and quickly found their seats and their cups. Their raucous cheers died down to low chatter now that the excitement was over.

The barkeep and the blonde barmaid rushed to the upturned table. While the maid collected the broken pieces, the barkeep set the table on its legs. Then he scuttled off, leaving the barmaid to clean the rest of the mess.

Reade flipped two more coins to her for her troubles before slapping Roy on his back.

“Come, lads. ‘Twill no’ do us any good searching for Sawny here.”



After making plans for another round of searching with Roy later in the week, Reade and Maddock parted ways with the Keppoch MacDonald and made their way home in the damp gloaming. When they entered the keep, Fiona, who had been reading near the hearth, removed her glasses and set them by her Shakespeare folio.

From the slow, measured way she placed them aside, Maddock braced himself for what his wife was to say next.

Fiona did not speak, at first. She rose from her chair and approached them, surveying them from head to toe. Her only reaction was a slight moue of disappointment when she noted the bruise on Maddock’s cheek and Reade’s abraded knuckles.

“What had gotten into ye?” she asked in a breathless tone.

Maddock had the wisdom to look abashed.

“I dinna –” he started, but his words were cut off when she lifted her hand. Her fierce blue eyes burned with irritation.

“I’ll fight, till from my bones my flesh be hacked,” she intoned. Yet another Shakespeare reference, but Maddock could not place the line. Her discontented moue increased.

“From MacBeth. When he is near his end and would rather suffer the pain and indignity of a fight he canna win rather than submit. Surely ye realized that ye are doing naught but drawing out Adaira’s pain with your actions?”

Now both Reade and Maddock appeared abashed. Fiona’s indignant look and chastising words pained them both as they dropped their chins to their chests. Their focus had been on finding the wayward betrothed and making him pay for aggrieving their sister so, and they had not considered what effect their actions might have on the very sister they were trying to avenge.

“How is she?” Maddock finally asked.

It was a question they should have asked sooner.

“Blair and your mother are with her now. She actually came downstairs again, but ‘twas no’ for as long as we hoped.”

Reade stiffened. “Why? What happened?”

Fiona flipped her blonde hair, unbound for the night, from her eyes. “She can tell that everyone walks on tiptoes around her, afraid to say the wrong thing. She knows that she is the center of gossip in the Highlands.”

“Is it truly that bad? Are our actions making her worse?”

Fiona pursed her lips and shrugged. “Ye are no’ making her better. Instead, ye should focus on helping her forget the object of her sorrow rather than keep the idea of Sawny at the center of your lives. We have so much going on, do ye no’ think ‘tis

time to leave Sawny to wherever he might be and help your sister recover from her heartache?”

Reade and Maddock shared a shamed look. Aye, perchance it was time to forget the search for the lad and focus on helping their sister.

Maddock rubbed his hand against his bruised cheek and gave his wife a thin smile. For all his humorous quips and easy manner, his body felt tight at the realization that their efforts might have been misplaced. Instead of searching for the man, they should have been home with Adaira, supporting her in her moment of grief and keeping the sniffing dogs who wanted to woo her away. He slapped the back of his hand against Reade's wide chest.

“Come, let us attend to Adaira. Mayhap we won't get our arses handed to us a second time by your wife or Mother.”

Reade rolled his eyes. “Doubtful.” Then he bowed politely to his brother's wife. “Thank ye, Fiona, for helping us to remember what is truly important in this situation.”

He turned and headed for the stairs. Maddock fixed his gaze upon his sage wife.

“Ye have spoken with wisdom once again, my love.” He held his arm out to her, and she threaded her slender arm through his. “Is it too soon to find another romantic interest for her? My father will want to form another alliance quickly, given the present state of the Highlands.”

Fiona moved toward the stairs, bringing Maddock with her. “A wee bit too soon. But unfortunately for her, she is the daughter of a chieftain and granddaughter of a laird, and that choice may well be out of her hands. But mark my words, as Lysander once said, *the course of true love never did run smooth*, and I pity the man who might be tied to her after Sawny. Her heart will take a long time to recover, and she may no’ love another man in the same manner that she loved him.”

Maddock sighed as they reached the stairs. “Well, let us hope that we can help her to overcome that dismal prophecy and find her smile again.”



Chapter Sixteen

MADDOCK WAS IN THE stables, brushing down Luath in wide sweeps with a hoar-hair brush. The bored horse flipped his tail to and fro, flicking away any flying bug that tried to get too close.

The early summer sun had finally pushed past the morning gray, and a light film of sweat coated him as he worked.

Caring for the stables and helping the stable lads with their work was one way Maddock was able to get his mind off the recent news his father had shared about possibly signing the Oath of Allegiance and committing to the false king. Even if it was just to placate the crown, take the reward money, and keep the Campbells off their backs until King James returned, the

idea of signing one's name to such an ignoble piece of parchment rubbed all the MacDonalds, and most of their allies, the wrong way.

The other way he preferred to keep his mind off Highland politics was not open to him, as Fiona was presently assisting Sorcha with the laundry.

None of this kept his mind off Adaira and her missing betrothed.

A crunching sound drew him from his thoughts. Arran had entered the stables, carrying two heavy buckets of fresh water from the well.

Maddock had known the man for much of his life. Arran MacDonald of the Sleat MacDonalds had been fostered at Glenachulish since he was twelve, after the death of his father. His mother had not fared well after his death, and as a favor to a local chieftain, Seamus had taken the lad under his wing.

Maddock and Arran had been of the same age, and tall, lean Maddock had taken an immediate liking to the more portly Arran. While Arran had grown out of most of his portliness, Maddock was yet taller and leaner and teased him about it whenever he could.

Much like Maddock, Arran typically had a smile on his face.

Today, however, something hung over the man like a specter.

Maddock paused, set the horse brush on a nearby bench and moved the horse into a stall. From the corner of his eye, he watched as Arran easily hefted the heavy buckets to pour fresh

water into the horse trough, yet his grim expression belied something deeper.

“Arran, what ails ye? Ye look as if someone stole your favorite treat.”

Arran’s expression tightened, and Maddock’s eyebrows rose. He touched a nerve. The burly man set the buckets to the side and pressed his hands against the damp trough, leaning upon it.

“How bad is the situation with the Campbells and the false king? I’ve heard rumors but naught with surety.”

Maddock shrugged one shoulder and leaned against Luath’s stall. “As well as can be expected for a set of clans who dinna want to accept the legitimacy of a sitting king and are searching for a rogue letter that might give their claim validity, while being pressed to sign a paper that might sign away their rights and power. So, no’ too bad.”

Arran did not react to Maddock’s light-hearted assessment of the situation.

“Why do ye ask?” Maddock pressed.

“The man who came to the door a few days past, the one who wanted to wed Adaira. He used the complications in the Highlands as a reason to woo her.”

Maddock stiffened. Why was Arran so interested in a misguided man who tried to court his sister?

“Och, weel, ‘tis a problem, aye? Adaira’s wedding was both a love match and a political gain, further aligning the

MacDonalds and strengthening those alliances. The Keppochs are wild and have no qualms fighting for what they believe. Glengarry sees that as an asset. Now with Adaira no longer marrying Sawny, every man with a hope to rise above his station is panting at her heels, and she has no love for anyone. Sawny's absence is most unfortunate for both Adaira and Glen Coe." He assessed Arran for a moment. "Why? Do ye have a solution to the problem of the missing Keppoch man?"

Arran's stern expression finally broke, and he turned, leaning his backside against the trough.

"No' a solution regarding Sawny, but an option, one that might eliminate the panting and your father's concern for his daughter's stricken state."

Maddock said nothing and waited for Arran to continue. What idea did the man have in mind?

Arran dropped his gaze, studying his boots. His wavy, light brown hair fell across his face, obscuring most of it from Maddock.

"Your father has been a mighty figure in my life after mine passed, and I see ye and Reade as brothers. Even your mother welcomed me with open arms when mine could not. I would do anything I could to aid your father and your family for all ye have done for me. And I know we dinna speak much of it, but I am a Sleat MacDonald, with powerful kin on my father's side. If Adaira were to wed me, it would retain the strong, needed alliance and stop the uninvited beaus from approaching your sister. Your father would no' have to decide which

alliance would serve best while trying to weigh Adaira's happiness."

Maddock's mouth fell open. Arran? He who enjoyed the brothels as much, if not more, than Maddock, and never, ever expressed any interest in marriage? Now he wanted to marry Adaira?

"What? Have ye lost your senses? Your debaucher character aside, ye have seen her? Not only full of sorrow and stupidly pining that the Keppoch bastard will return, but she is closed off, emotionless. I dinna think she will love another for a long time." His voice trailed off in his confusion at Arran's intentions.

"I want to try to do what is best," Arran said by way of explanation. "I have no prospects and she has unending sadness. 'Twould be a crime to her and her betrothed to offer a marriage under those conditions."

"Why ye, then? Is it no' a crime to ye?"

Arran lifted his chin so his dark hazel gaze met Maddock's. "I am doing it to be a friend to ye, Mad. To ye and your family. I know what it is to lose everything and need someone outside of family as a shoulder to cry on or an ear to listen to. And I would no' pressure her into anything. Your parents would be assured that I have no foul or conniving intentions, and 'twould take the pressure off your father and the need for alliances. Ye would be aligned with the Sleat MacDonalds. Though I have not lived with them in a long time, 'twould be something."

Maddock's anger fizzled out as his friend spoke. He was right, an alliance with the level-headed Sleat MacDonalds would be something. And in his heart, Maddock knew Arran, more than he even knew his brothers sometimes. Arran had no treachery in this offer, only longing to be of service to his family, especially his sister, in their time of need.

“Ye will no’ feel abused or swindled if she never loves ye? What if she never takes ye to bed? What of children? Of your own needs?”

Arran's hands flexed before he answered. “A wee problem. We can come to an arrangement about meeting my needs, if it comes to that. But if your family decides she must wed to fix this situation or if she feels she canna love but must marry because of family obligation, I will step up.”

“And have a loveless marriage?” Maddock insisted with a shake of his head.

“There are worse things, like a dead father, a missing beloved, or a life of loneliness. Who will marry her if no’ me? And unlike any other man, I understand and respect her wishes.”

Maddock was frozen where he stood, realizing how horribly perceptive Arran was.

“Arran, are ye lonely?”

Arran shook his head. “Nay the now, but time is taking me along for the ride, and what have I established in my life so far? My greatest fortune has been making a friend out of your

sorry arse and aligning with your kin. If I can return that gift by helping your family and your sister, 'tis the least I can do.”

Maddock breached the dusty stable air and clasped Arran on the shoulder.

“Weel, I canna say nay. ‘Twill help our family and the MacDonald cause, to be sure, even it if means the end of joy for ye. And ‘twill put an end to the wolves snapping at the gate. Come, let’s find Reade and then inform Father.”



A problem like Adaira.

Seamus hung his head in his hands.

What was he going to do with her?

She did not want to wed again – she had made that abundantly clear the night before when he had broached the topic with her.

It had been over a month, her mourning should have been over, and now ‘twas time to find a match for her. Preferably one that might unify clans and contribute to a united front against the pretender king and the fecking Campbells that continued to plague the MacDonalds like diseased rats.

No letter, no news from King James, and now he had the problem of Adaira.

In her present state, pale and withdrawn, what man would offer to wed his lass? And even if he did, Sorcha had pointed out another complicating factor – that Adaira did not want to wed. The prospect of giving her heart to another made his dear daughter blanch paler than she already was.

So if a man did offer for her, it would mean committing to a marriage with a woman who might not love him anytime soon, if at all.

Seamus believed that time healed all wounds, including Adaira's heart, but he also knew that the lass was as willful as her mother. She could be stubborn when it came to even trying to care about a possible husband.

No matter what issues a potential suitor might face, Seamus had another, more personal reason for wanting to have his daughter wed as soon as possible.

Like his sons, he too had heard the rude, offensive comments about his daughter's reputation, and by God he was not going to let those rumors reach her ears on top of everything else she was trying to overcome.

Nay. The sooner he found the lass a husband, the better.

A hard knock at his study door interrupted his thoughts. Believing the visitor to be Sorcha, he called out *Enter* without lifting his eyes.

Instead of his wife, Reade and Maddock stepped into the study, with Mad's friend Arran right behind. The burly man

appeared cleaner and more well-kept than Seamus had seen the man, ever.

Seamus read the situation with ease. Something was amiss, and Arran played a role in whatever *this* was.

“Hello, my lads. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

His chest clenched slightly when the three men standing in front of his desk shared a look, then returned their attention to Seamus.

What now?

Maddock, an easy, disarming smile splitting his face, spoke first.

“We have an idea, Father. One that might help solve your, uh, issue with Adaira.”

Seamus did not answer right away. He ran his tongue over his teeth and pondered Maddock’s statement. Issue with Adaira? Did he mean finding Sawny? Or his sister’s distress? The rumors swirling? Or something else altogether?

And why was Arran so neat-looking?

Seamus waved his hand at the trio. “Continue.”

Maddock shared a quick, sly look with Arran before speaking. “We know the politics in the Highlands are charged, and Adaira’s marriage to Sawny benefited us by strengthening our alliances. And as it was a love match, ‘twas ideal.”

“Aye, this I know. Why are ye here telling me what I already know?”

Reade pushed forward, elbowing Maddock and Arran to the side. “Arran is a Sleat MacDonald. He has agreed to take Adaira, love be damned, respect her in marriage, and aid us in another strengthened alliance.”

That was *not* what Seamus expected. He slowly leaned back in his chair, one arm on his desk, his other hand on his chin.

Arran?

Arran wanted to wed Adaira?

Or at least, agreed to take her in her present state?

He rubbed the stubble on his chin.

Truly, ‘twas a perfect solution. Even just a betrothal announcement would stem the flood of overreaching suitors, solidify the MacDonalds in the face of that feckin’ Oath, and give her a husband who would wait until she was ready before demanding any marriage rights.

Which was the best any father could hope for.

Yet to agree quickly might not be for the best. Seamus cleared his throat.

“Arran, I did no’ know ye wished to marry. I rather presumed ye and Maddock to be of a like mind in that regard.”

Ignoring the faltering smile on his son’s face, Seamus turned his hard, whiskey-hued gaze to the young man in front of him with slick-backed brown hair and a fresh plaid. His sons had

cleaned their friend up well, and Arran looked almost respectable.

Arran inclined his head toward Seamus. “Aye, we were of the same mind, to be sure. But like Maddock, I too see the value of marriage. More than that, I owe the Glenachulish MacDonalds much, and if I can help with Adaira, and help her in her sorrow, then I graciously offer my aid.”

Seamus raised an eyebrow at the lad. He immediately saw the benefit for all involved and sat upright.

“Aye. And I graciously accept. But I canna force the lass to wed ye. Make your argument for her hand to her, and if she accepts, we will meet with the priest to see about making the arrangements.”

All three young men bowed to Seamus and departed, light of step and of purpose.

Seamus liked the idea, but the trio’s joy might be premature.

Adaira had to say *aye*, after all.



Chapter Seventeen

THE SUMMER SOLSTICE WAS upon them, and at Fiona's urging, Adaira begrudgingly joined them at the fair just outside Ballachulish.

Fiona had heard from the miller's son that there were merchants, dancing, and even some travelers with intriguing wares. Sorcha concurred that an outing might do Adaira well, and Fiona and Adaira set out in the late afternoon with Maddock, Arran, and Conall as escorts.

When they arrived, the sun had crested the sky, kissing the horizon in a gray and pink haze. Torches and lanterns warmed the area, breaking through the cool summer mist and casting the entire event in a festive glow. A large bonfire, the featured

centerpiece of the solstice fair, burned in the distance, a beacon welcoming fairgoers and market vendors alike.

Adaira's brothers and Arran tied off their horses at the edge of the festival grounds. Maddock and Conall laughed along with Fiona as she clapped her excitement, but Adaira noted that Arran lingered near her as she slid off her mare.

Probably to keep an eye on her. Reade most likely had given the poor man strict instructions to keep Adaira in his sights at all times.

She sighed as she looked upon the colorful, tented vendors under the flickering light. She should be irritated at Arran's presence, but she did not have it in her. Her family meant well, trying to lift her from her saddened state, and perchance they were right. How could she enjoy this night if she was enshrouded in sorrow?

It had been well over a month, and Sawny was still gone.

Mayhap her family was right – he had departed, disappeared completely, and left her behind.

Mayhap she should start picking up the pieces of her life.

Though this event was meant to fill her with joy, she still felt nothing.

Would she ever feel anything again?

Margaret's words surged to the front of her mind. That Sawny would not have left Adaira at the altar, yet he was no' dead.

That paradox was a concern.

She had been feeling nothing for too much. It was as if Sawny robbed all feeling from her when he absconded.

Yet, if that was who she was now, so be it.

There were worse things, she supposed. However, they were few and far between when compared to being dead inside.

Her gaze flicked from the fair to Arran, who stood a polite distance from her, and kept his own eyes on the activity in front of them. Nearly as tall as Reade, with a burly chest and wavy brown hair, he had kind eyes, and having him as a chaperone was not the worst thing.

And his presence would keep overly aggressive suitors away. Just as she heard the rumors about her and Sawny, she'd also eavesdropped on conversations about the parade of men who were willing to take Adaira, despite her supposed ruined reputation.

Ugh.

She appreciated Arran as her chaperone, as she was not exactly in the best frame of mind, and if something did happen

...

What is going to happen?

Nothing.

Because there was nothing left to Adaira.

Still, her family had worked hard to make her smile, get her to eat, and now bring her to the fair so she might find some

measure of enjoyment. Thus, Adaira did what she had been doing for the past few weeks.

Putting a fake half-smile on her face and going through the motions of life.

It was not overly difficult.

And spending the evening at the fair might help her forget some of her misery, at least for a few hours.

She tilted her head toward the lantern light.

“Shall we go?” she asked Arran.

His lips tightened into a narrow smile and nodded. “Wherever milady cares to go,” he answered with a sweep of his hand.

Grateful for his kindness, Adaira lifted her plaid skirts and made her way toward the fairway with Arran at her back. Maddock, Fiona, and Conall waved as they departed slightly northward toward the bonfire.

Once she entered the main fair area, she did forget herself, for a bit. Fiona’s plan had been more effective than she could have planned, despite Adaira’s protestations.

In fact, Adaira felt like a wee child as she followed the flagstones toward the first set of vendors.

Silver glinted in the torchlight, followed by shiny fruits and well-crafted leather works. Banners and canopies flapped in the night air, and every piece of silver, pewter, and gold sparkled like treasure. All the merchants seemed to have their

appearance and brought out their best wares. Truly, it was a vision for the senses.

They passed an alley off to the right and away from the loud crush of the crowd. Adaira's gaze slid toward the darkness unbidden. She did not expect to see anything other than dirt and debris, and her eyes widened when she noted a splash of flapping purple amid the hazy shadows.

When she turned the corner to investigate, Arran's voice reached her ears.

“Milady, ‘tis but an alley.”

Keeping her attention fixed on the purple, she pointed toward it.

“Nay. I see a tent. I’d like to see what they have to sell.”

Arran came up behind her and huffed a loud, concerned breath. “Gypsies. Some wayfarer trying to take advantage of the fair.”

From his tone, she had the sense that he did not care for whoever occupied that tent.

“But is no’ every merchant here taking advantage of the fair? What makes this person somehow less?”

Arran shrugged. She pressed forward into the gloom, and Arran followed close on her heels. His hand dropped to the sword hilt above his belt.

“No’ that they are taking advantage, but these types, they sell falsehoods and fake goods. If I buy a silver ring from a

merchant, 'tis silver. If I buy it from one of these wayfarers, 'tis most likely lead.”

She puffed out a doubtful breath. “Ye sound as jaded as I. Come on.”

Making her way through the haze, she found the purple tent and its opening. Pale lamplight cast its incandescent glow that spilled into the alley and it was bathed in shades of purple, blue, and black, like a fairy cave from one of Fiona’s stories.

“Adaira,” Arran pleaded.

She lifted her hand and gave him one of her fake smiles. While she appreciated his worry, she would be less than five steps away. “Ye can wait out here, or right at the opening. I shall see what they are selling and rejoin ye.”

Arran pursed his lips and crossed his arms over his chest. A real hint of a grin tugged at her lips as he appeared to be pouting. “I will give ye five minutes, and if ye dinna return, I am going in and dragging ye out.”

Adaira blinked at him. “So ferocious. I shall be quite fine.”

Then she entered the mysterious tent.



Instead of glinting goods or foodstuffs, Adaira’s curious gaze found a scarf-draped table and a woman, also scarf-draped, sitting on the far side. A lantern rested on the table, providing a bright ring of light in the small space. A black curtain was at

the woman's back, possibly leading to another part of the tent or a rear exit.

The woman gestured to the low stool on Adaira's side of the table.

"Ye come seeking answers? Have a seat here."

The woman's voice was low, rumbling, like a large stone rolling down a moss-covered hill. It was also commanding, and Adaira did as she bid.

Adaira settled on the stool. "Are ye *ceàrdannan*? Like a tinker?"

The woman, who seemed ageless but for her wrinkled hands, gave her an assessing look, followed by a tight-lipped smile.

"I've been called that. I've been called many things. But I think ye are called to find an answer."

"How do ye know I want to find answers?"

The woman looked her up and down, her dark eyes like the evening sky itself. "Beautiful blonde lassies are not cloaked in sadness. If they are, then they are seeking answers."

Adaira's face did not shift at all. If naught else, the woman was astute.

Maybe she can tell me why Sawny left, or what I should do now that he's been gone. Give me some guidance.

Because it felt like she had none. She was a small boat adrift in the ocean, and she required a sextant.

Perchance this woman was that — her guide.

If the woman could see anything or give her any answers.

In truth, Adaira doubted she could. To her, there were no answers.

Curly black hair and a swath of purple scarf spilled across the woman's shoulder as she held her hand over the table. Her thick knuckled fingers were devoid of any adornment. This woman's hands were for business, not for pleasantries.

"Let me have your hand," the woman commanded.

Adaira again did as bid, placing her right hand in the woman's palm. The woman's eyelids lowered as she studied her palm, tracing the lines with a fingertip in the circle of the lantern's glow.

She hummed on and off as her eyes narrowed.

"What do ye see?" Adaira asked impatiently.

The woman clucked her tongue. "Dinna rush me. Ye rush a fortune-teller, ye get lousy fortunes."

She hummed more then pointed to a spot on Adaira's palm.

"Your heart line is split, not fragmented."

Adaira leaned over her hand in the light, trying to see what the woman saw. "What does that mean? 'Tis bad?"

It *had* to be bad. Was not Adaira suffering the worst of heartaches?

The woman grunted. "Fragmented means heartache, and dearie, most of us have some tributaries on our love lines,

see?” The woman lifted her own wizened hand to show off the many lines populating her palm.

The end of her heart line was rife with tiny, fragmented lines.

“Now look at yours. A cut, a split.”

Adaira saw it. The breach was obvious, to the point each line burrowed deeply against her skin. “What does it mean?”

Another grunt. “It could mean a few things. I’ve no’ seen this many times, but what I think it means is your true love was expiring, and ‘tis naught ye can do about it. But,” here the woman lifted a gnarled finger, “ye will love again. Love will give ye another path.”

Adaira shook her head. “Nay, ‘tis gone.”

“Why do ye say that?”

“Because he left me.” Adaira swallowed hard. Saying the words aloud burned her throat, like admitting a truth she did not want to acknowledge. “He left me at the altar. I thought he loved me, yet he left me and is no’ coming back.”

“Did he tell ye that? Did he say he was no’ coming back?”

Blinding tears seared her eyes and she shook her head. The woman grasped her hand harder.

“Tell me that ye believe that. Tell me that your heart says he will no’ return.”

Adaira shook her head. She could not do that.

“The world is a surprising place,” the woman continued as she released Adaira’s hand. “We make plans or assumptions

and God or the gods or the Otherworld show us that we are not in charge. Your hand tells me that your heart will return. Those lines? Those paths? Whatever or whoever 'tis, will come back in some way.”

In a shroud, if my brothers have anything to do with it,
Adaira lamented silently.

Unable to make any sense of the woman's claims, she withdrew her hand, gave the woman a coin, and departed.



Chapter Eighteen

ARRAN NOTED HER DISTRESS and rushed to her as she exited.

“Adaira! Are ye well? Did they hurt ye?” He glared at the tent, ready to burst through the open flap. She placed her hand on his arm. The only hurt she had was heartache, something not new nor caused by the woman in the tent.

“Nay, Arran. Dinna fret. She only spoke to me, and I did no’ understand all she said. ‘Tis of no concern.”

He did not appear to believe her – his eyes darkened in the already dimmed light – but he gratefully did not press the issue.

“Would ye like to join Fiona and your brothers at the bonfire? We can head that way.”

She was tired. The outing and emotional drain from meeting the wayfarer had sapped her.

“Nay. I think I’d rather go back to Glenachulish.”

His lips tightened, yet he did not argue. Instead, the darkness in his face fled and he held his elbow out to her.

“As ye command. Come, I’ll escort ye home.”

After they mounted their horses and started on the path toward home, he spoke again.

“May I inquire as to what the wayfarer said?”

Adaira flicked her gaze over to the man riding next to her. She had known him most of her life it seemed, and Arran had always been a person she could rely on. He had lost someone, too, she recalled, his father. Reade handled the loss of his dear cousin with anger, while Arran seemed to have come to terms with his loss. Adaira did not feel angry over Sawny’s disappearance, she just felt sad. Arran of all people at Glenachulish might understand her sense of loss.

“The woman, she read my palm, so most of what she said was probably practiced.”

Arran nodded and moved his horse closer to hers as they conversed. “Aye, she has to make her living.”

“But she did say something that bothered me. I presume ye can tell.” She glanced at him again and he nodded silently.

“She said my heart line is oddly split, and that meant ‘twas another path of love for me, or that my love will come back. I canna recall exactly.”

“I would no’ expect ye to recall exactly. I imagine her words took ye by surprise.”

Adaira nodded. “I paid her coin and left.”

“Her words make a wee bit of sense. Ye never know what the world holds.”

“She said close to the same.” She was quiet for a moment as they ambled along the dark path, the horse hooves clapping on the ground. “I worry that it means something more. I know Father has urgency with my marriage. Sawny was a smart choice because of his family. But I loved him. ‘Tis all that matters to me. Now I’ll be forced to wed another to continue aligning us in the Highlands, and I canna bring myself to even think of another man, let alone marry one!”

Arran kept his gaze straight ahead. From the corner of her eye, it looked like he was going to speak, then stopped himself. Adaira exhaled. Hearing her speak the words was like pushing a boulder off the crest of a hill, and all her emotions poured out at once. Her gown felt damp and clung to her skin.

“Maybe what she was talking about means ‘tis time I give up and realize that my life must go on, like everyone says.”

That statement, that harsh realization, was a knife in her heart, as if she were admitting that Sawny was indeed gone for

good – either dead or had abandoned her completely. Either way, the result was the same.

Arran made a sound deep in his chest. She tilted her head toward him as they veered off toward Glenachulish Tower.

“Aye, but there’s naught wrong in doing all that on your time. No one can tell ye or your heart what’s best. Even if your father and brothers have different intentions. They may push, and ye may have to wed, but ye can mourn as long as it takes. No one but ye can dictate that.”

She thought about his words, shocked at his sagacity. Then it dawned on her, he had been through the same when he was but a lad. He had to manage his own sorrow over the loss of his father, and he had to do it without family and with strangers who fostered him. Of anyone, Arran knew the turmoil churning inside her. How wise he was to share his thoughts and validate her need for mourning.

“Thank ye for that. Ye have insight I had no’ considered, and I appreciate ye.” She chuckled under her breath. “I would no’ have thought a friend of Maddock’s to be so insightful.”

He grunted in response. Obviously, he did not care for her kind assessment of his character.

“Weel, dinna think too kindly of me,” he countered in a gruff voice. The tone was a bit peculiar and she narrowed her eyes at him.

“What? Did my father or brothers tell ye to be nice to me? To placate me with cushioned words?”

She was not upset if they had – she needed to hear what Arran had to say. The behind-her-back nature of it, however ... that was another thing, something becoming far too common as of late.

Arran cleared his throat.

“Nay. In fact, I was the one who approached your brothers and father.”

About going to the festival and speaking with her? Why would he need approval for that?

“Ye dinna need their permission to speak with me.”

“Nay, but I did need it to ask if I might wed ye.”

Adaira yanked on her mare’s reins, making the beast recoil and lift her front hooves off the ground briefly. As Adaira clutched the reins to hold on, Arran calmly reached over and slipped his fingers through the leather bridle, restraining the horse.

“What did ye say?” she asked, wiping her disheveled hair off her face. Now that the beast was under control, she could focus on the asinine statement Arran had made.

She must have misheard him. She *had* to have misheard.

Arran kept his eyes averted, looking at his hand that held the bridle, covering his face with his hair.

Hiding.

That’s what he was doing.

Hiding.

“’Tis no what ye think. Believe me when I say I have no immoral intentions –”

“Och, ye don’t? They why would ye suggest such a thing?”

Shifting in his saddle, he toyed with the bridle strap.

“First, for ye. I know ye are no’ in any place to consider marriage, yet the politics and your father’s position as kin to Laird Glen Coe and Glengarry himself make ye a valuable chess piece.”

She snorted at the base assessment, but could not argue it. Adaira understood her position in the world. High-born women were oft bought and sold through marriage to make alliances or resolve political concerns, or even pay off debt.

Her own mother had been in a similar position, yet she had loved Seamus.

What would Adaira do if she did not or could not love the man she was attached to? That did not bode well for her at all.

“A problematic truth, but ‘tis a truth nonetheless,” Arran continued. “More than that, I would do it for ye. I have lived with ye as a friend and close kin for much of your life, and I would hate to see ye wedded to a man who might no’ understand your mind and push ye into things ye are no’ ready for or wanting.”

Joining. Och Maid Mary herself! Arran was talking about her having to bed a husband.

“Are ye saying ye would wed me, knowing I may no’ lie with ye or ever love ye?”

Arran dropped the bridle and rubbed his hand across his plaid. She guessed he was blushing in the darkness.

“I would wed ye to prevent such a fate for ye. I am a Sleat MacDonald, my name carries weight, and as a favor to your family, but also as a favor to ye. I know what sorrow is, and it would do me good to know ye could mourn as ye see fit. We can deal with any other issues at a later time, if at all.”

Her gaze was riveted on his darkened silhouette. His shoulders were curved and his head was down. It took much out of him to make this offer, everything including his own future happiness in a marriage to a woman he loved. And the bedding issue – he was nearly the rake Maddock was! What he was offering was a sacrifice.

Such an amazing way to show his love and fidelity to her and her family.

And it would put an end to the suitors and the conversation of what to do about Adaira.

She did not love it as a solution, but a marriage to Arran was a far sight better than anything she had heard whispered about in the corners of the keep.

“Can ye give me some time to think about it?”

His shadowed head nodded. “Of course. But dinna wait too long. I’d hate for your father’s hand to be forced if it comes to that.”

Adaira nodded. Of course. Otherwise, she could put the issue of her marriage off indefinitely.

“Shall we finish our ride home?” Arran asked in that soft tone – one at once unfamiliar and congenial.

She nodded again and reined her now-soothed mare straight on the road home.



Adaira did not have the chance to wait as she had hoped.

The following morning, right on the heels of the festival and as the sun peeked over the horizon, her uncle Ranulf and a handful of his men raced past the gate into the yard. Their shouting drew house staff, followed quickly by Sorcha, Seamus, and Reade.

They then called for Maddock, Arran, Conall, and the stable lands, and helped the men off their horses.

Adaira was awakened by the shouting, and tying a bed robe around her kirtle, she padded barefoot down the gray hallway and pushed open the window to watch from above.

Helping the men off their horses was a simple task – most were barely hanging on as it was.

Ranulf was still steady and leaped off his horse, then immediately reached for the man next to him as Seamus, Sorcha, and Reade aided the other men.

Half-carrying, half-walking his man, Ranulf's pale, grim face lifted to Seamus, and Adaira gasped.

Her uncle's long blond hair had obscured a gash across his cheek, a bloody lip, and a gash in his hairline that dripped in a crimson line to his right eye. As beaten and bloody as he was, his men were worse.

“Ranulf!” Seamus shouted. “What happened here? Were ye set upon on the road to the festival?”

Ranulf's face tightened. “Och, ‘twere as simple as that! The Campbells.” He turned and spat a glob of bloody spit into the dew-christened grass. “They were waiting for us as we returned. ‘Twas early morn, past the witching hour, and they must have known most of us would be coming back to Bidean nam Bian. They were right outside the gate. No’ too many, and we defeated them and sent them off and running, but several of my men were injured. Malvina is caring for the worst at Bidean keep, but these men would no’ let me come to ye on my own.” A measure of pride shone from his furious blue eyes. “As injured as they were, they escorted me here. Just in case.”

Seamus pursed his lips as he assessed the men and his brother-in-law. “No’ the worst choice. If the Campbells had been lying in wait for ye at your own keep, who knows what they would have tried with ye alone on the road?”

“Come,” Sorcha's commanding voice called out. “Let us get ye inside so we can treat your wounds and hear everything that transpired.”

No one dared disagree, and leaning on the Glenachulish MacDonalds, Ranulf and his men entered the safety of the

tower.

Adaira took advantage of the moment and raced back to her room, throwing on a rough gown and pair of leather slippers, tying the bodice as she rushed down the stairs.

They were all seated in the main hall with Maddock, Arran, and Conall who had joined them. Sorcha was instructing the housemaids to retrieve linens and hot water to treat the injuries. Then she stepped out of the hall and returned with her skin sewing kit. While most had only superficial wounds, one man had a gaping gash on his arm that would need stitching.

And Ranulf's wounds might need tending as well.

Adaira shuddered.

Why had the Campbells attacked? Ranulf's clan lands bordered the Campbells - mayhap it was a move to threaten or encourage them to sign the Oaths of Alliance? A way to force the hand of the Glen Coe MacDonalds?

Her heart leapt in her chest at another thought. Did this attack have anything to do with Sawny?

Nay. Dinna think such a thing. Sawny is gone from here.

Along with Blair and Fiona, Sorcha's maids helped clean up the men. Sorcha stitched up the hissing man's arm as his clansman poured a vial of whiskey down his throat. Sorcha pierced his skin again, and the man groaned, opening his mouth for more whiskey.

"Did they give ye any word or sign for why they attacked? To what end?" Seamus inquired.

Ranulf accepted the damp cloth from a white-faced maid. Some color had returned to Ranulf's cheek, most likely from rage. The gash on his cheek was significant enough to need a bandage, but no stitching, and would leave a scar that would interrupt his winter beard.

Her uncle could have been slain. What were the Campbells thinking? Why take such a dire step just to threaten the MacDonalds?

"The Oath," Ranulf answered in a low grumble.

Seamus and his sons all leaned back, as if the answer should have been obvious, and they were not surprised by this information at all.

"Of course, the Oath," Reade muttered under his breath.

"What else did they say?"

"That 'twas only the start of what will happen if we dinna sign the Oath. That the King and Breadalbane will serve up retribution for those who dinna sign."

"I thought we had until the end of the year," Maddock argued.

Ranulf gave a half shrug. "I guess they dinna want us to wait until the last minute."

"Feekin' Campbells," Reade cursed.

His own cheeks were bright red with fury. His dear cousin had been killed earlier at the hands of the Campbells, and now here his uncle and his kin had been attacked. His disdain for

the Campbells knew no bounds, and Adaira feared he might do something irrational in return.

Reade was not the most rational man. That she knew well.

She glanced at his wife, Blair, whose face was tight at his curse. She also knew how hardheaded her husband could be.

Something in Adaira pulled in her chest, drawing her gaze to Arran. His focus moved around the room, as if assessing the damage and what the MacDonalds were considering to do in return. His deep hazel gaze caught hers.

In that moment, she knew.

The fragility of life and the demands of Highland politics were not going to wait on the romantic whims of a lass.

That realization struck her chest like a hard wind, and she rocked back on her heels.

As much as she did not feel it was right and as much as it was not fair to Arran, his offer of marriage seemed like the best option.

Better to be with a man who understood her and would not demand her love or her body, than to be with, well, *anyone else* who would.

But now was not the time to discuss that matter. She dropped her gaze.

“What should we do about this recent development?” one of the men asked Ranulf and Seamus.

They shared a look.

“I think we need to inform Glen Coe and Glengarry. ‘Tis a new issue, if they plan on putting the pressure on us to sign before we hear from James or the end of the year. ‘Tis no’ what was agreed to.”

Ranulf nodded, and their low chatter and the groan of the men fell into the background as Adaira moved toward the stairwell.

She had intentions of returning to her rooms, but she was awake and her mother would need help cleaning the linens later.

Instead, she retreated out the kitchen door to the garden. The stone bench was damp when she sat on it, and the dew seeped through her skirts and chilled her skin.

She needed that coolness. Her body was overly hot, thinking about what was required of her and Arran’s offer.

The kitchen door opened and Arran stepped onto the flagstones.

“I saw ye leave. I thought ye might have something on your mind.”

She flapped her head toward the door. “With everything Ranulf has shared, how could I not?”

“Are ye well? Would ye prefer to be alone?”

A tight smile pulled at her lips. He was so considerate. How had she missed how considerate he was?

Because he was with Maddock most of the time. Consideration was not necessarily part of Maddock's wheelhouse.

Adaira scooted over and patted the stone bench. Sweeping his plaid around his thighs, Arran settled on the bench next to her. Not touching her, but close enough to make her skin feel hot again. She took a deep breath. Best to just get it out.

"Uncle Ranulf, his words, and what happened to him, has given me thoughts regarding your offer."

Arran stiffened. "And what are your thoughts?"

"Life is precarious," she said and did her best to keep her eyes on his face. This would take a measure of bravery, and Arran's sacrifice deserved her full attention. "'Tis fragile, and no' going to wait on my inconsequential whims."

"I hardly believe your marriage is inconsequential," Arran interrupted.

She gave him another tight smile. "Regardless, ye are willing to sacrifice much for our clan, and as a MacDonald daughter, I canna do any less. If ye are willing to live without love, I will wed ye."

"One day, your heart may heal. Time heals us all, in our own way. I will accept whatever ye can give."

He lightly grasped her hand and lifted it to his lips.

A chaste, simple kiss. A respectful kiss.

A scorching tear slipped down her cheek.

It was done. She was going to wed.

Time to put Sawny from her mind completely.



Chapter Nineteen

Sawny

The air in his dungeon cell warmed only slightly with the brightening day outside the window slit. Sawny tried to guess how many days he had been in this room. He did not think to start marking the days until after he had recovered from his fever, and he had twenty marks on the wall. He guessed that he had been sick for more than a week or more, and he had been in the cell for maybe five or six days before that. He estimated he had been imprisoned for at least a month, but 'twas a good chance his numbers were off and he had been in the cell for more than that.

A lot more.

It certainly felt like a lot more.

He dropped his head into his hands.

He could only presume what was going on above him with the MacIntoshes that would make Kelso's interest in him wax and wane like the tides and the moon.

Wouldn't Kelso want to get the information out of Sawny as quickly as possible? So they might act on it against the MacDonalds? If he was putting long times between his visits or his potential attempts to torture information out of him, that might mean Kelso was battling demons of his own up in his tower. Ones that distracted him from a lowly, easily forgettable prisoner in the gaol below.

Despite his weary, broken body, Sawny's lip curled slightly into his gaunt cheek. Perhaps one of those demons was Slippery John Campbell himself.

And if that were the case, then Sawny hoped Slippery John arrived with full horns and a fiery blaze to put Kelso in his place.

The lad, Addison, had been trying to bring him a wee bit more food, the good lad that he was. Porridge and weak ale were not enough to still sustain a bairn, let alone a full-grown man. Especially after his illness, the poor cuts of fatty meat, half a bannock, or dried fruit that Addison managed to throw on his tray with his past few meals had been more than welcome. Sawny had actually started to feel some of his strength return.

Looking down at his arm, Sawny pinched his skin between his finger and thumb. Despite Addison's efforts, he was wasting away. He had not eaten enough while he was sick, and the little amount of food he was getting now was not enough to sustain him fully, let alone help him rebuild and recover.

He was fading fast.

If Kelso was not going to torture him to death, it seemed that bastard was going to let him waste away and fade out of existence.

As he sunk more deeply into these self-pity thoughts, the image of Adaira rose before him. It had become harder and harder to keep her image and his vow to return to her in his mind and have her look at him. He had been robust and wild and strong the last time she had seen him. Now he was like a sickly old man. In his mind, her beaming smile dimmed, faltering, and her head turned away from him. And in his mind's eye, her blonde hair whipped up behind her as she held her skirts lightly with her fingertips and strode away from him.

He shook his head, trying to banish the thoughts and that image from his mind.

Nay.

Nay. I will not let this bastard get the best of me. I promised I would return to her and return to her I will.

Something inside him surged, a renewed vigor, and his eyes skipped around the edges of the room. In one corner, a wily

spider had crafted its web. The spider was not overly large, but its body was fat enough.

His lips pressed together in a grim line as he considered the point he had reached.

If a spider could inspire King Robert the Bruce to no' give up, perchance the wee beastie can do something of the same for me.

Moving slowly so as not to disturb the weak creature, Sawny crept along the stones until he was nearly within arm's reach. Then moving as quickly as his sore body could, he leaped forward and smacked the spider against the stones. It ended up a lumpy, bloody smear on the stones inside Sawny's hand.

Without stopping to think, because if he thought he would never be able to do it, he slid his hand along the stones to scoop up as much of the spider carcass as possible and threw his hand against his mouth, swallowing as quickly as his body could. The fare was sour and with a tinge of iron, its legs tiny strings as he swallowed it down.

Then Sawny skittered like the spider himself back to his place on his peat.

This is what I've become. This is what he's reduced me to. Scavenging for bugs in the corners of a cell.

But if it meant he could keep his strength to kill Kelso and get his arse back to Adaira, then by God he would eat every bug, every rodent, every snake that had the misfortune to scuttle across his path.

He was not going to let Kelso and his Campbell cohorts win. He was not going to permit this MacIntosh bastard to keep him from Adaira.



When the cell door opened the next day, Sawny was feeling slightly more improved. His health had mostly returned, baring his starvation, and Addison's extra food and the vermin in the cell were keeping his belly a bit more filled. Not full, but enough to give him strength.

He had made up his mind that he was done sitting in the shadows and feeling badly for himself. Kelso was going to let him rot or drag him away to his torture chamber, and he was not gonna make it easy for the man.

Sawny expected the servant lad, yet Addison was not with the guard. Much to Sawny's good fortune, the short, slightly built guard entered the room by himself.

Fools, he thought as he kept his head low and his shoulders slumped.

He kept his face hidden with his scraggly, matted hair and waited for the soldier to move close enough. When the soldier reached down to grab his hand, Sawny exploded off the stone floor like a tempest.

Using the guard's grip on his arm for leverage, Sawny launched himself upright, bringing his knee up and into the

guard's lowered face. It was always a sound move, if a fighter could bring a man's nose in contact with a knee, and one his cousin Roy had taught him. And it was a hit that was difficult to come back from. Sawny's strike was true and more powerful than he could have hoped for. The guard's nose broke with a sickening crunch. The guard screeched and floundered backward, releasing his grip on Sawny as Sawny rose upright.

That was all Sawny needed. With the guard bloody and confused and Sawny steady on his own two feet, he moved in and punched the floundering guard under his jaw. His strike knocked the guard to the side where he slammed against the wall with both hands. Sawny took a step forward to follow through with his left arm when his right arm was grabbed in an iron grip before he could finish off the battered guard.

That grip spun him around until Sawny faced the slightly taller, enraged guard from the hall next to him.

"Feckin' MacDonalds," was all the guard said before the man's fist made contact with a side of Sawny's temple, knocking him to the ground.

Sawny was no stranger to dirty fighting and was not going to give up so easily. He'd been knocked on his backside before. Many times. And he knew exactly what to do once he was down.

While he was on the ground, he grabbed the guard's ankle, pitching the man sideways. The unsuspecting guard, who

thought he had the upper hand, slammed onto his ass, shouting and cussing as he tried to catch himself.

This guard, however, was not going to be caught as unaware as his partner. Before Sawny could scramble away like the spiders he'd been feasting on, the guard kicked out with his heavy leather boot, making contact with Sawny's face, shoving Sawny to the ground. The guard got to his feet before he turned and spat at Sawny.

"Feckin' MacDonalds," he cursed again and with his foot, he shoved Sawny closer to the corner before attending to the other guard.

The other guard was groaning and holding his face. If Sawny was lucky, he broke the man's nose completely. The standing guard grabbed the injured man's arm and dragged him out of the cell.

The cell door slammed behind them, and the sound of the bolt clicking into place meant he was not going anywhere right now. There was a chance it meant he avoided Kelso's torture chamber another day.

Sawny sat up against the wall, letting the cool stone calm his excited, heated skin, and spat across into the corner. A bit of bloody spittle, but nothing to worry about. His face, other than feeling sore and bruised from the kick, did not ache much at all. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

This fight probably also meant he was not going to get fed tonight, but it had been worth it.

Next time, he'd try to lift the keys off the guard when he attacked him.



That night when Sawny slept, instead of fevered dreams and dark shadows torturing his visions, he dreamed of Adaira. His body still thrummed with the excitement of finally being able to fight back, and that buzzing carried him into his dream land.

This time in his dream, Adaira did not turn from him. Instead, she sauntered up to him, an inviting smile on her lips and her fingertips skimming along the neckline of her gown that barely contained her ample keeping breasts.

No one had a bust like Adaira. Och, they were a bounty, round and full beyond measure, more than a handful with brownish-pink tips that begged for his attention. In his dream, she pulled on that neckline until those luscious tips were exposed in front of him, enticing him, and he surged forward, sealing his lips against her sweet skin. She tasted of salt, of heather, of freedom, of ecstasy.

She lifted her skirts and moved her leg so it wrapped around his thigh, settling him closer between her velvet thighs. As his lips caressed her breasts and moved to the other pinkish tip that begged for attention, his hand found her thigh and he slid his fingers over that smooth skin up under her skirts where her dark blonde curls whetted in their invitation.

A surge burst through Sawny, something raw and primal and animal, and in his dream, his balls clenched. And when he found his moment, it was so explosive, that he awakened with a jerk. Adaira and her luscious body were absent. He found only the cold stones and old peat, and his essence sticky in his braies.

He cursed and clenched his fists.

She had been so real.

He was almost certain that Adaira had been there in his bed with him, that she had been touching him and giving him a reason to go on.

He dropped his head back to the stones with a groan and let his spent essence dry in his braies.

They were already so stained and disgusting anyway — what did it matter?

Burning these clothes would be the second thing he'd do the minute he escaped.



Addison returned in the morning with a platter of food. Unlike the previous mornings, he heard the jingle of keys from the hallway, and Sawny's stomach growled.

The guards might remain in the hall, yet they were trusting Addison, a young man a little more than a grown lad, alone with him.

These fools.

Addison once again managed to secrete extra food in addition to the porridge. A bannock but this one with a bit of honey. How had Addison managed to procure honey on the bannock? Under the sweet treat were several pieces of dried persimmon, and Sawny noticed the bowl of porridge appeared a bit fuller.

Quite the treat after starving the night before.

Evidently, the guards might be keeping an eye on Sawny, but not the food that Addison was bringing him.

The extra effort and amount of food that Addison took for Sawny had finally convinced him that he could probably trust the lad, perchance even engage him in an effort to escape. It was a weak piece of logic, but it was all Sawny had. And he was growing desperate. But he was not going to breach the topic this morning with the guard right outside.

Not so soon after attacking the guards.

He did, however, want to learn if Addison knew why Kelso was still keeping him, still feeding him, and not killing him to send a message to the MacDonalds. When Addison set the tray down, Sawny leaned close to speak quietly into the lad's ear.

“Do ye know of Kelso's plans for me? He keeps feeding me and naught has happened since shortly after I arrived.”

Addison flipped a cautious glance to the chamber door, then shifted so his lips were close to Sawny's other ear, the one farthest from the door.

“The chieftain has had some visitors. Campbells to be sure. And others. They keep fighting over a letter. I heard one man say that what the MacDonalds knew did not matter, but a deeper voice, one that held much more authority than my chieftain’s, kept telling him it did not matter who had the letter if the MacDonalds knew what was in it.”

Addison moved, quickly taking the bowl off the platter, clicking them loudly against the stones. Sawny’s gaze drifted to the door, understanding that the lad was making noise so the guard would hear he was moving the food and not dawdling.

Sawny was grateful. The last thing he wanted was for a guard to enter the cell and another fight to ensue. The fight the day before had taken much out of Sawny, and he had not eaten last night. He lacked the energy for another encounter.

“Do ye know why the chieftain believes I know anything about what the MacDonalds think with this letter?”

Addison shook his head. “Nay, but right now I believe ye are the only chance they have. And I think my chieftain Kelso is a bit piqued because one of the lads ye assaulted several weeks ago was a relation to him somehow.”

Sawny pursed his lips and leaned back against the stones. In addition to using Sawny as an opportunity to discern political secrets, Kelso had a bit of his own vendetta. At least he had not somehow attacked Kelso’s son, but as Sawny thought about it, he did not know if Kelso had any bairns. Perchance distant kin were the only children he had, and he felt some sort

of obligatory attachment, or mayhap he saw the lads like his own children.

That was an unfortunate bit of news. Regardless, all he could do was apologize, which was ridiculous because why should he apologize for chasing trespassers off his own lands? And try to convince Kelso that he knew nothing about a letter.

In fact, the only information he could share was that the letter was not in Mungo Gordon's box. Yet Sawny had the sense that the MacIntoshes and Campbells already knew that.

“Do ye know what he will do when he realizes I dinna have any information? He picked the wrong person to kidnap.”

Addison's shoulders sagged slightly, and he gave Sawny a sad half-smile.

“That I dinna know. He has no real cause to harm ye directly, since ye did not kill his nephew, nor did ye stray onto his land, nor are ye hiding any information. If he does kill ye, he shall have to be held accountable for it.”

He let the final words drift off and Sawny understood his meaning. With the conflict in the Highlands, no one other than Sawny's kin could hold him accountable. And with the larger concerns of the letter and dealing with the pretender king and the Oaths of Allegiance, the death of another Highland son would not garner much attention.

Sawny exhaled and watched as Addison picked up the platter. The lad paused briefly, giving Sawny an almost indiscernible bow before exiting the cell.

And that *fecking* door slammed again.

Sawny wondered if Addison knew that he had given Sawny much more information than he should have. Essentially, Addison told him that if he did not escape, his death was almost certain.

Feckin' MacIntoshes.



Chapter Twenty

IT TOOK MUCH LONGER than Sawny had anticipated before the guards returned. Addison was not with them, so he knew what was to come.

The shorter one had a scab on his nose and Sawny grinned when he saw it.

“Nice to see ye back on your feet,” Sawny quipped, looking up at the grimacing man.

The guard grabbed his upper arm and his partner, the one who had subdued him, grabbed his other arm.

“Keep your mouth shut, or I’ll see ye off your feet and on your back again,” the taller one growled.

With rough hands, they jerked Sawny to his feet, which was not difficult given how much weight Sawny had lost. Still, he made himself as heavy and unwieldy as he could – he certainly was not going to help them drag him to his torture.

He let his legs sweep behind him as they dragged him down the hall to the same room as before. A low fire crackled in the hearth and Sawny shuddered, recalling the last time he'd sat before that fire and the solution Kelso had employed with his wound.

Was this to be another round of branding?

Could he handle that?

Or something worse?

He liked to think he could, but believing he could withstand pain and actually doing it were two completely separate things.

And having experienced that agony once before tested his belief.

They shoved him into the same chair as before, and his insides shook. He swore he could still smell his burning flesh wafting off the chair. It was his imagination – it had to be – but it was there nonetheless.

They did not tie him to the chair. At first, he thought that was a mistake on their part, then he looked down at his sunken chest under his oversized tunic.

Mayhap not a mistake. How would he fight off two guards ready for him to react, and Kelso?

And if he did fight them off and escape, where would he go?

Kelso surely had soldiers at the stairwell.

Knowing all that, however, did not stop his mind from working, from taking in every aspect of this chamber and the hallway that he could.

In case the opportunity did present itself ...

The guards crossed their arms over their leather vests and fixed their hard gazes on him, almost daring him to move.

Sawny was not going to give them the satisfaction.

He was studying the dirt on the floor, looking for footprints to get a sense of this chamber's usage, when footfalls echoed outside the door.

Sawny's heart raced under his thin ribcage, and he focused, breathing steadily through his nose to calm himself.

He would not give Kelso the satisfaction of seeing him disturbed, either.

Kelso swept into the room in a rush. He wore clean woolen braies and a heather-colored tunic under a black velvet waistcoat.

If he did not know any better, Sawny would think the man was expecting company.

He stiffened. Perchance that was the reason he was in the chamber now. To get information out of him before this guest arrived.

As Kelso approached Sawny, he pulled a pair of black gloves from his waistband, slapping the limp glove fingers against his other palm.

“Ye look like ye’ve recovered from your illness,” Kelso said. “Tell me, how do ye feel?”

An odd question. Why did he care? Sawny did not respond.

The slap of leather against his cheek was more surprising than painful and he glared at the chieftain who had slapped him with his leather gloves.

“I asked ye a question,” Kelso intoned as he palmed his gloves.

Sawny’s upper lip twitched. “I’ve recovered.”

“Mmmm,” was Kelso’s response, and for some reason that frightened Sawny more than anything else.

“A representative of Breadalbane is on his way. He should be here this evening, and he will want information from ye. I have given ye a respite while ye recovered, and time to consider how ye should respond to my inquiry. Now I would know. Where is the letter?”

Sawny shook his head slightly. What could he say to the man to tell Kelso he did not –

He did not get the chance to finish the thought as the leather gloves smacked across his cheek again, this time the other side, making Sawny rock in the chair. And this time it stung like a whip and made the entire right side of his face throb as his head flung to the left.

Feckin' hell!

Sawny breathed out a long, slow breath from between his clenched lips and gathered his wits under his searing face.

Dinna let him see ye react. Dinna let him see the pain.

Lolling his head around, Sawny spat at Kelso's feet before lifting his gaze to Kelso's irritated face.

“What letter?”

Before Sawny's eyes, Kelso's face became a grotesque mask of fury. Clenching the gloves in his right hand, Kelso slapped at Sawny's head over and over, a short fat whip leaving red welts and ringing stings of pain on his cheeks and head.

When Kelso stopped, panting from the exertion and his own rage, Sawny's mind was spinning, as if the whipping had spun his brain inside his skull. He blinked as he tried to focus his eyes.

And that was just with a pair of gloves.

What was he going to do when Kelso moved to more significant weapons?

Kelso flipped his head back, glaring at Sawny under his greasy hair. His cheeks were bright pink under his beady eyes.

“Now. Let us try again, shall we?” he said breathlessly. “Where is the letter? What do ye know of it?”

Sawny licked his lips.

Let it never be known that a Keppoch would not stubbornly stand his ground, punches and torture be damned.

“What letter?”

“Ye feckin’ bastard!” Kelso screeched like a man possessed.

He snatched a piece of crumbling wood that had fallen from the firewood stack near him and brought it down hard.

Sawny had just enough time to bring his head down and his arms up, so his hands and arms took the brunt of Kelso’s fury. Slivers and crumbs from the decaying wood sprinkled around him like heavy snow and clung in his hair.

The stinging, furious attack was over as quickly as it began, with Kelso panting again. Truly the man sounded unwell.

Sawny lowered his burning arms, glancing at his abraded and bruised skin. He’d be picking wood slivers out of his arms for days.

Kelso flipped his head back again, and this time his gaze moved around the room.

Sawny had to keep his face like stone when he saw Kelso’s pale hand on a slender riding crop-style whip.

Kelso’s thin lips pulled into a grimaced smile, one full of evil intention.

“Hold him,” Kelso instructed his men.

This time, Sawny was not going to have the chance to protect himself. He kept his face as still as he could, a weak smile on his face. He tried to appear rather bored.

This was not the first time he’d taken a hit to the face. Or more than one. And he would not show Kelso an ounce of

fear.

Even if his skin shivered under his worn clothing as the guards grasped his hands behind the chair.

Kelso slapped the riding crop against his palm as he had done the gloves. His entire body exuded a sense of menacing control and ghastly delight at what he was about to do.

Kelso moved as quickly as a cat pouncing on its prey, and the riding crop struck Sawny high on the shoulder.

It stung like madness, as quick and sharp as Kelso's own movement, and he hissed as his skin peeled away from his body in a narrow line that bled through his tunic.

“Where is the letter?”

Sawny leveled his eyes at the man. He opened his mouth with a reply that would assuredly reward him with a second strike of the whip — probably more than one — when another man, this one *not* in a black vest, appeared in the half-open doorway.

“Milord. A visitor has arrived.”

Kelso cursed under his breath.

“Have Breadalbane wait in my study,” he instructed the man over his shoulder.

The man fidgeted at the doorway.

“’Tis no’ the earl or his messenger.”

Kelso stiffened for a moment before twisting toward the man quaking in his shoes.

“Then who is it?”

“He says his name is Duncanson, and he has something for ye. He insists ‘tis something ye must see right away.”

Throwing a final irritated glare at Sawny, Kelso tossed the riding crop on the table and stormed from the chamber, the poor messenger scrambling after him.

The guards released him as Kelso exited. Without a word, they gripped Sawny’s upper arms again and dragged him back down the darkened hallway, tossing him unceremoniously into his cell.

His shoulder stung where it slammed against the stone, but he was in far better shape than he anticipated he would be.

Despite the fact he was back in his dungeon, he was grateful for the messenger.

He might not be as lucky next time.



A narrow sliver of sunlight slipped from the slit and cast his prison into shadows. Sawny hung his aching head in his hands and tried to gather his thoughts.

If the Campbell Earl or his representative was on his way, it meant any torture for information was bound to get worse.

Whether he knew anything or not no longer mattered. He’d lose everything from his fingernails to his sanity while they

worked him over.

Sawny ground his teeth at the thought. He understood how torture worked.

If Breadalbane made it to Kelso's keep before Sawny found a way to escape, he was completely doomed.

Those thoughts only made his head ache more, because he had no options and no idea how he might breach the thick wooden door and find his way out of this dungeon.

Mired in his dismal prospects, he did not hear anyone outside until the door squeaked open. Sawny did not turn his head. He knew who was at the door.

Addison slipped inside and then did something he typically did not do.

He closed the door near completely. He'd have to use his fingertips to pry the door open again.

Now Sawny lifted his thrumming head and narrowed his gaze. Addison carried a tray of food, this time covering the tray with a cloth.

Another thing he did not typically do.

Addison set the tray down next to Sawny.

"What are ye about, lad?" Sawny whispered.

Addison silently removed the cloth, exposing a variety of food. Nothing to equal a full platter at a feast, but more than he had seen since entering this gaol.

“Kelso has called his men to join him upstairs. They are discussing a man who has arrived.”

“Nay the Campbell Earl?”

Addison shook his pale head. “Nay. A younger man, lean. A messenger or the like, but no’ from Breadalbane. He carries a letter.”

Sawny stiffened, his chest dropping to his stomach.

A letter? Nay! It canna be!

Then he blinked and regained himself.

Nay, he was leaping to a conclusion. The letter could be any message, even one from Breadalbane about his impending visit. It was far too much to presume Kelso held the mysterious letter everyone had been searching for.

“Do ye know what the letter reads?”

Addison shook his head.

“Nay, but I can try to find out. And ‘twill give ye time to eat before I return. Everyone is abuzz with this messenger so the keep is left relatively unguarded.”

Sawny shot straight up where he sat.

Unguarded?

“What are ye saying?”

Addison turned his milky face to Sawny, his deep eyes burning. “Eat. I will feel out those in the keep and the air of urgency. And see if I can hear about what this letter is or contains. If everyone is as distracted as I think they are, I will

bring a horse to the rear of the tower.” Addison pointed. “I’ll unlock the door and let ye know if ‘tis the mystery letter ye seek. And let ye escape. If ye exit the stair and turn immediately right, ‘tis a door that leads out a narrow hallway. The horse will be there, ready for ye. Then ye can ride to your people and bring them here, and retrieve said letter.”

Sawny had more questions and opened his mouth to ask, but Addison glanced over his shoulder at the door.

“I must go. I’ll find out what I can and return. Eat. Ye’ll need the energy for your ride.”

Then Addison was on his feet and at the door.

Without a look back at the shocked Sawny, he fingered the door open and sealed the door behind him.

Sawny did not hesitate. He reached for the platter and began eating all he could.



In truth, part of Sawny’s mind doubted the lad would return.

It seemed impossible that the opportunity to escape fell in his lap at this moment when his life hung in the balance.

Yet, no matter how hard that petulant thought pricked at his mind, he would not let it get a foothold.

The only hope he had to hold onto was that Addison would return and set Sawny free.

For a moment, he wondered why he had not pushed past the lad and ran out when he was here earlier. The answer rolled into his mind a second later.

Because he did not know if a guard had stood outside that closed door.

And the surprise of Addison's information shook Sawny to his core, freezing him where he sat.

At least his belly was full.

If he were to die soon, it would be with food filling him.

That was where his conflicting thoughts were when the door screeched open.

Sawny stood on shaking legs. Was this it? Or would a guard drag him away to his doom?

Addison's pasty face appeared around the doorway. Pale and filled with fear, he waved his hand, beckoning Sawny to the door.

"I ran here as soon as I heard the chieftain speak to his men about the messenger," Addison explained in a breathless voice.

Sawny reached the door. He glanced into the dim hallway. No guards.

"Why would he speak this news in front of you?"

He squinted his eyes at Sawny as if Sawny should understand something so basic.

"I'm naught but a servant. Nobles and men of power speak as if the help has no eyes or ears, and certainly no brain. Yet

we hear and know everything. Now, we must get ye out before they kill ye. Ye will be just the start. The guards are drunk, celebrating the letter even as they discuss it. Come now.”

Addison turned and Sawny stepped beyond his cell door after him.

“Why are ye helping me?” He rested his hand on Addison’s arm, slowing his rushing pace.

The lad paused and looked up at Sawny. For the first time, Sawny saw an expression on his face that was not one of fear or worry. Addison sneered.

“The Campbells and MacIntoshes only care about their power. They killed my father and mother, the MacNabs near Inverlochy, and my sister and I were taken as servants.”

No wonder Addison exuded dread. He lived in a constant state of it. Sawny pursed his lips, then turned his attention to the greater matter before them.

“Did you see the letter? What did the letter say?”

“I could no’ read it. I only overheard them discussing the news that the letter is a problem. Kelso was debating if he should destroy it before Breadalbane arrives or no’.”

So Kelso still had the letter.

That was a new development and meant a change of plans.

“Take me to the letter.”

Addison’s ferocious expression shifted in an instant, back to his pale fear. “What? Nay. I canna. ‘Tis on the third floor in his

study. If I'm caught ...”

Something else was going on with the lad. He was worried about more than getting caught with Sawny. Something else that made him pale so much that he resembled death.

“Then I'll go. Direct me to the stairs and I'll go myself. That way ye are no' caught and if I'm caught, I'll blame the drunk guards.”

The lad stared at him for a moment, then nodded. Sawny wiped his stringy hair out of his eyes and steeled himself.

“Where is the study, exactly?”

“From that door, go up the stairs to the right,” Addison said, tipping his head toward the iron-reinforced door at the top of the stone stairs. “Go left to the hall to another set of stairs that curves up into the tower. After the second set, 'tis a door on the landing 'twill lead to a narrow hall. The study is the first door on the right. But they may still be in his study. I dinna believe that Kelso will let the letter from his sight.”

“Let me figure that out. If they are drunk or celebrating that much, they may no' notice a dim figure skulking along the walls.”

“If they see ye ...” Addison's words drifted off, not wanting to speak such a dire thought into existence.

Sawny was not going to let that thought continue. “If they do, I'll run.” He leveled his gaze at the shorter lad. “I vow to ye, I'll never get caught by a MacIntosh again.”

Then he brushed past the lad and strode to the door.

Toward freedom.



Sneaking up the stairs had been rather easy. The guards and Kelso's men were collected in large drunk groups in the torch-lit hall. One man moved slightly, and Sawny cringed backward into the shadows, but he was only adjusting his ballocks under his liquor-soaked kilt.

Dismissing the drunkards, Sawny veered to the right, into the darker shadows. He noted the dim hallway that Addison had indicated would lead to the horse and his freedom, then tiptoed to the left and up the curved stairwell.

He continued up the second stairs and found the door on the right. The ornate wooden door was slightly ajar, and Sawny crouched low and pressed it open enough to peer inside.

Kelso's desk was just past the crackling hearth, and Kelso sat behind it, his feet on the desktop next to a lead crystal chalice of amber whiskey. The man's beady eyes were closed and a half-smile sat on his face. He altogether resembled a cat who caught a mouse – all he was missing was a thin tail dangling from his lips.

Sawny had no weapons, nor the strength to fight the pig hand-to-hand. Then to search for the letter ... nay. Guards would be on him in an instant. He'd not find the letter with Kelso still in his study. Sawny cursed to himself, then made a difficult decision.

Keeping low to the ground, Sawny crept backward from the door until he was in the shadows, then he raced, half-stumbling, half-falling down the stairs until he reached the main landing. The sound of chatter and silverware came from the opening to the left — those must be the kitchens. He headed into the darker recesses, rushing past a surprised late-night kitchen maid and out the rear exit as Addison had instructed.

He burst through the door, startling a horse that had been patiently munching on the grass right outside. The beast was saddled and bridled, and Sawny wasted no time slowing. He jumped on the steed's back mid-stride, mildly surprised that Addison had found him a horse at all. 'Twas little more than an aging steed, but it seemed healthy and strong, and if the beast rode him away from this hellscape, then it would have done its rider a fine service.

Grabbing the reins, he flipped his sweaty hair off his forehead and dug his heels into the horse until the steed was running in a full, wild gallop. Before the drunk MacIntoshes might have figured out where he had gone, Sawny was roaring past the gate and into the warm, drizzly night. His baggy shirt whipped against his skin until it was damp enough to cling to his malnourished body.

He pushed the horse harder southwest toward the woods and never looked back.

It was time to go home. Time to go to Adaira.



Chapter Twenty-One

Adaira

Adaira woke early on the morning of her betrothal announcement to a steady drizzle of rain – the gray skies matched how she felt. Though it seemed so wrong to agree to wed Arran so soon, and even more to announce that betrothal and make preparations as she had with Sawny, she had no other choice. What other man might take her in a loveless marriage, no matter her status as the daughter of Seamus MacDonald and the granddaughter to Alistair MacDonald?

Feckin' Highland politics, Adaira cursed. If not for the Oath of Allegiance and pressure from the Campbells, she'd have the

time to properly mourn Sawny and nurse her wounds of being left at the altar.

Instead, she was preparing to marry a man she did not love for a cause she could not fully understand.

Most women would dress for this event, where the families came together and offered dowries, pledged their troth, and set the date with the priest. It was an important moment for any couple, and she should dress accordingly, yet she had little care.

Her mother would be aghast at her dire thoughts and cursing language, yet those aspects only shone a light on how frustrating these events had become to her.

Adaira rose and went to her wardrobe. The gown she had worn when she and Sawny met at the church for their preparations, her lilac brocade, hung to the side. Adaira slipped the cool fabric through her fingers as memories of that day assaulted her mind.

How Sawny's dark hair was slicked back and tidy – so unlike his typical, unruly appearance.

His dress kilt, bright red and flattering his dark coloring, brought out the ruddiness in his cheeks.

And when he held his hand out to her by the vestibule, *Christ's blood!* She could see it like he was right there now, his hand outstretched.

Why am I so plagued with these thoughts and memories?

She dropped her hand.

This time, she did not care what gown she wore or if it was wet or muddy.

She drew down her dull green bodice and skirts. She would take a tip from her memory of Sawny. Still flattering, and when paired with her deep red and green plaid, might bring a touch of color to her cheeks, too.

Adaira did her best to gather her wits about her and pinned up her hair high on the crown of her head and out of her eyes. She could do nothing about her cheeks, once so round and full of life, now leaner and sickly pale. When she felt she was the most presentable she could make herself, she exited the stale air of her chambers and joined her family in the hall below.

Fiona and Blair stood by the hearth with her mother, while her father and brothers were nowhere to be found.

Presumably, they were with Arran, awaiting her at the church. This event was nothing more than a formality. She did not need to be there to sign or say anything; her father could sign all of the official documents for the upcoming wedding. Rather, her presence sent a much stronger message to have her at the church to sign her name, solidifying this alliance with the Sleat MacDonalds, and for the Highlands as a whole.

She did not know if her father or if Arran himself had reached out to his family to confirm this marriage and celebrate their union, but if she had to guess, she would say *aye*. Her father was not one to let such things fall by the wayside. And anything that her father, uncles, and grandfather

could do to promote a show of force by the supporters of King James and the House of Stuart would be done.

Her mother walked her, Fiona, and Blair down the muddy pathway to the foreboding church that two months ago had seemed like a beacon.

Now it was a gravestone, one that marked the death of her love with Sawny.

Dinna think on it, Adaira! she cautioned herself.

When she entered, her father joined her at her side and took her hand in his.

“Are ye sure of this, my lass?”

She dropped her gaze.

“What other choice do I have, Father?”

“Ye dinna have to wed. I’d never force ye.”

Liar, she thought bitterly.

He had already forced Reade and Maddock. She would be no exception when the moment came to make an arrangement to benefit the MacDonalds. While she would have preferred the time to mourn her love of Sawny fully, it was better to have some command of her future than none at all.

Flanked by her parents, they reached the altar where the priest looked at Adaira with sad eyes as he explained the details of the betrothal.

When the priest paused, Arran looked directly at her and leaned close.

“Are ye certain?” he asked in a voice low enough that only she might hear. “We dinna have to do this.”

She recalled her conversation with her father and how kind Arran was to offer this solution to her lack of a marriage. Then she shrugged as a slip of a wry smile graced her lips.

“Nay. ‘Tis the best option, I believe. Ye have the right of it.”

He took her hand and patted it. She noted that he dressed in his finery and felt a moment of dismay at her careless attitude toward her own attire. Brushing at her skirts to neaten them, she looked up at the priest in his white vestments again and nodded at the man.

Then Adaira sent up a final prayer before he finished his lecture of the importance of betrothal.

Please let this be the right decision. Give me a sign if no’, otherwise this poor man will be wed to a cold woman, dead inside.

The priest’s face was sallow as he spoke. No matter how sorrowful the priest appeared, he understood the situation as well as Adaira. This betrothal was something that must be done. Giving her the most comforting look he could muster, he placed his hand atop hers before handing her the inked quill.

She had to give the priest credit. There was not much he could do but offer her a modicum of comfort.

“Here’s the agreement, lass. Make your mark here and we will have the marriage within a fortnight. ‘Tis enough time for you to prepare, aye?”

What preparations? She was determined to keep everything about this wedding as simple as possible. Nothing that might make her recall her joyous anticipation of her wedding plans with Sawny.

Nodding almost imperceptibly, Adaira accepted the quill from the priest's wrinkled hand and poised it above the paper.

The air in the church was hot and muggy despite the wet, misty morning, and Adaira found the air too thick to breathe. There was something final in this moment, something absolute making her signature. It was as if by signing this betrothal parchment, she was acknowledging that Sawny in truth was gone from her forever. Her breath hitched as she pressed the quill tip to the parchment where the black ink bled into the fibrous parchment.

A rumbling sound came from the door, thunder it seemed. The perfect accompaniment to the turmoil in her belly at this moment. She exhaled hard and let the ink stain grow into a large splotch.

Then the door burst open, rumbling and squealing on its hinges, and the slit of the opening doors created a subdued glow against the dim church interior. The priest jerked upright as Adaira, Arran, and her family turned to the door.

"Who is there?" the priest called out as he narrowed his eyes.

Everyone who is supposed to be at this betrothal signing was present. A Sleat McDonald from Arran's family perhaps?

A silhouetted figure emerged from the mist at the door, dark and wet with long lanky hair dripping down over the figure's dark face and shoulders.

With commanding force, the figure shoved the doors wide enough and entered through them like a demon from hell on a mission. Arran started and moved closer to her.

Wisps of her blonde hair caught on her eyelashes, and she had to brush them away to fully see what her eyes were showing her.

Drenched from the rain, the scraggly-looking man strode into the narthex with force, like the devil himself emerging his way out of the bowels of hell to reclaim his throne. He was moderately tall, and while the expression on his face was hidden by his sopping hair, his body was clenched with fury.

The sound of swords sliding in their scabbards greeted the lone figure. Stiff and on alert, Arran pressed Adaira's arm until she was mostly behind him and drew his own sword.

From her limited vantage point behind Arran and her family, Adaira noted that the figure's clothes appeared baggy and tattered. Not that of a soldier at all.

Then the figure stepped past the back-lit narthex to the pews at the rear of the church and entered the circle of candlelight. With the move that was at once shocking and familiar, the figure flicked his head upward so his hair flipped clear of his face.

It was as if time stopped.

And with it, Adaira's heart.

She could not believe the vision before her eyes.

It was impossible.

She froze where she stood, certain she must be dreaming, or worse, in a bitter, taunting nightmare.

Sawny?



Reade, who is the closest to the figure, had his sword drawn as he approached.

“Who interrupts here?” Reade’s voice bellowed at the man.

Adaira realized no one else recognized him. But she did. From the hair flip. Sawny’s hair flip.

Who is this? A ghost? Had Sawny died and was now returning to her in the spiritual form?

Or ...

Or ... could it be possible?

Was this actually Sawny standing before her? A chill coursed over her body and her breathing hitched harder into a heavy, shocking pant.

The mangy man pulled back his shoulders and stared at Reade straight on.

He lifted his cleft chin and swept wet strands of hair off his tight, gaunt cheeks. The man's eyes peered into the dim church, scanning the crowd before landing directly on Adaira.

Tawny, deep-set eyes with an intensity bore into her, driving deep into her chest. She moved so she was no longer behind Arran.

Only one man she knew looked at her with that intensity.

Finally, the figure spoke.

"I would prefer if ye moved away from my wife," his raspy voice commanded.

The figure drew himself up to his full height, nearly as tall as her brother Maddock, and Adaira did not hesitate. Only one man had those eyes, that chin, that hair-flipping gesture, that voice.

Raspy, harsh, ragged, and Sawny.

That was *his* voice. This had to be more than a dream.

Reade took a half step forward, yet his grip remained on the hilt of his sword.

"Sawny? 'Tis truly ye, man?"

Adaira easily understood the disbelief in Reade's question. The man who stood before them was a whisper of Sawny. Like her, the months apart had not been kind to him or his body. Either through torture or starvation or other adversities, his figure was ravaged more than hers.

Adaira did not wait for the man to answer. Ghost or not, spirit or not, she cared for none of it. This was her one moment to perhaps touch Sawny again. And if he disappeared in a wisp of smoke in her arms, at least she would have touched him one last time.

Lifting her skirts, she shoved her Arran to the side and raced down the aisle. She longed to throw herself against him, but if he was not real, she did not want to stumble to the ground. When she was less than a foot from him, she slowed, and then in a shaky gesture of disbelief, she lifted her hand and pressed it to his bearded cheek.

He tilted his head into her palm and the world fell away from her.

It was him.

It *was* Sawny.

And he was real, not a specter or a ghost or a devil, and she was touching him. The heavy silence that filled the air pressed down on her. Her heart flailed in her chest as her breathing grew raw and erratic.

This time she did not hesitate. She threw herself against him, trying not to notice how bony his ribs felt. That meant nothing when his arms came around her and his face pressed into the delicate curve of her neck. He was embracing her as only Sawny embraced her.

It was him.

Tears whetted her eyes as she squeezed them closed and relished in the feel of the man.

It was truly Sawny. He had somehow returned from the brink of death or his absence, it did not matter which, because he had returned to her.

That was all that mattered.

Behind them, the storm outside had whipped up into a full tempest, as if only a storm could usher in the impossible.

Worse for wear, scarred and beaten, and dripping wet, the storm had made the impossible happen.

Sawny had somehow returned.



Chapter Twenty-Two

SAWNY WAS TIRED. SO tired. Had he ever been this weary in his life?

Nay.

Once he made it deep into MacDonald lands, he had to take a break. He was already falling off his horse, and as much as he longed to rush to Adaira, 'twas better that he made it to her alive than die at her feet the moment he found her.

He slid off the horse and tied it to a tree. Then he found a few berries and hazelnuts to feed his growling wame before wrapping himself in his oversized tunic and sleeping half under a bush on the damp, grassy ground.

The damp sleeping arrangements were welcome – he was breathing fresh air as a free man. He'd sleep on the bush itself if he had to.

The next morning was still misty, but he felt more alive than he had in the past two months. The horse, too, seemed re-energized and made good time to Glenachulish. His weariness yet enveloped him like a heavy plaid, until he spoke to the wainwright near the tower who, with a shocked face, waved him down and told him that Adaira had gone to the church with her new intended. A violent strength, one fed on desperation and intention, reinvigorated him. He rode his stolen horse right to the church and with everything he had left inside him, burst through the door.

And there was Adaira, her face a beacon in the turbulent storm that has been his life the past months, standing at the altar next to another man. Rage burned inside his belly in an uncontrollable fire.

Adaira, however, moved straight from one of his dreams, rushing toward him and placing her hand on his bruised cheek before embracing him.

If he were to die there, he would have died a happy man.

There were other concerns to deal with, including the fact Adaira appeared to be marrying another man. Sawny reluctantly removed himself from Adaira's embrace and turned to the MacDonalds in the church.

Though his arm shook, he pulled a slender knife from this waistband that he had requested from the wainwright and

leveled his face at Maddock's friend, Arran.

“Drop your sword,” Sawny intoned.

He knew he had no chance against a well-fed, well-rested Highlander holding a sword, yet he had to do something. Here Adaira was, the light of his life, standing in the church, ready to pledge herself to another man.

Had she forgotten him so quickly?

Nay, from the expression on her face, the needs of Highland politics had forced her into this position. He understood the nature of the beast that Highland politics rode upon.

Just as those needs had forced him.

He knew in the depths of his heart that she was still his, as much as Sawny was hers.

Arran shoved his sword back into its scabbard and stepped away with his hands raised. “Ye dinna have to fight. ‘Tis solely a betrothal agreement to salve her wounds and continue the unity of the Highlands clans.”

“Has she signed? Or are ye wed? Did ye say man and wife?”

Arran shook his head. “Nay, we had no’ reached that point yet.”

Sawny's weary gaze shifted from Arran to Seamus, then to their priest. “Is my betrothal agreement to Adaira still valid?”

The poor priest's shocked eyes were riveted on Sawny, as if he was seeing an actual ghost in his holy church.

“Aye,” the poor priest finally stuttered. “She did no’ sign another, nor is she wed, so your betrothal is still in force.”

“Here, here, Father Geordie!” Seamus called out. “We canna just switch betrotheds!”

The priest scratched his head. “Well, ‘tis no precedence for such a thing, but ‘tis no reason we canna do that either.”

“What of my daughter? We should ask what she wants!” Seamus said, his voice tight. Sawny could not make out the meaning of his sentiments, but then, his mind was barely his own at this moment.

However, Seamus, much to Sawny’s dismay, was right. Adaira’s voice was required in this decision.

“I believe I know her answer, but aye, we should ask her,” Sawny agreed.

He shoved his knife back into his waistband and turned to her. Like him, the ravages of his disappearance wore on her, making her thin, with shadows haunting her face. She lost some of her voluptuous curves, and in his mind, he vowed to care for her so that her full health and figure would return.

“What of ye, my love? What is your choice?” Sawny asked her.

Her deep green eyes studied him, as if she still could not believe he was truly alive.

“I thought ye to be dead,” she said breathlessly.

He took her hands in his. “Death is no’ a thing that can stop a love like ours. At best, it can only delay it a bit.” Then he leaned into her, sliding his rough, bearded cheek against her smooth one. “I would always return to ye. I would fight Death himself to hold ye in my arms again. Will ye take me, this broken shell of a man, and make me your husband, again?”



Adaira closed her eyes, tears flowing freely down her cheeks.

This. *This* was her Sawny.

Though it seemed an impossible dream, he was here. With her.

Och, how she had missed this. How she had missed *him*.

Was this real? Was he truly in this church, ready to wed her?

She peeked open her eyelids to see her mother standing to the side, a relieved smile on her fair face. As if her mother heard her silent question, Sorcha inclined her head ever so slightly.

Sorcha might be a force to be reckoned with, yet at the end of the day, she was a woman who loved a man and understood the raw need to be with that man.

Even if the circumstances surrounding it were the most bizarre.

“Aye. I’ll wed ye Sawny.”

Sliding his cheek back across hers, his lips found her mouth, and if it was possible to walk the path to heaven, then the sensation of Sawny's lips on hers was the closest she could imagine. His lips, though dry, were ardent and just as aggressive as she remembered.

A discreet cough next to her drew her face away from Sawny's. Seamus's eyebrows rode high on his head.

"Fine, lad. If Arran has no qualms —" he flicked his eyes at the man in question who politely shook his head, "then ye can marry the lass. We can have that arranged. What happened to ye? Where have ye been so long absent?"

Sawny kept his arms around Adaira's waist as he shifted his attention to Seamus.

"There is so much to tell, and I must speak with ye soon, but right now, I need to marry Adaira."

Seamus did not hide his shock. "What? Now? Nay the now!"

Sawny turned his liquid gaze back to Adaira, amber meeting green, sharing a moment long lost to them.

"Aye, the now," he said, more to Adaira than her father. "Ye have always had a place in my heart," he said to Adaira as he pulled her closer to him. "Even while I was gone, 'twas ye that kept me going. 'Twas your image that encouraged me to escape and return. Too much time has been wasted, and I would marry ye now, before another moment passes."



Seamus stepped up, mouth open and ready to protest, but Sorcha caught his arm and tugged him back with a shake of her head.

Adaira was frozen where she stood near the altar.

“We have a priest and your family,” Sawny said to a wide-eyed Adaira. “Ye can apologize to the poor sap I’m replacing, but I have waited too long and gone through too much to wait any longer.”

With that, it was like a weight was lifted from her chest, and she could breathe for the first time in months.

She paused though, and as she pulled back slightly, he gripped her upper arms hard, as if he was petrified of losing her. And he was, just the same as she. An inch between them was too much distance now.

With a flick of her finger, Adaira pulled out a lace bag from her slender bodice pocket and from it, withdrew a gold band. His eyes widened more than hers as he immediately recognized the ring that glinted in the candlelight, etched with bluebells.

It was the ring he had intended for her.

Their wedding ring.

She had kept it, despite everything.

“Where did you find it?” he asked, his raspy voice barely making a sound.

“The goldsmith brought it to Glenachulish shortly after your ... disappearance.” Her lips stumbled over that last word.

For lack of a better word, he disregarded the implication. What else could it be called? Kidnapping or abduction were words far too harsh for the church, and the selection of a word to explain what had happened to him was of no concern with their present audience and his bride standing right in front of him.

Words were meaningless. Actions — those were all that mattered.

“I shall marry ye now, as I am, filthy and starving and beaten to hell and back, with that ring, if ye will have me,” Sawny told her.

A smile cracked her too-thin face. “Aye,” she answered breathlessly.

In that moment, he longed to provide everything she might need to regain her health and happiness. Give her anything and everything she might need or want, anything to have his glowing Highland beauty at her most hale and smiling widely once again.

Someone behind them cleared their throat, and Sawny looked past Adaira who turned around and faced her father. Seamus stood at the edge of the pews, gripping a wooden seat

and waiting impatiently. Behind him stood her brothers, and Arran, in his pale green kilt, the previously intended groom.

“Ye have a lot to answer for,” Seamus announced as his hard eyes roved over Sawny’s disheveled and stricken frame. “But from the looks of it, ye have suffered quite a bit these past months.”

Sawny nodded but did not recoil from Seamus or the MacDonalds at all. Instead, he lifted his chin higher. He had faced all manner of atrocities in the past few months — looking Adaira’s father in the eye was of no consequence.

“Aye, and I vow to tell ye all. But right now, I have a promise I am late fulfilling.” He flicked his eyes to Arran.

Arran appeared fine with the change in circumstance in conceding his place beside Adaira. He placed a hand on Maddock’s shoulder, then whispered into his ear. With a wry side-smile that was pure Maddock MacDonald, he flapped his hand in the air.

“Arran says that while he is devastated to lose my sister as a bride, he will no’ contest Sawny’s claim and says congratulations.”

Though Sawny did not care for the speech that made Adaira sound like little more than chattel, his weary body was grateful it avoided physical combat and meant he could marry her right now. He turned to Adaira.

“Shall we?”

She smiled widely again and took his hand. They stepped in front of the altar where the sour-looking priest pursed his lips.

“This is highly improper!” he proclaimed, his cheeks reddening.

“I’ll say,” Seamus agreed under his breath. Sorcha elbowed him in the waist, and Seamus had the good nature to appear contrite.

Sawny narrowed his eyes at the priest. “I’ve spent the past two months in a dreary cell with only the thoughts of this woman keeping me alive and the vow that the moment I escaped that hell, I would come here and wed her as intended. I am two months late on that promise, so ye will wed us now.”

He spoke with all the force his chest could muster. Father Geordie’s dour look remained as he looked past the couple to Seamus. He, Reade, Maddock, and Arran had shifted to stand in the aisle between the pews, hands on their sword hilts, as if guarding the church against an unknown enemy. They might not understand what was going on, but they were going to protect the MacDonalds and this ceremony all the same. Seamus dipped his chin toward the priest who huffed again.

“Well, then.” The priest flicked his eyes from Sawny to Adaira. “Marriage! Marriage is what brings us here today! Do ye have the rings?”

With a surprisingly steady hand, Adaira handed the bluebell-etched ring to Sawny and the priest began their wedding ceremony.

And the moment Sawny and Adaira had waited for was real – they were married. And when the priest announced them *man and wife*, he wrapped his arms around her waist and crushed his lips to hers, kissing her desperately and passionately.

As man and wife.

Finally.



Chapter Twenty-Three

THE PRIEST HAD BARELY spoken the words *man and wife* when Sawny was dragging her away from the church. He did not head toward her father's keep, rather he clasped her hand and raced with her toward the woods.

“Adaira!” her mother called out behind her. Sawny did not turn around or acknowledge her at all. He was resolute in his intention.

His actions were desperate and rushed, and his urgency reminded her of the last time she had shared her body with him. They had snuck into the woods that time, hiding from her family, back when the world was clear and their future bright and untainted.

Now they both bore the stains of the past several months, but Sawny did not seem to care. Her betrothed was –

Nay. Her *husband*. He was her husband now.

The damp ground grew mushy under her feet. In the pale, misty light, she could see his thin body was clad in tattered clothing that fit him more like a blanket than a kilt.

Rain patterned down, whetting their clothing and hair until they were as sodden as the ground upon which they stood. Once he found a spot he believed to be private enough, he whirled around, his wet embrace tight. He held onto her as if he were afraid to let go, that if he did release her, he might lose her again.

“Sawny!” Adaira cried. Her hair had slipped from its pins, spilled in slippery damp locks around her head, and now stuck to her face. “What are ye doing? They are awaiting us!”

He placed his hand on either side of her face and stared into her eyes with such ferocity that her chest quivered.

“Let them wait,” he breathed in his raspy voice. “Let the world wait. God himself can wait. Because we have waited too long. We had time and hope and love thieved from us, a greater thief than I could ever be, and I will never, ever, wait for ye again. And I will have no one in all of Scotland call this marriage into question.”

His hands were on her skirts, exposing her pale thighs to the cool air and his surging, searching cock. His face pressed into

the curve of her neck, warming her skin as he panted against her.

“I canna wait again, Adaira. Never again. Please, Adaira.”

His pleading voice tore her breath from her lungs.

“Sawny –”

His hand worked his braies, releasing his manhood which brushed against her, hot and demanding. His thighs moved between hers as his body slammed her against the smooth wood of a birch tree.

He did not have to ask. She had been ready for him the moment he shoved open the church doors. His narrowed eyes bore into hers, sharing the intensity of his desire, of his passion, of his need for her.

“Please, Adaira. Let me make ye my wife in full.”

His raspy voice conveyed his sheer desperation, and she would deny him nothing.

“Aye, Sawny. Aye. Enough time has pa–”

She did not finish her words. Sawny surged forward until the tip of his cock easily slid into her welcome sheath. He exhaled a long, shuddering groan, and the heat created from their joining drove the chilled air away. She clung to him and gasped as he thrust inside her, joining them in the most intimate way, joining them again after being so long departed.

Something about his passion was dire, irrationally consuming, and it drove him as if he had lost all his senses. He

had one pursuit — Adaira.



Sawny's legs shook as he thrust inside, his cock finding home.

This – this was where he belonged, where she belonged. He and Adaira.

He was not sure he would have the strength to complete the act. After all, he was starving, abused, had been riding most of the night, and he'd had to face off with her family and her new, potential suitor, then run with her into the woods for a moment of privacy.

He had no strength. Nothing left. When he had entered that church, he had been so sapped of everything, he was not sure he would remain upright.

Yet seeing Adaira beside him, having her pledge her life to him revitalized him in a way he had not known existed. Touching Adaira was like giving this starving man food, a thirsty man drink, sustaining him in a way that nothing else in the world could.

One touch from Adaira and he was a man again. A Highlander. Adaira's Highlander.

His need for her, though, drove any passionate and loving thoughts from his mind, and he became craven with need. Once inside her warm sheath, his hips moved with a mind of

their own. Claiming her, ramming into her, shaky legs be damned, was his singular focus.

His moment rose quickly, far too quickly. He had longed for his first moment back with Adaira to last longer, but that was not to happen.

Gripping her backside (*no' as plush as it had been, but then, neither was he*) with one hand, he cupped her face with the other. Her fingertips dug into his shoulders and her eyes were green slits.

“Look at me, my beauty,” he panted.

Her green eyes parted slightly to meet his gaze.

“I’m almost there,” he huffed. “I wanted this to last longer, but I need ye too much. I needed this too much –”

Sweat broke out on his brow, and Adaira wiped his face with a light sweep of her hand.

“Ye were no’ the only one with need, Sawny.”

Despite their rough joining against the tree, tears reflected in her eyes, green pools that filled Sawny with a raw mix of fury and defense.

“Ada-”

“Dinna leave me again,” she whispered and closed her eyes.

Sawny’s moment was here, and he groaned as his hips moved a final time, driving as deeply as possible inside her, as if he might never have to leave, never separate from her.

Absolutely spent, he dropped his sweaty head and kissed her lips.

“Never again,” he whispered against her mouth. “I made ye a vow in that church, and I make another now. Never again will I be parted from ye. I will fight death himself to come back to ye.”



“I’m sorry for the tryst in the woods. I had hoped our first time after this would be in a comfortable bed with lingering touches. A more appropriate place for a wedding night. But I could no’ control myself.”

They had stepped from the woods and were approaching the church to walk on the road toward the keep. Adaira paused and tugged on Sawny’s hand.

“I am glad ye did no’ wait.” She stepped closer and rested her hand on his chest. So thin, so emaciated. Och how the past months had ravaged them, but he seemed to have received the worst of their separation and she dreaded hearing his story. “We dinna know when life will make those unexpected turns, so we should never wait.”

An expression she could not interpret crossed his face and he kissed her forehead.

“’Tis a vow I can make. Hell, I want ye again now, but I can barely stand. I dinna know how I’m going to make it to

Glenachulish Tower.”

They had reached the church when Adaira noted two horses tethered outside. She giggled. For the first time in months.

“We dinna have to walk. Look.” She pointed to the horses, and a smile broke across Sawny’s tight face, a real smile, wide and encompassing his entire face.

A Sawny smile.

Her heart leapt.

Sawny tugged her to the horses and boosted her into the saddle. Adaira watched as his arms tensed and for a moment she wondered if he’d have the strength to pull himself into the saddle. Then he was up and settled in, and she released a shaky breath. She had not realized how worried she was about his wrecked body.

Their escapade in the woods gave her family time to return to the keep and prepare a manner of feast in celebration. While this was not the wedding she imagined when she anticipated in her union with Sawny and the Keppoch MacDonalds, they were married and any celebration with Sawny was one she would be thankful for.

Having missed him for months, Adaira made her own vow to celebrate anything and everything with him.

Her brothers were waiting by the main gate when they entered, and as Conall helped her off her horse, she noticed that Maddock stood near Sawny’s horse, perhaps ready to catch him if he fell.

Truthfully, from how pale and sallow his skin was and his thin stature, Adaira marveled that he yet managed to remain upright at all.

Food. He needed food.

And rest.

She would give him both.

And if Adaira knew her mother at all, she knew Sorcha had crafted an immense feast in a matter of moments. Food was taken care of.

Once on her own two feet, she reached Sawny and they clasped hands. Flanked by Conall and Maddock, they entered the tower to cheers.

This was a celebration she would welcome, one she would revel in.

Because she was now Sawny's wife.

And he was her husband.

And that was all that mattered.



Subdued though the feast was, the food rivaled that of any celebration, just as Adaira knew it would. She could only imagine the storm of her mother rampaging through the keep.

Sorcha did not disappoint.

The housemaids had set about lighting candles and putting out silver as the kitchen maids raided the pantry and set out platters of dried meats, summer fruit and vegetables, soups, and baked goods with preserves and honey. Any crumb or vittle that could be found in the kitchen was removed to the main hall and presented in a silver, incandescent glow.

Fiona and Blair beamed as they ushered Sawny and Adaira to their place of honor at the head table. Adaira tried not to notice how Sawny leaned on her as if his legs might not hold up his weight. She released a tight breath once they sat so that Sawny might have the chance to eat and recoup some of his strength.

Seamus raised a chalice high and the chatter in the hall died down.

“We have our own prodigal son this day!” he announced and her family applauded. Adaira slid her hand to Sawny’s arm, touching him as if to reassure herself that aye, he was indeed returned, and without a moment’s hesitation, he covered her hand with his.

“And with his return, the marriage of Glen Coe and Keppoch! May your lives together be long and fruitful!” Seamus finished.

Adaira turned her smile to her father. His toast was both generous and short, exactly what they needed. No long-winded sermons on marriage or love.

Now they, or rather Sawny, could eat. With a glance to her and a sly wink, Sawny turned to his bowl of lentil soup and

dug in like the starving man he was.

His need for her satiated, he could satisfy his need for food.

Now that he was sitting this close to her and she was not otherwise occupied, Adaira assessed the condition of her new husband as she picked at her dried venison.

From top to bottom, he was a mess.

His body did not appear too broken, at least not from the what she saw outside his clothes.

She dreaded what she might see under them.

His greasy hair was matted in places and hung in his face in others. Between his hair and the dirt smudges on his face and arms, 'twas evident he had not seen a bath in the past two months. His clothing was as filthy as his skin, baggy, and apparently not his. His skin, what she could see of it under the filth, was paler than hers and sallow, not the rich ruddiness of a hale man who spent much of his days out of doors in the Scottish sun.

Nay, he had the skin of a man who had been kept indoors for a while.

Had he been ill? The dark purple half-moons under his eyes and gaunt cheeks suggested that. Or had he been kept inside for other, more nefarious reasons?

Adaira shuddered.

Seamus approached and Adaira tilted her head to her father as he knocked his fist against the table top.

“Adaira, Sawny. ‘Tis an odd manner of wedding, but I am pleased of this nonetheless.” The joy on his face faltered slightly as he leaned closer to Sawny. “I will send a rider to your family, informing them of your return. Before they arrive, though, we must have a word, lad.”

Sawny wiped his mouth with a filthy sleeve and nodded.

“Aye. But send the rider later. On the morn, and then we will speak. I have much to share, and while we should converse today ...” His words drifted off as his eyes flicked to Adaira. “I have more pressing obligations to attend to. Early morn, however, Seamus.”

Sawny’s voice shifted in intensity as he spoke, and Seamus nodded in understanding.

Seamus sniffed before stepping back.

“I would also recommend a bath before ye meet any of your *obligations*,” he commented. Adaira’s mouth dropped open while Sawny dipped his head. He did not disagree.

They finished their meal and prepared to make their leave when Arran weaved through the tables toward them.

Next to her, Sawny groaned slightly. She lifted her lips to his ear.

“Dinna fret. I’ll explain all, but between Arran and I is naught.”

Though he nodded, his face did not seem to fully agree with her sentiment.

Arran's face, however, was open and unencumbered by any sense of discord. He reached across the table and his plump arm grasped Sawny's thinner one.

"I would offer my regards and good wishes on your marriage," Arran told him earnestly.

Arran appeared good-natured about the change of circumstance. Nothing on his face belied any anger or jealousy, at least not that Adaira could see.

Sawny's lips pursed slightly but he kept a firm grip on Arran's arm. "I thank ye. And I thank ye for no' standing in my way when I returned."

Arran half shrugged and shifted his gaze from Sawny to Adaira and back. "Weel, ye did no' look as if ye might remain on your feet as 'twas. 'Twould no' be a noble thing to fight ye when ye can barely lift your hands. Ye are a decent fellow, and I'd hate to hurt ye."

Adaira bit her lip, hoping Arran's tease did no' strike a tender spot.

"Aye. Ye are a decent fellow, and I'd hate the wound. I thank ye for that as well," Sawny said with a slight smile.

Adaira exhaled. Though she and Arran might have had a less-than-conventional agreement with regard to their wedding, Sawny was not privy to that agreement. She would tell him later, of course, but in the meantime, it was a relief to have Arran step away politely. She gave her jilted suitor a soft look of thanks before Arran left their table.

Sawny leaned toward her. He was still coated in a layer of filth yet had made sure he married her, bedded her, and feasted to celebrate.

She had always admired him, the way he was his own man, and did not let the words or estimations of others bother him. To be unbothered by his own miserable state to the point that he put her concerns or wishes before his comfort was another trait she admired.

“Do ye think we’ve met our burden of time here?” he asked in his raspy voice. His eyes, usually so vibrantly hazel and full of life, were heavy-lidded and weary.

He had done far more than meet his burden.

“Aye, my love. Let us retire to my chambers.”

Sawny rose and held a grimy hand out to her. Adaira clasped it and wrinkled her nose.

“But let us also give ye a well-deserved bath when we get there,” she told him and lifted her hand to Una. She instructed Una to send up a tub and bathwater, then dismissed the lass.

Without any further delay, Sawny and Adaira waved their departure as they made their way to the stairs.



Chapter Twenty-Four

UNA HAD WORKED QUICKLY and two lads carrying a tub and another lad with the first bucket of heated water met them at Adaira's chamber door.

She let them in, and draped the cloth inside the tub before the lad with the bucket poured the water. The other two lads soon returned with more water and a sliver of heather-scented soap. She thanked the boys, sending away the last one once the water was high enough.

Then she turned to Sawny who lingered by her writing table.

Now that they were alone, he did not have to put on a show of strength, and his body appeared completely ragged, the

perfect complement to the clothes that hung on his frame.

A moment of trepidation made her hands shake as she approached him. If he looked this poorly in his clothes, how battered would he appear out of them? Adaira feared what she would find when she removed the tattered fabric.

Sawny did not move. He awaited her, as if he too feared what would happen once his body was laid bare to her.

“May I –” she started, then bit it off and touched the low hem of his tunic. Her hesitance puzzled her. They had just shared the most intimate moment in the woods! Did the prospect of removing his clothes worry her that much? Nay, ‘twas the unknown of what lay under them that did. “May I remove this?”

Sawny’s gaze fixed on her face. “Ye can burn it. I’d rather run naked than wear these clothes any longer.”

“Hmm,” she murmured as she lifted the hem up his torso and over his head. “I dinna believe ye will be running anywhere at the moment, but I’ll be glad to burn it.”

The tunic came up and over his head, and she inhaled sharply.

Sawny’s chin dipped as he lowered his gaze, and that one move, a gesture of subjugation, of humiliation, shook Adaira so hard that her fury roared in her ears. Someone brought her bold and brash Sawny to this point.

And if her father or his did not have that villain’s head presented to her on a platter, she would hunt him down and

claim it for herself.

He still did not move as he let her take full view of the atrocities he had suffered while he was missing.

His chest which had been full and well-muscled two months ago was bony. Not fully emaciated, thank Mary mother of God, but she could easily count his ribs under his thin, pallid skin, or what she could see of it. His skin was more a patchwork of bruises, scrapes, and hollow shadows. But the scar on his side ...

That jagged wreck of scarring made her stomach leap into her throat. What had caused such damage?

She reached out to touch it, then jerked her hand back.

“Ye can touch it,” he whispered roughly, keeping his eyes lowered. “And it could have been worse. Much worse.”

He flinched slightly when her cool fingertips caressed the wound. The skin was raw, the scar freshly pink and layered with knots of skin folded over itself around a puckered center.

A burn? But the scar extended past that pucker.

He shivered under her touch as she trailed her fingers over and around the hills and valleys of his suffering, and he swayed. She pulled her hand back.

“Ye are walking filth. Let’s wash the dirt of your adventures off ye, and perchance wash some of those memories away as well.”

“I fear ‘twill be a while before those memories fade. Yet the bath is more than welcome.”

He dropped his braies to the floor to join his tunic. She held his arm as he stepped into the tub one slender leg at a time. Then he sunk low, the water reaching his chest. Letting out a long sigh, he rested his head back along the rim and closed his eyes.

“I had not believed I would feel like this ever again,” he remarked.

Adaira rubbed the pad of soap across her hands, then massaged along his temples and up through his hair. His hair was so limp and grimy, the rich brown looked slick black in the curtained light of her room. Scratching at his scalp, she scrubbed his hair, adding more soap as she worked, and Sawny moaned and grumbled his gratification.

“I fear ye will put me to sleep, my love.” His words were slightly slurred. He was already half asleep, and she did not blame him.

“Rest, then. Let me wash ye, and then we shall get ye to bed.”

“Mmm,” was all he replied as she rinsed his hair and began another round of scrubbing his hair where it matted at the back, then down to his thick scruff of beard.

He was snoring by the time she moved to his body, slipping the soap under the water’s surface to wash his arms, legs, and

torso, taking care around his scar. He did not need to be awakened from his slumber as the scar was yet tender.

The water had cooled while she cleansed him, and once she finished with his long-toed feet, she had thought to sit by the bath and let him sleep in it. The prospect of waking him to move him out of the tub knotted her stomach.

She rose to grab her chair when he spoke.

“The water is probably more filthy than I can imagine, but would ye join me?”

Cool and filthy, but in this moment, she would deny him nothing.

Silently, she unfastened her bodice and skirts, and as she untied her chemise to let it drop to her feet, she noticed Sawny had pried one eye open into a slit to watch her. Only the sounds of their breathing disturbed the heady quiet.

Once she was bare and at the edge of the tub, Sawny shifted and took her hand as she climbed into the tub. With a shiver as the tepid water lapping over her, she squeezed between his thighs and leaned back against his chest. His arms immediately came over her arms, clasping her tight in a possessive grip, one that was much stronger than she expected. Again, it was like he feared letting her go.

“Ye lost weight.” His breath was warm on her ear.

“I’ll gain it back, surely,” she answered. “Now that ye have returned. And ye will fill out again too. We just need to keep ye fed.”

She felt him nod.

“I missed your full curves. I dreamed of them. That image of ye, I held it in my mind at all times.”

He sounded so forlorn that her heart trembled in her chest.

“Did ye now?” she asked and turned her head toward him.

He lifted his fingers from the water and held them over her chest until the droplets fell to her breast.

“Aye. ‘Twas all I had. I told myself if I thought of ye, then I could survive anything. And I would eventually escape to get back to ye. I just had to keep that image of ye in my mind.”

Adaira tried to swallow the lump in her throat and failed. Her entire body tensed when he said *escape*.

“Ye were captive then?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper, as if to speak it aloud was to relive the pain again.

He pressed his face into her hair.

“Aye.” His voice was muffled. “But as I said, it could have been far worse. I fell ill as a result of injury and the cautery that followed. Kelso must have –”

“Kelso?”

“Kelso MacIntosh. Under the auspices of the Campbells, ‘twould seem.”

“Och, my dear Sawny,” Adaira breathed out.

She brought his hand to her lips. His wrinkled fingertip lingered and traced her lips before dropping to her breasts. His chest under her back rose and fell steadily, slowing.

He was getting sleepy once more.

“I would love to tell ye all, but I am bone weary. More weary than any man should be. I know ‘tis only midday, but —”

She knew his question before he finished asking it.

“Of course. Let us get ye to bed.” Adaira rose in the bath, droplets raining off her and onto Sawny. She offered her hand and he accepted it, leaning on her to help him stand. “I dinna think I have a tunic —”

“Nay,” Sawny said as he stepped out of the bath, water coursing off him into puddles on the wooden floor and she followed. “I would have naught between us but the skin we were born in. I have need —”

He paused and dropped his gaze again, as if embarrassed. Her Sawny, embarrassed!

“I have need of ye, my beauty.”

Wordlessly, she gripped his hand and led him to her bed. The coverlet was rumped. She flipped it back, climbed into the cool sheets, and patted the space next to her. Sawny folded his body onto the mattress and curled into her, clasping her against his body as if trying to touch all of her at once.

His breathing steadied immediately, his breath lightly blowing into her hair, and she tossed the blankets over the two of them.

She might not sleep, but at least she could hold him and provide solace, and if he had nightmares, she could be there to

wake him and assure him she was no mere image from memory but real, alive, and right next to him.



Sawny's eyes popped open with a start. For a moment, he did not know where he was.

His chest went hollow as panic surged inside him.

Then, in the dim moonlight filtering past a curtain, he noted the bathtub and curtained bedding, and realized he was in a bed and comfortable.

A weight on his arm shifted, and he rolled into the figure next to him.

Not just any bed. *Adaira's* bed.

He had made it back.

So it *hadn't* been a dream.

Returned, married the woman before anyone might challenge his reappearance, and was now in bed with the woman of his dreams.

Dreams that had kept him focused and gave him the will to escape.

Like him, Adaira had lost weight. The past months had tried her as they had tried him. Her plump backside had thinned, and her breasts, while still more of a feast than any man might

require, did not fill her bodice as before. Shadows filled her – her cheeks, her ribs, under her eyes – as they filled him.

That knowledge pained him. That she had suffered under Kelso's actions. Her suffering angered him more than his own imprisonment did.

He'd have Kelso's blood on his sword before long for the despair he caused her.

As his mind awoke with these thoughts, so did the rest of his body. His hand slid over her shoulder, sweeping several smooth blonde tresses away from her neck. Caressing the length of her arm, his lips followed his fingers to her neck, kissing her soft, musky skin. His cock hardened as his hand continued its explorations, found her bare breast, and cupped it.

Her nipple peaked under his hand. He groaned and brushed it gently with his thumb.

She stirred, wiggling her backside deeper into the curve of his hips and burgeoning cock.

Fed and napped, he had the energy to attend his wife (his *wife!*) in the way she deserved.

A real wedding night.

Not against a tree in the rainy woods.

She made a purring sound and wiggled again.

“Och, lass. Careful or ye may find yourself tossed on your back and my thighs between yours,” he whispered into her

hair.

“Promise?” she asked and wiggled again.

Her teasing tone sent a wave of desperate desire washing over him, and his engorged cock quivered, brushing her arse with its eager tip.

In one movement, he rolled her to her back and loomed over her. He trapped one of her wrists against the bed and with his other hand, he traced the lines of her jaw, dipping his fingertips down to the valley between her breasts, each one two handfuls of pleasure.

His pleasure.

She was now his and his alone.

And she was here, underneath him, and not a figment of a dream.

“Promise,” he answered and shifted his thighs.

Her fingers slid behind his neck and entwined in his hair. The feel of her caress sent a thrill down his back and through his manhood.

Sawny thrust his hips forward, sheathing himself deep inside Adaira. She gasped and arched upward, pushing her hips closer until he was seated to the hilt. He paused briefly, taking in the moment of being joined with Adaira, being one with her again.

“Sawny,” she breathed, and he began his movements.

His mind was a fogged fury. Their moment in the woods had been too quick, and he longed to draw this union out, enjoying each stroke, relishing the squeeze and pull of Adaira's body on his cock. He needed to draw it out and stay inside her as long as he could.

He never wanted to leave her, to be distanced or separated from her.

He wanted to live the rest of his life inside Adaira. To be touching her, kissing her, holding her.

Sawny held her head in place, fixed so she faced him. Adaira closed her eyes at the rhythm of his movement.

“Nay, my love. Open your eyes. Watch me as I take ye.”

Her eyes peeked open, narrow but focused on him. He could see the green glint under her eyelashes.

“That's it, my lass.” His hips thrust again, sliding in deep. Her eyes crinkled at the corners, ready to close again. “Keep your eyes open. Watch me as I enjoy ye. As I love ye. Never take your gaze off me.”

Another shuddering slide in and out of her warm, gripping sheath. Her abundant breasts jiggled with each thrust, and though his attention wanted to linger on her entire body, his gaze remained riveted on her.

He would watch as she found her heights. He had worked too hard and suffered too much to ever miss seeing her face when he brought her ecstasy.

And he wanted his face impressed upon her, to have her watch when his moment arrived and he poured all of himself into her.

Adaira's hand caressed up his shoulder to his hair, twining her fingers into his dark locks as he gripped hers. Her fingertips sent a rush of tingling through his body, and he felt that familiar building sensation deep in his groin.

Her breaths quickened, and he waited on quivering arms until her gasps and writhing reached their point. When she opened her mouth wide to cry out her pleasure, he captured her lips with his, keeping his eyes open to gaze at her as he took in all she had to offer as she reached her height.

She clung to him as her body rocked under his, which only added to the fire of his passion. Her sheath gripped him hard as her hips lifted, and he was close, so close...

He tore his lips from hers. "Keep your eyes open. Dinna take your eyes off me," he demanded in his raspy voice, made more haggard by his momentum building, driving through his ballocks and cock.

Her eyes darkened with satisfaction as her fingertip moved from his hair to trail along the edge of his ear.

"Och, lass ..." He gasped as his hips moved wildly, taking on a force of their own.

He dropped his chin and her finger caressed the line of his jaw until it pressed against his chin to lift his face.

"Dinna drop your eyes, my love," she commanded.

She was now in charge. He might be the one riding her, but now that she had found her pleasure, she would demand everything of him until he lost himself in her.

“Look at me while ye build. Look at me when ye release. Dinna close your eyes.”

Her demand, the mirror to his, drove him into a frenzy until his ballocks flexed. He reached his zenith and spasmed with a guttural groan.

But he kept his eyes open, staring at her as his essence poured from him in an explosive rush.

Panting, his arms bent, dropping him against her chest. Adaira took advantage of his shift in position and kissed his sweat-dampened lips, capturing his panting as he had caught her moans. He clenched once more, distributing his last ounces inside her before the frenzy of his hips finally stilled.

Then he remained between her smooth thighs, panting and kissing and letting himself relish this moment that had been too long denied.

They would be denied no longer.

“I love ye, Adaira,” he said, his rough voice carrying on the night air.

“I love ye, my Sawny,” she answered, tugging his arm around her tightly, neither of them ready to separate from each other.



Her fingertips stroked his chest, tickling the fine hairs that grew in a narrow patch between his chest muscles. Lingering with Adaira was a blessing. Until they were wed, their interludes, though fervent, had to be also hidden and hasty. Dallying with Adaira in his arms was another joy he had never believed he would have.

His skin tingled as her fingers slid down his waist to his scar.

It was time.

This was a story he would have to tell over and over, and she had accepted much from him this day without any information or details regarding his absence or sudden return.

She deserved to know the events that had presently led to their marriage and his company in her bed. She had been more than patient with him.

“As I said, it could have been so much worse,” he began. His voice was ragged and he cleared his throat.

“Ye dinna have to tell me anything ye dinna care to. Ye are here, and ‘tis all that matters to me.”

His embrace tightened, drawing her ever closer.

Never close enough.

“But ye must know,” he told her. “If no’ for ye, then for me. For me to pour my adversities and agony from my mind and

release it so it does no' shadow our marriage like a scourge. I would have us enter our marriage free of any binds, even those that no longer hold us, hold me, captive."

Adaira nodded against his chest and waited for him to continue speaking.

His heart slammed inside his weakened chest as his lips formed the words he had to speak, like confession to cleanse the soul.

"'Twas no' my choice to miss our wedding. Our original wedding. I rode to the loch south of Keppoch House, ye ken the one?"

She turned her head so she could smile up at him, a sly, knowing smile. "Aye, I know the one."

Sawny patted her shoulder. "I rather hoped ye would. I'd be fair disappointed otherwise. Two MacIntoshes came upon me. As I was alone, I was at a disadvantage, but I'd no' let that stop me. I'd fought off two MacIntoshes before, sorry lot of men they are. But one caught me in the side with the tip of his sword while the other cracked me over the head. I awoke in a dungeon."

"A dungeon? Where?"

"I did no' know, no' right away. My side ached and 'twas a few days before Kelso had me dragged before him. He was searching for information."

"About the letter," Adaira stated flatly.

Everything was about the letter.

“Aye. He thought, given my relationship to ye and Glen Coe, I might have knowledge of where the letter was or what it said. And he was somehow related to a MacIntosh lad I encouraged to leave Keppoch MacDonald lands, and he longed for a bit of retribution.”

Her fingertips brushed his side again.

“’Tis why he branded ye?”

Sawny shook his head. “Nay. The sword wound was unclean and he sought to stop the bleeding. Once I awoke from the cautery torture, ‘twas inflamed and full of pus. ‘Twas another fortnight until I was healed from that, and then he let me waste away in his dungeon for even longer. I dinna know for certain what his intentions were or why he let me rot for so long, unless the lack of food and water was part of his torture. I –”

He bit off his next words. She could see his starvation – it was stamped all over his body. She did not need to know about his desperate attempts for food that drove him hunt spiders and vermin.

When she did not inquire, thankfully, he continued. “I dinna know how long I was down there. A young man who delivered my food was friendly enough, and we took to each other. He was the one who helped me escape.”

“How? Will he be punished for it?”

Och, his Adaira! Worrying for a poor lad’s consequences, a lad she did not even know!

“I dinna believe so. ‘Tis where the events get interesting.”

“I already thought them terribly interesting,” she commented under her breath.

He chuckled lightly at her response.

“Aye. Kelso finally brought me to him again, with his chamber of torture devices. He started with a few slaps, naught significant, but he was called away. Evidently, Slippery John or one of his soldiers was to make a visit or the like.”

She grimaced at the name.

“But ‘twas no’ Breadalbane or his soldier. ‘Twas another man. One with the letter.”

Adaira popped up, her eyes wide. “The letter? *The* letter?”

Sawny nodded. “Aye. Evidently.”

She sat up higher. “We must go! Tell my father now! We—”

He pressed his finger to her soft lips. “Ada, no’ the now. ‘Tis our wedding night, and I’ll no’ have anything, no’ even this feckin letter, keep me from you. That letter kept me from ye already, and I would not let it keep me from ye this night. Your father and I can deal with the letter on the morrow.”

The tension left her body and she lay back down with her head on his chest. “Ye are correct in that. I’d have nothing keep me from ye this night. So how did ye escape then?”

Sawny draped his arm over her shoulder. The tale, brief and undetailed as it was, had been difficult to share, and he was weary in the telling of it, left more ragged than he thought the outpouring of words could make him.

“The letter caused much excitement, and Kelso and his men were drunk on their discovery and whiskey. The lad, he left the gaol door open, and a horse at a hidden exit. I had hoped to try and take the letter with me, but Kelso had it with him in his study, and I was in no shape to fight him for it. He will destroy it or no’, either that night or later. One more day will no’ matter in the end. I decided discretion was the better part of valor and headed here. To ye.”

“To me.”



Their conversation fell away and they dozed together, entwined.

Adaira moved to adjust her arm caught under his, and Sawny twitched and grasped her wrist, hard.

His eyes were closed, his breathing steady. She brushed his lanky dark hair off his forehead.

“Sawny, are ye well?” she asked.

His grip tightened as one eye cracked open.

“Why are ye grabbing me so hard? I was only trying to find a comfortable position...” Her words trailed off as his grip loosened. His fingers, however, remained firm against her wrist.

“I thought ye were leaving,” he said in a craggy voice.

“Och, weel, I was no’ leaving. Merely rolling over.”

She did not move. Her eyes were riveted on his sleep-veiled face as her heartbeat echoed in her ears. What had prompted him to react so forcefully to her small movement?

“I was afraid I was losing ye,” he clarified.

His other eye opened as narrowly as the first, and he shifted his body so she could curl against him, her arm unimpeded.

“Why did ye think I would leave ye?” she whispered.

His chest heaved in a long breath, lifting her up and down like a ship at sea.

“’Twas no’ rational. But even the mere thought of ye pulling away made my throat close. I thought I had lost ye, before. ‘Twas my greatest fear realized. I’m a weak man when it comes to ye, lass, and I canna bear even the suggestion that I might lose ye again. Even if ‘tis ye rolling over in bed. In my sleep, ‘twas like ye were being pulled away.”

His words did not make the most sense, yet she understood. His sleep-addled mind was irrational and he grasped onto her to keep her close, fearing that she might somehow go away.

She had felt the same, wanting to cling to him, afraid that if she let him go, he’d disappear once more.

He closed his eyes again. “I dinna know if I will ever feel different. ‘Tis like I am afraid of losing ye every moment of the day.”

Adaira's breath caught in her chest. She surged forward and kissed his full lips. It began as a tender kiss, a promise that she was with him and not going anywhere, then quickly became burning and lustful, sucking and biting.

His arms clasped her to his chest, his desire for her obvious, and he nudged her thigh. He craved her again, but his energies were sapped.

Instead, Adaira pushed herself upright and straddled his hips. He cupped her breasts and took in the view of her riding him.

"Ye can rest," she whispered. "I'll do the work to bring us to our heights."

Then she gyrated her hips, sinking him in deep before lifting out and sliding back down his length. He groaned deep in his chest as her body's erotic dance sparked that familiar, animal need deep in his groin. She shifted her movements, slowing her pace before slamming onto him again, bringing him to the edge and backing off.

She was taunting him, driving him senseless until he could not take it anymore. His hands dropped to her hips and he took control, pushing her down as his hips bucked up.

And they did indeed find their heights.

This time, when they finished and curled around each other, damp skin against damp skin, they slept soundly and did not wake until morning.



Chapter Twenty-Five

SAWNY'S ENTIRE BODY SCREAMED in protest when he awoke the next morning, stiff and feeling every bruise, every cut, every abrasion.

Adaira's hand trailed down his naked body as he left the bed, as if her touch longed to linger upon him.

He did not blame her. All he wanted to do was linger with her.

But he had held off on his important message long enough. Too long. Though he should have told Seamus about the letter the moment he arrived, waiting did not really matter. Either Kelso still had the damning piece of evidence, or he did not.

They could not predict what he would do with the letter and better to have time to evaluate what to do than rush in and cause more chaos than what already existed in the Highlands.

Sawny drew on a new pair of braies. A bit wider in the waist, a gifted pair from one of Adaira's brother Conall, most likely. Of her brothers, he was the closest to Sawny in size.

Or had been before Sawny's time in the dungeon.

This fresh tunic fit better than the one Adaira had burned, yet still bagged in the shoulders and waist.

He was slipping on his tattered boots when Adaira stirred behind him. He looked over his shoulder at the bed. She was still burrowed under the coverlet, her chin propped up in her hand, her gossamer hair flowing around her like a golden river, and her pale skin peeking between the tresses. Her bust pressed against the bedding, shoving the rounded globes close to her chin. She looked as smooth and beautiful as a glinting selkie, and so enticing that it took all of Sawny's will not to climb back into bed with her.

"I'll return soon," he promised. "I have to speak to your father about the letter."

Adaira tilted her head. "What do ye think he will want to do?"

"Attack the MacIntosh keep to retrieve the letter, most likely."

Adaira shot upright, sitting tall in the bed and holding the plaid blanket against her chest. "Invade? Surely ye will no' go

with?”

Sawny marched to the bed and kissed the top of her head. “I dinna know what your father plans, so I shall make that decision once I’ve spoken to your father. Dinna fret.”

He spun toward the door and exited with haste, because she was fretting, and he could not bear to see her worried face.



Seamus awaited him in his study with his sons. Sorcha perched on a chair in the corner of the room by the bookcase, observing with her sharp green gaze.

“Sit down, lad,” Seamus told him as he entered and gestured to the cushioned chair in front of the desk. Sawny sat.

Seamus’s face was tight and he inhaled deeply. “What do ye have to tell us about your time with the MacIntoshes?”

Sawny decided to skip the details of his imprisonment – he was certain Seamus could see the effects of Sawny’s trials without having to provide the man details. Better to focus on the more pressing issue.

“Kelso has the Gordon letter. I tried to steal it when I left but could no’. He is meeting with Breadalbane or one of his representatives soon, and I expect the letter will change hands so the Campbells have it.”

The room seemed to buzz with this information, and even Seamus had to take a moment before speaking again. They did

not have the letter yet, but it was so close it was palatable.

This was their chance and they all knew it.

“Do ye think Slippery John has made it to Kelso’s yet?”
Seamus finally asked.

Sawny shrugged. “I dinna know. I think no’. He was surprised when the Duncanson man appeared. I dinna think he was expecting anyone soon. But I could be wrong. I dinna know what Kelso will do with the letter.”

“Do ye know if anyone else read it?”

Sawny shook his head. “I had help from a young lad who heard them talking about it when I escaped.”

“Did he read it?”

“Nay. He did no’ have the opportunity either. I dinna know who other than Kelso has read it.”

Seamus tapped his fingertips on his desk. “We need a plan to get the letter. If we go to Kelso’s keep, will the young lad help us find it? If we try an invasion or a secret attack?”

“I think if we go in secretly and sneak in, the lad can help us. The door he showed me to escape is hidden and no’ well-guarded as a result. And most of the men had been drinking heavily to celebrate the letter. Though ‘tis been more than a day, I presume they might still be drinking or suffering the ill effects. ‘Tis the type of men they are. The lad, he’s a Cameron, and his family was decimated by the MacIntoshes. I have the sense he’s no’ there of his own free will.” Sawny leaned forward and rested his forearm on the desk. “If we do this, he

will be exposed, and I'd like to bring him back here for safety. He can join me at Keppoch House when Adaira and I leave."

A sudden intake of breath drew Sawny's attention. It had been Sorcha, forgotten in the corner, realizing her daughter would soon be leaving the place of her birth to join her husband.

"We will return often," Sawny promised quickly, his gaze drifting to the mother about to lose her only daughter. Och, the plight of motherhood, and he briefly wondered when his mother would arrive so he might see her and relieve her distress.

"Of course," Seamus answered, and Sawny's intense gaze returned to the Glenachulish chieftain. "We will go in as a small entourage. My lads, a couple other men, myself, and ye. We can slip in and out and obtain the letter. We will leave at sunset and use the cover of darkness."

No one said the obvious aloud – all this was if Kelso had not destroyed the letter or given it to Breadalbane yet. Waiting on Sawny to come to Seamus might have been too long. Thus waiting until nightfall was torture, but it was a far better plan than riding up in midday's light in full view.

"Meanwhile," Seamus continued, pointing to Sawny, "I shall send for your family this morn, but ye need rest and time to heal. Your body is a map of bruises and scars. Rest and eat this day, regain your health and coloring. Will ye be ready to ride tonight?"

Sawny nodded. While Seamus did not mention Kelso, if this secret attack gave Sawny the chance to kill the MacIntosh bastard, he'd be more than ready.

“Aye,” he answered with a curt nod, before rising and departing the study.

Now he had to inform Adaira that he was going to ride back into the belly of the beast.



Sawny found Adaira pacing in the hall. Her blonde hair was loose and curling around her face. She had dressed in a light elderberry blue gown, with full sleeves, and a MacDonald plaid arasaid pinned so that it draped down her waist and back. The cinched bodice pressed against her full breasts that managed to peek past the ruched collar.

She was stunning. He could gaze upon her all day, a feast for his eyes.

Her eyes, however, were narrow and icy, like frozen dew on the grass at the start of winter.

“What did my father say?” she asked as he approached. Her hands were clenched at her side and her chin jutted high.

Lifting his gaze from her inviting bosom to her worried face, Sawny smiled weakly. He did not have to say anything. Adaira was a smart woman who read Sawny with ease.

“Ye canna go back and reive this letter!” Adaira burst out.

Panic was a dark flower blooming in her chest. She had only just gotten him back from the precipice of death, and he was planning on going with her father and brothers right back to that deathly place.

“Let my father and brothers retrieve this letter! Ye can barely stand on your own feet!”

Her fists clenched hard enough for her nails to bite through her palm. She would not have it.

Her arguments were strong — anyone would see Sawny was not the most hale. It would take a fortnight or more for him to return to his full health. He took both of her hands in his, drawing her close. Her fury was so heated, it radiated off her in waves. He did not blame her, this fury. He had only just returned, now he was preparing to leave her again after vowing not to. Would he not react the same if she had been lost, then found, and was preparing to leave again to the very place that had trapped her?

Sawny would chain her to his bed and bolt the door to keep her by his side, if the situation was reversed.

Nay, he did not blame her for her fury.

“I survived once, having your image in my mind. Ye, and coming home to ye, was all that kept me alive, kept me hopeful that I would find a way to escape and come back to ye. Now this time, I dinna go to Kelso’s keep alone and unarmed. I will have an army of MacDonalds with me. I will slay that man, not for his actions against me, but for keeping

ye from my arms all this time. For that alone, I will have my retribution. The letter, 'tis a bonus."

Her face crumpled. Her lips quivered and he could see she was doing everything to hold back her tears.

His bright and shining Adaira, brought to this low circumstance by Kelso feckin' MacIntosh.

Aye, he'd have his vengeance, but 'twould be for Adaira as much as it was for him.

"A young man may be returning with me, mayhap to foster here or at Keppoch House with us. He is the one who aided in my freedom. Will ye help me make sure he is made comfortable here?"

Adaira's mossy eyes widened. "For obtaining your freedom? Aye. He will be welcome here. He will be celebrated here."

The slender smile he gave her did naught to assuage her fears. She pouted, and he put his arms around her. He hated how thin her shoulders felt under his embrace, and at the same time, how frail she felt when he held her.

Their health would return. They were together again, and that was all that mattered.

"I made ye a vow, Adaira. That I would always return to ye. Ours is a love that canna be broken, no' by Kelso or any Campbell, not by any knife or a thousand swords. I will come back from the MacIntosh keep to ye."

"But —" she started to say, but a voice behind her interrupted.

“Ye dinna have to worry. I’ll make sure the uncivilized lad returns to ye.”

Reade stepped next to Adaira and set his hand on her shoulder.

Sawny shifted upright, puffing out his chest at the broad MacDonald man. “Ye dinna have to do anything. I’ll return.”

Reade snorted. “Ye keep using that word, but I dinna think ye know what the word means, given what happened last time. I’ll no’ see my sister devastated like that again. If it takes me dragging ye out of the mouth of hell to see ye safe in her arms again, I’ll make sure that happens.”

“Och, Reade!” Adaira gushed and wrapped her arm around his waist in a side-hug.

Reade grumbled under his breath.

Sawny lifted an eyebrow at Adaira’s brother. “I thought ye did no’ like me. I thought ye believed me to be a lecher or the like.”

“Ye may well be,” Reade agreed, “but my sister seems to love ye. And if it means her happiness, then so be it.”

His tone was begrudging, but Sawny accepted the peace offering, as poor of a reflection on Sawny’s personal character as it was.

Reade’s words must have mollified her, because the fire in Adaira’s eyes burned out, and she joined her mother and sisters-by-law in preparing a midday meal.

The entire tower was on edge for the day, anticipation over the letter and bringing Kelso MacIntosh a measure of recompense weighing on everyone's mind. Conversation was subdued and most of the men spoke in low tones as they prepared for their sunset departure. Sawny and Adaira remained close, in the hall with family, but separate, as if in a world of their own. This time together was essential for the two of them as if it would be their last. Though Sawny had assurances he would return, even he longed to stay close to Adaira. He feared even being a breath away from her for a moment might to deprive him of life.

The sun began to nestle into the trees on the horizon, and Reade and Conall approached Sawny. Conall had also gifted Sawny with a finer pair of boots, a belt, and a sword. Sawny's gaze fell to Reade's belt where a flintlock pistol was tucked in his belt.

Reade meant business — he had promised to return with Sawny, and the letter was at stake. Sawny would be more shocked if Seamus and Maddock did not carry pistols as well.

Sawny turned to Adaira who was blanched pale, which made the shadows in her cheeks and under her eyes darken.

“I love ye with the force of a tempest at sea, and I shall return,” he said and kissed her forehead. Then with a final hard, intense gaze, he spun and joined Reade and Conall as they walked toward the main doors.

Fiona reached Adaira as the men departed, their kilts swinging as they stepped into the gloaming. She took Adaira's

hand and sighed. Blair moved to stand on Adaira's other side, buttressing her with their presence.

Adaira rather believed they were. It was welcome support.

“Do ye think they will retrieve the letter?” Adaira asked out loud, more to herself than to either Fiona or Blair.

Blair scoffed before resting her hand on Adaira's upper back. “'Twould take a miracle.”



Chapter Twenty-Six

THE MACDONALDS CREPT THROUGH the night like thieves toward Kelso MacIntosh's keep. These furtive, covert motions were familiar and almost comforting to Sawny, especially since the last thing he wanted to do was go back into the place that had held him captive.

Leaving the horses tethered in the woods near the gate, the men slid off their steeds and vanished into the misty shadows.

They were fortunate as most of the soldiers were still reveling and drinking as night blanketed the land, and only one, poor lone MacIntosh guarded the hidden door off the kitchens. The fool stood his ground, however, even as Seamus, Reade, and Sawny approached him.

“Let us pass to the door,” Seamus demanded.

The pinch-faced soldier glared at him. “I’ll do no such thing.” He made to grab for his sword at his side.

“Reade, pull his arms off,” Seamus said without an ounce of humor.

“Och, ye mean this door?” The man swept to the side.

Reade did not pull his arms off, but he did strike the man on his head hard enough to render him senseless and unable to call for aid.

Seamus grabbed the man’s arms. “I’ll drag him away and hide him. The other men will cover ye in the keep. Sawny, find that letter.”

Sawny swallowed back the fear-induced bile that burned at the back of his throat and yanked the warped wooden door open.

Then he entered the very stronghold that had been his prison.

“Where would the letter be?” Reade inquired as they entered, followed by several other MacDonalds, all with swords drawn.

Sawny flicked his head to the stairs. “Third floor. But ‘tis little up stairs and I can sneak up easily alone. Make sure this floor and the second remain clear for when I come back down. And if ye see a frightened-looking brown-haired lad with a button nose and Cameron plaid, stop him for me. He’s the lad who helped me escape, and I’d free him from the shackles of this hellish keep.”

Reade nodded and pulled his pistol.

Sawny spun on his toe lightly and leapt up the stairs two at a time.

He was coming for Kelso.

And he would not leave until the man's blood stained the ground.



A flickering light poured past the study door and onto the wood plank flooring. Stepping quietly along the wall's edge to avoid any squeaking floorboards, Sawny reached the door and peeked inside. Kelso stood by the small hearth, staring into the fire.

Nay, staring at something in the fire.

Panic, hotter than the fire in the heart, surged through Sawny and he shoved his way inside, his blade leveled at Kelso's belly.

Kelso was burning the letter.

Feck. They had waited too long and now were too late.

Sawny glanced at the flames to see if he might nab it, but what remained of the parchment had curled into orange-tipped ash.

Kelso turned his bony face to Sawny and grinned. "I knew ye would return for the letter. One of my guards or my pathetic

excuse for a foster son must have mentioned it to ye.”

Sawny’s grip on his sword tightened at how unbothered Kelso appeared. “But ye read it. Of course, ye would. The information is too rich, too important to burn before ye read it.”

“I memorized it,” Kelso sneered. “Better to share it by spoken message to Campbell than let that letter fall into MacDonald hands. And that message is already on its way, and the Campbells and the king will be able to take action against whatever it might have read. Ye will never know what it read.”

Sawny rushed forward in a swift move, catching the sickly grinning man by surprise. Sawny’s blade easily slid to the man’s gullet, scoring the skin under his tunic.

“I will torture ye for it, just as ye tortured me. What did the letter say?”

He wiggled the blade, tearing into Kelso’s wame, and Kelso blanched whiter than summer heather. But he stiffened and did not appear frightened, merely pained.

“Only a great fool would ever share that information with ye. I am no’ a great fool and ye must suspect this. Ye MacDonalds have nothing, and now ye must sign your Oaths.” He spat a wad of mucous at Sawny’s face, who wiped it away slowly with his sleeve. “No’ that I see any value of a MacDonald in service to the king. But now ye have no choice.”

Sawny groaned. The letter was destroyed and the only people who knew its contents were on their way to tell the Campbells. The MacDonalds would never obtain the information they needed to upend the king.

Yet that did not mean Sawny couldn't torture the man for that knowledge, or take him to Keppoch House or Glenachulish under lock and key until the man sang like a wee warbler. The tip of Sawny's sword pressed harder into Kelso's belly and a flower of crimson bloomed against Kelso's shirt.

"Go ahead and finish," Kelso taunted. "Do ye really think I will let you take me as a prisoner and torture me for information as I tortured ye? Ye must be a feckin' fool."

Sawny froze where he stood, his blade at the ready, his jaw tight. Kelso read his mind and his words rang true. It would be too easy to kill the man, and God knew Sawny had every reason to do it. Nobody would judge him for slaying the man who had captured him, abused him, and stolen from him.

Kelso had done more than abuse his body – he had been a thief of time. He has stolen precious time from Sawny's life that he could have spent with Adaira.

For that alone, Kelso deserved to die. But Sawny was a good Highland son. Since Kelso had knowledge of what the letter contained, killing him would destroy the opportunity for the McDonalds to use that information and bring down an empire.

As much as Sawny hated to do it, he had to keep Kelso alive. He had no other choice, not when the Highlands hung in the

balance. The man seemed weak, and Sawny presumed Kelso would break easily under the right inducement.

“Ye deserve to suffer as much as I,” Sawny told him. “And perchance ye shall be a wee bit smarter than I was and share the information before we hurt ye too badly. But I will no’ kill ye.”

Sawny stepped forward to grab Kelso’s tunic when another, lighter voice spoke up behind them.

“But I will,” the ragged voice said.

A young lassie’s pale, stricken face popped up behind Kelso and shoved him with all of her might. Kelso’s body rammed into Sawny’s blade full tilt, embedding the blade deep and impaling Kelso completely. The man squealed then groaned as he sagged against a shocked Sawny. Kelso’s lifeblood ran down Sawny’s sword and hand, along with most of his innards and knowledge that Kelso had about King William.

The opportunity to extract that information from Kelso was gone.

Sawny yanked his blade back and let Kelso collapse to the floor. The man moaned lightly, but Sawny knew from the depth of that gash and the amount of his insides pouring out that he was not long for this world.

Sawny lifted his gaze to the mysterious figure. It was a young woman, dark-haired with fury burning in her eyes. She wore naught but a soiled shift, and she had been in the far

corner of the study when he entered. Kelso's body and position had blocked his view of her.

Had she been hiding in the study? Sawny noted the scrape on her chin and her bruised cheek and had a realization that the lass's presence in the study was not one she probably consented to.

He did not fault her for wanting to kill Kelso. Did he not want to do the same?

“Who are ye?”

The lassie's face tightened and Sawny realized he still held his sword. Did she think he was going to slay her next?

“Imogene!” another voice called from behind him.

Sawny spun around to find Addison hovering at the doorway.

The Imogen lass scrambled over the desk to avoid the dead man on the floor and thrust herself into Addison's arms.

It was then Sawny saw the resemblance. The same dark, earthy brown tresses, the same slightly upturned nose, the same haunted eyes.

Addison's sister? Or cousin?

Whoever she was, Sawny realized that this lass was the reason Addison had not left with him two days prior. He was not going to leave this young woman behind in the hands of a vile, abusive man.

A pistol shot sounded from somewhere below them. Reade must be paving their way out.

Sawny wiped as much of the blood off his blade onto Kelso's tunic before whipping around and marching to the door. He grabbed Addison's upper arm as he passed, tugging the lad and his sister or cousin with him.

Without looking behind him, Sawny asked, "Who is she?"

"My sister," Addison called out breathlessly. They panted as they ran to keep up with Sawny's long strides.

They reached the top of the stairs and Reade met them, his own sword uplifted and at the ready, his spent pistol tucked back in his belt. He looked over Sawny's bloody disheveled state and paused.

"No' my blood," Sawny explained quickly. "The letter is gone, burned. And Kelso is dead."

Reade leveled his stern gaze at Sawny's face. "I dinna fault ye for killing the man, but could ye have done it after we got the information?"

"He's no' the only one who knows. A messenger for Slippery John has been dispatched. He's on his way to share the information contained in the letter as we speak."

Reade ran his hand through his wild, unruly hair. "I will inform Father. He will dispatch patrols tonight to seek out this man and bring him to heel. We will get this information from him in anyway we can." He glanced from Sawny to the pair

next to him and back. “Take them to Conall and ride for Glenachulish. We will finish here and follow.”

Sawny nodded, but before he could step onto the stairwell, Reade rested his bearlike hand on Sawny’s shoulder. “I dinna fault ye for killing the man,” Reade repeated. “Of anyone, ye had the most right to do so, and ‘twould be foolish for any of us to tell ye different.”

Sawny kept his face fixed on Reade’s but his gaze slid to Addison and his stricken sister. Reade spoke the truth – everyone would readily presume that Sawny had ended Kelso’s life and not raise an eyebrow. Better to let the world believe Sawny took retribution for his own abuses than to bring a small lass into this complicated matter. If Kelso had abused her, she deserved to let that shame and the memory of that horrible rat-faced bastard to pass from her memory.

It was the least he could do to thank Addison for helping him escape. He would help Imogen escape her own horrors and restart her life with her brother.

“Kelso was too much of a coward,” Sawny told Reade. “He would no’ let me kill him. With my blade pointed at him, he thrust himself upon it. The man was no warrior.”

Reade bobbed his head in agreement. “Aye, to be sure. And Sawny, ‘tis important for you to know that ye’ve earned your place with me. I doubted ye much, questioned your intentions with Adaira, but returning to my sister and marrying her on the day of your escape speaks louder than any rumors or insults

that may have been lavished upon ye. Welcome to the Glenachulish McDonalds.”

Then Reade slapped his back hard enough that Sawny pitched forward, urging him down the stairs. Without another look back, Sawny rushed down to the secret side door and out of the MacIntosh tower.

Only then could he breathe fully again.

He could not get out of the tower fast enough, and all he wanted to do was go back home to Adaira.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

CONALL MET THEM OUTSIDE. He led them past the gate to the woods where their horses hid. Conall had also liberated another horse from the MacIntosh stables. “In case we found your lad,” he explained.

Sawny slapped his back in thanks, because they had found the lad. And the lad’s sister.

She looked older than Addison by a few years. She also appeared completely stricken, in naught but a kirtle and barefoot.

“Come, Imogen,” Addison said, taking her hand. “These are the MacDonalds, here to take us from this hellish place.”

Conall set her and Addison on a horse to ride back to Glenachulish, then he and Sawny mounted their horses and they headed south.

As they rode, Addison nudged his horse up next to Sawny, with Conall flanking his other side. Addison did not ride well, and Conall was ready to take the lass if their riding double became a problem.

“Thank ye for bringing us with ye.”

Sawny turned his gaze from the road to Addison’s pale face bright in the dappled moonlight. He still had dark shadows under his eyes, but that tightness that Addison had carried with him had lessened.

Sawny inclined his head slightly. “Of course. I would no’ have gained my freedom or had my revenge if no’ for ye.”

Addison’s sister shifted, and at first, Sawny thought it was her reaction to his less-than-truthful words because *she* technically had her revenge on the man. Then Sawny understood that she was elbowing her brother in his stomach. It reminded him of how Adaira behaved with her brothers, and the thought of her drove his need to return. To get away from this grotesque keep and find his solace with her.

“’Tis more,” Addison continued. “I know ye are distraught about Kelso burning the letter. I am sorry ye did no’ get to the letter in time. I tried to thief it myself, but he never left it alone in his study.”

“A fool’s endeavor,” Sawny commented, even as he knew that Seamus and the MacDonald chieftains and lairds would be devastated at this set back. He could only hope that they found the messenger in time. “We made it out safe and alive, and ‘tis all that matters. We will find another way to restore the king across the water.”

Addison’s gaze danced around the tree-lined road. “About that. What if ye could know what was in the letter?”

Sawny yanked on the horse’s reins, and the steed neighed as he stopped. “What do ye mean, Addison? Did ye read the letter before he burned it?”

“Nay me,” Addison said, shifting his gaze to his downcast sister. “She did.”



Sawny stared at Addison. “Your sister? Imogen?”

Addison’s face grew firm and he jutted his chin up as Imogen dropped hers impossibly lower, as if trying to hide behind her loose swath of dark hair. Conall urged his horse closer to the pair, his face tight and fixed.

“Aye,” Addison confirmed.

Sawny realized his mouth hung agape and snapped it shut.

The lass had read the letter?

The knowledge they sought was hidden in her mind, a young woman trapped in a Campbell-aligned house?

Och, the misery the past couple of days must have been for her and for Addison. If she had been found out, Kelso would have killed her in a heartbeat. No wonder she appeared so tormented and had killed the man. Perchance Kelso had even caught her reading it – that alone would have been a reason for Kelso to torture or slay her.

“Does anyone else know?” Conall asked.

“Did anyone see ye read it? Or know about this? Other than ye and your brother?” Sawny asked at nearly the same time.

Addison’s terse gaze shifted away from Sawny to Conall. From under her hair, Imogen’s eyes also slipped toward Conall.

Because that was the important question. Who knew about this? Who knew this lass held the key that might unlock Scotland from its tether to a pretender king?

Sawny was breathing shallow, as if he couldn’t catch enough air. As if all the night air was not enough to fill his chest.

Imogen shook her head.

“I dinna think so,” Addison spoke for her. “She did no’ linger longer than she had to.”

Conall and Sawny shared a terse glance over that statement. It held more meaning that Addison cared to admit. And Sawny knew of only one reason a lass might have access to a chieftain’s study, and it was not to serve tea.

Addison's desperate request to bring his sister was not for personal reasons, it was to save his sister from a fate worse than the one Sawny had been exposed to. If a man like Kelso could enjoy abusing another man, what would he do to a defenseless lass like Addison's sister, one who had been entrusted in his care? One who had read his precious letter?

Sawny shuddered.

"No one but me," Addison finished.

So Addison knew as well. This pair of orphaned Camerons, imprisoned by Kelso under the guise of fostering, alone in the world – they knew the largest secret in all of Scotland.

"Feck me," Conall whispered under his breath.

My thoughts exactly, Sawny said to himself.

Despite their protestations, secrets did not hold in the Highlands. There was a chance someone else might be aware of lass. While Addison believed no one else knew about Imogen and what she had read, rumor had a way of taking root in the Highlands. If Kelso had told even one of his men about Imogen, or anyone had seen her in the study with the letter, there would be hell to pay.

"Come. Now is no' the time or place. We will get ye to Glenachulish. Seamus MacDonald will house ye there, and ye will share this with him and his men. And we will protect ye. Both of ye."

Sawny looked over at Conall who was nodding his head.

Aye, they would all protect this lass and her brother who knew a secret that could bring down a king.



They arrived at Glenachulish as the moon cast its full light that cut past the clouds, alighting their way through the postern gate.

Shining the way home.

A crowd of people spilled out of the main tower, MacDonald soldiers and women waiting for the men to return. The rumble of the crowd reached them before he fully recognized anyone in yard. One person in particular stood at the front of the crowd, and she ran toward him.

Sawny slid off his horse, and the woman screeched as she rushed him, her dark blue gown flying like a banner behind her.

Margaret Ross MacDonald had held out hope that her son lived and had not run away in the face of all those who said otherwise. Now here he was, standing before her, confirming what she knew to be true the entire time. Margaret threw herself at her son, wrapping her arms around him.

“I knew ye were still alive, Sawny!” she cried into his chest.

His own arms slid around her back and he pressed his face into her hair. The familiar scent of her hair soap, heather and ash, reminded him of his childhood, when his world was safe

and calm, when his only concern was if he might steal a cake before his mother caught him.

She lifted her head and cupped his face with the palm of her hand.

“Are ye well, Sawny? Ye look so thin.”

He gave her a delicate smile. “I would say the same of ye, Mother. And I’m well.”

“Sorcha said ye married the lass already?” Margaret asked, meaning Adaira.

“Aye,” he answered with a nod. “Ye are no’ angry that I came here first?”

Her watery eyes released the pent-up tears of joy she had been trying to hold back as she breathed out a hard laugh. “I would have been angry if ye had no’. I know how ye feel about the lass.” She patted his chest. “I’m so pleased that ye have returned. I never gave up hope, ye ken?”

His weak smile widened. “Och, of course ye did no’. Your sheer force of will was enough to make sure I made it back home. What force can reckon with the will of Margaret Ross MacDonald?”

She tousled his wind-blown hair, then turned and threaded her arm through his.

“Come. Your father and brother will want to see ye, and if I’m no’ mistaken, your lass is on the steps, wearing a divot in the stone with her worried pacing.”

Sawny studied those gathered on the stairs, and he saw his brother and father weaving through the MacDonald men toward him.

His cousin Roy, much to his surprise, followed them.

Sawny greeted his brother and father, who discretely wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Roy, man, what are ye doing here?” Sawny asked. “’Tis a thing I’d no’ think to see, ye with the Glenachulish MacDonalds.”

Roy clasped his forearm and slapped Sawny’s shoulder. “Och, well, someone had to keep a lookout for ye, seeing how ye went and got yourself abducted. I did no’ trust these MacDonalds to let ye keep your head if they did find ye.”

Sawny grinned widely. He had no doubt that Roy spoke the truth. He would be of the same mind, had it been his sister left at the church.

He turned to Conall who was helping Imogen off her horse. Once he was certain that Addison and Imogen were in good hands, he turned back to his family.

“’Twas an ordeal, my time in Kelso MacIntosh’s dungeon, and I will tell ye all the unpleasant details when I come back to Keppoch House with my wife. For now –”

He gestured to Glenachulish keep, and his family looked behind them at the fair-haired lass in a lilac gown striding down the steps.

Roy slapped Sawny's shoulder again as they turned toward the tower, ready to retire for the night, content in the knowledge of Sawny's safe return.

Margaret tarried a moment, cupping her son's face once more, as if hoping that the sight of his face would carry her to sleep that night.

He noted Margaret touched Adaira's arm as she passed, a comforting touch, a gesture reflecting two women with a shared sorrow who were both jubilant that he had returned. Sawny strode toward Adaira as she stepped into the yard, a look of relief on her shining face.

They rushed into each other's arms. Torchlight from the hall spilled out, casting her in a golden glow, and his heart surged in his chest.

He was home, with Adaira, his family, and his body intact. He had his entire future ahead of him, and he was not going to squander it.

Adaira crushed herself against him.

"I feared ye would no' return again, having gone back to the very bowels of the hell from which ye escaped."

Sawny threaded his fingers through the loose tresses at the back of her neck, gripping her tight. Her eyes narrowed and she moaned softly.

"I vowed I would always return to ye. What we have is true love. Ye believe this to happen every day?"

Using her hair, he pulled her head back until her face was upturned, then pressed his lips to hers, sealing the vow he had made to her at their wedding and in the woods after.

She pulled her lips away. “Do ye vow ye shall always return to me?” she asked.

His lips brushed against hers, feathery light and full of promise.

“As ye wish.”

The End



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An Excerpt from The Maiden of the Storm

THIS SERIES WILL TAKE us back in time, to a place where the Ancient Celts, the Caledonii tribe, fought for their land and their people against the Romans in 209 AD



The Maiden of the Storm

*Northern Scotland, north of Antoine's Wall, Caledonii Tribe,
209 AD*

Rumors circulated of Roman Centauriae extending their patrols north beyond Antoine's wall, what they referred to disdainfully as cnap-starra. And her father's tribe watched from their secluded positions as those soldiers behaved in stupid, overly confident ways. If they wouldn't have risked giving away their positions, the painted men might have laughed at the ill-mannered soldiering of these weighted-down Romans.

Ru was chieftain of his tribe, a remote relative of the great King Gartnaith Blogh who himself managed to run the Roman fools from the Caledonii Highlands. 'Twas said the king laughed with zeal as the Latin devils, in their flaying and rusted Roman armor, scrambled over the low stone wall. As though a minor cnap-starra could stop the mighty Caledonii warriors from striking fear into the heart of their Centauriae. Fools.

But speculation blossomed of rogue Roman soldiers venturing far north of the wall, a reckless endeavor if Ru's daughter, Riana, ever heard one. Warriors from her father's tribe and other nearby tribes traveled across the mountainous countryside, through the wide glen to meet them.

Thus far, the soldiers had remained close to the wall, fearing to leave the false security it provided. Ru's warriors had struck down one or two that meandered away from that security, wounding them, perchance fatally, with a well-aimed throw of a spear. The diminutive Roman soldiers, even clad in their hopeful leather and metal armor, were no match for the powerful throw of a Caledonii spear.

This most recent Roman soldier, however, appeared less resilient, less aggressive than his previous counterparts. Though clad in full Roman military garb, he wasn't paying attention to his surroundings — distracted as he was. The Centauriae had traversed the low mountains and lochs to their hidden land. And he was alone. Ru noted his lean-muscled build and made an abrupt decision.

“Dinna kill this lad,” he whispered to Dunbraith, his military adviser and old friend. “We should keep him, enslave him. Melt his iron and armor into weapons. And use his knowledge against these pissants. Give them a bit of their own medicine.”

Dunbraith's face, blue woad paint lines mixed with blood red, was fearsome and thoughtful. “Severus is defeated,” his growling voice responded. “The Roman lines are scattered. 'Tis a safe assumption they will not even try to retrieve the lad.”

A frightening smile crossed his face, one that Ru knew well. A cruel smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Ru nodded his agreement and waved his hand at his Imannae, a young Caledonii eager to prove his worth. The young man positioned himself just beyond the leaves of the scrub bush in which he hid, narrowed his eyes at his prey, and launched a strong-armed throw of his sharpened spear.

The Imannae's throw was perfect, catching the young Roman's upper arm in a sharp drive. The lad cried out and dropped to his knees in pain and shock. Ru and his warriors moved in as silent as nightfall.

Start The Maiden of the Storm today!



Excerpt from Before the Cursed Beast

LOVE FAIRY TALE RETELLINGS? Give the Before ... series a try! Keep reading to discover Before the Cursed Beast and download the entire book!

Chapter One

I rushed into the magician's study, my skirts whipping at my legs, my arms full of clay jars, and my heart full of fear.

It hadn't always been this way, with fear ruling my life. Years ago, when I was a girl, the magician had seemed like a guardian, a caring protector. He was my first love, my first kiss, my first role model. But once I started to learn magic and master it with skill, he had changed. No longer did I play with childish magic, training rodents as pets or opening flowers in a field. *Non*, real magic affected the hearts and minds of people, and Adolphe's behavior towards me changed as quickly as if I'd cast a spell on him.

When he used to speak to me with kind words, he now barked demands and insults. Where we had once worked side by side, he now banished me from the study and relegated me to demeaning cleaning and gathering chores. When once he had touched me with love and adoration, he now delivered his harsh words with a smack or a slap.

And I was disappearing.

Not really, not like magical disappearing where something is no longer present at all. *Non*, disappearing into myself, losing what I used to be, a cherubic girl who loved to play with her guardian and magic.

Now every aspect of magic frightened me, or worried me, as I waited for a curse or a heavy hand. I no longer smiled, and

my once-shiny chestnut hair had become ashen, stringy. I had taken to sleeping in the kitchens, as I didn't want Adolphe to find me.

And it suited. I was treated as nothing more than a servant in what had once been my home. Why not sleep where the servants do?

“Salome! Where are you with my concoctions? Even a fool could work faster than you!”

Adolphe's harsh words exploded from his darkened study and carried into the hall where I juggled the jars. I held my breath as I walked, afraid of what he might do if I dropped a jar, or even almost dropped one ...

I rushed into the study and placed the jars on his disheveled worktable. Gone were the days where I perched on the table and watched him work. Now I cowered behind it.

“Took you long enough,” Adolph threw over his shoulder at me.

He faced his bookshelf, lifting the lids off glass jars and sniffing. Though his study was large, with vaulted ceilings reinforced with wood beams and a single long window at the far side of the room, Adolphe still took up so much space. He was tall, taller than most other men I'd met, limited though that might be, and his black velveteen cloak added to his dramatic flair. The olive undertone to his skin prevented him from appearing washed out, even in the dim light of the wall sconces.

“I had to find the right jars. There were so many in the cellar —”

“If you paid better attention, then maybe you’d find what you were looking for in a more timely manner.” His tone grew more harsh as he spoke.

“I’m sorry, I —”

“I don’t want to hear your paltry excuses,” Adolphe bit back. “Now put the jars in the center of the table, with the earwig dust closest to me. Then leave and make yourself useful by cleaning the rooms in this tower. You’ve let it become filthy.”

I bowed my head, trying to hide in the folds of my stained gray gown. When was the last time I’d worn a brightly hued gown, or one of rich jeweled tones? Or even a new one? Months? Years? This one lost all its color and barely reached my ankles.

“Yes, Adolphe,” I answered, casting my eyes at the floor.

He grumbled to himself as I picked up the jars and moved them as he asked. I had grabbed the last one when it slipped from my shaking fingers onto the table. The jar didn’t break, *thank the stars*, I thought in a panic, but the contents — powdered dung from the smell of it — spilled all over the table and his assorted papers and herbs.

My hands froze. Maybe I could clean it up before he saw. Maybe I —

Adolphe stopped his grumbling and whirled around. His black eyes blazed in his face, and I shrunk back from him.

“’Tis only the dung. I can clean it –”

Adolphe’s hand slammed onto the table with such force, all the jars clinked on the table, threatening to fall over.

They didn’t, and I released a slow, shaky breath. Then I looked up at Adolphe and cowered back more.

“Get you gone from here. You are as useless as a cane for a bird.”

Start this exciting fairy tale retelling series today!





About the Author



Michelle Deerwester-Dalrymple is a professor of writing and an author. She started reading when she was 3 years old, writing when she was 4, and published her first poem at age 16. She has written articles and essays on a variety of topics, including several texts on writing for middle and high school students. She has written over seventy books under a variety of pen names and is also slowly working on a novel inspired by

actual events. Her Glen Highland romance series books have won *The Top Ten Academy Awards* for books, *Top 50 Indie Books for 2019*, and the *2021 N.N. Light Book Awards*. She lives in California with her family of seven.

Find Michelle on your favorite social media sites and sign up for her newsletter here: <https://linktr.ee/mddalrympleauthor>



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