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USA Turkey Bestselling Author



Highlanders
Never
Forget

Wicked Willful Highlanders



Series by Julie Johnstone

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Highlanders Never Forget

Wicked Willful Highlanders, Book 3

by

Julie Johnstone

Highlanders Never Forget

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Dedication

To James for the encouragement, the listening, and the love.

Chapter One

The Year of Our Lord 1263

Huntley, Scotland

Distant thundering hooves broke Alex Gordon's concentration, which cost him. The sharp tip of Donnan's sword cut into his shoulder with stinging precision, but years of training took over. He jerked backward so that not too much damage was done, even as shock slammed into his chest. When his gaze met his older half brother's, Alex saw his own reaction mirrored in Donnan's eyes.

"God above," Donnan muttered. "I'm sorry. I should have pulled back sooner."

Alex glanced down at the long line of blood that had already appeared. "'Tis my own fault. I allowed my attention to stray."

"Or it could be that I'm the better swordsman," Donnan said, his tone lightly taunting.

"Nae better, just more focused in the moment," Alex retorted as he assessed the damage—minor—and wiped the blood away with his palm, then rubbed the residue on his plaid.

Donnan pointed the tip of his sword at Alex. "The ability to stay centered on the task makes me better. But if ye care to go again?" he asked with a challenging grin.

Alex grinned back. They'd been sparring like this for years, and it had gotten more competitive with each passing one. He was about to accept the challenge, but his younger half brother, Fingal, interrupted.

"Ye two are fools," Fingal said from where he'd been standing by the stone well, reluctantly waiting to fight the victor. "Yer injury is exactly why we do nae spar with real swords," he muttered.

“Yer concern over getting injured is exactly why ye should be on the strategic council and nae the guard,” Alex said.

“I agree,” Fingal replied. “If ye believe ye can convince Da...” he started and let the sentence trail off with a hopeful look.

“I already tried,” Alex said, his younger brother’s face falling. “Da does recognize that ye have a fine strategic mind, but yer mama insists ye be on the guard.” And their father always bowed to Moira’s dictates. Even if his father had not carried such great guilt for his dishonor with Alex’s mother, Fingal and Donnan’s mother Moira was heiress to Huntley Castle, and with that, she held the power to name the laird of the stronghold, and nothing meant as much to his father as maintaining his position.

“Mama fears my lack of fighting skill somehow reflects poorly on her,” Fingal said, his tone terse.

“Mama believes any flaw we have somehow reflects poorly on her,” Donnan added in a rare outburst regarding his mother.

Alex glanced at Donnan, and when their gazes met, Donnan reddened. “I should nae have said that.” Donnan shifted from foot to foot before stilling once more. “But she’s been especially grating of late with the news that there are two spots open on the Night Guard.”

It made sense that she would have become more difficult with the news. Gaining a coveted spot on the king’s personal guard was Alex’s only chance to build a future for himself. Bastards had little hope of attaining their own strongholds and warriors. But if he led a winning battle as part of the king’s Night Guard there was a chance the king would bequeath him a castle and lairdship. It had happened before to the current leader of the Night Guard, so Alex knew it was possible. Each clan could only send one warrior to represent them in the competition for the spots, and Alex intended to be the warrior his clan sent. Moira meant for Donnan to be that warrior, but Donnan didn’t need the spot as Alex did. As the eldest son, he

could be laird of the stronghold one day. It was true that while Moira was alive, she had to appoint him if their da passed, but as Donnan was her favorite, it was assumed that she would.

“Every time I lose a match to ye, she shrieks at me for hours. I wish she’d seen me best ye moments ago,” Donnan said.

Alex didn’t take the comment as a personal insult. If he were Donnan, he’d be tired of his mother’s screeching, too, and hope to give her something to keep her silent. Guilt stabbed at him. He knew that if he did not win so many matches against Donnan, his brother would have an easier time with Moira, but Alex could ill afford to lose, and it would not make Donnan a better swordsman. It’d only be a disservice to him. “Yer mama just wants ye to shine,” he said, trying to be generous.

“Aye, so that we will appear better than ye.”

It was true there was nothing Moira desired more than for her two sons to be better in every way than her husband’s bastard, but Alex did not voice his agreement with his brother. He’d learned long ago that though Donnan tired of his mother’s constant pecking, he was also protective of her and did not take kindly to Alex’s agreement regarding Moira’s character, so Alex simply stood silent.

The silence stretched and became awkward until Fingal motioned to Alex’s shoulder and said, “Ye best hope that would does nae slow ye down in competition.”

Alex looked down at his shoulder, which was inconveniently bleeding again, and then at Donnan who had a sudden, sheepish look on his face. Donnan was the one who had suggested they train with real swords today since the Night Guard would be arriving this day to begin the competition for the open spots. Alex had agreed with the stipulation that they pull back if they saw their blade was going to meet flesh.

“I am sorry,” Donnan added again. “I did nae think my blade was near enough to cut ye. If ye dunnae want to spar with sharp blades again—”

Alex’s foolish pride flared. “I’ll go again,” he interrupted, even as the sound of the horses’ hooves that had originally distracted him grew so strong that it vibrated the air around them. He turned to see who was approaching. From the inner courtyard of the keep, high up on the moat, it was easy enough to view who was trying to cross the bridge to gain access through the bailey to the main keep.

Alex squinted into the bright sun to see the men who approached. The plaids they wore—black with a sword emblem of the Night Guard—flapped behind them. Anticipation filled his lungs and sped his heart. “They’re here.” His brothers would understand to whom he was referring.

Within a breath, Donnan and Fingal stood on either side of him. “Took them long enough to make their way to us,” Donnan grumbled.

Alex didn’t take his eyes off the approaching men. He stared in awe and hope at the king’s personal warriors as they rode fast toward them. “Aye. My time has finally come.”

“Nae if I win the spot,” Donnan said.

Alex met his older brother’s gaze. There was no derisiveness in Donnan’s dark expression, only an intenseness. “I intend to best ye in the competition, Brother,” Alex said, very serious, but he clasped his hand to Donnan’s shoulder and grinned, hoping to avoid any tension between them.

“I intend the same,” Donnan replied. “May the best warrior win.”

The men of the Night Guard dismounted in the inner bailey below, and his da appeared to greet them with Moira. Two women dressed in silk finery flanked her. “Who are those lasses?” Alex asked, motioning with his hand.

Only ladies of a grand keep wore such garb. He didn't recall hearing word of any guests coming other than Laird Brodie and his men. He could not make out much about the lasses from this distance other than their hair color—pale blond on one lass and a deep shade of russet on the other, which reminded him instantly of wine.

The lass with the russet hair broke away from the other two women and rushed ahead to fling her arms around Laird Brodie, who had dismounted first and stood in front of his men. Alex recognized the head of the Night Guard by his size. He stood, like Alex, nearly a shoulder taller than most men. A massive white dog had trailed beside the lass when she'd rushed to Laird Brodie, and now, as he picked her up off her feet to give her a hug, the dog sat with her head tilted up toward them and cocked to the side, as if patiently waiting for the embrace to end so she could have the lass back.

"Those lasses are Laird Brodie's daughters," Fingal answered. "They arrived this morning when the two of ye were in the loch bathing."

"Why did ye nae make mention of it?" Donnan demanded of his younger brother.

Fingal shrugged. "Why would I? Ye'll meet them soon enough at supper."

"Did ye meet them, or did Mama tell ye this news?" Donnan asked.

"I met them," Fingal replied. "The one hugging Laird Brodie is Adeline. She's the youngest." Adeline was still in her father's embrace, so Alex could do no more than study her from behind. She was tall for a woman, but she wasn't nearly as tall as her da. She had buried her head against his neck, so that all Alex really could see, other than her height, were the thick, dark braids that wound around her head like a crown and then trailed over her shoulders like heavy ropes. Her da set her on her feet, she turned, and the smile on her face tightened his chest with the beauty of it. She patted her leg, and the white beast sprang to attention, trotting to her side as she stuck

her arm through the crook of her da's elbow. Alex found himself smiling at the scene.

“What's the pale-haired lass's name?” Donnan asked.

“That's Elspeth,” Fingal replied. “She's the eldest and the bonniest.”

“Ye can have her,” Donnan replied. “I've always preferred dark-haired lasses, and I dunnae need the eldest's keep given I'll inherit this one. But ye'll need it, Fingal.”

“So generous of ye,” Fingal replied dryly. “Mayhap the youngest daughter will want Alex and nae ye,” he added and nudged Alex in the side with his elbow.

Alex snorted. “A laird's daughter is nae going to want to wed a bastard.” He tilted his head toward the lasses. “They'll wish to wed laird's sons, like the two of ye.” He pointed at Donnan. “Ye will eventually have yer own keep and warriors, and ye—” he motioned to Fingal “—will be able to offer an alliance with the Gordon clan to any lass ye wish to wed. Nae to mention, ye will undoubtedly get a keep of yer own through Da's negotiations on yer behalf.”

“Ye'll bring an alliance with this clan to any marriage as well,” Fingal said, then glanced at Donnan with a pointed look.

“Aye,” Donnan replied. “Of course, but ye already ken that.”

“I do, but ye both ken that most lairds dunnae put much stock into alliances with bastards. We fall in and out of favor easily in clans, depending on the council and who is acting as laird.”

“Well, Donnan will be laird when Da is gone,” Fingal said, “and ye'll be in his favor.”

“I dunnae want to spend my life having to rely on the favor of any man,” Alex said. “I hope ye can ken that,” he added to Donnan.

“Ye think Mama will sway me in regard to ye as she does Da?” Donnan’s words had a sharp edge to them.

Alex took a moment to consider how honest to be. He didn’t want to start a quarrel, but it was not in his nature to lie. “Mayhap nae as much,” he said slowly. After all, Donnan would not carry the guilt their father did, which affected his decisions, but Moira would still hold the ability to take away the lairdship from Donnan. “But I do think yer mama will try to influence ye in regard to me.”

Donnan’s nostrils flared. “Are ye saying I’m going to be easily manipulated? Is that what ye think?”

“I think,” he said slowly, seeing Donnan’s rising color, “that this argument is pointless. I’ll win the spot on the Night Guard, so I’ll be gone and ye’ll need nae argue with Moira about me.”

“As I’m the better warrior and will undoubtedly best ye in the tourney, the argument is nae pointless—”

“Enough boasting out of the two of ye.” Fingal unsheathed his sword and held it up. “Mayhap I’ll enter the tourney and best ye both.”

Donnan burst out laughing as he sent his blade against Fingal’s and knocked the weapon out of his younger brother’s hand. Fingal’s sword fell to the ground with a thud. Donnan chuckled again. “Enter the competition, will ye?” He shook his head. “Ye would first need to learn to keep yer weapon in yer grip.”

A surge of pity gripped Alex as crimson stained Fingal’s face, and irritation at Donnan flared. Donnan was simply trying to dissuade Fingal from a bad, and possibly dangerous decision, but he’d gone about it in the wrong way.

Fingal bent over to scoop up his weapon, and a grinning Donnan swung his sword to smack Fingal in the arse. Before Alex knew it, he’d sent his blade across Donnan’s weapon with so much force that it flew out of his hands, just as Fingal’s had moments before.

The sword swished through the air to land at Fingal's side. His brother jerked upward, a shocked expression on his face, and Alex brought the tip of his blade to Fingal's chest. At the same time, he pulled out a dagger and pointed it at Donnan. Both men stood gawking at him. "Ye," he said to Fingal, "have more brains than brawn, and that is envious. Any man can build brawn, but we kinnae make ourselves more intelligent than we are. Ye will shine in the strategic council, nae on the field. 'Tis yer duty to find a way to do so."

Fingal nodded and smiled.

"And ye," Alex said, addressing Donnan, who had turned an angry shade of red, his blue gaze clouded and narrowed. His chest was puffed out, and Alex could see his blood pushing against his right temple. Donnan was angry indeed. "Ye are a good warrior, but ye are nae great because ye dunnae train enough to be exceptional, even with yer mama in yer ear to do so."

Donnan opened his mouth to retort, but then his gaze flickered past Alex. The angry blush on his face darkened as his lips pressed into a thin line and his nostrils flared.

"Alex speaks the truth of it," came the hard voice of Alex's father from behind him. Regret seized Alex as his gaze locked with Donnan's angry one. He'd not meant to shame his brother, and he'd especially never intentionally do so in front of their father. Though their father did not stand up for Alex against Moira, it was obvious to Alex that he was his favored son, which probably increased Moira's hatred of him. "Yer brother's dedication to training shows in his skill—unlike yers, Donnan," their father added.

"Donnan has more important things to do than train every day for hours on end," Moira inserted from behind Alex.

Alex had hoped perhaps it was just their father who had approached, but now that Moira was there, he had a dreaded feeling that Laird Brodie was as well. He forced himself to turn around and blinked in surprise at the group gathered there. Not only were his father and Moira standing there but beside

them were Laird Brodie *and* his two daughters. Before Alex could think what to say, the large white beast beside the younger daughter broke from her side and trotted over to Alex, nudged her nose under Alex's right hand, and looked up at him with eager blue eyes, the dog's head in position for Alex to rub it.

A surprisingly rich, full belly laugh came from the lass Adeline. He drew his gaze to her, and her smile left him momentarily speechless. It was warm and open, and it transformed her from bonny to breathtaking.

She cocked her head, green eyes studying him for a breath from head to toe, then returning to his face before she said, "I've nae ever seen Sciath approach anyone like that. She likes ye."

"'Tis nae a wonder," Moira chirped. "He's an animal just like she is."

A frown swept Adeline's beautiful smile from her rosy lips, and Alex found himself more disheartened by the loss of it than by Moira's words. He was used to Moira's venomous dislike of him.

"We're all creatures of God's hand," Adeline said, drawing his attention to her once more. Their gazes clashed, and she offered him a hint of that glorious smile for one moment before she focused on Moira with a dark look. "With that in mind, Lady Gordon, I suppose we are all animals."

"Adeline, mind yer tongue," her father said, stepping forward and in front of her so that she was blocked from view by her father's much larger body. Laird Brodie inclined his head to Alex, then Donnan and Fingal.

Laird Brodie's dark gaze rested on Alex. "I hope ye're planning on entering the tourney."

Alex opened his mouth to respond, but Moira cut him off. "He's a bastard, and I personally think that means he kinnae truly represent our clan."

Heat singed Alex's face, and Adeline gasped from behind Laird Brodie. Alex himself was not surprised. He'd expected some sort of protest from Moira, but the fact that Laird Brodie himself was a bastard and had gained all he had by securing a position on the Night Guard made Alex fairly confident this man could not be swayed by Moira the way Alex's father was.

"He is my son, and therefore, he can represent our clan," Alex's father said with a quiet sharpness Alex rarely heard him use with Moira. His da looked to Laird Brodie. "I was going to speak to ye about this privately."

Laird Brodie nodded. "Privacy for such delicate matters is always best."

"Laird Brodie, I encourage ye to hear my opinion," Moira said, her irritation obvious in the ringing of her hands.

Laird Brodie offered a placating smile. "I assure ye, my lady, I have heard it." He suddenly clapped Alex on the shoulder, and a genuine smile came to the man's weathered face. "Are ye as forceful with yer strike as ye are quick with yer moves?"

"Aye, Laird," Alex said, his heartbeat quickening.

Laird Brodie turned to Alex's father. "Are all yer sons such warriors?" the man asked, sweeping his gaze from Alex to Fingal to Donnan.

Alex held his breath in hopes his father would simply reply yes. It was one thing for Alex to have called his brothers out when he had thought they were in private; it was quite another for his father to do so in front of others. His father motioned to Fingal. "He's a mind for warfare as I've nae ever seen before."

Laird Brodie nodded as he looked at Fingal. "I am always searching for a clever strategist to serve me, if ye should ever be inclined to do so."

"I would, Laird," Fingal said eagerly. Then he added, "If it would please my da and mama." Hope tinged his brother's voice.

Their father nodded, but Moira scowled. “I had hoped both my boys would serve on the Guard in some capacity for the king to gain his pleasure.”

“My lady,” Laird Brodie said in a careful tone, “I assure ye the king places just as much importance on the men who plan the battle attacks as he does the men who fight them. Mayhap even more. After all, there are nae nearly so many men with minds sharp enough to strategize a war as there are with strong sword arms.”

Alex admired Laird Brodie’s cunning in how he had handled Moira. She beamed at him, then at Fingal. “I have always said Fingal should use his fine mind!”

Alex, his brothers, and their father all exchanged a quick look of amazement, but none of them contradicted her lie. After all, this way Fingal got what he wanted and what was best for him.

Alex’s father waved a hand at Donnan. “If this one would dedicate as much time to training as he does to the lasses, he could possibly be half as good as Alex.”

Alex glanced at Donnan, and the anger on his face was clear. And when Donnan’s gaze met Alex’s, he got the sense from how his brother’s eyes narrowed that at least some of that anger was directed at Alex. It was unfair, but he understood. Donnan had just been shamed.

Alex wanted to help, so he cleared his throat and said, “Da, Donnan is nae himself today, ’tis all.”

Alex’s father looked as if he was about to argue the point, but he nodded as he glanced at Laird Brodie. “Come, I’m certain ye must be travel worn and would like some food and drink.”

“That would be most welcome,” Laird Brodie said, and the men both turned to walk away, Moira and the lasses trailing behind them.

As soon as the party was out of earshot, Donnan jerked toward Alex, red-faced, and said, “I dunnae need ye sticking

up for me as if I'm a wee bairn." He swung up his sword and spat, "Come, let us go again, and I'll show ye who is best."

"Ye're vexed, and ye'll make mistakes because of it," Alex said, attempting to brush past his brother, but Donnan set the tip of his blade to Alex's side.

"Either fight me or admit ye're afraid to."

"I'm nae afraid, Donnan," Alex said, his own irritation rising. "But nor do I want to fight ye when ye're so agitated." Alex shoved the tip of Donnan's blade to the side and started to walk away, but he got no more than three steps before the flat of part of Donnan's blade struck him hard on the shoulder.

"Donnan!" Fingal shouted. "Dunnae be a clot-heid."

"Shut yer trap," Donnan snapped. "Ye were nae the one humiliated."

Alex sighed as he stared ahead toward the inner courtyard where the party had entered. The gate was still open, and Laird Brodie's daughters had stopped at the entrance of the inner courtyard, though Moira, Laird Brodie, and Alex's father seemed to have proceeded into the castle. He wished the guards would close the gate. He'd rather the lasses not witness the brewing quarrel.

"Fight me!" Donnan snapped and smacked Alex in the head with the flat of his blade. It was hard enough to rattle Alex's teeth but not snap his control to make him act rashly. Donnan would make mistakes in this fight because of his temper, and Alex wasn't about to risk injuring himself further, or his brother, to satisfy Donnan's wounded pride. The only hope was to relieve Donnan of his sword.

Alex quickly slid his blade under Donnan's, taking his brother by surprise. When Donnan tried to jerk his blade away, Alex swiveled his wrist to block Donnan's action, and then sent his weapon into Donnan's with a force that he knew would loosen his brother's grip. Then he circled his blade over Donnan's, forced it all the way to the ground, and stepped on the tip, which jerked the handle out of Donnan's hands.

Donnan went to lunge at Alex, but Alex brought the tip of his weapon up to his brother's chest. Standing to the side of them, Fingal was howling with laughter.

"I'll kill ye!" Donnan yelled.

"Nae this day, Brother," Alex said, not taking his brother's threat seriously. Donnan had a great temper and a lot of pride. One had been riled and the other had been sorely hurt. When he had time to cool down, he'd feel bad about this showing. He always did.

"I'm better than ye!" Donnan roared. "And I'll prove it!"

Alex didn't have to think of a response that might not make his brother angrier because Donnan swung away and stormed through the still-open inner courtyard gate, not even slowing to speak to the Brodie lasses who were gawking at him.

Fingal slapped Alex on the back, and Alex turned toward his grinning younger brother. "He'll be over it by supper," Fingal said.

"Aye," Alex agreed, even as weariness with the whole situation gripped him. "But he'll be vexed all over again if I fight in the tourney and best him."

Fingal nodded. "Nae if...*when*. Ye are simply better. And he will be vexed, and that may take him a long time to move past, but that will be his own fault. Ye dunnae see me acting like a bairn because I dunnae have yer skills."

"Aye, but the difference is ye dunnae care to be the best warrior. Donnan does."

Fingal shrugged. "I think he only cares because Mama pesters him so. Da was being generous earlier, ye ken. Even if Donnan practiced as much as ye, ye would still be better. Ye were given a gift from God. And ye're wrong thinking I did nae ever wish to be the best warrior. Of course, I did. What warm-blooded man would nae want yer fighting skills? Ye'll be a legend, and all the lasses will be swooning over ye."

“I already told ye lasses dunnae swoon over bastards.”

“Do ye nae think Laird Brodie’s daughters will feel differently, given their da is a bastard?” Fingal asked.

“I dunnae. In my experience, all lasses hope to wed a man who they ken will better their lot in life, nae one who *may* be able to *if* he can accomplish a great deal first. I imagine Laird Brodie’s daughters are nae any different. In fact, I would wager that, given they probably lived through lean years when their father was trying to gain all he has now, they would prefer nae to chance having to live that way again.”

“I think ye’re wrong,” Fingal said.

“And why is that?” Alex asked.

“Because they’re both staring a hole in yer back.”

Alex waved off his brother’s comment. “Because they likely expected Donnan to best me.”

“The younger one talked to ye,” Fingal said.

“Momentary lapse of her sound mind,” Alex shot back.

Fingal smirked. “I propose a wager.”

Alex shouldn’t ask. It could lead nowhere good, but he was intrigued. “What sort of wager?”

“Turn around, look them both in the face, and whoever dunnae look away, ye have to ask to dance after supper.”

“Are ye trying to embarrass me?” Alex asked, recalling the time he’d asked Laird MacDonald’s daughter to dance and she’d told him she didn’t dance with bastards loudly enough for the entire clan to hear.

“Nay, I’m trying to prove a point. Nae every lass is Lara MacDonald.”

“Nay,” Alex agreed, “they are nae. But there was also the time I tried to give Marion MacKean my favor at her clan’s tournament, and she said much the same thing as Leeta. And then there was Meeka Donald—”

“Ye’ve made yer point,” Fingal said, holding up his hand. “Now let me make mine. Turn around, meet their gazes, and learn who’s the smartest of us, Brother,” Fingal said with a wink and a grin.

“On this particular matter, I’d gladly accept ye as wiser,” Alex said, turning, because though he believed both lasses would look away, he was never one to pass up a challenge presented to him.

The lasses stood side by side, and he met the gaze of the eldest one first. Her lips pressed together, and she averted her gaze. He snorted at that and blocked the sting before it could fully penetrate him. Then he met Adeline Brodie’s gaze. The sunlight in her green eyes shone like bits of polished stone. The color was magnificent, certainly enough to make a man look twice, but it was the warm openness in them that made him unable to look away. She studied him almost thoughtfully, and when he smiled, a lovely, rosy blush kissed her sculpted cheekbones and her lips tilted up into that smile that made his chest squeeze tight.

Fingal was standing beside him now. “I win the wager,” he crowed. “Ye have to ask the lass to dance tonight.”

“Aye,” Alex agreed, not at all sorry to have lost this particular contest. He just hoped he felt the same way after supper tonight.

Chapter Two

“Stop ogling the bastard,” Elspeth hissed to Adeline that night at supper.

“I was nae ogling him,” Adeline lied and looked down at her trencher to hide the heat of embarrassment on her cheeks. Of course, she had been gawking at him. He was directly in her line of vision from where she sat in the great hall. He was seated at the table on the raised dais in front of her, in the seat farthest from his father. His half brothers flanked his father’s sides, and Lady Gordon sat to the right of Donnan Gordon. Alex’s Gordon’s seat was a slight to him. That could not feel good. Her heart squeezed in sympathy.

With his towering height, broad shoulders, and stormy blue-gray eyes he’d dominated her thoughts since seeing him in action earlier. And his smile... Well, she sighed now thinking upon it. It was a contradiction of a dangerous tilt and hesitant uncertainty. Even if he had not been so lovely to look at, he would still have been fascinating to watch. He had moved with the ease of a man born to hold a sword and to wield it to fell anyone who dared oppose him. He sparred with his brother effortlessly, relentlessly, and shockingly fast, like a wolf attacking its prey. And though the brother he’d bested didn’t seem to deserve Alex championing him, Alex had. She admired his loyalty.

Surely, her thoughts of him lingered because she felt bad for him. She had a soft heart for struggling creatures, which was how she had ended up with Sciath. She had been the runt of the litter when the head cook’s dog birthed her pups, and Alice had intended to throw Sciath to the wolves in the woods, so Adeline had rescued her. And then she’d rescued her cat, Tobias; her bird, Maybel; and her rabbit, Jack. She’d have rescued other animals, except her father had put his foot down and told her she could take in no more creatures.

She ran a chunk of bread through the gravy and attempted to steal a glance at Alex from under her lashes, but her sister snorted, making her look at her instead.

“Ye were gawking just now, ye were gawking earlier in the courtyard, and ye need to stop,” Elspeth hissed. “If ye must gawk at one of them, gawk at Fingal Gordon.”

Adeline could not help but laugh at her sister’s predictability. “Fingal and nae Donnan?”

“That’s correct,” Elspeth confirmed as she settled a glinting mischievous look on Donnan. “He’s the laird’s eldest son, he is nae betrothed, and he’s nae a bastard; therefore, he’s perfect for me.”

Adeline scowled at her sister. Elspeth had a good heart, but her fixation upon only wedding a man who would one day be a laird of a great clan made her rather uncharitable toward anyone who did not meet that qualification. And her sister’s determination had grown tenfold as of late.

Adeline sighed. “How many times do I have to tell ye that Da did nae mean yer worth was measured by the union ye would bring.”

“Ye can say it as much as ye like, but Da said ye were an extraordinary lass because ye had beauty and a sharp, inquisitive mind. That was how he answered the queen’s demand to relay something unique about ye. And how did he answer the same query regarding me?” Elspeth demanded.

Adeline cringed. When she didn’t answer, Elspeth said, “I ken ye remember, given it was a mere sennight ago. Da waved a negligent hand toward me—” Elspeth mimicked the action that Adeline clearly recalled their father doing. She too had felt it rather dismissive of Elspeth “—and then he flicked his gaze over me and said, ‘I pray my eldest daughter will bring me a strong union since she’s bonny.’ And when the queen arched her eyebrows and asked, ‘What of her mind?’ What did Da say?”

Adeline released the breath she'd been holding. "It dunnae do any good to repeat it."

"He said he prayed I had a sharp-enough wit nae to bore a man so I'd gain him the strongest union possible," Elspeth announced so loudly that Adeline glanced around to see if anyone had heard, but the strangers around them were paying them no heed. "This is my chance, Adeline." Adeline focused on her sister once more. Elspeth's eyes shimmered with the hurt of all the years their father had paid her such little mind. "This is finally my chance to make Da proud. Then he will love me as he does ye."

Adeline swallowed the large lump suddenly in her throat. "He loves ye."

"He barely tolerates me."

When Adeline opened her mouth to protest, Elspeth shot her a withering look, so Adeline pressed her lips together. It was useless to argue because Elspeth was right, though Adeline did not know why their father was so distant with Elspeth. The few times Adeline had tried to raise the matter with him, he'd waved her off and said simply, "We dunnae have anything in common, as ye and I do." And that was also true, but there was a coldness that seemed to extend beyond Elspeth not caring for talks on war, history, and strategy as Adeline did.

They sat in silence for a few moments, and then Elspeth said, "I will win Donnan's attention and wed him, and Da will be well pleased with me."

"Ye dunnae even ken Donnan Gordon."

"He will be laird one day," Elspeth said, a stubbornness in her tone that Adeline recognized. When her sister decided something, it was nearly impossible to sway her from her chosen course. Elspeth had inherited that mule-headedness from their father, and that was what they had in common. If only it would bring them closer.

“Ye should nae choose a husband because he will be a laird one day, nor dismiss a man as a viable candidate because he was born a bastard. Da was born a bastard and look how much he has accomplished!”

Elspeth snorted. “Da will tell ye himself that his being a bastard is what killed Mama. Honestly, Adeline, dunnae be foolish! Do ye think Da would ever allow either of us to consider wedding a bastard?”

Adeline clenched her teeth. “Da being a bastard did nae kill Mama. She became ill.”

“Because it was winter and we were poor, and she had to go out to forage for food because Da was gone with the Night Guard, fighting for the king to earn his favor. Da left Mama alone with me and ye.”

Adeline slid her teeth back and forth. Stubborn to a fault—that’s what Elspeth was. “All those things could happen to a man who was nae a bastard.”

“’Tis more likely to happen to a bastard,” Elspeth said in a dismissive tone. “Besides, I’ll wed a laird, as I said. And he will have a castle, and servants, and warriors, and fires, and food. I’ll nae be cold, or alone, or out looking for food, and neither will ye because Da will nae ever let ye wed a bastard and suffer Mama’s fate. So ye should quit ogling Alex Gordon. Anyway, if he’s interested in anyone, it’s me. I saw him looking at me,” Elspeth declared.

Adeline ground her teeth. Of course, he’d been gawking at Elspeth. She was the sort of lass men always stared at. She had a look of innocence about her with her wide clear-blue eyes, and she also looked fragile, as if she needed a strong man to protect her. And both those things were contradicted by her sister’s generous figure, which men clearly found beguiling, and Elspeth never missed an opportunity to let Adeline know it.

“Addie, did ye hear me?”

“I did,” Adeline said, unable to contain her sigh of irritation.

Elsbeth patted her on the arm. “There, there, Sister,” Elspeth said, her tone mildly smug. “Dunnae be jealous. As I told ye, he’s nae even acceptable as a husband.”

Adeline resisted the urge to shove her sister off the bench. She wasn’t jealous, per se. She knew she very likely did not inspire men’s lust. She was uncommonly tall, and her figure was more slight than lush. She didn’t have hair the color of the moon but more the color of dirt that had been rained on. And she didn’t particularly care to bother with it, so she mostly wore it in braids at the crown of her head. And whereas Elspeth had those startling blue eyes, Adeline had green eyes that she swore made her look as if she were constantly vexed.

Her best feature was her fair, clear complexion, but it usually had smudges of dirt on it because she liked to hunt and garden and roll around on the ground with Sciath. A lass with a smudged face hardly inspired longing. It had never bothered her because she had never met a man who had even sparked the remotest bit of interest in her...until now.

Before she could contemplate it further, Laird Gordon stood and announced the men who would be competing in the tournament the next day, and when Alex Gordon’s name was not announced, Adeline’s attention automatically drew to him. His expression showed nothing in how he felt, but she was vexed on his behalf.

“What do ye think happened?” Adeline asked her sister in a hushed whisper.

Elsbeth set down the wine goblet she’d just raised to her lips. “What do ye mean?”

“With Alex,” Adeline said, irritated that her sister was so self-absorbed. “Why do ye think they did nae announce his name as a competitor for the Night Guard?”

“Mayhap Da decided Lady Gordon was correct, and the bastard could nae represent their clan.”

“Stop calling him a bastard,” Adeline hissed, much sharper than she’d intended, but honestly, Elspeth could be so trying at times.

“Fine,” Elspeth said with a shrug. “If it means that much to ye, I will.”

Upon the dais, Laird Gordon looked to be discussing something with her father, or trying to anyway. Every time the man started to speak, Lady Gordon seemed to interrupt him. Adeline disliked the woman even more now than she already had for her unfair treatment of Alex. “I’m going to speak to Da the moment the opportunity arises and remind him he, too, is a bastard.”

“Oh, aye,” Elspeth said, her tone dripping sarcasm. “That ought to sway Da’s mind back to allowing the bast—*Alex* to compete. Honestly, Addie,” Elspeth said with a roll of her eyes. “If ye are going to chance Da punishing ye because ye question his judgment, simply because ye are lusting after a man, at least let it be for a man ye could possibly wed.”

“I am speaking to Da,” Adeline said through clenched teeth, “because of the unfairness of it. It has naught to do with lust. I am nae lusting after Alex Gordon. I dunnae even ken him.”

“Ye dunnae have to ken someone to lust after them,” Elspeth said with a chuckle.

Adeline ignored her sister’s last comment and watched as tables were moved against the far side of the left wall. When three men entered the great hall, each carrying a musical instrument, she knew dancing was about to commence. She got a fluttery feeling in her gut thinking about it. She was rarely asked to dance—likely because she was taller than a good deal of men—and Elspeth was asked nearly every time. Adeline was used to it at her own home and did not get embarrassed when she was sitting alone on the dais anymore as Elspeth danced, but here, it would be embarrassing. Or mayhap it would present her the perfect opportunity to speak with her father. He never danced, and she could approach him

at the dais if a seat beside him came empty. It would not seem so strange for her to go sit beside him, would it?

She looked back toward the dais and was surprised to find Alex Gordon approaching them. Beside her, Elspeth groaned. "I suppose he's coming to ask me to dance," Elspeth said on a huff.

Adeline had never been jealous of her sister, truly, but watching Alex walk toward them, envy pricked her. There was an air of isolation about him and a barely leashed energy that Elspeth would never understand or appreciate. Elspeth was like all the other women at their home—happy to cook and sew—so she fit in perfectly. Adeline was the oddity, so she understood feeling isolated. The only time she felt included was with her father, but those times were becoming rarer the older she got. He urged her more and more to take up more feminine interests because he said her husband would expect it.

She watched Alex as he strode toward them, and she recognized the restless energy that drove him to walk with such quick steps. She had the same energy within her, which was why she enjoyed the fast pace of hunting. No, Elspeth would never understand or appreciate such a man, or likely even agree to dance with him since he was a bastard, but Adeline would, if given the chance.

Alex stopped directly in front of their table, and as he looked down at them, a swath of wavy dark hair fell across his forehead. He splayed his hands on the table. He had wide, large palms and long, thick fingers. His hands looked as if they would easily make two of hers, and she could well imagine the strength in his fingers, given the way he had held his heavy sword with such ease.

"Lasses," he said, and the deep rumble of his voice drew her attention upward, over his chiseled arms and broad chest to his strong, square jaw dusted with dark whiskers, past his full lips, which turned up ever so slightly at the corners in a faint smile, and to his blue-gray gaze. She nearly sighed, but she

stopped herself, thank the heavens. She didn't know what it was about him, but he spoke to her in a way she'd never felt before.

“I kinnae dance with ye,” Elspeth announced, rather dramatically in Adeline's opinion.

The heat of embarrassment for Alex and outrage on his behalf over Elspeth's ridiculous hypocritical snobbery burned through Adeline, but what could she do? Offer up herself? She almost grinned at the notion, but it would be mortifying if he declined her offer.

“I actually was wondering if yer sister would care to dance with me. What say ye, lass?” Alex said, not even looking at Elspeth. His penetrating gaze was fixed on Adeline, making it hard to breathe.

Adeline frowned. “Are ye talking to me?” She pointed to her chest. Her finger actually met her chest before she realized what she had done. Heat burned her cheeks.

The corners of his lips stretched into a smile she was certain could only be described as earnest and teasing. It made her heart stutter.

“Aye,” he confirmed. “Who else would I be talking to?”

She looked between Elspeth and him, just to confirm, and he gave a little, almost imperceptible shake of his head. He leaned forward across the table, swallowing most of the space between them. The heat radiating from his body tickled her. She took a sharp breath in, and a woodsy scent filled her nose. He was so close she could see she had previously missed the silver flecks scattered among the bluish gray of his eyes. Only just remembering Sciath at her feet, she glanced to her dog, surprised she'd not growled when Alex had leaned close to her. Instead, Sciath was wagging her tail. Adeline grinned that the dog had judged him of good character.

“I came over here to ask ye to dance, Adeline Brodie, if ye'll have me.”

She could only nod like a simpleton, but she was relieved she could even do that. As he came around the table to stand behind her, she started to get up from the bench, and when she turned to put her right leg over it, he held out his hand to help steady her. Sciath immediately rose to her feet beside Adeline. She feared it would annoy Alex, but he smiled at Sciath.

“Ye’ve a good dog here to guard ye so.”

“She has a hoard of annoying animals she’s collected because she feels sorry for misfortunate creatures,” Elspeth said, giving Alex a pointed look that made Adeline want to throttle her.

He hesitated just as he was about to take Adeline’s hand, and her heart plummeted. She leaned close to him. “I assure ye, I dunnae consider ye misfortunate.”

His eyes seemed to burn into hers for a long moment before he nodded and took her hand. The heat of his skin singed her, and his fingers curled about hers with strength just like she’d imagined. Her pulse pounded a rhythm so hard she felt it in her neck, her heart, her stomach. She looked to her sister and found Elspeth gaping at them. It made Adeline want to laugh, but she managed to swallow the prideful sound down. Elspeth may not want to wed a bastard, as she had said, but her sister loved attention, and she no doubt did not like that Alex was not currently giving any to her.

As Adeline got her left foot over the bench to join her right, Alex released her hand. Disappointment flooded her, but then he stepped close, his heat now enveloping her, and he set his palm to the small of her back. A thrill shot down her spine, and she had to force herself not to curl it. He led her to the space cleared for dancers. Sciath was still following beside her but then positioning herself off the dance floor where she could watch Adeline.

“Yer dog is verra loyal to ye,” he said, the admiration in his voice evident.

“Ye’re verra loyal to yer brother Donnan,” she countered as they faced each other and waited for the dance music to begin.

There was an inherent strength in his face, and the set of his chin suggested a stubborn streak she imagined was the reason he was so good with a sword and had encountered no problem thwarting Donnan’s attempt to embarrass Fingal.

He frowned. “I am, but ye seem to be referring to something specific.”

“I saw him incite yer other brother, Fingal, to action in the courtyard, and then I heard him taunt Fingal. Yet, ye stook up for Donnan when yer da made an unkind comment.”

His dark eyebrows had risen in surprise. “Donnan is a good man.”

“Are ye trying to convince me or yerself?” she asked, and when his eyebrows rose even farther, she added, “I saw him attempt to use his sword to smack Fingal in the arse.”

He frowned. “Donnan lost his temper. We all lose our tempers at times.”

“Aye,” she relented. “’Tis true.”

“Are ye always so observant?” he asked.

There was something in the gaze resting on her that seemed almost sensuous, and his skin, bronzed by the sun, made his eyes stand out even more. She wagered Alex had encountered no difficulty finding lasses who wished to be with him, and the jealousy that gripped her at the thought surprised her with its strength. She could hardly believe he’d crossed the great hall to ask her to dance and not Elspeth. And then a horrid thought popped into her head. “Did ye say ye came to ask me to dance and nae Elspeth because she embarrassed ye?” Adeline blurted. He frowned, and even though she understood such direct questions were not polite, she didn’t care one bit.

“Nay,” he said, stepping toward her as the music commenced. “I’m nae a liar, Lady Adeline. I asked ye to dance because I wanted to ask ye and nae yer sister,” he added, though the music was so loud now she barely heard that last part. But she did hear it, and it made her grin.

“In that case,” she said, inclining her head to him as the other women were doing to their partners, “I do tend to watch people, so I would say that does make me observant.”

He let out a hearty chuckle. “Ye can observe me while we dance, aye?”

“Aye,” she agreed.

He gripped her by the hands and began to swing her around until she was breathless. They galloped hand in hand down the line of dancers, and he picked her up as if she weighed no more than a feather. He twirled her so fast that she circled her arms around his neck and laughed with delight. Her heart was pounding nearly out of her chest and sweat dampened her brow when the music came to an end. She clapped enthusiastically along with everyone else, hoping all the while he would ask her to dance once again. Oh, she’d danced with a few men before but none whose touch made her knees weak. This had been different. This had been thrilling, and she didn’t want it to end.

He turned to her after the clapping stopped, and something intense flared in his gaze that put a tingling in the pit of her stomach. She held her breath as he spoke. “Thank ye for the dance,” he said, and her heart dropped to her feet.

She exhaled her held breath and hoped she didn’t sound too disappointed that he’d not asked for another when she replied, “Ye’re welcome. ’Twas a great deal of fun.” She winced, suspecting she sounded as if she was gushing.

His gaze traveled over her face for a moment and then searched her eyes as if looking for an answer to an unspoken question. “Would ye—” he started, then stopped, shook his head, and scrubbed a hand over his cheeks and chin.

“Would I what?” she prodded, hoping he had decided to ask for one more dance.

His attention shot over her for a moment, and when she followed where it went, it rested on his older brother, Donnan, and her sister, who were walking toward the dance floor. Elspeth was chattering and staring at Donnan, but Donnan, Addie realized with a start, was staring at *her*. That was odd, and the way he was looking at her was most certainly strange—as if she were a juicy piece of fruit he wanted to pluck from a tree.

A dark scowl settled over Alex’s features. “I was going to ask ye if ye would care to stroll with me in the courtyard, but —”

“But what?” she asked, her voice pitched an octave higher than normal in excitement.

“But,” he started, then looked past her once more before settling his focus back to her. “But my older brother is walking toward us with yer sister, and by the way he’s staring at ye—”

“Oddly,” she interjected.

“Ye dunnae care for how he’s looking at ye?” Alex asked, his surprise evident.

“I dunnae,” she replied. “He looks at me as if he has nae had a proper meal in a sennight and he thinks me fruit.”

“Ye ken he’s the laird’s eldest son, do ye nae?”

She frowned. “I do. What does that have to do with nae liking the way he’s staring at me?”

Alex gave her an amazed look before grinning and then holding out his crooked elbow for her to slip her hand through. She did and then allowed her fingers to rest on the swell of his right bicep, which sent a ripple of excitement through her. He was very well formed everywhere, it seemed.

He led her through the crowd of his clan and toward the great hall door as Sciath trailed behind them. “Does yer dog go everywhere with ye?” he asked.

“Nay,” she said, even as Sciath came to her right side, tail wagging. “Does her coming with us bother ye?”

“Of course nae,” he replied. “I was just curious.”

“I rescued Sciath when she was a pup,” Adeline said. “She was the runt of her litter, so her mama left her for dead, thinking she wasn’t worth the effort.”

“My mama left me,” he said, surprising her.

He paused in the shadowy passageway, and she glanced sideways at him. He looked lost in thought. “Is that how ye came to be at yer da’s home?”

He nodded. “All I ken of my mama was what my da has shared, and that’s nae much.”

Adeline’s gut knotted in sympathy for him. Most of what she recalled of her mother her father had told her, too. “Do ye mind me asking what ye ken of her?” she asked as he continued into the main passage of the keep, which was littered with men and women standing around talking. Many called out to them as they strolled arm in arm to the large door that led to the courtyard. Men as well as women greeted Alex as they walked, but he merely waved a hand and smiled easily without stopping.

“She was a healer. My da met her when he was injured at a tournament, and she tended to him. He was in danger of losing his arm so he was in the healing room for quite some time. Moira was informed of his injuries, but she did nae wish to travel in winter to see him. He was at Dunhardy Castle.”

“Laird Lockhart’s castle?” she asked.

“Aye. Have ye been there?”

“Nay, but I ken of the winter tournament that occurs there every year because of my da.”

Alex nodded. “My mama, Gwyneth, was the healer there. All Da has said was that she was the kindest woman he’d ever met and her kindness led him to sin.”

“I suppose she was the opposite of yer stepmother,” Adeline said and gasped at herself when she realized how rude that had been. “I’m sorry.”

He waved a hand, then opened the door that led outside. “Dunnae be. ’Tis true.”

A breeze hit her as they exited the keep into the courtyard.

He paused. “She and my da became more than healer and patient. My da was healed, and he returned home to Moira. Later, my mama brought me here for my da to keep, and she fled. Nae anyone ever saw her again. Moira consented to my being raised here, but I honestly think it was so she could use my presence to torture him.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her heart twisting.

“What for?”

“This is yer home, but it is nae. That must feel awful.”

He stared at her for a long moment before answering. “It inspires me to have a home that is mine,” he finally said with such quiet resolution that she knew instinctually that it was why he wanted the spot on the Night Guard.

He released her arm and reached toward her, his thumb coming to her cheek. He smiled as he swiped it gently over the slope. “Ye had a smudge of dirt on ye.”

“I always have a smudge of dirt on me,” she said, breathless from his touch. “I roll around verra unladylike with Sciath, and I get dirty.”

He grinned, and it transformed him from ruggedly handsome to infinitely endearing. His smile made her shiver with a yearning she’d never felt before.

He moved in front of her and motioned to a staircase. “Do ye want to walk the battlement pathway? ’Tis my favorite place to view the sky,” he said.

She nodded eagerly, looked down at Sciath, and said, “Stay.”

Sciath's ears drooped a bit, but she trotted over to a patch of grass near the east wall and curled up.

"Will ye tell me how to train warriors like that?" he asked, his tone lighthearted.

"Give them lots of treats," she replied with a wink.

"A brilliant strategy." He chuckled as he took her hand.

Her heart skipped several beats as he led her to the stairs, then up them, the wind growing stronger as they climbed. When they reached the pathway behind the battlement, there was some protection from the wind because of the large stone fortifications, but it was much cooler, making her shiver.

"Are ye cold?" he asked.

"Only a bit," she said, clenching her teeth on the desire to chatter.

He released her arm and took off his plaid, which exposed his chest and stomach. He was no fat and all muscle, which didn't surprise her given she imagined he trained a great deal. He had several faint white lines that looked to be scars left by the slice of a sword. "Did ye get those in battle?" she asked.

"Some, and some training for battle."

He held his plaid up between them. "May I?" he asked, tilting his head toward her shoulders.

She nodded, and he settled his plaid across her shoulders. As he did so, his fingers grazed the exposed skin of her neck and made her shiver even more. "Ye should warm up in a second."

She was already heated through from his touch, but she simply nodded again.

"Look up," he said, even as she did so.

She started to, but his muscles rippling over his firm, bronzed skin stopped her for a moment, and she found her eyes tracing over each of his scars. As she raised her face to do as he had suggested, their gazes met. Though it was dark, the

torches that lit the passageway and the stars provided enough light that she could see the desire in his gaze. Or at least that's what she thought she saw.

"What do ye want?" he asked, his tone husky, warm, and oh so inviting.

She wanted him to kiss her, but she could not say that. "I want ye to be able to compete in the tournament and gain all ye desire."

His eyes widened in obvious surprise at her answer. "Thank ye. There is nae anything I desire as much as that... Well, mayhap there is one other thing." His gaze fell to her lips. "Do ye wish to ken a secret?" he asked, still looking at her lips as if he could not draw his attention away from them. It made her head spin.

"Aye," she croaked.

He drew his eyes to hers, and the heat, the intensity in his gaze made her knees weak. "I asked ye to dance because of a wager I made with Fingal."

"Oh," she managed to utter as disappointment nearly choked her. "I see."

"Nay." He grabbed her hand. "Ye dunnae see. I wanted to ask ye to dance. The wager merely gave me a reason in case ye refused me, so I'd nae be embarrassed."

She was dumbfounded by his honesty and inspired to offer the same. "I was certain ye approached my sister and me to ask Elspeth to dance because that is what always happens. She's the beauty with her pale hair and bright-blue eyes and petite stature."

"Nay," he said, "ye're the beauty. Yer smile is disarming, and yer eyes... Well—" He shook his head.

"What?" she asked, grasping his forearm now. No one had ever said such things to her.

"I could lose myself in yer gaze. 'Tis wise beyond yer years and earnest beyond measure, and it invites me to hope.

And honestly, I kinnae tell ye what color eyes yer sister has, but ye—” He squeezed his own eyes shut, as if to show her he was about to talk from memory. “On first look, yer eyes appear brilliant green like the grass or a gem, but there are layers to their color, just as I imagine there are layers to ye. There are flecks of gold and a smidge of brown, and ye have the longest lashes that frame yer lovely eyes.”

“I could kiss ye for saying such a thing,” she blurted, then slapped her hand over her mouth in horror. A few beats passed where he looked down at her with clear amusement, and she finally peeled her hand back from her flaming face. “I apologize for my untoward remark.”

“Ah, lass, dunnae ever apologize for being honest. I want to kiss ye, I do, but—”

She knew what he was going to say. She was a laird’s daughter, and he was a bastard. It was ridiculous, especially considering her father was also a bastard. “I dunnae care,” she said, hearing the stubbornness in her tone.

“Ye may come to,” he countered.

“Ye let me judge that. Mayhap after the kiss, I’ll nae ever wish another from ye, and the rest will nae matter.”

He cocked his eyebrows up. “Did ye just question my ability to properly kiss ye?”

“Aye,” she said, feeling bolder than she ever had in her life. But this moment, this man, was special. Every part of her said so from her rapid heartbeat to the fluttering in her belly to the tightening at her core.

He pulled her gently into the protective circle of his arms and up against the length of his body. His heart pounded through the plaid he’d wrapped around her and even through the material of her gown. He was just as excited about the kiss to come as she was. His large hand took her face and held it gently as he looked down at her, and she got the sense that he was memorizing her features. But before she could ponder it further, he lowered his lips and brushed them gently across the

surface of hers. It was a whisper of a touch that set her instantly aflame. His lips were warm and touched hers again before he captured her upper lip with his and suckled it, sending the pit of her stomach into a swirl of emotions and causing her to press up onto her tiptoes to get closer.

He grunted, and his hands went to her upper arms, gathering her closer and tighter than she'd known was possible. His kiss went from gentle to teasing and persuasive. He released her upper lip only to catch her lower one, and then he released that to trace the tip of his tongue across the crease of her closed mouth. She moaned—actually moaned—and a sweet ache sprang inside her. She wanted him to kiss her harder, and she wanted to taste him and feel his tongue inside her mouth.

So when his tongue parted her lips, she opened eagerly, glad he seemed to somehow know exactly what she needed and wanted. He was fire on the inside and a heady combination of wine and smoke. She felt instantly drugged, wanton, and ravenous for him. She touched her tongue to his, and this time, he was the one who moaned, or rather grunted, as the kiss went from eager to urgent. His hands left her arms to delve into her hair and cup the base of her skull, and her hands skimmed his biceps across his muscled shoulders to the broad expanse of his back. His mouth moved over hers in an almost devouring manner, and she matched him with the intensity of new need building within her.

He drew back from her mouth, and she started to cry out in protest until his lips came to her neck. The pleasure in that simple touch drew a soft whimper from her. She raked her nails into his thick hair, not to pull him back but press him closer, not caring that it was reckless, not caring that she'd only met him, not caring about anything but—

“Adeline!” came her father’s voice from very nearby.

All coherent thought returned in a crash. She glanced around, not locating her father even as Alex set her from him. He opened his mouth as if he were about to alert her father to

their location, and in panic, she slapped her palm over his lips and shook her head. His eyes narrowed, her father called her name two more times, and then silence reigned, but she stood still to the count of thirty, ensuring her father was gone.

When she peeled her hand from Alex's mouth his lips were pressed in a grim frown. "I suppose ye did nae want yer father to find ye with the likes of me."

She had to suppress the grin at his incorrect assumption and the realization that he cared why she might not want her father to find them. They barely knew each other, it was true, but there was something between them already, something that felt like it might only come a person's way once in a lifetime. And for her part, she did not intend to be foolish with the gift. Her father had once told her that he had not wed again because when he'd met her mother, it was like lightning had struck him, and he had never felt that way again.

Adeline stood looking at Alex with all her limbs shaking as if lightning had indeed struck her. "I did not want him to find us until ye or I have time to change his mind, in case we decided we want to."

Alex frowned. "Change his mind about what?"

"What caused my mama's death," she said, not wishing to be too specific. Before he could ask her another, more probing question, she sidestepped. "I must go to my bedchamber now, and it will nae do for ye to see me into the castle in case my da is inside the door. So, goodnight to ye, Alex Gordon." With that, she swiveled away from him and started down the passage toward the steps.

"Adeline!" he called after her. "Will I see ye again?"

She grinned at the thought that he wanted to, stopped at the stairs with a dozen steps between them, and looked at him through the shadows and firelight. "If ye've two eyes, ye will," she called back, then took the stairs as fast as she could, hardly believing she'd just been so bold.

Chapter Three

Adeline stepped through the door of the castle with Sciath on her heels and ran smack into her father. She stumbled backward, and he had to reach out and grab her elbow so she would not fall on her arse. “Adeline, I was just outside looking for ye.”

Her heart pounded so hard it hurt, and anxiousness gripped her. She didn’t want Alex to come through the door, her father see him, and possibly conclude that she had been outside with the man. That would not help matters if Alex decided he wanted to court her. If that kiss was any indication of how they would get along, she certainly hoped he would seek out her father to ask permission. But first, she needed to persuade her father to let him. She cleared her throat and said, “I was looking for ye, too.”

Her father’s silver eyebrows slanted together. “Outside?”

“Aye.” She nodded, trying to think of a lie that he’d believe. She did hate to deceive him, but in this instance, there was no choice. “I thought mayhap ye would be in the courtyard since the great hall was so stuffy.”

He gave her a suspicious look. “Adeline, I was just in the courtyard.”

“When I did nae see ye I climbed to the rampart to get a look at their fortifications.”

Her father chuckled at that, opened his arm up to her, and she happily slid close. He gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Addie, my dear, ye make yer da proud.”

She blanched a bit that he was praising her when she had just lied, but she didn’t feel she’d had a choice.

“What did ye find? Are there fortifications better than ours?”

She had really only looked at Alex's face and body. She cleared her throat. "They did nae appear to be."

He nodded, a satisfied look settling on his face. "I'm pleased ye take an interest in ensuring our castle is as well enforced as others, but next time, tell me where ye are going, aye? I came looking for ye and yer sister to walk ye to yer bedchamber, and yer sister said ye'd gone to dance with Alex Gordon and did nae come back. I was worried."

A pox on Elspeth. She was vexed that Alex had not lavished his attention on her so she was trying to start trouble. "Ye were worried that I was with Alex?" she asked, deciding to test the waters of her father's attitude regarding the man.

Her father moved them toward the stairwell that led to the bedchambers, not pausing to answer her. "I'd be worried about ye going out into the night alone with any man, Adeline. Ye're a bonny woman, and ye'll obtain a match with a fine man, but yer reputation must be impeccable, given I'm a bastard."

"Ye judge Alex Gordon unsuitable for me after meeting him once?" she asked.

Her father paused mid-step and turned to look at her. She met his now-sharp, assessing gaze, and she wished to heaven above that she'd not said a word about Alex.

"Do ye judge him suitable for ye after meeting him once and dancing with him once, lass?" The question was asked in a low, tight tone she knew well. Her father was irritated and holding on to his temper. She needed to choose her words carefully.

"Nay, of course I dunnae judge the man suitable for me after one meeting and dance." It had been the kiss, too, and the way he'd stuck up for his brother, and the insight she'd gleaned on why he wanted to be part of the Night Guard. He didn't want it for glory or the coin or power. He simply wanted his own home. Most of all, it was the feeling of being struck by lightning when she was with him. But she couldn't say any of that. It would sound silly, and her father would dismiss it all

out of hand. It *was* silly. She knew that, but knowing it didn't change how drawn she was to the man or the fact that he was the only man she'd ever had such an attraction to.

“Good, because I would expect such a thing from Elspeth's feather brain—”

“Da!”

He gave her a dark, warning look that made her clamp her lips shut.

“But nae ye,” he finished. “I have nae given my entire life in service to the king just so ye can wed a bastard and suffer the same fate yer mama did.”

There was no use arguing about it now. She'd not change his mind this night, that much was apparent. She cleared her throat, searching for the right words, but her father started up the stairs once more. This time he did so at a clipped pace that showed his vexation with her. Even with her doubling her steps, she could not keep up with him and was panting by the time she reached the end of the hall and stood in front of the bedchamber she and Elspeth were sharing.

He turned to her, his lips pressed so tight that it seemed a wonder he could part them to speak. “Good night, Daughter,” he said in the formal tone he reserved for her when he was vexed, which blessedly was rare.

She couldn't let him depart without bringing up the subject of Alex fighting in the tourney tomorrow. “Da, I could nae help but notice at supper that Alex Gordon's name was nae mentioned as one of the warriors who'd be competing tomorrow.”

“Ye could nae help but notice that, could ye?” her father said, his tone terse.

“Aye,” she replied, refusing to be detoured about this particular thing.

“And?” Her father's eyebrows were arched so high she wondered if he felt a strain to get them up there.

“And,” she said, nervously clearing her throat, “I dunnae think it right for ye to deny him the opportunity to compete simply because he’s a bastard, when ye yerself got that verra chance and it changed yer life.”

“I agree,” her father said, surprising her.

“Ye agree?” she repeated. He nodded. “Then why was his name nae announced?”

“Because, Daughter, Laird Gordon did nae wish to deal with his wife’s squawking in his ear all night about his bastard stealing something away from his rightful son, and I did nae see harm in letting the man proceed as he wished.”

“I’m glad ye agree about Alex,” Adeline said.

“Adeline,” her father said, his tone a mixture of regret and resolution, “ye need to ken that my agreeing the man should get a chance at a future through his own blood, sweat, and risk dunnae mean I think he’s a good candidate to court ye. I’ll always put yer well-being over everything else, including yer foolish desires. Do ye ken me?”

She nodded. But there was always tomorrow to try to change his mind.

She gave him a fierce hug, then turned and entered the darkened bedchamber. Sciath’s nails clacked on the wooden floor behind Adeline as her dog entered the bedchamber as well. The moment the door closed behind her, her kiss with Alex flooded her mind and she threw her arms out wide and swung around, allowing happiness to flood her.

“My, my, what’s this display about?” came Elspeth’s snippy question from the darkness.

Adeline stopped mid-spin and looked to her sister’s bed. Elspeth was now sitting up, and there was just enough moonlight shining through the window that Adeline could see her sister watching her with crossed arms and a scowl.

“I’m just happy,” Adeline said, seeing her sister brooding.

“Whatever for?” Elspeth demanded, falling back onto her pillow with a huff. “This place is cold and dreary, the supper fare was nae even passable, and Donnan Gordon was so distracted while dancing with me that he stepped on my foot nae once but four times.”

A burst of laughter escaped Adeline, then she cringed. The slip was a grave mistake for peacekeeping purposes.

Elspeth jerked upright with a gasp. She threw her coverlet off and was standing before Adeline in the blink of an eye. “Tell me what happened this instant.”

“Nae a thing,” Adeline said, trying to move past her sister, but Elspeth grabbed her by the arm.

“Ye’re lying.” Her sister pointed at Adeline, standing so close that her finger nearly brushing Adeline’s nose. “Ye will tell me what occurred, or I’ll tell Da ye left the great hall with the bastard. I could have already told him, but I covered for ye and said I only saw ye dancing with him.”

Adeline tugged her arm loose and took a step back from her sister. She wanted to shake Elspeth senseless. She feared she just might, so she remained at arm’s distance, in case Elspeth said anything else annoying. “Alex Gordon kissed me.”

Elspeth gasped again. “He ravished ye!”

“Nay,” Adeline said, rolling her eyes. “I allowed him to kiss me. It was... It was the most perfect kiss ever.”

“It was the only kiss ye’ve ever had,” Elspeth said in a dry tone. “Ye kinnae ken it was perfect. Likely, he’s a horrid kisser.”

Adeline shook her head, determined not to let her sister ruin this for her. “Nay. It was perfect. He was perfect. I dunnae need another kiss to ken it was exceptional. Do ye recall how Da said meeting Mama was like being struck by lightning?” Adeline asked, turning and falling backward onto her bed and grinning up at her sister, who was scowling back at her.

“I dunnae. Da only bothers to talk to ye.”

Elsbeth sounded like a petulant child, but Adeline understood she was jealous. “Well, when I danced with him, and then later when he kissed me, it was as if lightning struck me.”

“Ye dunnae mean to tell me ye think ye are in love!” Elspeth practically bellowed. “Ye just met the man!”

“Nay,” Adeline hastened to assure her sister, “but there is a draw to him as I have nae ever experienced. I think things like this must be special.”

Elsbeth flounced to her own bed and fell upon it. “Ye’re a fool. Ye’ve encountered a skirt tumbler.”

Adeline’s cheeks heated at the thought, but no, that could not be. “Ye’re wrong about him. Ye’re just jealous because he approached me and nae ye.”

“I’ll prove to ye I’m nae wrong.”

“How?” Adeline demanded, but as soon as the words were out, she wished she could take them back. Her sister had enough pride to fill a room, and that vanity had been nicked.

“Honestly, Addie, it’s really so simple I should nae have to explain, but I suppose ye are such an innocent that I do.”

“I suppose I am,” Adeline replied through clenched teeth.

“All it will take is for me to show a little interest in him, and then I vow to ye, he’ll forget all about ye and kiss *me*.”

“He will nae,” Adeline retorted. And if he did, he’d be dead to her, no matter how attracted she was to him.

Chapter Four

The early-morning sun streamed in behind Laird Brodie and Alex's da as the men faced Alex in the solar. Alex couldn't believe the good news. "I thank ye for allowing me to compete in the tournament today."

Laird Brodie scrutinized Alex for a long, silent moment, and then the man stepped so near Alex that he could smell the loch water coming off Adeline's father and could see that his hair was still damp. He must have headed down to the loch in the predawn hours to bathe, as Alex had been down there at sunrise and had not seen him. "I think every man deserves a chance to better his lot in life, but dunnae mistake me: that chance dunnae include my daughter."

Alex's muscles immediately tensed. He didn't know if Adeline had confessed the kiss to her father or if the man was just guessing. But since he didn't know, he needed to guard his words. "Which daughter Laird?" he asked, irritated but not surprised that the man, who had himself been born a bastard, viewed Alex as less than worthy.

"Alex," his father said sharply, but Laird Brodie waved a hand.

"'Tis fine. I'd be disappointed if yer son did nae have a strong backbone. He'll need it if he intends to win one of the two spots on the Night Guard." Laird Brodie kept his focus on Alex. "I'd be a hypocrite to deny ye the right to court Adeline simply because ye are a bastard, given I'm one as well."

"And yet that is what ye have indicated ye will do," Alex said.

"'Tis nae that simple," Brodie said. "It took me five years on the Guard to fight a battle the king considered worthy of finally gifting me land of my own, a castle of my own, warriors of my own, and the title of laird to begin the Brodie clan. During that time, I was away for months on end, year

after year. My wife and daughters were alone, except for a stable hand and a few field workers.”

“I have offered to provide my son warriors when he establishes a home of his own.”

“Enough to make an army?” Laird Brodie demanded.

“Well, nay,” Alex’s da said.

“Then they are nae enough to keep my daughter safe from the dangers of the world.” Laird Brodie turned his attention back to Alex. “I’m sure ye find me to be a hypocrite regardless of this explanation, and mayhap this conversation is nae even necessary. After all, ye just met my Adeline, but she is special. I ken it, and I always kenned there would come a time when other men would start to see it as well.”

“I barely ken yer daughter, Laird,” Alex said, though admittedly, he had not been able to shove the lass from his mind since kissing her. Not the way she’d tasted of honey or smelled of lavender, or that rich laugh that came from deep within her belly, or the delicate curve of her spine where it met her arse, or her cheeky wit.

Laird Brodie had a knowing look upon his face as he stared at Alex. “Aye, well, I had only kenned Adeline’s mother for a sennight, but that was all I needed to ken I wanted to wed her.” Alex didn’t know what to say to that, but it didn’t matter. Laird Brodie pointed at him and spoke again. “Ye may make the Guard—only God can ken that ahead of time—but even if ye do, it will likely be grueling years of service to the king before he gives ye land of yer own, men of yer own, a title of yer own, and I’ll nae wed my daughter to any man who is walking the path I did. My wife died when I was gone, and I’ll nae see my daughter fall to the same fate.”

“I would nae see yer daughter fall to that fate, either, Laird Brodie.”

“Excellent,” the man boomed. “Then ye ken me.”

“Aye. Ye wish me nae to pursue yer daughter.”

“Nay. I’m ordering ye nae to, and if ye fail to follow my order, yer chance to be on my Guard will nae exist. Do ye ken me?”

“Aye,” Alex said as a stab of anger and sense of loss hit him. He didn’t really know Adeline Gordon, but he’d be lying to himself if he denied that he’d wanted to. He could feel his father’s gaze upon him, and he knew what was expected of him. What other words could he give beyond compliance? He didn’t have anything, and the only way for him to make a life for himself in this world was to be a success on the Night Guard, just as Adeline’s father had. Alex could ill afford to ruin his opportunity before he even got it, but he couldn’t seem to open his mouth and give his word.

Just then, the solar door banged open, and Fingal charged in. He stopped mid-stride, his eyes widening, undoubtedly from the tension in the room. Alex imagined it showed on his face, as it did on Laird Brodie’s.

Fingal cleared his throat. “My apologies. I did nae ken ye were in a meeting, Da. Ye told me to relay when the men were gathered for the hunt.”

A momentary look of relief crossed their father’s face, but he quickly composed his features and instead scowled at Fingal. Alex half suspected the look was to hide the fact that his father was thankful the conversation had been interrupted. Alex was glad to be spared having to give his word to stay away from Adeline.

“I’ve also told ye to knock, ye clot-heid,” said Alex’s father. “But ye dunnae seem to recall that.”

“Apologies,” Fingal said again.

“I assume the men are ready?” their father demanded.

“Aye, Da, and the ladies.”

“The ladies?” their father asked, his brow furrowing.

Fingal grinned. “Aye. Laird Brodie’s daughters are mounted to hunt.”

“Both my daughters?” Laird Brodie asked, the look of shock on his face unmistakable.

“Aye, Laird,” Fingal replied. “Yer youngest daughter says she’s perfectly capable of hunting without an escort, but yer eldest daughter has requested Alex there to aid her.”

“Has she now?” Laird Brodie said, his tone tight with displeasure. He turned his attention to Alex. “That demand earlier, ye recall it?”

“Aye, Laird,” Alex said, hoping to the heavens the man didn’t demand his word about Adeline now.

“That goes for my eldest daughter, too. I’ll have yer word now that ye’ll nae pursue Elspeth.”

“I dunnae have interest in yer daughter Elspeth, but ye have my word, Laird,” Alex immediately replied, for that was easy enough to give. He turned toward the door to hide his grin, and he had taken only two steps when Laird Brodie spoke behind him.

“I’ll have yer word on Adeline, too, or ye may as well remove yerself from the competition.”

Alex clenched his jaw on a curse. He hadn’t realized until just this moment how his mind had grasped on to the possibility of being able to court her if she desired it. If he didn’t make the Night Guard, he’d have nothing to offer her but himself, and that was not enough. “Ye’ve my word,” he bit out and started toward the door, but Laird Brodie spoke yet again.

“In that case, I’d like ye to ride by Elspeth.”

Incredulity hit Alex, but he forced himself to turn toward the man.

“I ken it’s an odd request after what I just demanded, but Elspeth is nae a hunter, nor a particularly good rider. I kinnae imagine why she wants to take to the saddle today, but yer da tells me yer woods are ripe with wolves, so I want a good swordsman by her side.”

“Why nae one of the Night Guard?” Alex asked. There were, after all, eight of them here.

“I already sent the men of the Night Guard back to my stronghold. The other warriors will be coming for the competition at my home, and I wish the guard there to greet them. This is our last stop.”

“Then why nae ye?” Alex demanded, knowing he was out of place but not feeling particularly generous toward the man.

“I’ll be riding by Adeline,” Laird Brodie said.

“She’s nae a good rider, either?” Alex asked, surprised. He didn’t know why, but he would have expected Adeline to be an excellent horsewoman.

Laird Brodie shook his head. “Adeline is an excellent rider and hunter, but she’s fearless, and in yer woods, with the wolves about...” His words trailed off, and an almost embarrassed look crossed his face, but Alex understood it immediately. Laird Brodie could not watch over both his daughters at the same time, and the man had chosen Adeline.

Alex hadn’t particularly liked Elspeth, especially how she’d refused to meet his gaze and the way she’d assumed he had crossed the great hall to ask her to dance, but pity rose for her. He was not equal to his brothers in birth so he felt he always had to be better and prove himself. Perhaps the lass suffered some of the same affliction with her sister if her sister had skills she did not. He nodded. “I’ll gladly guard yer daughter, Laird Brodie.”

Chapter Five

Adeline was finding it impossible to keep her mind on the hunt with her sister giggling so loudly every few moments. Up ahead, Alex and Elspeth rode so closely together that their legs brushed. They disappeared down a twisting trail for a spell—the fourth time they’d done that since the hunt had started—and every time they reappeared, Elspeth’s face held a deep blush and Alex looked guilty. Adeline was certain they had kissed. She glared daggers at them, unsure who she despised more: her sister for proving her point, despite the fact that she knew Adeline liked Alex, or Alex for falling so easily into Elspeth’s snare.

“I told ye he was nae for ye, Adeline,” her father said, his tone grim.

She jerked her focus to her father as heat singed her cheeks, and her fingers gripped her horse’s reins. Sciath barked beside Adeline’s destrier, Geal, which made the horse neigh in irritation and brought a small, begrudging smile to Adeline’s face, despite her now-dark mood. The two animals had grown up together, and they frequently ruffled each other, but it never led to anything more than a bark and a neigh.

“I’ve put him out of my mind,” she lied.

“If that’s true, then good. Any man who will pay ye such mind one minute and then have his head turned easily by the likes of yer sister the next is nae the man for ye.”

Adeline’s jaw slipped open at her father’s words. “Da,” she said, her heart banging against her chest with the suspicion that had bloomed in her mind, “did ye purposely put Elspeth and Alex together on this hunt?”

“She requested it, and I agreed,” her father said without even a hint of remorse. It was a good thing the rest of the hunting party was so far ahead that they did not have a view of Elspeth and Alex disappearing repeatedly. Still, she wished her

father had not conceded to the request. “I ken yer sister well and what drives her. It’s easy enough to read in her eyes and upon her face, and I could see when she told me in the great hall that ye had danced with Alex that she was jealous and meant to get ye in trouble with me. I also kenned that same jealousy would drive her to try to get his attention for herself.”

“So ye threw her to him like prey to a wolf?” Adeline demanded, incensed for her sister, though she was vexed at her.

“Nae at all,” her father said with a chuckle. “She asked, as I said. Yer sister may try to take his attention from ye to her, but that’s all she’ll want from him. She’s already spoken to me about a possible match between her and Donnan Gordon. She may be a fool in most other things but nae regarding marriage.”

Adeline opened her mouth to ask her father if he’d just implied that *she* was a fool in regard to marriage, but Sciath started barking wildly and pulled her teeth back in a growl. Her heart jumped in her chest as Geal started dancing around and flicking her head back.

“Danger,” Adeline and her father said at the exact same moment.

She raised her bow, pulling the arrow taut, just as her father yelled, “Watch out!”

She swiveled her body to the left because that’s where her father was looking, and on the dense wooded embankment that rose on either side of them, a wolf stood, teeth bared, eyes glowing in the setting sun. The wolf jumped toward them just as Adeline released her arrow. It hit the beast a breath before it barreled into them, but the wolf was so close to her that its body hit the tip of her bow and wrenched the weapon out of her hands. The wolf and her bow fell to the ground with a thud. Before she could react to what had just occurred, her sister’s scream tore through the air.

“Wolves! Wolves!”

Confusion hit Adeline. Wolves? She looked to the left embankment, but there were no wolves there. The low hum of menacing growls came from behind her and to her right, sending chills racing across her scalp, down her neck, and over her spine. Fear gripped her as her gaze locked with her father's, and Sciath's growling and barking filled the air. Suddenly, Sciath turned from her side and charged away. Adeline glanced behind her to see her hound bolt straight for the wolves at her back. A third one lunged out of the woods and caught Sciath in mid-jump. Sciath let out a loud yelp that mingled with Adeline's own scream as her dog became a blur of rolling fur and growls and snaps of sharp teeth filled the air.

An arrow flew past her and hit one of the wolves and then another, and she tore her attention away from Sciath and the wolf she was fighting and turned toward her father. Beside him, close enough to jump on him, was a large, brownish-red wolf. "Da," she said, sweat instantly dampening her brow, her back, her palms. "Shoot the wolf beside ye!"

"I dunnae have any arrows left," he replied, his voice grave but his tone steady as he released the arrow aimed behind her. The largest wolf jumped toward her father, and a scream ripped from her throat. She watched in stunned horror as he raised his hands in front of him in what would surely be a futile effort to protect himself from the dangerous beast. But in midair, the wolf suddenly plummeted to the ground. Adeline looked to the motionless beast to find an arrow sticking out of the side of its neck and blood spreading on the ground beneath the animal. She frowned in confusion, then her sister screamed again and Adeline cast her gaze down the length of the trail. Elspeth raced toward them, and Alex sat tall and still on his horse, bow raised and aimed toward her father. He had saved her father's life.

"Da!" Elspeth gasped as she brought her horse to a stop in front of Adeline and her father. "Ye and Addie nearly died!"

Adeline was off her horse and turning to look for Sciath, even as her father bellowed for her to stay on the beast. She ignored him, tears springing to her eyes as her gaze fell upon

Sciath, motionless with the wolf she'd been fighting unmoving beside her. Adeline raced across gnarled roots and crunched through fallen leaves, her shoe catching on a particularly thick tree root, which sent her forward and to her knees. She hit the ground with a hard, stinging thud and was attempting to scramble up, heart pounding, when hands slid under her arms from behind her and she was lifted to her feet.

“Get behind me, lass.” The order was firm but gentle at the same time.

There was no chance to protest before Alex stepped in front of her, sword drawn in one hand, and holding out the other as if to block her. She understood, forced behind his massive body, that he was protecting her. “I have to get to Sciath,” she said.

“Aye, I ken ye do, but I'll have ye behind me until I'm certain the wolf yer brave dog was fighting is dead. If the wicked beast is alive and attempts to attack, it will have to get through me to get to ye, and that, I promise ye, will nae happen.”

Her lips parted at his statement. This man she had just met was fully prepared to give his life for her. They proceeded forward slowly, and behind her, footsteps fell and she knew her father was closing in on them. He reached Alex's side right before they got to Sciath and the wolf.

To her amazement, Alex stepped in front of her father and, without looking back, said, “I've got the wolf. Ye see to yer daughter and the dog.”

Her father nodded and reached back to grab her hand. He gave it a squeeze before releasing it and walking to Sciath. She followed close behind and fell to her knees beside Sciath when they reached her. Her da stood over Adeline and her dog. Adeline sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of Sciath's white coat covered in blood. When she began to run her hands over the dog to look for the injury, Sciath raised her head with a whimper, her big dark eyes locking on Adeline before the hound dropped her head once more.

Adeline checked the dog's front and rear paws, her back, and her stomach, parting her thick white coat and looking for the source of the blood. "I kinnae find the injury!" she cried out as fear gripped her. Sciath was no longer making any sounds.

"Let me check her," Alex said as he kneeled beside her.

"What of the wolf?" she asked.

"Dead," he replied. "Yer dog took a large chunk of the wolf's neck."

Alex leaned closely over Sciath and slid one hand under her dog's neck while using his other hand to part the fur and look for the injury. When he paused and a hiss escaped from him, her heart plummeted.

"Is it bad?" she asked, knowing he had found the injury.

"Aye," he said, scooping Sciath up and into his arms as he stood. Tears were already streaming down her face when Alex looked to her. "I'll do my best to save her."

"Ye ken how to tend to a dog?" she asked, shocked.

"A bit. I've treated other animals before. I need to get her to the healing room," he said and turned to walk away.

"I'm coming with ye!" she cried out, then belatedly thought to look to her father for permission.

After a brief pause, her father gave a reluctant nod. "We'll follow after we let the others in the hunting party ken what has happened."

She was already walking toward her horse as Alex lay Sciath's still body over his horse, mounted, and then scooped up her dog with one arm. He cradled Sciath to his chest. Her heart squeezed at his care and comfort with her dog, and as he motioned her up to his side, he said, "Stay beside me as we ride. I want ye in my sight to protect ye."

Something intense flared in Alex's eyes. Her flesh prickled with awareness of him that sank deep into her gut and lodged

there. His gaze became soft as a caress, not leaving her as he said, “If we encounter any more wolves, I want ye to keep riding until ye get to the castle.”

“What of ye?” she asked. “Ye’d have me leave ye behind?”

He nodded without hesitation. “Aye, Adeline. I would gladly give my life to protect ye.”

And as that astonishing statement sank in, they galloped ahead, making talking, or even thinking of anything but riding, impossible.

Chapter Six

It was difficult to concentrate on the hound with Adeline hovering so close to him that her scent infused his every breath, but he managed to stay focused enough that he felt fairly certain Sciath would live. He finished wrapping the wound, then gave the hound a pat on the head when the dog licked Alex's hand before dropping her head to the table once more and closing her eyes.

“Ye really think she will live?”

That was at least the sixth time Adeline had asked him that question, but he nodded and reassured her yet again. “Aye, lass.” Her genuine concern for her dog touched him deeply. It showed she had a heart overflowing with love. “The blood made the wound appear worse than it was. The wolf did bite Sciath, but it was nae deep. Sciath is much fiercer than the wolf, are ye nae, girl,” he said, patting the dog, who opened her eyes briefly and gave her tail a few thumps in answer before shutting her eyes again.

“I kinnae thank ye enough,” Adeline said, and he turned to see her shoulders slumping forward with obvious exhaustion. “For saving my da and for aiding my dog.”

“I could nae have done anything else,” he said, meaning it. When he'd realized she was in danger, all he could think of was saving her at any cost. Actually, he wasn't even certain he'd really thought at all. He'd reacted out of sheer black fright for her. And now that his pulse had returned to normal, all was calm, and she was standing there alive and well, his attraction to her washed over him.

Bitterness curdled in his stomach. He could not pursue her. If he did, he'd lose his chance at joining the Night Guard, and he'd been dreaming of that opportunity for as long as he could remember. There was no possibility to have his own

stronghold, his own clan, or a home to call his own, or even to build a family, without the Night Guard.

Her green gaze clung to him, and a rosy blush crept from her chest to her neck to her cheeks. Her lips were swollen and red, likely from the hard, bitter cold ride back to the castle, and she once again had the most beguiling smudge on her cheek. A physical ache to touch her, to comfort her, rushed through him, but he turned away and swept his gaze around the cluttered healing room, searching for something to distract him. His attention landed on a jug of wine, and he strode across the room, looked in it, found it full, and picked it up, turning to look for goblets, but his intentions halted on Adeline.

Her hands were raised above her head and held all her luxurious hair off her very enticing neck. Her skin was flawless, creamy, and inviting. “I think we could both use a goblet of wine,” he said, knowing he could. He needed to cool the desire in him that was heating at a shockingly rapid pace.

She released her hair, and it slid over her shoulders to trail to her breasts. He clenched his teeth in an effort not to release a grunt of need. She glanced around. He was unsure what she was doing until she walked to the table closest to the door, plucked two goblets off it, and brought them to him, holding them out with a smile that made the breath lodge in his throat. “I most assuredly could use a goblet of wine,” she said, her voice the sweetest sound he’d ever heard. She had a slightly husky tone that made him think of tumbling in his bed.

He filled both goblets, handed one to her, and motioned to the chairs on the other side of the room. “Do ye wish to sit for a spell? I need to monitor Sciath through the night, but if ye wish to go to yer bedchamber and wash the blood of ye—”

She frowned. “Nay. I wish to stay with ye as long as I can. I imagine eventually my da will return and make me leave.”

He imagined she was right. He doubted that the act of saving the man’s life would have changed his mind about Alex. Laird Brodie wanted the best for his beloved daughter, and he judged the path ahead of Alex would be too hard for

her. Given the man had been down the same path, Alex had to assume Laird Brodie knew of what he spoke.

They walked silently across the room to the chairs by the window, which faced each other. Once they were both settled, each raised their goblet to their lips and took a long swig. Alex savored the burn as the wine slid down his throat and eventually pooled in his belly. He let out a tense sigh and looked down at the contents of the goblet so he'd not stare at her as he wanted to.

“Ye're nae the clan healer, are ye?”

Her question brought a smile to his lips and had him looking up at her. What he saw rendered him speechless. Her eyes were closed, and her long, dark lashes fanned her cheeks. She leaned her head back against her chair, and the long column of her neck was once again exposed. Unable to help himself, his gaze followed the slender line down until he reached her collarbones, where her pulse beat rapidly in the hollow space between them. Never in his life had he wanted to touch something as much as he did the small spot where her very large heart was thumping against her skin. He longed to press his thumb there ever so gently and memorize the pattern of her life beating within her. It was the most dangerous desire, and he fought to ignore it. He swallowed, aware she was watching him and waiting for him to respond.

“Nay,” he said, dragging his gaze from her collarbones to her eyes, which were filled with questions. “The healer is an older woman named Leeta, but she's currently away aiding the Donaldson clan with a sickness that has swept over their people. She has been the healer here for as long as I can remember. She's as near to a mother as I suppose I'll ever ken,” he said, unsure why he had admitted that. Something about Adeline drew out secrets he'd long held inside.

“Did Leeta teach ye the healing arts?” she asked.

“Aye.”

Her brow furrowed. “Is that nae unusual?”

He smiled. “Do ye mean because I’m a bastard or a man?”

She blushed, and it nearly killed him it was so beautiful. “Because ye are a man,” she said. “Most men dunnae seem to take an interest in such things.”

He shrugged. “They should. Kenning the healing arts can be verra handy for keeping ye alive when yer injured, and I would say most men have a keen interest in staying alive.”

“Aye,” she agreed with a lovely chuckle, “but they expect a woman to tend to them.”

“I dunnae,” he said, meaning it, “but I suppose that’s because, unlike most men, I have nae ever really had a woman tend to me.”

“Oh, I imagine ye have,” she said, smirking, and he was shocked when his face heated. It was not like him to easily embarrass.

He cleared his throat and said, “Nae as a mama would, ye cheeky lass.”

She winked at him, and the playful gesture caused the grip she already had on him to tighten.

“So, how did it come to be that Leeta taught ye the healing arts?”

He scrubbed a hand across his face to give himself a moment to consider how to respond. Each personal detail he shared and learned of her would make it that much harder not to fall under the spell she didn’t seem to realize she was casting, but he couldn’t resist the captivating green gaze full of interest that was focused on him. “When I was a lad, Moira would nae allow me to take supper in the great hall, so I ate alone in the passage outside it.”

“That’s horrid,” Adeline whispered. “Yer da should have intervened.”

He ignored the tightening of his chest and said, “It was and still is complicated.”

“How so?” Adeline asked with a frown. “Yer da is laird.”

Alex sighed heavily. “The lairdship of the clan rests in Moira’s hands.”

Her confusion was evident on the sudden creases in her smooth forehead. “How can that be?”

Alex quickly told her how the castle was Moira’s birthright from her father, and how, along with the castle, he’d granted her the ability to choose the laird rather than naturally pass down to her first son. She got to choose. “So, ye see, if she becomes displeased enough with my da, she can simply choose another laird.”

“Anyone?”

“Well, nae. It has to be either Donnan or one of her brothers.”

Adeline cocked her head in obvious thought. “How did nae being allowed to sit in the great hall at supper lead to ye learning the healing arts?”

“Leeta passed me night after night on her way to supper. One night she asked me why I did nae dine with the others. When I told her, she became verra vexed for me, and she said she did nae care to dine with such cowards and hypocrites.” He paused, trying to recall more, but he’d been a lad of nine summers when that had happened. “I did nae ever really ken what she meant by that. Anyway, I dined with her for the better part of a year, and then one day, Moira happened into the healing room while Leeta and I were taking our supper, and the next day, I was sent away to apprentice with Laird Lockhart.”

“Ye trained under the most powerful magnet in the Highlands?”

“Aye.” Alex nodded. “It was an honor to learn from him. He’s a renowned warrior. Ruthless and rather unapproachable, but a great warrior nonetheless. I was there for six summers.”

Adeline gasped. “Ye were away from yer home for six summers!”

“Aye.”

“Did ye miss it terribly?”

“Nay,” he said, realizing belatedly how much that one word had given away about him when Adeline sniffled and tears filled her eyes. Two tears trickled down her right cheek, and he leaned over and brushed them away. The moment he did so, he knew it had been a mistake. Touching her was too much temptation. His mind was in chaos.

Adeline sucked in a sharp breath and placed a hand on his arm, rendering him more at her mercy than any weapon any foe had ever wielded against him. “Ye want to be on the Night Guard to gain yer own castle so ye will nae ever be turned from a great hall again.”

The pity in her voice did not irritate him as it might have if those same words had been spoken by anyone else. That she understood what motivated him so clearly surprised him and made him regret even more that he could not pursue her. “Aye,” he finally acknowledged, and when her eyes took on the sheen of unshed tears again, he took her face in his hands and held it gently as his pulse hammered within him.

“Adeline,” he said, wanting to tell her how much she tempted him but knowing he should not. He needed to release her and put distance between them, but for all his strength, he was having trouble conjuring enough of it to do as he should, to do as was prudent for his future and hers. And before he could find it, she leaned forward and pressed her sweet, soft lips to his.

He was lost to desire in an instant. His mouth came over hers with a fierce need to memorize the feel and taste of her, though it was the last thing he should be doing. He’d given his word, and he was not a man to break a vow, but when she touched her tongue tentatively to the crease of his mouth, he parted her lips with tongue and drank the essence of her in as

if she were liquid life. Mayhap she was, because he'd never felt more alive than in that moment. Her hands came to his back, and he delved his fingers into her silken strands, and then their bodies were pressed together as their hands frantically roamed over each other.

Just when his fingers grazed her hard bud underneath the fine material of her gown, the healing room door creaked. He shoved her away and scrambled to his feet, panting, and she sat there looking utterly, beautifully disheveled, dazed, and as if she had been properly kissed. There was no room for the pride of knowing she'd enjoyed it as much as he had. Concern gripped him as the door opened.

When her sister appeared, he exhaled a breath of relief that it was not Laird Brodie. That man was far too observant not to see that Adeline had been kissed, but Adeline's sister was too concerned about herself to notice someone else.

Elsbeth flounced through the doorway, and her gaze skimmed her sister before settling on him with an inviting look. He didn't know what game the lass had been playing this morning at the hunt when she'd flirted shamelessly with him, nor did he know what she was about now, but it was clear it was something wicked. "Ye were verra brave this afternoon," she said in a voice as suggestive as the look she was shooting him.

"Step out of the doorway, Daughter, and let me to Adeline," came Laird Brodie's gruff command.

Alex winced for Elspeth when stark hurt skittered across her features, even as she immediately complied with her father's bidding. Laird Brodie charged in and paused mid-stride as his gaze locked on his Adeline. He stared at her for a long, silent moment before he turned an accusing glare upon Alex.

Unease and shame gripped Alex. Laird Brodie knew Alex had broken his vow to him. It was as obvious as Adeline's still-swollen lips and tussled hair. The man's jaw went rigid as

he crossed the room to Adeline, gave her a hug, and asked, “How is Sciath?”

Adeline looked to Alex. “Thanks to Alex, Sciath is going to be okay, and ye are alive.”

“I *think* she will,” Alex corrected Adeline in regard to her hound. “I’ll stay with her through the night tonight and watch her. If she’s going to take a turn for the worse, she’ll do so tonight.”

“I’ll stay, too,” Adeline piped up.

A dark, thunderous look crossed her father’s face. “Nay,” he said in a hard, unbending tone Alex noticed made Adeline flinch, “ye’ll nae. Ye’ll go up to yer bedchamber now and get some rest. Ye’ve dark circles under yer eyes, and ye nearly died.”

“But, Da, what if Sciath should need me or Alex should need a hand?”

“Yer sister can stay,” Laird Brodie announced to Alex’s shock.

“Da!” Elspeth said, her distraught tone revealing not only her hurt but that she was not truly interested in Alex, as she would have had him believe earlier.

Laird Brodie waved a hand at his eldest daughter. “Just for a bit to ease yer sister’s mind. Now go to yer bedchamber, Adeline. I have taken care of what vexes ye, and I’ll nae listen to any more argument.”

Alex could clearly see by Adeline’s mutinous expression that she did not wish to comply, but he also could see that she knew it was hopeless by the way her shoulders had dropped in defeat. “If Sciath should worsen...” she said, looking directly at Alex.

“I will have yer sister come for ye immediately,” he assured her, though he knew doing so would anger Laird Brodie.

Adeline nodded and walked stiffly past her father and sister to give Sciath one last parting hug, and then she exited the room, her back ramrod straight and lips pressed into an angry line.

When she had disappeared from view, Laird Brodie looked to Elspeth, who stood with her arms crossed over her chest and sad smile on her face. “Wait outside for a moment, Elspeth. I wish to speak to Alex in private.”

The woman opened and closed her mouth several times, as if she might not agree, but then she jerked her head in a nod and departed the room to leave Alex alone with her father, the man who held Alex’s future in the palms of his hands. Laird Brodie turned unforgiving eyes upon him. “Yer stepmother did nae want ye to compete in the tourney.”

“I’m aware,” Alex said, understanding his future was teetering on a precipice. He did not regret the kiss, though he heartily regrated breaking his word and the possibility that his dream may now be beyond his reach. So, why didn’t he regret the kiss? Those two things alone should make him want to take it back, but he didn’t want to.

“Ye should also be aware that I made it possible by convincing her the king would nae be pleased if he heard one of the most promising warriors was held from his possible service because he was a bastard.”

“Are ye saying the king dunnae really feel that way?” Alex prodded, wanting to know exactly where he stood.

“I’m saying,” Laird Brodie replied slowly, “the king kens only what I tell him of his subjects, so if I’m for ye, the king is. If I’m against ye, the king is. And if ye break yer word to me again regarding my daughter, I will be more than against ye. Ye’ll have made an enemy. Ye saved my life today so I will turn an eye to my daughter’s disheveled state when I entered this room, but ye will forget any thought of her and a future with her, or I’ll destroy ye and any hope ye have of serving on the Night Guard. Do ye ken me?”

“Aye,” Alex choked out, rage heating him. Not relief, rage. What in God’s blood was wrong with him? Kissing the lass had addled his brain. Hell, the mere presence of Adeline had addled his brain.

Laird Brodie studied him for a long moment. “Ye seem to be a good man, but Adeline is my heart. I’ll nae lose her as I lost her mother. And ask yerself this: Do ye wish to lose yer only chance to gain everything ye desire for a lass ye barely ken?”

Hesitation gripped him. Two days ago, before meeting Adeline, his answer would have been a resounding no, but now... But Laird Brodie was waiting for his answer, and Alex had wanted the chance to gain his own stronghold for as long as he could remember, so he shook his head. “Nay.” He needed to think clearly from here on out.

“Excellent,” the man replied, then turned on his heel and exited the room. The door stood open behind Laird Brodie, and Alex could see him speaking with Elspeth. Her gaze went wide at something he’d said and her mouth formed a shocked *O*, but after a moment of hesitation, she nodded and turned from her father to enter the room with a look Alex recognized. The woman had a purpose for being here other than simply staying with Sciath, and Alex’s gut told him that by the time he really understood it, it could well be too late.

Chapter Seven

When the bedchamber door creaked open, Adeline sat up in bed, eager for news of Sciath. “How is she?” she demanded of Elspeth before her sister had even shut the door behind her.

“She’s sleeping and did nae have any problems while I was in there.”

Adeline frowned. “Why does yer voice have an odd, tight sound?”

“I dunnae ken what ye mean,” Elspeth said, crossing the room and sitting on her bed, which was beside Adeline’s.

“Yer tone is strained as if something is bothering ye. What is it?”

“I was right about the bastard,” Elspeth said, sounding sorry now.

“What do ye mean?” Adeline asked slowly, though of course she knew, and her heart stung with the knowledge that Alex had kissed her sister. She needed to hear it, though.

“I flirted with him in the woods this morning, and he kissed me, and then he kissed me again tonight in the healing room. So, ye can quit dreaming of the bastard as a perfect man. He’s nae.”

“I did nae have any such dream,” Adeline choked out, though in truth, after her intimate conversation with Alex earlier, she’d felt a connection to him that had seemed so real. Clearly, it was all in her imagination.

“I am sorry, Addie,” Elspeth said, and she sounded as if she truly meant it. “I dunnae want to hurt ye. I boasted as I did that I could get his attention because I was jealous.”

“I ken,” Adeline said, her throat tightening with the need to cry.

“I did nae really think I could. I...I am sorry. Ye must believe me. Please dunnae hate me.”

Adeline wanted to let her sister lie in her worry for a bit, but she could hear the real misery in her voice. Elspeth had not truly meant to hurt her. It was not Elspeth’s fault, per se, that Alex had kissed her, but it took two people to kiss, and Elspeth knew how much Adeline had liked Alex. So, instead of telling her sister she forgave her, she said, “I wonder how ye’d feel if I flirted with Donnan and got him to kiss me.”

“Ye would nae dare! Ye ken I plan to wed him.”

“As far as I can see, he dunnae even act as if ye’re alive,” Adeline retorted, regretting the unkind words the minute they left her mouth. But she was angry at Elspeth and Alex. How dare he kiss Adeline senseless, then turn around and kiss her sister, too! The man clearly believed no lass could resist him—and unfortunately, she had proven him right—and Elspeth clearly thought she was the only one who could turn a man’s head.

Adeline was going to show them, and she would do it without one bit of guilt.



“Donnan!”

Moira’s shriek cut through the clank of Alex’s and Donnan’s blades as they sparred. The interruption snatched Alex’s attention, and he missed blocking Donnan’s strike.

“Watch out!” Fingal yelled. Alex was already jumping back but not quite fast enough. Donnan’s sword slid across Alex’s chest, cutting it. He glanced down in shock at the stinging wound.

“We said dull blades only,” Alex muttered, ripping off a piece of his plaid to press it to the wound as it bled. Breath hissed between his now clenched teeth at the contact of the cloth to the cut. He rolled his shoulders to test the wound which throbbed in response. Anger flared at Donnan.

“’Tis my fault,” Moira said, sounding less than apologetic about it as she strode toward them with a sword in hand. “’Tis one of the reasons I came in search of Donnan,” she added, stopping beside Alex and Donnan and glancing at Alex’s hand where he was still holding the plaid against his chest. “I took Donnan’s blade to clean it for him, and I realized that I took the wrong one,” she said, offering Alex a patently fake apologetic look.

The woman had never cleaned anything in her life, but saying so would do no good. Instead, he lifted the cloth, wiped the blood away, and prodded the wound. It wasn’t deep, though it was not an insignificant cut, and with the tournament starting tomorrow, it could well cause him pain that affected how he performed. That, he was certain, was exactly what Moira had intended.

“How could ye nae ken ye were using yer sharp blade?” Fingal asked Donnan.

Donnan’s face reddened. “I forgot to check. I’m sorry,” he said, glancing at Alex. “I had other things on my mind.”

“What is more important than ensuring ye’re nae using a blade that would wound or kill our brother?” Fingal demanded, though Alex was thinking it.

“He has a lass on his mind,” Moira said, smiling smugly at Alex as she exchanged swords with Donnan.

“When does he nae have a lass on his mind?” Fingal said.

Moira scowled at Fingal. “This lass is different. This lass is someone a man would wed.”

Adeline. They were speaking of Adeline. His gut told him it was so. She’d been frostily polite for the last two nights, ever since her sister had stayed in the healing room with him for a bit and tried to persuade him to kiss her. Not with words but with actions. He’d not, of course, but Adeline had acted vexed with him, and it made him wonder what Elspeth had said. Yet, given that he needed to keep a distance from Adeline, it seemed best just to let her be vexed with him, so

he'd not tried to explain. And beyond that, she'd sat at the dais beside Donnan for the last two nights, laughing and openly flirting with his brother. Even still, his gut hollowed at the thought of Adeline and Donnan wedding.

"Ye should tend to yer cut," Donnan said.

Alex blinked and realized Moira was gone and Donnan and Fingal were staring at him. He'd been so utterly absorbed with thoughts of Adeline that he had not been aware of what was occurring around him.

"And ye should be able to drag yer thoughts off Adeline long enough that ye come to training with the correct sword instead of coming with one meant to kill me," Alex snapped. His words were sharp, but he didn't care to curb them. Anger pulsed through him at the thought of Donnan pursuing Adeline, which was foolish when he could not pursue her himself. But that didn't mean he relished the idea of Donnan doing so.

"Why do ye sound so angry, Brother?" Donnan asked, an irritatingly smug look on his face. "Because a lass wants me and nae ye?"

"Donnan!" Fingal protested, but Alex waved him to silence.

"'Tis all right," Alex said, carefully turning over Donnan's words and thinking upon his brother's challenging tone, the sudden arch of his eyebrows, the flare of his nose, and how he'd acted since the hunting party had come upon them after Alex had killed the wolves. Donnan had been short with him for the two days since the hunt. He'd snatched things, gave Alex one-word answers, and "accidentally" tripped him.

"Ye're pursuing her because ye realized I liked her. Why?" Alex demanded, anger singing through his veins. "Because I saved Laird Brodie and ye were jealous that Da praised me?"

"Nay," Donnan said, but his shoulders slumped. Alex knew something was amiss. "Mama gave me a terrible tongue

lashing after the hunt, telling me I had looked weak and useless in comparison to ye.”

Alex had not thought he could despise Moira more, but in that moment, he did. He hated the way she wielded her power over their father and Donnan. If the stronghold were not attached to her family instead of his father’s, things would have been different for him, for all of them. “Donnan,” he said, reaching for his brother to offer a comforting hand on his shoulder, but Donnan shrugged him off.

“She’s right,” Donnan said, misery drenching his words. “I do often look weak in comparison to ye, and I kinnae if I am to have the respect of the men who will be my warriors. Da sways how the men see me by always comparing me to ye and acting as if I fall short of ye!”

“Donnan—” Alex started, only realizing just how much their father’s favoritism of Alex as a warrior hurt Donnan. Given Donnan had everything else, Alex had not considered how much it must weigh on his brother.

“Nay!” Donnan said. “I dunnae want yer pity.”

“I dunnae pity ye,” Alex replied. “Ye’re a fine warrior.” But their father was correct in his assessment that Donnan could be better if he trained more. He could be one of the best. He was less driven, Alex supposed, because Donnan didn’t have to work for things as hard as Alex did. “I dunnae even have a place to quarrel with ye about Adeline. Her da has made it clear to me that if I attempt to court her, he’ll ensure I dunnae have a place on the Night Guard.”

“Why would her da have said anything to ye about courtship?” Donnan demanded, his face flushing.

Alex slid his teeth against each other to contain his own harsh words and not say more than he wished. “I suppose because I shared a dance with her—”

“A pity dance,” Donnan growled.

“I dunnae ken why the two of ye are fighting over Adeline Brodie,” Fingal said. “Elsbeth is the bonnier of the two

lasses.”

“She’s all yers if ye wish her,” Alex said. “And we are nae quarreling over Adeline Brodie.” Alex looked at Donnan to ensure his brother understood that if there was a quarrel brewing, it was of his own making now. “Are we?”

Donnan stared at him for a long, silent moment before speaking. “Nay,” he said, shaking his head with a forced chuckle. “I’m sorry to hear Laird Brodie issued ye such a warning, but nae too sorry, Brother.” That much was obvious in the uncontrollable grin that spread upon his brother’s face. Alex had the uncharitable thought that he’d like to knock that grin from Donnan’s mouth. “I would imagine Adeline will nae defy her father.”

“I would imagine nae,” Alex agreed, which only served to make him even more irritable. Not that he wanted her to do any such thing. He did not. It would serve no purpose. He’d been initially very angry at Laird Brodie’s command, but upon thought, he understood why the man had issued it. If Alex had a daughter, he’d likely do the same thing, and in truth, the thought of a woman capturing his heart and then his having to leave her for months on end to fend for herself while he went off to try to win a battle and gain the king’s favor put him ill at ease.

“If Adeline discovers she wishes to be courted by ye, then the best to ye both.” But Alex would prefer not to be around to watch it.

“I appreciate ye being more charitable than I am,” Donnan said, winking.

“I’m nae charitable,” Alex said bluntly. His brother’s increasing good mood was making Alex’s rapidly darker. “But as ye said, even if I wanted to pursue Adeline, she’d likely nae wish it now.”

“But ye think she wished it before?” Donnan demanded.

Alex thought of the kiss, of her saying she had not wanted her father to find them in case either of them decided they

wanted to persuade him to let Alex court her. He hadn't known what she'd meant by that at the time, but after Brodie's warning, she must have meant she knew how her father felt about bastards because he blamed his absence for his wife's death.

"Alex!" Donnan demanded.

Alex jerked his gaze to his brother, only just realizing he'd glanced down. Donnan had an impatient look about him. "Would it matter what she might have wanted before today if it kinnae be?"

Donnan's eyes got a hard look in them. "I suppose nae," he said, his tone begrudging, and then he forced a smile once more. "Besides, she seems to have forgotten ye already," Donnan added, then clapped a hand on Alex's shoulder, brushed past him with a jovial laugh, and sauntered away.

"He's jealous of ye, and it makes him act an arse," Fingal said, studying Alex with a thoughtful look upon his face. "If her da had nae forbidden ye to court her, would ye have done so kenning Donnan wanted to?"

"I'd have let her decide who she wished to be courted by," Alex said. "But the decision has been made for me," he added, and before his brother tried to talk to him any more about the lass who had haunted him since the day he met her, he stomped away toward the great hall, where he fully intended to keep his gaze and mind off Adeline and his attention focused on what he truly wanted: a position on the Night Guard.



Adeline entered the great hall with Elspeth walking stiffly beside her, and weariness hit her. Showing Elspeth that Donnan's head could be turned had made Adeline feel worse, not better. For one thing, she was not attracted to Donnan in the least. Not only that but she suspected his interest in her had more to do with taking what he thought Alex wanted than any real desire for her. Flirting with him had certainly been about getting back at Elspeth and Alex, but it made Adeline feel small, petty, and tired.

With these thoughts in her head, she turned in the opposite direction when Donnan waved at her to join him on the dais, and she headed for an empty seat at one of the tables in front of the dais. She was surprised when Elspeth followed, sat beside her, and asked, “Is this yer way of calling a truce?”

Adeline picked up her wine goblet to give herself a moment to decide. “Aye,” she finally answered. “I kinnae be vexed with ye forever, I suppose. Ye’re my sister, after all.” And she knew Elspeth was trying to make up for her betrayal in her own way. She’d been sitting in the bedchamber with Sciath when Adeline could not for the last two days since Adeline had their father move Sciath there. Alex had done fine work patching her hound, and Sciath was healing well.

“And Alex?” Elspeth asked.

Adeline met her sister’s concerned gaze. “Him I can be vexed with forever,” she said.

Elspeth nibbled on her lip for a moment. “And Donnan?”

Adeline knew what her sister was asking. “Ye are welcome to him. Though, I warn ye, he’s insufferable.” And as a moroseness hit her, she tipped up her wine goblet and drank the entire contents down in one gulp. When the wine hit her throat, she began to cough and could not get it under control. The liquid continued its path down to her belly and settled there as she hacked.

“Addie, do stop,” Elspeth said. “Everyone is staring at ye.”

“Dunnae. Be. Ridiculous,” Adeline managed to get out between harsh coughs. “Everyone in this h-hall is surely nae staring, and I ki-kinnae make myself stop.” She had to pause to gasp in a breath between coughs and wipe at her eyes, which were now watering so much that tears streamed out of them.

“Oh my god! Dunnae ye dare die!” Elspeth demanded and began to smack Adeline on the back.

“Ellie—” Adeline protested, trying to shove her sister’s hand away, but another round of coughing took hold of her so

fiercely that she doubled over, her head near her trencher of food.

“Ye are nae allowed to die while I carry this guilt!” Elspeth wailed into Adeline’s ear. Then Elspeth let out a loud gasp and stopped banging on Adeline’s back.

Adeline frowned, her forehead now resting on the table, her stomach clenched from the coughing, and she was certain part of her hair was lying in the trencher she had not yet touched and that, unfortunately, was swimming with gravy. All those thoughts left her head, though, as she was seized by another round of near-choking coughs.

“Here,” came a low, husky voice so near her left ear that the owner’s warm breath wafted over her ear lobe and caused an odd little shiver. “Drink this,” came the deep voice again, curling around her like a warm blanket. She struggled to set her hands on the edge of the table to push herself up, and that’s when strong arms grasped her shoulders and pulled her upright. There in front of her was a second goblet of wine, and behind her and a bit to the left so that she could see his profile was Alex. He was so close to her that her shoulder was pressed to his annoyingly well-muscled thigh.

There was no time to linger on the irritation she wanted to wallow in because he kneeled, scooped up the goblet he’d set in front of her, and looked at her as he held it out to her. The emotions that his face displayed were fast, furious, and gone in a breath, a bland mask of indifference now in its place, but she swore concern and regret had been there. How dare he pretend, too.

“Dunnae trouble yerself,” she croaked, shoving the goblet away that was nearly at her lips.

She thought her words elicited a scowl, but the tears still leaking out of her eyes blurred her vision and made her unsure.

“It will be more trouble for me if ye die in the great hall and I have to aid in digging a grave for ye,” he said, his tone

sarcastic. “Drink,” he insisted once more, moved the hand that she was holding in front of her face, and pressed the goblet to her lips. “This is a milder version of the strong wine ye drank. I promise it will stop the cough. I put a pinch of peeled seeds of serpent melon in it, along with the oil of plum stones.”

“Sounds delightful,” she said, matching his sarcastic tone. She fully intended to refuse the concoction, but the tickle in her throat was building once more, so with little choice other than choking from coughing, she gripped the goblet he was holding, inadvertently setting her trembling hand on top of his. Instead of releasing the goblet, he tilted it just enough that the wine wet her lips.

Her cough immediately stopped, and her gaze flew to his. He grinned, and her treacherous heart flipped in her chest. She hated that she still had a reaction to him, given she now knew him to be a skirt tumbler. She shoved the goblet away and said, “Ye may go. If I need someone to save me again, I’ll wave Donnan over.” She bit her lip on the foolish words, and the fact that they inspired not even a slight show of jealousy from Alex heated her with mortification. She’d been miserable for spending two days of her life flirting with his clot-heid brother, and it had all been for naught.

But then a shadow of annoyance crossed his face, and an alarming thrill shot through her, along with the uncontrollable desire to see if she could get another reaction. “If ye will take a care nae to drink the strong wine so fast, ye’ll nae need to wave my brother over.”

A very dangerous triumph expanded in her chest, and it stole her good sense. With one hand, she took hold of the goblet he had set down, and with her other, she picked up the wine jug, filled her goblet, then drank all the contents down again, this time with one loud gulp. She allowed the corners of her mouth to curl ever so slowly into a smile as she held his now-glittering gaze. “It’s much more enjoyable nae to be careful.”

He looked as if he might say something else, but he rose and turned as if to go. Adeline's gaze followed his movements, and that was when she realized three things at once: Most people had finished their supper, they had gone over to the cleared area to dance, and Donnan was almost to their table and staring at her...hard. She was quite certain her attempt to make Alex jealous had created more of a mess for her than him. And to worsen matters, the wine hit her almost instantly.

Dizziness gripped her, and heat swallowed her. She squeezed her eyes shut to stop the room from tilting, and when she opened them, Donnan stood there with a vaguely irritated expression, which she saw him school. He smiled at her, but it did not reach his eyes. "Would ye care to dance if yer coughing fit is over?"

She opened her mouth to say no when Alex spoke. "I dunnae think Adeline should dance currently."

How dare he! How dare he try to tell her what to do, the... the...the...sister kisser! She stood so quickly that she nearly tipped backward when her calves pressed into the bench. Alex gripped her by the elbow to steady her, but she shrugged him off and whipped her gaze to his. "I'm perfectly capable of deciding when and whom I'll dance with, thank ye verra much," she fairly spat before stepping away from the bench and taking Donnan's outstretched hand, determined to make Alex believe she liked him as much as he liked her: not at all.

Chapter Eight

“Ye’re staring,” Fingal said beside Alex as they sat on the dais after Adeline had taken to the dance floor with Donnan.

“Am I?” Alex asked, though he knew he was. It seemed he could not make himself look away from Adeline, no matter that he knew he should.

Fingal picked up his goblet, drank a sip, and put it down. “Aye. Ye have barely moved a muscle since ye sat down after playing the hero.”

“I did nae play the hero,” Alex countered, his gut tightening as Adeline laughed at something Donnan said. Jealousy, unlike anything Alex had ever known slipped a vise grip around his chest.

“Nay?” Fingal asked, disbelief dripping from the word.

Alex tore his gaze away from Adeline, where it had inadvertently returned off and on for the last five dances she had shared with Donnan. Fingal’s skeptical gaze annoyed Alex, and he was never annoyed with Fingal. His younger brother had a generous spirit and kind heart. Alex drew in a purposely slow breath to cool his jealousy, but it was still hot enough to scald his veins. “I simply aided her in her coughing fit because I kened how.”

“I’ve seen plenty of lasses coughing in here, and ye have nae ever rushed to aid them.”

“Then I must nae have felt overly concerned for the state they were in,” Alex replied, irritation rising again. He knew what his brother was trying to do, but Alex admitting that Adeline intrigued him more than anyone he’d ever met would do no good.

“Why do ye nae cut in and ask her to dance?” Fingal inquired. “I can see by the longing on yer face that ye want to.”

“I kinnae ask her to dance, Brother, because her father forbade me from courting her. I’ll lose any chance to gain a spot on the Night Guard if I do.”

“If I were interested in a lass as ye clearly are in Adeline, I’d toss everything aside I’d worked for all my life to pursue her.”

“Spoken like a man who is nae a bastard and is secure in the knowledge that he will have land of his own, a stronghold of his own, and men of his own,” Alex replied, his words shorter than they normally would be with Fingal. Adeline’s presence, his desire for her, was making him out of sorts.

“Alex, I’m sorry,” Fingal began, and Alex motioned for his brother to quit talking.

“’Tis I who should be apologizing. It is nae yer fault that ye were nae born a bastard and I was.” He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck that had knotted. “Please forgive my short words,” he added before focusing on the dance floor once more.

He did not see Adeline and searched the room but for a moment before locating her standing at her table, wine goblet tipped to her lips once more. He frowned and resisted the urge to go to her and snatch the wine goblet from her. He suspected she was being stubbornly defiant out of anger for him telling her she should take a care with the wine, though he was surprised his cautioning her had vexed her so. She’d drank three goblets of wine since she’d started dancing and that was far too many for a slight lass like her.

But she was not his responsibility. Her father should be watching out for her. Alex slid his gaze down the dais to where her father sat next to his at the far end of the table. They spoke animatedly about something, and Adeline’s father did not spare a glance for either of his daughters.

“Mayhap once ye gain a place on the Guard ye’ll be appointed a scrimmage and impress the king right away and be bequeathed all that ye wish, and ye’ll nae have to be away for

years as Adeline's father fears," Fingal said, referring to what Alex had confided in him about what Laird Brodie had shared. "And then ye can pursue Adeline, and—"

"I shared a moment with Adeline, 'tis all." Well, it was several moments, but it hardly mattered now. "I dunnae need to let a lass go to my head and ruin my future, especially when the lass in question seems to nae have placed any import on our time together and seems rather taken by Donnan."

"That's the spirit," Fingal agreed with blatant false joviality. Fingal clapped a hand on Alex's shoulder and winked. "She probably has feathers for a brain and ye just have nae seen it yet because ye have hardly been around her."

"Undoubtedly," Alex agreed half-heartedly.

"And she's probably selfish," Fingal added.

"Aye," Alex forced himself to say, though his gut told him that was not the case.

"And she's nae nearly as bonny as her sister, so she's probably been made bitter by jealousy."

Alex's only response to that was to gape at Fingal. Fingal scowled in return and asked, "Ye dunnae think Elspeth bonny?"

"She's bonny, I suppose," Alex relented, "but I dunnae like the way she seems to ken it and tries to wield it, and I dunnae think she's near as bonny as her sister."

"How do ye mean she tries to wield it?" Fingal questioned.

He told her quickly of Elspeth attempting to get him to kiss her on the hunt and in the healing room with Sciath. "I had the feeling she was trying to lure me into something. It was verra strange."

"Did ye kiss her?" Fingal demanded, ignoring everything Alex had said to warn him. Clearly, the lass had dazzled his younger brother.

“Nay, Fingal,” he assured him, dropping his voice low so no one would overhear their conversation. “I dunnae have any interest in Elspeth. If ye are truly intrigued by the lass, ye should pursue her. But I warn ye, I think she was mayhap giving attention to me to make her sister jealous, and that is nae a good quality.”

“Nay, ’tis nae,” Fingal agreed, but then he grinned. “I think the lass just needs a man to show her she is all he can think about, and then her yearning for attention will disappear, as will the conniving.”

Alex shrugged. “Mayhap,” he said because he’d wondered the same thing. “Ye should go ask her to dance and judge her character for yerself after ye have spent some time with her. I dunnae wish to sway ye. She’s just been sitting there alone since her sister left to dance.”

“Aye, I ken,” Fingal said, surprising Alex. “I’ve been stealing looks at her. Every time her sister dances with Donnan, Elspeth glares at them, but when Donnan is nae dancing with her sister, she dunnae pay him heed. She tracks her sister’s movements, nae Donnan’s. She dunnae care about Donnan. She’s more interested in the attention her sister is getting. So I’ve concluded the way to win her is to make her ken I dunnae see anything or anyone but her.”

Alex stared at Fingal in amazement. “Brother, I have long held ye have one of the finest strategic minds I have ever come across—”

“And I have just proved ye correct,” Fingal said, winking.

“Aye,” Alex agreed. “Ye have. So, when are ye going to start this plan?”

“Now,” Fingal replied. “Wish me luck.” Fingal rose.

“Best of luck, Brother,” Alex replied, and with a grin, Fingal made his way off the dais and strode across the great hall to where Elspeth sat. Fingal stood to the side so that Alex could see Elspeth, too, and when she shook her head, Alex felt sure she’d turned Fingal down to dance. The lass needed a

good shaking herself. Fingal didn't tuck his tail and leave, though. His brother moved around the dais, sat beside her, and turned his head to talk to her, though she moved her attention away from him. Still, Alex found himself grinning and hopeful. He suspected his brother would eventually wear Elspeth down and capture the lass. He just hoped Fingal didn't want to throw her into the loch after doing so.

And because he was so focused on Fingal, he did not realize that Donnan and Adeline had ceased dancing and returned to the dais until Donnan was helping Adeline into the now-empty seat next to Alex. When she sat, her arm brushed his, and his blood rushed through his veins with the force of a river.

"Oh," she said, turning to him and snatching her arm back so that he knew she felt much the same reaction he did. "I do apologize that my arm touched yers," she said, thankfully in a low tone. Her words were a tad slurred, and he realized immediately that the wine had gone to her head. Not only that but her eyes were slightly glazed, giving her a lovely rosy tint about her cheeks and lips that came from the combination of wine and dancing. "I'm certain," she said, still in a low tone, "that ye'd much rather be touching my sister's arm, as ye did her lips."

He frowned. Her sister must have told her that they'd kissed, which explained her behavior these last two days and her stalking off to dance with Donnan. She was vexed at him. She wanted to let him know without direct words. He should not be glad to discover this but he was, which he knew instinctually was dangerous for them both.

If he were wise, he'd allow her to go on thinking incorrectly. Instead, he leaned so close to her that her freesia scent swirled around him as he whispered, "I vow I did nae kiss yer sister." He could not let her think he'd choose Elspeth over her, no matter how unwise it was to speak on the matter at all.

She narrowed her eyes upon him and said, "Liar."

Before he could decide whether to refute her statement or simply let the entire matter go, Donnan leaned forward so that he was looking at Alex. His brother put his hand on Adeline's forearm and said, "Adeline, when ye're rested we should dance again."

She frowned down at Donnan's hand and moved it from her arm. Alex had never been so glad for a reaction in his life. He felt bad for it. He did. Donnan was his brother. But Alex could not help how he felt.

She gave Donnan an oddly disgusted look before saying, "I'm too parched to think about anything but quenching my thirst."

When she reached for her goblet, Alex slid it away, and leaning toward her, he said in her ear, "Ye need a hunk of bread, nae wine."

"Ye are nae my father to order me about," she replied, each word clipped. When she reached toward the goblet in his hand, he shoved a piece of bread in her mouth.

Her eyes popped wide, and he had to resist the urge to laugh. Instead, he said, "Chew. If ye keep gulping down wine to prove a point to me, all ye will end up doing is falling over or getting sick and embarrassing yerself and yer da. Is that what ye want?" he asked gently. Her eyes went so wide that he knew he'd guessed correctly as to why she had been overindulging in the wine.

As she glared at him, she chewed the bread slowly, swallowed it with an audible gulp, then said, "How dare ye ken my mind!"

Before he could think how to respond to that, his da leaned forward and said from the end of the dais, "Adeline, yer da tells me ye have been hunting with a bow since ye were a wee lass."

"Aye," she replied, turning away from Alex to look down the dais at his father. "Da says I'm a natural-born hunter."

“I’ve always said that about Alex,” his father replied. “Laird Brodie, are both yer daughters so exceptional with the bow? Mayhap they could give Donnan and Fingal lessons,” Laird Gordon joked, but the joke made Alex wince. It was cruel, and it was one of the reasons Alex believed Donnan felt so competitive with him. Their father stoked Donnan’s jealousy, possibly without knowing, or possibly on purpose with the hope that the other two would train harder.

“Only Adeline. Elspeth is useless,” came Laird Brodie’s reply, which unfortunately was at the exact moment that Elspeth and Fingal appeared at the dais after their dance.

Elspeth’s face turned red, and Adeline exclaimed, “Da! Elspeth has many fine qualities, and ye ken it. She has the voice of an angel.”

“I do,” Elspeth agreed, “and Adeline kinnae sing a note without making ye wince.”

“’Tis true,” Adeline agreed readily. Alex was struck with her loyalty to her sister.

“Aye,” Laird Brodie said. “Elspeth can sing, but what good is song in battle?”

“’Tis a balm to the men who’ve been injured in battle, Da,” Adeline said, and Alex could not tear his gaze from her. She was utterly selfless and even more lovely because of it.

“I can sing for ye all, if ye like?” Elspeth asked.

“Aye!” Adeline exclaimed, even as Alex saw her father start to protest, but he clamped his mouth shut and gave a curt nod to his eldest daughter.

“Go on with ye, then, and sing, then afterward, ye need to retire to yer bedchamber. Adeline too. ’Tis late, and I’m certain ye are both weary.”

Alex was certain the man just wanted Adeline away from him.

“With permission, I can see yer daughter Elspeth safely to her bedchamber door,” Fingal said.

“And I could see Adeline there as well,” Donnan added.

Laird Brodie smiled generously at both men before passing a disapproving look over Alex. He gave a nod to Alex’s brothers. “Excellent. That will leave me to speak longer with yer da about Night Guard training and the future of our clans.”

Alex inhaled a long breath at that. The future of their clans. As in, they were making matches.

“I, for one, can see myself to my own room,” Adeline announced, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Aye, ye’re quite capable, Daughter, unlike yer sister—”

“Da!” Elspeth exclaimed, and as irritating as the lass was, Alex found himself pitying her once more.

Laird Brodie waved a hand. “I only mean ye have a poor sense of direction, Daughter.”

She looked slightly mollified at that, though her cheeks were stained with embarrassment.

“Go on and sing for us, Elspeth,” her father said. She started to beam at him until he said, “And hurry about it. I want to get back to the business at hand.”

Alex watched for a moment as Elspeth’s shoulders slumped, and she made her way to the middle of the great hall, where other singers were lining up. As the guest of their clan, they moved her to the front of the line, and she took her place and began to sing. Right at the start of her song, her father leaned forward and said to Adeline, “Ye dunnae ken yer way around this castle. Ye will allow Donnan to guide ye to yer bedchamber door so I’ll nae be worried over ye.”

She was muttering under her breath. Alex could not understand what she was saying until the very last sentence when she said, “Ye should be more concerned about leaving him alone with me than my making my way to my bedchamber on my own.”

Alex’s body went rigid, and his attention immediately fell to Donnan. His brother sat straight as an arrow, fists clenched

by his sides and jaw tensed. Alex didn't know what had happened between Adeline and Donnan, but something had occurred, and while she may have been ordered to allow Donnan to escort her to her bedchamber, Alex had not been ordered not to make his way to his at the exact same time.

Chapter Nine

Her head was swimming, and she was finding it incredibly difficult to put one foot properly before the other. Clot-headed, that's what she was—far too stubborn and sinfully prideful. If she hadn't allowed herself to become jealous, her pride would not have been bruised when Elspeth had told her Alex kissed her, and she would not have indulged in that wine just because he had warned her not to. And she would never have agreed to dance with his brother, who had hands that kept wandering shockingly low to her arse.

“Adeline, please slow down,” Donnan said from behind her as she took the spiral stone stairs to the bedchamber two at a time. “Ye'll slip.”

Oh, she could only imagine that he wanted her to slow down so he could get her in his clutches again. Guilt did touch her because a bit of this was likely her fault. She had flirted with Donnan to make Alex jealous, but innocent flirting with a man did not give him the right to grab her arse as he had done on the dance floor.

“Adeline!” he said from behind her again, right before she felt his hand on her arm, jerking her around to face him. “Why are ye running?”

“I suppose I fear yer hands may lose their way again,” she tossed over her shoulder.

“Ye ken our fathers would be pleased if there were to be a match between us, and ye seemed rather taken by me before our dance.”

Guilt slowed her steps to a halt, and she turned to face him. “Donnan, I...I should nae have flirted with ye. I—” Heaven above, how to tell him the truth? Could she lie and say simply she did not think they'd suit? She stole a glance at him, and the intensity in his eyes told her he would accept nothing less

than the truth. "I...I am verra ashamed to admit this, but I wanted to make Alex jealous."

The look of rage he gave her sent a shiver down her spine, but it was gone in a breath, making her question if she had misread his emotions.

He studied her for a long, silent moment, then stepped close to her, surprising her when he gripped her by the waist and pulled her to him. "If ye will but give me the chance, I vow to ye that ye will forget all about Alex."

"Donnan," she said, shoving at his chest with her hand, "release me."

"Why will ye nae give me a chance?" he asked, sliding his other hand into her hair to grip her around the back of the neck. Her pulse spiked with fear. She'd never been in a position to be ravished by a man, and frankly, the thought that it could ever happen had never occurred to her. She realized in this moment how foolishly naive that had been.

She'd heard servant women speaking of men who had taken favors from them without being granted permission, and she'd always thought that could never happen to her, but in this moment, fear lodged in her throat. "I dunnae feel that way for ye, so release me," she demanded again, shoving at his chest once more to no avail.

"How do ye ken ye will nae?" he asked, his tone pleading. "Ye said yerself we just met and dunnae ken each other."

"I ken enough of ye to ken that we can be friends but nae anything more," she said, trying to twist out of his grip. But the harder she twisted, the tighter his grip became.

"One kiss," he said. "One kiss and I vow if ye feel nothing, I'll release ye."

"Ye will release Adeline now without a kiss because she asked ye to do so," came Alex's hard, lethal voice from the darkness below.

Adeline gasped in relief.

“This is nae any of yer concern, Brother,” Donnan spat. “Move along. Both our fathers wish us to be matched.”

“The lady dunnae wish it, so release her,” Alex said, stepping into the light of the torch that was just above him. Shadows danced across his features, but she could see enough of his face to drink in the rage radiating off him. His jaw was clenched, his eyes narrowed, and he had his hands in fists by his sides.

“Adeline, please—”

“I kinnae make myself feel what is nae there,” Adeline said in a firm voice, wanting to make him understand but not embarrass him or hurt him needlessly. “I dunnae feel for ye in a way that would lead to love.”

“But ye could—”

“Nay.” She shook her head, shoved at him hard yet again, and he finally released her. She stepped instinctively toward Alex, who took her hand in his and brought her to his side. He stepped slightly in front of her as if to protect her.

Donnan’s eyes narrowed on her, and then he looked from her to Alex and back again. A deep frown settled between his brows. “Ye dunnae mean to tell me ye think ye feel some sort of attraction toward Alex?”

She did not mean to tell him anything, but the wine was making her foolish and heat flooded her face. She cringed with the realization that her feelings were so easily read by him. His mouth set in a grim line for a long moment before he focused solely on Alex and spoke. “Ye reach too far above yerself by reaching for her. I told ye I wanted to pursue her. Ye said I was free to do so, given what her father threatened.”

Her heart lurched at Donnan’s words and the implications of them, and when Alex went stiff beside her, she knew her father had threatened to take away his chance at the Night Guard. The betrayal from her father cut so deep she had to clench her teeth and suck in a sharp breath on a moan.

She must have made some noise, though, some indication of her feelings because Alex turned his head and their eyes locked. Every feeling for him she had tried to push down rose like a tide that threatened to drown her. She swallowed, her thoughts struggling to come together quickly and logically. Damn her foolhardiness for drinking that wine. Her pulse thumped erratically with the awareness that what she said in this moment could affect Alex greatly. He did not know her well enough to have chosen her over the Night Guard, but she wished that chance for them. He, apparently, did not.

“He is nae reaching for me,” she said, glad that she believed the words she was speaking. “If my father gave him an order nae to court me, it was unnecessary because yer brother dunnae want me.”

With that, she swiveled away and rushed up the steps, determined to be out of sight before the tears hit. The moment she was on the landing and had turned the corner, tears pricked her eyes. She paused, wrapping her arms around her waist as she leaned against the wall and squeezed her eyes shut. She should not feel hurt that he had not picked her over the Night Guard. Of course, he hadn't. He hardly knew her. Still, knowing she should not feel hurt didn't lessen the pain. The tears leaked from her eye and slid down her cheeks, twin trails of frustration and shame.

“I want ye.” Alex's words were so near they slid warmth over her.

She slowly opened her eyes and found him directly in front of her, looking down at her with a heartrending tenderness. She moved her hand to swipe at the tears upon her face, but before she could, he raised his own hand and brushed his thumb first over her right cheek and then her left. His touch made her shiver. He glanced down the hall—she imagined ensuring there was no one coming—and then he set the palm of his right hand against the wall beside her head. He took her chin in his left hand with the gentlest touch and tipped her face up so that their eyes met.

“I do want ye, but it is nae as simple as that,” he said, the words tortured from his lips.

No, it wasn't. He also wanted the Night Guard. She wet her lips, watching him watch her every move so intently, and her heart lurched madly. “Ye did nae kiss my sister?”

He released her chin and traced his thumb over her upper lip and then her lower one before letting his hand drop to his side. His touch made her tingle all over. “I did nae kiss yer sister,” he confirmed. “She asked me to ride down the trails with her because she said she saw wolves to hunt, but each time there were no animals, only her desire for attention. And in the healing room, she did flirt with me and try to get me to kiss her, but I did nae. I swear it.”

A knot lodged in Adeline's chest. Elspeth had lied to her, and that cut deeply, almost as deeply as her father's likely betrayal. She cleared her throat to ask the dreaded question. “Did my da forbid ye to court me?”

Alex nodded, and her heart plummeted lower than she'd realized was possible.

“And that was all it took, I suppose? The great and mighty Laird Brodie telling ye nae to court his daughter.” She wasn't sure if she was asking him or simply making a statement.

He let out a long sigh. “That was nae all it took, Adeline. I want to court ye, but just because we both want it, dunnae mean it's possible.” He arched an eyebrow, an expectant look coming to his face, and even though he'd not voiced the question, she knew what he was asking.

She let out an embarrassed laugh. “I do want ye to court me. Or I did. Or that is to say, I still do.” She groaned at the mess she was making trying to explain herself. “What I'm trying to say is that I wish I did nae care if ye wanted to court me or nae.”

An amused smile tipped up the corners of his mouth and lit his eyes.

She smacked him gently on the chest. “Ye make my thoughts fuzzy and my tongue loose.”

“Are ye certain that’s nae the wine?” he asked, his voice teasing.

“I’m certain,” she replied, suddenly breathless with his nearness. “I felt all those effects before the wine, though it certainly did amplify them.”

He brought his hand up toward her face once more, but this time he traced his finger slowly over her collarbones, then settled it into the hollow space between them where her heartbeat pumped furiously against her skin. His eyes grew dark and serious. “Just because we both want it,” he said again, “dunnae mean it’s possible.”

He wanted to discover her. She longed to discover him. She didn’t see what more there needed to be than them both desiring it. “We will make it work,” she said, hearing the stubbornness in her tone.

“Adeline.” Her name was a tortured whisper from his lips. He surprised her by leaning his head down and resting it on her right shoulder, his face turned so that his lips grazed her neck. It was the most intimate moment of her life. Her insides turned to liquid as a fierce need sprang within her for this man. He had made a deeper impression on her in a few days than the scores of others she’d known for a lifetime. Mayhap it was all folly. But no, she could not believe that. What she believed was that they were at the precipice of something magical, something that would weave between them and bind them together in soul, mind, and body forever. What she believed was that if they had the time, if they could find a way, they would develop a love that would see them through the saddest and happiest moments. It would be their warmth when bitter cold surrounded them, their light if darkness should invade, and their shield against the harshness of life.

“Ye are too far above me to reach currently,” he said.

Eight horrid words that made her heart stutter. She inhaled slowly, searching for peace that seemed lost to her since she'd met him. Chaos. That's what he brought to her world—beautiful, heartbreaking, soul-searing chaos. She wanted to drink it in. Her breath hissed in her ears, and then it faded, leaving her acutely aware of the warmth of his lips touching her neck, the weight of his head resting on her shoulder, the length of his solid body pressed to hers. He made her feel safe in a way she had not even known was possible, and for that, she would wage war against her own father if necessary.

“Why do ye say that?” she demanded.

“Yer da told me that if I were to pursue ye, there would nae be a place for me on the Night Guard, that he would destroy me.”

She despised her father in that moment, allowing his fears to rule his decisions about her life. It was hers to live, and she did not want to choose a husband because he had a warm stronghold, plenty of food on the table, and a large army to keep her as safe as possible just to give her the best chance of staying alive. She was more afraid of living in safe comfort than surviving hardship and never having a love that she would gladly give her life for.

She wanted to be angry at Alex that he would so easily toss aside the possibility of what they could be for the possibility of what he could be if he obtained a position on the Night Guard, but she had not known him long enough to expect him to choose her, to choose them over the dream he'd probably long held and nurtured. But everything in her told her that given the time to learn each other, they would discover they would choose each other over anything, time and time again.

She inhaled a deep breath and set her thoughts in order before she spoke. “Ye will win the spot to come train at my father's castle.”

He smiled, and two dimples she'd not noticed before appeared. “That is my plan.”

“Well, ye must win it,” she said, nibbling on her lip as she contemplated everything going through her head. “If ye dunnae, I kinnae see a way we can come to ken each other.”

“Ye would defy yer father for the chance to ken who I am?” There was a faint tremor in his voice as though some emotion had touched him greatly.

It occurred to her then that it was likely no one had ever made him feel worth defying everything and anyone for. She wanted that feeling for him, to give him that. “Aye,” she said, the one word coming out throaty.

A look of wonder came to his face, and then his expression seemed to fall. “Adeline—”

She pressed a finger to his lips. “Dunnae say anything yet. We will come to ken each other while ye are there. It dunnae have to be as a courtship but more of a natural progression of friendship that blooms simply because ye are at my father’s home for a time. And if we should find there is more, and we both decide we wish to pursue it, then we will do so—”

“Adeline.”

“Nay,” she countered to the protest she was sure she’d interrupted.

He pressed a gentle finger to her lips. “Adeline,” he began again, her name heavy with heart-twisting regret, “I have already dishonored myself by breaking my word to yer father nae to pursue ye, and I risk everything I have dreamed of if I do so again.”

Technically, kissing her did not necessarily mean he was pursuing a future with her. It could simply be that passion swept him away, though inwardly she wanted to grin that it seemed it had all meant more to him. She understood his dream about wanting a home of his own to feel he belonged, but what good was such a stronghold if the person you loved did not live there with you? Love was the heart of a family, not a big castle. But she kept her opinions to herself. Now was not the time to share them. That time would come if they

discovered the connection between them was real and she concluded he was a man she could love. If those things came to pass, she'd simply have to find a way to change her father's mind about allowing Alex to court her.

So, instead, she let out a sigh she hoped was not too dramatic. She'd have to find a way to put herself in Alex's path while he was at her home, and she'd have to plot a way to get him to kiss her again because it seemed very important to test if the second kiss was as good as the first.

While all these thoughts were going through her head, he said, "Even if I set my word aside nae to pursue ye and my guilt of already breaking that vow, yer father made a point I kinnae forget."

"Which was what?" she demanded.

"I'm nae worthy of ye as I currently am, and it could be years before I am." He took a step away from her. "I'd nae want ye to wait for me, and I could nae verra well take ye to wife and feel good about going off and leaving ye."

She ground her teeth at his words and mentally added one more thing to her list: she'd have to convince the clot-headed man he was worthy of her and that she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself when he went off to secure them a better future. Women, she decided with an inner huff, had to do all the work. Her heart began to pound with the knowledge of what she was about to do. She did not consider herself a temptress in the least, but she had to try to tempt this man, to push him to reevaluate things and see them in the light of beautiful possibility that she did.

She stepped closer to him and saw him stiffen in response, but he did not retreat. One point for the lass and zero for the warrior. She tilted her head up to meet his gaze, and she could see that he tensed his jaw and the vein at the right side of his temple beat rapidly. His uncontrolled reactions did not dissuade her but encouraged her to continue. On a held breath, she brought her hands between them and slid them up his neck.

“Adeline,” he moaned, raising his own hands as if to take hold of her forearms and stop her from touching him.

She quickly responded, her mind searching for the exact right words to say. “This is goodbye. That’s all.” Her words were husky and breathless. Did he notice?

His eyes darkened from blue gray to stormy gray with only flecks of blue. It gave her a secret thrill. “Adeline, I kinnae—”

She moved her right hand to press a finger to his lips. By the gods, she’d never done something so bold in her life. “Ye are nae doing anything. I am.” And it was true. Her body heated with the anticipation of it. “Ye are nae pursing me. I am giving ye a kiss goodbye. ’Tis all.”

He gently brushed her finger aside, and the heavy sigh he released told her he was about to argue, so she took the only move she had left. Raising on her tiptoes, she crushed her mouth to his. He stood unmoving, still as a statue, but when she ran her palm across his chest, his heart thundered beneath her fingertips. Emboldened, she slid her tongue over the crease of his lips, once, twice, and finally, on the third, he growled and delved his fingers into her hair to cradle the back of her head. Gooseflesh peppered her skin along the path his fingers had taken, and her belly tightened as an intense ache unfurled within it.

He caught her upper lip with his mouth, first sucking it between his two while sliding his tongue across the sensitive flesh. If she had any rational thoughts left in her head, they fled. He released her lip only to delve his tongue into her mouth and swirl it around hers before pulling back to then catch her lower lip.

Each deep kiss tightened her belly more and made pleasure radiate from her body, but then, with a groan, he pulled away. She opened her eyes to find his burning gaze upon her. “Ye will strip me of my honor.”

The words were anguished and twisted her heart, but she refused to be dissuaded. Love, she decided, was like war.

There were battles to be won before the prize of happily-ever-after could possibly be claimed, and she wanted that chance, even if it made Alex her temporary opponent.

“Dunnae vex yerself,” she replied, patting him on the chest. “I kissed ye. And by they by,” she said, deciding now was actually the time to make one of the points she’d held back previously, “I dunnae think a kiss equates to yer pursuing a future with me, so I dunnae agree that ye have broken yer word to my da.”

His eyes widened with obvious surprise. “Lass,” he growled, “ye are a danger to me, and I’ll be avoiding ye because I kinnae seem to control myself when ye’re near.” He turned on his heel and strode off before she could respond, but it was just as well because all she could seem to do was grin. That, she decided after his footsteps completely faded, was two points for the lass and zero for the warrior. If things kept going like this, she’d easily win this battle.

Laughing to herself, she leaned her back and head against the wall, loath to go into the bedchamber and deal with Elspeth. Adeline closed her eyes, recalling the details of her kiss with Alex—his warm lips and strong hands, the way he tasted, the heat that radiated from his body. He wanted her. He’d said so.

Before she could contemplate it further, a woman’s voice broke her peace. “I will continue to do what I can, Donnan,” came Lady Gordon’s voice, “but ye must do yer part.”

“Ye dunnae get to tell me what to do anymore, Mama,” Donnan said. “I am making the decisions now.”

Adeline frowned, straining forward to try to hear what else Donnan said, but the creak of a door drowned out his words, and then it shut with an audible click, making it impossible to know what might have been said. Adeline’s heart thudded at the few words she’d heard from Lady Gordon and Donnan. She didn’t know exactly what they had been talking about, but her gut told her it was no good.

Chapter Ten

A flash of red came from Alex's right as he brought his sword up to parry the blow from Donnan. Their weapons clashed, and the force of his brother's strength rang down Alex's arm, the wound on his chest aching even more than he'd worried it would. Despite treating it with a healing salve, it was worse this morning, and he was slower and weaker for it. Donnan had come to the scrimmage angry, and it had benefitted his fighting all day. Alex's brother had won every match he'd been in, but so had Alex, so it hadn't concerned him...until now.

The red flashed again from his left, and knowing Adeline was in red, he looked. A quick glance confirmed she was all right. She was on her feet cheering, their gazes clashed, and he looked back to Donnan just in time to see his brother's sword meeting Alex's chest. The blade, though the dull one for the tournament, cut across the surface of his skin just above the wound that was festering. The burn made him clench his teeth. Blood appeared, and through the cacophony surrounding the scrimmage ring, a point was announced for Donnan in a loud, deep male voice. That made Donnan ahead.

Cursing, Alex jumped back out of the path of Donnan's sword, which was coming at him again. Donnan missed, but in the time it took Alex to bring his sword toward his brother, Donnan had recalculated how to attack him and swung low, hitting Alex on the right side of the leg.

He was in trouble. He needed to concentrate, needed not to think of her. But she was in every thought. Desire. Concern. Longing. Regret. Surprise still at her kiss. Guilt for allowing it. None of the emotions were good for winning the match.

Another point was called for Donnan. Alex cursed again, but this time loud enough that Donnan heard and shot him a smug look. "It looks like ye're the one who is going to be left

behind now.” Donnan danced backward, swinging his sword up as he did in a defensive stance.

Alex understood what Donnan was trying to do. He’d thrown a comment to purposely enrage Alex, and it had worked. He was enraged and regretful, too. He’d chased after Adeline last night and left Donnan standing on the stairwell without so much as a word. Donnan had stated his desire to court Adeline and Adeline had refuted him, and then Alex, knowing all this, knowing he could not court her himself, had run after her and abandoned his brother.

Alex didn’t charge as he was certain Donnan expected. He danced backward himself, brought up his sword in his own ready stance, and then raised his right hand and beckoned his brother to him. He knew what he was going to do. He knew it would send Donnan into a craze, and he knew his brother’s fury would allow Alex to best him. Alex had to let Adeline go, but he damned well did not have to let her go to his brother, who only wanted her because he wanted to take something from Alex.

“Come best me if ye can,” he said, his voice purposely taunting, and as his brother’s face turned red, Alex set Adeline from his mind. There was no way to ever have her if he didn’t secure this spot. Though, there likely was not a path anyway, despite her plan.

Donnan came at him, sword swinging, but Alex was now focused and his only thought was to win. Everything else faded—Adeline, all the people watching them, the setting sun above, the temperature. There was nothing for him to do but win and secure the opportunity to have a better future. He blocked Donnan’s hit from the left, then came back and hit his brother across the arm from the right. Donnan swung low, and Alex jumped over the sword and brought his own across his brother’s abdomen.

Alex felt no gratification in the fact that he was about to overtake his brother, but he had to push forward. He made a quick calculation and knew instinctually the best way to get

the two points he needed to end—and win—the battle. He brought his fist back, holding it for a heartbeat, until Donnan glanced up. He sent his fist into his brother's nose, hard enough to send Donnan reeling backward, and then Alex lunged forward, caught his brother by the right ankle and yanked his feet out from under him.

Donnan fell to his back with a thud, and his weapon flew from his hands. Alex kicked Donnan's sword away and brought the tip of his weapon to his brother's chest. In that moment, everything else came crashing back into his awareness. A breeze hit his face. Sweat dripped in his eyes, making him blink. His wound burned. His heart thudded, and the crowd's deafening roar hummed in his ears.

“Dunnae take the final point.”

Alex glanced down at Donnan. Misery etched lines on his brother's face. “If I dunnae get the spot, Mama will take the lairdship from Da and grant it to her brother and nae me.”

He stiffened at his brother's confession. He opened his mouth to ask Donnan when Moira had told him this, but it didn't matter. He could see by the worry in his eyes that it was true. One hit would give him the last point he needed, but it would destroy his da to lose the lairdship, and Donnan as well.

“Da dunnae ken,” Donnan said.

Alex gave a nod. No, he didn't imagine Donnan would have told their da about Moira's threat. It shamed Donnan and their da that Moira held such power, especially because she lorded it over everyone so often.

“Take the point!” the crowd chanted in thunderous unison.

Alex did not look away from his brother. If he gave this to Donnan, Alex would be giving up his own chance, but he couldn't in good conscience take the point. Bitterness filled his gut. Donnan was his brother, and his loyalty to that union would not allow him to do anything but aid Donnan, but the loss of chance at what he'd always wanted, at a real life of his own, filled his every pore with ice. Still, he inclined his head

in acceptance ever so slightly, and then he cut his gaze away for one moment, sweeping it across the crowd and finding Adeline. His chest squeezed when he laid his eyes upon her. She was watching him, a tense expression on her face. He drank her in for one breath, letting go of the sliver of hope of a possibility of a future for them, a hope he'd not realized he'd allowed to remain.

When he inhaled the next breath, he focused on Donnan once more. "I'll have yer word nae to pursue her anymore." Donnan started to open his mouth, but Alex cut him off. "Ye only wanted her because I did. Leave her to find someone else who wants her for her."

"Fine, I give ye my word."

Alex refused to allow emotion to hit him on his brother's acquiescence. "Bring yer forearm into my sword. I'll release it as if I was distracted, the weapon will fall, then roll to yer side, grab yer sword, and come up to make yer final hit."

Donnan didn't hesitate. He hit Alex's sword in the side on the flat part of the blade. It wasn't hard enough to make Alex drop it, but Alex pretended it was. The crowd gasped as his sword fell from his hands, Donnan rolled to his side and sprang to his feet with his sword in hand. He lunged at Alex and knicked Alex's stomach. The slight sting was nothing compared to the piercing loss of what could have been.



Adeline found Alex in the healing room. The door was ajar, and she could see him sitting in there by the window, under a slash of moonlight, his head in his hands. He looked broken, and it was like a hammer to her own heart. She didn't understand why or how she felt so connected to this man, but she did.

Her pulse thumped a fast, erratic beat, and she glanced around the shadowy corridor, fearing her father would suddenly appear. But no, she had waited in her bed for what felt like forever until she was certain almost everyone would be asleep.

It had nearly killed her. The image of him leaving the tourney arena—head bowed, strong shoulders curved forward in defeat—was seared in her mind forever. She'd sat tense and on the edge of her seat all through supper, suffering Donnan bragging about his false victory to her while she watched with hope every time someone entered the great hall, but Alex had not come.

She pushed the door open, and when it creaked loudly, he looked up. He attempted to sit straight, but his breath hissed between his teeth. She rushed across the room and crouched in front of him, taking in his bruises, cuts, knicks, and a wound that appeared to be festering. His sword lay beside him, and an untouched pitcher of wine sat there as well. Their gazes met, and he said, "I have lost my only chance to build the future I dreamed of."

The grief and despair in his tone tore at her heart. With his chance at the Night Guard gone, the divide between them remained. Though her father could not threaten Alex with taking the Guard from him now, Alex still would think himself unworthy and hold fast to his word not to pursue her. Despair rose in her at the utter unfairness of it all.

She set her hands on his knees, and he stiffened but did not move away from her or shove her hands off him. "Why?" she asked into the heavy silence, wanting simply to understand. "Why did ye allow yer brother to win?"

"I—" He stopped the confession she knew he'd been about to give and shook his head. "I dunnae ken what ye speak of."

"Ye're lying," she accused, and her anger at the entire situation overcame her. "Ye were supposed to be the winner! Ye were supposed to come to my da's home so we would have time to become better acquainted," she blurted. Time to fall in love. "I needed time to convince my da that my fate is nae mama's just because yer path was going to be like his."

His expression was like that of someone who'd had a dagger plunged into their heart. "Time was nae on our side, Adeline. Fate was nae, either. I'm a bastard. Ye're a laird's

daughter. Yer da was nae ever going to relent to my courting ye, and I could nae break the word I gave him again. Each time I do so chips away at my honor.” His misery-drenched words made her ache for the both of them.

She swallowed the knots in her throat, struggling through her thick thoughts to find the words to say. “I told ye,” she whispered, “kissing me is nae pursuing me.”

One corner of his mouth twisted upward. “But I want to court ye, ye see, and each kiss stokes that dangerous fire. Leave me my honor, Adeline. For all my strength, I kinnae seem to resist ye, and my honor, my word I am trying to keep, is all I have left. Especially now.”

She refused to believe it. There was hope left. If he had none, she would keep enough for them. She refused to accept this as the end of their story, but she knew if she said any of that, he’d resist even more than he already was, and it made her more drawn to him to see that his honor was not a thing he used for show but a driving force in the man he was. She had to somehow fix this for him. She didn’t know why he’d let his brother win, but his actions had been selfless, and his future, even if it did not ultimately include her, should include being on the Night Guard.

“Let me clean yer wounds before I go,” she said, grasping at any reason to stay a moment longer and to be able to touch him.

“I can do it,” he replied. “Ye should go before yer da finds ye here.”

She clenched her teeth in frustration. “I refuse to leave until ye let me aid ye.”

He let out a long, shuddering breath and finally nodded. “Only because I honestly feel like death. My chest aches with my wound from a few days ago in a way I’ve nae ever experienced.”

His admission caused real fear in her. She rose on shaky legs, gathered the washbasin and a rag, set them beside him,

and then asked, “What should I put on yer wound after I clean it?”

“Wash it first with the water, then on the shelf by the door is silver jug. In the jug is a healing liquid I made. ’Tis called Liquid Life. Pour it on the wound, and it should draw out the infection and start the healing process properly.”

She nodded, went to the shelf he’d spoken of and gathered the jug. When she returned, she kneeled in front of him, took up the rag, dipped it in the water, and set it to his wound. He stiffened, but he did not voice a complaint. She repeated the process until almost all the blood was washed away. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall as she blew on his skin to soothe it. It was oddly intimate, the cleansing and caring for him. She’d never done such things for a man, and she could envision doing this for Alex after battles if they were wed. She bit her lip on a smile and said, “All done with the cleaning.”

He opened his eyes now and sat forward, releasing another hiss between his teeth, and she saw that perspiration had dampened his brow. “Ye have the gentlest touch I’ve ever felt,” he said.

His words would have made her smile except they were sluggish, as if he was having trouble speaking. She frowned and pressed a hand to his forehead, gasping at how hot it was. “Alex!” she cried. “Ye’re burning up.”

“Aye,” he agreed, nodding his head. “For ye. I’m burning up for ye. The longing for ye will be the death of me,” he said, grinning at her even as his eyes drew shut and he leaned his head back once more.

“Why could ye nae give me such a confession when ye were in yer right mind and nae burning with fever,” she muttered. “Alex, should ye lie down?” When he did not respond, alarm raced through her, and she poked him. “Alex! Should I aid ye to yer back?”

That grin from a moment ago tugged his lips up once more, and he opened his eyes, sat up, leaned forward, and circled his hands around the back of her neck to pull her face only a hairsbreadth from his. She was not alarmed as she had been with Donnan. She knew instinctively Alex would never hurt her.

“If ye want me on my back so ye can have yer way with me, I’m happy to oblige,” he slurred.

“I want ye on yer back, ye foolish man, so ye do nae fall and injure yerself. Now get on the floor!”

She moved back, giving him space to kneel on the floor. He attempted to do so but careened forward into her, knocking her off her feet. They fell to the floor together, him on top of her, pressed against the full length of her body. He was heavy, but he quickly rose and braced himself with his right hand while he slid his left hand behind her neck.

“I should nae kiss ye,” he said, his words thick but giving her a thrill that he wanted to, nonetheless.

“Ye should,” she replied, knowing it was wicked to encourage him when he was in such a state, and when he didn’t press his lips to hers, she took the initiative once more and did what her body longed for him to do. When her lips met his, he hardened above her, and it made her ache deep in her belly.

Whatever hesitation he’d held in his lucid state seemed lost to the fever starting to consume him. He slid his tongue along the crease of her mouth, demanding she open it, and she more than willingly complied. Their tongues met and twined before he pulled back and sucked at her bottom lip, then her upper one. He captured her mouth again and delved inside once more, and the kiss was so erotic it drew a moan from her. She was on fire, burning from head to foot with need. An ache pulsed at her core and between her legs. Her breasts were heavy, and her buds were hard and sensitive to the feel of his chest against her. She ran her hands down his back and over

his arse, and when she did, she could feel his desire for her grow.

He drew back once more, and said, "I'm on fire."

"Aye," she agreed, "me too."

"Nay," he said, the word a croak mixed with a chuckle. "My chest is on fire. I want ye. Believe me, I do, but I've a burn here." He rolled off her to come beside her, touched his chest, and winced. "I dunnae ken why it hurts so."

Dear God! She'd taken advantage of him in a near-delirious state. She ought to be ashamed, but she was glad for the kiss they'd shared and to know he did indeed want her with the same intensity as she wanted him. "Ye were injured. Remember?"

He stared at her for a moment, eyes half-open, and said, "Aye."

She took up the Liquid Life and said, "I think this may hurt ye. Should I put something between yer teeth so that ye dunnae holler?"

"Kiss me," he said.

She didn't know that his suggestion was the wisest, but given that this could well be the last time they were together alone for a very long time—she refused to accept that this was simply it for them—she positioned herself to the side of him and dumped the contents of the jug on his chest, then pressed her mouth over his to capture his bellow. It reverberated through her, and she pressed her lips into his harder. His hands came into her hair, in an almost desperate way, and then he went slack.

Before she could sit up a voice behind her said, "Adeline. Get up this instant."

Fear rendered her near immobile, but she somehow managed to make herself sit up, and then she forced herself to turn toward the door where her father stood beside Fingal.

“Da,” she croaked. “Dunnae blame Alex. He’s incoherent with fever. I kissed him. I—”

“Stand up.” His words were clipped, and his expression was livid. She scrambled to her feet and walked to her father, who took hold of her by the arm. He turned to Fingal. “I would ask that ye nae mention this to another.”

“I will nae, Laird Brodie,” Fingal assured him with a sympathetic glance at Adeline.

“Let’s go,” her da said and tugged on her arm, but she could not will her feet to comply and simply leave Alex unconscious on the floor. Who would care for him?

“I’ll watch over him,” Fingal said, giving her a reassuring smile that she could not even return before her father pulled her out the door.

“Da—”

“Nae until we are in my private chambers,” he bit out.

It was the longest walk of her life. By the time the door to her father’s bedchamber closed, she had worked herself up to a near hysteria. As her father turned to her, she said, “Da, please, I ken ye’re vexed with me, but please listen.”

He gave a terse nod.

“Alex allowed his brother to win the tournament!” She waited with bated breath for shock to cross her father’s face, but when it didn’t, realization struck her and she exhaled her own breath in surprise. “Ye kenned?” she whispered.

“Aye,” her father replied, his tone matter-of-fact. “’Twas plain enough to see if ye were paying true attention to the match.”

“I think his brother must have asked him to let him win,” she said. “Da, he would do anything for his brother. He is that loyal.”

“His loyalty has nae been in question, Daughter.”

“I dunnae ken why he would do such a thing,” she said, wringing her hands as she paced back and forth. She could feel her father’s eyes upon her. She knew she was likely making matters worse for herself to show how much she already cared for Alex, but she was overwhelmed with emotions. Why would he give up his dream to be on the Night Guard when he believed it was the only way to secure a home where he would feel he belonged?

“Adeline, come here.”

The caring she knew of her father was back in his voice. She stopped and went to him, kneeling.

“This castle is the birthright of the women in Lady Gordon’s family, and the lairdship is granted by them to whom they wish,” her father began. “They may give it, and they may take it away. ’Tis a well-kenned fact. I imagine Lady Gordon may have threatened taking the lairdship from Alex’s father or some such thing if Alex did nae allow Donnan to win the match. From what I’ve observed, she’s poisoned by need for her son to be better than the bastard who reminds her constantly that her husband was unfaithful to her.”

“Aye!” she exclaimed. “So, ye will give Alex a spot to come train?”

“Nay,” her father said, shaking his head. “I’ve given the spot to Donnan. Ye were at the match. Ye heard me. He won the match, and that’s the tradition.”

“He won it unfairly, Da!” she protested.

“Aye,” her father replied, his steady gaze boring into her. “He did. But the matches are like war. War is often won by unfair means, but it dunnae matter how it is won. The spoils go to the victor.”

“But that is nae fair, either! Alex is the better fighter! He should have the spot.”

“He gave up the spot, Adeline. He made a choice. I imagine something was promised to him, some reward to entice him.”

“Nay,” she said, shaking her head and standing up. “He wanted that spot more than anything. He would nae be swayed by other enticements.”

“Ye barely ken him, Adeline,” her father said, standing and towering over her.

She was shaking with anger at her father for being so blithe about such an unfair thing. “I ken him well enough to ken he has honor,” she said. When her father’s eyes narrowed, she knew he realized that she was aware of what he’d demanded of Alex. “I thought I kenned ye well, Da. Ye forced him to give his word nae to court me, which he gave, by threatening to nae give him a spot to compete for the Night Guard. I suppose he can court me now,” she said, vexed beyond reason.

“Adeline, I’ll send ye to the nunnery before I allow that man to court ye, and it will be hard for him to court ye anyway, seeing that ye are coming home with me.”

“What are ye so afraid of, Da? I’m nae going to die.”

“’Tis what yer mother said when I told her I had to leave for yet another assignment. Bastards do nae have any easy path, Adeline. In the guard, Alex can make a future that would one day make him worthy, but it leaves ye alone. And without the guard, he does nae have any hope to make a secure future.”

This conversation with her father was not getting her what she wanted for Alex. In her father’s mind, Alex was damned either way. Given Alex’s dream was the guard, she had to try to make her father relent. “He’s the best warrior of the two of them. Ye ken it as well as I.”

“I do,” her father relented, “but there’s the rule of one warrior per clan.”

“Ye made that rule, Da, so ye can change it.”

His gray gaze darkened as he studied her. “I’ll change it,” he said, and though his words were what she wanted to hear, something in his tone made dread fill her. “If ye’ll enter into a marriage contract with Donnan.”

She took a quick breath of utter astonishment that her father was so fearful for her, he would resort to trying to force her hand into something she didn't want. He'd never done anything like this. "Donnan would be leaving me for assignment with the guard just as Alex would," she pointed out.

"Donnan, as the son of Moira and Laird Gordon will have the vast Gordon army at his fingertips to guard ye, and the Gordon stronghold for ye to live in while he's gone, unlike Alex," her father said. "Alex, as a bastard, does nae have a right to the warriors, and Moira would nae ever let him leave a wife here when he was away." The truth it made her want to scream. It was unfair.

Desperation hit her. "I dunnae ken Donnan well, but I what I ken of him, I dunnae like," she said. "Is that what ye wish for me? To keep me safe at the price of my happiness?" She held her breath, waiting for him to respond. She knew her father loved her, but his fear for her was ruling his decisions now.

"Nay, Adeline, ye ken I want ye to be happy, but I want ye alive. Donnan can immediately give ye the sort of security I wish for ye."

"And if his mother decided to take the lairdship from him?" she challenged.

"He's nae a bastard," her father said. "He'd still be entitled to a good measure of warriors and to live at the stronghold, but I firmly believe Moira made empty threats. She wants her son to succeed and simply pushes as she must to see it happen. She'd nae purposely hurt him, but she's keen and realizes he's nae certain she would nae. Adeline, Donna's father offered a marriage contract today."

She took a quick, sharp breath as her gut twisted. She could not wed Donnan Gordon, yet if she did not give her word, her father would not extend Alex another chance. She had to gain herself some time while also getting her father to give Alex the chance to compete for the Night Guard. "May I get to ken Donnan better before ye agree to the contract?"

“Ye may have two fortnights.”

“Give me yer word.” She surprised herself by demanding the vow from her father. But she needed his word that she’d have two fortnights before he entered her into a marriage contract so that she could use that time to convince him Donnan was the wrong choice for her and Alex was the right one.

“I give ye my word, Daughter, but I’ll have yers that if I allow Alex to come with us to compete for the Night Guard now, ye will wed Donnan when the time is up.”

Sweat instantly dampened her underarms and back. “I give ye my word,” she replied, praying it would not come to her having to keep it.

Chapter Eleven

It had been four days since Adeline had come to Alex in the healing room, but what had happened between them, the kissing, had come to him in snatches of dreams as his fever had worn off. The guilt that accompanied those memories was like a heavy weight pressing on his chest. It was bad enough he'd allowed her to kiss him before, and he'd listened to her ridiculous statement that kissing her was not courting her so his honor was intact. He knew better. She knew better now, too. Each kiss with her was a tempting glimpse into what a future with her held, if only that future were not beyond his reach.

She would be leaving soon, and it was wise for him to avoid her until then, as he clearly could not trust himself around her. The shame of it was bitter in his mouth. Fingal had told him that Adeline had asked about him daily, but she had not come back to the healing room to see him, thank god.

Leeta, who had only returned to the stronghold a short while ago, unwrapped the bandages Fingal had aided her in placing around his chest. She tsked as she shook her head. "I taught ye better than this," she said, pausing to fix her age-dulled gray gaze on him.

"I was nae exactly in a position to take care of myself," he growled, his mood not having improved much since he'd woken up the morning after the tournament only to remember he'd given his place to compete to his brother, and with that, he'd lost any chance he might have ever had, however slight, to make Adeline his.

Leeta made a derisive sound in response and stood back, studying his wounds. He had three cuts across his chest from the two practice matches with Donnan and the actual tournament match. Two of the cuts were healing much faster than the one he'd gotten when Moira had "accidentally" given

Donnan the sharpened blade to spar with Alex instead of the dulled one.

Leeta pointed to the wound that was still an angry red but no longer festering. “Something about this wound is odd.”

“What do ye mean?” he asked, glancing down at his chest, but when he did so, he thought he saw what Leeta was referring to. Streaks of red trailed away from the long cut that would not heal.

She frowned, tracing a finger over the streaks now. “The pattern...” She shook her head. “’Tis nae a usual one for a sword wound. I feel like I have seen streaks such as these before, but this old memory of mine will nae pull up when it was. It will come to me, though. It always does eventually. The wound has improved, but we need to keep putting the salve on it until it is totally closed.”

“I’ll do it,” he said, holding his hand out for her to give him the salve.

She handed it to him with a look of pity. “I heard about the tournament.”

“Aye,” he said, not wanting to talk of it so he stood to leave.

“There’s nae any way Donnan bested ye.”

“He’s my brother,” Alex said simply.

“And?” Leeta demanded, like her normal, nosy self.

“And he needed me, so I was there.”

She arched her eyebrows as she stared at him expectantly, but before he could think how to answer, if at all, Fingal came charging into the room. Fingal had checked on Alex every day, whereas Donnan had only come once. “Are ye better?”

Alex nodded.

“Good. Da wishes to see ye in his solar,” he said. Alex let out a sigh, to which Fingal smirked at him. “Did ye think Da

would nae demand a reckoning of why ye allowed Donnan to best ye?”

“I did nae allow—”

“Dunnae bother to refute it again. I saw it, and if I saw it, then Da did as well. The question is why, and ’tis undoubtedly why Da is calling ye to him.”

It probably was. Alex was surprised it had not happened sooner, but he had been rather sick, so he supposed his father had tried to be patient. Alex needed to think of a response besides the truth of just how far Moira would go to get what she wanted. He’d say that Donnan, as future laird of the clan, needed to be seen as the victor. His da would agree with that and possibly accept it.

“Come on, then,” Alex said, nodding to Leeta, who was frowning at him. She had never cared for Donnan overly much, and now that Fingal had blurted that Alex had let Donnan win the tournament, Leeta surely cared for his brother even less. She had been saying she didn’t trust Donnan ever since she’d caught him snooping in her healing room two summers ago. He’d been looking for a healing power for a toothache, but Leeta had refused to believe it for some reason.

When Alex and Fingal exited the healing room, Fingal paused and turned to Alex. “Laird Brodie is in the solar with Da and Donnan.”

That was surprising news. Had Laird Brodie told Alex’s father about finding him with Adeline in the healing room? Was he being called in for punishment? Somehow, Alex didn’t think Laird Brodie would want to tell anyone so that Adeline’s innocence would not be in question.

She was still as innocent as the day she was born but not because he didn’t burn everywhere for her. He squeezed his eyes shut to force the thought away.

“Are ye certain ye feel yerself again?” Fingal asked.

Alex opened his eyes. “I’ll nae ever feel myself again,” he said.

Fingal gave him a sympathetic look. “Because ye have lost yer chance at the Night Guard?”

Alex started to nod, but losing the promise of the Night Guard, he realized with shock, wasn't what filled him with the heaviest regret. It was the loss of Adeline.

Understanding filled his brother's eyes. “Adeline.”

Alex stepped out into the courtyard without answering his brother and then stilled. Across the way, in the grass, kneeled Adeline. She was petting Sciath, who was licking her face. His gut twisted with regret, and he strode as quickly as he could toward the castle entrance and purposely did not glance her way. Images of her filled his head nevertheless.

Once they were past her and in the castle, Fingal surprised him by grabbing his arm. “What ails ye?” his brother asked.

Frustrated, Alex shoved a hand through his hair. “I kinnae seem to put Adeline out of my mind,” he confessed. Fingal was the only person he could ever reveal this to.

“Well, giving the match to Donnan certainly added a barrier to pursuing her.”

“There were already barriers that were too great,” Alex snapped, irritated that his brother was right, but so was he.

Fingal shook his head as he turned away and started up the stairs toward the solar. It was so unlike his brother that Alex doubled his steps and caught up to him, now grasping him by the arm. “What are ye nae saying?”

Fingal turned and looked down at him from the higher step, frustration apparent in his gaze. “The only barrier that made it impossible for ye to pursue the lass was ye. I have nae ever kenned ye nae to go after what ye want with relentless determination. Ye could have trained there, which would have given ye time to discover her and her ye, and then ye would have won the spot, gone off to serve the king, and made an opportunity right away to lead a battle, win it, and get rewarded. But ye threw the chance away! Ye gave it to Donnan, who already has everything handed to him.”

Alex studied his brother a moment. His nostrils were flaring, his hands fisted by his sides, and his face a deep red. "This dunnae seem to be about just me," Alex said slowly.

Fingal stood in silence for a long moment before he sighed. "'Tis nae. I approached Elspeth about courting her, and she told me in verra clear terms that her interest lay with Donnan as the future laird, nae me."

"Then the lass has done ye a favor," Alex said and started up the stairs once more with Fingal falling in step beside him. "If she chooses being wed to a man simply because he will be laird over being wed for her heart, she is nae the lass for ye."

"The same could be said for her sister," Fingal replied.

Alex stopped in his tracks at that. "Adeline dunnae have any interest in Donnan, future laird or nae. She was flirting with him before because she thought I kissed her sister."

"Then ye're even more of a fool than I had concluded," Fingal said, "to throw yer chance away with such a lass."

"Ye dunnae ken the entire situation," Alex snapped and moved on before he revealed what he'd vowed to himself to keep secret.

They didn't speak again as they made their way up the stairs, down the passageway, and to their father's solar. After knocking, they were immediately bade to enter. Inside were not only their father, Laird Brodie, and Donnan, as Fingal had said, but also Moira. Dread gripped Alex. Nothing good ever came from Moira's presence, but with little choice, he made his way into the room and stopped in front of his father and Laird Brodie, who were standing.

He inclined his head to Moira, who sat in a chair beside Donnan. "My lady," he offered as politely as he could manage.

Her response was to press her lips together. Alex moved his focus to his brother, who gave him a tight smile. He could only imagine that Donnan had been subjected to more of Moira's berating this day.

“Son, we’ve called ye here for some good tidings,” his da announced.

“Aye?” Alex replied.

“Aye,” Laird Brodie answered instead of his father. “After careful consideration, I’ve decided to change the rule of only one warrior being allowed to come train from each clan. Ye will be coming with us to compete for the spot on the Night Guard.”

Fingal gave a whoop beside him. “This is excellent, Alex!” his brother exclaimed. “We three will go together!” He glanced to Laird Brodie, who nodded, and Fingal looked to Alex. “I’m to travel with Laird Brodie to serve under him for the King’s strategic council.”

Astonishment rendered Alex speechless, and then his first thought was of Adeline. He had to avoid her at all costs to keep his second chance and the scraps of honor he was trying desperately to hold on to. Alex glanced at Donnan and noted his brother’s posture had stiffened with the announcement that Alex would be allowed to compete. He frowned, and when Donnan turned his head and met Alex’s gaze, his brother smiled. “’Tis good news indeed,” Donnan said.

“It would be far better news if it were Fingal going to compete for the Night Guard spot and nae the bastard—”

“That’s enough, Moira,” Alex’s father snapped.

Moira let out a loud huff, then pierced Alex with a smug look. “Ye should share the other news with him,” Moira said, her tone sly.

Alex glanced at his father, who looked confused. “What news?”

“Honestly, Husband!” Moira huffed. She stared at Alex, her smug look growing. “Yer father and Laird Brodie have signed a marriage contract.”

“For whom?” Fingal demanded, his tone loud and angry. “For Donnan and Elspeth?”

Pity for his brother rose swiftly in Alex.

“Nay,” Moira replied, a ringing triumph in her tone. “For Donnan and Adeline.”

Laird Brodie started to speak, but Moira cut him off. “Alex and Fingal dunnae need to stand here and hear the details. Yer da and Laird Brodie called ye here, Alex, so ye could prepare to travel. So, go—” She waved a hand at him. “The lot of ye will leave after the nooning meal.”

Anger sent blood straight to Alex’s face and heat through him. He looked at Donnan, who stared down at his feet. His brother had broken his vow and betrayed him, and Adeline— Well, he didn’t even know why he expected anything from a lass he barely knew, but he had, and what he had expected had not been that she’d agree to wed his brother. He had been wrong about her. He’d been torturing himself over a lass whom he barely knew and who had agreed to wed his brother. He’d risked his future and tossed aside his word, no matter what she’d claimed about kissing, which was like poison in his gut.

He clenched his teeth on saying any more than he had to. “I’ll go prepare to travel,” he replied, his words stiff.

“Congratulations, Son,” his father offered with a genuine smile. “Ye, of anyone, truly deserves this chance,” he added. His gaze was shrewd and unwavering, and in that moment, Alex understood that his father had also known he’d allowed Donnan to win the match, but he’d not asked Alex why. Nor would he likely ever ask because Alex understood something else: His da either already knew Moira had something to do with it or he suspected it.

Alex turned without a word and made his way to the door. He had it halfway open when Moira said behind him, “Husband, ye did nae congratulate Donnan.”

“I congratulated whom I considered the winner,” Alex’s father snapped as Alex shut the door.

His anger toward Donnan didn't disappear, but it did take an unwanted hit. Pity tried to creep in for his older brother, but Alex was in no mood for generosity. He turned and started down the hall, getting no more than ten steps when heavy, fast footfalls resounded behind him.

“Alex!” Donnan called.

Alex considered not stopping for a moment. He considered just walking away, but he wanted Donnan to have to admit to his face that he'd betrayed him. Alex swung around to find Donnan nearly before him, brow furrowed and face red.

“I ken what ye must think,” his brother said.

“That ye broke yer vow.” The hypocrisy of his words filled him with self-loathing. “That ye betrayed me. That ye are wedding Adeline because ye kened I cared for her.” Contempt throbbed through him for himself and his brother.

“I did nae betray ye,” his brother said. “I'm the reason Laird Brodie changed the rule about each clan being allowed only one warrior to represent them in the competition for the Night Guard.”

Alex stared in shock for a moment and then managed to ask, “When did ye speak to Laird Brodie?”

“Last night after supper when ye did nae attend. I told him ye had truly bested me and I had begged ye to allow me to win because I was shamed.”

Alex stood speechless, unsure what to say. He was angry at Donnan's betrayal, and yet, his brother had aided him, and he should be grateful for that. The conflicting emotions battered him. Finally, he swallowed and said, “How did ye persuade him to allow me to come as well as ye?”

“In truth, it did nae take a great deal of work. He was already considering it because he saw how well ye fought. I imagine he wants to give ye the chance that was once presented to him.” Donnan put his hand on Alex's shoulder and squeezed it. “Take it, Brother. Train and likely both of us

will win the spots on the Night Guard because we are the best warriors in the Highlands.”

Alex knew he should feel grateful, happy even, but he didn't. His brother was going to wed the only woman Alex had ever been truly intrigued by.

Donnan studied him for a long moment, sighed, and shook his head. “I did nae want to tell ye this part, but it seems I must. I can see by the look in yer eyes that ye have nae set Adeline out of yer mind.”

“Speak yer piece,” Alex managed.

“I ken ye think I betrayed ye, but Laird Brodie is the one who approached Da about a union between the two of us. She kens it, and she has agreed to it. So, I did nae betray ye. I did nae pursue her. Laird Brodie came to us. He wants the best future for his daughter,” Donnan said. “Can ye blame him?”

“Nay,” Alex said. He couldn't. If he had a daughter, he'd want her to have the best possible future as well, but that didn't mean he had to like it, that didn't mean anger didn't scald his veins. He'd been judged his entire life by the fact that he was a bastard, and he was tired of it.

Adeline agreeing to a marriage contract with Donnan was a gift. He would keep telling himself that until he believed. Now the only thing he had to concentrate on was winning a spot on the Night Guard and securing a better future for himself. He would not think on her as anything more than the daughter of his commander and the future wife of his brother. She was the fruit in the Garden of Eden. He would not pluck it. He certainly would not taste it. He would avoid it. How hard could that be?

Chapter Twelve

How in the world was she supposed to judge in only two fortnights if Alex was the one for her if he would not even look at her? Adeline glared at his back as they rode out for the long journey from his home and to hers. Stubborn, obstinate man. She loved that he was honorable, but it was getting in her way at the moment. She ground her teeth together so forcefully that she gasped when pain shot through her back tooth.

“What’s the matter with ye?” Elspeth asked beside her in a concerned tone.

Adeline stiffened. She’d intended to let Elspeth wallow in the misery that her lie about kissing Alex was surely causing her, but with each day that passed, Elspeth was sounding and looking more retched. Adeline opened her mouth to confront her sister, but Donnan pulled his horse up beside Elspeth. The misery that had been on Elspeth’s face was replaced by a sweet smile, though, when bestowed upon Donnan. Adeline had to bite her cheek not to snort at her sister’s performance. It seemed even in guilt Elspeth would not be deterred from her plan to ensnare Donnan.

Donnan leaned forward on his horse and looked directly at Adeline. “I wanted to come up beside ye, but yer beast would nae move.”

Adeline forced herself not to roll her eyes. “I told ye in the courtyard when she growled at ye that her name is Sciath.”

Sciath chose that exact moment to growl again, as if inserting her dislike of Donnan into the conversation. Adeline barely resisted the urge to coo “good dog” at Sciath.

“Yer dog,” Donnan said, the words clipped, “is going to have to learn who’s master or else she’ll be gone.”

“My dog,” Adeline bit back, “kens who’s master: me. And ye dunnae have any control over whether my dog stays or goes.”

“Adeline, really!” Elspeth squawked, but Adeline saw the hint of a smile trying to curl her sister’s lips.

“We shall see,” Donnan said in a harsh tone before knocking his legs against his horse, who propelled him forward until Donnan was in line beside Alex and their brother Fingal.

“Whatever does he mean by ‘we shall see’?” Elspeth asked.

Adeline stared at the backs of the three men, trying to figure out that very thing for herself. Something was amiss. “I dunnae ken,” she muttered, glancing at her sister, who was smiling hopefully at her. “Ye lied about Alex.”

A deep blush stole over Elspeth’s face. “I—” Elspeth began, then stopped. “Ye dunnae ken,” she said in a suffocated whisper of pure misery.

Whatever anger Adeline had been clinging to disappeared as she realized her sister was truly suffering. “Then tell me,” Adeline replied, extending an olive branch.

“Da asked me to do this for him.”

Adeline sucked in a sharp breath. Her father was so desperate for her not to end up with Alex that he’d used the fact that Elspeth longed to please him to get her to flirt with Alex. She knew her father had hoped that Adeline simply would forget Alex when she thought his head so easily turned, and she also knew her father understood there was no danger in Elspeth falling for Alex because she was concentrated on catching Donnan.

“Da used ye,” she said softly.

“Aye,” Elspeth agreed, the word dripping with misery. “And to my everlasting regret, I went along with it because I want him to love me.”

“Da loves ye, Elspeth.”

“Does he?” her sister demanded. “He certainly dunnae act like he loves me as he does ye.”

It was true. He didn’t, and he was, in truth, often cold to Elspeth, but he cared enough to want her to make a good match, and Adeline did not think it was simply to benefit him.

“I’m sorry, Ellie,” she said, meaning it. “I will talk to Da for ye.”

“I dunnae ken why ye would do that after I lied to ye and flirted with Alex. Nae that it mattered. He ignored all my attempts to get his attention.”

That made Adeline grin.

“I thought that would please ye,” Elspeth said. “I have to say, the Gordon brothers are nae good for how I feel about myself. They act as if I’m a toad!”

“Nae all of them,” Adeline said. “Fingal has nae been able to take his gaze off ye.”

“Fingal!” Elspeth said so loudly that the man glanced over his shoulder at her and grinned. Adeline could not help but laugh at the silly, hopeful smile upon his face, which really was quite handsome—just not nearly as handsome as Alex’s.

“Did ye need me, Elspeth?” he asked, his tone just as hopeful as his look.

“Nay!” she bellowed, but Adeline did note that Elspeth sat up straighter and tossed her hair over her shoulder in a most flirtatious manner.

“Fingal tracks yer every move,” Adeline said, glancing from her sister to the path they were on, then back to her sister. “Why will ye nae give him a chance?”

“I wished to wed a laird,” Elspeth said, sounding suddenly miserable. “And Donnan has a great chance to be laird someday, but he acts as if I dunnae exist, just as Alex did.”

Alex, I can understand, as he clearly has a liking for ye, but I dunnae ken why Donnan ignores me.”

“He wants to take what he thinks Alex wants,” Adeline supplied. “He thinks Alex wants me, so he wants me. It dunnae have anything to do with me, Elspeth, but honestly, ye’re just as bad as he is. Do ye truly need to be mistress of a castle so bad that ye would wed a man simply because he was likely to be a laird?” Adeline asked.

Elspeth did not respond. They clopped along for several breaths before she finally inhaled a long, loud breath and let it out with a shudder. “It was the only thing I could think to achieve that may make Da as proud of me as he is of ye.”

“Ellie, ye deserve better than Donnan. Ye deserve a man who kinnae look away from ye, who worships the ground yer slippers tread upon, who would guard ye with his life, and kens the treasure ye are.”

“I’m nae a treasure, and I ken it,” Elspeth said, her tone barely audible now. “I had enough time alone in the bedchamber at the Gordon castle to contemplate just how awful I must be. I’ve nae had one marriage offer from any of the lairds I’ve tried to catch, and I ken it’s because I’m a tad demanding and tedious.”

Elspeth had been more than a tad demanding and tedious, but Adeline was not about to point that out when her sister had obviously had some sort of a revelation and appeared to be on the precipice of real change. “Well, ye dunnae have to stay that way, Sister. Ye have many wonderful things to offer. Ye have a kind heart. Pick a man who will make it happy, and I think if ye would give Fingal a chance, he could possibly be that man.”

Elspeth looked toward the brothers ahead of them in the line and so did Adeline. “He does have lovely thick golden hair.”

“He does,” Adeline agreed. “And have ye noticed his eyes?” She had a suspicion that Elspeth might have but had

not wanted to linger on it because of her determination to capture Donnan.

“Aye. They are an astonishing shade of green!”

Adeline bit her lip on her grin. “Aye. And I heard whispers that he has a verra sharp mind and that Da asked him personally to come to our home to sit in on strategy sessions for the king. Ye realize what that could mean?”

“He could become one of the king’s most important advisors!” Elspeth said, excitement in her tone.

“Aye.” Adeline nodded. “And the king gives his most important advisors land, titles, wealth. If that occurs, and ye wed him—though that should nae be the reason, mind ye—Da would undoubtedly be verra glad to have a strong tie with one of the king’s chosen men through ye as his wife.”

“Ye’re brilliant!” Elspeth exclaimed. “Will ye aid me in getting his attention and getting him alone, so we can come to know each other better?”

Adeline snorted at that. “I dunnae think ye will need my aid, Sister. He truly does track yer every move, as I said. I think he’s already quite taken with ye.”

“He dunnae even ken me.”

“True,” Adeline agreed, “so he’s taken with yer obvious beauty.” When Elspeth did not respond, Adeline glanced at her sister and found her worrying her lip. “What is it?”

“I fear he will come to ken me and nae like who I am.”

“Nonsense,” Adeline assured her. “Simply show him the real ye, nae the person trying to impress to get Da’s attention. If Da fails to give it, that’s a grave loss for him, but I feel certain he will come around.”

“’Tis easy for ye to say. Ye have always had Da’s favor.”

“Well, ye had Mama’s,” Adeline reminded her.

“I had Mama’s attention because I was a sickly child. Ye ken that.”

“I do, but I confess, I was jealous how Mama would give ye the extra blankets and give ye her broth when food was low. I felt she loved ye more.”

“Sometimes I wonder if Da blames me somehow for Mama’s death. Because she had to take extra care of me.”

Her sister could have just revealed the truth of the matter. Adeline hoped not because that would not be fair to Elspeth, but their da had loved their mama greatly and perhaps his grief had made him irrational. She would most definitely have to speak to him about this. “I dunnae think Da blames ye,” she lied because she didn’t want to hurt her sister further and because she honestly did not know, “and if ye need any help at all, I will aid ye. But I dunnae think ye will.” She hesitated. She had to tell her about their da trying to force her into wedding Donnan, but she loathed to destroy all the progress they had just made. “I need to tell ye something, Ellie.”

“Aye?” Elspeth said.

“The Gordons offered a marriage bargain to Da for Donnan and me.”

“I see,” Elspeth said slowly. “Do ye wish to wed Donnan?”

“Ye ken I dunnae. I wish to have time to discover if Alex and I might have more than just passion.”

“Addie! Did ye allow him to kiss ye again?”

A blush heated Adeline’s cheeks. Quickly, she told her sister about her other kisses with Alex.

“Ye kissed him?” Elspeth said, clearly astonished.

“Aye,” Adeline replied. “I did nae have a choice. He feels dishonorable for telling Da he’d nae pursue me and then kissing me.”

Elspeth rolled her eyes. “Kissing ye is nae pursuing ye.”

Adeline giggled. “That’s what I argued.”

Elspeth chortled at that. “Though, I suppose Da would consider the kiss to be Alex breaking his word.”

“Da is nae one to squawk about honor after he used ye and had ye lie to me.”

“Good point,” Elspeth said.

“Though,” Adeline said, quirking her mouth, “my own honor is currently a bit tarnished.”

Elspeth’s eyes widened. “What did ye do?”

“Well, I’m leading Alex to sin, I suppose.”

Elspeth grinned wickedly. “Nae if he ends up wedding ye,” she said with a snicker.

“Well, I also lied to Da. I asked for two fortnights to come to ken Donnan, but I ken verra well that I am just trying to gain time to ken Alex and sway him and Da.”

“I dunnae see that ye have a choice, and ye are nae harming anyone, so I dunnae think yer lies are horrid. But ye definitely need my help,” Elspeth said. The eagerness and pride in her tone had Adeline looking her sister’s way once more. Their eyes met, and Elspeth grinned. “Ye’ve nae ever needed my aid for anything, despite my being the eldest. I needed ye and Mama when I was younger and sick, and when Mama died, ye needed Da and he needed ye. There was nae anyone who needed me.”

Tears stung Adeline’s eyes. She held out her hand to her sister. “I always need ye, Ellie.” Elspeth took her hand and gave it a brief squeeze before letting go because it made riding difficult. “Will ye aid me?”

“Aye,” Elspeth said with a wink. “What ye need is time alone with Alex. Da will be watching ye closely, I imagine, and I’m just the person to create distractions so ye get what ye need.”

“How will ye do that?” Adeline asked. She’d been unable to come up with a good plan so far herself.

“Leave that to me,” Elspeth said, looking mischievous. “’Tis better if ye dunnae ken. Then ye will nae need to hide anything from Da or Alex.”

“Ye’re quite devious,” Adeline said.

“I am,” Elspeth said with a grin. “I really am, if only Da would appreciate it. Ye dunnae have much time, so we better start our plan immediately.”

“Ye mean as soon as we get to the castle?” Adeline asked.

Elspeth shook her head. “I mean *now*.”

Adeline was about to question how, but Elspeth startled Adeline but yelping and then doing so again. Then, Elspeth cried out, and started to tip off her horse so that Adeline had to grab the reins, stop both horses, and try to hold her sister upright.

“Whatever has happened?” she asked, her heart hammering as horses thundered toward them.

Elspeth’s eyes fluttered as if she were struggling to keep them open. “I think something bit my hand!” she wailed. “It burns, and I kinnae feel my fingers to properly hold my reins.”

Fingal was the first to reach them. He pulled his horse up beside Elspeth and asked her what had occurred. “Something bit my hand,” she whimpered as their father, Alex, and Donnan rode up to them. “I kinnae feel my fingers.”

Adeline believed it until all the men were staring at Elspeth’s hand and she winked at Adeline. Her jaw slipped open in surprise. Not only had Elspeth come up with this plan on a whim but she was executing it perfectly. Their father was missing an amazing strategic mind in Elspeth.

Adeline stole a glance at Alex from under her lashes and found his intense gaze on her. But what she saw there confused her. Bright mockery invaded his stare, and she blinked in bafflement. Whyever would he be giving her a look of disdain?

“Adeline, did ye hear me?”

Adeline flinched at her father’s sharp tone and jerked her attention from Alex to her father’s direction, but her sister sitting in front of Fingal on his horse—he looked quite pleased

at the turn of events—had Adeline staring at them instead. She'd been so captured with Alex's displeased look that she'd missed her sister's brilliant next move.

“Adeline!”

She jumped at her father shouting her name and looked to him. “Aye, Da?”

“Were ye bitten?”

Before she could form a reply, her sister said, “Aye, Da. She was bit. Mayhap she should—”

“Donnan,” her father said.

Before she could form a protest, her father had her reins in his hands, Donnan was dismounting his horse, and she was forced to keep her silence or ruin their plan. Donnan grabbed her waist and aided her from her horse, and all the while she could feel Alex's stare upon her. Or mayhap she was imagining it. When she was settled in front of Donnan, he pressed his thighs tight to hers, to her dismay, which prohibited her from moving forward on the horse to put space between them. She stole another glance at Alex and found his accusing gaze riveted on her once more, but what he was silently accusing her of, she had no notion.

Chapter Thirteen

It was not difficult for Alex to avoid being around Adeline the first day at her home. He was consumed with the beginning of the competition for the Night Guard, and he'd never had so many things go awry as he had today. His shield had gone missing this morning, and then a stray arrow nearly had hit him in the head in his afternoon match, and during the last match, the one he'd just finished, the wine he'd been served to quench his thirst had made him feel ill. Thankfully, he'd managed to overcome it all and win his matches.

A horn sounded, and having been given a full explanation of all the horns this morning, Alex knew this one was a call to the inner courtyard, so he, along with all the other warriors competing for the Guard, made their way there. Donnan stood to the left of the inner courtyard, and Alex's first instinct was to go to the right to avoid his brother, but he knew he was being unfair to Donnan. Donnan had done what he needed to in order to protect his lairdship and Da's, just as Alex had done, so he crossed to the left to stand by his brother.

"Do ye ken what this is about?" Alex asked as he reached Donnan.

"Nay," Donnan replied without looking at him.

Alex followed the line of Donnan's gaze and found his brother's attention on Adeline. She was standing with Sciath at her side in a half circle of children, and she had a gaggle of animals around her. Alex's chest tightened at the sight of her in a pale-blue gown. It hugged her curves in places that naturally drew the eye, and it set her dark hair off enticingly. "When I'm wed to her, she'll nae be rolling in the dirt like a common wench."

Alex frowned as he watched Adeline. She was swinging the children around one by one until they fell over dizzy, her with them. Then Sciath would jump on her and lick her face.

Sciath, fortunately or not, depending on how you saw it, apparently had mud on her paws because it was now all over Adeline's gown and face. "I dunnae see the harm. She's entertaining the children, and I think it shows that she'll make a verra good mother one day." The words set an ache in his chest. Adeline would be a mother to Donnan's children.

"'Tis unseemly. Mama dunnae do such things."

Alex resisted the urge to tell Donnan that was because his mother was a cold woman. Instead, he said, "Every woman is different, Donnan. Ye need to allow Adeline to be herself."

Donnan turned to look at him. "I'll deal with Adeline as I see fit."

There was tenseness in Donnan's voice that Alex didn't care for, but Donnan likely did not wish advice from him after Adeline had said she had feelings for him. "She's wedding ye, Donnan, so clearly whatever she thought she felt for me is nae thought any longer."

Donnan stared at him for a long moment, then slowly smiled. "Aye. Forgive me, Brother. She's a woman to inspire jealousy."

Alex almost nodded but stopped himself just in time. Instead, he asked, "How did ye fare in yer matches?"

"I won all three," Donnan said, a smug look settling on his face. "I heard ye won yers, despite yer troubles. Congratulations."

The felicitation rang somewhat false to Alex, but then again, he wasn't certain he wasn't being harsh with Donnan because of Adeline, so he said, "Thank ye."

Laird Brodie walked into the courtyard in that moment and said something to Adeline. Alex's stomach hollowed. "Mayhap he called us here to announce yer betrothal."

"Nay. He said he would wait to announce it until after the competition because he did nae want anyone to question my winning a spot if I do."

Alex frowned. “Why would they question it? Ye are competing in sparring matches. There is a winner and a loser, and everyone can surely see who the winner is.” Alex realized what he’d said after the words left his mouth. “I was nae referring to our match.”

A dark look had settled on Donnan’s face. “I suppose our match is exactly why he dunnae want any cause for questioning my wins in this.” Donnan shrugged. “It dunnae make a difference to me if he waits. Adeline kens of the wedding agreement, and that is all that matters.”

Alex was glad that Laird Brodie held up his hands and saved him from having to continue talking about Adeline with Donnan. As a silence fell, Fingal came up beside Alex and leaned toward him and said, “Yer chance is about to come sooner than ye thought.” Alex glanced to Fingal and found him grinning back, but there was no time to question him as Laird Brodie began to speak.

“I have this day received a missive from King Alexander. The Night Guard has been tasked with leading our good king’s army into battle against King Haakonsson. I’m certain ye are all aware that King Alexander fights the king of Norway to keep the western seaboard of Scotland under his rule.” Alex said “aye” along with all the men around him. Laird Brodie raised his hands for silence once more. “Haakonsson believes he has sovereignty over the area, nae our beloved Alexander.” Angry voices erupted at this, and again, Laird Brodie held up his hands. “We will go to the Ayrshire Coast and drive King Haakonsson back once and forever.” A thunderous roar went up in the crowd. When it died, Laird Brodie spoke again. “I have this day made a plan with my advisors and have added a new person to the counsel, Fingal Gordon!”

Alex glanced to Fingal in surprise. “I suppose this means Laird Brodie sees yer worth.” He grinned at his brother, who smiled in return.

“Well, ’tis a trial basis until I prove myself over time, but he was verra pleased with the ideas I presented,” Fingal said.

“Congratulations, Brother,” Donnan said above the excited conversation around them. “It seems we are both destined for greatness: me in the battle and ye planning it.”

“All three of us are destined for greatness,” Fingal responded, throwing his arm around Alex’s shoulder. “Listen to this part,” Fingal said to Alex as Laird Brodie began talking once more. “’Tis the best part.”

“I will choose three men to lead the three-prong attack,” Laird Brodie said as the noise died once more. “And the king has made it clear that he will be more than generous to any of the chosen leaders who win their campaign.”

The emphasis on the words “more than generous” was not lost on Alex. He immediately looked to Adeline and found her gaze upon him. This could have been their chance—except she was now in a marriage contract with his brother. Bitterness filled his gut and mouth, and he turned away, determined to keep his thoughts off his brother’s future wife.



“Tell me the plan again,” Elspeth insisted as Adeline took the pitcher of wine her sister handed her.

“Ellie—”

Elspeth pressed her index finger to Adeline’s lips and gave her a stern look. “Ye heard Da’s announcement,” Elspeth said. “Ye ken what this means.”

With her free hand, Adeline brushed her sister’s finger away from her lips. “Of course I ken what it means, Ellie. It means when Alex gains one of the spots on the Night Guard and gains a position as commander of one of the attacks for the king, he will win his battle—”

“Of course,” Elspeth inserted.

Adeline grinned. Her heart was still hammering from her father’s announcement in the courtyard and the implications of it. “And the king will be generous with him. And all this will happen soon, so Da should nae have any objections to Alex courting me...assuming he still wants to.”

Elspeth scowled. “If the man dunnae wish to court ye, then he is nae the man for ye.”

Adeline grinned at her sister. It was amazing how Elspeth’s attitude had changed in the two days since she had decided to give Final Gordon a chance. Doubt started to invade Adeline’s cheery mood, and she felt her smile fading.

“What is it?” Elspeth asked.

“This also means there is nae much time with Alex here. I heard Da say to one of the men in the courtyard that he wanted the new Night Guard to be ready to go in a sennight. I have to persuade Da to let Alex court me, and convince Alex that he’s good enough to court me, all in a shorter amount of time than I originally planned.”

“And Alex is avoiding ye,” Elspeth added.

“Aye,” Adeline agreed, thinking on how he’d not made eye contact with her since they’d left his home. The moment his gaze had met hers in the courtyard today, he’d looked away.

“I stand firm in my opinion that it dunnae have anything to do with ye and everything to do with the vow he made Da.”

“I thought that, too, but ye saw him talking and laughing with Morag when she brought him his trencher this morning.”

“As I said this morning in the great hall when ye pointed them out to me, it looked to me as if Morag was flirting with him, and at first, he was just tolerating it. Then I vow he glanced toward the dais, saw us looking at him, and then seemed more inclined to flirt back. I dunnae think he’s truly interested in Morag. I think he is trying to forget ye because he thinks he must.”

“Well, undoubtedly, Morag will be out at the training grounds serving wine.” It was part of her job as one of the kitchen servants, after all.

“Oh, I have nary a doubt that she’ll be there,” Elspeth agreed. “Morag could nae find her virtue if it was thrust right in her face. Maise says—”

Adeline held her hand up to her sister. “Let’s nae gossip about her. I ken what the other women in the kitchen say, but we dunnae ken it’s true.”

“I believe it is,” Elspeth said. “I saw her coming out of Thor’s cottage late one night several sennights ago, and she had nary a reason to be there at that hour.”

“’Tis nae our business. And I feel sorry for her. She’s a widow, after all, with a young bairn. She must be scairt and lonely.”

“I feel sorry for her as long as she dunnae present her charms to Fingal. That’s where my sympathy ends.”

“My, my,” Adeline teased as she started toward the door. “Ye certainly have taken a fast liking to Fingal Gordon.”

“Aye,” her sister said, blushing. “He’s so kind to me, Addie, and attentive. His only flaw is that he will nae give me any gossip about his brothers. But I kinnae truly fault the loyalty.”

“Nay,” Adeline agreed, heading into the courtyard with Elspeth by her side. “Ye kinnae. Are ye coming with me to the training ground?”

“Aye. I think Fingal went down there, and ye may need me to distract Morag if she’s got herself stuck to Alex.”

Adeline frowned. “If I’m that easy for the man to forget, then it’s as ye said and he’s nae the man for me.”

By the time they got down to the training ground near the banks of the loch, the warriors had already stopped for the refreshments the kitchen servants had brought them. Adeline scanned the crowd and found Alex, but heading straight for him was Morag. “Wonderful,” Adeline muttered.

“Dunnae fret, Sister,” Elspeth said. “I’ll take care of her. Ye focus on him.”

Adeline nodded as they descended the stairs and made their way across the grass to the flat, sandy ground where the

men who were left in the competition had been practicing for tomorrow's matches.

As they approached Alex and Morag, Alex glanced their way. His gaze locked with Adeline's, but he quickly looked away and back to Morag, whom he smiled at. Adeline slowed her steps. "Mayhap this was a mistake."

"Dunnae be ridiculous," Elspeth replied, taking Adeline by the elbow and fairly dragging her toward Alex. Adeline had no notion what to say, but Elspeth was not afflicted with the same problem.

"Morag, ye're wanted in the kitchens," Elspeth announced the minute she and Adeline were close enough to Alex and Morag for the woman to hear Elspeth.

Morag frowned. "By whom?"

"By Maude," Elspeth lied without blinking an eye.

Morag's face fell. She knew if the head of the kitchens wanted them, she had to answer the summons. "She told ye she wants me now?" Morag asked, looking to Alex, who was very obviously avoiding looking at Adeline.

"Aye," Elspeth said, "so move along."

To Adeline's dismay, Morag set her hand on Alex's arm. "It was verra nice to talk to ye again," she said, and Alex had no choice but to turn his head back toward the woman.

Since Adeline was now standing beside her, it was unavoidable for him to pass his glance over her. He did so without slowing one bit, and then he was staring directly at Morag again. "Ye as well," he said and offered a smile. Adeline could not quite decide whether it was polite or inviting.

"I'll be in the great hall after my duties tonight," Morag said and opened her mouth to say something else, but Elspeth interrupted.

"Ye'll nae be if ye annoy Maude. So ye best get going."

Morag nodded but gave Alex a look that could only be described as a pure longing. “I hope to see ye tonight.”

“We’re all certain ye do, Morag. Now move along!”

The woman scowled at Elspeth but turned and plodded away, and before she was even out of sight, Elspeth said, “Oh look! There’s Fingal. I’ll just go say hello.”

And before Adeline could even reply, her sister had scurried off, and Adeline and Alex were left standing alone in awkward silence. Adeline cleared her throat, suddenly very nervous. “Would ye care for some wine?”

“Morag already gave me some,” Alex replied, looking away from her and toward the crowd of warriors. His comment wasn’t rude, but his tone was cold and unfriendly.

She nibbled on her lip, trying to think how to draw his gaze to her, so they could talk. “’Tis good news for ye about the battles the Night Guard has been tasked to lead.” She saw his body stiffen, and a tic start at the side of his jaw. She wasn’t certain why that would make him vexed with her, but clearly it did. “Alex?” she finally prompted when the silence became nearly unbearable.

He whipped his head to her, and his angry gaze cut through her. “Why are ye here, Adeline?”

His curt tone stirred her own anger. “Well, I live here,” she replied.

“Verra clever,” he shot back, a look of annoyance twisting the lips that had stoked a fire in her before. “Ye should go talk to Donnan, nae to me.”

She frowned. Is that what this was about? Jealousy? Or was he trying to push her toward Donnan as a way to help him avoid her? “Alex, my da made me—”

“I dunnae need or want any explanations, Adeline,” he snapped.

His reaction seemed a bit excessive for her having ridden on the horse with his brother. He’d been standing there and

surely had heard her father insist that she do so. She opened her mouth to say all this when he said, “I told ye previously there was nae any way forward for us—”

“Aye, but, Alex, if ye get on Night Guard—”

“I hope *when*,” he said, looking contemplative.

“Aye, I do as well,” she said. “*When* ye get on Night Guard and when ye are appointed a leader...”

“God willing,” he said. “If yer da sees me as worthy.”

His humbleness was one of the things she found so appealing about him. “He will,” she assured him, praying it was so. “Ye’ll win yer campaign. I ken it.” His expression softened a bit, and the tension in her shoulders and neck released. She took a deep breath and continued. “Then the king will surely give ye the stronghold ye wish for, and—” She paused. She certainly could not just blurt out that she wished him to court her, that there would be nothing stopping him for his part. She needed to know if he wanted to court her before she blurted that she would somehow find a way to sway her father. She fumbled for what to say. “Would ye—That is, I mean to ask, as to us—”

“By god, woman,” he growled. “Are ye trying to tempt me to discard my honor completely?”

“What?” What did he mean *completely*? Did he mean the promise to her father? If only he’d let her explain the part about swaying her father to him. “Nay, ye dunnae ken me.”

“I ken ye,” he said, his tone had dropped low. He shoved a hand through his hair in obvious frustration. “I have moved on as I must, and so should ye.”

“Adeline!”

She glanced over her shoulder at her name being called and grimaced at Donnan walking toward them. Why he was suddenly so attentive to her was beyond her, but ever since they’d left his home, he seemed to find her no matter where she was. She turned back to Alex, and his look was hard as

granite. “Alex, if we can but find some time to spend together and—”

“Nay,” he said, the word ringing with finality. “I kinnae do what ye ask, and after what I said to ye in regard to my honor, I’m surprised ye’d suggest it.” She didn’t think the suggestion was so horrid, but his acting like it was made her burn with shame. “Forget the kisses we shared, Adeline. I have.” With that, he turned on his heel and left her standing there alone, looking at his back.

She felt a tap on her shoulder before she could think what to do. When she turned, there stood Donnan. “I thought we might stroll and get better acquainted.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to decline the offer, but she happened to look to her left and see her father watching her. Reluctantly, she nodded, and Donnan took her by the elbow to turn them away from the crowd. They got no more than ten paces when he said, “What were ye and my brother talking of?”

Her ears burned with the memory of her conversation with Alex. “The upcoming battles for the Night Guard and how it could mean he has a verra likely chance to get the stronghold he desires.”

The derisive noise Donnan made bothered her. Alex was nothing but supportive of his brother, but Donnan did not seem to reciprocate. “His verra cocksure to think he’ll be appointed a leader.”

“I’m the one who said that,” she retorted. “Nae him.”

Donnan stopped and looked to her, so she met his gaze. “I’m sorry,” he said. “’Tis just, all my life, I’ve had to endure my da constantly singing his praises and telling me in the same breath how I fall short of Alex, and this just feels as if it will be one more way for my da to criticize me.”

Her anger lessened just a bit at Donnan’s explanation. “I’m certain that’s been frustrating. I—”

“I’m as good a warrior as Alex is,” Donnan said, cutting off what she had been about to say—that maybe his father had been trying to compensate for how horrid Moira was to Alex. But though she did believe that, she’d also seen both men fight and Alex was simply the superior warrior. And he was certainly more humble. “I’m better, in fact,” he added.

She pressed her lips together to keep from responding to his arrogance, and she knew her lack of response annoyed him by the way his nostrils flared. “I’m going to be laird one day, Adeline. I will have power, and as my wife—”

“Adeline!” Elspeth said directly at her back.

Relieved for the interruption, she swung toward her sister. Donnan clearly assumed she wanted to accept the offer of marriage his family had brought. It occurred to her if she could explain to him that she still didn’t feel that way about him, mayhap he’d persuade his father to withdraw the offer, and that would take care of that problem. Before she spoke to him about it, she needed to think of a gentle way to say it. Honestly, though, he didn’t know her, so she could not imagine he truly wanted to wed her.

“Elspeth, did ye need me?” Adeline asked, knowing her sister was here to rescue her.

“Aye. I need ye in the kitchens,” she said, grabbed Adeline and started towing her away so that she had to toss a goodbye to a scowling Donnan.

When they were out of earshot of Donnan, Elspeth said, “Well? Did ye make any progress with Alex?”

“Nay. In fact, he told me to forget whatever we shared.” A lump lodged in her throat, and she swallowed. “Honestly, I did nae think it would be this difficult. I’m going to find myself forced to wed Donnan,” she said, feeling wretched. “And so far, the only thing I’ve learned of him is that he’s so conceited he’s sure I’ll accept his marriage offer, and he’s jealous of his brother, which I vow has something to do with why he offered marriage in the first place.”

“What will ye do?”

“I’m going to explain to him tonight that I still dunnae feel that way about him, and I pray he’ll withdraw the offer, which will solve one verra large problem.”

“That will nae sway Da to Alex,” Elspeth said.

“I ken,” Adeline replied, trying not to let her misery overwhelm her. “And it may nae matter anyway. Alex Gordon currently wants me to stay away from him. He dunnae even want to look at me.”

Elspeth got a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Ye’ve a plan?” Adeline asked, hopeful.

“Aye. We are just going to have to make it so that he kinnae look away from ye and so he’ll forget about his misplaced honor for a bit.”

Chapter Fourteen

Since it was customary for the warriors who had won both their daily matches to sit at the dais, Alex had no choice but to do so tonight, which was why he had taken his time making his way to the great hall to hopefully miss most of supper. Ever-loyal Fingal had offered to stay with him, so they entered the great hall together. He paused just inside the door and looked to the dais, warring desire raging within him.

He wanted Adeline to be gone from the hall already so that he'd not be tempted, and yet, he desperately wanted to see her. And there she was, the thing he wanted most and could not have without abandoning who he was at his core. She was resplendent in a forest-green gown that contrasted her pale skin. Her hair was piled high atop her head, exposing her long, slender neck and filling his mind with images of kissing his way down that column to the swells of inviting breasts the low-dipping gown displayed. He groaned with the thought of the treasures beneath her bodice. He wanted to touch her, lick her, bring her such pleasure that she screamed with it. He grunted this time.

“What’s wrong?” Fingal asked beside him.

“I’m tempted by her at every turn,” Alex ground out. “That is what’s wrong. I’m tempted, and I kinnae—I’m flesh and blood, Fingal. I am trying to remain honorable, but today she told me she wanted to find time with me and I wanted to say aye.” He glanced at his brother, who gave him a sympathetic look. “I wanted to say aye and betray Donnan.”

“Something is nae right,” Fingal replied.

Alex frowned, glad they were still close enough to the great hall door that no one had noticed them. “I confess to ye that I want to betray Donnan by doing all sorts of unimaginable things with the woman he’s to wed, and yer response is that something is nae right!”

“Aye,” Fingal said, nodding. “Elspeth keeps asking me odd questions, as if she’s trying to figure out if ye would court Adeline if Adeline could persuade her da to let ye. And that dunnae make sense given Adeline has agreed to wed Donnan.”

“Nay, it does nae,” Alex replied, scrubbing a hand across his face. “I would nae have thought Adeline the sort of lass to pledge her word to wed Donnan and then break it, and her da was the one who approached ours about the union in the first place.”

“Aye. As I said, something dunnae make sense.”

“Well, we’ll nae be figuring it out at this moment,” Alex said, elbowing Fingal and looking at Elspeth grinning and waving at Fingal from the dais. “Elspeth is beckoning ye.” He was glad to see Fingal’s happy smile.

“I’m going to wed that lass,” his brother said. “As soon as I think her da will say aye, I’m going to ask him.”

Alex chuckled at that. “Ye have nae kenned her verra long.” But the moment the words were out, he understood they were foolish. If his circumstances with Adeline had been different, he could see feeling that way about her.

As if Fingal knew what Alex was thinking, his brother threw his arm around Alex’s shoulder. “I kenned the minute I saw her that she was the lass for me. I kinnae explain it.”

Alex’s gaze strayed to Adeline. She had a goblet of wine to her lips, so he could not see if she was smiling or frowning, but her gaze was locked on him. Desire sunk its claws into him. Donnan was talking animatedly to her, but she did not seem to be listening to a word his brother was saying. Alex frowned as they started toward the dais and made himself look away from her. Adeline did not seem the sort of lass to enter into a marriage contract and then try to tempt another man, but he was unsure what other explanation there could be.

Both seats beside Elspeth were empty. Alex took to the dais first, determined to take the seat that would not put him next to Adeline, but when he started toward Elspeth’s left, she

waved him to her right. “This one is for ye,” she said, the look she gave him oddly glinting.

“Ye did exceptionally well in the match today,” Laird Brodie said as Alex made his way along the dais to his seat.

Alex paused where Laird Brodie was sitting and met the man’s intense gaze, which was fastened on him. “Thank ye, Laird.”

“All is nae decided, ye ken,” Laird Brodie added, “so make certain ye keep yer focus where it needs to be.”

“I will, Laird,” Alex replied, but at that moment, Adeline gasped, and when he looked toward her, Donnan had hold of her wrist in what looked to be tight. Alex took an instinctive step toward her, but Laird Brodie clutched his forearm, stopping his progress. He frowned and looked between the man and Adeline, who was now free of Donnan’s hold. Her face was flushed, and she was blotting at wine that had been spilled while Donnan bellowed for a servant to come clean it up.

Alex let out a sigh of relief that he’d misread the situation, and guilt pricked at him that he had been so willing to assume the worst about his brother so it would give Alex a reason to take up Adeline’s request to find time alone. Shame flooded him.

With no choice, he sat, accidentally brushing her elbow as he did so. She drew her arm away from him as she turned her head to meet his gaze, but his attention was caught by the red mark on her wrist where he’d seen his brother grasp her. She started to lower her arm under the table, but he gently took hold of her elbow to prevent her from doing so.

“What happened?” he asked, his temples pounding with a sudden fury.

She waved a hand toward Donnan, and Alex was amazed by how such a normally mundane gesture seemed so enticing coming from her. “Yer brother spilled his wine accidentally,

and he grabbed my wrist to prevent me from dragging my sleeve through it.”

Alex’s attention went to Adeline’s right sleeve, which was indeed bunched up to her elbow. Again, he’d misjudged his brother. He released Adeline’s elbow and shoved a hand through his hair as he glanced down at the table so he’d no longer stare at her. He had to gain control.

“Surely, ye did nae think I would mistreat Adeline?” Donnan asked, amusement in his tone.

Alex looked up and met his brother’s gaze. A smile that seemed slightly mocking lifted the corners of Donnan’s mouth, but Alex knew his judgment could not be trusted currently. “Nay,” he replied, but the word did not come out as convincing as he’d intended. God above, this yearning for Adeline was making him a clot-heid. “I was just asking. I noticed the red mark, ’tis all. I ken ye would nae ever treat a woman harshly.”

“I told ye I’d see ye in the great hall again tonight,” came a female voice from in front of Alex. The lass Morag stood in front of him with a jug of wine in hand and an inviting smile on her lips. He wished to heaven above he felt a spark of desire for Morag because that would certainly help put Adeline from his mind.

“’Tis good to see ye,” he said politely.

“Would ye like some wine?”

“Aye,” he replied, hoping the wine would dull his mind just enough that he quit imagining things that were not true. He held his wine goblet toward the lass, and she took it, filled it, and then, instead of putting it back in his outstretched hand, she leaned way over the dais, offering him a full display of her plentiful charms. “I have a full pitcher of wine in my bedchamber if ye wish for a quieter place to have a drink,” the woman whispered.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Adeline’s body stiffen, so he knew she’d overheard the lass’s offer.

“I appreciate the enticing suggestion,” he said, striving to keep his voice low so as not to embarrass Morag, “but I do believe the competitors for the Night Guard are supposed to stay in the great hall.”

“Nae all night,” she said. “I can wait.”

A derisive noise came from Adeline’s direction, and it took all his will not to look at her, take in her expression, and ascertain if she was jealous. It did not matter. It could not matter. “I need to get rest tonight.”

“I can help ye rest.”

“Oh, for god’s sake, Morag,” Adeline hissed, leaning so close to him that her shoulder touched his and the contact made him ache with white-hot desire. Under other circumstances, had Adeline offered to give him wine in her chamber, death could not have kept him away. “Why are ye even in the great hall serving wine? Dunnae ye normally cook and nae serve at the supper meal?”

“I offered to help in the great hall tonight in hopes that I’d run into ye,” Morag said, locking eye contact with him. Determination lit her eyes, and he waited to feel flattered, but all he felt was mildly uncomfortable. He didn’t want to hurt the lass’s feelings by being too blunt, but he could see it might well come to that. He took a swig of his wine and set the goblet down. He could feel a drop clinging to his lip, but before he could wipe it away, Morag surprised him by doing so.

He stiffened at her touch, his body rejecting her out of hand. He knew why, and the knowing was not a good feeling. She was a bonny lass, but she was not Adeline. Yet, mayhap the best way to forget Adeline was to accept the attention of this woman. “Thank ye,” he said, his voice coming out thick, but the thickness was not caused by Morag. It was the yearning for Adeline.

Morag’s eyes lit up, and he realized she believed the desire she heard in his tone was for her. “I’m done with my shift now,

so would ye like to dance?" she asked, leaning still farther over the table toward him and displaying her breasts nearly to their rosy buds.

No, accepting her attention was not the answer. He could not give one woman false hope to forget another. But how to let her down gently eluded him, so he picked up his wine goblet and took a swig to give himself time to think of a proper response.

"Mayhap ye should get yer gown properly fitted before ye attempt to dance," Adeline inserted into the silence.

The comment made him spit out his wine, and Morag gasped.

"I do believe Adeline is overly tired," Donnan said, his normally congenial tone hard. Donnan gave Alex an accusing look, as if he had somehow caused Adeline's show of jealousy, and God's blood the idea that he was the reason for her behavior did not displease him as it should.

"Well, I want to dance," Morag said and now looked to Donnan, much to Alex's relief. "Would ye care to dance with me?"

"I'd be happy to dance with ye," Donnan replied. "If Adeline dunnae mind."

"Why should I mind?" Adeline asked.

Donnan looked as if he was about to say something, but then he clamped his mouth shut and gave Adeline a tight look before leading Morag away.

"She's trying to make ye jealous, ye ken."

Alex turned to Adeline, and whatever reply might have come to him was lost. He plunged into the sea of glittering jealousy that was her eyes and down he went, sinking with the heavy weight of his desire. A slow, satisfied smile turned up the corners of his lips. He tried to fight it, but the tide of emotions was too much. He liked that she was jealous. He had no right to, but it didn't matter. He could see she was

physically trying to fight her own reaction. Her delicate hands were curled into fists. Her nostrils were flared, and he could hear her clicking her teeth together.

He should let her comment pass, but he couldn't. "She dunnae have what it takes to make me jealous."

"And what is that?" Adeline asked, her voice suddenly low and husky.

What was this woman doing to him? He was struggling to remain loyal to his brother, and that burned him with shame. He didn't say a word, but Adeline's lips parted with a slow inhalation, and understanding came into her eyes. She knew he wanted her.

"Alex." She breathed out his name like a sigh. He wanted to lean closer to her just to capture her breath. He found himself fighting not to do so, but it felt impossible. The noise of the clan members talking faded. The music disappeared, and everything but her blurred. He could only see the pulse beating frantically on her pale neck. He could only hear the inhalations and exhalation that came from between her lips. He was not touching her, but he could feel her.

"Come dance!"

The high-pitched demand was like a bucket of freezing loch water being thrown on him. He stiffened, Adeline jerked backward, and they both looked to Elspeth, who stood behind them on the dais with her hand outstretched to Alex. He opened his mouth to deny her, but he shut it. He'd nearly forgotten himself by merely sitting next to Adeline. He stood and took Elspeth's hand and forced himself not to look at Adeline. "I'd be honored," he forced out.

"Of course, ye should be," Elspeth replied with a wink. "I'm an excellent dancer."

They took the floor with the other couples, and as they started to dance, Adeline and Fingal came onto the dance floor as well.

"Ye should nae give her up," Elspeth said.

He blinked at the very blunt, very dangerous statement, and despite himself, his pulse ticked up with hope. He swallowed down the false emotion. “There is nae hope for us, Elspeth. Surely, ye can ken that.”

The woman frowned. “But dunnae my da’s announcement about the Night Guard give ye hope?”

“Aye. Hope that I’ll gain a home of my own and warriors, but nae yer sister. Yer sister is taken. Ye ken this.”

Elspeth frowned. “By whom? Yer brother?”

“I’d say so, given their in a marriage contract.” His voice was hard, but he didn’t care. What sort of game was Elspeth playing?

She missed a step, stumbled, grabbed him, and completely stopped dancing. She stood there gaping at him. “What did ye just say?”

An uneasy feeling came over him. “I said yer sister is taken, given she is now in a marriage contract with my brother.” Elspeth’s face went white, causing a warning sound in his head. “Elspeth, what is it?”

“Will ye excuse me?” she said, barely above a whisper and not waiting for him to answer before she walked away. He watched her as she weaved through the dancers straight to Adeline and Fingal. They stopped, Elspeth began to speak, and then the color slowly drained from Adeline’s face as her hand fluttered to her neck. He didn’t know what Elspeth had said to Adeline, but whatever it was had greatly upset her. Shock settled on her features, and she waved Fingal away.

The moment Fingal turned to depart the dance floor, Alex strode to catch up with him. “Brother!” he called out, weaving in and out through all the people milling about.

Fingal stopped and glanced back over his shoulder, a look of relief sweeping over his face. “I was just coming to find ye.”

“What’s occurred with Adeline?” Alex demanded, even as he was looking back over his shoulder to locate her once more. It took him a moment to find her. She was no longer standing with Elspeth but was near the great hall door with her father. They spoke animatedly and looked to be arguing.

“It seems,” Fingal said from behind him, bewilderment underlying his words, “she did nae ken she’d been entered into a marriage contract with Donnan.”



“Tell me it’s nae true,” Adeline said as she faced her father. She was so upset by what Elspeth had told her that Adeline didn’t care who might hear them. But her father apparently did because he glanced away from her momentarily, as if to ensure there was no one who might be too close. That’s when she knew for certain it was true, and her stomach clenched. “Da.” It was all she could say for a moment. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she felt ill.

Her father’s face fell, and he did look sorry, but she could not muster one bit of pity for him. Anger burned hot within her. “Ye lied to me,” she finally managed to say.

A hardness flickered over his features.

“Why?” She swiped at the tears rolling down her face. “Why would ye enter me into a marriage contract and nae tell me? Why would ye give me yer word I had two fortnights and then break it?”

“I did what I must to protect ye, Adeline.”

She laughed near hysterically at that. “Ye are hurting me, nae protecting me!”

His eyes narrowed. “Keep yer voice down, Adeline.”

“Why?” she seethed. “So that yer clan dunnae ken how ruthless ye are?”

Misery and regret etched his face, but she refused to allow her heart to feel any compassion. “Adeline, I am sorry ye feel

that way, but ye ken in yer heart my goal is to protect ye always.”

“Condemning me to a loveless marriage out of fear is nae protecting!”

“And what were ye trying to do, Adeline?” he demanded, his face now red. “Ye clearly we’re nae going to willingly agree to wed Donnan after two fortnights.”

“I had hoped,” she said, pausing as the full weight of her problem hit her. “I had hoped I could sway ye to allow Alex to court me, Da,” she said, filled with an all-consuming desperation. “’Tis nae too late. Alex will win a place on the Night Guard, and then he will lead a battle, and if he wins the king will—”

“Nay,” her father said, making her near speechless with anger. “’Tis better for everyone this way. Ye must trust me.”

“Everyone? Who is it better for? Me?” she ground out. “I dunnae even like Donnan. He’s harsh with me, and he nearly forced himself upon me when he walked me to my bedchamber.”

Her father frowned. “He attempted to ravish ye?”

“Well, nay, but he tried to steal a kiss,” she said.

“That is a far cry from ravishment, Adeline.”

Her father making excused for Donnan simply because he didn’t want to see the man was not for her, enraged her. “It was against me will!”

“I admit I do nae like that,” he relented to her everlasting relief, but then he took a breath and said, “but as yer in a marriage contract now, I’d say a kiss is his right.”

She gawked at her father. She could hardly believe what his fear was driving him to do and to accept. It was not like him at all. She took a deep breath, thinking what to say, how to argue for him to see. “Is it better for Donnan to be wed to a woman he wants simply to best his brother? Or is it better for ye? Ye are telling yerself that ye are doing all this for me, and

mayhap ye are, but that's fear making ye do it. Then again, mayhap the fear that's driving ye is fear for yerself. Mayhap what ye fear is nae that I'll endure hardship. Mayhap ye fear Alex will nae become a powerful laird, and ye'll nae get a strong union in marriage from my wedding him!"

Her father's palm hit her face before she knew what was occurring. Her head jerked to the side with the force of his slap, her skin immediately stung, and tears sprang to her eyes. Slowly, she turned her head until she was looking at her father once more, and the guilt in his eyes broke her heart. She raised her hand to her throbbing cheek. She had never fought with her father in her life. She had never defied him, but in this, she would. She understood in this moment, she had no choice. "I love him." She was certain of nothing but this.

"'Tis nae enough, Adeline. Everything I own, I own at the pleasure of the king. That is what being born a bastard gets ye. At least with Donnan, if Moira took the lairdship, which I do nae believe she ever would, Donnan would still have a home for ye to live in and enough warriors to protect ye, as is his right as a true son of hers and Laird Gordons. As a bastard Alex has no rights just as I had none. It dunnae matter how hard ye work or how many battles ye win, it can all be taken away. I dunnae want that life for ye. I did nae want to go on the mission I did when yer mother died, but I could nae say nay if I was to gain the castle, the lairdship, the men."

"Ye feel guilty," she whispered, "because ye wanted it for yerself. That's it, isn't it?"

He didn't answer, but he stiffened and she knew she was correct. "Mama did nae care, but ye did. And ye left, and she died because ye left her for greed. *Yer greed.*" His nostrils flared with her words. "She did nae care about a grand stronghold or servants. She only cared to have ye. But ye needed the rest. Ye killed her," she accused, such pain gripping her that she wanted to double over with it.

"Nay. Yer sister killed her."

Adeline felt her lips part with shock. Elspeth had been right. “Ellie did nae kill Mama.”

“She did,” her father replied, his words unbending.

Adeline could feel each beat of her heart in her eyes and hear it in her ears. “Ye need to believe that so ye can live with yerself. Yer greed killed Mama.”

“Nay. Yer sister was sickly, and yer mama went out in the cold to get herbs. The cook told me so.”

Adeline could not retreat. He had to see. He had to. “Ye left her because ye wanted all the glory and the gains. She’d nae have gone out if ye had stayed. Ye would have.”

Her father’s face was as stone. “Alex Gordon will do the same. He is the same as me.”

She opened her mouth to say he wasn’t, but did she really know? And her father, clever man that he was, read her hesitation and spoke. “He could have picked ye, and he did nae.”

“He did nae ken me well enough then,” she said, hoping with all her heart that she was right.

“Ye barely kenned him,” her father countered, “and yet, ye bargained for him to get the chance to be on the Night Guard.”

“Because I thought I was gaining time to learn him and decide my heart.” And she had learned him. He was honorable and kind and loyal, but would he pick her over the Night Guard now if presented with the choice? She just didn’t know, but she did know one thing for certain. “I will nae wed Donnan.”

“Then I will nae ever appoint Alex as a commander. Tell him. Tell him ye love him, and then tell him ye will nae wed his brother and that it is costing him the only thing he desires. See what yer love gets ye.”

She was too sad to say more, so she turned from her father to leave, but he caught her by the arm. “Addie, I vow, I do this for ye.”

She tugged her arm out of her father's hold. "Ye have convinced yerself of a lie, but I suppose ye had to in order to live with yerself." With that, she flung open the door to the great hall and began to run down the corridor. Behind her, the thud of footsteps resounded, and she assumed her father was following her so she pushed herself to run faster. She burst into the shadowy courtyard, and a draft of cold air hit her, making her pause.

"Adeline."

She turned at her name and found Donnan standing there. "What did ye do?"

She frowned at his question. "What did *I* do?"

"Aye. I saw yer da slap ye."

If she'd ever had a doubt that Donnan might be the man for her, which she had not, his immediately assuming it was due to something she had done and not anything her father could have possibly done, reinforced what she already knew: This man was not the right choice for her. She had to make him see that so he'd break the marriage contract, so that there would remain a chance that her father would appoint Alex as commander. "Why do ye want to wed me, Donnan?"

"Ye're verra bonny."

"There are many lasses bonnier than I am, and I'm certain as future laird of the Gordon clan, ye could have yer pick."

He stared at her for a long silent moment. "I want ye, and clearly, ye want me or ye would nae have agreed to the marriage contract."

"I did nae agree," she said, realizing she'd have to be blunt. "I only just learned of it this night."

"I see," he said slowly, his lack of reaction surprising her and making her wonder something.

"Ye guessed," she said.

"Aye."

“I told my da I would nae wed ye. I...I dunnae think we are right for each other.”

“Because ye think Alex is the man for ye?” The coldness in his tone made her shiver.

“I think so,” she said, “but my da says he will nae appoint Alex a commander if he makes the Night Guard if I dunnae wed ye.”

This was Donnan’s chance to show the same loyalty to Alex that Alex had shown him when he’d let him win the match between them, but when Donnan said, “Then ye best wed me,” she was not surprised. Anger and disappointment swirled in her.

“Ye could back out of the contract,” she said.

His lips pressed into a thin line. “I’ll nae.”

She blew out an exasperated breath. “I’m nae a prize to be stolen from yer brother, Donnan.”

“’Tis where ye’re wrong,” he replied, and turning, he left her standing alone in the dark.

She could not wed him, but she could not be the reason Alex never achieved his dream.

Chapter Fifteen

“Alex,” came a woman’s voice from behind him.

He swiveled around at the sound of it to find Elspeth in the doorway of the castle.

“Did ye follow me out here?” Alex asked.

Elspeth arched her eyebrows. “Did ye come out here looking for my sister?”

“I dunnae even ken why I’m out here,” he said, shoving a hand through his hair.

“Ye saw my da slap Adeline,” Elspeth stated matter-of-factly. “I have nae ever seen him do such a thing,” she added, but now her voice quivered just a bit, revealing how much it had shocked her.

“’Tis nae my place to have come after her.”

Elspeth nodded. “’Tis nae, but ye did just the same.”

“She’s betrothed to my brother,” he said, though he didn’t know why he’d stated out loud what they both knew.

“It would seem so, whether she wishes it or nae.”

He frowned. “This dunnae make sense. Why would yer da approach my da about a marriage contract for Adeline and Donnan, and then nae tell Adeline that he’d entered her into it?”

“I was to ken that it was yer da who approached mine,” Elspeth said.

“That’s nae correct.” Was it? Had Donnan lied?

Elspeth shrugged. “I dunnae ken for certain. ’Tis what Adeline believed, though.”

“So, she did agree to the marriage contract,” he bit out.

“Nay. She did nae. Or at least nae like ye think.”

“Explain yerself please.”

“’Tis nae my place. ’Tis Adeline’s.”

“It dunnae matter,” he growled. “She is to wed my brother, and I would nae betray him.”

“I do agree ye should nae betray family that is loyal to ye.” The way Elspeth stated it, as if there was something else to be said, had him staring hard at her, but she revealed nothing in her expression.

“Are ye suggesting Donnan is nae loyal to me?” he demanded. His brother was competitive, yes, but disloyal, no.

“I would nae ever say such a thing unless I kenned it to be a fact.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I do believe people underestimate ye, Elspeth.”

She flashed a smile. “I do believe ye are correct, Alex. I’m going to return to the great hall now. I left Fingal standing alone. Will ye be coming with me?”

He shook his head. He’d calmed down enough not to go charging after Adeline, but if he saw her father in the great hall, he did not trust himself not to say something to the man. “Which way is the garden?” he asked so he’d not go in the same direction as Adeline.

“That way,” Elspeth replied and pointed to a pebbled path to the west.

“What’s the other way?”

“The loch.”

He nodded. “Is there a good place to enter to take a swim?”

“At night, the best place to enter is around the first three stones. At the bottom of the seagate stairs, head left, pass the three large standing stones, and then ye’ll see a narrow path between the fourth and fifth one. “Take it, and ye can enter the loch to swim with ease.”



Alex was beginning to think Elspeth had played a joke on him by sending him off to find a passage to the loch that didn't exist, but after a long walk, he came to the stones that were well away from the castle. After passing the first three stones, he walked for some time before coming to the fourth, but then he had to stop and search around through thick brush in search of a passage between the fourth and fifth stones.

A breeze picked up and sent the smell of water toward him, which told him he was most definitely in the right spot. He pushed the brush to the side, stepping onto the passage, which he could now see was well worn. He released the brush behind him and made his way between the two stones that rose high above him. When he got to the end of the passage, it opened to expose a calm loch, which glistened under the moon that was now out. The smooth water beckoned to him. He moved toward it, glancing around the area to ensure he was indeed alone. To his right were multiple cliffs of sharp rock with one particular cliff that seemed to jut out over the water. It would, he decided, be an excellent place to hike to and jump into the water from if one was inclined to do such things, which he was, just not at the moment.

He needed and wanted to feel the cold bite of the water to take away the heat of anger that lingered from what he'd witnessed in the great hall...and to keep himself from going to find her. He wanted to ensure she was all right and seek answers about why her father might have kept the wedding contract from her, but neither would change the fact that she was in the contract to wed his brother.

He laid his weapon in the sand, kicked off his shoes, and discarded all but his braies, then stepped into the loch. The cool water slipped over his feet, then his ankles, shins, thighs, and waist as he waded in, taking the bite of his anger away with each step. He stopped there, inhaled a long, deep breath, and closed his eyes. He was here to win a spot on the guard, not Adeline's heart. He had given any chance of a future with

her up for the Night Guard and for his brother and father, and those circumstances had not changed. Yet, *he* had changed.

He had learned she was brave, bighearted, and passionate, and though he had felt unworthy of her without making the Night Guard, if he had it to do all over now, he would have presented her the choice.

He had to quit thinking about her. With that in mind, he dove under the surface and swam as hard and fast as he could, concentrating only on the way his lungs began to burn as he glided through the water. The burn became a pressing need for air, but he kept swimming, pushing himself until all he could think of was air. There was room for no other thought but that, and that's exactly how he wanted it to be, so he swam even farther, memorizing the feeling that he would draw from later when distracted. Finally, when he could take no more and he began to feel dizzy, he broke the surface, opening his eyes to the moonlight.

He treaded water as he wiped his eyes to clear his vision, and that's when he heard a dog barking. He glanced toward the sound. On the jutting cliff he had noted earlier stood, by the look of it, a woman in nothing but her undergarments. He blinked, sure he must be seeing things, but when he opened his eyes again, the woman was still there. The cream of her arms, legs, neck, and chest was in stark contrast to the night, but her hair, which had to be dark, blended with the shadows, and the more he stared at her, the more he became certain he was looking at Adeline and Sciath. He squeezed his eyes shut once more. He was seeing things that were not there. That's what this was. And yet, when he opened his eyes again, she stood there still, but now her arms were raised above her head, her hands touching at the fingertips as if to dive, and the beast was barking as if she were trying to deter Adeline.

For one breath, he fought with himself about whether he was really seeing Adeline or not, but when her arms went down and she shook them at her sides as if to shake off fear, then raised them again, he was certain of two things: Adeline was standing on the cliff, and she was going to jump.

“Adeline!” he bellowed, but the moment her name left his mouth, he realized his mistake. She jerked in midair, likely distracted by his calling her name, and instead of a smooth dive, she overturned and barreled toward the water with her back down.

Black fear swept through him as he watched her fall, worrying she would smack the water with her back. At the last moment, she seemed to bring her feet far enough under her to cut the water with them, but he wasn't positive. She disappeared beneath the surface, her splash resounding through the night and the cacophony of rushing blood in his ears for one moment before all fell silent.

He started toward her in a frenzy, feeling as if his life depended on it. His lungs protested the dizzying pace, having just recovered from the last swim, but he pushed himself, ignoring the burn. He cut his hands through the water relentlessly and kicked as if the hounds of Hell were nipping at his feet. Just as he neared where he thought she had dived in, she popped up, back first, head still underwater, and he released a roar of grief into the night.

Icy fear twisted in his chest as he grabbed her and flipped her over. Her eyes were shut, and he pressed his ear close to her mouth, relief rolling through him when warm breath tickled his skin. He rose, kicking his legs to keep them both afloat as he slid his hand around her abdomen before he started the swim toward shore.

“’Tis going to be all right, lass,” he said, talking to her as he swam, though she did not answer. “Ye must have passed out when ye hit the water,” he added, more to reassure himself than her. She probably couldn't even hear him.

“Ye distracted me,” she whispered, her voice thick and low.

He let out a relieved laugh and kept swimming, but suddenly he was aware of her in a way he'd not been just a breath ago. Her breasts pressed heavily against his arm, as did her round bottom into his groin. He shoved the dangerous

longing down as best he could and said, “I’m sorry, lass. I thought I was imagining ye at first, and when I realized I was nae and that ye were going to jump—”

“Dive,” she corrected, her voice a little less thick and low now, as if her body was starting to awaken fully. “I was diving. And I’m usually quite good at it.”

“I imagine ye are,” he agreed. “But I did nae ken that, and all I saw was the height, the darkness, and the danger to ye, and I simply reacted,” he finished as he reached shallow water. He stood and brought her with him. For one moment, they stood there, the length of her backside pressed to his, and desire gripped him again.

“I—” he started but paused because he heard lust clogging the one word and he wanted to rid himself of it before she heard it as well. He moved back just enough to put space between them but not so much that if her legs should give, he wouldn’t be able to catch her. “Can ye stand on yer own?” he asked as gentle waves lapped at his legs.

“Only since I was just shy of two summers,” she shot back with a hardy laugh that made him smile. He loved her wit.

God’s blood... He loved her.

The shock of the truth hit him, and he immediately released her. She turned slowly toward him until they were face-to-face. The moonlight glittered above her and caught her eyes in just a way that there almost seemed as if a light was shining from within her. Her wet hair was slicked back to reveal her face in its entire perfection, and she had her full lower lip caught between her teeth. The memory of how very kissable her mouth was made him as hard as stone. He would not kiss her. He would not touch her. She was to wed his brother, no matter how it came to be, and yet—

“How is it ye did nae ken ye had been entered into a marriage contract with Donnan if it was yer da who brought the suggestion to mine?”

She raised her hand to her face to brush a piece of her wet hair that was plastered to her right cheek and then another piece that seemed to cling to her neck. “My da told me it was yer da who brought the contract to him,” she said, and he heard his confusion echoed in her words.

“Yer da told ye this when?”

“He told me at yer home that yer da had presented a marriage contract for me to wed yer brother,” she replied as she struggled to pull away the strands of hair still sticking to her neck.

He stared at her, thinking how everything she did was graceful, even this. Her hair snaked across the long, slender column of her neck and down over her collarbones to plunge between her breasts, and there he lost all coherent thought because her undergarment—soaking, thin, and white—displayed a buffet of sin too great for him to turn away from. He was a starving man, and she was the sustenance he craved. Her breasts rose high, inviting and straining against the sheer undergarment, but more tempting, more wicked-thought-producing than that was the hint of dark buds, hard and protruding, that he could just make out in the moonlight. His blood rushed through his veins to heat him with fierce longing.

With an annoyed sound, she finally managed to get the wet strands with her fingers and tug them out from between her breasts, and he finally managed to force his gaze back to her face, where his eyes clashed with hers. What he saw there—the same deep longing he felt in his own gut—nearly had him reaching for her to kiss her, taste her, claim her, but God help him, she was not for the claiming. And still, knowing all this, knowing he should let any questions he had go, he said, “Then I’m confused. Did ye or did ye nae agree to wed Donnan?”

“I—” she started, but a sudden wave shoved her forward and into him, and his footing was just unstable enough that down they went, splashing into the water, him underneath and her on top. Water covered them both for a breath before he managed to push her up to the surface and bring himself up as

well. They both were sputtering, hair forward over their faces and struggling to stand. With one hand, he shoved his hair out of his eyes, then gripped her by the waist and tugged her to her feet.

She pushed her own hair back, and their eyes met again. “I agreed that I would wed him after two fortnights because it was what it took to get my da to change his mind about allowing only one representative per clan to compete for the Night Guard.”

Her words struck like an arrow to the gut. “But Donnan convinced him,” Alex said, repeating what Donnan had told him that day in the corridor.

“Nay,” Adeline replied, and the one word left no room for doubt. “I did. I made a bargain to save yer dream.”

“God’s blood,” he said, reaching for her and pulling her to him. Donnan had lied to him. He had been doing all in his power not to betray Donnan, to remain loyal to him, and part of that desire had been based on a lie his brother had told him. What if Donnan had lied about Moira threatening to take the lairdship from him and their father? His hands were around her back and his face buried against her neck in a breath. “Ye sacrificed yerself for me.” For a dream that had not even been the right one. She was the dream. She was what would make home. He let out a shuddered breath at the realization.

“Nae so noble as that,” she said, laying her cheek against his chest as her hands came to his shoulders. “I thought I’d be able to convince my da to allow ye to court me and that I’d be able to persuade ye to court me before the two fortnights were up. I thought—” Her voice broke on a sob. “I believed my da would not agree to the marriage contract until then. He vowed he would not, but he broke his vow.” Her words were bitter.

Her confession of what she had done for him—for them—was like a brand upon his soul. She pulled from him and then stepped away. “I’m sorry how it’s turned out. I—”

A sheen came to her eyes, and he stared in shocked amazement that she was apologizing to him. The waves that had been lapping at him grew in strength, so he motioned toward the shore. "Shall we?"

When she nodded, he took her by the elbow and led her out of the water. There waiting was Sciath, wagging her tail. Adeline glanced away from him toward Sciath. He wasn't certain what she was doing, but he watched as she walked away from him and to her dog by the cluster of rocks. Her hips swayed gently as she moved away, and the innocent, inherently feminine movement set a longing in him that singed his veins. She turned back, kneeled, patted her beast, then scooped up what he realized was her gown. She proceeded to put on. He tried to look away, but it was like trying to turn away from the most breathtakingly beautiful thing he'd ever seen. She bit her lower lip, he realized, when she was concentrating, and the pucker returned to her brow. She stepped into her gown, pulling it up and over each perfectly shaped leg, and then she bent forward, which gave him a full view of her inviting breasts. He wanted to cup them and let them fill his hands, and then he wanted to run his thumbs over the hard buds that still strained against the wet material of her undergarments. If it were possible to die from lust, he suspected he'd perish at any moment.

She started to stand, pulling up her garment as she did, and when she got the dress to her hips, she shifted to the left and right, making him grin. Then up the gown went past the curve of her waist, up over her lush breasts, and then she slipped each of her long, slender arms in before reaching back to lace it. That was apparently the hardest task because she grunted in frustration and quirked her mouth to the left and the right before turning away as she struggled to reach the laces.

He walked to her, and with each step desire built in him, so that when he was standing behind her, his need for her was a physical ache. Her scent hit him, and he had to take a breath to steady his shaking hands, so strong was his yearning to touch

her. “May I help ye with yer laces?” His tone was thick with wanting.

She nodded, and he took up the two ends of the dangling wet ties and began to clumsily loop them through the appropriate tiny holes. He’d never tied a woman’s gown, let alone done anything this intimate for a woman. Yes, he’d bedded women, and that was an intimate thing in its own sort of way, but this was different. The women he’d bedded he’d done so out of desire and a liking for them, but it had never been anything like what he felt for Adeline.

“I dunnae wish to wed him,” she whispered, her voice trembling. Alex’s gut clenched at her confession. “I told him as much tonight, hoping he’d end of the contract himself,” she continued. “But he said he would nae.”

His pulse beat harder with each breath he took, each word she spoke. His mind drifted to years from now if they were together, if they were wed, if Sciath was running about and there were children laughing gaily, running between them, tugging on her skirts, and he hoped this simple task of aiding her just as he was doing now, was a daily one. When her gown was laced all the way to the top, he set his hand to her shoulder and slowly turned her around.

They stood so close that her breasts brushed his chest, and the scent of freesia and loch that clung to her wafted over him. She tilted up her head and stared at him for a long, silent moment, and finally, she said again, “I dunnae want to wed him. I dunnae want to wed him because...because I love ye,” she whispered. “I dunnae love him. I kinnae ever love him because ye have my heart. I dunnae care that he can give me a grand home or if ye ever can give me one at all. We could have a small cottage or a cave—what does it matter? Our great hall would be made of love and be welcoming always.”

Her words were the salve he’d craved for years, always feeling he needed to prove his worth before he could be loved by another, count on another. Adeline would stick by his side no matter what. He raised his hand to her face and brushed a

lock of her wet hair back. “I love ye, too. I have fought it foolishly, but it’s nae a thing that can be defeated.”

“Ye love me?” she whispered.

The doubt in her voice, the doubt he’d caused, filled him with aching regret that made him blanch. “Aye, lass. Ye captured my heart the moment I saw ye. I dunnae want ye to wed Donnan, either.”

“My da will nae appoint ye commander if I dunnae wed Donnan. He told me so tonight.”

“I dunnae care,” Alex said. He cupped her face in his hands and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. “If I have yer love, it’s all I need.”

She wound her hands around his wrists as she looked at him. “Are ye certain? Before, ye chose nae to court me so ye could have a chance to be on the Night Guard and because of yer word to my da.”

“Aye, and yer da lied and manipulated ye, and he manipulated me to give my word, but I was a complete fool, Adeline, driven by my own belief that I needed to gain that position to have a home where I felt I belonged and to be worthy.”

She set a hand to his cheek. “What of yer brother? Will ye feel ye are betraying him?”

“Nay,” Alex said, meaning it. “He lied to me about persuading yer da to allow me to compete, and God above only kens what else he’s lied about.”

“Why did ye let him win the match?”

He told her quickly of what Donnan had told him about Moira taking the lairdship away from his da if Donnan did not secure the win.

“Do ye think he lied?”

“I dunnae ken now, but I wish to ascertain what is truth and lie so I ken how to deal with him going forward. The only

way I can do that, though, is by going home and confronting Moira.”

“But if ye’re nae here for yer matches—”

“I’ll stay and compete in them and leave when they are done, but then I will come back for ye, Adeline, win or lose.”

The smile that lit her eyes was the greatest gift he’d ever been given. He brought her into the full circle of his arms and hugged her tight. “I’m going to talk to yer da,” he said, making the decision as he said the words to her.

She pulled back, but he did not release her. He knew before she shook her head that she was going to protest. “Nae yet. Wait until the matches are over and ye have secured the spot. I will pretend to go along with his plan for me until then.”

“Nay,” he said, his chest tightening at how she was willing to do such selfless things for him. “I wish him to ken ye are more important to me than the Night Guard, and that he kinnae keep us apart.”

“Ye’re certain?” she asked.



Adeline’s whole being seemed to be filled with wanting as she waited for Alex to answer. The wind picked up as they stood there, and the air grew heavier with moisture that pressed down on her like a blanket. She shivered, and he pulled her fully into the circle of his arms.

“Adeline.”

The word was breathed into the side of her neck more than spoken, and the reverence she heard in it made her heart jolt.

“I’m certain, Adeline.” He pulled back and looked at her for but a moment before his lips gently brushed hers. “Are ye certain?”

She laughed at that. “Aye. Since the day I first met ye. ’Twas like—”

“Being struck by lightning,” he said.

“Aye,” she replied as the wind grew stronger and whipped strands of her hair across her face.

“We should get back to the castle,” Alex said, looking away from her and to the sky.

Disappointment filled her. She did not want to part from him moments after they had truly just found each other. He looked to her once more, and the heartrending tenderness in his gaze sent a swirl of wild emotions through her stomach. A small smile tugged up his lips. He understood, even without her saying a word, and that...that was why he was meant for her.

He leaned close and pressed his forehead to hers. “I dunnae wish to return to the castle and part with ye, either. Believe me. But a storm is coming,” he said, his lips grazing hers as he spoke.

Knots were forming in her chest, and her belly had hollowed—and it wasn’t due to the impending weather. “I’ve a sudden fear,” she whispered. “I fear something will go amiss, and we will... We will be torn apart.”

He cupped her face and gently kissed to her forehead, her nose, and then once more across her lips. “If we are ever torn apart,” he said, kissing the right side of her neck and then the left before looking at her once more, “I will find ye. Or ye will find me. We’re tethered by fate, by fortune, by love.”

She nodded, his words soothing the sudden worry within her. “Kiss me,” she said, wanting to feel his lips on hers once more before they went back to the castle and had to face her father. She had no intention of allowing her father to force her to wed Donnan, and yet, worry had taken hold that somehow she’d be forced into it. A realization struck. “Make me yers,” she said, standing on her tiptoes to touch her lips to his. “Make me yers so I kinnae be forced to be Donnan’s.”

“Adeline,” Alex said, claiming her mouth. His tongue traced her upper and lower lip before demanding she open for

him, and she eagerly did. Their tongues swirled and touched in a dance as old as time. His lips were strong and hard, and he tasted of spice, and she kissed him with a hunger unlike anything she'd ever known.

His lips left hers to sear a path down her neck, then over her right shoulder and back up the way he had come. But this time, he kissed the base of her throat where she could feel her pulse beating wildly. He pulled back, one hand now around her back and the other at her neck. "I will nae let ye be forced to wed another. We dunnae have to—"

She pressed a finger to his mouth. "I ken we dunnae 'have' to. I want to be with ye. I want to give myself to ye and ye to me."

"Would ye nae wish to be wed first?" he asked, and she loved that he was thinking of her even in this moment when she could feel his desire pressed against her.

"I dunnae need to be wed," she said, taking his hand and pressing it to her chest where her life force beat fast, "to ken this a right, true, and forever love."

"God's blood, woman," he growled before swooping his mouth down to capture hers again. He nipped her lower lip and then sucked her upper lip between his teeth. His kiss was at first fast and powerful, sparking a flame within her so hot she thought she would melt. But then the kiss became slow and intimate, so that it was her soul that was melting into his as they became one.

He pulled back and broke contact, removing his plaid as he did so and laid it on the ground before stepping to her once more. He delved his hands into her hair, and her body tingled in response to his touch. "Ye make it impossible to resist ye," he said. She grinned, and he kissed her hard on the mouth before pulling back again, his gaze locking with hers. "But ken this. I need to be wed to ye. I need to ken ye are mine in every way a woman can be a man's."

“Are ye saying ye’ll nae take me now?” she asked, hearing the disappointment in her voice, though she did love his proclamation.

“Good god, nay!” he said, swooping her off her feet before she realized he was going to do it. Then he kneeled, gently laid her on his plaid, and came over her so that his legs were braced on the outsides of her thighs and his palms were by her shoulders. His dark hair had mostly dried and hung down on either side of his face. “I’m nae so strong as that. I just wanted ye to ken that ye will be my wife.”

“I want to be,” she assured him, rising just enough to grasp him behind the neck. “Now come to me before the storm takes us.”

“Sciath,” he ordered suddenly, “go guard.”

Sciath trotted off as if it were perfectly normal for Alex to give her commands. He looked down at Adeline and grinned wickedly as he leaned close to her, tucked his finger under the top of her gown, and tugged it down just enough that he exposed one of her buds. The cool air caressed her a moment before his tongue did. The contact of his warm mouth on her hard bud sent a jolt of desire through her and set an ache between her legs.

She moaned and delved her hands into his hair as he took her entire bud into his hot mouth. The pleasure was unspeakable. She arched up instinctively as he suckled her breast. Each pull made the pressure that had begun building in her increase and the ache within her grow. He left that breast to expose her other one and give it the same attention. She caressed the strong tendons of his back as he worked magic on her, making her burn and throb with need.

His hand roamed down her belly and lower to raise her skirts, and somehow, as he kissed her, he managed to take her undergarment off her. She felt his fingers trace up the exposed sensitive inner skin of her thigh, and then he came to the juncture between them, and he brushed his fingers ever so lightly over a place she had not known existed. It was pure

bliss. Every part of her responded to his touch, and the ache in her grew even stronger, making her feel almost crazed with need for something. “Alex,” she panted, as his fingers parted her and touched the sensitive spot that seemed to be at the very center of her body.

“Aye, lass, I ken ye need release, and I’m guiding ye there.”

Is that what she needed? Thank God above that he knew, because she certainly did not. His fingers rubbed her gently, but the light touch was perfect. It drove her nearly mad until she thrashed her head back and forth and thrust her hips toward him, and yet, he continued his ministrations faster and faster until the pressure that had been building in her exploded like a star across the sky. She burned bright, hot, searing liquid, and then she was melting into him.

Her heart was pounding in her ears, her head, her chest, every part of her, really. Alex moved his hand from the juncture between her thighs, rolled away from her for one breath, and came back with his braies discarded. He gently parted her knees, which she’d drawn up, and he came between her legs, hovering there for a moment. “There will be—”

“I ken,” she assured him, and because she saw the question on his face, she said, “The upstairs chamber maids do talk.”

“Ah,” he replied, sliding his hands under her bottom and then lifting her as he entered her slowly. Her body stretched to him as he came into her, and she had a moment of panic that he’d not fit, that it would hurt a great deal, but he brought himself to the hilt within her, and there was but a brief pinch, where he stilled, breathing heavily. She knew he was giving her time to become accustomed to him, and when the burn seemed to lessen, she placed a hand on his chest and nodded for him to continue.

He drew himself out nearly to the tip, and as he slid into her again, pleasure rippled through her body. He repeated the process over and over until she was once again in flames and digging her nails into his thighs. His movements became

faster, and his hands found their way back to her breasts to circle his thumb and forefinger over her buds. It was the last of what she could take. The touch of his fingers to her sensitive buds shoved her over a precipice on which she'd not even known she had been standing, and with a scream of pleasure, she dove off an unseen cliff as wave after wave of hot pulses consumed her. Her body clenched tightly around his, and he grunted hard, stilling and filling her with the liquid of a life they might make.

He collapsed downward, catching himself before he fell atop her, and then he rolled off, taking her with him and into the crook of his arm. They lay there panting, the wind whistling around them, and a drizzle started to fall. Gooseflesh peppered her bare skin, and she looked up to find Alex staring at her. There was an intensity in his gaze unlike anything she'd ever seen from him.

"What is it?" she whispered, setting her palm against his stubbled cheek.

"I kinnae believe ye are mine, 'tis all." He shook his head, and understanding filled her.

She rolled on top of him and kissed him on the lips. "Ye were always worthy to me."

"I ken that now," he replied, his voice hoarse with his emotions. "I love ye, lass. All I want now is to wed ye and to have bairns with ye, and mayhap—"

"A great hall where ye always feel welcome," she supplied with a smile.

He gave her a brief kiss. "I ken now that it is nae the hall but the people in it, and as long as ye are with me, I'll always feel like part of a family."

"And I will, too," she said.

"Shall we?" he asked, looking toward the castle.

"Aye," she responded. "Time to face our obstacles."

"Nay, soon-to-be wife. 'Tis time to conquer our obstacles."

And as if nature had been patiently waiting for them, the moment they stood, lightning streaked across the dark sky, illuminating it in spidery trails of silver and pink, and a deluge of rain dumped down icy cold from above. Alex donned his clothing, grabbed her hand, and they began to run together toward the seagate stairs. At the foot of the stairs, Sciath was patiently waiting, and she led the way to the top of the stairs and through the gate.

Alex paused at the top stairs and gave Adeline a pained look before releasing her hand. "I would have Donnan learn of us from my mouth and nae by seeing us together."

Her heart swelled that even after discovering Donnan had lied to him, Alex thought to do what he could to protect Donnan's feelings. "I would nae have it any other way, Alex. This...this is one of the qualities that has made me fall in love with ye."

He pressed his lips to hers and said, "Some night, when we are alone and in our bed, I'll tell ye the verra first thing about ye that intrigued me. Now, go into the castle. I'll ensure ye get in safely, then follow. And tomorrow morning, directly after we break our fast, meet me at yer da's solar with yer da. Aye?"

"Aye," she agreed, excitement filling her. She patted her leg for Sciath to follow her and then dashed across the courtyard through the pouring rain toward the castle door. When Adeline and Sciath were nearly there, the dog let out a bark as she looked to the left of the door, to the shadows. Adeline frowned. There stood Morag.

"What are ye doing out here?" Adeline called out as she neared the door.

Morag pulled the hood from her cape up over her head, and Adeline noted the woman's hands were trembling. "Is everything all right?" Adeline asked.

"'Tis fine," Morag bit back, but her voice trembled as her hand had. "I was just coming from a swim and was caught by the weather."

Adeline's heart stuttered a bit to think Morag might have seen her with Alex, but no, no one ever came to that private spot. Still, she waited tensely for the woman to say something, but Morag turned her back to Adeline and opened the great hall door. Adeline followed her through, letting out a sigh of relief as the warmth of the castle rolled over her. The door closed behind them, and Morag fled down the corridor to the servant's bedchambers without bidding Adeline goodnight. Adeline frowned after the woman. They'd never been friends, but Morag had never been so frosty to her. Then again, she supposed Morag could think Adeline was the reason Alex had not returned the woman's attentions. She'd be right, and the thought made Adeline grin as she started toward the stairs.

Adeline yawned and an overwhelming tiredness settled on her. She started up the stairs and decided as she reached the top that she would check on Morag tomorrow. Even if the woman blamed her for Alex not flirting with her, that certainly did not make them enemies, and Adeline wanted Morag to know that if she needed someone to talk to, she could confide in Adeline.

Chapter Sixteen

“What’s this about, Adeline?” her father demanded as they left the great hall the next morning. She was so nervous for the upcoming talk with her father that her mind went totally blank on what to say. She didn’t want to tell him the truth of it until they were in private.

Just as panic was gripping her, Elspeth took her hand and squeezed it. Adeline glanced to her right and smiled thankfully at Elspeth, whom she had confided in about her and Alex’s plan earlier that morning. Elspeth had insisted she and Fingal be present to support them, and Adeline was more than grateful for the support now.

“Da,” Elspeth said as they left the stairwell for the passageway to the solar. “I do believe Adeline may wish to speak to ye about the slap.”

Adeline felt her lips part with shock, and she scowled at Elspeth, who shrugged helplessly. Well, bluntness was one way to approach it.

“I already told ye this morning that I am sorry for it. I lost my temper,” their father said, “and I do feel terrible about it.”

At that moment, they rounded the corner from their father’s bedchamber, and there by his solar door stood Alex with Fingal at his side. When Adeline’s gaze met Alex’s, she was certain everything would be all right.

“What’s this?” her father asked. They paused in front of Alex and Fingal, which put her father face-to-face with Alex. “Ye should be preparing for yer matches today.”

“I’m ready,” Alex said, and the confidence in his voice left no doubt in Adeline’s mind. “I have need to speak with ye, though,” Alex said and reached out to take Adeline’s hand. “About yer daughter.”

A shadow of annoyance crossed her father's face as he skimmed his gaze over each of them. "There is nae anything to say. Adeline is to wed yer brother, and ye ken what will happen if ye try to interfere," her father bit out, swung open the door, and strode into his solar. "Adeline and Elspeth, come inside and shut the door behind ye."

Adeline's heart dipped, but Alex squeezed her hand. "Where ye go, I will always follow." His words settled her and stopped the trembling that had begun, and together they entered the room as her father turned toward the door.

"If ye dunnae have loyalty to yer brother," her father said, looking directly at Alex, "then mayhap ye should think what pursuing my daughter, who is clearly foolish, will mean for ye and the Night Guard."

Beside her, Alex stiffened and drew Adeline to his side, as if to protect her from her father's harsh words. "Adeline is nae a fool, and I ken well what pursuing her means. And I dunnae care what ye strip me of when it comes to the Night Guard as long as I have Adeline. She is the most important thing to me. She is what I desire more than anything, and being on the Night Guard will nae bring me one bit of happiness without her."

"Please listen, Da," she said, speaking up.

"Adeline," her father said, the one word a hard reprimand.

"Da," she said again, releasing Alex's hand to go to her father. She strode across the room and took his hand, relieved when he did not pull away. "Alex has been honorable to Donnan. 'Tis his brother who has been dishonorable to him. He kenned that Alex cared for me so he did all in his power to take him from me, nae because of me but because of jealousy. Donnan dunnae care for me." She told her father quickly of Donnan's lie that it was her father to approach his with the marriage contract. "He said this because he thought to put doubt in Alex's mind and make him think I was perfectly agreeable to a marriage with Donnan so he'd turn away from me more easily."

“Are ye trying to convince me or yerself, Daughter, that it was all right for this man to be so easily swayed from yer side?”

“It dunnae matter what lies he told me, Laird Brodie,” Alex inserted. “And ye’re right, I did give up too easily, but that was because I doubted myself and my worth.”

Adeline held her breath on the light of understanding she thought she saw in her father’s eyes.

“I thought if I could gain a position on the Night Guard and acquire my own stronghold that then I would have value that someone could appreciate. But Adeline helped me see that I already possess that value, and meeting yer daughter made me realize that what I truly was seeking I’ve found in her.”

His words snatched Adeline’s breath with happiness, but she could see her father was not convinced. “Da, his path dunnae have to be yers, nor does mine have to be Mama’s. He will nae choose battles over me and leave me.” Her father flinched at that, and she squeezed his hands. “Ye have to let go of yer guilt, of yer hatred with yerself, because ye are taking out yer pain on me and on Elspeth. Elspeth did nae kill Mama,” she said, looking to her sister. She motioned for Elspeth to come to them, and she slowly did to stand in front of their father. “And I will nae die as Mama did simply because I wed Alex.”

Her father glanced quickly to Alex. “Aye, Laird, I will wed yer daughter.”

Adeline had to bite her cheek on a grin. “Da,” she said and waited for her father to focus on her once more, “Alex is a good and honorable man. I ken ye see it. He will keep me safe, and if he does have to go away, I can stay here at our home. ’Tis nae like it was with Mama. I wish yer blessing. I dunnae wish to defy ye, and neither does he, but Da, I will stand with Alex.”

“As will I, Laird,” Fingal said, speaking up. “If ye turn my brother away from the Night Guard competition, I will leave

with him. I will give up my position as part of the king's strategic council."

"I'll leave, too, Da," Elspeth said, surprising Adeline. She grinned at her sister. "I love ye, Da," Elspeth said, "and I have longed for yer love, but—"

"Ye've my love, Daughter," their father said, his voice cracking, and Elspeth flew into his arms. They hugged for a moment, and then he released her to face them all. "Since last night, I've thought of little else but what ye said to me, Adeline, and hearing all this now, I ken ye are right." He turned to Elspeth. "I'm sorry, lass. I did put the blame for yer mama's death on ye because I did nae want to face the selfishness that led me to leave her for glory and fortune. I hope ye can forgive me." Elspeth nodded. "And, Adeline..." He shook his head. "Ye are yer mama's daughter—stubborn as the winter is long. She was determined to wed me, regardless of what stood in our way, and I can see ye have that same determination to wed this man." Her father glanced to Alex. "Ye will nae ever put the Night Guard before her."

Alex smiled, and Adeline let out a sigh of relief. "Nay, Laird. I nae ever will, and if I'm called away by the king—"

"She will be here with her sister in the safety of my home," her father said.

"Or," Fingal said, speaking up, "they could be with me, in the safety of my home, which I am hoping will include Elspeth." Fingal looked to Elspeth.

"Ye wish to wed me?" she gasped.

"Of course, he wishes to wed ye," their father said. "Ye are a bonny, smart lass. He'd be a clot-heid nae to wed ye." And with that Elspeth burst into happy tears.



"Donnan sees us," Adeline said as she and Alex descended the seagate stairs side by side. "Do ye still wish to speak to him before the matches begin?" she asked.

“Aye,” he said, glancing at her. There was a lethal calmness in his gaze that set her at ease. He had four matches to fight today, and possibly one of them would be against Donnan. She did think it best for him to settle this business before the matches, but he had not asked her opinion and she had not wanted to give it without his request. “Do ye think it a good idea?”

“I do,” she assured him, glad he had asked her. It was but one more thing that showed her Alex was exactly the man she believed him to be.

“If ye would rather nae be in the conversation—”

“Where ye go, I go,” she said, repeating his earlier words.

“And I’m the luckiest man alive for that privilege.” He winked at her as Donnan stalked toward them. She was glad he was coming to them. They’d have more privacy by the stairs than by the tournament arenas.

As Donnan stopped in front of them, Adeline inhaled a sharp breath at the hatred blazing in his eyes. He settled his gaze firmly on her, ignoring his brother. “Where have ye been, Adeline?” Donnan asked, and his tone sent a ripple of unease down her spine. There was something in it, some measure of knowing mixed with a smugness that boded for ill returns.

“She’s been in her da’s solar with me, Fingal, and Elspeth, Brother.”

“I am nae speaking to ye,” Donnan said, as contempt settled on his face. “I am speaking to my future wife.” Finally, he turned his attention to Alex. “I’d like some privacy with her, if it pleases ye.”

“It dunnae,” Alex said, his tone cold and exact. “I ken ye lied to me about Laird Brodie approaching Da with the marriage contract, and now Laird Brodie does, too.”

“A harmless lie,” Donnan snapped.

“Nay.” Alex shook his head. “’Twas nae, and ye ken it. Ye wished to sway me to forget her, and ye thought that would get

ye what ye wanted.”

“’Tis nae my fault ye were so easily swayed.”

“Nay, that was my mistake, but I’ll nae make it ever again. Laird Brodie has agreed to break the marriage contract between ye and Adeline.”

Finally, there was a real reaction from Donnan. He frowned, even as he stiffened. “That kinnae be!”

“It can, and it is,” Adeline said. “We spoke to my da this morning, and he has come to see that Alex and I are meant to be together.”

“Ye would give up the Night Guard for her?” Donnan demanded.

“Aye, I would.”

“But he dunnae have to,” Adeline added. “My da has seen the error of such a thing, and he kens Alex will be an asset to the king as a member of the Night Guard and as a leader.”

“He’s nae either of those things yet,” Donnan said in a harsh tone.

“He will be,” Adeline replied.

His face set into a vicious expression for a moment, but Adeline watched in shock as he transformed it into a pleading one. “Alex, ye ken how Mama is. This could make her take the lairdship from me and Da—”

Alex held up a palm. “I would do just about anything for ye, Da, and Fingal, but I’ll nae give up Adeline, and after discovering how easily ye lied to me, I’m nae certain I believe now that Moira did make that threat.”

“She did,” Donnan said, his tone tight with desperation. “I vow to ye on our bond as brothers that she did.”

Adeline’s heart ached for Alex. She could see in the way he’d stiffened that he did not believe Donnan, but in that moment, the horn blew to announce the remaining Night Guard competitors should report to their arenas.

“Ye dunnae want to put me at risk for losing the lairdship, do ye?” Donnan demanded as the horn blew again.

“Alex,” Adeline said, fearful his brother would get to him.

He took her hand in his and squeezed. He looked at Donnan and said, “Would ye have a hand in my losing the woman I love?” Alex demanded. “Dunnae the bond of brotherhood run both ways?”

“Alex!” Adeline said, when the final horn for competitors rang. “Ye have to go.”

“Aye,” he replied, his gaze still focused on Donnan. “Adeline is mine. Ye would be wise to accept that. Best of luck to ye in the competition, Brother.” And without waiting for Donnan to reply, Alex stepped around him, hand in hand with Adeline, and started for the arena.

“Are ye all right?” she asked, nervous his focus would not be where it needed to be.

He stopped, turned to her, and took up her other hand as well. “Ye still love me?”

“Madly,” she assured him.

He leaned forward and kissed her full on the mouth. When he broke the kiss, he said, “That is all I will ever need to be all right.”

Chapter Seventeen

The last thing Alex wanted was to fight Donnan for one of the spots on the Night Guard, but fate was sometimes the cruelest of creatures, and Alex knew by the roar of the crowd, before Fingal came to the tent where Alex had been resting between his last match and this one, that Donnan had won his match—the one that meant he and Alex would indeed fight each other. One spot had already been won when Clyde MacDonald went undefeated in all of his matches, but Alex and Donnan had each lost to Clyde, a well-seasoned, impressive warrior trained by the undefeated laird of the MacDonald clan.

“Ye kinnae give him quarter,” Fingal repeated for the fifth time.

“I’ll nae,” Alex assured him, silently vowing to himself not to let his brother sway him once more. All his life Alex had striven to be a true brother, to be above reproach so that he would be accepted, be seen as worthy to be part of the Gordon family despite being a bastard. But he was worthy, bastard or not. Adeline had shown him that.

“He’d nae let ye win,” Fingal added.

“I ken,” Alex responded.

“It dunnae make ye less of a Gordon,” Fingal said.

Alex turned to his brother and clapped him on the shoulder. “I ken that now, and I’ll nae let him win. Adeline would kill me.”

“Ye’re right,” came her sweet voice from behind him. He turned toward the flap of his tent, and she stood there, holding the right side back, the sun shining behind her and making her hair seem to glow. She released the flap and walked toward him, Fingal silently exiting the tent as she did. She paused in front of Alex and gave him a look that showed every bit of her concern and made his chest tighten. “Ye got rest?”

“Aye, but ye did nae need to stay away.”

“I did. I wanted ye to get rest, and I ken ye would nae have been able to take yer hands off me had I come to yer tent.”

He grinned at her and reached around her to pat her bottom. “Aye, that’s true. I would have wanted to do this.” He patted her bottom again. “And this,” he said, kissing his way down her neck to between her breasts. “And this,” he finished, capturing her sweet mouth with his and giving her a long kiss that heated him with need for her.

With a moan, she pushed him gently away. “Come on,” she said with a look of yearning. “Donnan was making his way into the ring when I passed it.”

He nodded, and they started toward the tent flap, but she paused there and looked at him. “Whether ye win or lose—”

“I ken,” he replied, and he did with a surety he’d never experienced before. “Ye love me.”

“Aye. Night Guard or nae—” she started.

“Stronghold or cave for a home,” he inserted, guiding her out into the fresh air.

“Aye, stronghold or cave,” she assured him.

He grabbed her lovely round arse as she started to walk away from him, and she looked back. “I love ye, and if we end up in a cave, dunnae ye worry. I have a verra good way to keep ye warm.”

“A cave is nae sounding so bad,” she said with a giggle. “Now, go best yer brother.”



“I kinnae look!” Adeline wailed a little while later and covered her eyes as Donnan charged at Alex yet again with a ferociousness she’d never seen. At the clashing of swords, she demanded, “Tell me what’s happening.”

“Alex stopped an incoming hit from Donnan,” Fingal, who was standing beside Elspeth, said as the crowd began to cheer.

But just as abruptly as the crowd started to cheer, a collective gasp went up, and Adeline opened her eyes. She cried out at the sight of Alex on the ground and Donnan charging for him with his sword raised.

Alex had blood dripping down his forehead from an earlier cut, and she could see him squinting as he glanced to his left for his sword, which had been knocked out of his hands. “He’ll nae reach it!” she cried out, and without his sword, Donnan could easily get the last two points needed to win the match.

Just as Donnan reached Alex and brought his sword down to strike at Alex’s chest, Alex rolled to the left, swooped up his sword, and brought it up to send the blade across Donnan’s shin. The warriors surrounding the arena went crazy cheering, but Adeline was focused on Alex. Every time he’d gained a point on his brother, he looked regretful, and she feared he’d pull back and cost himself the match. “Fingal,” she said as Donnan danced backward with a roar.

“Aye?” Fingal responded.

“Do ye think Alex can make himself best yer brother?”

“I dunnae ken,” Fingal said, his tone grim. “Every time he makes a point, he looks more guilty.”

“Aye,” Adeline agreed. And with nothing else to do, she watched helplessly and sent a quick prayer up that Alex would not once again allow his past to dictate his future.



The blood dripping into his right eye made his vision blurry. That’s how he’d not seen the strike coming that had momentarily cost him his weapon. Alex wiped at the blood in the free moment he had where Donnan was reorganizing his plan of attack. He knew his brother would come from his left because that’s where Donnan was strongest and he believed Alex weakest, but what Donnan didn’t know was that Alex had practiced every night at home after the regular training of the day was over to quicken his reflexes on that side.

Donnan danced left and then right, and then he came straight at Alex from the left, exactly as Alex had thought he would. Alex spun just as Donnan brought his sword toward him and met his brother's weapon with his own. The force of Donnan's hit sent a vibration down the length of Alex's sword and through his hand to go up his arm. Alex looked to his brother in surprise. "Ye've been practicing."

"Aye," Donnan said, his tone as cold as the look upon his face. "Every night since the last time ye bested me in front of Da, and now I'm going to beat ye. I only wish Da were here to see it. I'm going to take the spot on the Night Guard," Donnan spat, swinging his sword up again. The force of the hit was stronger than the last. A brittle smile curved Donnan's lips for one moment. "And I'm going to take back Adeline."

"Ye may take the spot on the Night Guard," Alex said, "but Adeline is mine."

"For now," Donnan acknowledged, swinging his sword up over his head, and when Alex went to strike at Donnan's chest, he surprised Alex with how quickly he changed positions to block Alex's hit. Alex had to spin backward to reassess his own plan of attack, but his every thought was occupied with Donnan's comment that Adeline was Alex's "for now." Alex shoved the thought to the back of his mind, certain his brother was merely trying—and succeeding—at distracting him, and he decided to come straight at him and go sword to sword. Donnan had grown in strength, but Alex believed he was still stronger and quicker. And with the decision made, he charged.

Their swords met in a crisscrossed clash between them, chest to chest. Alex pushed forward, as did Donnan, but Alex was stronger, just as he believed. He edged his sword closer and closer to his brother's chest, his arms shaking with the effort and the cut on his forehead steadily dripping blood into his eye so that he could no longer see out of it. Just when he was a hairsbreadth from being close enough for his blade to touch Donnan and get the last point he needed, Donnan said, "I hope ye dunnae spend all yer nights wondering how I take Adeline when she's my wife."

The surety in his brother's voice did not have the effect of breaking Alex's concentration. It sent rage through him, and with a roar, he gave a final push and his blade met Donnan's chest. The crowd around them went wild, but Alex did not feel happiness. He saw the disbelief and misery on Donnan's face, and Alex was overwhelmed with sadness for him. He stepped toward Donnan so that his brother could hear him over the noise of the warriors and clanspeople. "I did nae ever want this divide between us."

"I did," Donnan said, his mouth twisting into a threat. "I have longed to best ye, and when it seemed I simply could not, I started dreaming of how to crush ye, to make ye inconsequential to Da, to take everything ye tried for, as ye have done to me all my life."

Alex stood in stunned silence as Donnan turned away from him and walked out of the arena, brushing past Fingal who tried to speak to him, and stalking away from all the crowd that had gathered for the spectacle. Laird Brodie had stepped forward and was quieting the crowd, and warriors kept coming up to Alex to congratulate him, but he watched his brother grow smaller as he made his way up the seagate stairs. His chest constricted in pain, and then he felt warm fingers entwine with his. He looked to his right and met Adeline's green gaze, filled to the rim with understanding and sympathy. "He will come to be happy for ye," she said, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"I dunnae think so," Alex replied and told her quickly of what Donnan had said, but before she could respond, her father called him to the front of the crowd.

"Go," Adeline said, trying to release his hand. "Enjoy yer moment."

"This is our moment," he replied and pulled her to him. "This is the beginning of our future."



The night had been perfect, but for some reason—perhaps because it was so perfect and everything seemed to be going

their way—Adeline felt uneasy. Alex stopped in front of her bedchamber door, having escorted her from the great hall where there had been a grand celebration for the new members of the Night Guard and the new leaders, of which Alex was one, and he turned to her.

She knew without asking him that the sadness shadowing his beautiful gray-blue gaze was because Donnan had not made an appearance at supper. “Did ye ask Fingal if he’d gone home?” she asked as Alex pressed his forehead to hers.

“Aye,” he said, the one word heavy with sadness. “He did nae ken. He looked for him as well but could nae find him. Fingal will ride home tomorrow if Donnan dunnae show up. I would go, but—”

“But ye are to leave in two days with my da,” she finished. Her father had announced at supper they had two days before they needed to depart.

“Adeline, will ye wed me before I leave?”

She pulled back from him and scowled. “Alex Gordon, if ye are asking me to wed ye because ye fear ye will nae be coming back to me, then the answer is nay.”

“Adeline,” he said, pressing his lips first to hers and then to her neck before capturing her hands with his and bringing them up to kiss her fingertips. “I dunnae fear I’ll nae be returning to ye. I hope ye have a bairn in yer belly now, and I dunnae want to take the chance that I’m nae back to wed ye before the babe is born.”

Her hands flew to her stomach as she gaped at Alex, who was now grinning at her. *A babe*. She felt her own lips tug into a smile, and happiness flow through her. “I had nae even considered...”

“I ken,” he said, resting his hand atop the one she had on her belly. They stood there silently staring at each other, grinning. “I love ye, almost wife of mine,” he whispered.

“I love ye, too, nearly husband of mine.” She stood on tiptoe, and he gave her a long kiss that made her toes curl in

her slippers. When she pulled away, she smiled up at him shyly and said, “Alex, if we are wed before ye leave—”

“Aye,” he said with a chuckle and a pat to her bottom. “We can most definitely attempt again to make a bairn in case we have nae yet.”

“Ye’re wicked!” she said with a laugh as she turned to her bedchamber door. It was late, and he had to rise early to prepare for the battle.

He caught her from behind and wound his arms around her waist as he brought his face close her hers. “I am wicked for ye but nae any other.”

She turned just enough so that they could share one more kiss. “Dream of me,” she said.

“Aye, my love, I will.”

Chapter Eighteen

A pounding on her bedchamber door snatched Adeline from a lovely dream about her and Alex and woke her to Elspeth yelling, "Go away! 'Tis nae even properly light outside!"

Adeline glanced out the bedchamber window, saw her sister was correct—dawn had not even claimed the sky—and fear hit her hard in the chest. She was scrambling out of bed and for the door, even as the pounding continued. She threw it open to find Fingal standing there holding a torch that cast ominous shadows upon his face. "Ye must come quickly!" he said, grabbing her forearm before she could voice her agreement.

She more tripped than walked out the door, stumbled into Fingal, and he steadied her. Behind them, in the bedchamber, came a crash that sounded very much like the washbasin had been knocked over.

"Wait for me!" Elspeth called out, then stumbled out the door herself, dressed in her nightclothes, just as Adeline was.

"What's happened?" Adeline demanded.

His eyes blazed with sudden anger, even as his face showed disbelief. "Morag was found beaten in the courtyard."

She gasped at the news. "I'll fetch the healer, and mayhap ye should fetch Alex," she said and started to brush past Fingal. "He may be able to help—"

She was grabbed by the arm from behind, and when she glanced over her shoulder, Fingal was shaking his head at her. "Ye misunderstand," he said, misery drenching his words. "Alex was taken to the dungeon. Morag named him as her attacker."

"What?" Adeline cried out. For one breath, she was too stunned to do any more than that, and then she shoved at Fingal while snatching her arm away, and she started running

in the direction of the dungeon. Behind her, Fingal and Elspeth called her name, but she didn't stop. She took the stairs three at a time, nearly falling down them midway. When she got to the bottom, she was so distraught that, for a moment, she could not recall which way the dungeon was.

"Ellie!" she cried out, glancing up the stairs at her sister, who was running behind Fingal down the stairs toward her. "Which way is the—" *Left!* She needed to go left, but she got no more than two steps before Fingal had hold of her wrist in a viselike grip.

"Just wait!" he commanded.

She tried to break free, tears springing to her eyes, her throat tightening, but she could not. "Let me go!"

"Addie," Elspeth said, her voice calm as she ran a soothing hand over Adeline's head. "There is nae any immediate danger to Alex."

"Nay?" Adeline shrieked. "Ye ken as well as I do that a man of the Night Guard who is found to have abused a woman is punished by loss of his hands."

"Aye," Elspeth said, cupping Adeline's face and swiping at the tears now streaming down them. "But Da is nae going to take Alex's hands unless he is certain Alex is guilty of the crime, and if ye go charging into the dungeon hysterical, it will make it look as if ye think there's a chance that he could have done such a thing. Do ye?" Elspeth demanded, arching her eyebrows at Adeline.

"Nay. Of course nae! I just had a nagging feeling of ill to come last night, and now it seems it has."

"Take a deep breath," Elspeth ordered, and Adeline did as she was bade.

After several deep breaths, she felt much calmer. "I'm sorry," she said, looking from her sister to Fingal.

"I would have reacted exactly the same if it were Fingal put in the dungeon for a heinous crime," Elspeth said, looking

at Fingal with obvious love.

“As would I,” Fingal admitted, giving Elspeth the same lovestruck gaze she had bestowed on him.

“Tell me what ye ken,” Adeline said.

“Alex and I were awoken from a dead sleep by banging at the door. I opened it, and men from the castle guard were there, as well as yer da and Donnan. One of the castle guards had found Morag in the gardens, just outside the inner courtyard when he was patrolling last night. She told him Alex had beaten her when she’d refused to lay with him.” Adeline clenched her teeth at the horrid lies. Fingal squeezed her shoulder. “I ken it’s nae true. The problem is that Donnan said he saw Alex in the garden with Morag. Donnan said he could nae sleep because he was upset about losing the match, so he went up to the ramparts for fresh air, and from there, he claims to have seen Alex and Morag arguing in the garden. In light of Donnan supporting Morag’s claim, yer da did nae have a choice but to take Alex to the dungeon.”

“My god,” Adeline moaned, her hand fluttering to her neck as her stomach dipped. “This is horrid.”

“Aye,” Fingal and Elspeth said as one.

“Donnan is a liar!” she bit out, and when she saw Fingal flinch, heat singed her face. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, “but it’s true. He’s eaten up with jealousy against Alex, and it seems he wishes to destroy him. He admitted it to Alex today!”

“Aye,” Fingal said miserably. “I told yer da as much, but he kinnae discount Morag’s word and Donnan’s without more reason to believe they are lying. If Morag retracted her claim, or some other information came to light...”

Adeline pressed her fingertips to her forehead. “Did my da say that?” It sounded like his words.

“Aye. That is why I’m riding home now.”

“To see if yer da kens anything?” Adeline asked.

“Aye, possibly my da, but more probably my mama. I have sat silent for too long and nae stood up for Alex as I should have. Mama was cruel to him for years, and Da did nae defend him against her as he should have, likely because he feared losing the lairdship,” Fingal said in disgust. “Instead of standing up to Mama, it became apparent without him saying so that he favored Alex. Alex is naturally more gifted with the sword than either Donnan or I, and that pleased Da greatly.”

“I’m sorry, Fingal,” Adeline said as Elspeth took his hand in hers.

“Dunnae be sorry for me. I did nae care so much as I prefer to use my mind over a sword, but Donnan...Donnan cared greatly. But the more he tried to best Alex, the more he failed. And the more Da praised Alex, the more Mama criticized him.”

Adeline caught her breath in her chest. “Yer parents unwittingly aided his jealousy—mayhap even caused it.”

“Aye,” Fingal agreed. “So, I’ll ride home to see if either of them will return with me and persuade Donnan to tell the truth.”

“I’ll go with—”

“Nay,” Elspeth and Donnan both said.

“Ye need to stay and try to get Morag to tell the truth with me,” Elspeth said. “The Night Guard leaves in two days for the battles, and if one of them dunnae admit to lying—”

“Alex will nae be going with them,” Adeline said.

Fingal and Elspeth exchanged a look that made the fear in Adeline increase. “What is it?” she demanded.

“Da says he’ll have to take Alex’s hands before he leaves if his innocence kinnae be proven by then.”



“Why?” Adeline demanded of her father.

Alex stood on the other side of the cell and watched helplessly as Adeline and her father argued. He'd tried to interrupt her, to soothe her, but there was no quieting the storm that had risen in the woman he loved. It gave him a sense of peace, even faced with the betrayal of this night.

"I have already told ye," Laird Brodie said, exercising a surprising amount of patience. "It's the law of the Night Guard to give anyone accused of a crime against a woman nae more than a fortnight to prove their innocence, and I will be gone far longer than a fortnight."

"So ye must wait until ye return!" she yelled.

"Adeline," Alex said, pressing his face to the small, barred window of the dungeon door.

She looked to him, and the fear and pain on her face nearly drove him to his knees. "He kinnae make an exception for me. Especially me. The men ken I was intending to wed ye."

She narrowed her eyes at him and stalked to the dungeon door. "Ye *are* intending to wed me. Ye *will* be wedding me."

"I'll give ye two privacy," Laird Brodie said and quickly left the dungeon room.

Adeline did not acknowledge her father's departure.

"Aye." If he still had his hands...

She inhaled a long, slow breath. "Ye will wed me, Alex Gordon, with or without yer hands."

"I will nae strap ye to a helpless man for life," he said. He'd intended to wait to tell her, but there was no use.

"But ye would bring a bastard into this world?" she demanded.

"Ye kinnae ken if ye're carrying our child yet, can ye?"

"I've a feeling, and my feelings are nae ever wrong," she said, spearing him with a look that dared him to argue. Instead, he laughed. She reached her fingers through the bars, and

when she touched him, he exhaled. "I will nae abandon ye," she whispered. "Ever."

That was the complication of the matter. He knew she wouldn't, and it pained and comforted him at the same time. "I love ye," he said because that was the most important thing he wanted her to know.

"I ken, and I love ye, too." She swallowed. "Fingal has gone to yer home."

Alex nodded. "He told me."

"I'm going to speak to Morag," she said.

He nodded again.

"And if I kinnae get her to tell the truth, I will try Donnan. When I saw Morag the night before last, she was acting strange, trembling and acting cold to me. I wonder now, if Donnan had threatened her somehow."

Alex whipped his head up at that. "Stay away from him," he said. When she looked as if she would protest, he twined her fingers with his. "Vow it. Stay away from him. I fear he could be dangerous, and yer da has already said he will question him again."

"As ye wish," she said, but he knew by her easy acquiescence that she was lying.

"Adeline, I beg ye."

"Would ye avoid danger if my hands were at stake?" she demanded.

"Damnation, woman," he growled as she leaned forward, pressed a kiss to his fingertips, then tugged her hands away.

"I'll return as soon as I can. Hopefully with a confession of the lies that were weaved."

Chapter Nineteen

It was hopeless. Adeline glared at Morag, who she'd been questioning since last night, and the woman glared back. An entire day had been wasted. Morag was no closer to telling the truth now than she'd been the night before when Adeline had come to her bedchamber and refused to leave.

"Please, Morag," Adeline begged again because that's what she'd resorted to doing.

"I've already told ye it was Alex who did this to me," Morag said from her bed where she was recovering."

Adeline slumped in her chair with defeat, and Sciath, who had stuck by her even more than usual since Alex had been imprisoned, nudged her nose under Adeline's hand. When she did not immediately start to pet her, Sciath began to lick her fingers. It seemed to Adeline that her hound was trying to encourage her. She had to go about this differently. Insisting Morag tell her that Alex was innocent was not working.

"I'm sorry," she said. "'Tis just that I love him, and I'm so shocked to discover he's nae the honorable man I thought him to be."

"Well, I suppose," Morag said slowly, "'tis a verra shocking thing."

"Aye," Adeline agreed, anger stirring once again that the woman would even agree to such a lie in Adeline's presence, "it is. He seemed special, ye ken?"

Morag looked suddenly intrigued, as if Adeline was about to tell a good story, and Adeline had to fight not to smile with the small triumph. Everyone had always told her she was an excellent storyteller. "I kenned a man once who seemed verra different to me," Morag muttered. "But then it turned out he was worse than all the others I'd kenned afore my dear Lachart died."

“Lachart was a fine man,” Adeline agreed, meaning it. “Yer son looks just like him.”

Tears immediately sprang to Morag’s eyes. “He’s a good boy.”

“Where is young Lachart?” Adeline asked, truly interested. “Who is watching the boy while ye are abed recovering?” The child was but five summers.

“The ladies of the kitchen,” Morag murmured, a concerned look settling on her face. “I told them nae to let him out of their sight,” she said, almost vehemently. “They vowed to me they’d nae.”

Adeline’s heartbeat ticked upward. Her gut told her that Lachart was somehow the key to Morag’s lies. “Are ye worried for him?”

“Aye,” Morag whispered, and she sounded more than worried. She sounded terrified.

“Morag,” Adeline said, leaning forward and placing her hands on the bed, “if someone has threatened Lachart—”

“Get out,” the woman hissed. Adeline had guessed right. She knew it, but she also knew the woman was so frightened for her son that she’d do anything she must to protect him.

Adeline had no choice but to speak her piece, hope Morag would consider it, and come forth and tell the truth. “If Donnan has threatened yer son—”

“Please go,” Morag moaned and rolled over, giving Adeline her back but not before Adeline had seen the truth of it in her eyes.

Adeline inhaled a breath for patience. “My da would protect yer son, if ye would but tell the truth. Alex would protect him.”

“From their mission for the king?” Morag spat.

Adeline’s pulse exploded into a gallop. So, it was true. Donnan had threatened to hurt Morag’s son if she didn’t lied

and say Alex had beaten her. “Nay,” Adeline admitted. “But my da would ban Donnan for his lies and treacheries, and the guards would keep him out.”

“I dunnae ken what ye speak of,” she said in a monotone. “Donnan is a fine man.” Her voice said he was anything but good.

Adeline squeezed her eyes shut and balled her fists. “*Alex* is a fine man. All he wanted was to win a spot on the Night Guard so he could make a home for himself because he never felt welcome in his. He felt the outsider always.”

Morag slowly turned back to Adeline, and her face had softened just a bit. Adeline winced at the bruises on Morag’s face.

“I fear my son will feel the outsider without a da to teach him.”

“Alex would gladly teach him how to fight, if he still has his hands,” Adeline said, trying to curb her bitterness. When regret flitted across Morag’s face, Adeline continued, “Could ye imagine how ye would feel if yer son was accused of such a horrid thing when he was an adult, and ye kenned in yer heart he did nae do it but ye were unable to aid him, and he lost his hands for it?”

Morag’s eyes had grown wide, and she blinked them now to rid them of the unshed tears that filled them. “I—My son would nae do such a thing. He’s a good boy, and he would nae ever...” Her words trailed off, and she sat in silence for a long moment, then let out a shuddering, almost defeated sigh. “My son would be protected?”

Adeline nodded and took up Morag’s hand with renewed hope. “Aye. I vow it.”

Morag nibbled on her lip then winced and released it. “I like Alex. He was verra nice to me, and he showed my son how to hold his sword.” She smiled at that and chuckled. “The boy could nae hold it, of course. He’s nae strong enough yet, which is why I have to protect him, ye see.”

“I do see,” she assured Morag. “Alex will nae let anything happen to yer son.” All the soft emotion that had been on Morag’s face suddenly disappeared as her gaze shifted past Adeline.

“Pardon the interruption,” Donnan said from behind her.

Adeline’s heart sank to the ground, along with her stomach. She turned slowly in her chair, and her breath caught at the sight of Donnan holding Morag’s son, who was squirming to get away from him. A satanic smile spread across Donnan’s lips. “I thought ye might like a visit from yer son, Morag, but we’ll come back.”

“Nay!” Morag and Adeline said as one.

Donnan’s eyes narrowed, and Adeline knew suddenly a possible way to get what she wanted. She stood and smiled sweetly at Donnan. “I was just leaving. I need to stretch my legs with a walk. Would ye... Would ye care to walk with me?”

Donnan’s eyes widened, and she cheered inwardly at the victory. He nodded but did not release the boy. Adeline motioned to Morag’s son. “Why dunnae ye leave the lad for a bit, and after our walk, ye can come fetch him and bring him back to the kitchen ladies. Does that suit?”

He looked between Morag and Adeline, and the boy cried out, “Mama!” and stretched his arms to Morag, who let out a near sob. Silence stretched for a moment, and Adeline feared Donnan would not relent, but then he slowly walked to the bed and set the boy down. Then he turned and offered Adeline his arm. “Shall we?”

Her skin prickled at the thought of touching him, but she nodded and hooked her arm with his. His touch made her stomach roil in protest, and as they started toward the door, she said, “Come, Sciath,” but there was no need. Sciath was already by Adeline’s side. “Shall we walk in the courtyard?” Adeline asked, wanting to stay where she could easily call to a guard.

Donnan nodded and let her out of the castle. It was just dawn so the sky was not yet fully bright and shadows still lingered in the empty courtyard, adding to her fear.

“I kinnae believe Alex did this terrible thing,” Donnan said.

His careful tone told Adeline that he feared Morag had told her the truth, and that was exactly what she intended him to think. She fully intended to trick him. She stopped, slid her arm from his, and faced him. “Donnan,” she said, and pitched her voice soft and sympathetic, “Morag told me the truth.”

He frowned. “I dunnae ken what ye mean,” he lied. He had stiffened at her words, and she knew without a doubt that he knew exactly what she meant. “Donnan,” she tried again, and this time, she put a hand on his forearm. Sciath barked, as if disliking her touching him, and she did dislike it. She loathed it, but she would do what she must to save Alex. “I ken why ye did it. Ye did it for me. Ye did it because ye love me so verra much, and ye wanted to stop Alex from having a chance with me.”

“I dunnae ken what ye mean, Adeline,” he replied, his tone flat.

“Ye beat Morag and threatened her son so she would lie about Alex. She told me,” Adeline lied, and he flinched so she pushed on. “But now that I realize how verra much ye do love me, I realize I love ye, too.”

“Ye love me? Over Alex?” he asked, his tone suspicious.

“Aye,” she said. “I do. I really do.”

“Then kiss me,” he replied, his tone challenging. “Kiss me, and then ye will help me kill Morag, so she can nae tell anyone else the truth.”

Adeline jerked in shock at his words about Morag, and she knew the mistake the moment his lips curled back in a snarl. Fear shot through her, and she went to step away from him, but his fist came out of nowhere. It hit her with such force that

she felt it into her bones, and her vision went instantly black, as did the world.



“Son.”

The sound of a voice startled Alex awake, and before the grogginess could clear, someone was shaking him. Alex opened his eyes, turned his head on the ground where he'd been lying, and stared in surprise at his father, who was kneeling by his side, along with Fingal. Behind them, Adeline's father was standing and smiling. Alex's da held out his hand to Alex, and Alex grasped it. His father helped him to stand. Once he was face-to-face with his father, his father said, “I'm sorry.” His voice cracked with the two words.

Alex frowned. “For what? What Donnan has done is nae yer fault.” He assumed Fingal had told their father the whole of it.

“It is,” his father said. “And Moira's, too. I did nae realize —” He looked to Fingal, who nodded encouragingly at their father. “I did nae consider how my anger at Moira had affected me.”

“Da,” Fingal interrupted, “start from the beginning.”

Their father nodded. “When yer mother brought ye to me, I wanted to leave with her. I was going to leave with her. I loved her.” The revelation was a shock to Alex. “But then Moira told me that she was with child—”

“That kinnae be,” Alex said. Fingal was a year younger than Alex and Donnan was a sennight older. Alex flinched with understanding. “I'm the eldest.”

“Aye,” his da sighed. “I'd been gone on campaign, and the day I returned, yer mother showed up with ye and Moira revealed she was carrying Donnan. I wanted to leave, but I kenned I could nae abandon Moira and our bairn, so I asked yer mother to stay. But Moira told me she'd take away the lairdship from me if I did such a thing to her. I could nae

leave, but to stay and lose the lairdship..." He shook his head. "I was weak."

"Ye sent Mama away," Alex said, anger and understanding knotting his throat.

"Aye," his father replied, the one word sounding broken. "I forced her to go. She did nae want to. She'd been turned from her home for becoming with child out of wedlock, and she had nowhere to go with ye. So, she left ye."

Alex balled his hands into fists. All these years he'd thought his mother had willingly abandoned him, but she'd had no choice really. "Where is she? Do ye ken?" A sad look settled on his father's face that tightened Alex's chest. "How did she die?"

"I thought she had jumped from High Point."

Alex frowned. "The cliff near our home?"

"Aye. I thought losing ye was more than she could suffer. I... I found her. I had gone after her. When she left, and I was holding ye, I realized I could nae stay, even for my unborn child, even for the lairdship, so I went after her and found her dead."

"And Moira did nae ever forgive ye," Alex said, full understanding setting in.

Alex's father nodded. "She did nae. She held the knowledge that I chose yer mother over her, and that I chose ye over our unborn bairn, and she could nae forgive that, and I have nae ever forgiven myself. But I was also at war with myself. I blamed Moira and Donnan for yer mama's death because I would nae have sent her away in the first place if Donnan had nae been in yer mama's belly."

"So, ye took out yer grief on Donnan by being critical of him."

"Aye, and my anger. Moira constantly threatened to take the lairdship from me, so I sat back and watched as she was horrid to ye, too fearful to stop her, and my anger grew."

Alex looked at his father, Fingal, and Laird Brodie. “This dunnae prove my innocence, does it?”

“Nae this part,” Adeline’s father said.

“There’s more,” Fingal added. “Mama told me that, in anger last year, she told Donnan about Da wanting to leave her and him, and about yer mama being sent away but leaving ye. Well, it seems, she was coming back for ye.”

Alex felt his frown deepen. “What do ye mean?”

His father sighed. “Moira suspected yer mama might change her mind, so she followed her. And when Gwyneth tried to return, she and Moira argued, and Gwyneth fell off the cliff.”

“Mama has carried the guilt of it all these years,” Fingal said. “She confessed it in anger and likely desperation to rid herself of some of the guilt to Donnan—”

“And he, in turn, used it against her,” his father said. “It seems he’s been forcing her to go along with a plan to take everything ye want from ye. He threatened to tell me what had occurred, and she feared I would leave her for good.”

Alex could hardly believe the revelations. He took in a quick breath, and a memory of his wound that would not heal was suddenly in his head. “The cut that would nae heal—”

“Donnan had Moira poison the tip just enough to make it slow healing so he’d win the match for the Night Guard,” his father revealed. “Moira got the poison from Leeta’s healing room without Leeta knowing it. When I went to tell Leeta, she remembered where she’d seen a wound like the one ye got from the poisoned sword, and it was on Thomas when he fought Donnan for the captain spot after I made ye head of training.”

“Ye think Donnan tried to slow Thomas to best him?” Alex asked. His father nodded. “And then he tried to slow me to best me, but he did nae best me.”

“He did nae,” Fingal agreed. “Then he lied to ye and told ye Moira had threatened to take the lairdship from him and Da so that ye would allow him to win.”

“In light of all of this,” Laird Brodie said, “I dunnae believe yer brother credible, so ye’re free. I do wish to speak with Morag, though. I sent Elspeth to fetch her and Adeline, and—”

“Da!” Elspeth came barreling into the dungeon at that exact moment. “Adeline has gone somewhere with Donnan! Morag confessed that she left with him and that Donnan had threatened to kill her son if she did nae lie and say Alex beat her.”

Alex shoved his way out of the dungeon, stark fear enveloping him, but he realized when he burst into the courtyard that he had no idea where to go. He looked to the left and right, and black fright left him immobile. If he lost Adeline...

Barking filled the courtyard, causing the birds to take flight above him. Sciath came tearing toward him, and Alex did not hesitate. He ran toward Sciath and stopped in front of Adeline’s dog, who jumped up on him still barking. “Take me to her, girl.”

Sciath turned and started to run, and Alex fell in behind her as the thud of many footsteps came from behind him. He glanced over his shoulder, not surprised to see everyone from the dungeon following. Sciath led them through the garden, up a stone path that led to the woods, and then up a steep path that wound around the mountain. “Where do ye think we’re going?” Alex called back to Adeline’s father and Elspeth.

“Devil’s Point is this way,” Adeline’s father, who was closest to Alex, answered. “At the top of the incline,” he added. Alex began to run up the path, fear pushing him to an inhuman pace. His footsteps thudded against the ground, and his breathing quickened to tighten his chest and his lungs. The higher he went, the wind grew stronger, and the greater his fear for Adeline became. When he rounded another bend, he

could see the top of the point not too far away, and there was Adeline standing on the ledge facing Donnan. Alex had a sudden bone-chilling fear that he was about to lose her.



When she glanced behind her, she saw them coming, but Alex would not reach her in time, unless she could stall. “Donnan,” she pleaded as the wind whipped her hair across her face and her skirts against her legs. “Killing me will nae solve yer problems.”

“It’s a start,” he snarled. “I’ll kill ye, and then I suppose I’ll have to kill Morag. She’ll nae ever keep my secret,” he said, stepping closer to her and reaching out as if to push her.

She instinctively stepped back, but there was nowhere to go. Her foot slid off the ledge, and she fell, more sliding off the rock than plunging. At the very last second, she grabbed a branch sticking just off the top of the ledge and dangled there, her heart lodged in her throat.

“Donnan!” she screamed, looking behind her for a breath at the steep incline. She was going to die! “Donnan!” she screamed again, not even getting the full bellow out before a strong hand grabbed her wrist. She looked back to the cliff and cried out in joy at the sight of Alex, kneeling at the edge, his fingers locked around her wrist.

“I’ve got ye,” he assured her and hauled her slowly up as tears of relief filled her eyes.

When she was just over the ledge, his other arm circled her waist, and he brought her all the way over and on top of him. They rolled backward into a heap as he pressed kisses to her face and Sciath barked at her side. He pulled back, her cheeks cupped between his palms, and said, “God’s blood, lass. I ken I said wherever ye go, I will go, but can we agree nae to go over cliffs?”

She laughed as she kissed him hard on the mouth. When they broke the kiss, the noise behind them registered with her, and she glanced over her shoulder to see Alex’s father holding one of Donnan’s arms and Fingal holding the other. Elspeth

appeared suddenly from the trail, as did her father, and she knew by the fearful looks on their faces, as their gazes locked with hers, that they had thought she might possibly be dead. Her father started toward her, relief sweeping his face, but Elspeth caught him by the arm and said something that stopped him.

Adeline knew her sister was attempting to offer a moment of privacy with Alex, and she was grateful. She looked to him and found him staring at her. "I almost lost ye," he said, his voice choked with emotion.

"Aye," she agreed, "but ye did nae. Ye're stuck with me for life now."

"Is that a vow?"

"Aye," she said and brushed her lips to his. "Wherever ye go, I go. Because we are family."

"But nae over a cliff," he reminded her.

"Nay," she said, hugging him and burying her face against his neck. "Nae over a cliff."



To be getting married after the dramatic events of the day seemed a strange thing indeed, but Alex was heading out with her father and the other members of the Night Guard first thing in the morning and they both agreed they wished to be wed before he departed.

Adeline finished bathing, slipped into her best gown, and was just setting the lovely crown of flowers her sister had made her on her head when her bedchamber door opened and Alex appeared. She scowled at him. "Ye are nae supposed to see me until I come to ye in the chapel. The older wed ladies here say 'tis bad luck."

Alex grinned, strode across the room, and slid his arms around her waist. He then leaned down and brushed a gentle kiss to her lips before pulling back to look at her. "I needed to see ye."

She understood why without him saying it. “They are gone?” she asked, referring to his father and Donnan.

He nodded, and leaning forward, he pressed his forehead to hers. He stood that way for a long, silent moment, and she understood that he just needed to absorb the comfort that could only be found in the embrace of the person you knew would always be there for you. “Da is taking him home where Donnan will be branded for his crimes and then live imprisoned, and Da and Moira will try to heal the hurt that has driven Donnan to such lengths.”

“And what happens if one day they think he is better?” she asked. She wanted to be hopeful, but Donnan had tried to kill her, beaten Morag, threatened to kill a child, and lied to and manipulated Alex.

“If that comes to pass, they will call a meeting of the council, and we will also be there to cast a vote if we think he should be released to go make a life elsewhere but nae ever at the Gordon stronghold again.”

“We?” she asked, surprised she was included.

“Aye.” His large hand took her face and held it gently. “Ye will be my wife; therefore, we will be family and ye will have a vote.”

She nodded, her heart fluttering with the knowledge she would soon be wed to him. “Did ye speak to him?”

“Aye,” Alex said, staring intently at her. “I told him that I kenned the pain that had driven him and that eventually I would forgive him.” He brushed a hand down her face. “Ye probably dunnae ken why I wish to forgive him—”

“I do,” she interrupted, placing her palm against his warm, stubbly cheek. “Ye dunnae wish to hold anger in yer heart, and ye are loyal to the bone. That is one of the verra first things that made me want to ken ye better.”

“The verra first thing that made me want to ken ye better was yer arse,” he said, reaching around her and giving her

bottom a playful tap as a wicked grin tugged up the corners of his mouth.

“Be truthful!” she said, laughing.

“All right.” He gave her bottom a squeeze and then brought his hand between them to splay it over her heart. “’Twas yer heart.”

“My heart?” she asked, confused. “Ye kinnae see a person’s heart.”

“Oh, aye, my love, ye can. ’Tis in their actions. The verra first glimpse I got of ye was when ye ran to embrace yer da at my home, and then ye nudged him to break away from ye and give yer sister the same welcome he gave ye. Both acts showed me yer loving, selfless, loyal heart, and that made me want to ken ye.”

“I love ye, Alex,” she said, his words filling her with warmth and happiness.

“Nae half as much as I love ye,” he replied, kissing her.

“I love ye more, but we have a lifetime together to debate it.”

“Aye,” he agreed, “that we do. And I would nae trade this gift for anything.”



I hope you enjoyed reading Adeline and Alex’s story and will consider [leaving a review](#)! I appreciate your help in spreading the word about my books, including letting your friends know. Reviews help other readers find my books. Please leave one on your favorite site!



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Not even her careful preparations could prepare her for the barbarian who rescues her. Don't miss the USA Today bestselling *Highlander Vows: Entangled Hearts* series, starting with the critically acclaimed [When a Laird Loves a Lady](#). Faking her death would be simple, it was escaping her home that would be difficult.

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Excerpt of *When a Laird Loves a Lady*

One

England, 1357

Faking her death would be simple. It was escaping her home that would be difficult. Marion de Lacy stared hard into the slowly darkening sky, thinking about the plan she intended to put into action tomorrow—if all went well—but growing uneasiness tightened her belly. From where she stood in the bailey, she counted the guards up in the tower. It was not her imagination: Father had tripled the knights keeping guard at all times, as if he was expecting trouble.

Taking a deep breath of the damp air, she pulled her mother's cloak tighter around her to ward off the twilight chill. A lump lodged in her throat as the wool scratched her neck. In the many years since her mother had been gone, Marion had both hated and loved this cloak for the death and life it

represented. Her mother's freesia scent had long since faded from the garment, yet simply calling up a memory of her mother wearing it gave Marion comfort.

She rubbed her fingers against the rough material. When she fled, she couldn't chance taking anything with her but the clothes on her body and this cloak. Her death had to appear accidental, and the cloak that everyone knew she prized would ensure her freedom. Finding it tangled in the branches at the edge of the sea cliff ought to be just the thing to convince her father and William Froste that she'd drowned. After all, neither man thought she could swim. They didn't truly care about her anyway. Her marriage to the blackhearted knight was only about what her hand could give the two men. Her father, Baron de Lacy, wanted more power, and Froste wanted her family's prized land. A match made in Heaven, if only the match didn't involve her...but it did.

Father would set the hounds of Hell themselves to track her down if he had the slightest suspicion that she was still alive. She was an inestimable possession to be given to secure Froste's unwavering allegiance and, therefore, that of the renowned ferocious knights who served him. Whatever small sliver of hope she had that her father would grant her mercy and not marry her to Froste had been destroyed by the lashing she'd received when she'd pleaded for him to do so.

The moon crested above the watchtower, reminding her why she was out here so close to mealtime: to meet Angus. The Scotsman may have been her father's stable master, but he was *her* ally, and when he'd proposed she flee England for Scotland, she'd readily consented.

Marion looked to the west, the direction from which Angus would return from Newcastle. He should be back any minute now from meeting his cousin and clansman Neil, who was to escort her to Scotland. She prayed all was set and that Angus's kin was ready to depart. With her wedding to Froste to take place in six days, she wanted to be far away before there was even the slightest chance he'd be making his way

here. And since he was set to arrive the night before the wedding, leaving tomorrow promised she'd not encounter him.

A sense of urgency enveloped her, and Marion forced herself to stroll across the bailey toward the gatehouse that led to the tunnel preceding the drawbridge. She couldn't risk raising suspicion from the tower guards. At the gatehouse, she nodded to Albert, one of the knights who operated the drawbridge mechanism. He was young and rarely questioned her excursions to pick flowers or find herbs.

"Off to get some medicine?" he inquired.

"Yes," she lied with a smile and a little pang of guilt. But this was survival, she reminded herself as she entered the tunnel. When she exited the heavy wooden door that led to freedom, she wasn't surprised to find Peter and Andrew not yet up in the twin towers that flanked the entrance to the drawbridge. It was, after all, time for the changing of the guard.

They smiled at her as they put on their helmets and demi-gauntlets. They were an imposing presence to any who crossed the drawbridge and dared to approach the castle gate. Both men were tall and looked particularly daunting in their full armor, which Father insisted upon at all times. The men were certainly a fortress in their own right.

She nodded to them. "I'll not be long. I want to gather some more flowers for the supper table." Her voice didn't even wobble with the lie.

Peter grinned at her, his kind brown eyes crinkling at the edges. "Will you pick me one of those pale winter flowers for my wife again, Marion?"

She returned his smile. "It took away her anger as I said it would, didn't it?"

"It did," he replied. "You always know just how to help with her."

"I'll get a pink one if I can find it. The colors are becoming scarcer as the weather cools."

Andrew, the younger of the two knights, smiled, displaying a set of straight teeth. He held up his covered arm. “My cut is almost healed.”

Marion nodded. “I told you! Now maybe you’ll listen to me sooner next time you’re wounded in training.”

He gave a soft laugh. “I will. Should I put more of your paste on tonight?”

“Yes, keep using it. I’ll have to gather some more yarrow, if I can find any, and mix up another batch of the medicine for you.” And she’d have to do it before she escaped. “I better get going if I’m going to find those things.” She knew she should not have agreed to search for the flowers and offered to find the yarrow when she still had to speak to Angus and return to the castle in time for supper, but both men had been kind to her when many had not. It was her way of thanking them.

After Peter lowered the bridge and opened the door, she departed the castle grounds, considering her plan once more. Had she forgotten anything? She didn’t think so. She was simply going to walk straight out of her father’s castle and never come back. Tomorrow, she’d announce she was going out to collect more winter blooms, and then, instead, she would go down to the edge of the cliff overlooking the sea. She would slip off her cloak and leave it for a search party to find. Her breath caught deep in her chest at the simple yet dangerous plot. The last detail to see to was Angus.

She stared down the long dirt path that led to the sea and stilled, listening for hoofbeats. A slight vibration of the ground tingled her feet, and her heart sped in hopeful anticipation that it was Angus coming down the dirt road on his horse. When the crafty stable master appeared with a grin spread across his face, the worry that was squeezing her heart loosened. For the first time since he had ridden out that morning, she took a proper breath. He stopped his stallion alongside her and dismounted.

She tilted her head back to look up at him as he towered over her. An errant thought struck. “Angus, are all Scots as tall

as you?”

“Nay, but ye ken Scots are bigger than all the wee Englishmen.” Suppressed laughter filled his deep voice. “So even the ones nae as tall as me are giants compared te the scrawny men here.”

“You’re teasing me,” she replied, even as she arched her eyebrows in uncertainty.

“A wee bit,” he agreed and tousled her hair. The laughter vanished from his eyes as he rubbed a hand over his square jaw and then stared down his bumpy nose at her, fixing what he called his “lecturing look” on her. “We’ve nae much time. Neil is in Newcastle just as he’s supposed te be, but there’s been a slight change.”

She frowned. “For the last month, every time I wanted to simply make haste and flee, you refused my suggestion, and now you say there’s a slight change?”

His ruddy complexion darkened. She’d pricked that MacLeod temper her mother had always said Angus’s clan was known for throughout the Isle of Skye, where they lived in the farthest reaches of Scotland. Marion could remember her mother chuckling and teasing Angus about how no one knew the MacLeod temperament better than their neighboring clan, the MacDonalds of Sleat, to which her mother had been born. The two clans had a history of feuding.

Angus cleared his throat and recaptured Marion’s attention. Without warning, his hand closed over her shoulder, and he squeezed gently. “I’m sorry te say it so plain, but ye must die at once.”

Her eyes widened as dread settled in the pit of her stomach. “What? Why?” The sudden fear she felt was unreasonable. She knew he didn’t mean she was really going to die, but her palms were sweating and her lungs had tightened all the same. She sucked in air and wiped her damp hands down the length of her cotton skirts. Suddenly, the idea

of going to a foreign land and living with her mother's clan, people she'd never met, made her apprehensive.

She didn't even know if the MacDonalds—her uncle, in particular, who was now the laird—would accept her or not. She was half-English, after all, and Angus had told her that when a Scot considered her English bloodline and the fact that she'd been raised there, they would most likely brand her fully English, which was not a good thing in a Scottish mind. And if her uncle was anything like her grandfather had been, the man was not going to be very reasonable. But she didn't have any other family to turn to who would dare defy her father, and Angus hadn't offered for her to go to his clan, so she'd not asked. He likely didn't want to bring trouble to his clan's doorstep, and she didn't blame him.

Panic bubbled inside her. She needed more time, even if it was only the day she'd thought she had, to gather her courage.

“Why must I flee tonight? I was to teach Eustice how to dress a wound. She might serve as a maid, but then she will be able to help the knights when I'm gone. And her little brother, Bernard, needs a few more lessons before he's mastered writing his name and reading. And Eustice's youngest sister has begged me to speak to Father about allowing her to visit her mother next week.”

“Ye kinnae watch out for everyone here anymore, Marion.”

She placed her hand over his on her shoulder. “Neither can you.”

Their gazes locked in understanding and disagreement.

He slipped his hand from her shoulder, and then crossed his arms over his chest in a gesture that screamed stubborn, unyielding protector. “If I leave at the same time ye feign yer death,” he said, changing the subject, “it could stir yer father's suspicion and make him ask questions when none need te be asked. I'll be going home te Scotland soon after ye.” Angus

reached into a satchel attached to his horse and pulled out a dagger, which he slipped to her. “I had this made for ye.”

Marion took the weapon and turned it over, her heart pounding. “It’s beautiful.” She held it by its black handle while withdrawing it from the sheath and examining it. “It’s much sharper than the one I have.”

“Aye,” he said grimly. “It is. Dunnae forget that just because I taught ye te wield a dagger does nae mean ye can defend yerself from *all* harm. Listen te my cousin and do as he says. Follow his lead.”

She gave a tight nod. “I will. But why must I leave now and not tomorrow?”

Concern filled Angus’s eyes. “Because I ran into Froste’s brother in town and he told me that Froste sent word that he would be arriving in two days.”

Marion gasped. “That’s earlier than expected.”

“Aye,” Angus said and took her arm with gentle authority. “So ye must go now. I’d rather be trying te trick only yer father than yer father, Froste, and his savage knights. I want ye long gone and yer death accepted when Froste arrives.”

She shivered as her mind began to race with all that could go wrong.

“I see the worry darkening yer green eyes,” Angus said, interrupting her thoughts. He whipped off his hat and his hair, still shockingly red in spite of his years, fell down around his shoulders. He only ever wore it that way when he was riding. He said the wind in his hair reminded him of riding his own horse when he was in Scotland. “I was going to talk to ye tonight, but now that I kinnae...” He shifted from foot to foot, as if uncomfortable. “I want te offer ye something. I’d have proposed it sooner, but I did nae want ye te feel ye had te take my offer so as nae te hurt me, but I kinnae hold my tongue, even so.”

She furrowed her brow. “What is it?”

“I’d be proud if ye wanted te stay with the MacLeod clan instead of going te the MacDonalds. Then ye’d nae have te leave everyone ye ken behind. Ye’d have me.”

A surge of relief filled her. She threw her arms around Angus, and he returned her hug quick and hard before setting her away. Her eyes misted at once. “I had hoped you would ask me,” she admitted.

For a moment, he looked astonished, but then he spoke. “Yer mother risked her life te come into MacLeod territory at a time when we were fighting terrible with the MacDonalds, as ye well ken.”

Marion nodded. She knew the story of how Angus had ended up here. He’d told her many times. Her mother had been somewhat of a renowned healer from a young age, and when Angus’s wife had a hard birthing, her mother had gone to help. The knowledge that his wife and child had died anyway still made Marion want to cry.

“I pledged my life te keep yer mother safe for the kindness she’d done me, which brought me here, but, lass, long ago ye became like a daughter te me, and I pledge the rest of my miserable life te defending ye.”

She gripped Angus’s hand. “I wish you were my father.”

He gave her a proud yet smug look, one she was used to seeing. She chortled to herself. The man did have a terrible streak of pride. She’d have to give Father John another coin for penance for Angus, since the Scot refused to take up the custom himself.

Angus hooked his thumb in his gray tunic. “Ye’ll make a fine MacLeod because ye already ken we’re the best clan in Scotland.”

Mentally, she added another coin to her dues. “Do you think they’ll let me become a MacLeod, though, since my mother was the daughter of the previous MacDonald laird and I’ve an English father?”

“They will,” he answered without hesitation, but she heard the slight catch in his voice.

“Angus.” She narrowed her eyes. “You said you would never lie to me.”

His brows dipped together, and he gave her a long, disgruntled look. “They may be a bit wary,” he finally admitted. “But I’ll nae let them turn ye away. Dunnae worry,” he finished, his Scottish brogue becoming thick with emotion.

She bit her lip. “Yes, but you won’t be with me when I first get there. What should I do to make certain that they will let me stay?”

He quirked his mouth as he considered her question. “Ye must first get the laird te like ye. Tell Neil te take ye directly te the MacLeod te get his consent for ye te live there. I kinnae vouch for the man myself as I’ve never met him, but Neil says he’s verra honorable, fierce in battle, patient, and reasonable.” Angus cocked his head as if in thought. “Now that I think about it, I’m sure the MacLeod can get ye a husband, and then the clan will more readily accept ye. Aye.” He nodded. “Get in the laird’s good graces as soon as ye meet him and ask him te find ye a husband.” A scowl twisted his lips. “Preferably one who will accept yer acting like a man sometimes.”

She frowned at him. “*You* are the one who taught me how te ride bareback, wield a dagger, and shoot an arrow true.”

“Aye.” He nodded. “I did. But when I started teaching ye, I thought yer mama would be around te add her woman’s touch. I did nae ken at the time that she’d pass when ye’d only seen eight summers in yer life.”

“You’re lying again,” Marion said. “You continued those lessons long after Mama’s death. You weren’t a bit worried how I’d turn out.”

“I sure was!” he objected, even as a guilty look crossed his face. “But what could I do? Ye insisted on hunting for the widows so they’d have food in the winter, and ye insisted on going out in the dark te help injured knights when I could nae

go with ye. I had te teach ye te hunt and defend yerself. Plus, you were a sad, lonely thing, and I could nae verra well overlook ye when ye came te the stables and asked me te teach ye things.”

“Oh, you could have,” she replied. “Father overlooked me all the time, but your heart is too big to treat someone like that.” She patted him on the chest. “I think you taught me the best things in the world, and it seems to me any man would want his woman to be able to defend herself.”

“Shows how much ye ken about men,” Angus muttered with a shake of his head. “Men like te think a woman needs *them*.”

“I dunnae need a man,” she said in her best Scottish accent.

He threw up his hands. “Ye do. Ye’re just afeared.”

The fear was true enough. Part of her longed for love, to feel as if she belonged to a family. For so long she’d wanted those things from her father, but she had never gotten them, no matter what she did. It was difficult to believe it would be any different in the future. She’d rather not be disappointed.

Angus tilted his head, looking at her uncertainly. “Ye want a wee bairn some day, dunnae ye?”

“Well, yes,” she admitted and peered down at the ground, feeling foolish.

“Then ye need a man,” he crowed.

She drew her gaze up to his. “Not just any man. I want a man who will truly love me.”

He waved a hand dismissively. Marriages of convenience were a part of life, she knew, but she would not marry unless she was in love and her potential husband loved her in return. She would support herself if she needed to.

“The other big problem with a husband for ye,” he continued, purposely avoiding, she suspected, her mention of the word *love*, “as I see it, is yer tender heart.”

“What’s wrong with a tender heart?” She raised her brow in question.

“’Tis more likely te get broken, aye?” His response was matter-of-fact.

“Nay. ’Tis more likely to have compassion,” she replied with a grin.

“We’re both right,” he announced. “Yer mama had a tender heart like ye. ’Tis why yer father’s black heart hurt her so. I dunnae care te watch the light dim in ye as it did yer mother.”

“I don’t wish for that fate, either,” she replied, trying hard not to think about how sad and distant her mother had often seemed. “Which is why I will only marry for love. And why I need to get out of England.”

“I ken that, lass, truly I do, but ye kinnae go through life alone.”

“I don’t wish to,” she defended. “But if I have to, I have you, so I’ll not be alone.” With a shudder, her heart denied the possibility that she may never find love, but she squared her shoulders.

“’Tis nae the same as a husband,” he said. “I’m old. Ye need a younger man who has the power te defend ye. And if Sir Frosty Pants ever comes after ye, you’re going te need a strong man te go against him.”

Marion snorted to cover the worry that was creeping in.

Angus moved his mouth to speak, but his reply was drowned by the sound of the supper horn blowing. “God’s bones!” Angus muttered when the sound died. “I’ve flapped my jaw too long. Ye must go now. I’ll head te the stables and start the fire as we intended. It’ll draw Andrew and Peter away if they are watching ye too closely.”

Marion looked over her shoulder at the knights, her stomach turning. She had known the plan since the day they had formed it, but now the reality of it scared her into a cold

sweat. She turned back to Angus and gripped her dagger hard. "I'm afraid."

Determination filled his expression, as if his will for her to stay out of harm would make it so. "Ye will stay safe," he commanded. "Make yer way through the path in the woods that I showed ye, straight te Newcastle. I left ye a bag of coins under the first tree ye come te, the one with the rope tied te it. Neil will be waiting for ye by Pilgrim Gate on Pilgrim Street. The two of ye will depart from there."

She worried her lip but nodded all the same.

"Neil has become friends with a friar who can get the two of ye out," Angus went on. "Dunnae talk te anyone, especially any men. Ye should go unnoticed, as ye've never been there and won't likely see anyone ye've ever come in contact with here."

Fear tightened her lungs, but she swallowed. "I didn't even bid anyone farewell." Not that she really could have, nor did she think anyone would miss her other than Angus, and she would be seeing him again. Peter and Andrew *had* been kind to her, but they were her father's men, and she knew it well. She had been taken to the dungeon by the knights several times for punishment for transgressions that ranged from her tone not pleasing her father to his thinking she gave him a disrespectful look. Other times, they'd carried out the duty of tying her to the post for a thrashing when she'd angered her father. They had begged her forgiveness profusely but done their duties all the same. They would likely be somewhat glad they did not have to contend with such things anymore.

Eustice was both kind *and* thankful for Marion teaching her brother how to read, but Eustice lost all color any time someone mentioned the maid going with Marion to Froste's home after Marion was married. She suspected the woman was afraid to go to the home of the infamous "Merciless Knight." Eustice would likely be relieved when Marion disappeared. Not that Marion blamed her.

A small lump lodged in her throat. Would her father even mourn her loss? It wasn't likely, and her stomach knotted at the thought.

"You'll come as soon as you can?" she asked Angus.

"Aye. Dunnae fash yerself."

She forced a smile. "You are already sounding like you're back in Scotland. Don't forget to curb that when speaking with Father."

"I'll remember. Now, make haste te the cliff te leave yer cloak, then head straight for Newcastle."

"I don't want to leave you," she said, ashamed at the sudden rise of cowardliness in her chest and at the way her eyes stung with unshed tears.

"Gather yer courage, lass. I'll be seeing ye soon, and Neil will keep ye safe."

She sniffed. "I'll do the same for Neil."

"I've nay doubt ye'll try," Angus said, sounding proud and wary at the same time.

"I'm not afraid for myself," she told him in a shaky voice. "You're taking a great risk for me. How will I ever make it up to you?"

"Ye already have," Angus said hastily, glancing around and directing a worried look toward the drawbridge. "Ye want te live with my clan, which means I can go te my dying day treating ye as my daughter. Now, dunnae cry when I walk away. I ken how sorely ye'll miss me," he boasted with a wink. "I'll miss ye just as much."

With that, he swung up onto his mount. He had just given the signal for his beast to go when Marion realized she didn't know what Neil looked like.

"Angus!"

He pulled back on the reins and turned toward her. "Aye?"

“I need Neil’s description.”

Angus’s eyes widened. “I’m getting old,” he grumbled. “I dunnae believe I forgot such a detail. He’s got hair redder than mine, and wears it tied back always. Oh, and he’s missing his right ear, thanks te Froste. Took it when Neil came through these parts te see me last year.”

“What?” She gaped at him. “You never told me that!”

“I did nae because I knew ye would try te go after Neil and patch him up, and that surely would have cost ye another beating if ye were caught.” His gaze bore into her. “Ye’re verra courageous. I reckon I had a hand in that ’cause I knew ye needed te be strong te withstand yer father. But dunnae be mindless. Courageous men and women who are mindless get killed. Ye ken?”

She nodded.

“Tread carefully,” he warned.

“You too.” She said the words to his back, for he was already turned and headed toward the drawbridge.

She made her way slowly to the edge of the steep embankment as tears filled her eyes. She wasn’t upset because she was leaving her father—she’d certainly need to say a prayer of forgiveness for that sin tonight—but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d never see Angus again. It was silly; everything would go as they had planned. Before she could fret further, the blast of the fire horn jerked her into motion. There was no time for any thoughts but those of escape.



About the Author

USA Today and #1 Amazon bestseller Julie Johnstone is the author of historical romance novels set in the Medieval and Regency periods and occasionally modern-day times. Her novels feature fast paced plots filled with political intrigue, intricate world building, and complex characters.

Her books have been dubbed “fabulously entertaining and engaging,” making readers cry, laugh, and swoon. Julie is a graduate of The University of Alabama & Springhill College. She lives in Birmingham with her youngest son, her snobby cat, and her perpetually happy dog.

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