

*He may have secrets
but hers are lethal...*



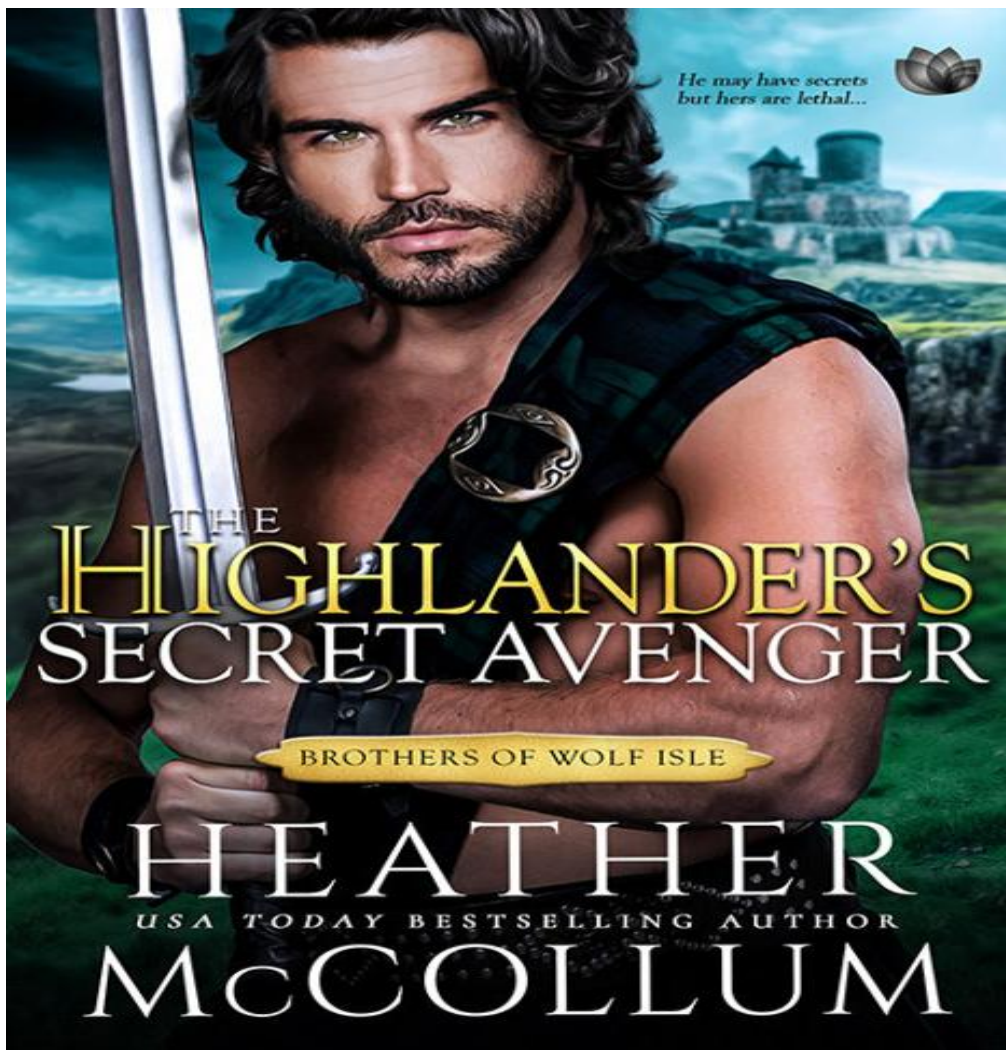
THE
HIGHLANDER'S
SECRET AVENGER

BROTHERS OF WOLF ISLE

HEATHER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MCCOLLUM



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To all the kitten rescuers of the world. We need your bright spirit and loving heart, protecting the weak and showing that there's goodness in the world. Thank you.

Foreign Words used in *The Highlander's Secret Avenger*

arrêt – stop (French)

c'est vulgaire – that's rude (French)

daingead – dammit (Scots Gaelic)

l' âne – ass, jackass (French)

ma chérie – my dear (French)

mattucashlass – short dagger with both sides of the blade sharpened (Scots Gaelic)

quelle malchance – what bad luck (French)

Chapter One

29 April 1548

Isle of Mull, Scotland

Drostan Macquarie yanked the pallet of sheared wool by the twine wrapped around it and then hefted it up onto one shoulder. He inhaled the briny scent of mid tide as he pivoted and carried it with heavy footfalls toward the waiting carrack ship. The morning was crisp, but the sun promised that spring was on its way to the western isles of bonny Scotland. Gulls cried, swooping down to attack a flopping fish that fell from a net being hoisted above the scurry of dock workers and traders at Mull's port.

"A good yield this spring," Callum, his twin brother, said, as he trudged under the weight of another pallet of wool. "Curse or no curse, sheep seem to have no problem multiplying and growing wool on Wolf Isle."

Drostan cut his brother a glare. "We don't talk about the curse," he said, his voice hushed as he glanced to see who may have heard. But Mull's dock was in a frenzy of loading and unloading, and no one seemed to notice.

Callum smiled back. In fact, since he'd married Anna Montgomerie, his brother rarely showed any other emotion than bloody happiness. "'Tis broken," Callum said, referring to the legendary curse placed upon their ancestral isle, which was only a rock-skip across from Mull, home of their allies, the Macleans.

Drostan looked away as they climbed the plankway to load their wool onto Tor Maclean's ship, *The Beast*, for the short trip over to the mainland where the wool would be handed off to its buyer. "Several lads have asked Adam if they can settle on our isle," Callum said, grunting as they lowered their burdens in a designated place. "The sheep are happy. The children are happy. Adam has a healthy son, and Beck's first bairn is on the way. Not to mention that the willow tree has unfurling leaves."

There was no use mentioning that the tarnished dagger placed by the witch a century ago was still embedded in the willow tree's trunk. Callum knew this and Drostan wasn't going to be overheard spreading rumors about the curse on the Macquarie Clan.

"Eliza's old shipmates have the town of Ormaig nearly back to its original sturdiness. And Lark wants flowers planted everywhere this spring." Callum clomped back down the plank, following Drostan, to retrieve another pallet.

"Good," Drostan said, eyeing his brother. "Then I don't have to wed and learn all about love in order to break the..." He moved his hand as if continuing on without saying "curse."

Callum crossed his arms over his chest and grinned like a fool. "Ye may want to reconsider. Marriage to the right lass will banish that frown that plagues ye. Anna makes me smile all day and especially at night when I can steal her away from her sisters."

"God's teeth, Callum, I know. Ye tell everyone how lucky ye are to be wed to an angel." Drostan hefted another pallet of wool and stalked away, pausing only to allow a tenacious gull to hop out of his path with half a fish in its beak.

"An angel with a devilish streak," Callum called over a woman hawking fresh buns and hurried to catch up. "More like a siren with charms I would follow to my death."

Drostan rolled his eyes, but his brother was behind him and couldn't see the annoyance. Callum had been the jester of their family before, always ready with a joke or trick to make everyone merry. But now he was joyful every minute of the bloody day, and it was damn annoying. Drostan was actually looking forward to Callum and Anna's first marital fight. Maybe that would knock the stupid grin off his brother's face. At least for a bit.

Drostan lowered his bale to the deck and turned toward another ship that had anchored farther down the dock. His gaze followed the lines upward above the lowered sails. "Daingead," he muttered.

Callum dropped his load with a grunt and straightened, following Drostan's line of sight. "Is that a cat?"

"More like a kitten," Drostan said, watching the small creature climb the sail line as if safety might be found in the sky. The creature was too high now for it to jump without injury or death.

A lad stood below, hand pinning his cap to his head as he looked up. He beckoned to the kitten, but the scared creature wasn't listening. Drostan jogged off *The Beast* toward the predicament. The ship belonged to one of the traders from up north, stopping at Mull to buy supplies before Tor could take them to the mainland. Several rough-looking men toward port side watched the scene, but they seemed more interested in the lad than the kitten.

"Bloody ballocks," the lad said, head tilted back. "Come down now. We need to go, Sia." Judging from the lad's higher voice and slight frame, he must be under four and ten in age, and from the look of it, without a guardian.

The captain of the vessel stood toward the stern, his gaze sliding along the dockside. He was stout, round in the gut, and bearded.

"Blasted cat!" the lad called. "Are you attempting to climb to Heaven?"

From the dock, Drostan called to the boy. "Your kitten isn't cooperating."

The lad spun around, his hand still intent on keeping his bulbous cap from tumbling off. A tendril of long brown hair escaped like a snake, landing on his shoulder.

Drostan's inhale paused. Despite the mud haphazardly smudged across the boy's face and the masculine clothing, there was no doubt in Drostan's mind that this wasn't a lad at all, but a lass. In male form, she looked scrawny and young. As a female, she looked to be in her twenties.

He walked closer, using the sunlight shining on her face to his full advantage. Her wide brown eyes were framed by lashes, and light freckles lay scattered across smooth skin.

“No, she’s not cooperating,” the lass said with a ridiculously deeper voice. She grimaced as if realizing how poor her masquerade sounded and turned back to the cat.

Drostan felt the corners of his frown turn upward at the bad performance. No wonder the men on board were staring. With high cheekbones, a straight nose, nicely arched brows, and a full mouth, the lass was too beautiful for mud and lad’s clothes to hide her.

“Well now—” Callum began, his brows high as he inspected the woman, but Drostan elbowed him.

“The *lad* needs our help,” Drostan said. “And the crew isn’t inclined.”

The woman ignored him, and Drostan climbed the plank leading onto the ship. The crew watched, as did the captain, but they didn’t approach. Perhaps that was because Drostan and Callum carried swords or perhaps because Tor Maclean, chief of Aros Castle and Clan Maclean, was walking along inspecting the ships. His fierce warrior, Keir Mackinnon, followed, making everyone hurry out of their path.

Drostan stopped by the woman. “The kitten is yours?”

She glanced at him. “I found her onboard. No one claims her, and she’ll die if I leave her.” Her arched brows pinched tightly together. “If that makes her mine, then, yes, Sia belongs to me.” She glanced at the curious crew. “And I wouldn’t leave her with these fiends anyway.”

“Climb on up, brother,” Callum called from the dock, waving his arm at the dangling ropes.

Drostan snorted. “I’ll make the wee beastie climb higher.”

Callum tipped his head back, hands propped on his hips. “It’ll run out of line.”

“So will I,” Drostan said, but he was already removing his sword. Luckily, he wore his work boots with ridges cut into the thick hide making up the hammered sole.

“A rescue is underway?” Tor asked, walking up to the scene.

“Aye,” Callum said, walking up the plank to the ship’s deck.

Tor and Keir came aboard to talk with the captain while Drostan grabbed the thick rope. He'd climbed ropes on Tor's ship and Beck's ship before it burned at sea while battling the dastardly pirate, Claude Jandean. The trick was to use the legs and feet as much as the hands and arms. He wore only a tunic and plaid wrap around his hips with nothing beneath. Should he warn the woman? He wouldn't warn a lad, so he didn't say anything.

Making a loop with one foot and shoving it down, he repeated it with the other foot so he looked like he climbed a set of stairs. Eight feet up, he heard a small gasp from the lass who must have noticed the view up his wrap, but he kept climbing until he reached the kitten.

Meow. Hissssss. The wee thing was a mix of fury and fear, not knowing where to go and if to trust him. "Ye can choose death or life," Drostan said, reaching for the cat as it clung to the mast arm stretching out over the deck.

With another meow and gray eyes wide with terror, the cat lunged for him. Its needlelike claws pierced through his sleeve to the skin underneath. The beastie scampered up his arm to his shoulder, surely leaving pock marks of blood along the path.

"Bloody hell!"

The cat didn't stop there. The little thing wanted something larger to sink its pointy wee claws into and grabbed Drostan's head, pressing its fuzzy stomach against the side of his cheek, front nails in his scalp and back nails hooked in his jawline.

Drostan spit out some fur. "Mo chreach." He quickly descended, ignoring the prickles. He'd have to dab on Aunt Ida's ointment to keep the wounds from growing tainted. Using his hands, one over the next, he slid down slowly to prevent rope burns.

He stepped off the line and turned to the woman. "Take it off my face."

Callum doubled over with laughter, his hands on his knees.

The lass reached up on tiptoe to work the cat's claws out of

Drostan's skin, her body brushing against his. If he hadn't already guessed she was female, he would have realized it then. She was definitely a soft woman and not a scrawny lad. Had the captain known she was a woman and hid her away from the crew?

"Come here, Sia," she said.

"Sia?" he asked. "Ye named her six?"

The lass's gaze met his. Her eyes were brown with a circle of gold in each, like the gold rings people used at weddings.

She sniffed, her pert nose scrunching up as if it itched. "She has six toes on each foot." She sniffed again, pulling the cat to her chest where it clung. She gave a quick nod, and as if remembering her costume, deepened her voice. "Thank you for your assistance."

The woman grabbed a wrapped bundle that seemed too big for her to carry. She balanced the cat against her chest and hefted the bundle, jostling it under her free arm as she walked to the plank.

Drostan rolled his eyes. She'd end up in the water trying to balance both on the narrow walkway. He strode up behind her and lifted the awkward bundle by the tied strings.

"Leave off, else I gut you," she said, turning to face him. The threat in her tone was mirrored in her narrowed eyes, showing that she meant every word.

"Merely helping ye off the ship," Drostan said. "Where exactly are ye going?"

"'Tis none of your concern." She pursed her lips and then hurried down the plank to the dock, turning to him to grab the bundle.

He easily evaded her grab. "I'll escort ye wherever ye're headed." He leaned closer. "The crew seems overly interested in ye. And not in a good way." Tor and Keir were still on the ship, but they wouldn't notice a few sailors disembarking to rob a lad or do worse to a lass.

She glanced behind him, cursed softly, and turned to stride

away. "I'm in need of an inn."

Drostan snatched his sheathed sword from beside Callum. He ignored his brother's raised eyebrows and hurried after the woman. "There's only one," he said, nodding toward the center of the village. Mull had grown with trade over the last decade, bringing money and people to the isle. And now people were considering a move to Wolf Isle, which was what his brothers wanted. But Drostan liked the quiet life there now.

The woman's nose wrinkled, and with the kitten tucked into her chest, she tipped forward, sneezing toward the ground. Righting herself, she sniffed. She set the cat down and pressed one finger on the tip of her nose as if trying to rid herself of an itch. "Pardon me," she mumbled and continued her quick steps.

"'Tis your beast that makes ye sneeze," Drostan said, pulling a linen handkerchief from his plaid. His long strides brought him even with her. After a long moment, the lass finally took it, wiping her nose.

"She's not mine." She continued to walk toward the center of the village, not bothering to hide her true voice any longer. The cat trotted along beside her.

"Ye named her, and she's following ye. I'd say she's yours."

Drostan watched her run ahead, but the cat kept up. The lass turned, shaking her head as she walked backward for a few steps, her brow pinching. "I guess she is."

She turned back around in a fluid motion. In the breeches, Drostan could see how her hips curved outward, and the natural sway of her walk beckoned no matter how she was dressed. Och, but the crew must have noticed she wasn't a lad.

"The Caim Inn," he said, nodding toward the two-story daub and waddle building. It stood along a square lined by several shops and cottages built in the same fashion. The inn housed a tavern below and a few rooms above. "Refresh yerself there, and ye can make up your mind where ye're headed."

Their boots crunched on the pebbles as they walked across the square. "Do you know how to get to Ulva Isle?" she asked.

He stopped, and she took several steps before she realized he wasn't with her. "Ye mean Wolf Isle?"

She looked back at him. "I mean Ulva Isle."

"Ulva is the Old Norse word for Wolf. We call Ulva Isle Wolf Isle around here."

"Very well," she said. "How does one get to Wolf Isle?" Sia took the opportunity to rub along her legs, weaving between them.

"Why do ye want to go to Wolf Isle?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I have business there."

"What type of business?"

Her lush lips pursed tighter as if she were purposely holding in her intentions. "I hear there's a village where I might be able to live." She crossed her arms, a deterrent against other questions.

Drostan snorted. "'Tis getting filled up already."

She pulled the bundle from his arms. "Is there a ferry across?"

"At times."

"What times?"

"Ye'll need to get permission from a *Macquarie* to cross." Despite her small size, the lass was courageous to sail with a bunch of rough men and try to save a cat that wasn't hers. Maybe she'd do well in Ormaig Village with neighbors helping her since she seemed quite alone.

She handed back his used linen, but he waved it off for her to keep. If the cat was going to linger, she'd need it. "And where is a *Macquarie* to *query*?" she asked, emphasizing the rhyme.

He grinned at it. "I plan to return to Wolf Isle tomorrow after the Beltane festivities. Ye can accompany me then."

She froze, her lips gently parted. He watched her swallow, her gaze slaking down him as if taking in every detail. It made

him stand a bit straighter like when his Aunt Ida inspected him and his brothers before they set off somewhere. “Are you a Macquarie?” she asked.

“Drostan!” Callum called from across the square. Several of the children who’d come over from Wolf Isle clustered around him. He looked like he needed rescuing as much as the kitten had.

“Pip needs the privy,” Callum said, pointing to his second brother’s young ward who had brilliant red hair.

“I do, too,” Hester, Pip’s two-year-old sister, added, holding her hand.

“Don’t tell the bloody world that I have to pee,” Pip said, frowning.

“Don’t say bloody,” Dora, Callum’s wife’s sixteen-year-old sister, reprimanded her.

Callum pointed behind him. “And Aggie’s thirsty.” The three-year-old lass stuck her tongue out as if wishing to catch raindrops that weren’t falling.

“Pardon me,” Drostan murmured and turned, but the woman caught his arm, her fingers digging into his flesh.

“Are you a Macquarie?” she asked again, each word succinct and forceful as if she threw daggers.

He stared into her golden eyes, the sun making them almost fill with flames. She didn’t even blink as she met his gaze.

“Aye. Drostan Macquarie.” He tilted his head in a silent request for an explanation.

“Go get Drostan,” Callum said loudly, and a gaggle of young lasses surged around him.

“Can we go to the castle to use the privy?” Pip asked in a whisper that sounded more like a shout.

“It would be better if you took us,” Dora said. “I don’t know Lady Ava or Meg well yet.” Callum was already jogging back to their neglected pile of wool.

“Let the innkeeper know I brought ye here,” Drostan said to

the woman and let them...whatever they were to him...sisters by marriage, wards, sort of adopted nieces...lead him away toward Aros Castle.

Chapter Two

Amelia MacLeod stared after the man who was caught in a surge of girls of various ages from the small to the one who was nearly a woman. He walked slowly so as not to trip over any of them while they swerved around him along the path like puppies following a food bowl. One of them even caught his hand, swinging it merrily between them.

Drostan Macquarie. Her gaze narrowed, but then her nose tickled, and she stifled another sneeze with his handkerchief. He was bigger than either of her brothers. Broad and tall, Drostan Macquarie walked with a warrior's brisk, powerful stride. In his woolen wrap around narrow hips and a thin tunic, she could tell that the man was all lean muscle.

His boots rose halfway up his calves, leaving some of his muscle exposed, although she'd certainly gotten a full view when he'd climbed the rigging of *The Tern* to get Sia. And it had been bloody good. Chiseled thighs had led all the way up to a tight arse that wasn't even hairy like some she'd seen before.

"Bloody hellfire," she whispered when she realized she was gawking. It had been her mother's favorite curse. Agatha Scott had a rebellious spirit but weathered her position at home with patience and beauty. The bruise of missing her made Amelia rub her chest.

Sia licked a paw without care, because she had no idea that she'd just been saved by the devil himself, or at least one of them. Lia knew there were five Macquarie brothers, each of them deadly and malicious, brutal monsters. But this one had risked his life for a kitten. That didn't make sense. The Macquaries Amelia had heard about were cruel and deserved to die painful deaths, preferably by decapitation by a dull sword.

She pinched her nose to stop another sneeze and sighed. Could the cat be making her nose itch? Her brother, Alasdair, had such an affliction to furry animals and had never let her

keep any in the castle. But, right now, the wayward cat was her only companion, so she bent to slide a hand over her arched back and up her tail. Amelia would put up with some sneezing and sniffing for a soft friend.

She stared across at the inn. She had a few coins left after paying for her protected passage, tucked away safely in a small room off the captain's quarters. It had cost more than half of the allowance she'd saved ever since her mother had whispered to her to start saving years ago.

Agatha Scott had been married off to Lia's father as a young girl and knew the same could happen to her only daughter. *Save to run, if you must.* With both her parents now dead, and Alasdair pushing an alliance with the MacKinnons of Skye, it had been time to run. But if her wild plan worked, she'd prove she was valuable to her clan in more ways than being a broodmare for an alliance. She would rid her clan of an old adversary, and Alasdair would have to treat her better. And, more importantly, Amelia might move past her shame.

"Come along, Sia," she said, walking with her bundle clasped to her chest toward the two-story inn with a wooden sign hanging from it proclaiming it a restful place of Caim. Caim was a Gaelic word that meant sanctuary, even if it was only an invisible circle, which was more magic than real. It was not something Amelia had ever felt or seen in her life. The only true safety was behind the point of an arrow.

She dodged several girls who laughed, circlets of flowers on their heads. Hastily, she tucked the riotous curl that lay along her jawline back under her cap. *I should have cut it off.* But she hadn't the nerve. Or she believed her brother when he said it was her only good quality. She'd rather think of herself as a coward than only good for possessing long, wavy hair.

Sia darted down the narrow path that ran between the inn and another cottage. Both buildings were made of sturdy timbers held together with daub. The height of the inn darkened the alleyway. "Sia." Amelia huffed. She followed, blinking against the shade after the brightness of daylight. Sia was hunched over a fish on the ground. "What have you got, kitten?"

“Something tasty that’s lured ye into trouble, lass.” The man’s voice shot through Lia, and she spun to find her way blocked by one of Captain Gordon’s crew. The burly, bearded man with broad shoulders and girth had been outside the captain’s cabin when Amelia emerged to disembark *The Tern*. Had he guessed she wasn’t a lad?

Amelia’s heart thumped like a deep drum, shooting blood through her, readying her to run or fight. The brute must have followed her from the ship, leaving a fish to lure the cat into the dark space between the buildings.

Lia dropped her bundle, yanking open the ties. Her hat fell off, letting loose her half-undone braid. From the man’s chiding frown, he’d figured out that she wasn’t a lad anyway.

Don’t let a man near ye. Her younger brother’s advice rang in her ears. *If they corner ye, they’ll rut on ye. Kill ’em first.*

“Ye shouldn’t be here,” he said.

Fear was like a beast, clawing up her chest, and her arms felt clumsy under its heaviness. It may have slowed her a bit, but she was used to fear and was proud she could still act while under its weight. She yanked her strung bow several times before it came loose from the bundle where she’d stored a change of clothes. She grabbed up her mother’s quiver filled with arrows, flinging it over one shoulder. Its modest weight was familiar and helped Amelia slow the terror prickling through her like poison.

Footsteps from deeper into the dark alleyway made her spin around. Another brute from *The Tern*. This one had his jack out, randy and eager, his hand gripping it as if he were ready to jump on her. Iain had been right. Men only wanted to rut on her.

“Stay away,” she yelled. Her muscles contracted with smooth familiarity, pulling back the bowstring. *Hold it steady even if ye’re shaking. Hit him the first time or ye’re dead.* Her younger brother’s voice seemed to whisper in her ear, making all the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end and a sick feeling roll through her stomach. She almost glanced behind to see if his ghost stood there with a sardonic grin on his cruel

mouth.

“Stop or I’ll kill you,” she said.

“Not likely, girl,” the man answered and made a dodging movement as if he weren’t afraid of her smaller-sized bow. It might be made for her size, but it could split a skull. Not that she’d done more than lodge her arrows halfway through a tree trunk, but surely that power could split a head, even a thick one.

He chuckled darkly. “How’s about a bit of fun instead?”

“Och but,” said the man at the opening of the alley, blocking her way, “ye best stay back, Henry. She looks feisty.”

But Henry didn’t slow his approach. “If I’d known you were on board last night,” he said, “I’d have—”

Schwank.

Her arrow hit the middle of his full stomach. His eyes snapped open wide as his breath caught, and a gurgling sound burred from his open mouth. He dropped sideways to the ground, his trousers down to his knees and his hands clasped around the protruding arrow.

“Shite,” the first man yelled, making her swing around to face him. Before she could pull back the arrow that she’d quickly nocked, his meaty arms grabbed around her with bruising strength. “Hold still,” he breathed in her ear. The arrow and bow clattered on the flat rocks under her feet, and he yanked her off the ground.

Amelia kicked hard. *Kick a man in the buttocks hard enough to shove them up into his mouth.* When she was younger, Iain had taught her to defend herself, but she hadn’t much practice in up-close combat. She couldn’t get her boots up higher than the man’s shins as the smell of unwashed sweat and ale assaulted her nose, making her gag. She twisted and squirmed. “Get your foking hands off me!” she yelled, and his dirty hand clamped over her mouth. It tasted salty with a nauseating tinge of fish.

“Lass?” a voice called, and it wasn’t her younger brother’s voice calling from the grave. “Daingead!”

“Go on your way, Highlander,” the beefy man said, “and leave us to our business.”

Business? Was he going to rape and kill her? Was that his business? He certainly wasn't going to chat about the price of wool. Amelia bit down on the fleshy part of his hand with the force of an iron trap and the iron taste of blood mingled with the grime coming off his hand.

“Daingead!” he yelled and dropped her to the ground, shaking his hand where blood leaked from the torn skin.

Amelia scrambled backward, her hands grabbing her bow, and spit on the ground. Behind her she heard the man grunt. Pressing against the rough side of the building, she watched Drostan Macquarie continue to punch the brute. Fast and hard, Drostan's fists cracked against the man's round face and then his gut, making him double over. Another powerful uppercut to the brute's chin sent him flying backward to land on his arse, his head snapping back to strike the stony ground.

Drostan stood over him, his bloodied fists ready even though he wore a sword, but the sailor didn't move.

“He's unconscious?” She pushed up the wall to stand. Her fingers wrapped tightly around the bow, but they were numb.

“Aye,” Drostan said, his breath coming hard and even. He turned to her. “Are ye well, lass?” His gaze raked along her arms, face, and chest as if looking for blood or bruises.

She pointed at the dead sailor without looking at him. “I killed the first, but you let the second live.” Amelia's brothers would never have let the man live. Even now, unconscious, Alasdair would have skewered the scoundrel.

“Let's get ye to the safety of the inn,” he said without explanation. “And I'll report this to Tor Maclean.”

Her fingers were sticky with dampness as he uncurled them, taking her bow and arrow from her hand. Blood rushed in her ears. *I've killed a man.*

Her gaze was drawn to the fresh body. Blood stained the dead man's dirty tan tunic, spreading out from the arrow shaft, bright and fresh. His eyes were open, staring at nothing. She

swallowed hard. *I killed a man.* Her stomach was awash in a burning sensation, threatening to bubble up her throat.

“Wait,” she said, bending forward, hands perched on her knees, for several long breaths to prevent herself from retching. Drostan Macquarie waited with great patience. When she straightened, having gained control once again, he led her away from the dead man and around the second man who lay unconscious on his back.

Drostan held firmly under her arm. “Ye had no choice, lass,” he said, his words soft.

She hadn’t, of course. The man was twice her weight and flashing his ready jack around as he stalked toward her. He’d have torn her clothes off if she’d let him get near her.

They stepped out of the alleyway, and Sia ran to her, sliding against her legs, almost tripping her, but Drostan held her securely in the upright position. Amelia took a full inhale. “You rescued me,” she said. “Drostan Macquarie?”

“Aye.”

“One of the five Macquarie brothers of Ulva Isle?” Her voice sounded numb over the rush of blood in her ears.

“Aye,” he said, studying her with beautiful hazel eyes. Cut cheekbones, a straight nose with a small bump showing a previous break, and generous lips formed a face that any woman would invite into her dreams. But Amelia wasn’t just any woman.

I will not have Drostan Macquarie in my dreams!

He continued to lead her with all the kindness of a nursemaid. His identity was confirmed.

Drostan Macquarie—one of the five devils she’d come to ruin.

• • •

“She won’t say who she is?” Meg Maclean asked Drostan as she and Grace, Keir Mackinnon’s wife, followed Drostan

toward the Caim Inn. Meg was Tor and Ava Maclean's daughter, fair and old enough to marry even if Tor chased off all her suitors.

At one time, Drostan had considered courting Meg, but something always seemed to be more important at the time, like a pirate abducting his brother's wife or traveling down to England to rescue Lark's sisters.

"She hasn't told me anything," Drostan said. The lass had seemed completely wrung out from the ordeal in the alley, following him mutely to the parlor at the back of the inn. For a moment outside, Drostan thought she might swoon or vomit, either of which would have been appropriate after killing a man.

"She came on one of the trading ships dressed as a lad," Drostan said. "The two who attacked her were part of *The Tern's* crew."

"Did she say where she was headed?" Grace asked. Grace Mackinnon had gray streaks in her long braid. She had the soft curves and lovely features of a beautiful lady aging comfortably.

Drostan's boots crunched on the pebbles as they walked. "She asked about Ulva Isle."

Meg gasped softly and kept her words hushed. "Maybe she's with child and ran away to live with Grissell."

Grissell, descendent of the witch who'd placed a curse on his family a century ago, lived on Wolf Isle. She disliked the Macquarie brothers because of their blood even though the roots of their family trees were twisted together. She kept several cottages on the south side of the isle to shelter any lass who was in need and without resources. Some came to her burdened with a child, others from abusive homes. Could the slender lass who'd killed one of the sailors be pregnant and fleeing?

Tor Maclean and Keir Mackinnon stood at the head of the alley beside the inn. Drostan had alerted them of the assault when he went to find Lady Ava Maclean. She was off Mull

helping with a birth, but her sister and daughter hurried in her stead to help the mystery woman.

Leading the two ladies into the main room of the inn, Drostan nodded to Jamie, the barkeep, and his daughter, Greta.

“How’s your knee, Jamie?” Grace asked.

“Better,” he said with a bright smile. “Ye fixed her up nice, Lady Grace.”

“I brought the poor thing some stew,” Greta said, nodding toward the parlor door. “She didn’t say anything other than thank you.”

“I’ll pay you for it,” Meg said.

Greta waved her off. “It could have been me in the alley.” She smiled sweetly, her gaze going to Drostan. “She was lucky you came along to be her hero.”

Drostan didn’t agree nor disagree. The lass had taken care of the first villain herself. “Thank ye for the stew and room.” He walked across the well-kept common room.

Rap. Rap. “Lass,” Drostan called through the door. He swung it inward to stare at the point of a nocked and ready arrow.

The woman had unleashed her wavy blond hair. She’d changed into a rumpled green gown and stared at him over the lethal weapon, her brown eyes determined.

“She seems to have recovered,” Grace said, bustling into the room. She placed a hand on the arrow, pressing downward to lower it. “No one is going to hurt you now that the Chief of Mull and his commander know you’ve been attacked.”

Meg dodged around Drostan into the room. As usual, she was full of smiles and kindness. One could depend on it like the sun rising in the east. “I’m Meg Maclean, the chief’s daughter, and this is Lady Grace. They’ve arrested the injured man who attacked you and are discussing the matter with the captain of the vessel who employed them.”

The flurry of information was met with silence as the lass continued to stare at Drostan, studying him.

“Do you have a name?” Grace asked slowly and repeated her words in French and Gaelic.

The lass’s lips squeezed together, and she opened them, looking directly at Meg. “I am... I’m called Lia.” She repeated her sentence in French and Gaelic, making Grace chuckle.

“Let’s converse in English then,” Grace said. “I’m sorry such an unpleasant incident happened right after you reached Mull.” Grace came forward slowly as if approaching a fearful animal. “Our isle is usually quite safe. Thank goodness Drostan came upon you and killed the one and injured the other enough to get you to safety.”

The lass’s gaze snapped to his, her brow raised.

“I told them how I came across ye,” he said. “And took care of the one.” He raised his own brow back. “So, if his family comes looking for retribution, they will look for me as the one who did the deed.” If the lass wanted to admit she’d been the one to kill the first sailor, incurring the possible wrath of his family, then so be it. But he’d give her the choice.

She inhaled slowly but didn’t say anything.

“You can talk freely here,” Meg said, her face pinched as if she wished to jump into Lia’s brain and riffle around in it for answers.

“Thank you,” Lia said, her words soft, but the woman’s stance and face were fierce. From the glint of her watchful eyes to the slight lifting onto the balls of her feet, Lia was ready for any type of attack, like a waiting wildcat.

Meg glanced at Drostan and then back to Lia. “I hear you’re headed to Wolf Isle.”

“Ulva Isle.”

“They’re the same,” Meg said. “Even though Ulva means Wolf, there aren’t any wolves on the isle. There must have been long ago when the Norse inhabited it.” She smiled encouragingly. “Now ’tis home to the Macquarie Clan and Grissell, a woman who takes in children, girls, and women who have no home.”

Drostan watched Lia closely, but the woman gave nothing away. Had she come to take refuge with Grissell? *Daingead*. She was all questions and no answers. He inhaled fully. “Meg has kindly said ye can stay with the Macleans up at Aros Castle tonight so ye don’t have to pay for a room here. Then I can take ye to Grissell after the Beltane festivities finish up tomorrow midday.”

Lia offered a small smile toward Meg. The gentle curve of the mystery woman’s lips made her whole bonny face soften. “Thank you. I don’t have much coin left.” Her gaze shifted to Drostan, and her smile faded. “And I would appreciate a ferry ride over to Wolf Isle.”

“Maybe I can find you another gown while we have this one brushed and pressed.” Meg caught Lia’s free hand. Bow and arrow still resting against her side, Lia let Meg pull her toward the door. No one thus far had asked how he’d shot the man with a bow that Lia never seemed to release.

Grace picked up the closed satchel and followed. “A warm bath and some of my stew will fix you right up.”

They had to walk past Drostan to exit. Lia’s gaze rose to meet his, and, for a moment, her mask fell away. A mix of silent emotions sat in her eyes: disappointment, determination, and possibly remorse. The lass had a story hidden inside her. *None of my concern*. He knew the thought to be a lie as soon as it was born.

Drostan nodded to Greta and Jamie on his way out of the inn. The alleyway was empty, so he continued down to the docks, his rapid footfalls grinding on the pebbled path to mimic the clenching of his teeth. The lass could have been raped and killed, right there on Mull in daylight. The isle was becoming too populated, something he hoped wouldn’t happen to Wolf Isle now that it was recovering.

Tor and Keir stood on the dock before *The Tern*. Neither the dead man’s body nor the man he’d felled into unconsciousness were there. Tor’s words were forceful as he spoke to the captain.

“If these are the type of sailors ye hire, ye are not welcome

back at our port.”

Captain Gordon frowned. “Murdo says the lass killed Henry.”

Drostan strode up. “Those two were planning to rape and likely kill the lass.”

Gordon’s gaze shifted to him. “Were ye there as witness then?”

Drostan had come upon the scene after the second man, Murdo, had grabbed Lia around her arms, pinning her. “I witnessed enough to know what they were about,” he said. “The one bastard had his breeches down. And the man I beat is wrong. I’m the one who shot the first arse, in case anyone asks.” He stared hard into Gordon’s eyes. “A wee woman like that couldn’t kill a man that big.”

After a pause, Captain Gordon nodded. “Well then. One of the Macquarie brothers killed him.”

“Because he attacked a helpless lass,” Tor added. “The fact that Macquarie was saving her from brutal ways makes him innocent of any accusations of crime.”

“And we are the law here on Mull,” Keir said, his expression full of threat. Keir Mackinnon, even though he was close to fifty years old, was as menacing as he was when he was thirty and known as the Devil of Dunakin.

“Both of them are from northern clans,” Gordon said. “They’ll make me pay a recompense for the loss of a man.”

“Think of it as a penalty for ye hiring depraved men who prey on lasses,” Drostan said.

Gordon stepped closer to Drostan. “Macquarie, huh? Ye know there are men who’d pay to see all the Macquaries dead.”

Drostan’s mouth opened to invite them all there so they could be shot one by one, but Tor stepped between them before he could do something so stupid. Tor would certainly not want Drostan inviting battle to his isle. Drostan stepped to the side to see around the Maclean chief, but one glance from

Keir reminded him to hold his tongue.

“Ye and yer crew are not welcome on Mull anymore,” Tor said. “Is that clear?”

Gordon stared hard at Drostan but didn’t say anything.

“Answer Chief Maclean else find yerself floundering around in the sea,” Keir said, his words low but snapping out with threat.

“Aye,” Captain Gordon said, a belligerent grimace on his face. He pivoted and stalked toward his ship where his crew stood along the rail watching with open hostility.

Tor watched but spoke to Keir. “I’ll let Cullen Duffie of Islay know to watch for *The Tern* while he’s patrolling our shores.” Tor looked at Drostan. “Let Adam know ye’ve made an enemy.”

“Even though the lass killed the man?” Keir asked.

Drostan nodded while watching the men lift the long thick poles to push the ship from the dockside to catch the rising tide. “She’s already dealing with something fierce enough to make her run away. She doesn’t need angry kin hunting her.” The memory of her wide, desperate eyes made his chest tighten.

Tor’s hand came down on his shoulder. “Neither do ye, Drostan.”

Chapter Three

“The Macquaries?” Meg said as she and Amelia walked down the second-floor corridor of Aros Castle. The fortress wasn’t as impressive as Dunvegan on the Isle of Skye, but Aros had three levels and thick walls. Would they be thick enough to keep Amelia’s brother out if he discovered she was there?

“Yes,” Amelia said. “What say you about their character?” She bent to unhook Sia’s claws from the pretty blue gown Meg had loaned her. She’d taken a bath in a polished wooden tub and feasted on a delicious chicken stew. Between the two, she’d nearly succumbed to sleep since she hadn’t slept well in the closet on the ship.

They reached the bottom of the stairs but paused in the alcove. “I’ve heard they are brutal men,” Amelia said.

“Brutal only to their enemies,” Meg said, clasping her hands before her. “There’s this terrible pirate, Claude Jandeu, who continues to harass them and attempts to steal their wives to sell or use horribly.” She shook her head, and they walked into the Great Hall. A glance showed it to be empty. “And Jandeu wishes to kill the Macquaries for fouling up his plans and burning his ship,” Meg continued. “Drostan and his brothers have been trying to bring the pirate to justice, but he’s as slippery as an eel.” She picked up two oatcakes from a stacked plate on a long table and handed one to Amelia.

“How are they to neighboring clans?” she asked, nibbling the lightly sweetened biscuit.

Meg’s head tilted. “I don’t know if Jandeu is attacking any other clans along the—”

“I mean the Macquaries.”

“Oh.” Meg looked upward as if pondering. “Helpful, upstanding, I suppose.” She took a bite of her biscuit, chewing quickly. “We’ve always been their ally,” she said behind her hand and swallowed. “Since my father took them under the protection of our clan when their mother died and everyone

moved off Wolf Isle.” She puckered her lips in a mild frown. “’Tis such a sad story. Their mother dying, along with a baby sister, and everyone believed in the curse.”

“I had heard something about a curse,” Amelia murmured, which was a deceptive understatement. Her brothers had talked on and on about it.

Meg leaned toward her and lowered her voice even though they were alone. “Their ancestor got a peasant girl with child and then left her to marry another woman. The girl killed herself, and her mother cut the baby from her body.” She shuddered. “The grandmother raised the child to hate the Macquaries. She stabbed a dagger in the tree before their castle on Wolf Isle and said that until the Macquarie Clan learned about true love, the isle would remain cursed.”

Meg nodded quickly as if confirming it. “’Tis written from firsthand accounts that if any of the Wilyam Macquarie’s descendants father a bastard, the curse will doom their clan. They won’t have any more children, and the clan will die out. All that had remained were the five brothers until the first three married. So far, they’ve had one bairn, but if that’s the end of the line, the Macquaries will be gone in one more generation.”

Amelia watched a pair of shaggy, gray dogs trot into the keep toward them. “And you believe this?”

Meg scratched the two massive heads. “Everyone does. I’ve seen the cursed tree myself. And it does have a dagger in it that won’t come out, and it looks like blood is dripping from it, although they say ’tis sap, but willow trees don’t drip sap like that. And for a hundred years!”

The dogs moved over to Amelia for head scratches, which she obliged them. Alasdair had never let any pets in Dunvegan.

“Let’s go into the village,” Meg said, tugging her hand. “You look bonny all clean and in my blue gown.”

“Thank you for letting me borrow it and everything else you’ve generously provided,” Amelia said. The kindness of

the Maclean Clan, Meg in particular, was surprising and unfamiliar. Amelia's clan certainly wasn't generous with strangers.

"You can keep the gown," Meg said. "I already have a blue one." She smiled, and Amelia marveled at the sincerity in the woman's face. She'd never met someone like Meg Maclean, so uncalculating and friendly. 'Twas a shame she was friends with the Macquaries.

"Consider it a gift for Beltane," Meg said. "Do you celebrate the coming of spring?"

"Yes," Amelia said brightly, but the memory of her mother's enthusiasm for the first day of May squeezed her heart. Since she'd died, Amelia hadn't anyone to dance with between the fires.

Meg's smile broadened. "We celebrate with abundance! Beltane starts at sundown with the fires. The livestock will be driven between them before heading out to the summer pastures. They're so happy to be out after the long winter. Some of them leap about." She laughed lightly. "And 'tis good luck so we walk between the fires, too. Then there's dancing and singing. Tomorrow will be games of strength and accuracy."

Amelia had never heard a woman talk so much, but she was grateful. Meg and her aunt didn't guard their tongues at all, handing out weapons to anyone listening. *If any of the Macquarie brothers have bastards, the curse will doom their clan.* Information was power, and this information confirmed the rumors Amelia had heard.

"You'll get to meet my mother tonight," Meg continued. "She returns sometime before dark from helping my cousin give birth to her first child out on Barra Isle."

Meg walked to the door and waved for her to follow. "There will be roasted fish, venison, and steak along with the most delicious tarts." They walked outdoors and Sia trotted up to them.

"So sweet," Meg said, bending to pick up the small cat with

splotches of black and tan over her face and back. Amelia could already hear the kitten purring as if she knew whatever Meg Maclean was going to do to her would be wonderful. Meg rubbed the ball of fluff against her cheek. “Sia can enjoy the abundance, too. When she goes with you to Wolf Isle, she can meet Grissell’s two cats. They are white and named after saints.”

Amelia let Meg ramble as she surveyed the warriors moving about the bailey. They seemed plentiful and equipped with swords. A few above the gate held firearms. The smell of fire was in the breeze coming from the fields beyond the village. Children laughed as they ran in the streets, guiding and sometimes pulling reluctant sheep and goats along with them, presumably to be blessed by walking between the fires. Music played in the distance as people moved almost in mass toward the Beltane celebration.

Amelia had been told the Macquarie brothers were five monsters, hideous and cruel. Unfortunately, Drostan Macquarie looked like neither. In fact, he looked the opposite of hideous and cruel with his broad shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist and strong legs. There’d been kindness in his eyes when he’d demanded that she remove Sia from his face. Despite his annoyance and discomfort, he hadn’t thrown the cat, possibly hurting her. Alasdair wouldn’t have had such patience.

Now that she’d made it to Mull and nearly to Ulva Isle, could Amelia carry out her original quest to avenge her brother? The memory of the villain crumpling in the alley, her arrow protruding from him, left her cold. Amelia, despite her desperate plans, wasn’t a killer.

Bloody hellfire, things were getting complicated.

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Drostan stood near one of the bonfires watching the animals and people climbing the gentle hill through the meadow. He wasn’t searching for a particular lass, he told himself.

He rolled his eyes at the lie and turned to the flames that

were quickly licking up the dry peat toward the dead trees that Tor's men had found while hunting for cabers to toss in the games the next day. Daylight clung to the sky, but it was slipping behind the edge of the sea. A tree, stripped of its limbs and tacked on top with long, colorful ribbons, was being erected in a deep, narrow hole for dancing the next day.

"I've heard ye've had a hell of a day," Eagan, Drostan's youngest brother, said as he walked up.

"Aye." Drostan took a drink off his bladder filled with honey ale. Lia still hadn't emerged from the twilight.

Eagan looked out at the people, mimicking Drostan by drinking from his own flask. "Adam and Tor will make sure the bastard ye let live and his captain don't cause any more trouble here." But he could cause trouble elsewhere, for another lass in an alley. Should he have killed him? Drostan exhaled long and took another drink of ale.

"Cecilia is looking bonny," Eagan said, nodding toward the dark-haired woman who was always the center of any gathering. Three men walked with her, smiling and trying to catch her attention. Her gaze slid along them and on to other men as if blatantly hunting for a husband. She'd been set on marrying Beck, Drostan's second brother, until Beck brought Eliza home from sea. Now that Callum was wed, Drostan was made to suffer her attention more than he ever had before.

Spotting him, she smiled and walked in his direction. Eagan gave a low whistle and sauntered off. The three men surrounding her frowned and remained behind as she approached Drostan.

"What has the hero of the day scowling so fiercely?" Cecilia asked.

"I'm keeping watch that there aren't any more scoundrels about," he said, because he wasn't willing to admit he wanted to catch sight of Lia, only to make certain she was well. He wasn't looking to spend time with any lass, even if his new sisters teased him about finding a wife. They didn't know his secret oath that he'd never marry. He couldn't, not with what he'd done as a lad.

Cecilia sighed. “With so many ships coming and going, who knows what kind of evil will come to our isles. Like that dastardly pirate or wayward women trying to get to Grissell.”

“I wouldn’t put them in the same category,” Drostan said. Cecilia judged everyone harshly except for the men she saw as potential husband material.

She laughed lightly and looked outward, tossing her dark curls. Musicians had set up near the tree line and were playing a jig that had many people already swaying in the night breeze. Cheers went up as the barkeep wheeled a cart up the gravel path with a tapped barrel of whisky lashed to it. His daughter, Greta, directed people into a queue for a free nip to light a fire under everyone’s spirits.

“So, the girl you saved is headed for Grissell’s.”

Drostan looked at Cecilia, her painted lips turned up at the corners. “Lia said she was trying to find Grissell’s home?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know what actually came from the girl’s lips.” Cecilia shrugged. “But she’s obviously running away from someone and is asking about your isle, Drostan. Anyone can see she’s a lass in trouble.”

She leaned into him, and the cloying scent of cloves that she wore made his nose itch. “You should stay away from her,” she continued. “She’s probably carrying a bastard, and you don’t want any association with that in case it could feed the curse.”

He rubbed the back of his neck that had somehow knotted as soon as Cecilia began to talk. “First off, it wouldn’t be *my* bastard, and second, I think the curse is already broken if there even was such a thing. People are moving back to Ormaig, and my brothers are starting their families. The Macquarie Clan is growing once more.”

Her brows, plucked to thin lines, rose higher. “Make sure you aren’t the one to destroy all that good. You need to find a wife, Drostan Macquarie. ’Tis your turn now that the oldest three have wed.”

Cecilia had a way of sending the ache in Drostan's neck spreading up the back of his head. He wasn't sure if it was caused by her words or the high-pitched tone of her voice. Maybe it was the cloves, or it could be all three.

"Pardon, Cecilia, but I best get in line if I want to sample any of Greta's fine whisky before 'tis gone." He gave her a weak smile and walked across the circle to the back of the line. His sister-by-marriage, Lark, would call him rude for not offering to take Cecilia with him, but his head might explode if he'd had to listen to her further. An exploding head would surely be ruder.

He returned the nods from half a dozen Maclean warriors that he knew through training. Several men were looking beyond Drostan, and he turned to see whatever was capturing their attention. *Lia?*

"Who is she?" Charles Duffie, son of the chief of Islay Isle, asked as he walked up to Drostan. "And will she marry me?"

"Lia," Drostan murmured, watching her walk next to Meg down from Aros Castle. Charles's sister, Camille, who had the same thick dark hair as her brother, waved to Meg and hurried over to walk with the ladies. Camille had married a Fraser over a year before but had been visiting home for Beltane.

He took another sip of his honey ale as he watched Lia walk with Meg and Camille in the golden glow of twilight. Lia's face was free of dirt, and her hair hung about her slender shoulders. As she neared the first of the fires, the warm light shined reddish gold along her loose blond waves. Her eyes were naturally large, taking in all the festive chaos. Meg and Camille waved to festivalgoers and called out greetings while Lia remained quiet, but her perfectly shaped mouth curved in a smile, and she nodded.

"Your mother might want to interrogate her first before ye whisk her off to the church," another warrior said, slapping Charles on his shoulder.

"Her name is Lia?" Charles asked, walking after Drostan. "From what clan does she hail?"

Lia was dressed in a pale blue petticoat with a darker blue bodice, crisscrossed in front over a white smock edged in lace. The bleached white lace slid along the smoothness of her skin, which swelled slightly above the top. A woven shawl rested on her shoulders and curved over each arm.

“She looks lovely,” Meg said as Drostan stopped before them. “All cleaned up and not a wrinkle in sight.”

“And the softest tresses,” Camille added as if showing off a prized mare.

“Ye are well then?” Drostan asked.

Lia met his gaze, her head slightly tilted as if she, too, wished to figure him out. “Yes, and well cared for thanks to Maclean generosity.”

“And Drostan’s heroics from what I’ve heard,” Camille said. “He’s always been the quiet hero of the Macquarie brothers.” She winked at him. Apparently, Camille had decided to play matchmaker. *Bloody hell*. Drostan almost took a step back but held his ground.

Lia’s smile dimmed at the reference to the attack. The space between her brows pinched, but she nodded. “Many thanks.”

“How is Sia?” Drostan asked, his words coming quickly to stop Camille from saying anything about the smoothness of Lia’s skin or the gentle curves of her body.

Lia’s smile returned. “Well. Exploring the isle.” She glanced around as if trying to spot her wayward kitten. “I’m afraid there’s a lot for her to get into here.”

“She can meet Grissell’s cats on Wolf Isle,” Drostan said. “Saint Joan and Saint Margaret.”

Camille laughed lightly, almost sounding like her French mother. “Father Timothy must take issue with that.”

The reverberating blast of a horn cut through all conversation, signaling that the edge of the sun had fallen completely below the horizon on the sea. “Beltane has begun,” Tor Maclean called from on top of a wooden box placed between the two bonfires. He held the horn in one hand and

raised his tankard of ale with the other. “May we all be blessed by the lengthening days and enjoy a fruitful spring and summer!” Cheers rose.

“Slainte!” everyone yelled, holding their mugs or fists in the air before imbibing whatever was in the nearest cup. Tor hopped down, sloshing some ale out of his tankard, and opened his arms to his wife, Ava. She stepped into them, throwing her arms around his neck to kiss him. The musicians began to play a fast tune for dancing, but suddenly it seemed everyone wanted to meet Lia.

Drostan backed up as several lads stepped closer, led by Charles. They didn’t even know her full name or from where she hailed. The captain of the ship she’d traveled on, Tavis Gordon, was a tight-lipped bastard who’d obviously been paid well not to talk. He’d departed for the mainland after their confrontation at the dock.

So, Lia’s secrets were her own, and she wasn’t talking. What was she hiding? Was she with child, trying to get to Grissell? Who had she left behind? Unanswered questions rolled through Drostan’s mind, making him think about the lass far more than he should. *She’s just another bonny lass and her secrets are hers to keep.* He had his own to worry about.

He took his place once again in the whisky line, suddenly needing something to numb the hollow worry in his gut. The niggling fear that he would doom his clan, that his actions would spur the curse into full fruition, was such a familiar part of him, it shouldn’t bother. But it did.

Glancing back, he paused when he saw Lia watching him. He nodded to her with a half-smile. Her head tipped slightly like she was an artist studying him from another angle. She nodded but didn’t return his smile.

“Here’s a cup,” Greta said.

Drostan looked at the barkeep’s daughter. “And a second for the new lass.”

Greta’s full mouth twisted in a teasing smile. “She’s right bonny now, isn’t she? And brave.” She handed Drostan a

second smaller cup that she gave out to lasses, although he knew some who drank more than the men.

Did Lia drink whisky? 'Twas the mystery of her that drew him back to her side with the cup, not the fact she seemed to watch him or that her hair glistened like gold heated in the smithy fires.

Drostan held out a tin cup to Lia. "'Tis whisky. The smoothest." He tipped his head toward the woman serving it. "Greta distills the best on Mull."

"Hear! Hear!" several men called, raising their cups.

"Thank you," Lia said, looking down into the cup.

"You don't have to try it," Meg said, making a face. "*I think it tastes horrid.*"

Cecilia walked up, and the men gave her room. "But it sure makes one warm inside." She held her own small cup and took a sip, her long lashes blinking several times as she breathed out through lips the shape of an *O*. She acted like an authority on imbibing even though Beck's wife, Eliza, had taught her within the last year.

"Lia, this is Cecilia Maclean," Meg said. "A cousin of mine."

Cecilia smiled, but the curve of her lips was far from genuine. Cecilia's fangs were out.

"Lia?" Cecilia said. "Is that short for another name?"

Everyone around them paused to hear. When Lia didn't answer right away, Cecilia gave a little laugh and spoke in a loud voice made to sound like a whisper. "Or is it a secret?"

Chapter Four

The lass cleared her throat and gave an unconvincing smile. “My name is short for yours, Cecilia, but I prefer Lia.”

Cecilia’s lips pursed quizzically before relaxing. “Well, ’tis the best of names. But what is your family name?”

“Your clan?” Camille asked, and everyone around them hushed. Would she share her name or refuse?

“Scott.” The word snapped out of her like it burned her tongue, but then she smiled. “Cecilia Scott, but I go by Lia.” She took the cup from Drostan, meeting his stare. “Thank you.”

“From down near England then?” Charles asked. Scott was a lowland clan with territory along the English border.

She nodded and took a quick sip, her eyes widening before a cough erupted.

Cecilia laughed, patting her on the back. “Breathe the fumes out or it tickles your nose.”

“Horrid stuff,” Meg said, making several of the men laugh.

Cecilia kept looking at her. “Wait for it.”

Lia sniffed, her hand to her chest.

“’Tis warm down inside,” Cecilia said.

“It is.” Lia sniffed. Following Cecilia, she took a second sip and breathed out the fumes, making several of the men around them laugh. Drostan didn’t laugh though. The lass was obviously inexperienced with the spirit.

“Perhaps ye shouldn’t be drinking anymore since ye aren’t used to it,” he said. “It can make one ill.” What the hell was he thinking bringing her a cup? He hadn’t been thinking about anything except how the sunset and now the flamelight caught in her hair. *Idiot.*

“Or it makes one foolish,” another man said. His brows rose and fell quickly. “Actually, keep drinking it, lass.” The fools

standing around them laughed.

“Charles,” Camille said with a severe frown. Since she’d married, she’d become tamer. She looked to Lia. “He’s my wayward brother who uses pretty words to make lasses forget their morals.” She wagged a finger at him. “Look out for men like him.”

Charles held a hand against his chest and looked aghast. “Ye wound me, sister,” Charles said, turning his smile on Lia. “I but speak the truth when I say the flame is no match for the warmth ye bring the world.”

Several men groaned, and Camille rolled her eyes. Lia smiled, and Drostan hoped it was due to Camille’s annoyance and not the poetic words of his witty friend.

She took a bigger drink of the whisky and made certain to exhale the fumes. Several of the men did it with her, and they all exaggerated the technique. Drostan reached for the cup. “I’ll hold it for ye so ye can go through the fires for the Beltane blessing.”

He let his thumb cross over her palm as he drew it away. It was soft, except for a row of calluses where her bowstring rested. A lot could be revealed in a hand, how the world scarred one. She hadn’t toiled, but she’d practiced with her bow extensively.

“Oh yes,” Meg said, grabbing Lia’s hand from his. “Let’s go through before all the cattle leave piles to avoid. Does your family go between fires on Beltane?”

Drostan strained to hear her answer, but all she said was yes.

Camille, Meg, and Cecilia led Lia between the fires. She imitated their turning dance, arms overhead and moving like the flames leaping toward the sky. Lia had slender arms, and her hand had been soft. She had a graceful way of moving and skipped along with the others. Who was she? Why had she run away dressed as a lad? He knew nothing about the Scotts. Maybe his oldest brother, Adam, did. Or Tor Maclean.

He drank the rest of the whisky in her cup. It would be blasphemy to pour it on the grass.

“Ye best marry her before ye get her with child.”

Drostan turned to see his aunt, Ida, stopping beside him. She wore her usual drab clothing and frown, her hair pulled back in a tight braided coil about her head like the biblical serpent.

“I won’t get anyone with child, Aunt Ida.”

“See that ye don’t, else bring ruin on our family.”

It was the same reminder he’d been bludgeoned with before even knowing what getting someone with child meant. But he’d taken care of that as a lad. He would have no children if the curse were true, and it certainly seemed to be real. *Lord, lift the curse from us without me siring a child.* “The tree has green leaves on it, and folks are moving back into Ormaig Village,” he said.

She nodded. “All it takes is one brother to ruin everything. Your father is likely holding his breath.”

“Da is dead, so he has no breath.”

Ida gently punched his arm. “Escort your old aunt through the Beltane fires.”

No one liked Aunt Ida because she judged people immediately and loudly. And she’d been adamant that they shouldn’t return to Wolf Isle. She’d tried to sway them to stay on Mull up until their father died, only loosening her hold on the boys once John Macquarie was buried. His father’s funeral was the only time Drostan had ever seen the rigid woman weep.

They walked slowly while Ida made soft references to the fools dancing around them. At the end, she patted his arm. “I’m returning to my cottage. Ye are welcome to stay the night. Any of my kin are.”

He kissed her cheek that was more weathered than her fifty-five years should have shown. It was probably from all the frowning she did. “Thank ye. I’ll let my brothers know.”

“And they can bring their squalling bairns and wives, too. I have pallets still from when ye all lived with me.”

Drostan’s lips twitched into a smile. “I’ll let them know.”

She nodded and walked off into the deepening shadows.

Drostan turned, his gaze searching until it landed on Lia near the tables laden with fresh baked tarts, pies, and bread. Her face was turned down, so her hair slid forward over her shoulders. His fingers curled into his palm as if he was stopping himself from running over there to dip them into its silky mass. Bloody hell, what was wrong with him?

He turned his gaze and shook his head at his twin. Callum was completely besotted with his wife, Anna, and bowed low before her with a bunch of spring flowers that he'd wrapped with a ribbon. She took them like a queen, lifted his chin, and leaned over to kiss him. Callum straightened, wrapping her in his arms.

Drostan huffed and looked away, his gaze falling back to Lia. She moved with such grace, and when her smile turned unguarded it caught his breath.

Adam and Beck, Drostan's two oldest brothers, walked up. "Any more information about who she is?" Adam asked.

"Who?" Drostan asked and looked back toward Callum and Anna.

Beck snorted. "The one ye've been staring at. Lia, the lad turned bonny lass who can shoot a bow with deadly grace."

"She told Cecilia they share a name," Drostan said. "That she shortened it to Lia and that she's from the Scott Clan near the English border."

"Ye sound skeptical," Adam said.

"She doesn't look like a Cecilia."

Beck laughed. "Ye mean with fangs and claws disguised behind smiles and not-so-innocent touches?"

Drostan crossed his arms over his chest as he watched the men standing close to the mystery woman. "And she doesn't sound like a lowland lass."

"From the Highlands then?" Adam asked.

Drostan nodded. He rubbed his chin as he watched her. "Her

palms are smooth except for where her bowstring sits.”

“She’s highborn?” Beck asked.

“Not that she’s admitted. She wants to go to Wolf Isle. I said I’d take her and her cat tomorrow after the competitions.”

“To Grissell’s?” Adam asked.

Drostan watched Charles hand Lia another cup, hopefully of sweet ale and not whisky. “Grissell will take her in.”

“Highborn, from the north country, and likely running away from someone,” Adam said.

The three of them watched her. “She looks familiar,” Beck said. “Maybe I’ve seen her at a festival.”

“Before Eliza caught ye, ye paid attention to every lass that walked by,” Adam said. “Ye could be remembering her from years ago.”

Beck laughed and took a sip of his whisky. “Well, my pirate lass has me all to herself now.” He looked back where Eliza stood, sliding a hand casually down her slightly rounded belly. She talked with Lark who held her squirming son.

“Ye’ll have to share her once the bairn is born,” Adam said with a knowing nod and a raised brow. Beck and Eliza had recently announced that she was with child, due in the fall.

“Did ye see if Aunt Ida went through the fires?” Adam asked.

“Aye,” Drostan answered. “She’s already gone home. Says we can stay with her tonight if needed. Even the squalling bairns.”

Adam chuckled. “Glad she’s come and gone so I don’t need to fetch her. She was Mother’s sister, but where Mother got all the sweetness, Ida got all the sour.”

“I think she’s lonely,” Drostan said.

“She does it to herself by being so ornery,” Beck said and then raised his cup. “Slainte, to ye two. I’m reclaiming my pirate before she threatens anyone. Being with child has made her a little more...tetchy.”

“More like stabby,” Adam said. Beck laughed, nodding, and sauntered down the hill. Adam yanked Drostan’s sleeve to get him following. “We need to sign up for tomorrow’s competitions.”

The night was relatively clear with a cool spring wind. Drostan could almost smell the earth growing. Each day brought more sun, and the sheep on Wolf Isle would continue to grow thick wool. Several of the men from Eliza’s pirate crew had remained on the isle to fix up and live in Ormaig Village. They each had started a garden, and Lark, with the help of Eliza’s friend, Kofi, had the kitchen garden sprouting behind Gylin Castle. It made Drostan yearn for his own.

He’d been building a cabin for himself on the western side of Wolf Isle near the sea, close enough he could hear the surf when a storm blew in. It was nearly complete, but he hadn’t yet moved out there. Perhaps now was the time with Beck and Adam growing their new families.

He and Adam had rejoined the wives, and Drostan listened while Beck and Eliza teased one another. Lark bragged about how well wee John was running about. Callum and Anna held hands. Anna’s younger sisters and the orphans that Eliza had adopted talked and laughed, adding to the festive familial sounds.

Drostan mostly listened. He liked to listen and watch. Some said it made him look stern or condescending, but he didn’t feel that way, and people should mind their own business.

A burst of feminine laughter made him turn, and he spotted Meg, Cecilia, and Lia dancing together while a group of warriors clapped in a circle around them. Meg’s father, Tor, stalked into the middle, which made several men retreat into the shadows. Before he realized it, Drostan was already halfway across to them.

“’Tis late,” Tor said, sending glares toward the lads. “Do I smell whisky?”

“I wasn’t drinking it,” Meg said, her eyes innocent.

Cecilia pointed to Lia, her arched brows rising higher.

“I was,” Lia said and then put a finger against her lips. “It keeps one warm,” she said from around her finger. “I never knew how much.”

Meg pointed to Drostan. “He gave her whisky.”

Tsk, tsk. Cecilia gave him a teasing smile.

Tor frowned, and Drostan held up his hands as if in surrender. “Only one and I drank most of it when I realized she hadn’t ever tried it before.”

“The other men gave me more,” Lia said, standing straight, her breasts rising even higher. She still held a cup and raised it as if she forgot it was in her hand. But then she pushed her hair behind her back with the other. “I feel a bit flushed with all the dancing.”

“Meg, your mother would like to talk with you,” Tor said. “Something about the tarts ye’re baking for tomorrow.”

Meg smiled at Lia. “I’ll be right back, and then we can go up to the castle. Keep an eye on her, Drostan.”

“Aye,” Tor said. “’Tis rowdy at night with the whisky flowing freely. The three of ye should head straight to bed.”

Cecilia leaned into Lia as Tor nearly dragged his daughter away. “The chief keeps a tight hold of Meg. If she gives away her maidenhead, he won’t be allowed to form any alliances by marrying her off. I say she should tup the nearest lad to be free of it.”

Lia looked at her. “Is that what you did?” She hiccupped. “Throw away your virginity to save yourself from being married off?”

Cecilia’s eyes widened as she glanced about, but then her gaze landed on Drostan, and a slight grin grew. “I think a man might like someone with a little knowledge of how to give him pleasure.”

Charles walked up, offering his arms. “Now that the frowny chief has disappeared, let’s dance some more.”

Lia’s hand went to her head, and she swayed. Drostan caught her arm. “Are ye feeling well?”

“Mm-hmm,” she said. “But the drink is making my arms and legs feel...achy in a good way, like I want to stretch.” She raised both hands over her head, one still holding onto the cup, although it looked like she would drop it any moment.

“I’ll hold that for ye,” Drostan said, taking the half-empty cup from her and dumping the contents behind his back. Blasphemy, but if he kept drinking Lia’s whisky, he might be tempted to do something mad like kiss her. The thought ricocheted through his head, proving that he balanced on the line of sobriety and being a drunk fool.

“She’ll be fine once she starts dancing,” Charles said.

“Nay,” Drostan said. “The night is over for her and Meg. Take Cecilia.”

Cecilia scrunched her nose. “Some lasses can’t hold their whisky.” She looped her arm through Charles’s and strode off with him toward the musicians.

“I’m thirsty,” Lia said, moving her lips around. “Did I lose my drink?” She bent forward, looking on the ground where her bare toes curled up from the edge of her petticoat. “Hellfire,” she whispered, studying them. “I’ve lost my slippers.”

“Let’s find ye a new drink,” Drostan said and took her arm, leading her to the nearest table that had watered down honey ale. It was mild enough that children drank it, but the brew made the water safe to drink. If he’d been near a spring, he’d have flooded her with fresh water.

She took some long sips off it, apparently quite thirsty. “Much thanks,” she said when she’d emptied the cup, handing it back to him. He refilled it and pressed it into her hands again. “Is there a privy close?” she asked, blinking her long lashes as she stared up into his face. The drink had lowered her guard and relaxed her face even though she frowned. She was quite expressive with her large eyes and full, soft lips.

“Outdoors, over this way.” He led her toward a set of boulders inside the forest line where most people released their drink.

“Ouch,” she said, lifting one foot. “Stones hurt. Where are

my slippers?”

“Where ye left them,” he said, glancing toward the fires. “Let me...” He bent, his one arm behind her back.

“What are you doing?” she demanded as he lifted her into his arms. She wasn’t a waif, but her weight was nothing to him.

“Picking up the drunk lass who lost her slippers and has to piss.” He carried her toward the boulders.

She exhaled long, and the stiffness receded from her frame. “Rescuing me again.” She said it as if it were the last thing she wanted. “Rescue a kitten, then me in the alley, now me again. Oh, and from any family members who might seek revenge because I shot their dastardly kinsman.”

“Ye’re keeping a tally?” He walked with her against him. She smelled like that damn delicious soap Lady Ava made up at Aros Castle, and her soft body seemed to melt against him. Had the whisky vanquished the tension and tight annoyance she’d radiated earlier?

She waved her hand. “You aren’t supposed to be so honorable and...” She patted his chest. “You know, so brawny and big and not hideous.”

His lips turned upward in the dark, his boots crunching along the pebbles that would have cut her feet. If he were weak and hideous, no one would think about marrying him. He wouldn’t have to worry about keeping up a farce of being a normal man who wanted a wife and family. “Ye would prefer me dishonorable, weak, scrawny, and hideous?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice loud, and took another large drink of the cool ale. She swallowed and then huffed. “But then I suppose Sia would be dead and me, too.”

“Maybe ’tis good ye don’t get to decide how I am.” Perhaps he should start acting dishonorable to scare away the lasses who might want to marry. He would stick with the clever widows who were too independent to ever want to carry the yoke of marriage again.

The faint moonlight showed Lia’s lovely features scrunched

up as if she were thinking hard. “I suppose so,” she said, and looked up at him. He almost jerked back when she reached forward to rub a cool fingertip over the scar on his forehead. “How did you get this? A fight?”

“Aye, with a tree branch that fell on my head.”

Her finger smoothed it. The tip was cool against his skin, yet the contact sizzled through him. “Oh,” she said, the single word coming on a shallow exhale.

They reached the rocks, and for a long moment he held her until she retracted her hand. *Lower her.* But he didn’t want to.

“Is the privy here?”

He set her feet on the ground and nodded toward the rock outcropping. His hands splayed out, ready to steady her. “Do ye need...help back there?” He didn’t know what exactly that would entail, but he didn’t want her falling down and rolling in piss-soaked leaves or worse.

Lia turned to look at the large rocks. “That’s not a privy. ’Tis a rock.”

“Most people go behind it when at the festival.”

“But someone could see me.”

“I’ll guard it and won’t let anyone by.”

“What if they come from the woods?” she said, pointing to the thick forest behind.

She apparently hadn’t ever been on a journey without regular stops at inns or homes that had a privy. “No one will come from the woods.”

As if to shout he was a liar, a man and woman appeared from behind the rock. From the looks of the lass’s half-laced stays, the only relief they’d been finding back there was of the carnal kind.

Lia flung her arm out toward them, her eyes wide, along with her open mouth. “*They* were back in the woods!”

Lord, she had a lovely round mouth. Drostan’s jack twitched, apparently not realizing it wasn’t an invitation. He

cleared his throat. "I can take ye up to the castle. Meg will meet ye there anyway, and there's a privy room inside."

Lia came close, her face tipped up to find his gaze. "That sounds much better." She lifted her arms, the ale cup still in one hand. He took it from her, setting it on the ground. "I'll find ye something fresh up at the castle."

She kept her arms raised and wiggled them in the air like Drostan's nephew when he wanted to be lifted. "I still have no slippers," she said in explanation. "And since you're insistent upon rescuing me, here I am again needing to be carried. You should like that."

"I thought I'd be dishonorable and hideous instead and let ye stagger back to find your slippers," he said, keeping his face neutral.

She slapped his arm.

"What?" he said. "I'm trying to be weak and scrawny for ye, too."

She thumped his chest, and he couldn't help but smile. "Can you wait to be dishonorable and hideous on the morrow?" she said, and he noticed her start to shift uncomfortably.

He lifted under her legs and pulled her against him. "Ye are demanding, Lia Scott."

"So I've been told," she said, resting her cheek against his chest. After a few steps, she tilted her bonny face up to him. "I wonder if they were tuppung in the woods. They wouldn't be pissing together."

"Probably not."

She nodded, closing her eyes. "They were definitely tuppung."

"Ye know about tuppung, do ye?"

"I know how it all works."

"All of it?"

"I believe so." Her eyes opened and she pointed, her relaxed body stiffening in his arms. "See, over there. Look."

He looked toward the fire expecting to see two people thrusting against one another in wild, drunken debauchery. Instead, he saw one of her shoes and strode toward it.

“I found a slipper,” she said. “I’m not drunk then.”

He set her down near it and helped her balance as she worked her toes inside.

“There’s the other one,” she said, her voice loud enough to make several nearby couples look their way. “I found them both myself.” She released his arm to half hobble, half hop over to the other slipper in a tuft of grass. She grinned at him as she wiggled her bare foot into it. “Didn’t need you to rescue me this time.”

He couldn’t help but smile at her pride. “True.”

She nodded and turned. “Now where’s that real privy?”

“This way,” Drostan said, and she caught up to his quick stride. They didn’t talk as they walked, his boots crunching on the pebbles along with her quieter steps as they traversed the dark streets toward Aros Castle. Most of the village was either still in the meadow or tucked in bed. Only two guards watched from the tower above the raised portcullis, and one stood near the doors to the keep.

“This is Lia Scott,” Drostan said at the doors. “She’s staying the night as a guest of Meg’s.”

“And I have need of a privy that’s not a rock that people tup behind,” Lia added.

The guard grinned. “Well, now, Chief Maclean happens to have four of those inside.” He made a flourish and opened the door. Drostan followed Lia inside. He’d visited Aros Castle many times, including earlier when he’d brought his nieces up for the very same reason.

Drostan showed Lia to the small closet off the great hall. She entered and peeked around the door at him. “You’ll guard the door?”

“From whom?” he asked, his arms open wide to indicate the vacant room.

“Maybe the two people who *weren't* in the woods,” she said and slowly pulled the door closed, her eyes wide and watching him the whole time until the door blocked first one eye and then the other until it clicked shut.

Drostan couldn't help but grin at her gestures, but it faded. There was nothing humorous about a lass who drank enough to be foolish. In the wrong hands, she could be in danger. Aunt Ida had once called him a natural protector. Perhaps that was why he felt so inclined to watch after the lass.

After a few minutes, he heard her fumbling with the door. “Do ye need help?”

“The door has no handle on the inside,” she said. “And I can't see anything. Does it open inward or outward?”

He chuckled silently. “Ye pulled the door shut with a handle, so there is one and it pushes outward, but I'll open it from this side.”

Drostan opened the door. Lia stood there looking like a lovely poppet being unwrapped from a box as a Hogmanay gift. “Are ye well?” he asked.

She thought for a moment. “I believe so, but whisky doesn't make things easier.”

“Nay, it doesn't.”

“At first,” she said, stepping out, “whisky seems to make it easier to smile and dance about, but then everything gets mixed up and difficult.” Her pert nose scrunched as if in distaste.

“Ye should only drink it with close friends who won't trick ye.”

“I don't have close friends, or any friends really.” Her eyes were dark in the low light, broken up only by a few lit sconces in the corridor behind him. But he saw something there that could be sadness, and it squeezed his chest.

He took her hand and pulled her out of the alcove “Well, ye have me. I'm your friend and won't let anything bad happen to ye.”

She shook her head. "I'm afraid you cannot be my friend, Drostan Macquarie."

"Because I'm not hideous?" he asked, shaking off his dark regret.

She shook her head again. "I can't tell you why."

"Why not?"

"I can't tell you that, either." Her gaze rested on him, a pinch between her brows. Her hand came up to touch his face, and he held his breath. "Why do you have to be handsome?"

He blinked and caught her hand. It was cool, her palm tender, and almost fragile in his large hand. His thumb stroked over the middle, making her slender fingers curl inward. Her fingernails were nicely shaped, although one was torn, and Drostan nearly raised her knuckles to his lips. But honor overrode the heat that had started inside him, and he turned, tugging her along. "I'll take ye to the library where ye can wait for Meg."

Chapter Five

“There must be hundreds of books here.” Lia’s gaze roamed the shelves lining the walls in the Aros Castle Library. “Have you read them?”

“We’ve a library at Gylin Castle, which I read from,” he said, watching her open awe.

She ran her finger along the spines, and he tried not to imagine what that would feel like over his skin. He’d never noticed a woman’s hands in such detail before, but he suddenly wished to make a study of Lia’s. *Too much damn whisky.*

Drostan cleared his throat and crossed his arms. “Do ye have books at your home?”

She turned to frown at him. “You like to read, and you rescue people and kittens.”

She was either blatantly ignoring his probing or couldn’t keep track given her drunken state. He gave a slow nod. “I’m also a decent carpenter and can skip a stone nearly to the shores of Wolf Isle.”

“And you’re a Macquarie,” she said.

“And ye’re a Scott.”

She frowned, matching his stance with crossed arms, and the toe of her boot tapped on the wooden floor. Were her toes as perfectly shaped as her fingers?

“Why do you have to be a Macquarie?”

“I was born that way. What’s wrong with being a Macquarie?”

“Everything,” she said, but then turned back to the books.

Drostan walked to the hearth and crouched with the poker to stir the glowing cinders there. “I’ll let Meg know where I’ve left ye.” The cinders sparked as he unsettled them.

“You have a lover’s lips.”

Drostan's hand froze, and he turned, still crouched down. "Pardon?"

She stood beside the writing table and squinted at him. "Very not hideous." She glared and walked closer to him. "They aren't thin and pinched, although a smile would make you more likely to be kissed."

Bloody hell. He straightened, setting the poker against the hearth, and examined her. "The whisky is making ye say things ye'll regret." With her hair flowing free around her shoulders, windblown and full of loose waves, and her bodice sitting a bit lower than proper, she looked ravished. His whole body tightened, his jack hardening under his woolen wrap. Without looking down, he adjusted himself.

"Life is full of regrets." Her tone held a shrug. She moved right before him and pushed her finger against the corner of his mouth, trying to create a smile. Her other finger pushed the opposite corner.

He stood still, not daring to move with his restraint feeling so thin, for he had a sudden desire to suck one of those precious fingers into his mouth. *Step away. Leave!* But then a voice in his head pounded over the rest. *Kiss her.*

She remained close even though she dropped her hands, tilting her face. His fingers slid along a curl that had gotten stuck at the corner of her mouth. He plucked it free and brushed it behind her ear. *Mo chreach.* The slip of hair did feel like silk.

"If you have a lover's lips," Lia said, "then you should kiss. 'Tis a responsibility."

Her words rattled the bars he'd placed around himself, and he tried again to take control of this situation that felt like it was spiraling into something molten. "Ye ran away to go to Grissell's home on Wolf Isle."

She blinked as if lost but didn't pull away. "Yes. To find the Macquaries." She grabbed his hand. "And I caught one."

"Ye did," he said. She was close, her body giving off warmth and the smell of some flower. "What are ye going to

do now?” he asked.

She tipped her head to the side, her hand sliding up his arm to his biceps, squeezing the muscle that he naturally tightened. She exhaled long. “I don’t want you to die.”

Drostan froze. *Die?* “Why would I die?”

Her other hand joined the first to wrap around it, although her fingers couldn’t touch. “So large.” She looked up into his face and inhaled. “You, Drostan, have large muscles, smell good, and are clean. I think I will kiss you first.”

“Before I die?”

She didn’t answer but stepped into him, her hands clasped around his thick arm. She reached up on the tips of her toes and leaned toward his face, pressing her lips there. The questions still running in his brain slowed and stopped as the warmth of her lips penetrated. She stood still as if unsure what to do, but Drostan knew what to do. *Pull away. Don’t be an arse.*

Instead, Drostan tilted her face to the side. She was relaxed and tasted of honey ale. Her arms came up to his neck to pull herself into the bend of his body. *Good bloody lord*, every part of her that touched him was soft and beckoning. He should pull away, but felt caught in a fragrant, warm snare that he might never desire to leave. All of it wrapped around him and filled him like a siren’s song infiltrating his soul.

Her lips parted under his mouth as a small moan came out with her breath. The effect of that small sound on his jack was immediate and forceful, and his arms encircled her, lifting her against him so that the crux of her legs fit along his hard length. His hands played along her spine that arched gently, thrusting her body against him.

The door of the library opened. “Macquarie! What the devil are ye doing?”

• • •

Amelia grabbed hold of Drostan’s shoulders as he tried to pull

away. The heat from the whisky seemed to have reignited, flooding her, making her ache. “No,” she whispered, the chill in the air replacing the warmth of his lips. “Don’t stop.”

“Drostan Macquarie. What are you doing with that poor girl?” A woman’s firm voice broke through the heat that throbbed within Amelia, and she let Drostan pull away.

“I...” Drostan stammered. “She had to use the privy, so we came up to the castle.”

“Using the privy has nothing to do with kissing her,” the woman said. Amelia looked across at Meg, her father, and the woman who stood frowning. The woman was over two score in years and beautiful with silver streaks accenting her brown hair.

“I have no excuse, Lady Ava.” Drostan sounded full of remorse, which was annoying. Amelia wasn’t sorry. Should she be? *He’s a Macquarie. Bloody Hellfire!*

Suddenly, Meg was beside Amelia. “Lia, I am so sorry. Drostan, you should be ashamed of yourself.”

Lia? *I like that name.* Amelia sounded so mouselike, and she was no mouse. No, to venture forth from Dunvegan to pay her way onto a ship for ports unknown, to survive an attack in an alley, and to somehow work her way into her enemy’s presence, she was no mouse. And she was no Amelia. She would be Lia.

From the look on Drostan’s face, he was ashamed. Should she be ashamed? Good lord, what had she done? *I kissed a damn Macquarie.* Lia’s fingers touched her damp lips. *And it was bloody wonderful.*

Drostan met the wrath evident in Tor Maclean. Lia had seen punishments dealt out by her brothers to people they thought had slighted them or taken too much interest in her. Would Drostan be whipped, flayed in public, spit upon? Panic tightened her chest.

“I kissed him!” she called out. “He had nothing to do with it.”

Lia’s stomach felt like the rolling sea. “I drank too much

whisky, and it made me kiss him.”

“He most certainly had something to do with it,” Tor said, his voice as fierce as his face.

“He was kissing you back,” Meg’s mother said, a bit of English in her accent. She flapped a hand up and down Drostan. “Kissing you back with his whole self.” She shook her head with nothing less than total disappointment. “I thought more of you, Drostan. Your aunt and brothers will be dismayed.”

“I beg your pardon,” Drostan said and turned to Lia. “And yours, Mistress Scott.” He gave a little bow to her and strode to stand before Tor. Lia wasn’t sure who would win in a fight, but Drostan would lose an important ally if it came to blows. Isn’t that what she wanted to have happen? The Macquaries lose their allies, so they’d be vulnerable? She held her tongue but felt faint from it all.

“You should sit,” Meg whispered and took her over to a writing table.

“I didn’t mean to bring dishonor to your home,” Drostan said. “I hold the utmost respect for ye and your family, Chief Maclean, and I am ashamed of my actions.”

This seemed to appease Meg’s father somewhat, and he stepped aside. Drostan bowed his head to him and Lady Ava. “Again, I am sorry. It won’t happen again.”

What if she wanted another kiss? *No. I can’t.* Lia let her head drop in her hands where she’d propped them on the small desk.

“I’ll walk ye out,” Tor said.

Lady Ava exhaled as if exhausted. “Apologies, Mistress Scott, for our friend’s behavior and for meeting you under these circumstances.”

Lia shook her head and slowly raised it from its perch. “I... It was me who should be apologizing, Lady Maclean.”

“Please call me Ava.” She offered her a smile even though her eyes were still assessing.

“And please call me...Lia.”

Meg rubbed her arm, and Lia looked at it as if trying to comprehend what she was doing. No one had given her comfort for a long time. “You’ve had a turbulent day and should rest.”

Lia touched the gnawing ache of exhaustion along her forehead with her free hand. “I think whisky is not something I should drink.”

Meg laughed lightly. “No, you should not.” She looked at her mother. “The lads were giving her lots of drinks, Ma. Drostan poured out her last one and chased them off.”

“I’ll send up a tonic to fight the aftereffects,” Ava said. “Meg, help me ready a room. I sent Fiona and Mattie to the festival.”

“Thank you,” Lia said. “And please forgive me for...” She indicated the space where she’d been kissing Drostan. “I don’t normally kiss men...or anyone.” Her breath paused. Her very first kiss had been with a Macquarie. *Damn!* Never again.

Oh, but she wanted to feel that heat again, the heat she realized hadn’t been the whisky at all. In fact, it rivaled the heat from the whisky and seemed even more powerful. It made her forget all her plans and her purpose. Kissing Drostan Macquarie was dangerous.

“He should know better,” Ava said. “The Macquarie brothers must be careful not to ruin their family and isle again. Right when everything is improving.”

The ache in Lia’s head cleared away some of the fuzziness that had left her unfocused and dizzy. *If any of the Macquarie brothers have bastards, the curse will doom their clan.* Meg had said it earlier, backing up similar conjectures made by her brothers.

“Wait here,” Meg said, smiling down at Lia, “while Ma and I make up a room right next to mine.”

They left her sitting at the writing desk alone in the quiet room that smelled of polished leather, parchment, and ink. She worked her fingertips along her forehead, but the pressure

didn't change what she'd done. *Dammit*. She'd kissed him, kissed a Macquarie. "Whisky is evil," she whispered. She'd had a plan when she'd left Skye, and kissing a bloody Macquarie was not part of it no matter how soft his lips were or large his muscles were or how good he smelled.

Shaking her head as if to expel the memory, she pulled a sheaf of parchment from the small stack that sat under her elbow and picked up a quill, shoving it into the inkpot. She should have thought about what she'd say to people before she left. Her lies would trip her up if she didn't stay consistent. She wrote Cecilia Scott on the paper. "Lia, short for Amelia and Cecilia." She smiled and wrote Amelia and Cecilia and then underlined "lia" under both.

Now what? She was going to Wolf Isle to see Grissell. She wrote the number one on the page. "Journey to Wolf Isle and stay with Grissell," she murmured, dipping the quill back into the ink and scratching the tip over the paper. She put a precise little check next to it because she was going there on the morrow. *Close enough*. And she liked checking things off her lists, of which she made many.

Dipping the quill back in the ink, she held it ready. "Two..." The ink dripped out, leaving a splotch, so she set the tip to paper and started writing before more mess could be made. "Doom their clan," she murmured. *The Macquaries deserve to be ruined*. But then Amelia rubbed the circle brand on the inside of her wrist, feeling small and impotent again. Her stomach curled inward at the guilt that ate at her, the guilt over her relief that her younger brother was gone, guilt instead of sorrow or fury. But her older brother, Alasdair, wanted revenge and Amelia had to prove she was a strong MacLeod, capable of taking down their enemy and not merely a woman to marry off.

She shook her head, blinking hard to study the words. How was she going to doom their clan? She crossed the line and the number two out. *Specifics. I need specifics*. Was the curse real? Real enough that Ava Maclean believed it to be. If any of the brothers had a bastard, the clan would die out. If Lia had a bastard, she'd be responsible for ending the Macquarie Clan.

She jabbed the quill back into the inkpot and scratched words quickly on the paper while the ridiculous plan was still in her head.

2. *Seduce Drostan Macquarie*

3. *Get him alone, maybe drunk on whisky*

4.

She hesitated. She was a virgin, but she knew how mating worked after what she'd seen at Dunvegan. And the thought of being naked with Drostan made her heart thud like the drum around the Beltane fires, flushing her face. She put her quill tip back to the paper.

4. *Bed Drostan Macquarie*

She thought and then added, *many times*.

5. *Leave Wolf Isle and birth a bastard*

6. *Destroy the Macquarie Clan*

Before it could smear, she sanded the paper and waved it back and forth to dry. It was small, and she folded it even smaller, creasing the folds vigorously.

"There now," she whispered to the watching room. "I didn't forget myself kissing him. 'Tis part of my plan." She said it out loud, her words slurred slightly as if the whisky had numbed her tongue. Was that why she'd kissed him? In truth, the reason had far more to do with the kindness in his eyes and the chiseled hardness of his body. And he'd saved Sia and her.

Guard your heart. Lia sniffed, remembering her mother's advice. If Agatha Scott were still alive, she'd have talked Alastair out of his terrible plan for his only sister. But her mother, her only source of kindness and support, had died.

Lia laid her head on the desk. "'Tis merely part of my plan."

The door swung inward. "Oh my, she's passed out." The laughter that followed made Lia raise her head to find Cecilia standing with Meg.

"I was but resting." Lia curled her fist around the folded list in her lap. She was sober enough to know that she absolutely

couldn't let them find it. "'Tis quite late," she said, pushing up from her seat. "Are you staying the night?" she asked Cecilia.

"No. I was here to use the privy and saw Meg scurrying around since she let her maids go to the festival."

"'Twas no problem for Mother and me to make up the room," Meg said, looping her arm through Lia's and pulling her out from behind the desk.

Lia glanced at the hearth, and her heart skipped faster. It wouldn't do to let either woman see her risky plan. She'd remember it now that she'd put it down in words. But then she couldn't scratch off each task. Her forehead scrunched. No, she needed to get rid of any evidence of any ill intent. Lia staggered toward the fire, tugging Meg.

"Let's get you undone and tucked in for the night," Meg said, trying to guide her.

The exhaustion from her journey, the shock of the attack, and too much whisky pressed against Lia's shoulders and back like a burden of boulders tied there. All she wished to do was to fall into a safe, clean bed and dream about being kissed. But first...

As they walked, she staggered away from Meg toward the fire.

"Oh my," Meg said, "Cecilia, help me."

Before they could pull her away, Lia tossed the folded list into the hearth.

...

"Ye kissed her?" Eagan asked as he briskly rubbed his damp towel over his naked form. They stood behind Aunt Ida's cottage, which was a short walk from the freshwater lake where the Maclean warriors liked to bathe.

"Aye," Drostan said. What had he been thinking? *She's beautiful, and her hair feels like silk.*

"Did she slap ye?" Eagan grinned and tried to catch

Drostan's face. "No lasting hand print."

Drostan dodged him. "She didn't slap me, but Tor Maclean seemed inclined to thrash me."

"Daingead," Eagan said, his smile fading. "Ye should give Adam some forewarning that the Maclean Chief might boot us off the isle."

Drostan felt a heaviness in his chest. Making an enemy of the Macleans would see the Macquaries ruined as completely as him fathering a bastard. "I didn't kiss Meg."

"Of course ye didn't, or ye wouldn't be breathing this morn," Eagan said and slapped him on the shoulder as he walked by, grabbing up his tunic and plaid wrap.

Drostan rubbed the side of his face with his hand. *Bloody hell*. Lia was someone's daughter. Would he have another father out to gut him?

'Twas just a kiss.

A kiss that had erupted into fire inside him. The warmth she gave off and the soft curves of her body had wrapped around him like intoxicating shackles. And that was before he'd inhaled her fresh scent. What would have happened if the Macleans hadn't walked in? Surely, he would have come to his senses and stopped anything from continuing further. For God's sake, he had honor, loads of it.

He had no time nor inclination to be dishonorable. He wouldn't allow anything to slow or ruin his plans to live on his own, maybe with a dog or two, helping his brothers build up the strength of their clan. From the age of twelve, Drostan had known he wouldn't marry and have a family, that he'd live alone. With Aunt Ida's prediction that one of the five Macquarie lads would doom their clan by siring a bastard, a young Drostan had decided to ensure he wouldn't be the despised brother to do it.

Adam, who was already a young man by then, refused to drink Ida's concoction that would kill a man's seed, so Drostan had refused as well as all the brothers. When their father found out that Ida had tried to castrate them with herbs, he'd been

irate, threatening to take them away. Yelling that Ida would doom the Macquarie Clan herself.

After that, their father had sat them down to warn them about things that could make them unable to father a child, which they shouldn't do with a lass until they were married. To a twelve-year-old lad, who had only just noticed that lasses smelled better than lads, it was all confusing.

“The most powerful way to ruin any hope of fathering a child,” their father had said as he paced before them where they sat on stumps, “besides cutting one's ballocks off...” That made the boys pale and glance wide-eyed at one another. “Is to attempt to cut down the cursed willow tree before Gylin Castle on Wolf Isle. Even touching the tree could prevent ye from getting a woman with child.” Their father had stopped and jabbed his finger with his next words. “So don't even touch it until ye're old like me.”

“But wouldn't it make sense to do that if it stops us from making a bastard?” Drostan had asked.

Beck had laughed, and Adam shook his head, his arms crossed since he was the oldest and always serious. “Ye'll want to father children after ye wed,” Beck said. “If ye can't, no one will marry ye.”

“I don't want to marry anyone,” Eagan announced, but he was only a lad of ten. Drostan hadn't said it because Beck laughed again, but he agreed, and he'd pledged to himself right then to do something about it.

Chapter Six

“I’ll be staying away from Lia Scott,” Drostan said.

“Ye don’t have to stay away from her.” Eagan threw Drostan his own tunic. “Just don’t kiss her in Tor’s library.” He pointed at Drostan, jabbing it in the air. “And don’t get her with child, else ye *will* be marrying her.”

“Ye sound like Aunt Ida and Rabbie. No bastards born to a Macquarie.” Rabbie was their father’s old advisor, and he, like Aunt Ida, was a staunch believer in the curse.

“They aren’t wrong,” Eagan said, suddenly serious. “Things are going well for Wolf Isle. ’Tis the two of us left who don’t have loving wives to bed. I think Adam’s anxious to see us shackled to lasses.” He didn’t look happy about that.

Drostan snorted. “As if we are his daughters.” He threw his tunic over his head where it stuck to the dampness of his skin. “And just because a man’s wed doesn’t mean he can’t also father bastards,” Drostan said.

“Adam says finding a wife like Lark will keep us happily returning to our own beds each night.” He gave a wry grin as if he didn’t believe it. “But I like...variety.”

They walked around the cottage where they’d stayed the night under Aunt Ida’s watchful eye, which was why his three older brothers, who were blissfully wed, chose to sleep at the inn or with friends. While they’d probably spent the night tugging their generous wives, Drostan had tossed and turned trying not to think about the lass he’d decided to stay away from.

The morning was fresh, the sun peeking from the horizon as if it were waiting to ambush the world, setting it ablaze to burn off the dampness of a cool night. Wood smoke from cookfires ribboned up from each cottage, and doors opened with children racing out as people wandered toward the festival grounds. The caber toss trees were set on the far end of the meadow where morning mist still rose from the spring

wildflowers and grasses.

Drostan swung his arms to work his muscles. The dip in the lake hadn't fully woken him after the restless night. When he'd finally slept, he'd dreamt about standing before the dead willow tree in the bailey of their castle.

"I'm doing the caber toss this year," Eagan said and pointed. "Let's head there so I can inspect the logs."

Next to the cabers sat the archery targets to test accuracy and the hammer throwing station to test strength. The maypole stood in the middle of the field, its colorful ribbons dancing about in the spring wind. Eagan and Drostan strode off the road onto the path eaten through the grasses by Maclean sheep and goats the week before in preparation.

"Lots of dew about," Eagan said, nodding toward a dozen ladies sitting and rolling amongst the bending bluebells and spring daisies, laughter rising around them. Eagan nodded to the other side of the field. "When else would ye see Cecilia Maclean rolling in wet grass like a sweaty mare?"

"Only on Beltane," Drostan said.

Cecilia and Meg sat in the dew, but where was Lia? Was she still abed? Could she have fled during the night, dressed like the lad as she'd arrived? Or could some of Captain Gordon's crew found her?

Drostan strode faster toward them, breaking into a jog. As he came up, both women turned wide-eyed to him. "Where is —?"

His words broke off as Lia rolled through the tall grass toward them down a hill, her skirts wrapped around her legs, and her arms extended overhead.

...

Lia kept her arms stretched above to protect her head, which, despite Lady Ava's concoction, still ached after the whisky incident last night.

Nudged awake by Meg before dawn, Lia had followed her

enthusiastic friend outside to meet over a dozen young women in the damp fields where low-lying fog made the flower heads seem to float on the surface of a sea made of mist. Apparently, rolling in the May Day dew was a Beltane tradition on Mull. Maybe it was also on the Ilse of Skye, but Lia had never been invited to participate. Alasdair would never have let her go anyway.

“Ooof,” Lia said, as she rolled up against something. She opened her eyes to the sky, but it was blocked by the serious and utterly fascinating face of none other than Drostan Macquarie. She sucked in a grass seed or some pollen on a gasp, making her cough. She twisted, pushing upright from the tall grass, and he reached down to grab her arm, helping her sit.

“Pardon me,” she said and coughed several times into her fist. Lord, help her. Could she be any more mortified?

“Are ye well?” Drostan asked, his intense eyes gazing down at her in all their golden-green glory.

She coughed again, waving him off as she croaked. “I breathed in something.”

“Goodness,” Cecilia said. “I hope it wasn’t an insect.”

It wasn’t what she said but how she said it that grated on Lia’s nerves. Just about everything that came from Cecilia’s lips was cutting in some way. Why did Meg tolerate the woman? Maybe she was lonely, too. Lia understood the sting of loneliness.

The coughing ceased, and Lia realized her hair had fallen by the rolling and had twisted around her head. She must look like she’d been tossed by a wet whirlwind. Little grass seeds and a couple daisy petals stuck in the frizzy display of hair tossed around her shoulders. She pushed backward and felt rather than heard a crunch under her. “God’s teeth,” she said and raised up slightly to pluck the flower crown from under her. She’d made the festive ring that morn, but now the bluebells were squashed on one side. She pushed it onto her head anyway, hoping the lopsidedness wouldn’t be noticed.

“Good morn, Macquarie brothers,” Cecilia said. “Care to join our roll in the May Day dew?” She patted her smooth cheeks. “It brings beauty to the maiden for the year.”

Lia looked up at Drostan, feeling her cheeks warm. The rising sun cast him in a golden light like some Greek god flung to earth. She couldn’t help but stare at his mouth. She’d kissed that mouth. Really kissed it. The memory would be etched in her mind forever. *Bloody hellfire.*

She looked away, her cheeks hot. The whisky had made her so foolish. She’d never had it before, her brothers not allowing it because she was a woman. Alasdair should have been giving her whisky as soon as their mother died so she could drink it without turning into a traitorous kissing fool. Oh, what a kiss it had been, and it had been her first.

“Lia says she’s never done it before,” Meg said.

Lia’s gaze snapped to her. *Kissing?* Had she told Meg she’d never kissed a man before? The confusion on her face made Meg squeeze her arm. “’Tis fine if you haven’t before,” Meg said. “May Day rolling isn’t the only way a maiden can look lovely. Like you, some are born lovely.”

“She’s beautiful without it,” the other man said, his smile full and his eyes appreciative as he stared at Lia. He nodded to her. “I’m Eagan, the last of the Macquarie brothers.”

Lia looked between the two men. They had the same firm jawline and handsome features, but Eagan’s lips formed an easy smile while Drostan favored frowns. Right now, his eyes pinched together as Eagan looked at her.

Cecilia gasped, pointing at Lia’s cheek.

Lia gasped, too, swatting her cheek as she leaped onto her knees. “Is it a bee?”

Cecilia broke into laughter. “’Tis a leaf. God’s teeth! I thought it was a slug.” She covered her mouth with her hand, trying to control her giggles.

Lia brushed her hands over her entire face to make sure nothing else was sticking to it, her heart pounding furiously. Her cheeks heated as if the sun beat down on her face. How

foolish she must look sitting there wrinkled, damp, and tossed with her arms wildly flapping about her head.

Meg leaned closer and straightened Lia's damp petticoat. "That spot on your cheek will be particularly beautiful this year."

"After all this rolling, our new friend should be lovely from head to toe," Cecilia said, her gaze running up and down Lia's damp figure. "You've certainly taken May Day rolling seriously."

Friend? Cecilia wasn't the type of friend Lia needed. She'd met women like her on Skye, those who sought to lower others to make themselves look better. They didn't seem to realize it made them look uglier.

Cecilia laughed. "You look like you've slept out here all night."

"Cecilia," Meg said, a frown in her tone that made her sound nearly identical to her mother, Lady Ava.

"Have I said something untrue?" Cecilia asked, indicating Lia sitting in her damp gown.

Lia pushed up to stand out of the grass, flapping her petticoat back and forth to dislodge the grass seeds. It was the dress she'd brought rolled in her sack, so it had been wrinkled already. She didn't look at Drostan but felt his gaze on her.

"Truth," Lia said, "can be spoken with kindness or with malice." She met Cecilia's gaze even though her cheeks were still hot. "How one chooses to speak truth reveals one's heart to be good or ugly."

Lia tipped her head to the side and squinted at Cecilia, studying her. "Huh," Lia said as if slightly surprised by what she saw in Cecilia, and turned, walking away. She picked up her bow and the beautiful leather quiver that had been her mother's and continued toward the archery targets.

"Did I say something wrong?" Cecilia asked, but Lia ignored her and strode forward.

"Where are you going?" Meg asked, catching up.

Hand to her half-smashed crown so it wouldn't blow off, Lia glanced at her. "Somewhere far from her."

Meg threaded her arm through hers and leaned in toward her ear even though Lia refused to look at her. "She's jealous of you."

Lia snorted. "With my rumpled wet gown and leaves stuck to my cheek." *Attacked in an alley, no kin, and I bloody kissed the enemy.*

Meg huffed at the exertion. "She thinks Drostan will ask her to wed, but the way he was looking at you in the field... Well, I'm sure Cecilia picked up on it, and jealousy makes her vicious."

"He was looking at me?" Lia whispered. Wed? Was Drostan planning to ask Cecilia to wed soon? The thought shook her composure, but she kept her stride even.

"He was looking at you with *intensity*," Meg whispered.

A commotion across the field made Lia turn to the tall maypole. Younger girls, who'd just run up to it, stood holding the long, colorful ribbons that were tacked to the top of the trimmed and smoothed tree trunk standing erect. They all stared upward at something clinging to the top.

Lia gasped. "Sia!"

Chapter Seven

Lia held her bruised wreath on her head as she ran across the field to the beribboned, naked tree that served as the maypole. Drostan appeared, jogging with her.

“Sia!” she called as she reached the pole, clasping it with both hands to tilt her head back. It looked so much taller when one was right up against it.

“It bounded over and scampered up the pole before anyone could grab it,” one older girl said. “’Tis just a kitten.”

“Such a pretty little thing,” said another.

“Lovely splotches of color over it,” said a third.

Camille came up, along with Meg. Even Cecilia strode closer to see the source of the emergency.

“Sia, come down,” Lia called.

Cecilia tipped her head back as if to display her long neck for appreciation. “The creature really doesn’t listen to you.”

“No cat comes to its name,” said a redheaded girl, holding a little blond girl’s hand. Lia recognized them as the children Drostan had escorted to the privy the day before.

The little blond girl pointed up the pole. “Kitty.”

Meg stroked Lia’s arm while still staring up. “She may come down on her own.”

“If the pole was shorter, we could pull the ribbons, making her fall off,” the red-haired girl said. She looked at Lia. “I’m Pip, by the way, and this is Hester. We have experience with cats.”

Several more ladies clustered there, faces tilted toward poor Sia.

Drostan exhaled long, his breath coming out like a lament. “I’ll get her.”

Charles Duffie stood with his hands on his hips looking up.

“’Tis about twenty feet, Macquarie. How do you intend to do that?”

The brother named Callum joined them, shaking his head. “The pole is rubbed smooth. ’Tis different than climbing a ship mast that has rungs. And the ribbons won’t hold your weight.”

“Throw something soft to knock the kitten off, and we’ll catch it,” Eagan said.

“Take a flexible pole and vault up there,” another man said.

“Grow some wings, Macquarie.” A muted chuckle rose among the men.

Drostan looked at Eagan. “Give me your belt.”

Eagan stood tall and glanced around, scratching the back of his neck. “But it holds up my kilt.” Laughter followed, and he smiled broadly. “The lasses may like it, but their suitors will not.” More laughter.

“Use your hands to hold it,” Drostan said.

Meow, called Sia at the top. Her eyes were huge in her small face.

“She’s terrified.” Lia went to the pole, her hands reaching up it as far as she could. “Please come down, Sia.”

Meow. The kitten balanced on the top, her tiny claws tethered to the ribbons. *Meow*.

“I would fly up to you if I could,” Lia said, wishing for those wings someone had mentioned.

Drostan bent to tighten the laces on his boots. “Perhaps ye should consider a leash for her.”

The corner of her mouth hitched up as if he’d handed her some wings to strap on. “Have you ever seen a cat leashed?”

“Nay, but I’ve never seen a cat on the top of a maypole, either.”

Meow!

Bloody hellfire. Sia’s cries were becoming more panicked.

Drostan threw the thick belt around the pole. “Give me a bit

of room.”

“Be careful,” Lia said, looking at the height.

His brow rose slightly. “I will be well.”

She flapped her hand at the cat. “I mean, be careful not to shake the pole too much.”

Eagan, who was holding his woolen wrap around his hips with one hand, laughed. “The lass isn’t worried about ye, just her kitty.”

“This should be fun to watch,” Charles called from the rows of onlookers encircling the pole.

Drostan reached up high with the belt that he’d buckled on the loosest hole around his back and settled it, leaning back. He planted a foot on the pole.

“Watch out for splinters,” Callum called as Drostan put his other foot on the pole, using the belt at his back to hold him off the ground.

It seemed nearly everyone at the festival had come to watch. Sia had made Drostan the center of a spectacle. His frown and silence showed he didn’t enjoy the attention, and if he fell or failed, everyone would laugh. Not to mention, he could break his back.

“Good Lord,” she whispered. “What am I going to do with you, Sia?”

With a small grunt, Drostan jerked the belt higher on the pole, and used his legs to propel him upward, the edges of his boots digging in to steady him so that he was almost walking up the pole. Everyone stilled, watching. The muscles of Drostan’s legs, arms, and back mounded as he worked, making him look like he was made of stone under the smoothness of his tan skin. Several people had gathered close to stand with her: Meg, Cecilia, and some of the children who’d been dancing around the pole.

“He’s so strong,” the girl named Pip said.

“Uh huh,” the little girl agreed, clinging to her hand.

Suddenly, Meg gasped, and Cecilia chuckled. “Now that’s quite a view.”

Lia’s gaze fastened on the wide-open view of Drostan’s tight arse. Like she’d seen when he climbed after her wayward kitten the first time. The angle showed every detail of his backside, the muscles in it working hard to keep him climbing.

“Meg! Step back from there.” Meg jumped at the sound of her father’s voice and whirled around. “Ye other lasses, too. Back up. ’Tis not decent.”

It was almost comical to watch the mass of onlookers step inward, not back, at Tor Maclean’s words.

Lady Ava and her friend, Grace, pushed forward. “Away now,” Ava called as they both shooed everyone back, although Lady Grace took a peek, her cheeks flushing red. The crowd listened to Lady Ava and moved backward. Drostan was nearly to the top. The pole hadn’t looked so high until Lia saw him way up near Sia.

“Oh my,” Grace murmured as she looked up again from her closer position.

Ava playfully hit her arm. “Stop looking.”

“I’m a healer,” Grace said. “I’ve seen naked arses before. Although most are old and wrinkled, and that lad’s arse certainly is neither.”

“He’s also only a few years older than your son,” Ava said.

Grace frowned at her. “You have a way of ruining all my fun, Ava.”

Lia held her hands clasped before her and looked to the top where Drostan paused. With a meow, Sia leaped to him, clutching his head with her claws like she had on the ship.

“Oh no,” Lia murmured.

“Bloody hell,” Drostan grumbled, trying to move the cat over to his shoulder, but its tiny claws seemed embedded in his skin.

“’Tis stuck to his face,” someone in the crowd pointed out,

and everyone erupted in laughter.

While Sia clung to Drostan's head, half covering his face with her soft belly, Drostan started his descent. His boots helped him slide slowly until he reached the ground. Lia ran up to him, and everyone cheered.

"Take the cat," he said, his voice full of ire, "off my face."

"Thank you," she said, slowly pulling the claws from Drostan's lower jaw and head. "What am I going to do with you?" She cuddled the cat to her neck and instantly felt an itchiness in her nose.

Drostan unlatched the belt and tossed it to Eagan. "Take her away from the pole, so she doesn't climb right back up." He stretched his upper arms before his body one at a time.

Lia tried not to notice the finely chiseled muscles even though all the other women seemed to be doing so. It was a wonder Drostan wasn't already married. Was it the curse of Wolf Isle that kept the lasses away?

She scooped up her bow and quiver, keeping Sia tucked under her arm. Luckily, the kitten seemed content to be carried after its fright. Lia trudged away from the pole in the direction of the archery field.

Meg chased after her. "She truly is adorable."

"She makes me sneeze." Lia sniffed.

Meg leaned into her, petting Sia's head. "But she also makes Drostan Macquarie come to the rescue. Did you see his arse?"

Of course she saw it. She couldn't stop seeing it in her head. "Everyone has arses."

"Not like his!" Meg laughed. "Too bad my da would never let me marry a Macquarie."

Lia's gaze shifted to Meg. "Why wouldn't he?"

"Oh, because of the curse on their clan. Although the other wives have survived so far." Meg shrugged. "And they seem quite content." Meg glanced back over her shoulder. "I'd be content with a man as brawny as Drostan Macquarie."

Lia followed her gaze to where Drostan was being congratulated by the men and fawned over by Cecilia and the other young women who'd spied up his kilt. Fortunately, he'd been facing the pole, or they'd have seen his jack, too. For some reason that annoyed her, not that she had any proprietary ownership over Drostan's nether region. But no one should be looking up his kilt. *You did*, she reminded herself. Well, it *was* her cat. Lia snorted softly.

Meg coaxed Sia from Lia's arms. "Drostan has saved your kitten twice and you twice, and you've only been here a day."

"Twice?" Lia asked. "The cat, yes but—"

"From the terrible sailors in the alley and then again last night when all those randy lads kept giving you whisky. Even if he kissed you up at the castle, he still saved you from them. 'Tis rather gallant."

Drostan was also attempting to save her from the crewman's clan if they decided to hunt down the person who'd shot their kinsman. Lia obviously knew vengeance was a real threat.

She felt the ache in the back of her head grow tighter. Drostan Macquarie was different from the devils her brothers had described between drinks of mead and roars to see the Macquarie devils dead.

Every act of bravery, compassion, and assistance slashed at the revenge she'd planned to seek.

...

Drostan studied the frowning lass who held tightly to her kitten. They stood on the ferry tied to the dock, waiting for his family. She touched her fingertip to the slightly tilted-up tip of her nose and rubbed, sniffed, and stifled another sneeze.

She sneezed anyway, and he handed her a handkerchief. "Thank you," she murmured, her frown still in place.

Perhaps Lia was angry about the kiss the night before. *Mo chreach*. Drostan cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, lass, for last night in the library. Ye needn't fear. 'Twill not happen again."

She glanced at him. “You were ready to take the brunt of Chief Maclean’s anger, weren’t you?” Her words came like she was accusing him of an atrocity.

“Aye?” he said, but it sounded much more like a question.

“When I was clearly to blame for...throwing myself at you like a common drunk.”

“I don’t think there’s anything at all common about ye,” he murmured.

“Rescuing me again.” Her voice was a bit below a yell, and the kitten opened her eyes to see what the fuss was about, but Lia rubbed a finger over her back and Sia closed her eyes again. “Rescuing lost travelers from attackers in allies, kittens from masts and poles, and foolish women who drink too much whisky to keep their wits about them.”

“Ye’re angry?” He crossed his arms over his chest, his legs braced in a battle stance. It was a natural reaction to what sounded like the start of combat.

“Three times for me,” she said, poking his arm. “And twice for Sia.”

“And that makes ye angry?” he asked.

Charles was right. Lasses were horribly complicated. His gaze moved to his growing family, laughing as they hurried down the path to their ferry.

“Do you feed orphans and clothe lepers, too?” she asked. Sarcasm made her lips pinch.

“I don’t know any lepers,” he said but nodded to the children headed their way. “Although we do have orphans on Wolf Isle.”

Lia huffed and turned to stare out at the calm water.

“I think we’re all here,” Lark said as she and her sister, Anna, herded the five young lasses onboard. Eliza’s charges and Lark’s sisters chatted away about the colorful ribbons they’d received from Lady Ava. The noise made Sia sit up, arching her back, until she saw who was coming aboard. She settled back down as if judging them all as non-threatening.

Adam held wee John on his shoulder. Muriel carried her daughter, named after Lark, on her hip. Eliza with her friend, Alice, brought up the end of the procession with Drostan's four brothers.

"Will the ferry hold all of us?" Aggie asked, clutching Anna's hand with both of hers.

"There's only one more person plus a tiny kitten than when we came over," Dora said.

"Onward," Beck called, passing poles to his brothers who weren't holding a sleeping bairn.

Drostan pushed against the rocky bottom, and they moved out into the channel. Halfway across one of the ladies gasped, pointing back at Mull.

"Ye bloody rascals!" Rabbie MacDougall called from the shore. "Ye forgot me!" He held several tarts in his hands, half of one in his beard from the looks of it.

"I knew we forgot someone," Adam said.

"Go sleep at Aunt Ida's," Eagan called back.

"I'd rather swim across," Rabbie said, making everyone laugh, everyone except Lia.

She viewed the smiles and exuberance with a slight grin that didn't reach her eyes. It was as if the happiness around her brought her pain. But why? The lass carried secrets like a pack mule. Drostan had his own secrets, so he rarely pried into others' pasts. Lia needed help, and even if she disliked his meddling, he'd already decided to save her, as many times as he must.

...

"Achoo!" Lia released Sia to the pebbled shoreline and grabbed the fresh handkerchief that Drostan had given her. Someone else would have to take the cat. "Be free here, Sia," she said, wiping her irritated nose. The more she was with her, the worse her sneezing seemed to get, and the roof of her mouth itched. She slid her tongue over it, wishing for some ale

to wash the itch away.

“Both Gylin Castle and the village of Ormaig are up this path,” Drostan said, stopping beside her after lifting each child over the gap between the ferry and dock. The blasted man was saintly. She frowned, kicking a rock in front of her so that it shot off into the tall grasses lining the path. The realization that she probably looked like a pouting child irritated her even more.

Drostan pointed up the path that wound through a narrow stretch of woods away from the shore. “Muriel and her daughter will be walking home to Grissell’s place. Ye can stay with her until ye decide if ye want to live there or move into a cottage in the village.”

She should stay close to the Macquaries, but she also must act natural to gain their trust. And she hadn’t been invited to stay up at Gylin Castle.

“I suppose...I’ll go with Muriel,” Lia said, stepping to the side to wait for her.

She met Drostan’s gaze for the first time since leaving Mull. In the daylight, his eyes were a light shade of green. “’Tis quite generous of Mistress Grissell to open her home,” she said and nodded. “I don’t have one at present.”

That much was true. After her mother had died, Dunvegan had turned colder and colder. Alasdair didn’t pay to have new tapestries or portraits commissioned. The one of Lia dated back to when she was eighteen. It hung over the hearth in Dunvegan’s library, capturing her forever as a near child seeking marriage since Alasdair had smaller portraits of her made from it to send out to rich prospects.

“Grissell’s home is usually temporary unless ye decide to help her with the new mothers and bairns,” Drostan said.

“Where do you sleep?” she asked and kept his gaze despite feeling warmth grow in her cheeks. “Live,” she added. It didn’t matter where he slept. Or with whom.

“I’m usually up at the castle, though I have a cabin on the west coast of the isle where I’m planning to move soon.” She

followed his finger as he pointed supposedly west. "I'm going to work on it later today."

"You don't want to live with your brothers?"

He crossed his arms. "Lark and Adam and John live up there, along with Rabbie and Eagan. Beck moved to a cottage in town with Eliza, and Callum and Anna live in Ormaig, too." He glanced away as some of the children ran by. "It can feel crowded up at the castle. My cabin is apart. 'Tis..." His voice rose louder as the children shrieked at a toad that hopped into the path. Their surprise turned to high-pitched laughter, some of them imitating the hop. "Quiet," he finished, a soft grin curving his perfectly formed lips.

"Quiet can be lonely," she said.

He tipped his head, and she watched a bit of his hair fall over his forehead. "Have ye been lonely?" Drostan asked, but Lia was saved from having to create a suitable answer when Muriel stopped even with them.

"Lark said you may stay with us out at Grissell's," she said to Lia. "You can walk there with me and little Lark."

"Thank you," Lia said, and she looked at Drostan. "Goodbye."

He tipped his head to her and turned, striding toward the castle. Beck's little girls caught his hands, swinging his arms as they skipped along.

I could run away forever, forget about revenge. Was Iain even worth avenging? She absently rubbed at the circular scar on her wrist.

"'Tis about a twenty-minute walk along a path through the woods," Muriel said, pulling Lia's attention. "Shorter if you aren't helping a wee one along."

The forest around them was awakening with spring. Green buds dotted the trees and daisies pushed up from the cold ground. A few trees lay toppled as if pushed over by a passing giant, and Lia thought she saw something pulling back inside a hole at the base of one.

“You named your daughter after Lark Macquarie?” Lia asked.

“Aye,” Muriel said. “My daughter and I owe her our lives.”

“It seems all Macquaries are rescuers,” Lia murmured, following the flight of a bluish-hued bird above the tree canopy.

Muriel laughed. “I suppose they are.” She took her daughter’s small hand. “Lady Lark saved us from that devil, the pirate Claude Jandeau. He thinks nothing of raping women or selling them.” She shook her head. “All three ladies of Wolf Isle, Lark, Eliza, and Anna, have had to battle him.”

“And yet he’s still out on the seas?” Lia spied some bluebells sitting in a clump in the forest. Wolf Isle didn’t look cursed to her.

Muriel nodded as she drew away a mushroom that wee Lark had picked, tossing it far from her. “Aye, even though half his original crew drowned, and the other half were hanged for piracy.” Muriel rubbed her daughter’s hand on her own petticoat.

“He’s from France?” Lia asked.

“He spoke French,” Muriel said. “Most of his crew, too, except for that bastard of a Scotsman who helped him drag Lark and me onboard with him, along with one other lass from Grissell’s home.”

“A Scotsman was helping him abduct girls?” Lia asked, her gut tightening as her gaze snapped to Muriel. “When was this?”

She nodded. “About three years ago,” she answered, and scooped up the adorable blond child. “I gave birth to Lark soon afterward.” The thought of the little girl ending up being sold, along with her mother, to some horrid brothel or cruel man turned Lia’s stomach. “Did this Scotsman drown, too?”

“No, he got decapitated by a Macquarie sword,” Muriel said and set her wiggling child back down.

Lia stopped walking, her knees turning to soft jelly. She laid

her palm against a tree, and the forest faded as her memories surged forward.

Several dingy blankets cradled a hulking form, carried by four warriors through the entryway into Dunvegan Castle's Great Hall on the Isle of Skye.

"What is this?" Alasdair yelled while Lia stood numbly beside the table.

Fergus MacLeod's words broke the silence. "Your brother, milord. He was brought down by a Macquarie sword. His body and head were delivered to us, and we brought him home."

Alasdair stood from his throne-like chair and walked across the stone floor, his boots clacking with heavy heels. He reached the wrapped form, staring down at it for a long moment before grasping the free end. He yanked it back, and Lia's breath choked her at the sight of the bloated, stiff body, its head severed completely above the shoulders. Rotated unnaturally to the side, the unseeing eyes settled on Lia. She turned away, trying not to breathe in the putrid smell of death.

Lia held on to the tree in the path and inhaled fully to replace the smell in her memory with the piney freshness around her now. "What was his name?" Lia whispered, but she already knew. "This Scotsman devil who was working with the French pirate to abduct women and children?"

Muriel caught her daughter up in her arms and turned to her. "Iain. Iain MacLeod."

Iain, her brother. Lia's heart vibrated inside her as if it shivered from fever. Iain had been truly evil. *Not just to me.* He was evil to helpless children and women. She sucked in a jagged breath, feeling the sting of tears behind her eyes, and rubbed the pain in her chest.

"Are ye well?" Muriel asked, frowning at her from ahead where she lifted Lark into her arms.

Lia nodded, wiping away a stray tear on her cheek, and offered her a reassuring smile. *Iain was truly wicked.* The thought loosened the knot of guilt inside her, the shame of wishing him dead.

Had Drostan been the one to kill Iain? Had he rescued her before he'd even met her?

Chapter Eight

Chickens scattered as Drostan pulled Maise, his dun-colored, sturdy mare, to a halt and dismounted. Laughter and a squeal came from one of the four huts that made up Grissell's sanctuary for unwanted girls and children.

The door flew open, and Sia scampered out, followed by Muriel's daughter, her little hands extended to catch the kitten. With all these trees around, the kitten would have no problem climbing out of the child's reach, but then he'd have to rescue it again. Two other white cats trotted out as if to watch the drama unfold.

"Lark," Muriel called, following her daughter and catching her up in her arms. "Look! Drostan is here," Muriel called out with exuberance, obviously trying to distract her from the chase.

Several of the lasses hurried out of the cottages. Grissell's door opened, and the woman, using a carved branch for a cane, emerged. No matter what Lark and Anna said, the old woman looked like a witch with her hair, long and soft white, hanging about her bent shoulders. A little boy walked out with her, holding up a flower crown as if she forgot it. She took it from him and plopped it on her head. The child beamed with pride, and she came forward like royalty.

"A Macquarie," she said, her lips tight. "I told her ye'd be around before nightfall, but she wouldn't wait."

"Lia?" he asked, glancing around.

"Who?"

"Cecilia Scott is her full name," he said.

"If that is what she told ye," Grissell said. She raised a gnarled finger toward the west. "She decided to walk. My guess is to your cabin."

"Does she have another name?"

"Most assuredly," Grissell said.

He waited, but she didn't say anything. "What is it?"

"One's name is their own to give or keep."

He looked at Muriel who shrugged her shoulders. Had Grissell convinced Lia to trust her, or had she magically plucked the name from her head? Who knew what kind of power the crone possessed. He almost crossed himself.

Sia rubbed a figure eight between his boots, and Drostan scooped her up. "I'll take the kitten to her."

"Ye do that, Highlander," Grissell said, a smile growing on her mouth, showing two teeth missing. Lark thought she was in her eighties, but Drostan would guess at least a century by the way her eyes sat sunken into her face. Aunt Ida said Grissell was old even when she was a child. Some whispered that it was her magic that held her earthbound.

Drostan mounted, kitten tucked in one arm to sit on his thigh. As if realizing he was a safe hiding place, the wee beastie curled up, purring against him. He weaved in and out of trees through the old growth forest, the ground soft from winter-decayed leaves underneath. Was Lia headed to his cabin? Why? To find him? The thought warmed him. Perhaps she didn't hate him for the kiss.

He noted a broken twig, a heel mark, and a mutilated primrose with its white petals leading away. Movement caught his eye, and he glimpsed Lia's light-colored hair disappearing between some larger oaks. He clicked his tongue, and Maise trotted faster. "Lia," he called.

She jumped, throwing her back against the nearest tree. Her hand that wasn't holding her bow pressed against her chest. "You startled me."

She wore the same green gown she'd brought folded up in her satchel. With the sun shining against the leaves above, casting green downward, she almost blended in. It made her look as if she belonged there, out amongst natural things.

"Sia was looking for ye," he said, halting Maise beside her. He held the sleepy kitten up with one hand.

"Muriel was looking after her," she said, reaching for the

cat.

“I think Sia got tired of wee Lark trying to squeeze her organs out of her. Sia was eyeing a tall tree, so I thought I better take her.”

Lia sighed. “What shall I do with you, sweet thing? You make me sneeze.” As if to demonstrate, Lia sneezed toward the ground.

Drostan dismounted, handed her a cloth, and took the kitten back to secure in his plaid. “I’ll carry her.” The kitten began to purr again. “Were ye headed somewhere or only walking about?”

She dabbed her nose with his handkerchief. “I... I remembered you said you’d be working at your cabin, and I have a question.”

She pocketed the cloth and turned golden brown eyes on him, studying him as if she thought he had secrets neatly written and sitting inside that she could unfold. But Drostan didn’t like secrets. They had a way of eating one up from the inside. So, he had only one.

“What is it ye wish to know?” he asked without looking away.

Her piercing eyes opened wider for an instant, and she blinked. Wisps of hair floated about her chin, free of a loose braid that fell down her back, softening her look. For a moment, she said nothing. Then her words came out like strikes of a fist. “How many men have you killed?”

...

Lia stared into Drostan’s face, trying not to think of him as handsome, even though there was no doubt that he was, amazingly so. She tried to imagine him snarling and cursing and slashing. Even when he fought her assailant in the alley, he hadn’t used deadly force.

He stood, tall and brawny. She almost shook her head to deny it, but there was no denying the beauty of the man.

“Have you killed many?”

“Nay, not many,” Drostan said. “I’ve battled the pirate Claude Jandeau who abducted Lark and Muriel. Some of his crew died in the fighting.”

Sia reached up his chest with her tiny paws, making an adorable picture of a man who was also a killer. But there was a difference between a killer and a warrior bent on saving the innocent. She began to pace. It helped her think.

“As ye saw in the alley,” he said, “I don’t resort to killing. But if someone threatens my family and those I love, I will not hesitate.”

Drostan set the kitten down and put himself in front of Lia, catching her shoulders and bringing her to a halt. He looked into her eyes. “Why are ye asking me this?”

Lia met his gaze. “I’ve lost people in the past, family members.”

She watched his eyes as he took in the information.

“Do ye fear a family member now?” he asked. “Someone who made ye run from your home?”

“My oldest brother,” she said, her voice smaller than she wished. She rubbed the small circular brand on her wrist, but Alasdair hadn’t pressed the skin-scorching MacLeod ring into her flesh, Iain had. *And Iain is dead.* Relief was followed immediately by guilt. He was her brother after all, but Lord how he’d tortured her.

She turned, breaking Drostan’s gaze to walk northwest on the path she’d started. Sia trotted before her as if she knew where to go. The little head of a bluebell became the kitten’s prey, and she pounced on its dangling bell. Behind her, she heard Drostan lead his horse, following.

“I can ride ye back to Grissell’s,” Drostan said. “Now that ye’ve found me to ask me about my...killing status.”

“I would like to see your cottage,” she said without looking back at him. He’d tell her if she veered off the narrow trail that he must have made hauling supplies out to it.

Drostan came even with Lia, his horse trailing behind by a long lead. “Why are ye here on Wolf Isle, Lia?”

The question was expected, but she still wasn’t prepared to answer it. “Isn’t your cabin close? I feel like I’ve been walking for miles.”

“’Tis not too much farther.”

They continued in silence for several minutes. The wind picked up, and the woods grew darker as clouds converged above the tree canopy. In the distance, Lia heard the rolling sound of waves hitting the shore.

“Will ye not answer then?”

“Yes, I would like to see your cabin.”

“Not that.”

She took a steadying breath. Lying had to be handled with delicacy.

“Why did ye come to Wolf Isle dressed as a lad from off a sailing ship? And ye speak with a northern accent, so ’tis doubtful ye come from the borderlands.”

Hellfire. He didn’t only make her insides heat and her heart fill with guilty gratitude, he was also clever. Damn him. “I’m running away from my home.” That much was true.

“Why?” His face was hard, his brows low.

“My reasons are my own, and I’d appreciate you not telling everyone you suspect I’m someone other than who I’ve told them. The less people who know I’m here, the better.”

Drostan caught her hand, halting her. “Your brother... Has he hurt ye?”

She pulled her hand, and he released it. “I’m worth much more to him alive and unblemished.” All of that was true, yet she felt heat rise in her cheeks.

Lia hurried toward an opening where the sea washed up on flat boulders. A gull dropped an oyster onto the rocks, diving down to eat the flesh that had been exposed on impact. The rush of the wind and waves reminded her of Skye.

“That didn’t answer my question,” Drostan called, and she spotted him near a two-story cabin amongst trees. He looped his horse’s reins over a post and walked toward her.

Lia turned back to the sea and stepped along the low, rolling boulders where gentle waves pulled the smaller stones back, tumbling them upon each other. The sound was beautiful, like hundreds of gentle raindrops tapping the leaves of a summer forest as they clinked. She breathed in the tang of the sea. She lived along the sea on Skye, but she’d never been able to take such a deep breath there. Here, she sucked in the damp freshness, watching dark clouds billowing in with an incoming storm that swelled over the sea.

The darkness inside her seemed to mirror the storm. The need to run from Alasdair’s cruel plans to give her to a stranger in marriage for an alliance and gold. Her realization that she might not be able to protect herself in the dangerous world. The guilt from praying Iain wouldn’t return and then celebrating with relieved tears when his empty eyes proved he would never return. But then he had, in her mind and terrible dreams, whispering to her about how horrible she was for wishing him dead. All of it billowed inside her like the storm coming in.

Drostan stepped up next to her on the rock. “Your brother must have done something terrible to ye to make ye run from home.”

She turned her face to his, the rising wind blowing the hair that had escaped from her braid across her face. She brushed the strands from her eyes and met his green eyes full of questions and concern. They were so intense, yet kind. She’d never been looked at that way, and it drew her to him.

For a moment, she felt pulled, her secrets ready on her tongue. But then Lia tore her gaze from him and looked back out to sea. “I don’t think...” She let her breath out in a gust to match the wind. “I can’t return home.” She’d been delusional before, thinking she might. She wasn’t a warrior, killing for her brother. And she couldn’t doom a clan because they’d been protecting themselves against a madman. She would never be able to prove herself worthy to Alasdair unless she wed the

elderly Mackinnon chief.

“I don’t wish to talk about it,” she answered.

Did she imagine his quiet curse, the sound caught in the wind? Would he yell or turn away from her?

As the first big drops blew sideways in from the sea, he caught her hand. The touch surprised her, but it wasn’t rough or painful. Drostan had never been so, even when he was frustrated. He tugged her toward the front porch, which was held up by polished tree trunks. Sia was already waiting there, and Lia scooped her up in the wind.

“Ye can go in while I put Maise in the stable out back,” Drostan said, leaping off the side of the porch to grab the horse’s reins.

Lia held Sia and pushed through the thick wooden door, closing it behind her so the rain wouldn’t blow inside. She stopped, her eyes growing wide as her mouth dropped open. “Beyond measure,” she whispered in awe. In the center of the large space of freshly set logs were three trees. They rose to a loft above. Partway up, a canvas was stretched between the trees like a nest. Steps encircled the trio of oaks, built into them at ascending intervals to reach the upper story in a masterfully strange staircase.

She set Sia down and ran her hand over the smooth rail and climbed. Above was an open bed chamber with views out front of the gray sky and sea. Windows behind the large bed had panes of glass in them and showed the trees behind the cabin. The entire space smelled of freshly hewn logs. She peeked over the rail to see the hearth on one end that was built of stone. It was clean, showing no fire had yet been lit.

Sia used her claws to climb up one of the polished trees, tumbling onto the stretched canvas bed. Her tail puffed up in mock fear as she rolled, leaping up to climb higher until she balanced on the rail and leaped into Lia’s arms. “’Tis fun,” Lia murmured, setting the cat down and scratching the itch climbing up the front of her neck.

The bed took up a large part of the loft and had been built

huge to accommodate Drostan's size. A spread of branches was carved with amazing artistry along the headboard. She stood staring at it and rubbed her nose, sniffing and clearing her throat.

The front door opened, and Lia spun around as if caught spying. She coughed at the tickling in her throat and hurried back to the rail. Drostan walked in below, his tunic pocked with raindrops. He ran his hand through his hair and looked up, finding her.

"I came upstairs when Sia climbed the"—she indicated the soaring trees that dominated the cabin—"your...trees."

"They may keep her out of the real trees," he said.

Achoo. Lia covered her nose and reached for the handkerchief she still had, but it was time for a new one. "She rolled about on the canvas."

"I like to sit there. I call it the nest. I've even slept in it."

She descended quickly, sliding her hand along each tree as she circled them on the way down. "I've never seen anything so beautifully made." Sia rubbed against her skirts. She even managed to get underneath to slide against Lia's bare legs. "The headboard and this stairway."

A rare smile broke across Drostan's face. "The trees were standing here when I chose this spot to build. They had suffered a lightning strike, killing them, so I built around their bases, propping them below ground and above." He indicated the rafters braced around them. "I stripped off the bark and sanded them smooth."

"How did you get the braces up there?" she asked, unable to keep the amazement out of her voice.

"My brothers with ropes and a pulley system helped, but it was difficult."

"And the hearth is..." She shook her head, her hand resting against her forehead. "You have a talent for building, Drostan Macquarie." She rubbed her nose, wrinkling it as it burned, and then scratched at her neck. Sia shook, and her hair flew up around her. Watching it made Lia's throat feel thick.

Drostan crossed his arms over his chest, his legs braced, but his expression was pleased. “Ye’re the first to see it complete. ’Tis taken over a year to put together. I learned a lot.” He turned in a circle surveying his workmanship. “And I know where all the mistakes are.”

The wind whistled across the top of the chimney. “Well, this storm will tell you if ’tis watertight or not,” she said and then rubbed her tongue against the roof of her mouth where irritation prickled. She blinked at the burn starting in her eyes.

“Are ye well?” Drostan asked, his pleased smile fading as he studied her.

A gust of wind threw rain against the front windows, making Lia jump. She nodded, wiping the handkerchief under her nose. She wished she could reach down her throat to scratch.

She turned away from the beautiful shelves he’d built along the wall next to the hearth. Two doors sat closed on the back wall. “Two exits?”

“One’s a privy.”

She opened the door to a small room with a privy box built in and a window to let in light. “Convenient.” She sniffed back the sneeze she felt gathering.

“Ye don’t have to dodge behind a boulder here.”

She smiled and cleared her throat. “Where anyone could see you.”

He lifted his hands to a low beam by the tree staircase, stretching his well-muscled shoulders. Any remaining moisture in her mouth seemed to retreat. Heat warmed her cheeks, and she shifted, clearing the thickness that was collecting in the back of her throat.

His hand lowered to catch the back of his neck. “We... I apologize again for—”

She held up her hand, palm out. “We both...” She coughed. “Imbided and...fell prey to foolishness.”

Wrapping a hand around her neck, she rubbed the itching

skin. If she wasn't careful, she'd leave trails from her fingernails. Lia walked to the water-slashed windowpanes, staring out at the angry gray sea. She coughed into her fist and quickly wiped her nose. "You won't find a wife out here in the forest."

"I'm not looking for a wife."

"What about the curse?" She sneezed into her hand. "Apologies. 'Tis Sia's fur."

His eyes narrowed slightly, and he lowered his arms. "Who told ye about the curse?"

Her hands moved around. "Everyone knows about the curse of Ulva Isle."

He snorted. "Adam thinks if we don't mention it, people will forget."

"Don't you have to marry and fall in love? Do you have another handkerchief?"

He handed her a square of woven plaid from his belt. "I've read the legend a thousand times. Nothing says we *all* must marry." He shrugged. "And the willow tree is healing." He looked closer at her. "Ye're red around your neck and..." He ducked his face. "Under your chin."

She dabbed at her neck with the square and cleared her throat. "'Tis the cat. She shook, and her fur went everywhere." Lia wiped her nose. "Aren't you afraid you'll father a bastard?"

"I'm careful."

Careful? Lia wasn't sure what that meant. "You don't tup then?" She felt her cheeks warm using the term. It was better than what her brothers called it.

His brow rose. "That's a personal question, lass." She waved it off, but he continued. "Let's just say I know some ways of preventing such a thing."

She frowned. "Even if you bed a woman?"

He nodded, keeping his gaze on her.

Relief swelled inside her for a moment. Even if she wanted to, she wouldn't be able to doom the Macquaries with a bastard if he knew how to prevent it. She turned back to the window. It had been a ridiculous plan, made first while desperate and second while intoxicated.

Achoo! She caught the sneeze in the square. The itching in her mouth had moved down her throat as if she'd swallowed some of Sia's hair. She sucked in air and felt the wheeze as if her throat truly had narrowed. Her eyes opened wide, her hands going to her neck as she turned back to Drostan.

She bent forward. "I... I can't breathe."

Chapter Nine

Lia coughed, trying to clear the thickened airway. The sound was different from a cough from an illness. It was dry, almost like a dog's bark.

"The cat," he said, stepping up to her and ducking to look into her face. "Yer whole body is reacting to her."

Lia coughed more, but the sound was muted by lack of air movement. She lifted her head, her eyes wide. "What do I do?" The whisper was stifled. She tried to suck in air through her inflamed mouth and throat, making her cough more.

Drostan grabbed her. "We need to get ye free of the fur. 'Tis all over ye."

Before she could agree, he yanked the ties of her petticoats and shoved them down her body. He threw her shawl away and unlaced her bodice, shoving it off her shoulders. The freedom of not being squeezed helped, but she still struggled to suck in air.

He swooped her up into his arms, holding her against his chest. Shifting her, he yanked open his door and raced them outside into the storm. Her heart leaped into a race as she fought for air. Coughing helplessly, she held tightly to his neck while being jarred as he ran them through the slashing rain around to the back of his cabin. He stopped, letting her feet down but still holding her.

Eyes closed, Lia tried to focus on pulling air inside her body. Panic pounded through her, and she shook in the whipping wind and rain, while trees mimicked the desperate flight of thoughts in her head. *Will I suffocate here? How could a cat do this? Poor Sia. I can't touch her again. If I live. Cats don't feel guilt, do they? Not like people. Not like me for my wicked relief.* She was drowning in regret and suffocating.

"Her fur," Drostan said as he started to wipe his hands down her remaining smock. The cold, wet wind sent chill bumps over her skin as if every inch of her body reached out to grab

in the air that couldn't make it to her lungs the usual way.

Lost in muted coughing, she nearly fell over when he yanked down each of her stockings, leaving her barefoot in the growing puddle. She'd once again lost her slippers.

"Sit here," he called over the thrashing sound of the leaves, and she realized they were beside a cistern that collected water from a stream that must flow toward the sea.

Drostan yanked another rag looped over his belt and dunked it in the clear, collected water. He wiped her face and neck, all the way down her chest as far as her smock would allow, followed by damp strokes over her arms and hands. His fingers raked through her rain-heavy hair as if trying to free it of cat fur.

She began to shake from the cold, and he pulled her up, lifting her again to carry her against his bare chest. At some point, he'd removed his own tunic and sash, maybe even his woolen wrap. The kitten had been all over him while they rode to his cabin.

He paused near the porch of the house, stared at the door for a moment, and then reversed direction, striding through the gusting rain. Lia pressed a hand against her chest that ached from the battle to breathe. The muted wind made her open her eyes to see they were standing in the barn. Drostan held her, breathing hard.

"Daingead," he murmured, leaving the door open to let in some more light. "Where is that blanket?"

She wanted to tell him that he was warmer than a cold blanket, but whatever breath she could pull in couldn't be wasted on words. He set her down on a stool, waiting to see if she could balance there. She nodded, and he ran off. If she weren't nearly smothering to death, she'd have better appreciated the tight perfection of Drostan's bare arse. He'd indeed stripped down to remove all cat hair from himself. And his muscles contracted in long lines from his shoulders to his chiseled calves as he moved.

He turned back from a chest against a wall with two

blankets before him. “Ye aren’t sensitive to horses, are ye?”

She shook her head no, her shoulders moving with each stuttered inhale.

He ran back, crouching before her to wrap one blanket around her shoulders, clasping it closed in front. “’Tis clean, but some of Maise’s hair might be on it.”

His large, warm hands pushed clumps of wet hair from her face, and he stared into her eyes. “Lia, breathe with me. Ye are trying to pull in air too fast. We need to calm all of ye, so slow, even breaths.” He breathed in while counting. “One... Two... Three... Four... Hold for two seconds. Now out. Don’t force it. Let it slide out evenly with the count.” He nodded when she did. “Close your eyes.”

She would have refused. She never shut her eyes, not when the unexpected could befall her at any moment. Iain had taught her that. But this was a different situation, and Drostan wouldn’t let anything happen to her in the darkness. Lia let her eyes flutter shut.

“Now imagine your throat as a...long pipe or a thick grass stalk. And imagine the hole running through it getting larger around, opening into a bigger hole.”

They breathed slowly together for several long minutes while Lia imagined her throat opening. Drostan’s counting, with his strong, deep voice, kept her going, soothing her panic.

He tucked a stray hair into the barely contained braid down her back. He inspected the blanket around her, plucking off anything that could be animal hair, and continued to count slowly. He hadn’t bothered to cover himself, and he crouched before her like a sculpted hero.

“That’s it,” he said. “In for four, hold for two, and out for four. All the hair is gone.”

Little by little, more air came to her until she could speak. “Better,” she croaked softly.

Drostan huffed, and his head dropped to hang for a moment like he was overcome with relief. The movement caught her, and she felt the sting of foolish tears. He cared enough for her

to show such relief, such weakness at her possible injury or death? No one since her mother had cared for her comfort or health. Sometimes, Alasdair acted as if he didn't care even if she died before he could marry her off.

Drostan squeezed her shoulder and rose, not caring that he was naked, his relaxed jack still heavy and generous in size. Lia had seen jacks before, hard and ready. There had seemed a violence about them, or about the men perhaps, but nothing about Drostan seemed violent. He grabbed up the second blanket next to him and wrapped it around his hips, holding it closed. "I'll get ye something to drink. Are ye warm enough?"

She was wet and wind-whipped, but she was warm in the blanket. She nodded, her lips parted as she continued to slowly breathe in and out, counting in her head. Although she paused when he pulled his dry blanket off again, throwing it over the stall door to run back out into the drenching storm.

He left the door of the barn open, and she watched him run naked across the yard toward the front porch of his cabin, his muscles on display as the rain pelted him. Bone, sinew, and muscle worked in concert under his tan skin to propel him with obvious strength through the yard, his boots still laced up his shins. What would it feel like to touch his toned form, his warm skin, those generous lips again?

"Bloody hellfire," she whispered, feeling her body heat. She shifted where she sat, but the ache below was annoyingly persistent. Lia had touched herself before in the darkness and privacy of her room, especially after watching the debauchery of her brothers when they had their naked parties in the Great Hall. Perhaps all she needed to do was bring herself to climax again to get rid of the ache. What would it be like for Drostan to help her do that?

He came flying back several minutes later, and she couldn't help but look. Broad shoulders led down to muscles obvious in sections down his chest, all narrowing into a *V* that led the eyes down to his heavy jack and long, muscular legs. He was a godlike vision of masculinity.

When he crouched before her again, his dry blanket was

back in place, but water beaded across the skin of his chest and shoulders. He held a covered jar in his hands. “This is clean water with peppermint and honey in it. I made it from Lark’s directions. She says it helps with breathing difficulties.”

He pulled the cover off and helped her hold it to her lips. The liquid soothed the itch in her mouth and slid down her throat easily. She took the cup with both hands, and he sat back, watching her. She closed her eyes and concentrated on sipping and breathing. The peppermint was calming, the honey sweet, and the coolness of the fresh water refreshing.

Lia opened her eyes to find Drostan watching her. “Are ye better?” His lips were parted, his breath still coming quickly from his run.

She nodded but exhaled a huff of frustration through her nose. “You can’t seem to help yourself.”

“Lass?” His brows narrowed over searching, serious eyes.

“You rescued me once again.”

A grin relaxed his mouth, and he snorted softly, his hand running up his forehead to push his wet hair back. “Because ye continue to get yerself into trouble.”

Her thankfulness swelled, and then as if a vicious hand reached inside her, the thankfulness was crushed. Drostan had been determined to save her. Would he if he knew who she was? She hadn’t wanted to tell him before because he might guess her ideas about revenge against his clan. But now would he hate her for sharing the same blood as Iain MacLeod?

• • •

Drostan lit the second lantern to chase back the shadows that filled the barn. He’d built the well-insulated structure first, so he’d have a place to keep Maise when he stayed overnight working on the cabin. It was still fresh and devoid of cats.

“You can sleep in your cabin with Sia,” Lia said, her gaze going to the closed door below the loft where they sat. A sharp gust of wind pelted the slate roof with acorns and small

branches, making Lia's gaze snap upward.

"It will hold. And the cat is fine on her own in there. Last I checked, she'd curled up on a towel I left for her before the hearth."

He'd made a bed of fresh hay in the loft and covered it with more blankets to keep down the dust that might make Lia cough and stop breathing again. *Mo chreach*, she'd scared him. For a moment, he worried about the curse being somehow responsible. *Bloody hell*. What if he hadn't been able to get the hair off her?

"Once I take the kitten to Grissell's, I'll wipe down my cabin before ye enter again," he said.

She looked down at her hand, which his large one still covered. Miracle of miracles, she didn't yank it away. "Thank you," she murmured.

After a moment, he broke contact, leaning back to pull a satchel to them along the floorboards supporting them. "'Tis not much. I didn't think to be spending the night here." He pulled out an oatcake.

"I don't need to eat," she said.

"We both need to eat," he said, handing the cake to her and a dried piece of pork. "We spent a lot of energy keeping ye breathing." He smiled.

She snorted a little laugh. "I've never had so many near-death experiences before." She rolled her eyes. "And then I met Drostan Macquarie."

"I have something to do with it?"

"Obviously," she said and grinned, taking a bite of the slightly sweetened cake.

"Ye didn't have cats at home?"

She shook her head. "Both my brothers had the same sensitivity. Alasdair as bad as I was today from what he's said."

"Alasdair?"

The smile fell from her face, and she looked down at the oatcake in her lap. A wee nod was barely perceivable.

Drostan chewed and swallowed some of the salted pork, washing it down with some mead that Eliza and Lark made in vats up at Gylin. “Did Alasdair teach ye to shoot?” He asked the question with casual disinterest, which was a complete lie.

She shook her head, and he watched the still-damp waves of blond hair slide against her cheeks. Most of her hair had escaped her braid so she’d taken out the rest. The rainwater was drying, making the tresses curl in all their natural glory.

“My younger brother taught me.” She cleared her throat, although this clearing wasn’t anything like it had been when she couldn’t breathe. “I was eight years old when he gave me a set for Hogmanay.”

Would she slip and tell him the younger brother’s name? “Alasdair must have been happy ye used his gift.”

She frowned as if he weren’t keeping up. “’Twas a gift from my younger brother.”

Ballocks. No name. “Do ye miss him?”

“Yes,” she said quickly, then looked down to pick at one of her fingernails. “No.” She pulled in a long breath, one he was utterly grateful to hear, and rolled onto her back. He tried to ignore the way her full breasts rose, perching on her chest. “He wasn’t a nice person and isn’t around anymore.”

Drostan stilled, watching her closely. He kept his voice even as he reached to slide a finger over the circular scar on the inside of her wrist. He’d noticed the burn earlier. “Did he do this to ye?”

She tugged, and he released her hand. Did this ill-tempered brother brand his sister?

“’Twas long ago when we were children.”

She could have been thought a child a mere five years ago. “Where is he now?”

“Not somewhere he can come back from.”

“But he hurt ye, growing up? Things besides the brand, which was downright barbaric by the way.” Fury coiled inside Drostan, but he sought to keep it from his voice.

“I don’t wish to talk of him.”

He crossed his arms where he sat across from her, his legs out before him on the loft floor. He’d taken off his boots and still wore the blanket around his hips. “So ye ran away on a ship. What’s your plan now?”

Her lips remained parted, and he waited for words. “I had a plan,” she said. “But now I see it was foolhardy.” Her gaze connected with his. “Perhaps I will settle down here.”

“On Wolf Isle?”

She nodded. “I’ll have my own hut without cats. I could marry.”

“Ye wish to marry then, to have children?” he asked, although the words almost stuck in his throat. He stared at her profile, his gaze sliding down the gentle slope of her nose, noticing how its end was a perfectly rounded tip. He tried not to look at her full breasts propped up under the thin smock as if begging to be touched. She would likely be a bonny mother, nursing her bairns. His stomach clenched.

“It must be with the right man,” she said, her gaze moving to his. She studied him. Was she wondering if he was the right man? Nay. He couldn’t be the right man for any lass who wanted children. *Blasted hell.*

He cleared his throat. “So ye do want children then? With someone ye choose?”

“Of course I want to choose,” she said tersely. “And there is no man on Skye who comes close to someone I would choose. So, you see, I must move on, which I did.” She gave a nod and crossed her own arms.

Skye? The Isle of Skye lay north where *The Tern* may have left harbor.

Lia seemed to wait. Somehow this conversation had become a volley back and forth, and it was his turn. “Ye certainly did.”

She frowned as if he weren't offering anything to the conversation and flopped on her side, gazing up at him.

"'Twould be best if ye live with friends. The world is a violent place, and lasses can be attacked, as ye saw in the alley."

"Shall I hide away then?"

"Nay, just...fully figure out your plan before dashing off."

She stretched her finger out and poked him hard in the chest. "I didn't just dash off."

The jab surprised him more than offering any pain, and he rubbed the spot. "Well, ye hopped on *The Tern* and—"

"I'm not some flighty hare hopping on the first ship I saw, Drostan. 'Twas part of a well-thought out plan. And I know what can befall a lass. I'm not the innocent you think I am."

Drostan closed his mouth and inhaled to prevent his words from coming out as a shout. "Did yer brother touch ye, Lia?" He'd learned quite a bit about despicable fathers from Lark and Anna. Brothers could be as heinous if they were without morals and full of evil.

She blinked and looked away. "I learned how people copulate by watching, not doing."

That wasn't an answer, but if that's all she was willing to give right now, he wouldn't push her. Then her words sunk in.

Thunder cracked nearby, but he ignored it, his brows rising. "Ye've watched two people...tupping?"

"No."

"Thank the saints," he murmured, but she continued.

"Not two. Eight or more."

Drostan choked again, coughing into his fist.

"Are *you* sensitive to cat hair?"

He shook his head. "Who the bloody hell were ye watching?"

"My brothers liked to entertain more than one woman.

Together.” She made a face. “I peeked. There were usually two other warriors with them, but I didn’t want to see my brothers that way, so I didn’t watch them, only the others to see what went where.” Her face relaxed, and she met his gaze in the dark. “To me, it seemed like having more women around left some of them less attended to. I don’t think I’d like that. And I wouldn’t want others watching me make those noises.”

He rubbed a hand over his jaw. “Noises.” *God’s teeth.*

“Yes, the moaning and such. And one woman definitely told my younger brother he was choosing the wrong hole. She knew that there’s a proper hole and now I do, too. I like knowing things.”

“Did he still...” Drostan waved his hand. “Never mind.”

“Yes, I think so, because Alasdair came over to help and wanted to be with her at the same time.”

Drostan’s hand slid down his cheeks as he imagined the carnal party. His erection had been growing under the blanket. Daingead! What would Lia think if she saw it?

“What do *you* think?”

“Me? Think?” He stared at her dumbly.

“Do you like to tup with many people?”

He dropped his hand to his lap and wondered if his jack would ever grow soft again. “I think two people alone is best.”

She nodded, her head against the blankets. “So do I.”

Drostan crossed his arms. He opened his mouth to say something twice but had no words until he recalled her earlier revelation. “Ye’re from the Isle of Skye, not the border of England?”

The rain beat down on the stable’s slate roof like a million tiny feet dancing without stop. He spoke above the noise. “Are ye a MacLeod or a Mackinnon or a MacDonald?”

A rumble of thunder sounded in the distance, accenting this vital question.

She caught her own cheeks with her hands as if dismayed. “I

have taken the name Scott from my mother.”

He pulled her hands from her face and leaned over her. “But ye belong to a northern clan.”

She stared up at him as if deciding whether or not he would believe a lie. Her brows bent sharply. “No.”

He turned his head slightly to the side, keeping his gaze on her. “Ye aren’t a very good liar.”

“I’m not part of any clan anymore.” She turned from him, presenting her back.

“Lia.”

“We should sleep.”

He’d likely never fall asleep with the mystery of Lia in his head, not to mention the carnal pictures she’d innocently painted. He exhaled and lowered his body to the pallet, his back to her and his hand on his jack. Lord, it would be an uncomfortable night.

Chapter Ten

The ache in Drostan's ballocks grew to the point he groaned low. In his dream, the sound of the rain turned to the heavy rush of his breathing. His hand moved through the warm blanket downward and felt movement against his jack. Blood tore through his body at the brush of a warm body against him and the smell of rain-fresh hair.

He opened his eyes, and the glass window behind Lia's head flashed with lightning. Lia lay on her side facing away, but her perfectly rounded arse moved against him, the edge of her smock slid down to expose one gloriously naked shoulder. Then all went black again.

"Lia," he said over the raging storm that mimicked his own struggle. Her breathing was ragged as if she, too, fought with passion. "Are ye awake?" He backed up to roll her to him. Thunder rumbled.

Her eyes were shut, lips parted as she shifted. "No," she murmured. "Don't wake me. 'Tis a wonderful dream."

He inhaled, all his senses alert at her slight movements. They were rhythmic, almost like she was... Nay, only men had wicked dreams. Didn't they? She was a virgin, but a virgin who'd witnessed wild tuppung parties. The thought of her having an erotic dream sent another strike of lust coursing through him.

When lightning flashed again, he realized that the edge of her smock had inched down, exposing one pale breast, and her hair tangled in wild waves around her beautiful face. Even though it went black again almost at once, the mix of innocence and carnal beauty would be forever etched in his mind.

"Lia, yer smock," he said, his voice rough with want. He pulled up the blanket, setting it higher. Her face was exposed, and he waited for another lightning strike. When it lit the room, he saw that her eyes were still closed, and her lips were parted as if in pain. A small moan escaped them.

“Bloody hell,” he whispered, his hand stroking down to his aching jack. He should leave her be, turn away. She’d be embarrassed to know he’d watched her enjoying whatever was playing behind her closed eyes.

Another small moan escaped her, and Drostan prayed for lightning. His hand moved up and down over himself, and he couldn’t help his own groan. The hard pelting rain seemed to cover the sound. But he jolted at the feel of a hand touching his chest. Small and cool, it slid down to rest upon his own hand at the juncture of his legs.

Lightning flashed, and in that second, he stared into Lia’s open eyes. The want in them nearly made him spill. “Ye’re awake,” he managed to grit out.

“No,” she answered. “We’re both having a dream.” Her hard breathing made him think that she’d peaked already.

Without a word, she guided his hand to her mound, and he groaned at the wet heat there.

“This is not a dream.”

Instead of arguing with him, she pressed forward, her mouth finding his. Her kiss was full of wild want as if she felt as desperate as he to push their passionate aches to completion. He opened his mouth, and she followed, sweeping inside in such a way that he lost his thoughts completely. She spread her legs, rubbing against his moving fingers.

Her smock lay bunched between them at her middle, and her legs tangled with his. She pulled away. *Nay!* It took everything inside him not to yank her back. But then she was throwing her white smock away from her. Totally naked, Lia planted her hands on his shoulders and her lips back on his. She slid her smooth, warm body along his, the crux of her legs rubbing his jack as his hands on her arse lifted her against him. Evidence of her passion wet his length, making him groan against her mouth.

All thoughts about who she was and from where she hailed were caught by flames, burning up through Drostan. She slid his hand downward again to the spot that his jack sought. She

whispered against his mouth, “Touch me inside, too.”

The whirlwind of need made him comply without hesitation. He knew exactly where and how to touch her inside and out, and soon he had her writhing on the pallet. “Like that?” he whispered, kissing a hot path along her exposed neck.

“Yes,” she cried out as the circular path of his thumb over her most sensitive spot sent her spiraling toward release. Inside her, he stroked quickly, making her pant.

They were shrouded away from the world by the night and the storm. Tucked up in his warm loft where curses and family angst and his yearnings and remorse couldn’t reach him. Drostan kissed her deeply, his body moving over hers, and her legs opened wider. She was soaked and hot, so ready. “Lia, this is not a dream. I need ye to tell me ye know that.”

She blinked in the darkness, her lips parted on shallow breaths, her body still sliding intimately against him in rhythm. “You are awake, Drostan, and so am I.”

He still held himself back, his breathing ragged. “Do ye want—?”

“Yes.” Her hands went to his head, holding him on both sides. “I want you inside me. This ache...”

His hand teased her nipple, palming her full breast as he eased a bit into her body, waiting.

“Holy hellfire, yes,” she said, trying to thrust higher, but he held back.

“Wait for it, lass.”

Her hands grabbed hold of his shoulders, her nails scoring his skin.

Drostan waited. He wanted to see her face.

She moaned, pressing the split of her sex upward against his tip. “Drostan, now!”

Lightning lit the sky, and Drostan thrust into her body, watching her mouth open and her head drop backward. His groan, torn up from his gut, was overpowered by the cracking

of the thunder. Lia's barrier was hardly noticed as the two slammed together. If she felt pain, it was gone before he could retreat because she wrapped her legs up around his hips, holding him to her.

"Oh, Lia," he said, starting a rhythm. Her pale face was shadowed, but he could see her lips parted for breath as they strained together.

"Drostan, yes." She moaned, arching her back, which thrust her breasts high, her nipples hard pebbles. He wanted to suck on them, tease them, but the storm of passion overtook them both.

The rest of the night would be for teasing and exploring. Right now, the two were bent on shattering the world. "Lia, lass," Drostan said and slammed into her eager body. She met him thrust for thrust. His hand moved between them, stroking her right above their joining.

"Yesssss," she called, hissing out the last sound until it blended into a moan. He felt her body stiffen around him, sucking along his length to pull him over the edge. He should pull out of her just in case.

As if she felt his intent, Lia wrapped her legs around him, holding her to him as he pumped. He groaned, his voice reaching over the rain that hammered on the roof. It was as if all of nature was flooding, matching him as he filled her body.

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Drostan took another drink from his weakened ale flask to wash the sleep from his mouth. He stared at the softly breathing woman on the mused pallet next to him. She was a tantalizing mix of angel and devil. Her golden hair lay like sun rays across the makeshift pillow. She had thirteen freckles across her thin nose. Long lashes lay fanned out under her eyes. She was a glorious siren and he wanted to remain wrapped up with her here in his sanctuary.

They'd come together again before dawn, exploring and clinging to each other without words or questions or

confessions. But now it was daybreak, and the sun was creeping higher until it cast a glow into the window high in the barn loft.

Lia's body shifted with the slow twist of someone waking. Without opening her eyes, she stretched her arms overhead, arching her back. One of her bare feet hit his naked shin, and she froze. Slowly, one of her eyes opened.

"Good morn." Drostan's low voice sounded loud to him, and she blinked. She had such clear eyes. They looked golden in the morning light with little flecks of green shooting outward from the center like the middle of some complex wildflower.

"Good...morn," she returned, and he saw her cheeks turn rosy, but she didn't look away. Her tongue touched her bottom lip, making his jack twitch, already in a ready-to-tup state. She slid her hands under the blanket and down her body. "So, last night...was definitely not a dream."

He shook his head, his face tightening. Bloody hell. She'd been a virgin. Coming together was not something they could undo. "Do ye wish it was merely a dream?"

She tilted her head, and the hint of a smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. She shook her head, and he released his breath. He handed her the flask, and she pushed up on one elbow, which made her hair cascade around her, gold against pale, smooth skin.

Drostan smiled when she took it, drinking the still cool ale. He smiled because he felt...happy. In that moment, without questions or curses or clan history, he felt the elusive emotion.

"I had no idea I was so wanton," she whispered, wiping her mouth with the back of a hand.

"'Tis not a bad thing, lass," he said, his words playful, but he kept to his side of the pallet.

She snorted softly and glanced at the window that showed one corner of his cabin. "Sia and her fur. My clothes were covered." She looked back at him as if everything was coming back to her. "And you saved me again."

“I apologize?” The question was heavy in it, but she continued.

“I think...” She rolled onto her back, pulling the blanket up to her collarbone. “It started as a dream, and then you were here, and I think I...attacked you.” Crimson infused her cheeks, as red as the center of strawberry tarts.

“Attack is a harsh word.”

Her head rolled so she faced him. “Seduced you?”

She looked upset, even ashamed, and he hated that. He scratched a hand through his tousled hair. “I would call it a mutual enjoyment between adults.”

She exhaled, her face relaxing. Her hands slid down over her naked body under the blanket. He could imagine the valley and hollows that they touched.

“My body is still sensitive. Achy.”

His was hot and ready. “Achy in a good way or bad way?”

Her face turned back to his. “That depends on if you’ll touch me again.”

Drostan slid to his side and rolled halfway over her, his arms on either side of her head. She stared up at him as if waiting, as if him wanting to pounce on her wasn’t written into every line of his body.

“Och, but aye, Lia lass, I want to touch ye again.”

Her smile broadened. “Then the ache is very, very good.”

He leaned down, their lips touching, and it was as if they were melting into one another again, melding like heated iron into one being. The blanket separating them slid away, and he stroked along her side, dipping with her waist and rising along her hip. So smooth. Her leg lifted to rest over his hip, opening her to him, and he stroked her inner thighs.

“Touch me inside again, Drostan,” she whispered. Which he did, first with his fingers and then by sinking into her with his jack. The tight warmth was better than any feeling in this mortal world. He reveled in it as he watched her eyelids lower

with her pleasure.

Her lips opened as he held himself there, moving slowly, enjoying the bliss etched along the lines of her face now that it was daylight. “Yesssss,” she said, and he pushed all the way in, making her catch her breath. He nuzzled the base of her throat, inhaling their mixed scent, moving below, and palming her sensitive breast.

“Ah, sweet Lia,” he whispered at her ear and pinched her nipple lightly.

Her eyelids fluttered, and her mouth lay half open as if she was so full of passion it needed a way out. Their kiss was slower but every bit as arousing as the frantic kissing during the night. She slid her feet up his legs to rest on the taut muscles of his arse as they began a deep, slow rhythm.

“Brother? Are ye here?”

They both froze, Drostan’s body tensing, and their faces turned in unison toward the barn door below the loft. Drostan placed a finger over his lips and slowly withdrew from her body. The wet sound nearly made him spill, and the look on Lia’s face showed she was close to the edge herself. *Daingead*. The ache in his jack made him want to yell and surge back into her. Finish what they’d begun.

“Drostan!” It sounded like Callum. “Where are ye?”

“Mo chreach,” he murmured, rolling away, his erection pressing against his taut abdomen.

Lia’s naked chest was flushed with passion, but she reached for her smock that was rumped next to the spread of hay over the loft floor.

Drostan wrapped the blanket around his hips, glancing around for his tunic and woolen wrap. But he’d stripped away everything with cat hair on it when Lia had reacted. *Daingead*. He stepped quickly down the ladder, reaching the bottom as the barn door opened.

A bit of hay dislodged from the loft as if Lia pulled back from the edge.

“What the hell are ye wearing?” Eagan asked, looking pointedly at the blanket.

“And why are ye out here?” Callum said.

Ballocks. Had all his brothers come to find him?

Callum pushed inside and glanced around. “We went to the house first but only Lia’s cat was in there.”

Drostan felt heat in his cheeks. The words ‘I was having the most pleasurable morn and you ruined it’ jumped to his lips, but he pushed them to the back of his mouth where they mixed with the taste of her.

Drostan cleared his throat. “I ran out here in the storm because I was worried about Maise.”

Eagan walked over to the stall where Maise lifted her head over the door for him to scratch. “She looks fine.”

Callum crossed his arms, frowning. Even though they were very different people, Callum and he were twins, so Callum usually knew what he was up to. “That doesn’t answer why ye’re wearing a blanket.”

Eagan lifted his gaze to the loft.

“I wasn’t wearing anything,” Drostan said, pulling his attention, “when I ran out in the rain to the stables. I decided to stay the night here and grabbed a blanket is all.”

“Staying the night out here in the stables,” Eagan said. “Alone?”

“With the horse,” Drostan said.

“Oh,” Eagan replied, his brows high as he gave a slow nod, his lips pursing in a duck-like fashion. “And ye happen to have Lia’s cat?”

“The lass is apparently sensitive to it,” Drostan said, crossing his arms. “We need to find it a new home.” He tilted his head. “Did ye ride all the way out here to check on me?”

Callum scratched his head. “Ye didn’t come back to Gylin last night, and Grissell hasn’t seen Lia since ye followed her into the woods.”

Eagan met Drostan's sour face with a foolish grin. "And there's a pile of women's clothing inside the front door of your cabin," Eagan said, "which is bloody amazing, by the way. The cabin, not the clothes. The clothes are merely... suspicious."

Before Drostan could come up with a plausible or even an implausible lie, Lia's voice called out from above. "Very well. I'm up here. I had a terrible reaction to Sia and almost died when my throat began to close." She peeked over the edge of the loft far enough that they could see her head. "Drostan saved my life by washing me down and getting all the cat hair off me, which included my outer clothes. I had to sleep out in the barn during the storm."

Callum and Eagan stared up at her, Callum with a frown and Eagan with a grin. "Good morn, Lia," Eagan said. "Glad ye didn't die."

Drostan shoved Eagan's shoulder to get him walking. "We can talk outdoors."

Drostan pushed his brothers out of the barn, shutting the door firmly. He waved them to follow him back to his cabin. Sia ran past his legs as soon as he opened the door. Hopefully she hadn't fouled his cabin during the night. But he didn't see any shite or puddles, only cat hair covering the petticoat, bodice, and stays that they'd left heaped by the door. Sia must have slept there, huddled under Lia's clothes while the storm raged.

"Ye tupp'd her?" Callum asked, his face growing red with reprimand. "Was she a virgin?"

"Both questions are none of yer goddamned business," Drostan said, grabbing up his tunic. He shook it viciously, his anger making Sia hair fly off in all directions. He tossed it away and trudged upstairs to grab a clean one from his closed chest.

"Actually," Eagan called behind him, "any brother tupp'ing a woman is family business if the lass gets with child."

"She isn't going to get with child." Drostan spun around to

find his plaid. It was draped below over one of the limbs, but it would also have cat hair clinging to it. He grabbed another plaid from the trunk and hurried down the turning steps.

“Are these trees alive?” Eagan asked, running his hand down one polished trunk.

“Nay, but they’re braced so as not to fall over,” Drostan said, his voice sour. He had no desire to talk about his cabin right now.

“Pulling out isn’t effective every time,” Callum said.

“I’m not having this conversation with ye.” He wasn’t telling them he’d remained inside Lia. That they’d come together like lightning meeting water in an explosion of such intensity he was amazed the barn hadn’t burst into flames with them.

He stared at Callum, meeting his frown with his own “I won’t get any lass pregnant.” Drostan belted on his clean wrap. “I saw to that when I was a lad.”

Callum’s frown turned into a gape. Eagan followed suit. “What did ye do?” they asked in unison.

Chapter Eleven

“Bloody hell, Drostan,” Eagan said, his eyes wide. “Did ye castrate yourself?”

“Nay.” Drostan pulled the belt tight.

“Ye touched the tree or dagger, didn’t ye?” Callum said.

Drostan had been a lad of twelve years when he’d decided that he’d rather remain unmarried and childless than cause the doom of his clan by mistake. “Both,” he said. “I was a lad, but the curse is quite specific about anyone trying to cut the tree down or remove the dagger.”

“Bloody foking hell, Drostan,” Callum said, his gaze cast down at Drostan’s kilt. “Does it hurt? Does it even stand up?”

“Fok, brother,” Eagan said, mimicking Callum’s gaze. “Can ye even tup with a curse on yer jack?”

Drostan rolled his eyes. “’Tis quite well, and I tup fine, thank ye.” His gaze went to Callum. “And I didn’t do anything to hurt the clan. The tree is healing, and I’ve never fathered a bastard.”

“Have ye told Lia that ye won’t be having any children?” Callum asked, looking toward one of the windows.

“I’m not marrying her,” Drostan said.

“Does she know that?” Callum asked.

They hadn’t talked about it, but a lass shouldn’t think they would marry just because they’d tugged. *Daingead*. He better clear that up with her.

Drostan did a fast job of folding his plaid, wrapping it around his hips while keeping his still stiff jack covered. “We are two adults who gave and took pleasure from one another when thrown together in a storm while being pretty much naked.”

Both brothers stared at him, Eagan with his mouth dropped open like a caught fish.

Callum crossed his arms. "Would she phrase it that way?"

Drostan felt his face warm. He threw his arms up before more questions could be hurled at him. "Stop asking things I will not answer." He grabbed up Lia's clothes.

"Ye don't even know who she is," Callum said. His brother was right, but last night and early this morning, that didn't matter one bit.

"Go on," he said, shooing his brothers out the front door onto the porch. "Take the cat to the children at Grissell's."

Eagan went down the steps to crouch before the kitten standing forlornly in the puddled yard. "Aren't ye a pretty beast," he said. He had a natural way with animals, and Sia trotted over to him. "I'll take her to the lasses," he said, picking her up gingerly, "but if they don't want her, I'll take her myself."

"As long as she doesn't live inside Gylin," Drostan said.

As they walked toward the two waiting horses, Lia ran out of the barn, clad in her smock and wrapped in a blanket. "I need to say goodbye to her." Her eyes were shiny as if she held back tears. The sight twisted in Drostan's gut.

"Don't touch her," he said, meeting her before Eagan.

"I won't." She sniffed, smiling at the kitten. "I'll come around, Sia, but you'll have a whole group of sweet girls to play with at Grissell's. And other cats." She straightened, clutching the blanket tightly around herself as if to stop herself from gathering the kitten to her one last time.

Drostan wanted to wrap her up in a hug, try to soothe away her grief. But his watching brothers rooted him to his spot. Callum studied her with a frown while Eagan stared with an awestruck gaze.

Och, but Lia had a wild, natural beauty. Her hair hung in tousled waves around her shoulders. They were light colored with streaks of gold, the rain having dried small fairy snarls into them. The rose color in her cheeks gave her a healthy glow even if it was probably from embarrassment. *Idiot brothers.* 'Twas another reason he wanted to live apart from

Gylin and Ormaig, so his personal affairs would remain his own.

“Go on,” Drostan said to his brothers. “Now.”

Callum nodded to Drostan, disapproval in the hardness of his jaw. About him sleeping with Lia? About him touching the tree and dagger as a boy? *I don't care*. He stuffed the lie down inside. Fact was, he didn't want to care about his brothers and clan and the damn curse that seemed to rule their lives. But he did.

Lia and Drostan stood side by side as his brothers rode away. “They think poorly of me,” she said, her voice sure.

“Nay, lass.” He lifted her hand to wrap in his larger one. “They think poorly of *me*.”

She looked up at him, her face pained. “I'm sorry for that, Drostan. Last night...” She blinked, glancing above before settling back on his eyes. “I lost control.”

He coaxed her gently back into his arms and rubbed a line down her back. “I did, too.”

She relaxed there. “And I felt things I didn't know were possible,” she whispered.

He moved to her ear and inhaled the heady fragrance of her. “Me as well.”

His jack hardened quickly, and he reached to adjust it through the wool. Lia's gaze followed his hand, and then lifted to his face. “Perhaps we should finish what your brothers interrupted before heading to Gylin,” she whispered.

“Aye,” he said, his own voice full of need. But then he would find out exactly who was Lia Scott, sister to Alasdair, from the Isle of Skye.

...

Lia rode in the *V* of Drostan's legs on his large dun-colored mare. They hadn't even made it to the loft after his brothers left before she'd pressed him against the back wall of the barn.

With a growl, he'd lifted her, turning her to face the wall before using his hands, fingers, and mouth to make her moan. It was as if Drostan's touch on her was magic, bringing heat and muddling her thoughts immediately.

Their time together had been amazing. She'd opened up her body to him, giving herself fully, barring Drostan from nothing. She stifled a sigh. Except the truth about who she was. Lia stared out over the horse's head, thankful Drostan couldn't see the unease in her features. She was too vulnerable to hide them.

"Drostan?"

"Aye?" He kissed the spot above her ear. They were deep in the forest, and he slid his nose down her neck.

"My name is Amelia."

He paused in his nuzzling of her neck.

"'Tis my given name," she continued, still looking outward as her confession came fast. "But I prefer Lia now." Amelia was a docile sister who hid away in the shadows of Dunvegan, a mouse-like girl who vomited from fear. But Lia was a woman who was free, someone who had been loved thoroughly by this brawny, honorable man.

"Amelia from the Isle of Skye where your brother, Alasdair, still resides."

She nodded, closing her eyes. *Please don't ask more.* She didn't want to lie. Not after what they'd shared last night and this morn.

More questions were delayed because they broke out of the forest line. "There's Gylin," he said. "I skirted the village so we can go directly there since ye aren't dressed."

Lia hadn't had time to study the looming fortress when she'd first landed, following Muriel to Grissell's cottages. The castle was at least four stories tall and perched on the sea behind a thick wall. The wall and castle were made of gray stone, and although ancient in style, it was kept well. There were no crumbling bits of mortar along the outer wall that needed to be patched, and the path leading to it was smooth

and free of deep puddles. The open portcullis was clean of rust, and the weeds were nibbled down by the grazing sheep and goats. Pots of spring flowers sat higher on stone posts so the animals couldn't reach them. Although one goat stretched on his hind hooves, trying to catch a daisy that bent and danced in the breeze. The goat dropped to all fours when they approached and trotted off.

Lia had forgone the dress because of the fear of another reaction, so she sat draped in a blanket from the barn over her smock.

"Drostan," Beck said, nodding to him as they rode into the bailey. "Lia." A slight grin played along the second brother's mouth, although the lift of his brows held questions. "Lark and Anna were fretting over ye during the storm last night," Beck said, catching Maise's reins while Drostan dismounted and turned to lift her down. His hands were warm and firm around her unbound waist. The touch, so familiar and desired, sent another thrill through her middle.

"We got stuck at my cottage on the northwest side," Drostan said.

"Together and alone?" Beck asked.

Lia felt the heat prickle in her cheeks.

"Aye," Drostan said, his face belligerent.

Beck held up his hands, palms out in surrender. "No judgment, brother." He dropped his hands and smiled at Lia. "For either of ye." He threw one arm out toward the fortress. "Welcome to Gylin Castle where ye can find a warm bath, tasty food, and good company."

"And no cats?" she asked.

Beck's brows rose again. "None that I've seen."

"She had a breathing attack last night," Drostan said, taking the reins of the horse from Beck. "Lia is extremely sensitive to the animals, so Sia will have to live apart from her."

"Which is why I'm not in my costume," Lia explained.

Beck nodded, his smile fading. "Understandably."

Drostan took Lia's hand, leading her toward the front of the castle. In the center of the bailey was a willow tree, as broad as it was tall. The leaves were green and small, the whiplike limbs undulating with the breeze.

"Is that the cursed tree?" she asked, releasing his arm to stand before it.

"Aye, but ye can see 'tis healing," Drostan said. "Three years ago, it looked brittle enough to catch fire by itself."

Lia turned to study his rugged profile. His features were finely cut with a small bump on his nose from a poorly set break, high cheekbones, and a strong jawline covered with stubble. His gaze on the tree was so intense she could imagine a tether between them. "You believe in the curse," she said, her voice small.

He pulled his gaze away to meet her eyes. "Aye."

They stared at one another for a moment until the ache in her chest reminded her to breathe. She turned back to the willow, and her hand pressed against her heart. "That's the dagger. The one the witch stabbed in the tree."

"Ye know the details about the curse?" he asked.

"The ladies on Mull mentioned parts of it." She stepped closer, ducking slightly so the limbs couldn't reach her. "The dagger truly bleeds. The dark stain there..." She pointed.

Drostan drew her back. "It could be sap, but it looks like blood."

"Why don't you cut it down or pull the dagger out?" she asked without taking her eyes from it. The breeze blew a chill over her arms, making bumps appear.

"The dagger won't come out until the curse is broken." He shrugged, still looking over her head. "So says the legend. 'Tis stuck so hard it won't budge."

"You've tried?"

He was silent for several moments. "Our father couldn't pull it out and his axe made no cuts in the trunk."

“Perhaps you could—”

“He forbade us from trying. Said it would make us unable to father children.”

“So, you want children?” she asked.

He took her arm to lead her toward the doors to the keep. “I don’t plan to father any. My brothers are already producing.”

“Oh,” she said, feeling a tightness in her chest. Drostan didn’t want any children, and yet he’d spilled his seed inside her. Three times. Surely the man knew how bairns were created.

The front door opened, and Lark stepped out with her sister, Anna.

“Welcome to Gylin,” Lark said without any indication of surprise.

“We saw you coming from the window.” Anna pointed above their heads.

“You poor thing,” Lark said. “You’ve lost your dress.” She hurled a glare at Drostan.

In the light of day in her smock, Lia felt cold, quite naked, and dirty. “’Tis a long story,” she said. “With Drostan rescuing me from dying once again.” The excuse didn’t hide the embarrassed heat in her cheeks.

“Let’s get you into a warm tub of water then,” Anna said, drawing her away.

Lia looked back at Drostan, still standing with his horse. He was so brawny and tall, his face cut in handsome lines. With all that strength and power, he was gentle. Seriousness creased his brow, and something intense shone in his eyes as he watched her go. *Hellfire*. He was a far better person than she. Even angry at being interrupted this morning, it was obvious Drostan loved his family, protected his family. If she was to get pregnant, she couldn’t let him destroy it by fathering a bastard.

• • •

Lia leaned back into the water of the bathing tub in her assigned room. The Macquarie castle wasn't as large as Dunvegan on Skye, but it was nicely furnished and equipped with many comforts, including soft rugs, full mattress ticks, and the large bathing tub. Lark had supplied Lia with sweet-smelling soap, a towel, and a whole ensemble.

"I will have to pay her for the clothes," Lia whispered as she rubbed the soap over her arms, breathing in the fresh lemony scent. She glanced at the small wardrobe where her one other dress, from Meg, hung. Her own gown was being brushed and her smock washed to rid both of cat hair.

She closed her eyes and sunk in the fragrant water, letting the remaining warmth caress her skin and dissolve the kinks in her muscles. Her fingers skimmed lightly over her stomach bringing back the erotic memories of Drostan stroking across the different planes of her sensitive skin, teasing such pleasure out of her with every reverent touch.

Her fingers dipped lower, touching the places he'd touched and loved. After this morning, she'd felt sated. But now the want swept up through her again. Did Drostan feel a renewed ache?

With a final press against her mound, she lifted her fingers to clutch the sides of the tub. She must stop thinking about him touching her and figure out what she was to do now that her initial plans were in shambles. She didn't need to avenge Iain's death to lessen the shame she'd felt over celebrating his end. Her brother had been a true devil, and not only to her because she somehow deserved it.

Rap. Rap. Rap. "'Tis Lark."

Lia's face snapped to the screen.

"And Anna."

Lia heard the door open. "Are you enjoying the bath?" Lark called as they came in.

"Very much. Thank you," Lia replied and finished rinsing her neck and arms.

"The water must be cool now," Lark said.

Lia looked at her wrinkled fingers. “I suppose I must get out.”

One of them laughed softly, and Lark peeked around the screen. “Do you need help?”

“No, I have the drying sheet.”

“We can comb the snarls from your hair,” Anna called out.

Lark pulled her face back behind the screen, and Lia pushed up from the water, being careful not to slosh the contents over the side. “This was exactly what I needed,” Lia said as she wrapped the bathing sheet around her. Back at Dunvegan, the maids were too busy cleaning up after her brother to be burdened by requests for frequent baths.

“We heard more about Drostan saving you,” Anna said.

Lia stood, clutching the sheet around her damp body.

“So frightening,” Lark said with a shiver in her voice. “’Twas a good thing he was able to get you away from Sia’s fur. I’ll have to watch my babe carefully to see if he has any reaction to cats.”

Lia stepped from behind the screen, determined not to act guilty of wantonly attacking their brother. “Yes, I was fortunate he acted quickly.”

“Stripping your clothes from you,” Anna said, watching her.

“Because...of the cat hair,” Lark added, but Lia heard the hint of a question.

Lia hitched the corners of her mouth up to face both ladies, standing by the bed, hands folded before them with their own fake smiles.

Holy Lord, they know. Lia’s smile dropped away.

Anna spoke first, her smile flattening into concern. “Did he seduce you?”

Lia’s mouth opened, closed, and then opened once more. “No... *I* may have seduced *him*.”

Both ladies exhaled, their eyes shutting and opening again

as they sat on the bed in unison. “We certainly love our brother,” Lark said. “All of them, but if any of them coerce a woman into—”

“He didn’t,” Lia said, shaking her head. I had this dream, and well, it rather continued when I woke.”

“You were a maid?” Anna asked.

It wasn’t her or anyone’s business. But these ladies had taken her in, given her food, clothes, a bath, and hadn’t called her a whore. “Yes,” Lia said. “But I didn’t care to remain one.”

“Why?” Lark asked.

Lia sat on the edge of the bed between them. The sisters turned inward, their knees propping them like bookends around Lia. “My brother wants to give me in marriage to a man much older than me.”

“Oh,” Lark said.

“So, you used Drostan to take your virginity to get out of the marriage,” Anna said, judgment in her voice.

Lia’s cheeks turned red. Had she? “I didn’t go to his cabin or fall asleep or have a sordid dream with that in mind.” She looked between the women. “But...” She dropped her gaze to her bare toes. “I’m sorry if I’ve caused trouble.”

“As long as you aren’t birthing his bastard,” Lark said. She squeezed Lia’s hand. “And Drostan is certainly not letting anyone think *you* seduced *him*.”

“He’s not?”

Anna stood, pacing over to look out the window at the courtyard. “My husband, Callum, suggested you might have an evil agenda, and Drostan told him that if he was fool enough to think you’d *tricked* him into bedding you that he should...” She tilted her head, glancing up as if trying to remember. “Should go stuff his mouth with cowrie shells until he choked, fell on the ground, and hit his head enough to knock some sense into it.”

She smiled over her shoulder at Lia. “And then Drostan pelted him with hard cowrie shells from the beach where they

were standing.” Anna crossed her arms. “One hit Callum so hard in the eye that ’tis swelling.”

Lia blinked. “I...I am sorry.” She shook her head. “I have no wish to cause a rift between brothers.”

Lark waved it off. “They’re siblings. Siblings always have disagreements.”

Lia had certainly had disagreements with her brothers, but due to their strength they’d always won. She rubbed her thumb over the circular scar, remembering how Iain had held her so tightly around the wrist that it had bruised. But it had been the flesh-searing burn that had caused all the pain.

Lark led Lia to a chair and combed through her wet locks. “And don’t worry about Adam,” Lark said. “I’ll make sure he knows that you’d never wish us harm.”

Lia saw her smile in the polished glass set on the table before her. “Thank you,” Lia whispered, trying hard to keep Lark’s gaze so Adam’s wife would see the truth in her gratitude. Would she also see the lie? Because Lia had definitely planned to harm the Macquarie Clan before Drostan Macquarie had rescued her.

Chapter Twelve

“If ye live on an isle, ye must have gone out on a smaller boat like this,” Drostan said as he pulled on the oars to move the large dinghy out from the shore. The sea was calm without much wind, and the clouds had parted at sunset bringing a rare clear sky above with a sliver of moon.

Lia tipped her head back to stare upward, exposing the long line of her throat. “I don’t really like the sea.” Perhaps that’s why her hands clutched both sides of the rowboat even though it was large and stable.

“Why don’t ye like the sea?” He’d start with easy questions before hunting out Lia’s full identity. Now that they’d slept together, his brothers were adamant they discover her true identity, especially since they guessed what Drostan was starting to realize. He wanted Lia to stay in his life.

She lowered her gaze to his. “I almost drowned when I was eight. My younger brother took me out like this, but the water was rougher.” She shook her head. “’Twas foolish really.”

“Did ye fall over?”

She looked over the side at the black water. “Yes, and he took his time fishing me out.”

“Took his time?”

“He thought it rather funny, but I was terrified.” She looked back out. “Father beat him when we returned, and I haven’t ridden in a rowboat since.”

“Sounds like he deserved the punishment,” Drostan said, anger tightening his gut. “This brother... He’s the one who branded ye?”

She looked out at the dark water. “He’s dead now.” The words came out like the shutting of a vault. So, he wasn’t just far away like she’d said the other night in his barn; he was all the way in Hell.

Drostan breathed deeply of the sea air. “I can row us back to

shore,” he said, preparing to swing them around. He should have explained his surprise outing before luring her into the dinghy.

“No, ’tis well,” she said, and he caught a glimpse of a smile as she tipped her face upward. “The water is calm, and you’re right about the stars. They do look brighter away from shore.”

Billions of sparks lay scattered in the night sky, like God had flung them out, seeding a fertile field. Some made patterns or pictures, and others sat in haphazard groups.

He secured the oars and pointed to one group directly overhead. “See the circle there? Made of seven stars.”

“I think I do,” she said, her head tilted back. She sat in the middle of the boat on a bench, and he moved to it with practiced balance. The boat was large enough to hold all his brothers without effort, so it barely rocked.

“That’s a crown.” He moved his finger to trace the circle. “Given by the god, Dionysus, to a princess in Greek myths. Ariadne was her name, and she helped the hero, Theseus, escape her half brother, the Minotaur, when Theseus was trapped in a labyrinth.”

Lia looked at him. “She turned against her own brother?” A slight alarm slid along her words.

“Aye...” Drostan said slowly. “She’d fallen in love with Theseus.”

“Did the brother die?”

“Aye, by Theseus’s sword.”

“Did the sister avenge her brother?”

Drostan rubbed his chin, trying to understand the thread of unease he heard in her voice. “Nay. She actually gave him the bronze sword and a ball of string so Theseus could find his way back out of the labyrinth.”

“What happened afterward? Did they marry?”

“Nay. She ended up married to Dionysus, the god that gave her the crown, which rests now in the heavens.” He pointed up

again.

“Why didn’t they marry? Ariadne and Theseus?” she asked.

“’Tis a legend, Lia, told through the ages, so there are many reported reasons.”

“Such as?”

Well, hell. Why had he picked Ariadne’s crown to tell her about? “Theseus abandoned her on an isle.”

“After she helped him kill her brother?” She sounded aghast.

“The Minotaur wasn’t only a *half* brother but a beast who killed lots of people,” Drostan said. “Ripping them to shreds in the labyrinth.” He paused, but she seemed to wait for more explanation. Drostan cleared his throat. “Some say Dionysus desired her so much he entranced Theseus, making him leave her so he could marry her.”

Lia tipped her face up to peer at the sky. “’Tis a sad story.”

“Not for Dionysus,” Drostan murmured.

They fell into silence. All Drostan could hear was the gentle lapping of water against the hull of the boat. He’d thought to bring Lia out on the calm sea to get her to relax enough to talk more. And maybe give him another kiss. He’d discovered her cruel brother was dead, but he was seriously failing at winning a kiss.

Lia’s eyes shone like polished stones when they turned to him. “My younger brother was a beast much of the time,” she said. He heard her sigh softly. “I...I think... Well, I can understand why Ariadne may have helped Theseus. ’Tis sad they didn’t end up together.”

Her words caught his inhale, his hands forming fists to rest on his knees. “Did he do...even more horrible things to ye, more than the branding?” Drostan asked, his voice soft. He reached over to feather his thumb across her wrist.

She let him hold her hand. “Some,” she said, glancing down. “But I think it helped me become a survivor.” She looked out at the sea. “If I could survive twenty-five years with my two

brothers, I could survive any adventure out in the world.”

Drostan took a calm breath to control the rage simmering in him. “A brother should protect his siblings, especially those who are physically vulnerable.” He slid his fingers in between hers, bringing their palms together. “What did he do?” he asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

“’Twas mostly threats. Punching the barn wall next to my face. Alasdair would have beat him sorely if he’d left a mark on me.”

Alasdair. The older brother. It was a good thing the younger brother was dead, or vengeance would drag Drostan under until he made the man pay.

“I’m grateful Alasdair was there then,” he murmured. The lass had lived in limbo between the brothers.

She snorted. “Alasdair wants me unmarred to marry off.”

If the younger brother was dead, she’d run from the possible marriage. Lark and Anna had said as much to him earlier, but they’d advised him that Lia seemed to have run more from her brother than her elderly suitor.

“That can’t be a star,” Lia said, staring level out into the night. “’Tis too low.”

Drostan followed her gaze and caught the random blink of a light far off over the dark water. “A ship passing.” They didn’t see many. Could Cullen Duffie, the chief of the MacDonalds of Islay Isle, be sailing out during the night? He helped them patrol for signs of Jandeau.

“From the...west?” Lia said, her finger tracing some stars downward.

“It could be headed north between Wolf Isle and Coll and Tیره isles,” Drostan said. “I’ll let Adam know. Cullen alerts him of his patrol schedule.”

Lia continued to watch the blink of light in the distance. “Alasdair has a ship,” she said and pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

The brother was wealthy enough to own a ship? “Ye think

he's coming after ye?" Drostan asked.

Lia's face, pristine in the scant moonlight, turned to him. "I know he is." The words held a chilling note. "But he won't find me." Her words were confident, but Drostan knew Captain Gordon could be paid to talk. Would he guess that she'd continued on to Wolf Isle after landing in Mull?

Lia turned her face back to the gently lapping waves. Scant moonlight reflected off her hair.

Drostan's jaw remained tight. "Will this older suitor come looking for ye, too?"

She shook her head. "I don't know if he'd even care."

Would she keep moving to outrun her brother? "What are yer plans, Lia? 'Tis not safe on your own."

Her shoulders rounded forward as she clasped her arms around her bent knees. "I will be more wary," she murmured.

Drostan ran his hands down his face. He didn't want her to leave, but could he ask her to stay without proposing marriage?

"I could stay here." Her voice was firm as if she'd thought about it. "The people are good here, kind."

He could say it. *Stay here, Lia. With me.* But what future would they have if the curse kept him from having children? Not that having children was everything, but to a lass who might want to be a mother, it would be. He swallowed. "Of course, ye could stay here. Have a cottage in Ormaig. Perhaps Alasdair will look farther south."

She nodded but didn't say anything for a long moment. Her gaze leveled with his, and they stared at one another on the bench, their faces only an arm's length apart. "The other night...in your barn..." Her voice came soft. "It was wonderful, Drostan. Every bit of it."

Her lips remained parted as if recalling how she moaned, and Drostan's hands clutched the curved undersides of the bench. He waited in the darkness there, only the gentle lap of the water against the hull breaking the silence.

“I...” she continued, “remember the feel of your touch. My skin still tingles with it.” She shifted on the bench, her eyes never leaving his. “Do you...still ache?” The question was a whisper.

Did he ache? *Good God!*

“Aye.” The word came out with an exhale. “If ye could see under my wrap, ye’d know how much I ache, Lia.”

She slid closer on the bench. Was the darkness once again making her bold? “I would see.”

Drostan slid his woolen wrap higher until his erection was revealed, his hand wrapping around it.

“Hellfire,” she whispered. “’Tis not so obvious for women.”

He covered himself, but Lia’s arms came up to rest on his shoulders. “Maybe we can do something about it,” she whispered, the teasing edge to her tone shooting like a million darts of lust into his body.

With a groan, Drostan reached for her, his mouth dropping onto hers. She opened under his kiss with need. She tipped her face, their kiss instantly wild, as if they’d been apart for months rather than two days. He raked his fingers through her hair, freeing the curls from the pins holding it up. It tumbled down, and he inhaled the scent of her along her temple, burying his nose in the silkiness. He groaned when her hand found his jack. Her cool fingers wrapped around him without hesitation, sliding up and down like he’d shown her in the loft.

“Ah, Lia, lass,” he said and grabbed the soft wool of her gown, raising the layers to slide his fingers against her bare inner thighs.

“There.” She exhaled against his mouth as he reached the crux of her legs where wet heat soaked his fingers. She thrust against his hand, mimicking the rhythm they’d kept. This was no dream turning her into a wildcat. Fully awake and aware, they both still wanted one another, ached for one another.

He lifted under her round arse, settling her across his lap so that she straddled him face to face, her bare thighs spread. She rubbed against him in the most erotic way, the gentle sway of

the boat adding to the to-and-fro motion.

“What do ye want, lass?” he asked, his voice strained. With one hand he grabbed the back of his tunic and yanked it over his head, letting it fall to the bottom of the boat. They sat perfectly balanced on top of one another and far enough out from the land and around a set of boulders so that they were as alone as they’d been in his barn.

Her hand left his shoulder to find his jack between them, the pad of her thumb circling over the sensitive head. Bloody hell, he wanted to impale her, feel her heat surround him and suck along his length. He kissed her for long minutes before pulling her hand away. “I’ll spill now if ye keep that up,” Drostan ground out hoarsely. “I would hear what ye want, Lia.”

Her fingers moved to her neckline, untying the ribbon on her smock. “I want you to untie my stays,” she said.

Drostan ran his fingers up her back, tugging the ribbon there and feeling the bracing loosen. All the while her most intimate, bared part nestled his jack. She shifted against him, and he groaned at the friction. He dropped his hands to her hips, holding her still, but then her shoulders moved, letting her stays and smock down. Two plump breasts swelled out of the top, round and white in the darkness, perching on the edge. His mouth dropped to one, sucking the pearled nipple, and she began to rock against him, releasing a husky moan.

He sucked on the second one, palming the first with one hand while his other dropped to her lap, rubbing against her sensitive nub.

“Drostan, please,” she said, the words almost like a whimper as she rocked.

“Tell me what ye want,” he urged, his fingers finding her completely open. He lifted under her arse, holding her poised over his rock-hard jack.

Hands braced on his shoulders, Lia leaned to his ear, her breath hot and rapid. “Thrust into me, Drostan. Fok me.”

The crude word on her lush mouth broke through whatever restraint he had left. Drostan lowered her onto his straining

jack. Slowly, until he was fully embedded inside her hot body.

His groan overrode her gasp, and she clutched him, pressing her naked breasts against his hot chest as she clung. Hands holding her sweet arse, he lifted and lowered her along his length, and pleasure swept through him like a fiery frenzy turning the world, everything else besides Lia, to ash.

Lia held tight, rocking with increasing rhythm. The angle brushed her mound, rubbing as he lavished her neck and breasts with kisses. He tasted the slight salt from the sea breeze on her skin and felt the thud of her pulse under his lips. Pulling her forward until she almost lay straddled on top of him, she rubbed faster, her feet braced in the bottom of the rowboat. Her rapid breathing drew out into a moan. The feeling of her body clenching around his jack sent Drostan headlong over the edge, his body tensing as he, too, released.

They held tightly to each other, their bodies joined as the waves washed through them. Minutes passed as the intense pleasure ebbed to sated relaxation. Lia raised her face from where it pressed in that place between his shoulder and neck. "I've decided two things," she said, her voice even as her rapid breathing calmed.

"Oh?" Drostan asked and reached over to grab his discarded tunic. He helped her off his lap and handed her the tunic to sit upon.

"Two things," she repeated as he helped her right her bodice, covering her breasts.

He could see a teasing smile on her face even with the quarter moon.

"One, I like rowboats now."

He chuckled, his own smile making him feel light.

"And two," she said, her smile faltering into something more serious. Her eyes seemed to search his. "I really like you, Drostan Macquarie. For more than this," she added quickly, moving her hand to indicate their two bodies.

A small wrinkle between her brows made his sexual fog clear. Had she not expected to like him?

Drostan pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her so that her face lay against his chest. Could she hear his heart thumping?

“I like ye, too, Lia. For your courage, loveliness, and for trusting me with the truth.”

She stiffened ever so slightly. Perhaps she was cold or... perhaps she would never tell him the full truth.

...

Drostan walked across the bailey toward the willow, taking care not to crunch the pebbles, not that anyone was about. His brothers and the few men who'd come to Wolf Isle took turns at night to walk the shoreline but not the castle wall.

The night was dark and clear, and he couldn't sleep, not after the unexpected and thoroughly satisfying time with Lia in the rowboat. *Lia or Amelia. From Skye. Two brothers. One dead. One, Alasdair, who owned a ship, cared little for her, and held orgies.* The bits and pieces of information Drostan had gleaned swirled in his mind, making him dizzy.

The wind blew off the sea, bringing a chill that felt more like winter than spring. But that was how it was in the Highlands. Winter held on with talons until spring grew strong enough to conquer it.

The limbs of the willow whipped about, and he stood on the perimeter of its reach. The darkness hid the embedded dagger, but Drostan knew right where it sat, had always sat, for a century now. Because of Wilyam Macquarie, the foking arse. He'd wed another woman after getting a local lass pregnant. The lass hanged herself because of heartbreak, but her mother saved the bairn from her belly. She'd cursed the Macquarie Clan, stabbing the tree with the dagger she'd used to rescue her granddaughter from her mother's cooling womb.

Grissell was a descendant of that granddaughter. But, in ways, the old woman who cared for lasses and bairns was still that vengeful mother from long ago. She cursed the Macquaries every chance she got and sheltered girls and

women who were mistreated by men.

Lia had come here because she'd been mistreated by her brothers, and she might stay.

Drostan clawed a hand through his hair and watched the fog blow in through the bars of the portcullis, giving the bailey an eerie look. The mist remained low, hovering in the shelter of the walls around Gylin, creeping across the bailey ground toward him by the tree.

“Do you think grabbing the blade will keep you barren? Or do you think pulling it free will break the curse and allow you to father children?” The questions came on the breeze, and Drostan's hand lurched for his sword. On the other side of the portcullis stood a woman. In the darkness, with the mist around her, she looked otherworldly with long white hair. A white cat slid between the bars.

“Grissell?” Drostan walked toward her. “What are ye doing out here in the night?”

The old woman, who most thought was too old to go far from her cottage, shrugged. “I like to walk at night. My cats do, too.” The second white cat slid out from around her skirts to weave through the bars. Grissell gazed at him with a combination of mischief and pity. “You can't *trick* your clan out of the curse, lad.”

He grimaced at how close her words struck the mark. “I'm not trying to trick anyone.”

“Oh?” she said, nodding to the tree through the bars. “Yanking the dagger from the tree or chopping the willow down won't do what you think it will. Only honoring the woman you love will allow your clan to survive. Not doing so and getting her with child will doom you all.”

“I haven't gotten any woman with child,” Drostan said, trying to ignore the crawling worry up his spine.

She tipped her head, and a knowing smile slid across her thin lips. She kept a tight gaze on his face. “Tricking the curse didn't work when you were a lad of twelve and it won't work now.”

“I’m not tricking it, I haven’t gotten a woman with child, and I love no woman,” he said, his voice louder than he’d intended. How did she know about his visit when he was twelve? Had Eagan and Callum told her? Had she seen him those many years ago?

Grissell slid a gnarled hand along one bar of the portcullis. “She has secrets, like you. Love won’t grow with secrets choking the sprouts.”

“What do ye know about Lia, about Amelia?”

The woman smiled. “Good. You know her true given name. ’Tis a start.” She turned away.

“Wait,” Drostan said. “Did she tell ye anything else?” But the woman vanished into the sea mist. He felt a brushing against his legs and saw her two white cats dodge him and the bars to trot silently after her.

“Secrets must be revealed by the one who began them, or love will be lost, maybe forever.” The words seemed to blow around him in the mist.

“Daingead.” He traipsed back to the willow tree. Worry and anger twisted inside him like the thin, whipping limbs of the tree. He slapped them aside, his jaw clenched, and strode right up to the dagger. He hated it, hated the damn tree that stood out in the open for everyone to see his clan’s shame. It controlled their lives, caused fear, and held sway over all the souls who tried to be happy on Wolf Isle.

“Foking curse,” he gritted out, his hands sliding up the rough bark until he found the protruding handle. It had seemed higher up the tree when he was shorter, a gangly, twelve-year-old boy, a boy with shaking hands and large eyes. Afraid he’d fall down dead on the spot or worse, his jack would shrivel up.

His fingers struck the handle, and with a quick inhale, he wrapped his hands around it, braced his boot at the base of the trunk, and pulled.

“What the fok are ye doing!”

Chapter Thirteen

The dagger's handle was cold and rigid in Drostan's palm. Ignoring Adam's furious words, Drostan yanked harder. It didn't budge, not even a wiggle. As a lad, he hadn't really expected it to move, but as a grown man who trained daily with sword and stones, he couldn't imagine not being able to remove the dagger from the willow tree. If he could get it out, perhaps the damn curse would be broken.

The wind picked up, and the thin limbs slashed about as if trying to reach him against the trunk. He heard Adam's boots crunching as he ran under the tree limbs, grabbing Drostan's shoulder to spin him around. Drostan let go of the dagger. It wasn't moving anyway.

"What the foking hell are ye doing?" Adam shouted in his face, shaking him. His hands ran down Drostan's arms and then thumped him on the chest and back as if to see if he were whole or if he stood there as a dying man.

"I'm well enough," Drostan said, pushing his hands away. "And my jack isn't shriveling, either."

Adam rubbed a hand over his mouth and then pointed toward the castle. "Inside. Now."

Drostan followed him, not because he was the chief or even his oldest brother, but because there was nothing left to do outside. The tree wasn't giving up the dagger or the curse.

When they entered the Great Hall, Adam turned on him. "Ye were trying to pull the blade from the willow. Why?"

"To break the curse." It was the easy answer.

"Ye know it doesn't work that way. Ye may have just made yourself impotent, ye fool."

Drostan shook his head, looked Adam in the eye, and exhaled. "I touched it back when I was twelve years old, and my jack works fine."

Adam stared at him. "I didn't believe it when Callum told

me yesterday. I thought ye'd made the story up to get him off yer back about Lia." Adam shook his head and looked at him. "Ye came over here when we still lived with Aunt Ida on Mull?"

Drostan nodded.

"By yerself? To a cursed isle where a witch lived?"

"I thought ye don't believe in the curse anyway," Drostan said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Bloody hell," Adam murmured. "I don't know what I believe except that things are thriving on Wolf Isle and the damn tree seems to be healing." He met Drostan's gaze. "And ye took it upon yerself to break the curse when ye were twelve?"

"Either that or make it so I couldn't doom the clan by fathering a bastard." Drostan inhaled. "Aunt Ida went on so much about the curse and how she wouldn't let us ruin the family. I decided to row over and..." He shrugged. "'Twas during daylight. I stole a rowboat, rowed over, found the tree, and yanked on the blade. I even climbed up in the limbs and then took an axe to the trunk."

His tone didn't give away how terrified he'd been through it all, watching over his shoulder for a witch with white hair to come stab him through, pinning him to the tree, so he'd slowly bleed out with the whipping limbs cutting him to shreds. Or worse, feeling his jack fall off, hitting his legs on the way to the ground. How he'd waited for days to see if he'd stop being able to piss or sicken.

Adam shook his head. "I always knew ye to be the bravest of us, but ye could have died, Drostan."

Bravest? Adam's words straightened Drostan's spine. His brother, the chief, the serious one who never showed an inkling of fear, thought Drostan was the bravest? Drostan inhaled fully, crossing his arms. "But I didn't die. And I've tupp'd lasses since who've not gotten with child."

"Ye don't pull out?" Adam asked, his eyes widening.

"Nay, well, sometimes. I guess I do to make certain."

“With Lia?”

Drostan didn't even blink as he stared back.

“Bloody hell,” Adam said and wrapped his hands behind his neck as if Drostan was making it ache. Adam looked at him. “If she gets with child, ye're marrying her.”

“Well, ye should know...” Drostan began.

“What?” Adam dropped his hands.

“Her real name is Amelia, and she ran away from the Isle of Skye because her arse of a brother wants her to marry an older man. The brother's name is Alasdair.”

Adam stared. “And ye took her maidenhead.”

Drostan's lips pursed, and he nodded. “Aye.”

Adam's brow furrowed tighter. “From what clan does she hail?”

“She hasn't told me, but her brother is wealthy enough to own a ship, and she had a younger brother who died.”

“I only know one Alasdair on Skye,” Adam said. His face always held a serious grimness, but now it looked almost like dread. His hand dropped heavily onto Drostan's shoulder. “Alasdair MacLeod, the chief of the MacLeods and brother to that criminal, Iain MacLeod, who I killed on Jandean's ship.”

Drostan felt his stomach drop. “There could be an Alasdair in the MacDonald or Mackinnon Clans,” Drostan said. “'Tis a large isle.”

“Aye,” Adam said, mimicking Drostan's stance, arms crossed and feet planted as if bracing himself. “Or ye could have just started a war with Clan MacLeod, one of the most powerful clans of the Scottish isles.”

...

I like ye, too, Lia. For your courage, loveliness, and for trusting me with the truth.

Drostan's words were the first that came to mind when Lia

opened her eyes to the dawn lighting her bedchamber in Gylin Castle. He thought her courageous and lovely, which was wonderful. She thought Drostan was brave, strong, and honorable. Also, brawny and able to deliver such pleasure that she flushed again recalling what they'd done in the rowboat. But trust?

Did Lia trust Drostan? Apparently, she trusted him with her body. She shivered slightly under the thick quilt. Lia's hand slid over her sleeping smock, across her abdomen, remembering the feel of him. *Bloody hellfire!* He made her wanton.

Lia pushed the quilt aside and slid her bare feet to the wooden floor, rubbing her hands over her face. "Lord, help me," she whispered. She'd also told Drostan about Iain and Alasdair.

But she hadn't trusted Drostan enough to tell him why she'd come specifically to Wolf Isle. Nor did she give him her clan's name. If he hadn't puzzled it out yet, he would soon, and then he'd likely hate her. He certainly wouldn't think she'd given him her trust.

"'Tis only been a week," she whispered to the empty room. A mere week since he'd saved her in the alley, taking the blame for killing the first brute and knocking out the second. And in that time, because of Drostan's heroics or touch, she'd given away her secrets along with her maidenhood.

The plan, which had seemed so clear when she'd hurried to board *The Tern* dressed as a boy, was ludicrous. She'd sought to avenge Iain's death somehow while running away from Alasdair's wedding plans. Amelia had wanted to wash away her immense guilt for being relieved that Iain was dead, his head severed from his shoulders. He'd been her brother, yet all her tears after his body was returned to Dunvegan Castle were tears of joy that he was truly unable to hurt her again.

Revenge was difficult. She couldn't end someone's life, and from what Muriel had said, Iain hadn't been killed in some ambush or sword fight from drinking too much whisky. Her brother had been pure evil to be working with that horrid

pirate to steal women and children.

But to show Alasdair she wasn't merely valuable to marry her off, Amelia had considered the Macquarie curse, which her brothers had gone on and on about. So, she'd run away, come down here on her own to prove she was valuable to her clan and vanquish her guilt over being grateful that Iain was dead.

She'd quickly confirmed through the Macleans that a bastard born to a direct descendent of the Macquarie chief who'd started the curse would doom the clan to die out. No children born to them would live, and the clan and its isle would become infertile and sickly. It was the ultimate revenge against a clan, wiping it out without ever lifting a sword.

But after meeting Lark and Anna, and of course Drostan, she couldn't bring herself to harm the Macquarie Clan. She wasn't heartless like her brothers, no matter how much she'd considered ruthlessness. If she did become pregnant with Drostan's child, she couldn't leave him and possibly make others on the isle grow sickly and die.

The thought of tricking Drostan and leaving him twisted her stomach so much, she felt she might vomit. Lia pushed the stricken, accusatory face of Drostan out of her mind and stood up, pacing to the window that overlooked the bailey. *I won't return to Alasdair.* "But I can't tell them what I had planned." If the Macquaries and the Macleans found out, not only would she hurt Drostan, but also the people she'd met here and on Mull. Kind people who'd given her clothes and food and shelter when she deserved none.

She looked at her reflection in the wavy glass mirror. Wisps of hair had been plucked free of her braid while she tossed through the night, unable to sleep with such a secret weaving like a serpent through her mind.

I like you for trusting me with the truth.

"Bloody hellfire." How could she live with the Macquaries and not tell Drostan her initial plans for revenge? "I either have to leave or..." She released a long sigh.

Or I have to tell him. Everything.

• • •

Rabbie hobbled in through the entryway with Charles Duffie. “The young Duffie brought this letter over from Mull by ferry,” Rabbie said.

“Welcome, Charles,” Anna said from where she sat next to her sister. “How is your mother, Lady Rose?”

“Irritated that Father has been spending more time patrolling the waters, but otherwise she’s in excellent health. Thank ye.” Charles glanced around as Rabbie handed the letter to Adam at the table. “Where is the fair and mysterious Lia?” Charles asked, his brows high.

Drostan felt a stab of annoyance at his friend whose crisp tunic and bright plaid suddenly seemed much richer than anything Drostan owned. “She hasn’t come down to break her fast yet,” Drostan answered.

Old Rabbie lowered himself across from Adam to grab a currant-studded scone from a plate. “More of Kofi’s delectable creations,” he said, nearly salivating.

“Hands washed?” Lark asked.

Rabbie stuffed the scone in his mouth and raised his two hands that looked somewhat clean. The cuffs of his tunic were wet.

After three years of training, the old man and the Macquarie brothers had finally learned manners thanks to Lark’s guiding. It was amazing how she wielded a disapproving stare much like a warrior wielded his sword. Gylin Castle might not be as rich as Dunyvaig Castle where Charles helped his father lead the MacDonalds of Islay, but Gylin was clean, smelled fresh, and was full of family comfort. And it was improving every year.

Charles glanced at the empty stairway. “Ah, well then, I’ll wait, too, since I believe I’m supposed to escort her back to Chief Maclean,” Charles said, holding his clean hands up to Lark before taking a scone from the basket.

“Why does Tor want to see her?” Drostan asked, standing.

Charles shrugged. "I happened to be visiting the docks when he sent a man down to bring this note to Adam. He said to wait for Lia's return."

Bloody hell. What did Tor need with Lia? He watched Adam as he opened the letter.

Callum and Eagan came over to the table from the hearth where they'd finished a game of chess. Only Beck and Eliza were still in the village in their own cottage with their adopted girls.

Charles lowered his voice. "Has the lovely lass revealed any more of who she is?" His brows were high, and his gaze moved about the people at the table, landing on Drostan.

Annoyance itched up inside Drostan. "A person's identity is their own to tell. If Lia wants ye to know more about her, then she will tell ye directly."

Charles snorted softly and cut him a grin. "In other words, ye still know little if anything about our mystery lass."

Our? When had Charles Duffie become such an arse? Or rather, when did him being an arse become so bloody irritating? And when before had Adam taken so long to read a damn letter?

Charles spread some butter on his scone. "Well, if ye don't know anything more about her, then maybe she's waiting for someone with more..." He moved the scone around in the air as if trying to think of the word. It was a movement that Drostan had seen his friend's French mother do often. "More ability to help her with whatever trouble she might be in."

"We are able to help her," Drostan said. If only she would trust him with her whole story.

In truth, whenever they came close to each other, all Drostan's logical plans began to smoke until they burst into flames when she touched him. He'd been with his share of lovely lasses, but none of them set him on fire so quickly and so completely. Lia was different, distractingly different.

"Tor is summoning me, Lia, and Drostan to Mull," Adam said.

“Today?” Lark asked.

“Aye, within the hour.”

Drostan frowned. “Why?”

Adam glanced at the paper again. “He doesn’t say, but it must have something to do with Lia.”

Adam looked at Charles, but he shook his head, shrugging.

“I know nothing but will be happy to offer her a home on Islay if Tor has issues with the lass,” Charles said, sitting straight.

“It doesn’t say there are issues,” Drostan said.

Charles shrugged. “She should know her options.”

Drostan crossed his arms. “Ye don’t need to worry about taking care of the lass. If there are any problems, I will be the one to deal with them.”

Charles stood slowly. “Drostan Macquarie, forever the rescuer,” he said, his words twisted with sarcasm. “Maybe ye should give the rest of us a chance with Lia. ’Tis not like ye’ve marked her as yours.”

Adam made some noise in the back of his throat. Eagan laughed, and Callum snorted. Drostan felt heat rise in his face.

“What?” Charles asked, narrowing his gaze at each brother.

Callum stood, looking across at Eagan. “Perhaps there’s been some news about Captain Gordon or the men who attacked her,” he said. “I’ll come, too.”

Eagan nodded, chewing. “Aye,” he said and stood.

Charles continued to move his gaze from person to person. “What is this response about Lia?”

“Response about me?” came Lia’s voice from the alcove. She walked into the Great Hall, hair pinned in a swirl atop her head. She wore a woolen, plaid skirt with an overlay in front that served as an apron. Her blue bodice laced in front over her breasts but revealed a stomacher of the same plaid. The entire outfit held her body in the bonniest way, showing her soft

curves. It made him want to strip her right out of it. Her gaze met his, and he watched a stain of red bloom on her cheeks, her smile tentative.

“Lady Lia,” Charles said, stepping out from the table, blocking Drostan’s view.

“Charles Duffie?” she said, and her gaze moved past him back to Drostan’s, a question clearly there. “What response are you asking about?”

Charles glanced at Drostan and then bowed over her hand. “I’ve come to escort ye, milady.” He kissed her knuckles, and Lia politely pulled her hand back.

Drostan walked up behind Charles. “Tor has asked for us to come over to Mull this morn, but he hasn’t said why.”

Her expressive brows pinched downward. “He didn’t say why? That cannot be good.”

“He might have more information about the crewmen who attacked you,” Anna said, waving her closer. “You should eat first. Everything is easier to handle without the gnawing of an empty stomach.”

Lia walked over and took the scone she offered, along with a cup of weak ale, Charles following her like a puppy. Drostan could tell by the rigidness in her movements that she was worried—maybe more than worried, maybe panicked.

Eagan stretched. “I’ll go ready the ferry.”

Lark wrapped another scone in a napkin, handing it to Lia. “You barely had time to break your fast. Take this to eat when you realize that ’tis nothing of consequence.” She smiled at Lia with encouragement, although Drostan saw the questioning look she traded with Adam when she sat down.

“Lady Ava is sending a bolt of fabric for Grissell’s girls,” Anna said to Callum. “Be sure to bring it back with you.” Callum kissed her head, his mouth still full of scone.

Drostan held his arm out for Lia to take before Charles did. “Lia,” Drostan said, letting her know that he hadn’t shared her real name, at least not with most of the room. Only Adam

knew the secrets that Drostan had unearthed.

For a moment, Lia stared at his offered arm.

“Or my arm is available,” Charles said with a brilliant smile. “As a sturdy alternative.”

Lia laid her hand on Drostan’s arm. She looked up into his eyes. “And we should talk,” she whispered.

If he hadn’t felt the gentle way she clung to his arm, he’d have worried she was breaking off whatever had started to grow between them. *No good comes when a lass says she wants to talk.* Callum’s pre-wedded wisdom was unfortunately accurate.

“As soon as we return,” Drostan agreed. *And with our clothes on,* he thought, and they stepped out into the brilliant spring morning.

“The cursed tree looks healthy and happy,” Charles said, his voice grating on Drostan. The tree’s limbs held hundreds of green leaves in their perpetual state of half open. Even through the cold winter, the little leaves clung as if they were sculpted and painted instead of living. The brothers never talked about it, as if doing so would make the curse more real.

Outside the portcullis was Beck, his hair mussed and his sash dragging behind him. Eagan hurried past him toward the dock.

Beck threw a hand toward him. “Eagan says ye’ve been summoned to Mull this morn.” He rubbed a hand down his face and offered a sleepy smile to Lia. “Lady Lia.”

Lia cleared her throat. “My name is Amelia, but you can call me either. I rather like the shortened version.”

Beck sniffed a laugh. “I tried calling Eliza Elly once. She shoved me into the water.” His gaze shifted to Charles Duffie. “Why are ye here?”

“Good morn to ye, too,” Charles said, mimicking Beck’s frown. “I think the Macquaries, out here nearly alone, have lost their congenial ways and welcoming manner.”

“We’ve never been congenial and welcoming,” Adam said,

indicating the path that they should all be walking down.

Charles chuckled. “I brought a letter over on the ferry. Didn’t know the whole Macquarie Clan would return because of it.”

Beck grabbed up his sash, fastening it correctly with a muttered curse under his breath. Beck hated mornings and usually slept late if he could. Eagan must have run to the village to wake him.

“’Tis good of ye to come,” Drostan said to his brother.

Beck grinned, raking his hair with his fingers. “Macquarie brothers stand together.”

Lia tripped over a stone in the path, and Drostan held tighter to her arm.

The ferry trip was quiet and short. Tor wasn’t at the docks, but there were several trading vessels moored. Lia’s gaze ran along the line of ships as if searching for *The Tern* and Captain Gordon.

Drostan leaned near her ear. “Gordon isn’t here. And if the family of the man ye shot is here, I’ve taken responsibility.” She turned to meet his gaze, blinking several times, her breathing shallow. “What is it?” he whispered.

“I feel...” she started and stopped, wetting her lips. Och but they were luscious lips. She started again. “There are things you need to know, but I feel like I’ve suddenly run out of time.”

With his brothers and Charles close by, there was no privacy. He leaned into her ear, inhaling the now-familiar scent. “We will stay behind and talk when this meeting with Tor is over. Perhaps ye can visit with Meg, too.”

She nodded, but the anxiety in her eyes had spread across her face.

Adam stood, studying the ships. “Do ye recognize any of them?” Drostan asked.

Adam shook his head. “I don’t stay abreast of the sailing vessels. Beck?”

Of all the brothers, Beck was the sailor and had captained his own carrack before it burned. “The one on the end is a trading vessel I’ve seen docked at Oban before. The one before it is from the north.”

“’Tis hard to make out from here, but I’d say it flies a Mackinnon coat of arms,” Charles said confidently, pointing at the flag that fluttered in the mid-morning breeze.

“Mackinnon?” Lia said, the word breathless, and Drostan felt her falter in her step.

“Probably come to visit Keir, Grace’s husband and Tor’s general,” Drostan said, leading her along the path from the docks.

Lia opened large eyes to him. “Grace’s husband is a Mackinnon?”

“Aye.” Drostan studied her. “He was known as the Devil of Dunakin before he married Grace. He was in line to be the chief, but he gave the responsibility to his best friend and cousin, Brodie Mackinnon.”

Lia dug in her heels, stopping him in the road. “Drostan.” She shook her head. “I cannot go up to the castle. I can’t meet with Chief Maclean.”

“I thought ye might say that, so I came down to meet ye at the docks.” A man, light of hair and broad across the shoulders, stepped from around the side of a cottage.

The brave woman Drostan had come to know seemed to melt away like snow set over a flame. Lia was left pale and weak as she leaned against him, her hand clutching his arm like she was lost in a flood and must hold on to save her life. Instinctively, Drostan covered her hand with his and pressed into her to give her more support.

Lia looked up to him, and the fear he’d seen lurking now swam openly in her eyes. Fear and remorse.

“Let go of that...Macquarie,” the man said, a lethal edge to his voice. “And come greet your betrothed.”

A second man stepped out from the cottage, along with Keir

and Tor Maclean. The man was light of hair, too, and had a face that reminded Drostan of the Norsemen. He was almost as large as Keir and mimicked his frown.

“The lass is not betrothed to anyone she doesn’t accept,” Drostan said. His four brothers formed a semicircle around them.

“Amelia MacLeod will wed Brodie Mackinnon as soon as we return to Skye.” The fury on the man’s face didn’t abate, even as he smiled. “I, Alasdair MacLeod, chief of the MacLeods of Skye, have accepted the betrothal for her as her brother and guardian.”

Chapter Fourteen

Nauseating terror washed through Lia's middle. She'd never liked sailing on the waves, and the ferry ride had already pushed the eaten scone up higher than it should be. She pulled away from Drostan's arm.

"Lia?" he asked, but she ignored him as she took even steps forward toward her brother. She deviated at the last moment to lean over the street, letting the force of panic push her breakfast up and out, holding her skirts back, her eyes squeezed shut. She was mortified by everything, might as well add vomiting in public to it.

"Lia." Drostan's voice sounded as if he was striding after her. "Get the fok out of my way." She didn't need to turn around to know that Alasdair had blocked him.

"She's my sister, and I will care for her. The Macquaries are not only murderers but apparently make anyone they touch sick."

"Neither of your bloody slanders are true," one of Drostan's brothers called.

"Which one of ye sliced my brother's head from his shoulders?" Alasdair asked.

"I did." She recognized Adam's voice.

"I did," Beck added.

"As did I."

"That would be me."

One by one, each Macquarie took responsibility for Iain's death even though Drostan had told her it had been Adam, striking back as Iain tried to shoot him as he swung down the side of the pirate's ship. The Macquarie brothers stood as one, taking the blame together.

"Lia needs to be taken up to the castle," Drostan said. "Lia lass?"

“Her name is Amelia,” Alasdair said with a sneer in his voice. “And ye will call her Lady Amelia if I allow ye to talk to her at all.”

Lia remained bent, hands on her knees and eyes squeezed shut. If she swooned, everything would go away, at least for a bit. But that was cowardly, and she didn't want to prove herself a coward before Drostan. She breathed slowly and walked her hands up her legs until she straightened, turning.

Drostan dodged her brother and handed her a clean handkerchief. Concern, not anger, bent his brow. She wanted nothing other than his arms around her, but she stood rooted in panic.

Brodie Mackinnon cleared his voice. “Let's make our way to Aros Castle where Lady Amelia can recover and figure out whatever tangle we seem to be in.” His words were a mix of kindness and confusion. He handed Lia a leather bladder with drink in it. She took a swallow of cold ale to clear the foulness from her mouth.

“Thank you,” she murmured, handing it back without looking at him.

“Ava and Meg will have something for yer stomach,” Tor Maclean said.

Brodie offered her his arm. She hesitated but placed her hand there so as not to cause more yelling. Without looking at Drostan or any of his silent brothers, Lia stepped forward on Brodie's arm. *One, two, three, four...* She counted to four with her inhale, held her breath for two, and counted back down with her exhale. The numbers and breathing kept her thinking in manageable spurts instead of running amok with panic.

Alasdair might kill me if I ruin his alliance with Brodie Mackinnon. Three, four. Hold, one... I can't marry a man who wants a virgin. Two, exhale, two, three, four... Drostan. Oh God, Drostan.

Her breath choked, and she coughed. Brodie offered her a handkerchief, but she still had Drostan's and shook her head. Did he think she was merely a reluctant bride? Someone who

would come around and finally love him once they married? He'd been married before and had a daughter and son Lia's age.

Keir walked beside Brodie, silent and foreboding. Alasdair walked on Lia's other side, judgmental and controlling. Tor and Adam led the way and Drostan, with his three other brothers, walked behind them. Their group made a knot that spanned the cobble street winding up to Aros Castle, Lia at the center.

I'm not a virgin. I will not marry Brodie Mackinnon. I will not return with Alasdair to Skye. I want to stay with Drostan. The last truth made Lia swallow hard. Would he let her stay on Wolf Isle after finding out that Iain MacLeod was her brother? Iain, the monster, who'd tried to help a pirate abduct the lovely Lady Lark and all her sisters as well as Eliza and her sweet charges. Iain's dark blood ran through Lia's own veins. It was a wonder that anyone would want her.

Lia swallowed, her lips parting to suck in the cool spring air. "I cannot marry you, Chief Mackinnon." The words popped from her lips, sounding over the crunch of their shoes in the bailey before Aros Castle. Her voice was strong and even, and she waited to see what would come forth next. As if she were watching some tragic play.

Brodie patted her hand. "I think once ye get to know me, lass, ye'll change your mind."

"And ye will do what ye're told," Alasdair said.

"I did not sign the betrothal contract," Lia said, her voice even, emotionless.

They followed Tor and Adam into the entryway. "The contract has already been signed by Chief Mackinnon and me," Alasdair said. She could hear the undercurrent of threat. He was willing her to keep her mouth shut and do what he ordered, follow his dictates without a mind of her own. Like back at Dunvegan Castle on Skye.

She'd been a prisoner there behind its walls after her mother died. Alasdair, and Iain when he was alive, had dictated her

every movement. Refusal meant pain. She swallowed hard.

The party emerged into the Great Hall where Ladies Ava, Grace, and Meg stood. Meg clasped her hands before her, worry on her face. Although the flames from the lit hearth gave off heat in the room, prickles of cold chilled Lia's bones. *Be brave.*

Lia turned to Brodie. "Chief MacKinnon, I apologize for you journeying here to learn that I cannot marry you."

Alasdair raised his voice behind her, the tone like a steel blade that he used to cow her as he railed at her at Dunvegan. "Ye will mar—"

"The contract is broken," Lia said. "I am not a virgin."

Everyone in the room seemed frozen in time's grasp. In fact, Lia wondered, as stars flashed in her periphery, if her words had frozen time itself. But then she inhaled, and the rush of blood through her ears ebbed enough that she could hear the crackle of the flames in the grate and Meg's murmured prayer.

Alasdair moved first, grabbing her arm in such a pinch that she nearly cried out. "I had ye checked by a midwife on Skye."

She wouldn't look at her brother or anyone except the far kinder eyes of Chief Mackinnon. "I apologize, milord, but I am no longer a maid and therefore unsuitable to be your wife."

Alasdair whipped her around to face him, and she heard her shoulder pop as he yanked her arm. His skin up his neck and into his cheeks were red with fierce emotion. His teeth stacked, clenching on top of each other. "Ye whore." He drew back his hand to slap her.

Maybe she deserved the punishment for tricking Drostan, but self-preservation won out quickly. *Dodge the blow.*

Lia let her legs buckle, dropping to the floor as Alasdair's hand swung. Her hands grasped the sides of her head, and all hell broke loose above her. At least four men yelled and possibly Lady Ava. Drostan leaped forward, his full weight shoving into Alasdair. He caught Alasdair's hand that was balled like a fist instead of open like a slap. He'd meant to fell

Lia, knocking her with a blow that might have broken her jaw, nose, or eye socket.

Keir had grabbed Brodie, but the Mackinnon chief shoved his friend's hands away, cursing at him as he watched the scuffle, looking ready to jump in. The two Maclean hounds barked, running around the group, trying to figure out who their master considered the enemy. Tor yelled for everyone to stop and for Drostan to step away from Alasdair who was lying spread out on the ground. None of the other Macquaries had pulled their swords, but they all stood around Alasdair, fists ready to aid Drostan if needed.

Pushing her way through the press of men, Lady Ava crouched before Lia. "Come with me," she said, her voice commanding but not unkind. She was amazingly strong as she lifted under Lia's arms, helping her rise. Drostan dipped down to help.

"Thank you," Ava said, "but I've got her. You make sure no one, including yourself, starts any more violence in *my* hall." She narrowed eyes at him, then at Brodie, and finally at Alasdair as he rose from the floor, brushing the dirt from his cloak.

Drostan nodded but still helped Lia stand. Their gazes met for a moment, and she let the tears swell forth despite blinking them back. His face, blurred from her tears, was tight with fierceness. Was he angry she hadn't told him who she was? That her younger brother was the monster they'd killed? And her older brother was a devil who controlled armies?

"I'll see ye hang," Alasdair yelled, and Lia wasn't sure if he meant Drostan or her. *Either way, I'm dead.* The thought of Drostan being tortured because of her twisted so hard in her stomach that she thought she might vomit again.

But Lady Ava led her briskly and forcefully to a seat by the hearth. "Sit," Ava said. Grace dragged a chair next to Lia and sat in it like a sentry, saying nothing but watching her husband, Keir, who was talking briskly to Brodie Mackinnon. Her hand patted Lia's folded ones.

Meg appeared with a cup, putting it into Lia's hand. "Some

light wine,” she said, her lips pursed but her eyes worried. Did she think Lia a whore? Was it condemnation she saw in the sweet woman’s wide-eyed face?

“Was it ye?” Alasdair yelled at Drostan. “Did ye fok my sister?”

The crude words, said before all these people, made Lia want to shrivel up into a dry husk to be blown away by the wind.

“A foking Macquarie?” Alasdair continued, all semblance of dignity gone as spittle flew from his lips. Tor held him back from Drostan who stood between Alasdair and Brodie. Adam’s hand anchored Drostan’s shoulder.

“Which one of ye?” Alasdair’s glare was lethal enough to slaughter all five brothers.

Lia saw Callum step closer, and for the briefest moment she was horrified that they’d all take responsibility like they had for killing Iain. Wouldn’t she look the whore then!

“Alasdair,” she called, hoping to override anything that might be said. “Brother.” But he ignored her, centering his heated gaze on Drostan.

“I will see your meager clan wiped off this earth and sent to Hell,” Alasdair said, his words as firm as an oath.

“No!” Lia yelled out. She couldn’t let Drostan take the brunt. Nor his clan who’d taken her in. “’Twas—”

“Me,” Drostan said before she could come up with a suitable lie. “My brothers had no knowledge of our indiscretion.”

Alasdair struggled to leap forward, but Tor kept him back. “Macquaries killed my brother, Iain, and dishonored my sister. I demand your lands forfeited for your crimes and your necks choked with a noose.”

“Your brother helped a pirate abduct my wife,” Adam said, his fists at the ready. “He died while trying to kill us when we rescued them.”

Beck’s face was sharp with focus as he met Alasdair’s wild

gaze. “Your brother was a greedy man without heart, sense, or a conscience, willing to barter the bodies and lives of lasses to steal our isle.”

Brodie looked at Keir, and Keir nodded once. It seemed the Mackinnon chief trusted the fierce warrior. Brodie Mackinnon’s face darkened. He turned to Alasdair. “I would not align myself with a clan led by such wickedness.”

Alasdair seemed to collect himself at the man’s words. “I had no idea what Iain was about. If what they say is even true.”

“’Tis true,” Ava said loudly. “I treated the women myself, one of them close to giving birth. They each talked of Iain MacLeod’s viciousness and association with Claude Jandeau, the French pirate.”

Grace rose from her seat. “Your brother had no care for the women he carelessly traded to Jandeau so the pirate would help kill the Macquaries. They both planned to take their ancestral isle.” She shook her head, firm and furious despite her kind countenance. “If he hadn’t been killed in battle, he would have hanged.”

Alasdair didn’t look convinced, but he kept his opinion locked behind thin, tight lips. He looked to Tor. “I will take my sister and depart for Skye.”

“Nay,” Drostan said.

Panic climbed up from Lia’s gut again. As soon as Alasdair got her alone, he’d deliver pain in so many ways. Her life, for however long he allowed it, would be full of emotional and physical torture.

Lia stood. “Send me to a convent if you must, but I will not return to Skye with you, brother. Else let me remain here with these people. If I am a whore, I am no good to you any longer.”

“Ye are not a whore,” Drostan said, shaking his head. His breath came out in a gust, and he met her gaze. “Lia can stay with me as my wife.”

• • •

Drostan held himself rigid, staring at the lovely woman across the hall. All he wanted to do was carry her to safety and hold her until she didn't look so overcome with dread. She was Amelia MacLeod, sister to his enemy. No wonder she'd run away, looking for Grissell where she could be safe from a monster of a brother who still lived, dictating her life as if she were a pawn on a chess table. No wonder she'd been terse when discovering he was a Macquarie, especially one who would rescue her instead of being the murderer she'd been told.

She would have known going to Grissell's for help would put her in Macquarie territory. Why would she have risked living on the same isle as her brother's killers? *She hadn't any other option*, he thought.

None of that mattered right now. All Drostan knew was that he couldn't let Alasdair sweep Lia away, no matter how he felt about marriage. Alasdair was a monster who'd had her checked for virginity and still planned to marry her off to Brodie Mackinnon despite her being desperate enough to run away from the safety of her clan. No man in good conscience could allow that to happen.

Lia's gaze raised to his. "Wife?"

"Aye," Drostan said. "Will ye marry—"

"Nay!" Alasdair yelled, leaping toward Drostan again. This time Keir restrained him, his strength wrapping around the out-of-control chief's arms. "Ye've stolen my brother. I will not have ye steal my sister as well. I'd rather see her dead."

Lady Ava held her hands out as if she were trying to stop two bears about to attack one another. "Lia is ill, and you, Chief MacLeod, are not thinking straight. Everyone needs time to calm down and consider options."

"Aye," Tor said and looked to his wife. "Take Lia upstairs to lie down."

"She can come to my bedchamber," Meg said, standing.

“Oh my,” came a voice from the entryway. “Am I missing a party?”

Cecilia strode in with a beaming smile, a basket on her arm as if she were going to market. Instead, she walked into a room swollen with accusations, judgment, and fury. Not that she seemed to care. Cecilia loved drama, especially the type she could gossip about later.

“I was...” Meg started to say, her eyes wide. “We ladies are going above.”

Cecilia walked amongst the large men, scowls on every face. She turned in a circle between Drostan, Brodie, and a restrained Alasdair. “My... It seems we are at war here in the Great Hall of Aros.”

Lady Ava tugged Cecilia out from between the bears who might tear into each other at any moment. “Come along, Cecilia, and keep your words behind your lips.”

Grace led Lia after Ava who towed Cecilia. Meg came along Lia’s other side, the five women disappearing above.

With the ladies out of the fray, Drostan shrugged off Adam’s hand and looked pointedly at Brodie. “She will not marry ye. She ran away so as not to be forced.”

“I knew nothing of that,” Brodie said, frowning at Alasdair.

Keir finally released Lia’s brother, and Alasdair tugged his tunic back into place. “’Tis within my right as her brother and guardian to see my sister wed to a strong man with many resources. I guarded her well. It wasn’t until she reached Wolf Isle that she lost her maidenhead.”

“I will marry her,” Drostan said again. “Unless she refuses me.”

“If she’s not with child,” Callum added behind him. “If she is, then she must marry Drostan.”

“I will see her dead before I allow that to happen,” Alasdair said, his lips pulled back.

“Enough,” Tor said.

Alasdair glared at Drostan over Keir's shoulder. "We leave at high tide."

"That will be in the middle of the night," Tor said. "Ye'll have to wait."

"I'll stay on Mull until this is resolved," Drostan said.

"We all will," Adam added.

"Chief Mackinnon and I will leave, with Lia, on the morrow," Alasdair said. He still thought he could steal Lia away from here, from him.

Drostan took two steps forward. Only Keir's chest kept him from holding his fist before Alasdair's straight nose as he spoke. Drostan leaned around the Devil of Dunakin. "And I will see ye dead before I allow that to happen." Because Drostan wouldn't be able to live knowing Lia was forced into a despised marriage or tortured, and perhaps killed, by her cruel brother. If she was prepared to go to a nunnery instead, she might find life in his arms, even without children, to be better.

Drostan's sworn bachelorhood, his detailed plans for his solitary life, were in certain jeopardy. But that was nothing compared to the rending of his heart at the thought of Lia's absence from his life. He was torn, but he knew that he could not live without a heart.

Chapter Fifteen

Time both flew by and dragged on as the day progressed. Lia forced herself to lie on Meg's soft bed. The midday meal of roast chicken pie was brought up by one of Aros Castle's maids. Cecilia paced about Meg's room even after Meg said she could leave.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Her steps only paused as she turned at the window or when she whispered into Meg's ear. 'Twas as if everyone remained quiet to try to hear what was going on below despite there being wood and stone between them.

"If you are going to walk continually," Lia said from her side facing the women in the room, "please remove your shoes."

"Oh." Cecilia looked down at her satin slippers. "Are they bothering you?"

Why was the horrid woman even there? "Yes," Lia snapped. She would demand Cecilia leave, but Lia was a guest here, and a ruined guest who'd been called a whore before them all.

Lia looked toward the door. *Oh Drostan*. He'd said he would marry her, but he must be so angry that she hadn't told him she was related to such a vicious, powerful chief. Alasdair was her legal guardian. What could she do?

Lia hid her face in the pillow. She could hear Cecilia and Meg whispering in the corner and tried not to believe that they were whispering about her ruin. Instead, she retreated to what gave her comfort—making a list.

She outlined reasons she didn't regret tugging Drostan Macquarie.

Reason one: there are other women in the world who married without being virgins.

Reason two: I wouldn't trade my time in Drostan's arms for Alasdair's alliance with the Mackinnons. Or any clan. The

passion they'd shared together had been filled with respect, kindness, giving, and explosive desire. Things every woman should experience at least once before she died.

In her mind, Lia jotted her points on a parchment. Perhaps she could use a sheaf from the small pile she saw on Meg's desk by the window. She opened her eyes, but her gaze went to the two women.

Cecilia's hands snapped about in the air, her face red, as she whispered continually at Meg. Meg's lips were tight, and she looked over to the bed as if feeling Lia's gaze. Instead of giving her a sympathetic smile, her brows lowered, and she walked over.

Meg sat on the edge of the bed, and Lia pushed up onto her elbow, lifting to sit against the headboard. "Your brother is harsh?" Meg asked.

It was obvious the woman was puzzling something out. "Yes. More so since my father died, and he became chief."

"And he hates the Macquaries because they beheaded your younger brother?"

"Yes, although Alasdair was trying to get Iain to leave Skye, find a place of his own, and Iain decided on Wolf Isle. So, Alasdair wanted the Macquaries to abandon their isle or die out before Iain was killed."

"Killed for abducting women and children and trying to steal an ancestral isle," Cecilia said, her words vicious.

"I..." Lia hesitated. "I did not know all of that until I came here and spoke with Muriel on Wolf Isle."

"Muriel was the pregnant woman that had to be rescued from Jandeau's ship," Meg murmured as if she were still thinking hard. She met Lia's eyes. "And you came here because...?"

Lia's lips parted but she held the words inside. "Captain Gordon's ship sailed south so I bought passage. It came to Mull, and I learned about Grissell taking in lasses." None of that was untrue, but Lia's cheeks heated anyway.

Meg exhaled as if she were annoyed but not necessarily at Lia. “And you ...joined with Drostan Macquarie. In bed.”

It wasn't a question, but Meg seemed to wait for an answer, so Lia nodded.

“Why?” Cecilia asked, pacing closer. “Why sleep with Drostan?”

“I... He kissed me, and I...I like him.”

“And you wanted to get out of the betrothal contract with Chief Mackinnon,” Meg finished.

Lia nodded, feeling rather mouse-like again. “Yes.”

“And you didn't think about how your brother might seek revenge,” Cecilia said.

Lia felt tears gathering behind her eyes, but she wouldn't show them to this bitter woman. Lia had been so strong and ready to take on the world and carve a new life for herself when she set out, and yet now she felt weak and impotent like she had at Dunvegan. But now she also felt the fool. “I'd hoped my brother wouldn't find me.”

Cecilia snorted, rolling her eyes. Meg sighed with what sounded like resignation. “But now he's here,” she whispered. “And he wants to take you back to Skye, and I can't think of a way to legally sever his control over you.”

Lia placed her hand over Meg's and met her gaze. “I can't go home with him, Meg. I know what will happen.”

“What?” Meg whispered.

“He will tie me to the whipping post in the bailey and flay me.” She needed to convince the young woman to help her escape her fate. She squeezed Meg's hand. “My brother will leave me for dead for giving my virginity to a Macquarie.”

...

Drostan rubbed a hand down his bristled jaw. He hadn't bothered to shave after rising at dawn from the pallet in Aunt Ida's cottage to head back over to Aros Castle. High tide was

late morning, and he wasn't about to miss rescuing Lia from sailing to Skye. He'd climb aboard and hide if he must.

The fear he'd seen in her eyes, not to mention her retching, had twisted around his gut like a rusted coil of wire. She'd instantly lost all traces of the strong, brave woman Drostan had come to know. He knew Alasdair had exposed Lia to his orgies and had her virginity checked. That was horrid enough, but the fear he saw said she also feared for her life. 'Twas as if her brother had murdered her strength and courage, leaving only a pale, hesitant, abused child.

Drostan would rescue her again and take her away somewhere, at least until Alasdair gave up looking for her. Drostan had talked with his brothers well into the night about it, Ida pattering around behind them, only offering an occasional snort or shake of her head. All five brothers had slept on the same pallets in her house that they'd used growing up. Ida was sour, but Drostan thought she liked the company. She sent him on his way with fresh baked bread and cheese, which he forced himself to consume. He needed strength and didn't know if this would be his last meal for a while if he ended up hiding in the hull of the Mackinnon ship.

As he waited in the empty Great Hall of Aros Castle, one by one, Drostan's brothers walked inside, Beck being last and still looking blurry eyed. Adam stopped beside Drostan. "Did ye check the docks first?"

Drostan nodded. "The crew are checking the lines, but there was no sign of Alasdair MacLeod or Brodie Mackinnon. The mate said they were still up here."

Adam nodded and poured some ale from the sideboard.

Voices from a back corridor heralded Tor and Keir with their wives. Grace's hand moved as she spoke. "I've only known Brodie to be honorable, except years ago when he was trying to help Keir drag me up to Skye." Grace smiled fondly at her brusque husband.

Keir lifted their clasped hands to his mouth and kissed it. "I was right to give him my claim to the clan's leadership," Keir said. "I don't think we could have been happier than we are

here.”

Drostan was already standing, and he walked forward to meet the small group. “Brodie Mackinnon is honorable but will only wed a virgin?” he asked, his words terse. “Did he demand Lia be checked by the midwife?”

“Good morn, Drostan,” Lady Ava said, giving him a slight frown. “That is what one usually says upon greeting.”

Drostan bowed to her. “Good morn, Lady Ava, Lady Grace.”

Keir’s face held his normal frown, but the set of his brows showed his annoyance. “Brodie says he didn’t request the checking,” Keir said. “He’s looking for a young wife, and it was easiest to ask for a maiden.”

“So, it makes him look like someone requiring a pious, biddable woman instead of an old man looking to wed a lass half his age?” Drostan asked.

Adam huffed. “Pull back, brother. Let them break their fast.”

Drostan raked his nails through his hair. “Pardon. I’m... worried. I won’t let him take her away against her will.”

“We don’t want to see the woman gagged and offered to Brodie without any say, either,” said Lady Ava.

Drostan kept his mouth shut so the two couples could sit at the long table. He walked to the hearth but continued to watch the stairs for Lia. If Brodie hadn’t asked for Lia’s virginity to be checked, would he still wed her without her being a maiden?

Beck handed him a mug of weak ale and spoke low. “Ye look like ye want to kill someone.”

“I’ll start with Alasdair,” Drostan said, taking a drink.

Beck studied him. “Do ye just feel responsible for her safety?”

“’Tis more than that.”

Beck rubbed his jawline. “So...she’s truly important to ye? More than an enthusiastic beauty in yer bed?”

Was she? Drostan released a full exhale. “Aye.” When had that happened?

Lia was like a siren to him. His blood stirred whenever she was near, but even beyond the inferno of physical attraction between them, Drostan was drawn. Courage gave her the strength to run from the abuse she suffered and an unwanted marriage. Practiced talent allowed her to defend herself in the alley. Kindness made her champion the kitten. And she was funny. Her nose scrunching up when something distasteful confronted her, which had been Drostan before the night in his barn. Even her sneezes, which were loud and free of the little chirped *achoo* some ladies allowed, were full of boisterous honesty. He liked them, because it showed she wasn’t trying to hide her humanity, never belching or sneezing.

Drostan nodded and looked at his brother. “Lia is important to me.”

“And ye haven’t changed yer mind in the light of morning? Ye still want to wed her?” Beck said.

“Aye.”

“Even if ye don’t have to?”

Drostan didn’t answer because Lia stepped in from the alcove housing the spiral staircase, and his heart sped as if readying for battle. Her face was pale but unbruised. Alasdair’s fist would have broken bones if Drostan hadn’t jumped in to block it flying toward her face. Imagining the damage the MacLeod chief could inflict made Drostan’s fists clench and his jaw ache. He forced himself to breathe evenly.

Lia was dressed in a simple gown of pale blue wool, the lace edging of her white smock fringed along the neckline that stretched across her collarbone. Her gaze sought his, and there was a sorrowful look in her eyes. It drew him, and he strode toward the table at an intersecting line. Was she accepting her horrible fate?

Meg and Cecilia walked with her like attendants. As if she were a leashed dog, Alasdair followed directly behind the three ladies with Brodie Mackinnon. To hell with letting them

eat peacefully. Lia didn't look like she'd eat anything anyway.

"My offer still stands," Drostan said. "I ask for Lia MacLeod's hand in marriage. No dowry is desired."

Alasdair cast him a disgusted look, eyes narrowed and lips pulled back. "And my denial still stands. Lia will marry Chief Mackinnon or come home with me, her legal guardian."

"If the lass agrees, I will still wed her," Brodie said.

"She doesn't agree," Drostan said. "She ran away to get out of wedding ye."

Lady Ava escorted Lia to the table and motioned for her to sit. Food was slid before her, but as Drostan expected, she didn't eat.

"She does agree," said Alasdair, walking up behind Lia to place a hand on her shoulder, his finger extending to the bare skin of her neck.

"I would hear it from her," Drostan said. "And with ye not touching her. In fact, ye should be far away from her so there's no threat of ye breaking her jaw like ye meant to do yesterday."

"Ye foking bastard," Alasdair said, stepping back, his hand going to his sword. "Why don't we step outdoors so as not to drench Lady Ava's Great Hall in your blood?"

Meg gasped, her hand going to her mouth. Cecilia stood beside her, tugging her skirt. "You have to say something," Cecilia said.

Beck whispered to Drostan, his lips barely moving, "Alasdair MacLeod is a renowned swordsman."

Alasdair smiled. "I kill ye and Lia returns with me without any fuss."

"No," Lia said, rising to turn toward her brother. "Don't fight." It sounded like desperate resignation, as if she threw herself between him and a shot to save his life with hers.

"Marry me, Lia," Drostan said. "Stay with me where ye'll be safe." Should he say he loved her? Did he? Everything was

happening too fast, but he must convince her to stay with him. "I...I love ye, lass." The words stuttered out of him, making him sound like a lovesick swain. He stood taller. "And I will fight to the death to save ye."

Lia stared at him, acceptance warring with hope in the shine of her eyes.

"If you're not going to say something, then I am." Cecilia's words cut through the tension around them. "I won't let Drostan sacrifice his life."

"Say what, Meg?" Tor asked. "Speak up if you have anything that pertains to this bloody mess."

"I..." Meg's face was tight with worry. She scratched her forehead and then withdrew a piece of paper from her pocket. "I found this in the library hearth the morning after Beltane." Meg's cheeks reddened. "I didn't say anything because...well, it was thrown away, but..." Her face was full of embarrassment and worry.

Cecilia snatched the note from Meg's hand. When she unfolded it, Drostan saw the edges were singed. He glanced at Lia. Her shoulders had risen stiffly, and her hands clenched together before her on the tabletop.

Cecilia's voice boomed with well-honed theatrics. "It has two names on it. Cecilia and Amelia, and the Lia part is underlined on both. Then there's a list. One. Go to Wolf Isle and stay with Grissell. Two. Seduce Drostan Macquarie."

Drostan's breath lurched to a halt inside his chest. All gazes were on Cecilia as she continued but his slid to Lia. She looked straight ahead at the wall across the hall, her face pale as moonlight, her chest still as if she held her breath.

"Three," Cecilia continued. "Get him alone, maybe drunk on whisky." Her voice came louder. "Four. Bed Drostan Macquarie." Pausing, she glanced about the room. "Many times." Her brows rose as if she were reading a story now, and she looked back to the paper. "Five. Leave Wolf Isle and birth a bastard." She glanced up, her gaze going to Drostan. "And the last item on the list. Six. Destroy the Macquarie Clan."

Chapter Sixteen

Lia's heart stopped, or at least she wished it had. The pain in her chest was enough to kill her, but unfortunately, she wasn't dropping to the floor. Instead, she found that she'd stood, leaning against the table, letting the wooden edge hold her upright.

The list had survived, the damning list she'd jotted down her first night on Mull to justify why she'd kissed Drostan Macquarie. It was supposed to be burned to ash. She'd thrown it in the hearth on her way out of the library, following a happily chatting young woman to a comfortable bed.

You damned fool.

She'd been drunk and apparently missed the flames, forgetting about the list entirely as if she'd never touched quill to paper.

Meg dashed over to Lia, and for a second, Lia wondered if the sweet-natured girl would strike her. But Meg hugged her, her lips at her ear. "This way your brother won't kill you. You were trying to destroy his enemy by sleeping with Drostan."

Even with the evidence of Lia's duplicity, Meg Maclean was kind. The young woman backed up, retreating to the table. Tears stung the back of Lia's eyes.

Cecilia waved the damning list. "So, you can see, Drostan, there is no reason for you to risk your life trying to keep or, heaven forbid, marry this...woman. You can remain solitary." She said the word "woman" as if she'd contemplated another word like whore or liar or vengeful bitch.

Adam took the paper from Cecilia's hand, reading down it before looking to Drostan. Adam gave Drostan a slight nod. Without even a parting look, Drostan turned away, striding toward the door.

As if her heart had finally stopped, Lia's knees buckled, and she dropped straight down to the cold, hard floor. The pain of her arms hitting the edge of the table as she fell faded as

darkness flooded her.

...

Drostan's stride ate up the hill as he trudged. *Destroy the Macquarie Clan*. If Adam hadn't confirmed it was authentic, Drostan wouldn't have believed it. He might still have thought it was fabricated, but he'd been watching Lia. Face white, brows pinched, lips parted in a look of pain... The list was truly Lia's.

"Bloody foking hell," he roared, his voice startling a small group of grazing sheep that ran toward the tree line to avoid him. He'd said before his brothers and Alasdair MacLeod that he loved her. *I'm a goddamn idiot!*

Cecilia had been only too happy to pronounce it before everyone. At least Meg appeared sorry for it all. He hadn't even looked at the devil, knowing Alasdair would have smiled in triumphant gloating. Even now he was probably laughing over Drostan's stupidity while ordering Lia down to Brodie Mackinnon's waiting ship.

What a jest on her that Drostan had made certain he couldn't father children by tugging on the knife and climbing the willow tree. Even though they'd come together four times... He rubbed both hands down his face as if he wished he could slough it off. Four glorious times. During those times Lia had been honest, showing her pleasure openly and generously. But her list explained why a virgin would act on her heated dream. "'Twas all part of her plan," he seethed.

He paused on the hill, his gaze staring down at the green grass and early bluebell flowers before him. "She didn't come here to find Grissell." *Why do you have to be a Macquarie? I don't want you to die*. Her drunken words in the library beat in his head with the thudding of his heart. It had been moments before he kissed her, the two of them already feeling drawn to one another.

"Daingead!" He slapped a low branch of a tree he passed, and newly unfurled leaves flew off. How could he have been so foolish? How could he have believed her? He continued

trudging up the hill. *What other lies did she tell me?*

He huffed. Actually, she hadn't lied. She hadn't told him anything, and he hadn't pushed, thinking she was tormented by memories of home. *She was. She is.*

Drostan let out a growl and turned around, his gaze sliding down the meadow to the village and castle beyond. The fear he'd seen etched on Lia's pale face when she was led below this morn was real. And there had been remorse, even before Meg had produced the foul list from her pocket. He shook his head as if flinging off the concern and spun around.

"Are ye coming to visit or not?" Ida stood before her cottage door, and Drostan realized he'd trudged there without thought.

He was suddenly weary. Ida was sour, which matched his mood. "I've been deceived and made the fool."

She came over, her face softening, and weaved her arm through his to lead him toward her cottage. He must look pitiful, because it was the kindest she'd ever been to him or anyone. "Och, but lad. I certainly know how that feels. Whisky will help."

It wouldn't help. There was no help for having your pride ripped out of your chest, flung on the ground, and stomped on. But he'd take some whisky anyway. It would help when his brothers came to find him. It would help numb the pain of knowing Lia was sailing away from him. Forever.

...

Lia stood at the rail of Brodie Mackinnon's ship. Meg and Lady Ava had accompanied Tor and Keir to see them off. Meg had squeezed her hand. "You'll be safe now," was all Meg said to her as if she were trying to convince herself that revealing the terrible note had been the right thing to do.

Lia couldn't fault her. After all, Lia *had* written the horrid list. *Damn whisky.* Lia could fault Cecilia though. In fact, she hated her. The gloating smile added to the nausea that threatened to spill Lia's stomach again.

Drostan's brothers had filed out of Aros Castle right after Drostan while Alasdair laughed. Her horrible brother had stepped over to Lia, lifted her off the floor, and wrapped his arms around her, squeezing her. "Ye little schemer," he'd said proudly. He lowered her and had the audacity to pat her rolling stomach. "Let's hope ye have a wee bastard taking root in there."

"Ye should wear a wrap." Brodie Mackinnon's words brought Lia back to the deep sea beneath her. He laid a woolen cape around her shoulders as they stood at the rail, watching the men throw the lines off. "My men can handle the pulling away, but I need to get back soon to the helmsman to set our course." She was too numb to respond.

He leaned his back against the rail, and she could feel him studying her face. "Ye surprise me, Lady Amelia. I didn't take ye to be someone so vindictive."

Did that make her attractive to him? It didn't matter. Her heart was dying. Tears ran down her cheeks, but she kept them turned to the wind. She would never love anyone, not after Drostan. He'd said he loved her, and she'd heard the uncertainty in his voice. But the word had felt good. Love? Was that why she felt so wretched? Had she begun to love Drostan? The word felt like a knife, twisting in her chest so she couldn't speak.

"If ye aren't with Drostan's child, I'll still marry ye," Brodie said as if discussing a pallet of wool that might or might not have been tainted with bugs. "I think living as my wife might be preferable to living under Alasdair's thumb." His hand touched her wrist, making her jump. He tutted at the bruise around it that Alasdair had caused when he'd yanked her yesterday, and he slid his thumb over the circular brand. "I'm not heavy-handed." There was anger in his voice, but not enough to convince Lia that he'd never raise a hand to her once she married him.

"Captain, sir," a man from the foredeck called.

"Pardon," Brodie said and turned, striding away.

Lia shivered despite the heavy wool around her shoulders.

She watched the dock as they pulled away, but there was no sign of Drostan nor any Macquarie. She hadn't even been able to say farewell to the ladies and children on Wolf Isle. Her inhale stuttered. "Sia," she whispered, and a new wave of tears washed down her cheeks. She'd never see her kitten again.

Meg raised her hand from where she stood next to her mother, but Lia couldn't bring herself to respond, and turned her watery eyes to the vast sea cradling the ship. She remained there at the rail as the Isle of Mull withdrew. Her gaze scanned the shore of Wolf Isle, but it remained vacant and silent.

As they rounded the southern side, Lia's gaze caught on a lone figure standing on the rocks. A woman, her hair long and white, watched her sail away. Grissell didn't wave, only watched, and a shiver ran down through Lia as if she'd been stripped bare. She remained at the rail as they rounded Wolf Isle, the trees on the western side hiding the beautifully wrought cabin that she knew sat there engulfed in quiet and peace. And then the isle fell behind them as she sailed away.

The hour, standing at the rail clutching the cape before her, turned into hours until Lia's legs ached as badly as her chest. She breathed in the salt air and mist as they sailed between the isles northward toward the Isle of Skye. Where she would wait to see if her monthly courses came. If they did, Brodie would marry her, and their marriage would form an alliance between the MacLeods and Mackinnons. Her sacrifice would create harmony between two large clans. Even though it was a selfless brokerage for peace, Lia felt sick at the thought. Cold and sick would be her way of life.

If she didn't get her courses... If she were pregnant... Would the curse really doom the Macquarie Clan if she didn't marry Drostan? Alastair would never let her out of his sight then. She swallowed hard, blinking. Could she live with the guilt if terrible things happened to the family that had welcomed her into their home? Lark and her son John. Muriel and wee Lark. Eliza and Beck's unborn bairn. Pip, Hester, Aggie, and all the lasses at Grissell's? Would they all be in jeopardy?

Exhaustion pulled on Lia, making her sway with the ship.

She closed her eyes, her cold fingers dropping to wrap around the polished wood rail. How easy it would be to fall overboard. Would God damn her for letting it happen? For not fighting against the cold water sucking her down into its depths?

Her hand slid to her abdomen. If there was life starting there, she couldn't doom it by forfeiting her life. If there was a bairn within her, she would get back to Drostan somehow. "I swear it," she whispered, the wind drying the tears on her cheeks.

...

"Bloody fok. She must be pregnant," Callum said next to Drostan as they stood before the willow tree in Gylin's bailey. All five Macquarie brothers stood in a half circle around the oracle of their clan's fate.

Adam moved closer to the wilted leaves, catching one dancing limb to study. "They don't look healthy."

Drostan's stomach, which was already sour from regret and loss, twisted into a ball of pain. He rubbed a fist against it. "If the legends are true enough to affect the leaves, then they must be true enough that one who touches the knife and tries to injure the tree will be barren. I cannot father a bastard if I'm barren." He walked over to the tree and tugged on the protruding dagger for good measure.

"Then how do ye explain the leaves dying?" Callum yelled. Drostan's twin judged him harder than any of his brothers.

"They aren't dying," Drostan said, catching a limb and holding the little green leaf up to his face. "They are curling a bit."

Eagan caught one, too. "There's a bit of brown on the edges."

Beck didn't touch a limb but studied the branch his oldest brother held. He'd do nothing to jeopardize the bairn growing inside Eliza.

Beck turned his face to Adam. “Do we evacuate the isle?”

“Daingead,” Drostan murmured and caught the back of his neck with his two hands, rubbing at the knot there. Despite his attempts, he was dooming his clan exactly like Aunt Ida had predicted.

“’Tis up to each family to decide,” Adam said.

Drostan gestured at the path leading to Ormaig. “Are ye planning to go around to each cottage door and say ‘Pardon me, but Drostan may have gotten a lass pregnant and now the willow’s leaves are turning brown, so ye might want to leave Wolf Isle before your family starts dying.’ Is that what ye’re going to say?”

“That sounds about right,” Callum answered, crossing his arms and stuffing his fists in his armpits.

Drostan glared at him. “I tell ye, my seed is barren. I even took an axe to the trunk of the willow, hacked at it.”

“We should talk to Grissell,” Beck said, stepping out of the way of a dancing limb as if it were a serpent bent on striking.

“Fok,” Drostan cursed, remembering the old woman in the mist the night he’d come out to attack the tree, after he’d been with Lia again. “Grissell told me...” He hesitated.

“Ye already spoke to her?” Adam asked.

“She walks at night with her cats,” Drostan said, realizing as the words came out how strange they sounded. He shook his head. “One night she came up to the bars when I was out here. She saw me trying to take the dagger out.”

“Ye could have told us,” Callum yelled.

“Hold yer tongue, Cal,” Beck said. “What did Grissell say?”

Drostan paced, his heart racing. “Something about not being able to trick the curse.”

“Well, shite,” Callum said, kicking a rock. Drostan watched it shoot across the bailey all the way to the doors of the keep. “Anna’s pregnant,” Callum said, and they all looked his way.

Drostan felt heat radiating up his neck. Would he cause the

death of unborn children? Or would his brothers think he was the cause if things went wrong, even the slightest bit?

“We weren’t going to tell anyone for a while,” Callum said. “But...” He indicated the tree. “I’m taking her to Aunt Ida’s until we figure things out.”

The rapid crunch of pebbles made them look toward the raised portcullis where Rabbie came running in. “I checked with the Ormaig farmers. One says a ewe is spewing in the field.”

One ewe vomiting didn’t mean much on a normal day, but this was definitely not a normal day.

The door of the keep swung open, and Lark ran out holding John. “He has a fever,” she yelled as she hurried to Adam. “Out of nowhere.” She looked at the tree but didn’t gasp. Adam must have already told her about Lia and the mess that Drostan had made.

Drostan’s biggest nightmare was coming true. He’d doomed his clan.

“I already have our things packed,” Lark said, glancing between Adam and Callum. “Anna and I are going to Aros Castle. Lady Ava will help us find accommodations if Aunt Ida doesn’t want to be overrun.”

Drostan walked up to her. “Lark...I am—”

“Sorry,” she finished, desperate worry tainting her eyes. “I know. We all make mistakes, brother. Ye need to fix yours quickly.” The last came out with firm rebuke that made his cheeks burn.

“I will.” He didn’t know how, but, somehow, he’d fix what he’d done. He looked to Adam, but he was already carrying John down toward the ferry where he’d personally take them across.

Beck turned to jog out the gate. “Don’t leave without us. I’m fetching Eliza and the girls. We will stay with Alice and Gavin on Mull.” He turned to race down toward the village.

Callum wrapped his arm around Anna’s shoulder, guiding

her after Adam and Lark. Only Eagan remained in the bailey with Drostan.

“Bloody hell,” Eagan said, looking at him. He rubbed his jaw. “What are ye going to do?”

He pulled in a long breath full of determination. It was the first full inhale since Cecilia had started speaking in Aros Castle’s Great Hall. Before everything he thought was true was yanked out from under his feet, knocking him on his arse in front of everyone. Because now he had a reason for risking everything to go after Lia. Not because he was a heartsick fool, but because he must save his clan. And if he’d admit it, which he wouldn’t because everything was still too raw, he needed to find out the whole truth.

Had anything between Lia and him been real?

• • •

“I know those colors,” Brodie Mackinnon said, warning in his voice. He stood on the forecastle of the ship with Alasdair and Lia. She held onto the high deck’s rail, swaying with the waves under them. “’Tis a French ship,” Brodie said.

“Bloody hell,” Alasdair cursed under his breath. “Amelia’s possible pregnancy with a Macquarie bairn has twisted my plans.”

Lia’s gaze snapped to her brother. “You have plans with a French ship? Plans that include me?” Her mouth went dry.

Alasdair ignored her, speaking to Brodie. “I made a business plan with the captain and now I’ll have to change it. Perhaps he will be pleased with the turn of events.” Alasdair looked at Brodie. “The captain hates the Macquaries as much as me.” Her brother gave off an uncaring regard, but after years of watching him for signs of brewing violence, Lia knew he was worried by the way he plucked at the hair trimmed near his ears.

She looked out at the ship that was moored around the back side of an isle. Men scurried along the rails, spotting them. A tall figure stood at the helm, like a boulder as men washed like

a retreating tide around him. He was too far away to see clearly, but a shiver still crawled between her shoulder blades.

“Can ye swing alongside them?” Alasdair asked Brodie.

“Aye, but I’ll have the cannon ready. In case they decide they’d rather forgo business discussions.” Brodie turned to Lia. “Ye should go below and lock yourself in my cabin. I’d prefer them not to see ye.” Brodie held a finger out, counting under his breath. “He has thirty-eight cannons, but I have forty.”

He turned to Alasdair. “And don’t ye mention that she’s aboard.”

“He’s expecting me to have retrieved her,” Alasdair said.

Lia’s eyes opened wider. “I am part of this business deal?”

Alasdair’s hooded gaze slid to her, and she had the feeling that she was being examined by a snake. “Ye were until I found out ye might be with child by a Macquarie.” His words added more chill bumps to her arms, and her hands instinctively slid to her still-flat belly.

Brodie shoved Alasdair’s shoulder, spinning him back to him. “Ye were making plans to use my betrothed as part of a business deal?”

Alasdair threw Brodie’s hand off him and glared back. “The captain was supposed to meet me on Skye after I sent him a message that would say whether Amelia was found and dutifully wedded ye or if she refused.” He glanced toward her. “If she married ye, the captain would leave. If she refused, the captain has ammunitions and the like he wished to trade for her.”

Lia gasped softly, her hand going to her mouth. Her own brother was selling her. She dropped her hand. “And I thought Iain was the devil in the family,” she said, her lips curling up in disgust.

Alasdair stared hard at her. “And you’re the whore.” He gave a vicious smile. “What a bonny family we are.” He turned back around. “I’ll have to tell him there’s a delay by a month, until I know if she’s with child.”

“I will wed her if she’s with child or not,” Brodie said, glancing her way. The pity on his face pricked her anger. It was one thing to know her family was made of cruel schemers; it was another thing to have other clans know it.

Alasdair glanced back at her with a grin. “I wager she’ll run down the aisle to wed ye this time.”

“Approaching starboard,” a crewman at the bowsprit called.

“Go on now,” Brodie said, shooing her toward the ladder leading to the lower deck. He turned away when she moved to descend. His hands clasped together behind his back as he addressed Alasdair. “What is this captain’s name?”

Alasdair mimicked Brodie’s stance. “Jandeau. Claude Jandeau.”

Chapter Seventeen

Lia slammed the door of the captain's cabin and stared unseeing at the small room, her breaths coming in panicked draws as she held tightly to her bow, her mother's quiver slung over one shoulder. *Claude Jandeau? Captain Jandeau!* The same madman who had worked with Iain to steal Lark, Muriel, Eliza, and Anna.

She tried to shove a chest to wedge against the door, but it was bolted to the floor. Quiver awkwardly sliding off her shoulder, she shoved it back on and ran to the desk. She threw her bow on top to free up her hands, but the desk, too, didn't budge. All the furniture was bolted down to prevent shifting during a voyage. "Bloody hellfire!" She ran back to the door to make sure the thick oak bar she'd thrown over it was placed securely.

There were several portholes in the cabin to allow fresh air, and Lia ran to one through which she could see several men from the French ship swing across to Brodie's ship. None of them wore a uniform proclaiming their allegiance to France or any other country. They wore various jackets over sturdy trousers, their faces dirty and frowning. Lia's stomach lurched at the sight of swords, daggers, and a few pistols. These weren't businessmen; they were pirates.

One man, the tallest and cleanest, strode toward the ladder leading to the upper deck. A bright white tunic lay untied at his thick neck to show a deeply tanned, hairy chest. His long seamen's coat swung about the top of his shiny black boots as he walked with steady, powerful steps.

Lia ran to the porthole on the other side but couldn't see him. She could hear his boots clicking sharply on the wooden deck and then up the ladder. *That must be him.* The cruel stealer of women and children, rapist, murderer, thief. The pirate who'd escaped the noose on Tilbury Hill, the man who'd sworn revenge on the Macquarie brothers. Claude Jandeau.

She couldn't see him standing above her with Alasdair and Brodie, but she could prop the porthole open and listen while she stared at the ceiling.

"Well," said Alasdair with an air of annoyance, "I am delivering the message myself then since we came upon ye. I will be keeping my sister for a time to see if she is pregnant."

For a time?

"This is the man ye were going to give Amelia to?" Brodie asked, his voice nearly a yell.

"I must make a profit somewhere."

"What the fok kind of brother are ye?" Brodie shouted.

"One who is determined to keep Clan MacLeod strong on an isle with powerful rivals."

"I will take la mademoiselle if she is with child or not." The accent was French, but it wasn't thick, as if Jandeau had practiced hiding it for some time. "She fetches more gold if she is a virgin, but if she's beautiful she can bring a profit, and her child later."

"I will marry Amelia either way," Brodie said.

I want Drostan. The thought swelled through her, pushing tears from her eyes, which she rubbed away like a frightened child. Drostan, who'd walked away from her, who probably hated her. She realized he was the only man she wanted, might ever want.

"I'm keeping Amelia until I know if she is with child, because the child would be a Macquarie bastard." Alasdair sounded almost gleeful in his condescending way.

"Macquarie?" Jandeau said, the name coming out like the shot of an arrow. "Your sister whored about with a Macquarie pup? Which one? Or all of them?"

"Bloody hell, man," Brodie said. "Amelia is not a whore."

Someone snorted. Either Alasdair or Jandeau. Lia felt her cheeks heat, her cool hand going to one. She'd been wanton, yes, but only with Drostan. The two of them had been drawn

together from the very start.

“Drostan Macquarie,” Alasdair answered Jandeau. “And if she is with child and doesn’t marry him, their legend says the clan will die off.” He laughed. “Something I understand ye would be pleased with, too. Then I will take Wolf Isle. So ye see, Captain Jandeau, I have need of my sister. Either through a marriage to Chief Mackinnon or to doom the men who killed my brother Iain. Or both.”

Silence sat amongst the men standing above Lia for several long seconds. She held her breath until her chest screamed for her to exhale.

“I remember your brother,” Jandeau said. “He promised me access to Wolf Isle.”

“That could still be part of the arrangement, for a price,” Alasdair said.

Jandeau made a nasal sound that showed his disapproval. “Your brother,” he said, “was, how should I say it...? A raging imbecile. He demanded things, assuming I would provide based on promises of gold or les filles.”

The hairs on the back of Lia’s neck prickled upward. Could her brother hear the undercurrent of threat in the even voice?

“The deal I made with ye,” Alasdair said, his voice a bit strained as if he was hiding his impatience, “was dependent on if my sister was available for me to trade. She is not.”

Boots clipped slowly above Lia’s head. “Where is la mademoiselle now? In the captain’s cabin? Perhaps with her legs tied at the ankles spread apart on your bed, Captain Mackinnon?”

“Daingead,” Brodie swore. “Nay.”

“Have you not taken your pleasure on her yet? Knowing she is no maidenly flower.”

“Of course not,” Brodie snapped. “I do not rape, and I don’t do business with those crass fiends who do. So you and your men should depart now before I order my clansmen to fire upon your ship.”

A deep chuckle made chills spread from Lia's nape to her arms, and she rubbed them, realizing the cape had fallen into a heap. "How about you bring me la mademoiselle, and I let you live, oui?" Jandeau said.

Alasdair laughed as if he were surrounded by a legion of MacLeods when in fact he was on the open ocean without his men on a ship that wasn't even his. "How about ye take your velvet-clad arse back to yer ship, and I let *ye* live? Although, if ye tarry in these waters I'll report yer whereabouts to the English Captain Wentworth who've I heard is hunting for your mongrel head."

"Hellfire, Alasdair," she whispered. Her brother thought Jandeau was all bluster, but from talking to Muriel, Lark, and Anna, Lia knew Claude Jandeau didn't waste his breath on idle threats.

Alasdair chuckled condescendingly, and she could imagine the side of his mouth hitching upward. The look had always made her want to slap him. What must it do to a fiendish criminal who was used to being feared? One who had a reputation to uphold?

"Shall I tell you a secret, l'âne McLeod?" Jandeau said.

Lia heard heavy footsteps striding slowly and strained to hear the pirate's words.

Alasdair began to answer. "I could not care any less—" Her brother's words turned to a gasp and then a gurgle.

"What the fok!" Brodie yelled, covering whatever Jandeau may have said, and gunfire exploded.

Lia jumped, her arms out wide as if deciding which way to run. But there was nowhere to run. She was trapped in a cabin on a ship in the ocean.

A heavy thud on the floor above made her tip her head back to look up at the place she would wager Alasdair lay bleeding or dead. The angry shouts of men filled the air outside the portholes, and Lia watched in horror as more of Jandeau's men swung across on ropes to join their crew.

"MacLeod was a fool," Brodie yelled. "We can make a deal.

Spare my men and ship, Jandeau, and..."

Lia's hand pressed tightly over her mouth.

"And ye can have the lass and then Wolf Isle when she bears a Macquarie bastard."

"Arrêt!" Jandeau yelled, his voice as forceful as cannon fire, and the sound of violence ebbed.

The footsteps above moved farther toward the front of the ship as if they avoided Alasdair's body. Looking up, Lia could imagine blood pooling along the polished boards, filling the lines between them, where she'd stood less than an hour before.

"I can have all that and still kill you, non?"

"Then ye will have Clan Mackinnon and Clan MacLeod as enemies. If ye hope to land or sail anywhere near the Isle of Skye, ye will be harried the entire way. Making enemies of Highlanders is not a good thing, Captain Jandeau. As it is, ye already have the Macleans of Mull and the Macquaries hunting for ye. And I hear the MacDonalds of Islay Isle also hunt your black heart. Would ye add two more large clans to the hunt? Along with England?"

Jandeau scoffed, but he paused. "I take la fille and the Macquarie's territory."

"Aye."

Jandeau didn't say anything, but the calm footsteps told Lia what she needed to know. Brodie had given her up, and now Drostan's family was doomed if she was pregnant.

Lia grabbed her familiar bow and sat gingerly on the small berth of a bed. She watched the door as weight was thrown against it and lifted her bow, pulling an arrow from the quiver she'd hidden under the thick cape she'd retrieved. Over and over, a log struck until the strong oak brace weakened, the cracks in it buckling until splinters shot out and the door hung in tatters on its hinges. She lifted and aimed. Two pirates peered in, one of them grinning at her viciously.

Thwack. She fired, hitting him right between his leering

eyes. He fell forward and another man ran in, his face wide with surprise. He passed the sign of the cross before him.

“God’s teeth, wait, lass,” he said, and she recognized him as the second man who’d attacked her in the alley on Mull. She pulled a second arrow out and nocked it.

“If anyone harms the girl,” Brodie called out, “she will lose the bairn and there will be no bastard to doom the Macquaries.”

“Stand back, Murdo,” Jandeau said. His stern voice was low but powerful enough to make the man jump, retreating like a fat rat that knew a tiger stood behind him.

Lia aimed at Jandeau, but he was already aiming a cocked pistol at her. “We both die or we both live, ma fille. ’Tis your choice.” Jandeau had tanned, swarthy skin from sailing under the sun. Under the captain’s felt hat, his nose was angular and white slash marks scarred his cheek. He stared with eyes like obsidian holes devoid of a soul. “Although a bullet will do the job for certain, while a mere arrow can be removed.”

Lia imagined if Satan came up from Hell in the form of a man, this was what he’d look like. His hard mouth turned upward at the corners, and he held the pistol in one hand and a long dagger that was darkened with drying blood in the other.

“You can try to pull the arrow out of your man’s forehead and see how he fares,” she said.

Jandeau’s hard mouth turned up into a grin, showing white teeth. “Ma fille has fire. I like that.”

Lia’s heart pounded. If she shot, he’d pull the trigger. It would be easier for her to die now, but what if she was with child? What if they died before she could right this wrong to Drostan and his clan? She hadn’t investigated the infamous curse, so how could she know what would happen? Lia slowly lowered the arrow.

“If you touch me, I will bleed out this bairn, and you will have no revenge upon the Macquaries.”

He tipped his head to the side, walking up to her to snatch the bow away. He threw it with force so it splintered against

the wall, making her jump and push back against the wall by the bed. “Either way, the Macquaries will come after you, ma fille.” His gaze raked down her and then back up to her face. “Drostan Macquarie will come to rescue you. ’Tis in his foking noble blood.” He smiled like a wolf who knew he had the upper hand. “And his loyal brothers will follow, if not to save their tiny isle, then to save their brother.”

She shook her head. “They know I plotted against them. Each one turned their back on me and walked away.”

“I’ve gone up against three Macquarie brothers, and each one is foolishly loyal to the lady they choose to love.”

“He doesn’t love me,” she said with stubborn finality. He’d said he did in the Great Hall, but if there was any hint of truth to his words, it had been erased by her damning list.

Jandeau came forward, and it took all of Lia’s courage not to give in to the sparks of a swoon threatening to consume her. Fists squeezed tightly at her sides, she stood her ground until his large body pressed lightly against her front so she had to stare at the open cut of his shirt down his chest.

“He’s already forgotten about me,” she whispered.

Jandeau’s finger rose to trace a path down her face, the calloused skin rough against her cheek. It slid under her chin, forcing her gaze up to his. “For your sake, mon amour, you better pray that is not true.”

...

“Is that Chief MacDonald?” Drostan asked Beck where they stood on the deck of Tor Maclean’s swift carrack ship, *The Beast*. He pointed to the ship coming from the south.

“Aye. That’s his ship, *The Rose*, named after his bonny wife.”

Charles Duffie leaned on the other side of Drostan, having demanded to come with them. “My da says she’s sleek and survives everything the world throws at it, just like my mother.”

“I hope it can survive a pirate attack,” Callum said as he climbed up behind them from the lower deck. “Jandeau is not some wet-eared seaman.”

“Neither is my da,” Charles said. He was right. Cullen Duffie, the Chief of Clan MacDonald on Islay Isle, had been sailing since he was breeched some fifty years ago.

“He’s helping us build two new ships,” Adam said, walking up. “Come.” His hand landed on Drostan’s shoulder. “We need to make plans with Tor and Keir.” Tor owned the ship, and Keir was always by his side when the issue involved warfare. Also, Brodie Mackinnon listened to Keir, and Drostan had made it plain to him that his friend was not going to marry Lia even if ’twas what the chief wanted.

Drostan walked beside his eldest brother. “If the curse has the power to make sheep and bairns ill, then it also has the power to make a man’s seed null. Lia can’t be with my child. I will have no children.” He’d tossed the question around in his head since they’d set out from Wolf Isle to Mull, asking for Tor’s help, two days ago.

Adam stopped. “I have no answers, Drostan, but we are in jeopardy of losing everything we’ve accomplished over the last three years.” He wiped a hand over his short beard. “And I cannot chance losing my son nor Lark.”

“They are safe on Mull now, along with all the other children,” Drostan said, the stab of guilt sharp in his chest. He felt guilty partly because he didn’t know for certain that they *were* safe there at all. Could the illness reach them across the small channel? It hadn’t harmed him and his brothers when their mother and Eagan’s twin sister died at birth, and their father had rushed them to live with Aunt Ida on Mull.

Adam looked out to sea. “Lady Ava said she’d call it a children’s teaching trip to tour the libraries and learn how to run a castle. Every child on Wolf Isle has been evacuated to Aros Castle for the teaching. Hopefully, no one will spread the truth, or we will never get people to move to our isle.”

“Could parts of the legend be true and other parts false?” Drostan asked, his words soft.

Adam released a long exhale. “We’ll sit down with all the evidence and talk with Grissell in depth about it, what she remembers from her mother, what’s been passed down to her through the generations since the time of Wilyam Macquarie’s great sin. Once all this mess is untangled.”

“Can it be untangled?” The worry in his gut twisted with his shame at not pulling the ugly truth from Lia before.

Adam placed both hands on Drostan’s shoulders, staring hard at him. “Ye are going to marry Amelia MacLeod.”

“I will do what I must to save our clan,” Drostan said, his words clipped. But he would not, could not, give her his trust so she could rip it apart again. It would be a marriage of convenience, nothing more.

Adam crossed his arms. “If saving our clan means loving her, ye’ll figure out how to do that, too.”

Drostan’s face pinched in disbelief. “Ye read that list!” His harsh words carried, making the crew nearby glance his way. He lowered his voice, but his anger simmered, mixed with shame and the hollowness of betrayal. “She lied by omission to me, to all of us.” His words hissed from his clenched teeth. “Love cannot grow from lies,” he said, remembering Grissell’s dark words coming from the mist. “Not ever.”

Adam raked his hands through his usually kempt hair. “She wrote the list while drunk on whisky after fleeing an abusive situation where her brothers had scorned us. And then she tried to burn the list.”

Drostan moved his stiff jaw side to side and looked out over the water. “Ye can’t just decide to love someone, Adam. Bloody hell, I don’t even know what to call her. Amelia or Lia MacLeod.”

“Drostan,” Adam said, and he looked at his older brother’s stern face. “Ye need to talk with her, see if there’s a chance. Open yerself up to forgiveness. It might mean the difference between the survival and death of our clan.”

“Bloody hell,” Drostan murmured.

Adam’s eyes moved to Tor, who waved them to join him on

the upper deck with Keir. "Come on."

They dodged coiled ropes and Maclean seamen dressed mostly in trousers to keep their legs warmer on the open sea. Beck had donned them, but Drostan hadn't taken the time.

Tor nodded toward an island. "We've reached the Isle of Rùm so we should arrive at Dunvegan on Skye within three hours. The tide will be going out so we may need to anchor offshore and row over. When we arrive, though, we should expect hostility."

"We should dock on the southern part of Skye," Keir said. "Cullen Duffie says the MacDonalds of Sleat will let us land. His cousin is the MacDonald chief up at Dunscaith Castle."

"Where is the seat of your clan?" Drostan asked Keir.

"Dunakin Castle is way around on the far side of Skye," Keir answered. "'Twould be easier to land at Sleat and go overland to Mackinnon territory."

"If Brodie returned to Dunakin, we could go there and convince him to help us," Adam said.

Drostan looked at Keir. "Do ye think he returned home or took Alasdair and...Amelia to Dunvegan Castle first?"

"He would go around the isle, so he'd stop on the coast of MacLeod territory for them to row ashore." Keir's nose wrinkled, and his gaze leveled with Drostan first and then Adam. "Brodie's an honorable man. I think he would stay at least for a few days to make sure the lass is being cared for."

Drostan scrubbed his face with both hands as the men still talked. *Lia*. His heart sped, hard thumps in his chest, as he remembered how brutal Alasdair had been. Tor told Drostan when they sailed that Meg had confessed that she'd brought the note only because she thought it would save Lia from her brother. *God, let her be well.*

"Then we head toward Dunvegan and see if Brodie's ship is moored there," Tor said and turned to lean over the upper rail. He shouted to the helmsman who watched below through a small open window. "Sail west around Skye, Bart. Keep the whipstaff ready." He turned outward. "Prepare to sail west and

north,” he called out and then jumped down the stairs to walk amongst his crew. Keir followed, leaving Adam and Drostan on the top deck. Below, Beck, Callum, and Eagan were helping to raise the sails to catch the outgoing wind.

The ship tipped with the force of the unfurled sails, their brilliant white snapping as they filled quickly. Under them, the wooden vessel creaked with movement through the white caps blowing across the surface of the sea.

“We definitely need two ships for Wolf Isle,” Adam said. “Two at least.”

But Drostan was watching the horizon, not listening to his brother dreaming about a prosperous clan. So much hinged on what Lia would do when he found her. What he would do, too. At Adam’s nod after reading the damning list, Drostan’s worry for Lia and determination to save her had fused together, changing with his shame and fury into something close to hate. He closed his eyes, letting his exhale release through his nose. But was it hate for Lia or for himself?

From an early age, Drostan had assumed he would be the one to doom his clan, that somehow because of his actions Wolf Isle would continue to wither away, as would his family. ’Twas why he’d taken matters into his own hands by attacking the tree when he was twelve. And now here, even after drastic attempts, his lack of caution had done the unthinkable. He should have made her tell him everything. Instead, he’d fallen into her arms. Aye, he didn’t hate her; he hated himself.

“A man!” someone yelled from below deck. “On Rùm.”

“He’s waving with both arms,” called the sailor high above in the main topcastle. “He looks stranded.”

“’Tis Brodie,” Keir yelled.

Tor ran to the helmsman’s window. “Turn starboard, Bart.”

“Brodie Mackinnon?” Drostan asked, leaning over the top rail to squint toward the small isle set off from Skye. The man was waving desperately, jumping, and running along the surf. His ship was nowhere to be seen.

Drostan’s heart thumped like it could break rocks. “If

Brodie's there alone..." He looked at Adam. "Where is Lia?"

Chapter Eighteen

Lia stood at the rail of Jandeau's ship like she had an hour ago when they'd sailed away from Brodie Mackinnon swimming as fast as he could toward the small isle of Rùm. The pirates had crippled his ship by cutting all the sails and killed half the crew while looting it. Then Jandeau ordered Brodie thrown over the side.

Before they could tie his hands and feet, weighing him down with a cannonball, Brodie had dived off the lower deck into the frigid sea. A few men fired pistols at him, but as far as Lia had seen, the Mackinnon chief had made it out of range without being hit.

Jandeau had grabbed her then. *Don't struggle or you will harm your babe, ma fille.* She didn't even know if she was pregnant, but she needed to keep up the pretense. So, she'd let the pirate captain swing her across to his ship on a thick rope, courage keeping her gasp inside when her feet flew through the air. Her only weapon was her quiver of arrows that she managed to hold under her heavy cloak. But how good were they without a bow?

Lia had found a spot out of the way of the rough men and watched the water off the stern as the sight of Brodie's foundering ship grew smaller, disappearing as they sailed north. She relaxed her fingers enough to set the quiver against the side and leaned there, her mind too muddled to make any plausible plans of escape. *Escape?* She snorted softly and shoved a piece of hair out of her eyes.

Her fingers slid to the metal collar biting into her neck; a thick chain hanging off it was tied to a cannonball at her feet. *So, you won't jump overboard, mon amour.* Jandeau had shackled her to a cannonball, so if she jumped into the sea, she would sink quickly to the bottom. He didn't know she might decide to end her life. *Once I know I'm not with child. I cannot kill a child.* The bairn would probably have Drostan's beautifully shaped eyes. Maybe they would be green like his, a grayish green like a misty moor at dawn.

Although, would she doom the Macquarie Clan if she had the child and was never allowed to reunite with Drostan? If the child lived, sold off by Jandeau and lost forever, would the bastard born fulfill the legend's dark promise to wipe out the Macquarie Clan?

She blinked back the tears that threatened to give away her panic and sickening stomach. *Oh Drostan. I am so sorry.* The heaviness of her remorse added even more weight to the cannonball. What could she do?

Fight. It was a word that her mother had whispered to her on her deathbed as if she knew she was leaving Amelia with fiends, her own sons.

Fight? What weapons did she have? She formed a list in her head. *Arrows. Without a bow. Courage. Sometimes.* Sharp teeth and strong fingernails. A possible pregnancy. A penchant for vomiting. And her stomach surely was rolling now with all the fear and choked back tears. Her arsenal wasn't much, but surprise could work in her favor. Jandeau probably didn't expect her to fight back.

Footsteps behind her made her breath catch as she steeled herself. They were rapid footfalls and heavy but somehow lightened as if someone was sneaking along the deck. Not Jandeau. She turned and gasped, pressing back against the rail as Murdo came toward her. His gaze was furtive, although his scowl was the same dark slash across his big face.

"Stay away," she said.

"Hush, lass," he said, glancing back over his shoulder before squinting at her. "Ye got that bow of yours from the alley? The one that took down Henry?"

She shook her head, and he ran a hand down his chin. "Of course not, but ye're a good shot, aren't ye?"

She nodded, her words tumbling out in a whisper. "If I scream, Jandeau will gut you for threatening his prize."

"I ain't doing nothing to ye," Murdo said and slid behind a stack of barrels. "Turn to stare out at sea," he instructed. "Go on."

“What do you want?” she asked, looking out across the choppy water.

He scoffed. “What I want is to make it home alive, and I wager ye do, too.”

Lia thought back to the day she’d met Drostan. Murdo was one of the attackers. He’d trapped her in the alley on Mull, joining his crewmate in attacking her. “Stay away from me.”

“Listen.” His words rushed out in a blustery way. “I was sent by Brodie Mackinnon to Dunvegan to guard ye before ye ran from your brother.”

Her breath stilled as she listened.

“I saw ye when ye planned to sail on *The Tern*, so I signed on with the crew and followed ye to Mull. I tried to stop that arse from attacking ye in the alley, but then Macquarie got involved and got me sacked, so I went back to lurk at Dunvegan until I heard from Chief Mackinnon. That’s when I saw your brother meet with Claude Jandeau.”

“You’re a Mackinnon?”

“Aye, loyal to the chief. When he said to sign on with whoever was meeting with your brother, I ended up here.” He blew air out of his cheeks.

“I’m weighted down,” she said, lifting her chain off the deck, the chinks clattering.

“Bloody devil likes to toss people into the sea to drown shackled.”

“I have fifteen arrows with me. Can you find me a bow?”

“Aye,” he said from his hiding position, “but one of the men would snatch it from ye like Jandeau did.”

Her gaze rose. “Not if I’m up there.” The main topcastle was the tallest part of the ship. It was a small platform surrounded by a low wall where the lookout could see better than anyone on the deck. Right now, it was vacant as all the men scurried below, working the sails with the changing wind.

He blew out a dark laugh. “Ye’re going to climb up there

with a cannonball around your neck, along with a bow and quiver.”

Lia glanced at him and realized the man was sweating. He'd seemed like a huge monster in the alley, and she'd assumed he was there with the other crewman off *The Tern*. Now he looked pale and very nervous. If Jandeau caught on to what he was doing, Murdo was aware he'd die painfully or full of saltwater.

“Get me a bow, one that isn't too tight to pull,” she said. “Quickly.” If Jandeau locked her in his cabin, she wouldn't get a chance to climb. “And a way to get this cannonball off me.”

The man ran a tattered handkerchief down his face as if he wanted to wave it in surrender. “Like a blade and a hammer?” He stared at the chain, gauging the thickness. It was about an inch thick and had gaps in each rung to join the links.

“Yes.”

He moved off, and Lia turned back to the sea, closing her eyes in prayer. *Thank you, Lord. Help save me and any bairn that might be in me.*

• • •

Keir pulled on Brodie, who fell into the dinghy where it bobbed outside the surf line along Rùm. “What the devil happened?” Keir asked.

“Where's Lia?” Drostan demanded over Keir's question.

Brodie, soaked through, his jaw clenched with cold, took the woolen blanket from his friend and shook his head. “Alasdair made a deal with that French pirate.”

“Jandeau?” Drostan shouted.

“Start rowing back to *The Beast*,” Adam said.

“I didn't know it was him until he and his men were swinging aboard,” Brodie said. “Foking hell,” he roared in frustration.

“Lia? He took Lia?” Drostan asked, his muscles straining as

he yanked on the oars without care as to the pace. Let his brothers keep up with him.

Brodie exhaled in a huff. “Aye, after he killed Alasdair for not wanting to give Amelia up to him without knowing if she’s with child.”

“Alasdair was going to sell her to him, wasn’t he?” Drostan asked, fury itching up inside him, a fury he couldn’t skewer because the monster was already dead.

Brodie nodded. “His plan was to sell her to Jandeau for ammunition and gold, probably to fight my clan if I didn’t marry her.”

“Slimy bastard,” Callum said, huffing as he pulled on the oars.

Brodie looked at Drostan. “I didn’t know about Alasdair’s wickedness, I swear. I had...” He wiped a hand over his mouth. “Doubts. His servants scurried around like frightened mice, but I had no idea that he’d make a deal with a pirate.”

“Ye’re lucky to be alive, my friend,” Keir said.

“Jandeau killed half my crew,” Brodie continued, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Slit all my sails and was about to chain me to a cannonball to throw overboard. I dove in before he could. God was with me as they fired pistols at me in the water. But the cold...damn cold water nearly pulled me under anyway.”

Keir rested his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “’Tis a wonder he didn’t sink your ship or steal it.”

“He was more interested in Amelia.” Brodie looked at Drostan who strained to haul on the oars, hurling his worry and anger to battle the resistance of the waves. “Especially after Alasdair told him he needed to keep her because she might be carrying a Macquarie bairn. I think he expects ye to come after her.”

“We *are* going after her,” Drostan said.

Brodie clutched the blanket around him. “’Twill be a trap.”

“One we know about,” Eagan said from his spot at the oars.

Callum spoke over the wind that was kicking up, making the white caps spray against the prow of the small boat. "I should have killed him at Chester. He's a devil with too much luck." Callum had fought the man at Grigg Hall when fetching Anna and Dora from England. Drostan knew his twin brother still felt guilty over letting the murdering pirate get away when he could have skewered Jandeau while he lay unconscious.

"Do ye think he's staying in these waters?" Adam asked. "Waiting for us?"

"My feeling is aye." Brodie looked out over the empty sea. "But he obviously didn't tell me as much."

No one talked the rest of the way back to the ship. Only the creak of the oars, slapping of waves, and gusty wind filled the momentary silence around the men. Drostan struggled to control his breathing.

Brodie met Drostan's narrowed gaze. "I told Jandeau that any trauma to Lia, to her body or by scaring her, would make her lose the bairn if she has one. That if he wanted to doom the Macquaries, he needed to keep the bairn thriving."

Drostan gave a brief nod. The ploy would protect Lia, at least until her body showed she wasn't with child. He hated to think how Jandeau might check to see if her courses came.

"'Twas the only thing I could think of to help," Brodie said, and his face made Drostan realize that the man might have started to care for Lia. "That and I saw Murdo on his ship."

"Murdo?" Eagan asked, his hair whipped about by the wind.

Brodie looked at Keir. "Murdo Mackinnon. The man Drostan left alive after surprising Amelia in the alley."

The information ruined Drostan's rhythm, and his oar hit Callum's. "The brute who attacked her? By the devil, Mackinnon." The dinghy bumped into the side of *The Beast*, but Drostan kept Brodie skewered with his gaze.

"Isn't he a Munroe?" Adam asked, steadying the dinghy as the rope ladder was dropped next to them.

Brodie shook his head. "He works for me. I had him

stationed at Dunvegan when Alasdair sent around the betrothal contract. I wanted him to watch Amelia, see what the lass did, and he followed her onto *The Tern* when she ran from Skye.” Brodie shook his head. “He wasn’t going to attack her.”

“He grabbed her, pinning her arms,” Drostan yelled.

“So she wouldn’t shoot him, too,” Brodie said, apparently having heard about the horrid incident.

“Was the other man working for ye?” Beck asked.

Brodie shook his head. “Nay. And if the man had his yard out like Tor told me, ’tis good he was slain.”

Adam waved at Eagan to climb the ladder and then Callum. Keir followed and then Adam, leaving Drostan and Brodie balancing in the rowboat.

“I had ordered Murdo to try to find out more about Alasdair from his staff,” Brodie said. “He must have signed onto Jandeu’s ship when he saw Alasdair making a deal with the pirate.”

“Will Murdo help her?” Drostan said, suddenly very relieved that he hadn’t used his sword on the man.

“If he can without being caught. He’s got a strong desire to live.”

Drostan certainly hoped Lia did, too. He’d completely turned his back on her. *Let her be furious*. Hate could give her strength.

Drostan grabbed hold of the ladder rung above his head. *I love you*. That’s what he’d said to her. It hadn’t sounded convincing to him then, and she hadn’t responded. His words had probably sounded like a trick. She hadn’t believed them, especially when he walked away.

“Damn it all,” he murmured and climbed swiftly up the side of *The Beast*.

Chapter Nineteen

“If anyone tries to climb up here, I’ll shoot him through the head,” Lia called from her perch in the crow’s nest forty feet above the deck. To prove her point she aimed downward toward Jandeau, but the man held a thick wooden shield before him. If she fired, she’d only waste the arrow.

“She’s treed like a cat,” one pirate yelled out. “Here kitty kitty!” The others laughed, their necks exposed as they tipped their faces up to her. She was tempted to release her arrow, but if she missed, they might swarm upward.

“Seems she’s trapped up there. Keeps these randy bastards away from her.” That was Murdo. She knew his voice now, the vicious devil turned cowardly angel in these dire circumstances. With one stroke of the hammer on the weakest link, he’d cut off the heavy cannonball, leaving two-thirds of the heavy chain. Fear of being discovered had sent him scurrying away.

She’d climbed without notice, towing her chain, quiver, and bow while there seemed to be some raucous yelling toward the front of the ship. By the time she reached the topcastle, her arms had quivered with exhaustion.

“Leave her up there then,” Jandeau said, taking Murdo’s unspoken suggestion. “Rotate guards below in case she decides she’s hungry, cold, or has to piss.”

She snorted, letting the bowstring relax. *I’ll piss on their heads.* It was a boast to help strengthen her resolve, but she doubted she could do it. Although another couple of hours up there might make it more thinkable.

Her cape provided warmth and protection from the dampness that wafted around them in the form of mist. Leaving the arrow knocked in the borrowed bow, she let the weapon lean against the curved wall of the small space that swayed with the mast. It was making her already rolling stomach pitch even more with the exaggerated motion caused by the height and swells along the sea.

“Have a comfortable night, Lady Amelia,” Jandeau called up with a smirk. “And do let us know if you get your courses up there.” Several men made gagging sounds.

“Starting tomorrow,” Jandeau said, “I’ll check you each morning myself.”

The thought of him lifting her skirts to check her petticoats and inner thighs for her monthly bleeding turned her already twisted stomach. She didn’t answer, pulling in the cool air to bolster her courage. He trudged away, and Lia looked out at the thick, darkening mist. They were somewhere south of Skye, but she hadn’t a hope of making out any landmarks or any land at all in the thick, wet air.

Lia was thirsty and wiped gathered droplets of mist from the lines to lick off one finger, all the while keeping watch on the men below. As if giving up, the sun sank downward to what Lia imagined was the horizon. Darkness invaded earlier than normal, a darkness without stars or moon. Lia felt like she was adrift in nothingness with sharks beneath her.

And if she couldn’t see anything, then no one could see the ship, either. Even the lanterns being lit on the deck were so dim they couldn’t penetrate the fog. She pulled the hood of the cape tight under her chin.

Who would even be looking for her? Brodie Mackinnon was stranded on an isle: wet, cold, and without shelter. His ship foundered in the darkness somewhere out there after its sails were sliced through and most of the crew slaughtered. No one from Skye would know they’d been attacked. And Drostan... Drostan was far away, and they were separated by so much more than distance. She wouldn’t blame him if he never spoke to her again.

Meg thought she was doing Lia a favor protecting her from Alasdair’s wrath for lying with Drostan. But she’d rather bleed from her brother’s whip than from the harsh stare of dark surprise and hurt on Drostan’s face. He would never come for her, even if he knew that she was in Jandeau’s dastardly hands.

In the darkness, Lia let the tears pour out silently, wetting her face and hands. The taste of salty sorrow made her cry

more as she relaxed her tense body, setting down the heaviness of the bravery she'd been wearing all day. What a miserable little mouse she'd become.

A tabor drum started a quick beat and within minutes a lute's strummed chords joined in, along with a tinny-sounding flute. Lia pushed herself back into a sitting position, pulling her knees into her chest, as she stared across the small space of her nest. Glancing down the hole around the mast, she saw Murdo tapping the drum, parading toward the bow of the ship. Deep voices had begun a sea shanty, and they all followed him. 'Twas like the Piped Piper of Hamelin, leading the rats and children away. The voices were loud and rough. At least they weren't underneath her anymore. She glanced down and saw one man leaning against her mast, taking his turn at guard duty.

Leaning her head against the wooden wall, she closed her eyes again. Despite the noise, she fell asleep, her body and mind exhausted from the trauma of the day after a sleepless night at Aros Castle. The sea rocked her, the height exaggerating the tilt. 'Twas almost like a cradle.

Lia jerked awake, her mind leaping out of the comfortable darkness of sleep. Something had woken her. Was it a lecherous crewman climbing toward her nest? Someone who would assault her despite Jandean's forbiddance?

She pulled her bow closer, her shifting making the iron collar bite into the flesh of her neck. The arrow scraped over the floor of the topcastle, and she balanced the weapon in its launching place. Looking down the hole, she saw that the man at the bottom was gone.

Two men reappeared from around some crates. She cocked her bow but then realized one was Murdo when he held up his lantern. Had he enlisted another to help her?

Murdo pointed up, and the man tipped his face to her. Lia's breath caught as she saw the face in Murdo's light, the handsome face she'd tried to etch into her memory, thinking she'd never see it again. "Drostan?" she whispered.

The wind and mist muted any noises except the creak of the

ship and the lap of the water against the hull. Surely Jandeau had men patrolling the ship at night. Her hammering heart thumped hard at the thought of Drostan being caught by the mad pirate. The atrocities she'd seen when being dragged from Brodie Mackinnon's cabin would haunt her nightmares. If she were to see Drostan sliced open or hanged from the rigging, she might never stop screaming. She shook her head at the thought, her eyes wide with horror.

He reached high on the mast and climbed. Lia carried the chain to prevent its loud scraping as she pressed against the curved wall behind her to give him room. 'Twas dark, but even in shadow she knew the face that appeared through the hole.

"You're here?" she whispered. He continued to climb upward, rounding his shoulders inward to squeeze through the space. "You can't be here. Jandeau is waiting for you. He'll kill you."

He didn't say anything, and his silence cut through her as surely as a dagger.

"I am sorry," she said, emotion thick in her whisper. "I need you to know...I wasn't planning to do those things on that horrid list."

"Aye," he said, "ye were. At least when ye first came to Mull."

She shook her head. "I was...ashamed at how happy I was that Iain was dead. I...I thought that I might feel better if I tried to avenge him, but I quickly realized I couldn't and then I found out how horrible he had—"

"Now is not the time for words. If we all make it out alive, perhaps then."

"She still up there?" came a rough voice from below. Another crewman?

Drostan stooped in the small space, his trouser-clad knees jutting into her meager space to where she had to bunch her skirts to straddle them.

"Aye," Murdo said. "Saw her peek over an hour ago. Must be asleep now."

“Too bad there ain’t more room up there,” the man said. Lia could hear the leer in his tone.

“If ye try to climb up there, ye’ll end up with an arrow stuck from here through yer skull to here.” A glance showed Murdo poking a finger up under the man’s chin.

“Not if she’s asleep.”

Lia swallowed and stood, looking over the rail, her bow in her hands. She straddled Drostan, the crux of her legs coming a mere inch from his face. “I can shoot you dead in my sleep,” she said, pointing the arrow down.

“God’s cockles,” the man said with the high-pitched yip of a dog. He raised his arms as if to block the arrow and skittered back.

Murdo did the same. “Ye’ll be sorry if ye shoot us, lass.”

“Not as sorry as you with an arrow through your skull,” she retorted and pulled back inside the small topcastle. She breathed fast and remained standing, one foot braced on either side of Drostan.

“Ye best go on, Olly,” Murdo said. “I still have to watch.”

“Better your skull than mine.” Olly stalked toward the prow of the ship.

Lia sunk down and stared through the darkness over her bunched petticoats at Drostan. “How are you even here? Murdo has been trying to help me. Is there a ship close by?”

He finally met her gaze. “We rescued Brodie from Rùm Isle.”

“You were...” She swallowed past the dryness in her throat. “You were sailing up this way?” *To rescue me?* She couldn’t bring herself to say the words.

Drostan’s gaze turned upward as if looking at stars, but mist obscured everything. “The leaves on the willow look like they might start to die, and Adam’s son got a fever. Perhaps ye are with child.”

Her stomach sank. He hadn’t come because he truly loved

her. He'd come because the curse might harm his clan. Of course.

She swallowed. "I don't think I'm with child."

"How could ye know?"

She wasn't about to discuss how she had twinges of cramps that heralded monthly pain through her abdomen and back. Her courses would probably come within the next few days. She shook her head slightly. "You're right. There's no time to talk."

"But somehow the tree and bairns are threatened," Drostan murmured. "I need to get ye off this ship either way."

"He's chained me," she whispered, touching the cuff around her neck. "And there are over forty pirates on board. All loyal to Jandeau, except Murdo."

"'Tis good I didn't kill him in the alley," Drostan murmured and pushed up from his squat. He pulled a rag from his belt, lifting it to her neck. His fingers were warm as they slid along her cold skin, tucking the soft linen between her throat and the rough iron of the collar. Her breath caught at his touch, wanting so badly for them to return to their time when betrayal and distrust hadn't shattered whatever had been growing between them.

"There's a rowboat on the leeward side, toward the stern. And *The Beast* is anchored not too far off to the east along the coastline of Skye." His fingers dropped from her neck, and he reached behind his back to yank a satchel to the front of his body. They were so close together in the small space that the bag was smashed between them. But it was her damn list that had become the unmovable boulder keeping them apart. Rightfully so, she supposed. "Trousers and a tunic for ye," he said. "Leaving your petticoat above may hide that ye're gone for a bit longer."

He shoved the empty satchel under him and reached for her. Lia's heart stuttered for a moment, the memory of him desiring her so clear. But he was helping her disrobe, not for loving but for re-dressing. In the cramped space, they pulled ties, and she

pinched open hooks that held her bodice and petticoats together. His touch here and there, the untying of her clothes, even in these dreadful circumstances, felt right.

“Drostan.”

He didn't say anything, just kept loosening her bodice ties until they were completely undone. “Ye'll have to take off the stays to get the smock off.”

“Drostan.” She caught his hand, so he'd look at her.

“There's no time.”

“If one of us dies, you need to know I would do anything to take back writing that list,” she said. “It may have been...my thoughts when I was desperate to...” She huffed, letting her gaze go upward. “Desperate to be free of my guilt of rejoicing in Iain's death. Desperate to earn some type of respect from Alasdair. I don't know. 'Twas all unachievable and horrid.” She took a deep breath, letting it out. “But as soon as I learned who you were, the kindness of your family...” She shook her head. “Nothing on that list was what I wanted.”

They stared at one another in the darkness as she tugged open the stays, unlacing them completely to take them off with the damn chain still attached. Drostan widened the neckline of her smock until it could drop downward, but his gaze remained on her face as she bared her breasts. “Not even number four?” he whispered.

He'd remembered the numbering? The list must be carved with a rusty dagger in his mind. “Number four?” She threw the tunic on, her head bursting up through the neck hole, the damn chain cutting a long cold line against her skin, making her shoulders curve inward.

Drostan slowly pulled the chain up out of the neckline and fixed the rags tucked into it. “Aye, the one about bedding Drostan Macquarie.” His gaze met hers again as he tied the tunic shut at her throat. “Many times.”

They pushed to their feet, which were braced around the center hole. She shook the trousers open without breaking their stare. “That was the only one I still wanted. That I...”

She wet her lips, risking everything. “Still want.”

She stood only in the long tunic but knew there was no time to waste even if she desperately wanted to lean into Drostan. Lifting a leg, she shoved it into one side of the trousers and then, balancing, slid the second leg into its place.

They were thrust together in the small space, but his stiffness told her that they were miles apart. She cinched the braided tie tightly, closing the trousers. How could she prove to him she meant what she said? That she would never hurt him or his family again? That she’d been wrong and despised herself for concocting a plan to have his bastard to doom his clan.

“Drostan,” she said, her hands reaching out to grip his upper arms. “Marry me. Right here. Right now.”

Chapter Twenty

Drostan stared at Lia's shadowy image. He couldn't make out her expression in the unbroken darkness of the topcastle, the misty night shrouding them. But he could hear truth in her voice. "There's no time to wed right now," he said, struggling to keep his voice quiet. There were vicious fiends below, and he had to get Lia safely away before *The Beast* fired on Jandeau's new ship.

Her nails curled into his tunic on either side. "If either of us dies without being married, and I *am* with child, will the curse continue?" she asked, making him pause in his restrained kicking at her petticoat that took up most of the room in the barrel-like space.

"Ye're not going to die," he whispered harshly as if he battled the words themselves.

"The pregnant girl who hanged herself died, and the curse continued."

"The curse began with her when her mother cast it upon the Macquarie Clan." He knew his clan's dire history inside and out, but they were venturing into untried territory.

She exhaled. "And what if you die, Drostan, while I'm with child and we never marry...?"

"The curse might see it as me having a bastard." Drostan's heart thumped hard with the need to get Lia off Jandeau's ship. The last days she must have been pummeled by fear of torture and of losing her life. There was no reason for her to delay her rescue, and yet she was. She delayed for no other conceivable reason except to try and save Drostan's family. His chest squeezed and then opened, allowing him to take a full breath of the misty night air.

Drostan glanced below at Murdo. The man beckoned them to hurry, so there was no time for him to turn this new piece of evidence around in his head.

Lia grabbed his hands. Hers were cold and small wrapped

around his. “You said that you loved me back at Aros Castle,” she said, giving a small shake of her head. “I know that my actions crushed any truth in your statement.” She swallowed. “But if you believe in this legendary curse and worry over saving your clan, marry me here quickly. If I’m not with child, I will agree to an annulment.”

“There are no witnesses.”

“God is our witness, and we can tell Murdo we pledged to one another. I’ll swear to it later before the kirk.” She clutched at the linen of his tunic, moving it as if wanting to shake sense into him, and stared hard into his eyes. “I cannot go on knowing I have harmed your family, harmed you. Marry me, Drostan. Please.”

Since the moment he’d charged away from her in Aros Castle he’d existed in a type of limbo, caught between fury and embarrassment. The feel of her against him, her smile, her smell, the taste of her kiss... Every aspect of her had haunted him.

She found his hand in the fabric of her petticoat and lifted it. “Drostan Macquarie,” she said. “I, Amelia MacLeod, take you to be my husband. As God is my witness...” She looked up into the misty sky above them and then back at Drostan’s face. “I will be faithful to you and honor you until death do us part. And not only because I might be with child. And not only because you are rescuing me, again.” She stared into his eyes. “You might never forgive me, but I pledge myself to you.”

Forgive her? At her words, Drostan realized that once devoid of embarrassment, the fury that swirled inside him wasn’t aimed at her but at himself. How easily he’d abandoned her, not trusting the feelings that had been growing between them.

Psssttt. Murdo called from below. “Come down.”

Drostan grabbed the horrid chain, laying it over his shoulder before tugging Lia gently to the hole where he stepped down the first two rungs.

“I, Drostan Macquarie, take ye to be my wife, Amelia

MacLeod. With God as my witness,” he said as he climbed down, her boots and trouser-clad legs a few rungs above him, “I will be faithful to ye and honor ye until death do us part.” Her back was to him as they descended so that her arse, outlined nicely in the trousers, moved before his face.

He reached the bottom and helped her land, turning her to face him. She blinked, and he saw the shine of tears there as if a small seed of hope drowned in them. A tear leaked out, and he raised his thumb to catch it on her cheek.

He leaned in, delivering the quickest kiss on her lips to seal the ceremony.

“What the hell are ye two doing?” Murdo asked in a frantic whisper, his hand waving a pistol around as he talked.

Lia’s lovely face in the light from Murdo’s lantern was a mix of beautiful sorrow, but the hope had softened the pinch between her eyes. With her hair in chaotic tangles, her face full of emotions, she looked how he imagined the Greek princess, Ariadne, did when she’d been forced to decide between Theseus and her half brother the Minotaur. All they needed was the god, Dionysus, to trick Drostan into leaving her to make the tragic myth come to life.

“We just got married,” Lia said. “Until death do us part.” She looked from Drostan to Murdo. “And you’re the witness.”

“Witness?” Murdo said. “I didn’t even hear ye.”

“Until death do us part,” Drostan said. “And we have a need to keep our witness alive.”

Murdo’s frown softened, his eyes growing wide. “Aye then. I’m a witness who mustn’t be left behind.”

Drostan grasped Lia’s hand, leading her toward the prow.

“Did ye think to leave me behind?” Murdo whispered, his wide face pinching. “Is there room in your rowboat? I’m a big man. Can’t swim, either.”

Drostan had only knocked out one man after climbing aboard, leaving him by the gunwale as a marker for the rope ladder dangling down to the boat. Drostan’s gaze slid along the

gunwale, but the splash of light from Murdo's lantern showed no fallen man heaped on the deck. The grapple hooks for the ladder were gone, too.

Bloody hell.

“Quelle malchance,” came a voice from the shadows. “Tut, tut. To think you would leave, mon amour, without farewell. C'est vulgaire.” Captain Jandeu stepped out from a group of crates, aiming a pistol straight at Drostan.

• • •

Before anyone moved, Lia lifted the bow she'd dragged with her out of her tiny sanctuary up in the sails. Fluidly she nocked an arrow, aimed at Jandeu's chest. Would his pistol still go off, shooting Drostan? Without thought, she tipped her aim and released.

It hit Jandeu's arm, throwing it back. *Crack!* The pistol went off, its shot hitting somewhere to the side.

A man grunted. “The captain shot me.” The words seethed with surprise and pain. “He foking shot me!”

Drostan barreled across the space, hurling into Jandeu, nearly lifting him up over the rail. Would the devil fall on the rowboat below, jeopardizing his brothers waiting there and leaving them stranded on this ship of devils?

“I told ye it was a bad idea to sign on,” another crewman yelled. “Jemmy! Jemmy, hold on now.”

While the drama unfolded in the shadows, Drostan traded punches with Jandeu. Only Murdo's lantern gave off light, but it fluctuated as it swung from his hand. Lia ran toward the rail, hefting the chain over one shoulder. “Help,” she called down the side, but her chest clenched. There was no boat, only black water and mist.

Men pushed toward them from both sides, raising lanterns to see the fight. Murdo acted as if he were one of them, blending in with the half-asleep men who'd come when they'd heard the pistol shot.

“Get the girl!” someone yelled, and everyone looked around. “Is she still above?”

Lia glanced up the mast to see her petticoats through the hole, and stepped backward through the throng, thankful for the men’s clothes. She clung to the corner of the stacked crates, hiding mostly behind them in the shadows.

Jandeau slashed at Drostan with a dagger, making Drostan leap backward. He had only a short sword and a sgian dubh. Drostan threw the dagger, and Jandeau turned, trying to dodge it. The blade sliced past his cheek, and Lia saw blood swell out of a cut it had left. Jandeau wiped a hand over his cheek, glancing at the blood on his fingers. “The Macquarie pup has teeth.” His voice rose to an order. “Grab him, you cowards!”

Several men ran forward, ready to advance. Drostan nodded to Murdo who turned around, spying her, and ran toward her. “Come,” he said and began to drag her away from the prow.

“No!” She struggled. “I can shoot,” she said, trying to twist in Murdo’s arms.

“He said to get ye to safety, miss.” Murdo continued to drag her through the darkness.

“I can help him. He’s by himself against all of them! Let go, you bloody oaf!” Without the heavy petticoats, Lia raised her foot, bringing the heel of her boot down on Murdo’s toes. He grunted, his hold on her loosening for a second so that she could twist to face him. In a fluid motion, Lia jammed her knee upward into his jack.

With wide eyes, he doubled forward, his hold going slack so that she could jump away. Without thought, she ran back toward Jandeau and slid into the shadows by the crates. Drostan slashed his short sword back and forth before the pirate crew as if they were a pack of lions and he held a fiery torch.

“Hellfire,” she whispered and turned. She must get up higher.

Chain in one arm, bow in the other, her quiver still slung over her shoulder, Lia ran to a pyramid of crates. Throwing the

chain up, she followed, ignoring the press of the metal against her throat where the rag had fallen away.

Scrambling up after the chain, she stood and nocked her arrow. A rush of pirates had gotten the sword from Drostan and now held him. Jandeau pressed a handkerchief to his own bloodied cheek. He was talking to Drostan, but Lia couldn't hear the words. But then Jandeau turned his back on him and motioned to a man holding the pistol. "Shoot him."

No! She screamed inside her head but remained silent. Drawing back, she released her arrow. It pierced her target, the head of the pirate holding the pistol. He flew backward with the force, landing on the deck, the arrow sticking out his forehead like a macabre human unicorn.

Nock, pull back, steady, release. Her second arrow pierced the head of the man holding Drostan's right arm. She repeated the motion, shooting the man on Drostan's left arm. Drostan leaped to the side, punching the man there, throwing him over the rail. No more crewmen tried to grab him. They were caught in the panic spreading out before her on the deck.

Jandeau. Where was he? She held her fourth arrow nocked as she turned to search, but the sly man had disappeared while his crew ran around yelling for more light.

"Lia!" Drostan yelled, but whatever else he said was lost as cannon fire lit the night. The blast shook the ship under her, throwing her to her knees on the hard edges of the crate, almost tumbling her to the ground. The yank of the iron collar against her throat made her cough as the pain in her knees radiated up and down her legs.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Three blasts shook her as she clung to the crate on her stomach. She worked her fingers between her throat and the collar and felt the wetness of fresh blood.

"Lia!" Drostan's voice cut through the shouts of men on the deck, running to load cannons.

Tears blurred her eyes, and Drostan's face appeared before her. He lifted the heavy chain, but it was the sight of his face,

so firm and determined to help her, that lifted some of the heaviness in her limbs.

She pushed upward, swinging her legs over so he could lift her down. *Boom!* Another blast shook the boat. Splintering wood shot everywhere, but Lia found herself blocked from the debris by Drostan's body. He steadied her against his solid form. "They've forgone the stealthy rescue," he said. "Come."

She took his hand, abandoning everything, and ran with him through the smoke as he carried her chain. Fire licked up a sail, and three crewmen attacked it with buckets of water.

"Where's Murdo?" he asked. "He was supposed to get ye off the ship."

"You'd be dead if I hadn't kneed him in the ballocks."

He glanced back at her, and a look of pride filled his face. They dodged two more men who didn't seem to take in who they were, or they didn't care with the ship catching fire around them. Making it to the rail at the back of the ship, Drostan laid her chain over the rail.

Boom! The pirate ship fired on *The Beast*.

"We must get off this devil ship," Drostan said. He lifted her over, and she balanced on the small platform there, the chain draped over the rail. "Murdo tied this rope." He pressed it into one of her hands while the other clung to the rail.

The rope dropped down to the black water below. Lia could hardly breathe as she stared at the cold depths where pieces of wood floated, caught aflame and hissing as the water warred against it. She imagined hungry, snapping sharks as she stared at the dark, icy depths of the salty sea.

"I...I cannot," she called, not bothering to hide her desperation. "I will sink with this chain." Her breathing was coming too fast, and she started to see sparks in her periphery. Perhaps it would be best to swoon before drowning.

"Lia!" Drostan yelled, and she realized he'd called her name several times. His hands shook her shoulders to get her to look at him, and she met his eyes. "I won't let ye sink. Trust me."

She sucked in air fast, unable to move with her fear of the dark swirling mass below her. 'Twas like the time Iain had laughed as she sputtered in the sea. She'd felt the pull of the water on her legs like cold tentacles pulling her below the surface. Terror swamped her.

"Count with me," Drostan said. "In, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four." He exaggerated his own breath, so she'd follow his lead. "In, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four."

She nodded, the sparks disappearing. Feeling came back into her hands as she wrapped them around the rail.

Drostan threw one leg up to the rail as if to jump over with her. The sound of French cursing made him stop. Jandeau stood on the upper deck, directing his men to put out flames and to fire more cannonballs at the other ship.

"Drostan!" Lia yelled over another blast from the cannons that shook her where she balanced on the ledge, holding the rope for balance. "Don't leave me."

He turned back to her, his fierce gaze connecting with hers. "I can kill him now, the pirate who stalks my family."

She watched in horror as he turned back and forth as if deciding whether to run toward Jandeau. Tears ran hot down her cheeks. By marrying him, she'd cut any need for him to keep her alive. If she fell into the sea now, lost to the icy depths, he would be a widower, free to love and marry another woman.

The man had been hunting Jandeau for three years, a lunatic criminal who sought to annihilate Drostan's family. Would he risk all, including her, to prove himself to his family? Showing them that he'd do anything to make up for almost dooming them? Dooming them by letting Lia get close, close enough to trick him?

"Drostan," she said. He turned back to her. She could see the fire behind him, framing him in a glow. His gaze sought hers and held as if they moved slowly through time.

Boom!

The cannon blast from *The Beast* struck to the right, jerking

her from the platform. Lia's hands flailed at the dangling rope, but the chain fell, yanking on her neck. Burning cut along her palms as she tried to find traction on the rope, but she was dragged down by the heavy chain. She screamed, and the black, icy fingers of death slammed into her body with the salty sea.

Chapter Twenty-One

Drostan dove over the side of Jandeau's ship, his pointed fingers aiming toward Lia and the damn chain that would drag her under the surface. His eyes remained open so he wouldn't lose her in the dark. Flaming debris cast enough light that he saw exactly where she entered the water.

There was no room for error, no time to consider his need to keep Lia alive. He must save her no matter that she'd originally wished him and his clan harm.

He hit the icy sea, slicing into it without holding back, his need to contact some part of Lia so intense, he didn't care if he shot to the bottom of the deep sea to do it. His hands hit something soft. A body. His fingers curled into it, moving frantically for a hold. *Lia*. 'Twas her arm. Without letting go, he sought her other arm, grabbing it, pulling them both up until he had her around the chest. Bubbles streamed from his mouth and nose.

Realizing he was there, Lia clutched onto him, her fingers digging desperately into his shoulders. He grabbed the iron links that pulled her, lifting them. It was as if the sea tugged on the end. Lia kicked against the drag, her arms trying to swim to the surface. Luckily, she wore trousers, not deadly petticoats. The two of them worked together, Drostan kicking upward with the weight of the chain in his arms while she pulled with her arms. With all his muscles working hard, the surface with floating fire came closer. His chest burned from the need to inhale. *So close*. He kicked harder, his muscles burning as if running uphill despite the icy cold.

Breaking through, he gasped, his head turning to the splashing sound. "Lia!" She coughed, sucking in air, one hand at her throat where the shackle encircled her, as if she would claw the iron off. "Float, Lia," he yelled as he kicked underwater, holding the chain at the waterline. "Float on your back."

There'd been no time to shuck his boots, which made

treading water even harder. Muscles burning to keep the weight up, he searched for something to buoy them. *The Beast* was too far and there was no returning to Jandean's burning ship.

"Drostan!" The voice came from the darkness.

"We're here! Here!" he yelled.

Lia's arms moved on either side of her body, but she kept sinking. Drostan kicked harder so he could press his empty hand under her back, lifting her. She gazed up at him as if he were truly her lifeline, her lips open, her breaths shallow.

"Over there!" He heard a voice, which sounded like Callum.

Oars slapped the water as they neared. "She's chained around the neck," Drostan said, waiting for the dinghy to come alongside. "Take it." He surged upward, holding the chain, and hands took it from him. He sunk into the water in relief, his head going under for a moment. Surfacing, his hands pressed upward against Lia's back.

"Drostan," she said.

"I've got ye."

"Thank you," she whispered, breathing raggedly as if she sobbed. Her whole body shook as Drostan pushed her up to Adam. He and Callum lifted her aboard the small vessel before a backdrop of destruction.

"The ship might blow," Eagan called, already starting to row as Drostan hoisted himself over the side, falling exhausted into the hard bottom of the boat. The muscles in his legs and arms trembled after the exertion of keeping the damn chain and Lia afloat in the choppy swells.

Lia lay next to him as if they were two fish who'd been caught in a fisherman's net and pulled aboard. He tugged her sodden, frozen form into his arms as his brothers took up the oars. She shook, her face against his chest.

"You j...jumped in to...save me." Her words were jumbled. "When you could have gone after—"

"Aye," he said, pushing back the wet strands of hair from

her face. From the firelight around them, he could see the remorse etched into every feature. There were no lies there, no need for revenge, nothing but gratitude and regret. And he realized what had made him dive without a moment of hesitation. “Because I can’t lose ye, Lia.” He shook his head. “I would have come after ye up on Skye even if the tree hadn’t started to turn. Even if ye aren’t with child.”

Her face crumbled in tears as if she’d been given a reprieve from a death sentence, as if she couldn’t quite believe it. She buried her face in his chest. “I love you, Drostan, even if you will never believe me. And I would have found a way to get back to you. I swear it.”

She loved him? The words came from truth, he could hear it, could feel it in her hold on him. How she’d demanded he marry her in case one of them died so he would save his clan. He hugged her to his chest and closed his eyes.

The waves and debris battered against the sides of the dinghy as Drostan’s brothers rowed out from both ships.

Kaboom!

“Shite!” Beck yelled, and the brothers crouched low, covering their heads.

Drostan covered Lia as bits of wood rained down, hitting his back. But they were far enough out that what reached them wasn’t deadly.

Eagan straightened in his seat. “Jandeau’s new ship is blown to pieces. Hopefully, that devil was on it when it blew.”

Drostan didn’t care about any of that as long as he could get Lia out of the sea and into warm, dry blankets. He turned his face upward where Adam rowed. “Lia and I married while we were on Jandeau’s ship.”

Adam’s gaze snapped downward. “Ye married? Surrounded by pirates?”

“’Twas her idea,” Drostan said, hugging her close. “In case one of us died, and the curse decided I’d left her.”

They were all quiet for a long moment until Eagan spoke up.

“Clever.” Were they all weighing her actions? Drostan didn’t care; he’d seen the truth in her eyes.

Callum glanced over his shoulder at Drostan. “And rather telling.” Callum’s brow rose, as he looked at the half-drowned lass in Drostan’s arms. “Seems we have a new sister.”

“I plan to make it more official as soon as we reach Wolf Isle,” Drostan said, which meant he’d make sure to do so before the willow tree at Gylin Castle. No one said anything else. They rowed steadily toward *The Beast*. Even with the darkness around them, and the acrid smell of destruction, Drostan’s heart felt lighter.

Lia loved him.

...

Lia wrapped the warm cloak around her to guard against the morning chill. It was an hour past dawn as she hurried down the spiral staircase toward the Great Hall of Gylin Castle. From her window, she’d seen Drostan in the bailey.

It had been two days since they’d been pulled from the icy water and nursed, and she hadn’t had a chance to talk alone with him. She’d told him she loved him, and although he held her tightly, he hadn’t said the same.

Charles Duffie’s father, Chief of the MacDonalDs of Islay Isle, had sailed close to the Maclean ship and helped them round up the surviving pirates who had leaped from it like rats. Murdo Mackinnon had also been fished out of the water where he’d clung to a broad piece of gunwale. The pirates would be transported to Captain Wentworth of the English navy for trial. Claude JandeaU had not been found bobbing in the dark sea, which had put the five Macquarie brothers on edge. They would surely still be searching for the devil if Tor Maclean hadn’t called a halt to the hunt. They’d left JandeaU’s ship caught on rocks along Skye’s coast and returned to Wolf Isle and Mull.

Whether from their hasty marriage in the topcastle of JandeaU’s ship or Lia’s declaration of love, the willow tree’s

leaves looked healthy again. Lark and Adam's bairn had fought off the mild fever, and everyone had returned to Wolf Isle.

Lia smiled tentatively at Lark and Anna as she walked through the Great Hall. "I'm wrapped up and warm," she said to head off Lark's order to return to her bed. "I'll be but a moment." In silent, humble proof of their goodness, the women had been kind to her upon her return. They seemed to understand the terror she'd gone through and hinted at their own horrid life before coming to Wolf Isle.

Lia stepped out the double doors of the castle into the spring day. Any remaining shadows from the night were fading as if they were exhausted and easily vanquished. Drostan stood before the willow tree but turned at the sound of the door closing behind her.

Her heart felt full to bursting at the sight of him whole and well. His minor scratches and bruises looked well tended, and the brutal chill that had invaded his gaze when her note was read was gone. They stepped toward each other at the same time, meeting in the middle. Lia looked into his serious but kind eyes. Her middle flipped with hope.

"I can't believe we are here and not at the bottom of the sea," she said, shaking her head. "I am so grateful. For everything. For you." She held her breath as his hand rose, his thumb sliding across her cheek.

"Either way, we would be together." A slight grin turned up the corners of his mouth. "But I vastly prefer this."

He leaned down, meeting her upturned face with a kiss. It started soft, but as she breathed in his fresh scent and felt his warmth envelop her, she melted into him, losing herself in the feel of him. His arms slid around her and Lia's thoughts swam. She wished they were once again alone in his cozy barn loft. But Drostan pulled back with a haunted look on his face.

Her stomach clenched. "What is it?"

"Ye're not with child?" he asked, but she knew that Lark or Meg must have gotten word to him when her courses came

after her first night back at Gylin.

“No,” she said, feeling a tinge of loss and worry. Had he only married her because of the threat of a bastard? “Do you... I will give you an annulment,” she whispered.

Drostan blinked, surprise bending his brows. “Nay. But...” He glanced at the willow tree where the dagger still bled, embedded in the trunk. He took a full breath and let it flow back out before turning to meet her gaze. “Lia, lass. I...I may never be able to father a child. I’ve touched the dagger and tried to chop the damn tree down.” He stepped back from her as if building a wall between them. “Our father said that doing so, trying to end the curse that way, would render the man unable to father children.”

“Yet you thought I might be pregnant because the tree leaves were turning and John had a fever.”

“I wasn’t certain.” He rubbed his loose fist against his forehead, letting his hand continue up to stroke over his light brown hair until it ended up pinching the back of his neck. The morning sun had crept high enough to shine over the wall surrounding Gylin. Its bright rays gave his hair a golden sheen.

Drostan shook his head. “I don’t know what to believe now, but I wanted ye to know.” He reached to take her hand. “In case ye wish for an annulment.” He shook his head. “No more secrets between us.”

She pulled in a full breath, her lungs opening as her chest relaxed. “No more secrets.” She intertwined her fingers through his. “I’ll tell you this.” She leaned in. “I don’t really want to become swollen and sick, risking my life to birth a person in a process that nearly splits me in two.” She straightened. “If I do and ’tis yours...” She smiled. “Then ’tis fine, but if I do not, there seems to be an abundance of children already on Wolf Isle whom I can love. If a bairn is abandoned, perhaps we can take them as our own.”

She hadn’t realized how tight he’d been holding himself until she watched it ebb away like ice melting under a hot sun. His broad shoulders lowered, and the uneasy hardness of his face softened. He hadn’t said he loved her, but she would take

forgiveness as a start.

She leaned toward his ear. “And ’tis not like your jack is cursed,” she said and let her gaze drop to the front of his plaid. Was it her imagination or did it twitch beneath the light wool?

“’Tis cursed in that it shows itself randy and ready anytime ye come near me,” Drostan said, pulling her close against him where she could feel that she hadn’t imagined the growing hardness there.

A bubble of laughter came out of her. ’Twas a miracle when she’d thought she’d never laugh or even smile again. “If we stay wrapped up like this, no one will know how wanton you are.”

He inhaled gently along the skin above her ear. Sensation tickled down through her, releasing a stream of heat inside. He whispered, “They might know something is afoot if you’re divested of your petticoats.”

She smiled fully, a sly look in her eye. “Perhaps we should take this matter of yours somewhere private before we’re spotted.”

His brow rose, and she laughed as his smile turned into an assessing leer. But then his scandalous look softened, and he brushed her hair back from her face to meet her gaze fully. “I love ye, Lia lass.”

Lia’s breath stuttered in her chest. “I...” She blinked against the flood of happy tears that threatened to spill down her face. “I love you, too.” As several tears escaped, she drew a ragged breath. “And I am so sor—”

“I know. I am sorry, too, for turning my back on ye because of my hurt pride.”

She swallowed hard. “You’re forgiven.”

The corner of his mouth hitched upward. “And do ye forgive me for rescuing ye again?”

She smiled back. “Yes, because I rescued you, too.”

He huffed a laugh. “Aye, ye did just that.” He caught her cheek in his palm. “In so many ways.”

Drostan guided her mouth back to his, sealing their oaths of love. The kiss was gentle but strong, binding them together. They continued to kiss for long moments, the heat growing between them, as the willow's branches danced overhead.

Lia barely noticed the running of feet and laughter growing behind her.

"Huzzah!" A chorus of yells rose, and they broke the kiss. Drostan's brothers with their wives, and even the children who'd come up to the castle, were gathered in the bailey.

Lia laughed at the jubilant noise that showed what Lark and Anna's kindness had assured her. The Macquarie Clan had also forgiven her.

"I've found a cleric to marry ye for real," the elderly warrior, Rabbie, called as he walked out of the keep with a tart in his hand.

"The willow tree says they're already married," Callum said.

Rabbie continued, "He'll be here from Mull with Tor, Keir, and their families this afternoon."

Pip tugged on Lia's cloak. "Hester and I took in Sia. She sleeps with me every night, and I always make sure she's fed and safe." She wrapped her arms around herself. "She is the best cuddler." A tug on Lia's heart melted as the girl smiled brightly. "I love her, and she loves me."

"And me," little Hester said, swinging Pip's arm.

Lia squeezed Pip's hand. "Thank you." She looked at the younger girl, crouching down to her level. "And you." She looked up at Pip. "You will be her mama, and Hester can be her sweet auntie."

Pip nodded, looking quite happy and confident.

"That leaves Eagan to fall in love," Lark announced loudly behind Lia.

"Bloody hell." Eagan tugged on his chin, his gaze moving to the open portcullis like he wished to escape.

“We can help get Miss Lia ready for the wedding,” one of Anna’s sisters called, two other girls nodding with her.

The large, warrior-looking cook named Kofi emerged from the keep carrying a tray laden with rolls. The children squealed and followed him to a stump where he set it. Callum drew Anna over to them. “Is this the recipe ye told Kofi about?”

All around them, the bailey was filled with smiles and conversation as if a festival had broken out on an ordinary morning.

“’Tis a bit loud,” Drostan said above the din.

Lia shook her head, letting joy infuse her face. “’Tis perfect.” She leaned into his ear. “Although your cabin and all its private comfort is waiting for us.”

His smile broadened. “Aye. But I don’t think they’ll let us leave.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “We have all the time in the world.”



Follow the conclusion of The Brothers of Wolf Isle series with Eagan Macquarie in Book #5. The fifth brother must find his true love to finish breaking the infamous curse plaguing their clan. With his family parading lass after lass before him, he escapes into the forests of his home and meets a beautiful, clever lass who just might be a witch.

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Acknowledgments

Thank you, fabulous readers, for following the Macquarie brothers in their search for love and freedom from the Macquarie curse. With each book in the series, I want more and more to move onto Wolf Isle and become friends with the growing Macquarie Clan!

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Also...

At the end of each of my books, I ask that you, my awesome readers, please remind yourselves of the whispered symptoms of ovarian cancer. I am now a twelve-year survivor, one of the lucky ones. Please don't rely on luck. If you experience any of these symptoms consistently for three weeks or more, go see your GYN.

- Bloating
- Eating less and feeling full faster
- Abdominal pain
- Trouble with your bladder

Other symptoms may include indigestion, back pain, pain with intercourse, constipation, fatigue, and menstrual irregularities.

About the Author

[Heather McCollum](#) is a *USA Today* bestselling author of historical romance full of adventure and touched with spice. Brawny Highlanders with golden hearts and feisty heroines are her favorites. She has over twenty-five romance novels published and is the 2022 winner of the National Excellence in Romance Fiction Award.

When she's not creating vibrant characters and magical adventures on the page, she's roaring her own battle cry in the war against ovarian cancer. Ms. McCollum slew the cancer beast and resides with her very own Highland hero, a rescued golden retriever, and three kids in the wilds of suburbia on the mid-Atlantic coast. For more information about Ms. McCollum, please visit www.HeatherMcCollum.com.

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