

*New York Times and USA Today
Bestselling Author*

TANYA ANNE
CROSBY

ON BENDED KNEE

BOOK #3 THE HIGHLAND BRIDES

ON
BENDED
KNEE

TANYA ANNE
CROSBY

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Dedication

To brothers—because I have two of the best.

Praise for Tanya Anne Crosby

“Crosby’s characters keep readers engaged...” – *Publishers Weekly*
“Tanya Anne Crosby sets out to show us a good time and accomplishes that with humor, a fast paced story and just the right amount of romance.” – *The Oakland Press* “Romance filled with charm, passion and intrigue ...” –
Affaire de Coeur

“Ms. Crosby mixes just the right amount of humor ... Fantastic, tantalizing!” – *Rendezvous* “Tanya Anne Crosby pens a tale that touches your soul and lives forever in your heart.” – *Sherrilyn Kenyon #1 NYT Bestselling Author*

Books In This Series

The MacKinnon's Bride

Lyon's Gift

On Bended Knee

Lion Heart

Highland Song

Look for Highland Steel early 2014

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Prologue



Colin Mac Brodie was surrounded by laughter.

People were drawn to him—as Seana was—as everyone couldn’t help but be.

Watching from a safe distance, under the shade of an old elm, Seana sat nibbling on a tart she’d snatched from somebody’s window where it had been laid to cool. She felt guilty, but hunger had driven her to it.

Just now, the children were all ooohing and awwwing over some new dagger Colin’s da had given him. The boys were envious and the girls all properly impressed while Colin swaggered before them—as only Colin could—beaming as he sheathed the knife, then drew it from his belt.

Much as Seana would have liked to see it too, she knew better than to join them.

Sudden jeers and laughter caught her attention and she peered up to see that Lagan MacKinnon was looking in her direction. She froze. Seana didn’t like Lagan. He had cruel eyes that were full of anger and envy. And just now, they were filled with hatred directed at Seana.

“Thief!” he shouted and threw a pebble in her direction. It skimmed the dirt and smacked the tree behind Seana and her heart beat faster.

She wasn’t afraid, she told herself.

“Ugly lame witch!” Lagan persisted.

Seana willed herself to remain calm.

They would have their fun and it would pass—as always it did. Lame in one leg as she had been born, Seana was used to the jeers. People seemed afraid of her because of her limp leg, although she didn’t precisely know why.

She held her breath as Lagan stooped to pick up another stone, for it seemed this was far more cruel than usual. She braced herself as he threw it at her, hitting her in the shoulder this time. She didn’t cry out, but tears

pricked at her eyes, and she swallowed the wave of grief that rose to choke her breath away.

“Colin doesna like ye!” Lagan shouted, “Go away, witch!”

Seana felt like sinking into the ground. She didn’t respond, didn’t dare.

They all turned to Colin, teasing him suddenly... about Seana.

“Marry her, Colin!” Lagan taunted, laughing cruelly as he pushed at his shoulder. “Go on and wed the ugly witch!”

Colin pushed Lagan back, and cast Seana a harried glance.

Seana swallowed.

They were only teasing him, she knew as she had oft seen them do, but she realized Colin must not like it.

“She stole that tart from your minny!” one of the girls said to Lagan, casting Seana a disgusted glance.

Lagan’s eyes narrowed upon her. “Thief!” he shouted. “Hobbling wart-faced hag!” He seized Colin’s dagger suddenly, and threw it in Seana’s direction, snickering maliciously. “Go and get it, Colin!”

The dagger barely missed Seana, landing at her side. She blinked, thinking it might have had her eye out.

“Damn, Lagan, ye arse!” Colin railed.

“Go on—get it!” Lagan taunted. But Colin merely stood there, looking at Seana, his expression one of frustration.

Seana’s heart hammered as she met his gaze and held it... och, but he had the most beautiful blue eyes.

He was afraid to come and get his dagger, she realized. But there was no hatred in his eyes, only fear.

Were they afraid that the weakness in her leg was contagious? Seana didn’t understand, but she felt—as she had countless times in her near eleven years—like some vermin to be stamped out.

Swallowing her own fear, she reached out, taking Colin’s dagger into her hands. Amidst laughter and more jeers she stood, though it took some effort to rise to her feet. She straightened her shoulders, faced them, and then took a fortifying breath and walked toward the throng of kids, keeping her gaze fixed upon Colin for strength.

“Look, look!” another boy shouted. “The cripple can walk!”

Seana ignored the laughter and walked straight up to Colin, her cheeks stinging with warmth and her eyes burning with tears she refused to shed.

She handed him his knife. His companions all gibed him fiercely, shoving him.

Colin snatched it from her.

“Where did ye get the tart?” someone taunted. “Did ye steal it from Lagan’s minny like Edith said?”

Seana tried to ignore them.

“Colin and Seana kissing in a tree!” they began to sing.

“Go away!” Colin shouted at her suddenly, clearly buckling under the pressure. “I dinna like it when you follow us, do ye hear! I dinna like you, Seana!”

Seana flinched at his cruelty, but her feet would not budge. She kept her gaze affixed to his, though she didn’t know why. Her heart felt as though it were breaking.

“Go away!” he shouted again when the din grew louder. He gave her that look—that look she couldn’t bear to see—so filled with loathing and revulsion.

This time Seana turned and fled.

“And dinna come back stupid thief!” he shouted at her back.

Seana tried to run faster, but her bad leg would not allow it. Tears coursed down her cheeks. All at once rocks began to fly at her back, but she didn’t dare turn to see who had cast them. One hit her in the back of the head, and she cried out, more in fear than in pain. Stunned, she did turn to look then, and met Colin Mac Brodie’s gaze. He was standing there with a strange expression upon his face.

Why? she asked silently.

How could ye do it?

She had only dared to love him—as did everybody else.

His companions all laughed at her, shouting names, but he just stood there, looking at her, and in that instant, Seana believed she hated him.

She turned and fled again, running until she could run no longer... running until she heard her name on the wind.

“Seana!”

She turned to see that Broc Ceannfhionn had followed her. Seana stumbled to the ground, tripping over her bad leg. Frustrated, she sat and wept... and Broc came hesitantly and sat beside her.

Broc Ceannfhionn was older than she was, older than Colin as well, though she didn’t think by much.

“He didna mean it,” Broc defended his friend. He was not the least out of breath like Seana was. “’Twas Lagan’s fault to be sure.”

Seana didn’t care. She began to sob in earnest.

“Och,” he exclaimed, and reached out awkwardly to hug her. “Dinna pay Colin any heed, Seana. He isna so bad.” He wiped away her tears. “Dinna cry,” he begged her.

For Broc, Seana tried not to cry, but if she lived a thousand years, she didn’t think she could ever forget that look upon Colin Mac Brodie’s face... the sound of his laughter. If Broc were to look at her that way, too, she thought she would die.

She peered up at the awkward giant and he smiled down at her. Seana wiped her face with her sleeve.

“Ye know how it is when you’re with friends,” he tried to explain, giving her a sympathetic look. “He didna mean any of it, Seana.”

Seana shook her head. “I have no friends.”

“Aye, ye do,” Broc countered. “Ye have me.”

Before today, the two of them had rarely spoken.

Seana blinked, and he nodded at her, as though to assure her it was true.

“You will be my friend?”

He nodded again, more resolutely. “And if ye should need me, only call,” he said. “Dinna suffer their taunts any longer. Come and tell me, Seana, and I’ll give them a bloody nose for their efforts!”

Seana smiled. “Truly?”

He nodded. “Truly.”

He was the only one who had ever dared call himself her friend. “You will not regret it, Broc Ceannfhionn! I swear that one day I will find a way to repay you!” She threw her arms around him, daring to hug him with gratitude.

“Och, Seana, ye dinna have to repay me!” He pried her away, chucking her beneath the chin. “That bonny smile is thanks enough.” He winked at her.

Her heart quickened and her cheeks heated, but she smiled shyly up at him. And in that instant, Seana truly thought she loved him. Someday, she swore to herself... it didn’t matter that he said she did not have to... someday... she didn’t know when or how, but she was going to find a way to show him Broc Ceannfhionn how much this meant to her.

Someday...

Chapter 1



Colin Mac Brodie was the biggest rogue in all of Scotia.

He was also the key to Seana's greatest desire; Broc Ceannfhionn.

Since they'd been wee ones together, Seana had loved Broc, had dreamed of someday becoming his wife. She wanted to take care of him, as he had done for her so oft.

She would never forget the day she'd first spoken to him, the same day Colin Mac Brodie had broken her heart.

But Seana wouldn't fool herself.

Broch had merely felt sorry for her that day. How could he not have? She'd been a lame child, scarce able to walk. Since then, the years had been kind to her. With much determination, and the help of her da, she'd strengthened her leg and now the limp was barely noticeable. She'd had nothing to offer Broch until now, and had begun to fear the day might never come that she might. But now she was strong and able and ready to be the wife she knew he needed and deserved. Broch was a kind and good man, and Seana thought she might be able to make him a good home. She only needed a bit of help to convince him.

Why was she such a bloody coward?

Colin couldn't hurt her anymore.

Well—she peered at him out of the corner of her eyes, her gaze acknowledging the strong lean lines of his body—he *could* hurt her, but not even Colin Mac Brodie was so cruel a man to hit a woman. Aside from that, there wasn't much to be afraid of, still, she hesitated approaching him.

"Milksoy," she muttered to herself. "You're worse than a bloody Sassenach!" And she frowned in wholehearted disapproval at the feet that stood planted so firmly to the ground.

She had come to this wedding not to celebrate, for while these were not her enemies, neither were they her friends. Nay, she came to speak with Colin Mac Brodie—though it galled her that she should need his help. But

she was not so proud that she was willing to lose the man she loved. Everyone was getting married, it seemed—the MacKinnon, Meghan Brodie, and soon enough Alison MacLean. It was only a matter of time before Broc would wed, as well. *Now* was the time to act—before she lost him forever. So what was she waiting for?

Seana frowned as she contemplated the answer to that question.

Her gaze wandered to the happy bride and lingered wistfully. Meghan had been the envy of every woman in Scotia, with her beautiful copper hair and her perfect face. If aught at all, the Brodie women had been cursed with loveliness, Seana thought, not madness.

Meghan was everything Seana was not, but somehow Seana could never envy her. Colin's sister was beautiful, aye, but she'd lived as lonely a life as Seana had.

Of course, Seana had her da, but Seana's da had never been her strength. Rather, Seana had been his.

Speaking of which... She turned her face up to the sky to gauge the hour. It was growing late and her da was like to be hungry by now. For most of the guests, the gaiety was only just beginning, but if Seana didn't make her way home soon, her da would be asleep for the night and without supper. Nor did she relish the thought of making her way through the woodlands once night had deepened the shadows of the forest to black. She was not afraid, of course, but it would simply be too dark to keep to the path.

Just go talk to him, she bade herself. He cant' hurt you.

Still she hesitated.

Meghan's wedding celebration had been a grand one. Her brothers had denied her nothing, despite that the nuptials had come about so suddenly. The festivity began early in the day and would continue until the wee hours of the morn, until the men were drunk enough to kiss the ground and their women were forced to drag them home by their feet.

Seana would have loved to have brought her da, but her da would no longer leave their home, so Seana was forced to come alone, and to bring home her tales.

Belonging to neither the MacKinnon nor the Brodie clan, and having lived practically alone most of her life, Seana had few friends, and fewer yet who were so close to Broc as Colin Mac Brodie. In fact, she doubted anybody knew Broc better than Colin did—though Colin was certainly his

own best friend. Still... who better to teach her how to win the man she loved than the man who knew him best?

Aside from that... neither did anyone know better what attracted a man to a woman than did Colin Brodie—rogue that he was!

Nay, there was no way around it; she needed help, and Colin was the only one she thought could provide it. She had already tried all her wiles with Broc; nothing seemed to work. Broc remained blissfully unaware of her interest, if not of her presence. He was such a sweet clod of a man, and the thought of him, as always, brought a gentle smile to her lips.

She shook her head in disgust as she considered her options... short of asking him outright to wed with her, she had tried all she knew to do.

Colin Mac Brodie was her last resort.

Together she and her father had for years made the *uisge beatha* for trade with the neighboring clans, but they wouldn't need to trade any longer if she were to wed with Broc. She was weary of working all alone, and her da was no longer in any condition to help. He was ill and needed a new home, one that wasn't made of piled stones.

Time to swallow your pride, Seana!

Her gaze returned to Colin, and she thought it likely he did not even remember her. She had been careful to stay out of his way all these years.

There was nothing to be afraid of, she told herself—except that *she* remembered. The memory of his cruelty would be imprinted upon her heart forever.

Night was falling.

Beginning to feel a growing sense of urgency, Seana searched out Broc to no avail. As tall as he was, she had been able to keep him within sight most of the day, but he had vanished for the moment, and was nowhere near his friend's side. He and Colin were apart for now... but no telling how much longer...

Seana straightened, swung her hands behind her back, locking them together and started in his direction, but then stopped.

Colin was no better than she, she assured herself—though he most certainly must think otherwise. Her gaze returned to Colin Mac Brodie and her brow lifted. The years had been overly kind to him, she thought bitterly. He scarce needed those teeth to be quite so blinding white nor that hair the color of gold at twilight!

How many hearts had he broken without even the least concern for them?

One too many, Seana thought with no small measure of disgust.

Hers had been one of them, but, of course, she had been young and stupid!

Even as she stood there watching, two young lasses sauntered past Colin, giggling to each other and casting him flirtatious glances. Seana rolled her eyes and thought for sure she didn't have the stomach to watch.

For those women Colin decided to favor with one of his smiles there was never the least chance for escape. Seana would like to have crawled into his bed one night whilst he slept and yanked out a few of those gleaming white teeth—for the good of all womankind!

What man had the right to win and throw away so many hearts?

The longer she thought about it, the more incensed it made her. Och, but Colin Mac Brodie ought to have been relieved of his manhood the moment of his birth! He didn't deserve it! Dirty misbegotten scoundrel that he was!

In an attempt to calm herself, she forced her gaze to the happy couple. For Meghan's sake, Seana hoped the Sassenach would love her truly. Meghan certainly deserved it, if anyone did.

It was amazing how two people could come from the same womb and be so different.

Shaking her head, she cast a withering glance at Meghan's brother, though he remained oblivious—as always—to her glares.

From what Seana knew of Meghan, she was kind and sweet, as well as lovely, and the fact that she'd cherished Alison MacLean as a friend told Seana much.

Alison MacLean, like Seana, had been born different, and though Seana did not know Alison well at all, she hadn't missed the way others looked at the poor lass. For Alison, it was her crossed eyes that made everyone uncomfortable. For Seana it had been her twisted limb.

And they had yet another thing in common... Colin Mac Brodie.

Alison had been enamored with Colin for too long, and Seana, for one, was pleased to know that Leith Mac Brodie had enough good sense to look beyond those crossed eyes to the heart within. Seana hoped Colin would be sorry some day.

For herself, she hoped Colin's bloody balls would rot and fall off and he would find himself childless and without a wife to warm his bed at night. Wouldn't that serve him right?

A tiny smile crept to her lips.

As she stood there, the voices of the two girls who had cast him longing glances carried to her ears. Seana couldn't help but eavesdrop. It wasn't her fault, of course. They were talking entirely too loud.

"He's so beautiful?" the more petite of the two exclaimed. Her beautiful golden curls framed a perfectly lovely face, one without freckles or the slightest discolor from the sun.

"Aye!" said the taller of the two so excitedly that Seana thought she would choke. "Did you see him look at me—I know he did!"

"Nay!" argued the other, her lovely face turning suddenly offensive, "It was me he smiled at!"

Seana rolled her eyes. Were they truly going to fight over the knave? Silly wenches! He wasn't worth it, didn't they know?

The most wicked thought suddenly entered her head.

It was whispered behind her back that she was a child of the mischievous brownies, and perchance she was, because she could seldom resist temptation. A thief she was not, but mischievous, aye. Her da had said it too oft for her to deny it.

Suppressing an impish grin she turned to the woman standing beside her as the two girls passed her by and said in the loudest voice she thought convincing, "Och, but isn't it a shame about Colin Mac Brodie?"

The woman standing beside her, whom Seana knew not at all, stopped an animated conversation with her neighbor at once, turned to Seana, and asked with narrowed brows, "What about Colin Mac Brodie?"

Seana tried not to laugh when the two girls turned to listen as well. The smaller of the two made a point to stop and fret with her shoe, babbling some nonsense about an imaginary pebble pricking her toe. The other joined her, making a ridiculous fuss about her friend's shoe.

Seana had to refrain from laughing.

"Och," Seana said, in her most concerned tone. "didn't you hear!"

The older woman beside her shook her head, and the curiosity in her clear blue eyes nearly made Seana giggle. Whatever else Colin was, he certainly made interesting fodder for gossip. It seemed everyone wanted to know about Colin Brodie!

"Oh my!" Seana said with feigned gravity, and shook her head. "I thought everyone knew! But now I should not speak out of turn." She turned away from the older woman, her gaze returning to the happy bride and groom, pretending to politely dismiss the topic.

Lyon Montgomerie's heart was in his eyes, his adoration in every sweep of his gaze over his beloved Meghan.

Seana sighed, thinking it would be wonderful to someday find someone to gaze at her like that. Her dream was that Broc would someday look at her just so and she dared to hope he would finally look at her and realize she was no longer that pitiful little lass she had been so long ago.

The two girls at once began to whisper fervently to one another. "What do ye think she knows?" Seana heard one ask the other.

"I dunno!"

Seana pretended not to hear them, but it was all she could do not to burst into laughter.

The older woman tapped Seana on the shoulder. "Tell me, what you've heard, lass. I have a daughter, you see..." She gave Seana a meaningful nod.

Seana sighed.

Yet another victim.

Did no woman have the bloody good sense to stay away from Colin Mac Brodie?

"Of course." Seana nodded sympathetically. "You should know then..." She bent close to the older woman. "Well, you see," she began, placing a hand to her mouth, in a gesture of utmost secrecy.

The two girls ceased fussing with the shoe, going entirely still as they listened to Seana, obviously not wanting to miss a word.

"I hear Colin Mac Brodie is wastin' away," Seana said in a loud whisper her attentive audience was certain to hear. And she gave a knowing nod.

"Och!" the older woman exclaimed. "Whatever do ye mean?"

"Well," Seana continued, just a little softer now, making the girls work a little harder for their gossip. The two girls leaned closer. "I cannot know it for certain myself, you see... but I do know someone who does... they say his manhood is shriveling away. Soon he willna even be able to conceive bairns!"

A look of horror entered the older woman's eyes. "Och, shriveling away, ye say!"

A collective gasp came from the two girls.

Seana nodded soberly. "Aye," she said. "'Tis true—and it was told to me by someone who saw *it* with her own two eyes, so ye can see why I canna

say who. But, aye, she said 'tis shriveled away... some cok wastin' disease, she believes!"

The older woman crossed herself. "A penance," she said ominously. "For all his wicked ways!"

Seana's brows lifted. "Mayhap," she agreed and nodded portently.

"Just like his da!"

All of the Brodie men, except Leith, had in some way been tainted by their blood, it seemed. Their sires and grandsires had been rogues, all of them. Their women had been beautiful and sweet and yet their men's eyes had roved. And Colin... Colin was most certainly just like his da!

All at once, the older woman, the two girls and Seana, peered in Colin's direction.

He stood there completely oblivious to their whispers, and Seana, once again, nearly burst out with laughter as the two girls suddenly put their heads together, whispered something fervent between them, and darted away into the crowd to spread their newly gleaned gossip.

"May God be with the lad!" the older woman said gravely and crossed herself once more.

"Aye," Seana agreed, nodding.

May God be with him because he was going to need all the help he could get if Seana ever had her way with him!

Rotten misbegotten cur!

Feeling quite emboldened suddenly, she slipped away from the older woman and made her way toward Colin Brodie.

It wasn't as though she were asking for charity. Nay, she was willing to give him in return her most valuable possession—something all the clans had long coveted and he'd be a bloody fool if he refused to help her.

Chapter 2



A wedding wasn't precisely Colin's idea of something to celebrate.

He damned well hoped his sister understood what she had gotten herself into. For some reason he'd never imagined Meghan wedding all, but to see her bound to some devil Sassenach was enough to rot his bloody gut— way worse than this rotten *uisge beatha* Leith had purchased. He tossed out the contents of his tankard, grimacing over the burn in his gut.

Where the hell was Broc?

He'd left to get them both some good ale. Neither of them had been able to stomach the *uisge beatha*, but Broc had yet to return and Colin needed something to wash away this bitter taste from his mouth.

It wasn't easy to stand by and watch Meghan give herself to the enemy. It wasn't easy to stand back and swallow his pride. In fact, he'd prefer to be carving the Sassenach's heart out, but would content himself with a simple tankard of decent ale. Damn, but his bloody cup had long been empty and his best friend was nowhere to be found.

He smiled at a young lass who passed him by. Deep blue eyes and pale golden hair, not unlike his own, with a smile that warmed his loins.

Women were his greatest downfall.

Broc, on the other hand, seemed perfectly content to keep his own company. Colin had never known a man so at ease with himself and the world. And truth to tell, he envied that in his friend. It was partly what drew Colin to Broc, though Colin was only beginning to realize it. Something was missing in his own life, and it seemed Broc held the key to whatever that *something* might be.

Colin would be damned, however, if he'd live the life of a bloody monk. Mayhap it was good enough for Broc, but it was a miserable prospect for Colin.

Automatically, his gaze was drawn toward a fiery-haired beauty with deep green eyes who cast him a shy backward glance. She stood alongside her

mother, holding her infant brother in her arms... or perchance her son, though Colin hoped not. He winked at her, admiring the rosy flush that crept into her sweet round cheeks.

Women were beautiful.

Women were godsend.

He stood there, admiring the red-haired wench, imagining the heat of her skin upon his lips... until he was rudely interrupted.

“Dinna tell me you’d bed a man’s wife, Colin Mac Brodie!”

Colin cast an annoyed glance to the bearer of the voice, offended by her insinuation. He didn’t recognize the face, however. Black hair framed a bonny face that had grown tawny beneath the sun’s many kisses. Lips as pink as the petals of a rose were pursed in disapproval. Brilliant green eyes glared back at him. He was stunned, at first, by the animosity apparent there.

No woman had ever looked at him that way.

What the devil had he done to deserve her rancor?

“I have *never* cuckolded a man in all my life!” he argued.

She lifted a brow, and peered up at him, her hands going behind her back in obvious challenge. It was clear she didn’t believe him. “Nay?” she asked. “Why? Because ye haven’t the heart to tangle with her man? Or because, God forbid, ye should have some wee bit of honor after all?”

Who was this wench who dared to speak to him so?

Colin stared down at her with knit brows, trying to remember when he might have ever crossed her path...

Surely he had scorned her some time before... or her sister mayhap. He could not fathom why else he should be the victim of her scathing tongue. And yet... he could not imagine ever having scorned that lovely face. Nay, she wasn’t beautiful in the way his sister was, but she was lovely nevertheless. Those eyes were the cool, vivid green of a forest glade, and that skin... soft looking despite the deep color it bore. And those lips... of a sudden he had the urge to see them pursed... though not with scorn.

“What ails ye lass?” he asked, nonplused. “You look like you’ve been sucking sour berries.” He winked at her, trying to lighten her mood. “A smile would suit that bonny face far better!”

“Aye?” She raised one brow contemptuously. “And what if I happen to like sucking sour berries?” She raised herself up on tiptoes then, leaning toward him defiantly.

Saucy wench.

He'd like to give her something to suck, he thought, and his lips curved into a roguish smile.

"So suck them," he relented.

Dismissing her, he turned his gaze, if not his full attention, toward his sister and her new Sassenach husband. He watched them dance together, trying to ignore the she-devil at his side.

Wench.

With hair as black as hers she was like to have a disposition as wicked as Eve's sin.

Would she be wicked in bed? he couldn't help but wonder, and the thought quickened his breath just a little.

Those fine lips were made for more than sucking berries, he'd warrant.

She didn't leave him, he noticed, but stood stubbornly by his side, waiting to torture him a little more. Well, she was doing a fine bloody job without even opening her mouth, didn't she realize.

Her sweet scent drifted to his nostrils, taunting him... rosemary... and sunshine... and... something else he was hopelessly addicted to. *Woman.* He inhaled deeply and held his breath, savoring the pleasurable scent.

If she didn't get herself away from him—and soon—he was going to drag her into the woods and have his way with those fine firm breasts that taunted him in his peripheral.

Och, but how long had it been since he'd been with a woman? A day? A week? A month? He felt suddenly famished... as though it had been bloody years. His mouth watered at the thought of kissing those impertinent lips, and his loins tightened in response.

She was watching Montgomerie with his sister, Colin realized, and he thought he heard her sigh.

"Meghan is so beautiful," she said, and Colin nodded in agreement. She sighed again and he turned to look at her. Her expression was wistful, though not the least envious.

"She is," he agreed, studying her face.

So was she, didn't she realize?

Few women were gifted with the sublime perfection of Meghan's beauty, but Colin had come to see rare beauty in almost all women. All but for a few who had been stricken with misfortune, like Alison MacLean. That face of hers was not so terrible, but Colin could scarce look at her for the

deformity of her eyes. He felt badly if he'd treated her unkindly, but such impairments often made him recoil deep inside. It angered him, often, that he could not stomach them, but he could not help it.

"Ye dinna even remember me do you?" she asked, and his gaze was drawn downward to the tapping of her toes.

His gaze returned to her face. He stared, trying to place her. Something about her was vaguely familiar though he swore he'd never set eyes upon her before today. Something about those green eyes, however, unnerved him just the same.

Auld Angus of the MacKinnon's, white-haired and red-eyed, passed by in that instant, singing drunkenly, swinging a tankard of uisge in hand...

"I have me a gentil cok!

He croweth alla the day!

He makes me risen early, my matins for to say!

Ohhhhh, yea, I have me a gentil cok!"

He stopped to wink at Colin's mystery woman and then muttered to himself. "Bah, who needs to wed anyway! She wadna even let me look at all the bonny lasses—pluck out my eyes!" He nodded at Colin, and exclaimed, "Dinna get yoursel' no bride, lad! Ye dinna need one!" He waved his hand in warning and started along his merry way once more. "I can look at what pleases me!" he muttered drunkenly, "and no one can stop me! Yah, that's right!" he said, and his voice faded into the crowd. "I have me a gentil cok..."

Colin chuckled and turned back to see that his mystery woman was staring at him, waiting... for what?

Bloody hell, had he sampled her sweet wares and completely forgot? Was it possible?

His brows knit. Och, but he prided himself on his powers of recollection. He relished the treasured hoard of memories he had stored... every name of every woman he had ever kissed, every sweet shuddering breath he had ever heard... every melodic note of every whimper... every luscious scent...

He shook his head. Damn, but he didn't remember.

"Nay, lass," he admitted a little abashedly. "I dinna remember ye."

She nodded, looking quite smug with his response. “Of course not. And why should ye?”

Her cute little nose crinkled in what Colin interpreted as contempt. Well, he could not help that he couldn’t remember. His memory was usually very good, and he decided that he couldn’t possibly have forgotten her had their encounter been anything more than a simple halloo.

He waited for her to enlighten him, thinking that mayhap she had the wrong man, but she simply stared at him, her brows knitting, as though she were trying to read his thoughts.

A dog’s bark drew his attention.

He tore his gaze away from his mystery woman long enough to turn and see that Merry, Broc’s ever faithful four-legged companion, was weaving her way beneath the bare legs of his kinsmen. The sight of her brought a smile to his lips. Wherever Broc was, Merry was. The two were inseparable.

“’Tis about damned time!” he muttered to himself. He was growing as dry as a stone waiting for Broc to return.

Merry, the sweet mutt, came leaping at him, perching her paws upon his chest to lap at his face.

“Hell and be damned!” Colin exclaimed.

“Wretched beast! Your master has taught ye naught but rudeness! No kisses!” he demanded, and jerked his face backward, managing to avoid a full slathering of his cheek. Her slobbery tongue grazed his chin. He wiped it upon his shoulder and then patted Merry upon the head, “Yah, yah!” he said, “I like ye too, auld bitch!” His hands went about her to steady them both.

“At least she does not have fleas any longer,” he turned to tell his mystery woman. “Thanks to MacKinnon’s bride...”

She was gone.

He searched the crowd for some sign of her, but she had vanished—not a trace of her save the scent that lingered at his side.

She’d left him talking to himself. Now why had she gone and done that?

He turned and frowned at the dog still panting in his face. “How rude was that?” he asked Merry. “She could have at least bid me g’nite, dinna ye think?”

He couldn’t recall ever having been discarded so easily by a woman. Merry inched her paws up over his shoulder, turned her snout up and panted

at the sky, and Colin's frown deepened.

"Ye must have scared her away with that foul breath of yours. Gadamn dog!" he grumbled to himself, fanning at his face. He'd had a bonny woman at his side—how the devil had he been left embracing a stinkin' dog?

This was not his day—his baby sister had gone and wedded a thieving Sassenach and his best friend's dog was his only dance partner!

Broch tapped him on the shoulder suddenly. "That's my woman you're messing with," he said, and his grin was so wide Colin thought it would split his face.

"Whoreson," Colin said and pushed the dog away. Merry returned to all four paws and sat before him, panting and wagging her tail happily.

Broch laughed.

"Tis about bloody time ye made you're way back!" Colin said, his mood soured at being abandoned for the second time in one day.

If possible, Broch's smile widened. "Aye, well, I'd have come sooner but for a rumor I overheard." He handed Colin a tankard of ale.

Colin lifted both brows. "Rumor? Och, dinna tell me ye've taken to gossiping like an auld woman, Broch!"

Broch's good humor remained. "This one was particularly interesting, I thought. Seems I heard some poor oaf has shriveled nuts!"

Colin's face screwed. "You mean to say you kept my ale from me all that time just to listen to gossip about some man's bloody balls? Christ!"

Broch lifted a brow. "Aye, but not just any man's balls." He chuckled. "*Your* balls, Colin Mac Brodie!"

It took an instant for Broch's words to register, and then Colin exclaimed a bit too loudly, "My balls!"

Broch burst into laughter and couldn't stop. His hulking shoulders shook with mirth.

"What the hell are ye talking about? My balls?" Colin asked again.

Broch nodded, not quite able to speak for his laughter.

"Och, I dinna have shriveled balls!" Colin protested, and his indignant exclamation drew the attention of everyone in their immediate vicinity.

Broch laughed all the harder.

"Well, did ye speak up and tell them?" Colin asked, heartily offended now.

Broch gave him an insulted look. "Ye want me to speak up in defense of your balls? I dinna think so Colin Mac Brodie!" He waved his chin in

Merry's direction. "I have enough rumors of my own to crush with that bloody mutt of mine sleeping in my bed! Ye can bloody well defend your own balls!"

"Gadamn!" Colin exclaimed, and lifted his tankard to his lips. He turned the bottom up and downed it all at once, then wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "This has not been my day," he muttered. "Not my day at all!"

Time to get drunk, and to bloody hell with women! God's truth but they were the bane of his existence.

Chapter 3



Seana had spent far too many hours at Meghan's wedding trying to muster her courage, and then when, at last, she'd confronted Colin, she'd spent the little time she'd had provoking him instead.

She was still kicking herself for it.

Although she didn't pretend to like him, she had thought herself long past her anger toward him. She had spent years, in fact, lifting herself above such spitefulness.

So why had she been reduced to such bitterness today?

It wasn't good for the soul, she reminded herself, to dwell in anger. Too oft it only hurt the bearer, because the receiver was scarce aware, or didn't care anyway.

Colin Mac Brodie might deserve all the ill will she could summon for him, but it didn't behoove her to give her energy to such wasteful feelings.

Nor, in fact, would it get her what she really wanted from him.

And that, she decided, was the most important thing. She wanted—needed—to wed Broc Ceannfhionn. Life was hard, and she didn't wish to spend the rest of it alone.

She felt the knot in her dress slipping and stopped to secure the bread she had stashed in her skirt. She hadn't snatched it from the celebration only to lose it now.

Och, she was weary, but as soon as she saw to her da, she was going to have to rush out to tend the *uisge*. The next batch was for the MacLean, who intended to purchase it for his daughter's wedding celebration. And the barrel thereafter would be his, as well, a gift from Seana to Alison. Though Seana didn't know her well, Alison held a special place in Seana's heart. She was very happy for MacLean's daughter.

Alison and Meghan, both, were lasses that Seana would've loved dearly to have called friends, and the thought of Alison surrounded by sweet little Leiths made Seana smile.

Colin Mac Brodie was going to choke on his envy some day when he saw what a fine, fine wife the MacLean's daughter was going to make his brother! And Seana would love to be near the day he realized beauty sometimes blinded one to the ugliest of hearts. It would serve Colin right to wed someone whose face was beautiful but whose soul was black. Didn't he know that sometimes the greatest treasures were found covered in the deepest mud? A little love and care to brush it clean was all that was needed.

A smile would suit that bonny face much better.

Seana's brows drew together at the memory of his words.

So bloody what if he'd called her bonny! He couldn't seem to help himself. He probably called every woman bonny... at least every woman whose face and body was perfect enough not to turn his gut. As for Alison or Seana... he was too empty-headed to see beyond their faults.

But Seana didn't care!

Nor did she care if he had a perfect smile, or if the blue of his eyes were like the pale blue of a summer sky.

It was Broc she wanted.

Not Colin.

And she wanted children, too. She wanted laughter, and little hands tugging at her skirts. She wanted to care for Broc and mend his shirts.

She wanted kisses and a warm body next to her in bed at night—all those things, and more.

She frowned at that thought.

The thing was... try though she might, she could not quite envision herself kissing Broc.

Mayhap because she'd never kissed a man before, and didn't know how it was done?

Broc was certainly a beautiful specimen of a man, so tall and strong, with golden hair and all his teeth. Seana had no problem imagining how a woman might wish to kiss him. She was certain, in fact, that the reason he was not wed as yet, was simply because he was too tall to see the way women ogled him. He looked eternally over their heads, oblivious to their longing glances—hers as well.

Broc was going to make some very fortunate woman a wonderful husband, and Seana intended for that woman to be her.

Tomorrow, bright and early, she was going to seek out Colin once more, and beg his help in winning Broc. She only needed to know a bit about the gentle giant... what sort of women did Broc like? And how should she act? Mayhap, even, Colin would speak to Broc in her behalf... or simply make him aware of Seana's interest. She didn't know precisely what she wanted from Colin, though he certainly seemed the expert in matters between men and women.

She nodded, pleased with her plan, as vague as it was.

She wasn't about to let herself lose the next opportunity when it arose, else she'd spend the rest of her life alone... with only a bloody cat whose complete trust and affection she was never going to win.

Her gaze sought out the shadow moving alongside her in the gathering darkness of the forest.

Wretched cat!

Seana would have liked to think it had grown fond of her and loved her so dearly that it could not part with her company, but she knew better. It followed her everywhere, that much was certain, but it had never allowed Seana to pet it. She might come close enough to touch it, but it never remained to be loved. It darted away the instant it felt her touch upon its sleek black fur.

"I see you," she told the nearly invisible cat. "I think you like to torture me, rotten beast!"

Her father had found the animal years back, when his eyes had only begun to go bad. He had gone out to check his spirits and had returned with the cat he had forever after referred to as "My Love."

Seana stopped suddenly. She couldn't help herself. "My Love," she called out, just to see if it would come to her.

She was forever trying to win the cat's affections—forever and to no avail.

The cat stopped when it realized she was no longer walking. Seana peered hard through the misty forest to catch a glimpse of its sleek dark body moving toward her.

My Love was beautiful, to be certain, beautiful and clever and more than just a wee bit wild.

"Here, My Love," she called out, once more coaxing it. The cat peered out from behind a tree at her. Seana caught the glimmer of a golden eye through the shadows of the forest. She stooped, making soft cooing noises

as she tried to win the animal's favor. "Here kitty." She reached into her skirt and tore off a tiny piece of bread and held it out to the cat. It was growing almost too dark to see, but those shimmering yellow eyes were more keen than her own, she knew.

"Damned cat!" she declared, when it was obvious that it would not come, and surged to her feet. She popped the piece of bread into her own mouth and slapped the crumbs from her fingers. The cat simply watched her, unwilling to move, unfazed by her indignation. Certainly, it seemed unmoved by her gesture—or even the fact that she'd eaten her offering, as well.

She started on her way again, determined to ignore the beast once and for all. A rustling of leaves followed her, almost too faint to be heard, but Seana knew it was there. "I dunno why ye bother to follow!" she huffed. "I think you're trying to drive me mad!"

"You've some bloody wicked sense of humor, My Love! I'll warrant you're laughing behind those evil eyes o' yours! Well, I dinna care!" she assured it. "Away with ye, accursed beast—begone!"

And she began to sing: "Ohhhhh, I have me a gentil cok..."

Chapter 4



Colin first came aware of the break of daylight behind his aching lids, and next the weight of an arm or leg upon his bare arse. He'd drank far too much, and his head was throbbing... almost as much as his...

Christ, but it was frozen... he groaned, but didn't dare move, afraid to cause himself more damage—not that he was afraid of a little pain... but he was greatly afraid of a little pain *there*.

He'd passed out, it seemed—though not alone—upon the ground. And more's the pity but he'd been far too drunk even to work off the *frustration* his mystery woman had left him with. He imagined himself surrounded now by plump breasts and round bottoms and lamented the fact that his head was aching far too much for him to even roll over and thaw his cok against the wench's bottom.

He groaned and opened one eye, then closed it again. Pain shot through his head and he thought he heard his sister railing at him, though he knew it was the tortured invention of his *uisge*-battered brain.

Colin Mac Brodie! Look at ye! Who's going to take care o' ye now, ye sodden oaf?

Och, nobody, he acknowledged, feeling sorry for himself. He might have answered, even, but he knew Meghan wasn't really there.

His sister was well and duly wed now, whether he liked it or nay—for better or worse—to that rotten Sassenach husband of hers! Montgomerie had better take good care of his sister, or the cur was going to answer first to his fist, next to his sword.

Just now, however, his first concern was in thawing his cok. Whatever had possessed him to strip down and dance naked before the fire last night? Stupid bastard, he railed at himself. What had he been trying to do? Prove to everyone that his nuts were not shriveled?

He opened his eyes, squinting against the brilliant morning rays, and peered back at the foot lying upon his thigh.

It was a male foot.

“Gadamn!” he said, kicking it away, and rolling toward the fire, heedless of the remaining coals that sat cooling. “Aaayyyyyyyyyiiii!” he howled, and leapt up as a hot ember singed him upon the arse.

A frozen cok and a burnt arse! How much worse could the bloody day begin!

Broc grunted, opening his eyes and squinting up at him. An amused smile suddenly turned his lips.

“Whoreson bastard!” Colin railed. “What makes ye think my arse was made to warm your gadamn foot!” He peered back at his singed flesh, cursing beneath his breath.

Broc didn’t seem the least contrite. In fact, his grin widened. “Not that I enjoy the idea of my foot up your arse, Mac Brodie, but no one told ye to go and strip bare. Och, but we didna need to suffer it, ye bloody bastard!”

“Aye, Mac Brodie,” grumbled Broc’s young cousin, Cameron, waking, his hand going to his head. “Damned *uisge*.” He groaned in pain. He glanced about. “Hmmpf... where did all the women go?”

Colin frowned. “Home,” he answered irascibly. “Where are my bloody clothes?”

Broc chuckled. “Gone with the women,” he revealed, to which Colin replied with a muttered curse.

There was something inherently wrong with this scene; a bunch of witless men warming their arses by the fire and not a woman to be spied! Christ! The women had been smart enough, at least, to steal away before morning light and were likely all sleeping sweetly with their blushing cheeks lying upon soft pillows while the men were left here to pick rocks from their arses and burn their nuts on hot coals.

He spied his tunic balled up beneath Cameron’s head and his breacon laying over Broc’s legs and spat another string of oaths. He marched over and yanked the tunic from under him and the breacon from his legs.

“Well, ye werena using it!” Cameron said in self-defense, and it was less what he said and more the look upon his face that struck Colin wrong. Colin snarled at him and Cameron added sullenly, “I need to take a piss.”

“Aye, do that!” Colin urged him, eyeing him with rancor. “And take your time while you’re at it!”

Cameron leapt up from his bed upon the ground, dusted himself off and walked away into the woods to relieve himself. Colin shook his head as he

watched the lad go. "If he were not your cousin..."

"He's young," Broc replied. "Give him a few years."

Colin cast Broc a glance. "For what?" he snapped, and pulled his tunic over his head.

Broc shrugged.

"Anyhow," Colin advised, straightening the wrinkles from his tunic, "'tis not me who needs to be wary o' that boy." He nodded in the direction of the woodlands where Cameron had gone. Merry lifted her head and peered back at him, as though sensing his gaze. "Seems to me has his own ideas about how things should be done. I see that look in his eyes."

Broc shrugged again. "He's at that age, Colin. Full o' piss and *vin aigre*, and thinks the old ways are dead."

Merry sat and whined for attention. Broc snapped his fingers and she came loping toward him. He reached out to stroke her back and she sat upon the ground between his legs.

"With those damned Sassenachs invading our lives, he may well be right!" Colin remarked. "Soon they'll have no need to raise swords against us! They'll breed us out of existence! Think we are stupid, do they? That we dinna know their plan! King David is a bloody fool, or a Sassenach one!"

Broc ignored his dire predictions. He glanced again in the direction of woodlands where Cameron had disappeared, still contemplating his cousin. "He has not taken to Iain's new wife."

"Oh?" Colin lifted both brows. "Why not?"

"Well... I dinna ken exactly, but I think he does not trust her. He blames her for coming between Iain and Lagan is my guess."

Lagan was Iain MacKinnon's cousin. All Colin knew of the man was that he had tumbled from the cliffs at Chreagach Mhor soon after their return from England. The details, however, were obscure at best, for the MacKinnons were good about keeping their secrets. He would ask Broc, but even as good of friends as they were, Broc was a MacKinnon through and through.

Colin nodded. "I canna say as I blame him for that. I do not like it much that my sister has wed a gadamn Sassenach, but I would not like it at all were Leith to do so. There is a difference, I think, between a Sassenach bride and the Sassenach bride of a laird."

Broc gave him a knowing glance. "Aye, well, soon enough you'll not have to worry about that. He'll be wedding MacLean's daughter."

"So it seems," Colin agreed, dismissing the topic, uncomfortable with it. He was aware of Broc's continued scrutiny but ignored it.

That his brother was wedding Alison MacLean did not disturb him in the least. He didn't want the girl any more now than he did before. That Leith had stepped forward to wed her when Colin could not even abide the sight of her made Colin feel the lesser man. So what if she had crossed eyes? She was sweet and kind, as Meghan had oft pointed out, and Colin didn't like that part of himself that could not see past her silly imperfection. He had hurt her, he knew. His sister was right; he was a shallow brained oaf.

"At any rate..." Colin shrugged away his thoughts, "...why should Cameron like her simply because she is Iain's wife?"

"'Tis not simply a matter of liking her or not liking her," Broc revealed. "He does not accord her the respect due her as his laird's mate. Iain's patience grows weary."

"Then let him suffer Iain's wrath. Mayhap it will humble him. He could use a bit o' that, I think."

Broc cast him a troubled glance. "I am responsible for my cousin. When his da died, he was left to me to protect—he and his wee sister, Constance, though I do not know what to do with that one! She runs about nakey most o' the day, chasing after Merry, and there is no one about who can keep her clothes on."

Colin chuckled. "And what of Page?" he asked. "Can she not see Cameron is just a boy and simply give him time?"

Broc frowned. "It isna Page he angers. In truth, she pretends not to notice, but I can see verra well it pains her. Ye canna understand, Colin, and you do not know the whole story. You canna blame FitzSimon's daughter for what passed between Lagan and Iain simply because she is English. Page had nothing to do with it."

Colin cast him a curious glance. "Mayhap, but since when do you go about defending Sassenachs?"

Broc, Colin knew, had more right than any to loathe them. His own father had been murdered by one—Cameron's, as well—in defense of their land. Broc had made a lifelong vow to avenge his da. Whatever had happened to change that, Colin didn't know. He hadn't seen Broc at all since their return from England where they'd gone to retrieve the MacKinnon's son from

FitzSimon's treacherous clutches. But somehow, his friend seemed changed upon his return.

"'Tis what Cameron asked me as well."

Colin studied his long-time friend, looking for some clue as to his change of heart. "And what did ye answer?"

"I have no love for the English," Broc admitted. "But I do not think they are all evil." There was a pause of reflective silence. "Not anymore."

Colin had heard rumors about Lagan and Iain, that they were in fact brothers and not cousins. He was curious, as was everyone, to know what had really happened that night when Lagan had gone over the cliff, but he wasn't certain whether to ask. He didn't like to put Broc in a position to have to refuse him confidence. Friend or nay, Broc's first loyalty was to Iain MacKinnon and it was unswerving. As it should be. Colin accepted that, and more he respected it.

"Did ye ever find Lagan's body?"

Broc nodded, wincing, but wouldn't elaborate. He eyed Colin pointedly, changing the topic. "You'd do well to give Montgomerie a chance, Colin. He canna be so bad if Meghan loves him."

Colin turned away. "Mayhap, but I do not like the way he wooed my sister. My sister deserved better than to be carried away like some sack of meal! I know Meghan, and she did not want to wed at all!"

"Aye, but she did," Broc countered. "And she did it of her own free will."

Colin scowled. "Aye, she did."

"Then mayhap she found something in Montgomerie to love?"

Colin said nothing to that because it was true.

"She did not look to me like a woman forced into her marriage bed," Broc pointed out. "She looked to me like a woman in love."

Colin cast his friend a beleaguered glare.

"Ye know... I wasna willing to give FitzSimon's daughter a chance, either... in the beginning. But she proved to be true of heart and Iain canna have found himself a bride so fair and kind, and brave, as she is. Mairi, God save her rotten soul, could not have walked in her shadow."

Iain's first wife. MacLean's eldest daughter. Mairi died after giving birth to Iain's son, flinging herself to her death from a tower window right in front of Ian's eyes. Still, Colin has never met a Sassenach he'd ever liked. He turned to look at Broc, raising a brow.

“’Tis the truth,” Broc persisted. He leapt to his feet, ready to do battle though none was waged. His overreaction took Colin by surprise. Merry too. Startled, she bolted away. “Any man would be proud to call her wife, Sassenach, or not!”

Colin watched the dog bound away, tail between her legs. She halted at a safe distance and turned to look with confusion at her master. Colin did as well. “Christ and be damned, Broc. Settle yourself down. It sounds to me as though ye have more than a liegeman’s heart for the wench.”

Merry whined.

“Nay!” Broc denied at once, though without anger, seeming to realize suddenly how his reaction might have appeared. “I do not,” he assured Colin.

“Are ye certain?”

Broc grinned suddenly, changing the subject. “As certain as your balls are not shriveled!”

Colin screwed his face. “Whoreson bastard,” he said without anger, then laughed.

Broc sat once more and Merry returned to her spot between his legs. Broc resumed petting her and she turned on her back, offering her belly. She wagged her tail happily, and Broc peered up at him. “Though I do hope to find someone like her some day,” he confessed, red faced. “She’s beautiful, she’s brave and full of spirit!”

Colin sat as well. “Och, now, but I do not know a single woman I would call brave. Soft and sweet, mayhap... even canny... but brave?” He raised a brow at Broc.

“Aye,” Broc maintained. “Brave! Ye should have seen her!” He grinned. “She did not cow before Iain, nor did she blink an eye to look at me.”

“Hate to tell you, but you’re not so bloody frightening, Broc,” Colin countered, grinning. “You like to think so, but your face is as sweet as a lassie’s.”

“Page called me a behemoth,” he said proudly in defense of himself.

Colin’s smile widened. “Baby-faced behemoth.”

Broc narrowed his eyes. “You’re a bastard!”

Colin laughed.

Broc lapsed into silence a moment, then said, “Imagine what it might have done to you to be spurned by your da. That bastard did not even want

her, Colin.” He shook his head in disgust. “He told us to keep her or kill her, he cared not which. What sort of man does that, tell me!”

Colin didn’t have to imagine it. His da had never been satisfied with his sons. He’d found fault with everything Colin had ever done. Nothing ever pleased him. Meghan and Gavin had been spared his wrath and heavy hand, but he and Leith had borne the burden of their father’s expectations. Still, not even his own da could have been so cold. “A cruel man,” Colin replied.

“Well, Page never let it conquer her spirit,” Broc said, with admiration. “The lass has the heart of a saint behind the armor of her tongue. Och, but she can kill with a look. I pity Iain when her temper is roused!”

Colin chuckled at the image of Iain MacKinnon cowering before his lovely wife, and he was reminded suddenly of his mystery woman. “Saucy wench,” he said, remembering her cutting glances and snappy tongue.

Damn but those lips had been sweet... even if her tongue was not.

He’d like to have tasted that tongue, he thought, and felt himself stir at the images that came to mind.

Who was she?

“Aye, she is,” Broc said, thinking Colin was still speaking about Page. “Ye should have seen her challenge Iain. Och, but, nay... ye should have seen her challenge the bloody lot of us!” He chuckled to himself. “The pawky wench! She kept us awake singing lullabies and stole our bloody horses, had us chasing her bare arsed across the border!”

Colin frowned, too preoccupied now with his own thoughts to focus upon his friend’s tales.

Whatever had happened to the girl from last eve? He’d looked for her all night, listened for her voice, searched through the crowd to no avail. She had simply vanished.

And then he had become sotted with drink, and had made a bloody fool of himself. What was wrong with him that he’d had to prove himself... *unmarred*?

He winced as he recalled the rumors... shriveled nuts had he? Who would say such a vicious thing? Who would be so spiteful as to cast doubt upon his ability to father a child and bed a wife?

But it angered him more that he seemed to need to prove the rumor a lie!

He should have let them all think what they would, and carried on as he had always done! Why should he care what anyone thought?

He didn't like that about himself, that he was constantly proving himself though no one asked it of him.

"What the hell is taking him so long?" Broc asked, casting impatient glances at the woods. "He said he was only going to piss—how long does it take?"

"Ehhh, leave him be. Mayhap he drank too much and finds himself in need of a good purging."

Broc made a disgusted face. "Aye, well, ye ought to be spewing your guts out this morn, too, ye drunken arse!"

God's truth, he might still. He was suddenly not feeling so well. Damned rotgut *uisge*.

The sound of the arrow as it embedded within the tree sent Cameron stumbling backwards on his arse.

He saw it belatedly, wobbling ominously mere inches from where he had stood relieving himself. He hadn't had time even to feel the leap of his heart before he was at once surrounded.

Englishmen.

Dressed in tunic and breeches and armed to the teeth, seven of them stood glaring down at him. He might have been afraid in that moment, except that he recognized the oldest, stoutest of the group. He met the man's eyes, not bothering to rise from where he sat.

"We've been waiting for you," the older man said smugly.

"'Tis no way to greet a man!" Cameron spat, annoyed by the smirks upon their faces.

The older man's brows shot up. "Man?" he said, and turned to look at his companions. "Did he say man?" The rest of them laughed. It grated on Cameron's nerves.

"I see no man here!" said one of his lackeys, and then the man sniggered. Cameron glowered up at them.

Stinkin' Sassenachs, all of 'em!

It didn't matter. They were his means to an end. And they needed him as much as he needed them. With that in mind, he rose, unfazed by their leers. He slapped the dirt from his hands and then his bottom, meeting their leader's gaze with as much swagger as he could return.

"FitzSimon," he said in greeting to the man. "You're a bloody fool for not taking her last night when ye had the chance!"

“I’m thinkin’ ye’d like to keep your tongue, Scot!” another of his lackeys said.

FitzSimon raised a hand to the man. “MacKinnon never left her side,” he said plaintively. “What would ye have me do? Walk up and wrench her from his arms?”

“You’re her da!” Cameron reminded him.

“Aye, but my daughter has lost her wits over this man. He steals her from my home and she somehow manages to lose her heart to him! Little fool! She would not see reason two months ago, why should she now? Nay, you must bring her to me, instead.”

Cameron screwed his face. “Me!” He pointed to himself incredulously. “Ye expect me to drag her out of my laird’s bed?”

FitzSimon narrowed his gaze. “You are a bright boy. You’ll find a way to lure her out from his sight.”

“Not me!” Cameron refused. It was one thing to make FitzSimon aware of Page’s whereabouts so that he might take her himself, and another entirely to take a hand in her abduction. Iain would skewer him through! “I’m no boy,” he said, casting daggers with his eyes, “and neither am I a fool!”

The man’s brows lifted. “Ho ho!” He walked forward and stood before Cameron. “Are we not?”

Cameron refused to be cowed though his gaze shifted nervously from one of FitzSimon’s men to another. All stood watching, grinning, their rotten teeth flashing. FitzSimon reached out for him suddenly, and he couldn’t help himself. He flinched. The men’s laughter rang in his ears.

Gently, he slapped Cameron’s face. “Soft as a maiden’s breast,” he remarked, and a chill passed through Cameron, despite his rising fury.

FitzSimon’s men laughed in unison.

Cameron shoved FitzSimon’s hand from his face.

“Tsk. Tsk. I should never have expected a boy to do a man’s job,” FitzSimon said, and shook his head. “Go home to your mother, Cameron.”

Cameron’s face and neck heated, though not so much in chagrin as in fury. He was not a boy, and he hadn’t had a mother in so long he’d forgotten what one was! No one gave him any respect! He was not stupid and he had a rotten feeling in his gut about FitzSimon and his daughter both. As far as he was concerned they could both go back to hell from whence they came!

“Dinna fash yourself... I’ll get her to ye!”

FitzSimon's eyes glimmered suddenly. Satisfaction curled his lips.

"If you swear to take her—all o' ye!" Cameron made a sweeping motion with his hand. "Back to your bloody Sassenach land and be done with us forever!"

"Of course." FitzSimon nodded. "Ye've my word."

Cameron spat upon the ground. "That's what I think about the word of an Englishman!" he told FitzSimon.

"Why you!" FitzSimon's man lunged forward, but FitzSimon placed himself between them, shielding Cameron. The man halted, casting Cameron malevolent glares. It was clear to Cameron what he would have liked to have done to him had he had the chance.

FitzSimon turned to him. "You're not too quick-witted, boy, are ye?" He spat upon the ground after Cameron.

Cameron glowered at him. "I'll get her to you, FitzSimon!" he swore, his feet planted firmly and his shoulders squared. "But then I want you out of here forevermore!"

The two of them stared at each other a long moment, and then FitzSimon nodded in agreement. "Get my daughter back to me... and aye, we'll go."

Cameron gave a nod. "'Tis done, then," he agreed.

The older man smiled and reached out to grip one of Cameron's shoulders.

Cameron shrugged away, giving him a malevolent glare. "Dinna ever again touch me!" he declared and spun on his heels, walking away.

"Let him go," FitzSimon said when his men moved to stop him. He waited until Cameron was gone. "I want him dead once my daughter is returned," he said casually.

"Aye, my lord," said his captain.

"Arrogant little Scots bastard! No one—no one takes what is mine!"



Seana couldn't stop Constance long enough to ask the child where Broc was. Her cheeks stained with dirt, the wee one was chasing chickens in Merry's absence, laughing impishly as they protested when she managed to seize a feather.

Seana sighed, following behind the naked child.

“Constance, where is your brother?” she persisted.

Constance giggled, plucking another feather from a squawking hen. “I dunno,” she managed to reply, then tripped suddenly and fell upon her belly. “Ouch!” Her lips turned into a pout, but she held her prize feather in front of her, and the pout didn’t remain.

Seana fell to her knees beside the child. “Are you all right?”

Constance nodded and smiled.

“Good,” Seana declared. “Constance, where are your clothes?”

The child shook her head. “Dunno!”

“What do you mean, ye dunno,” Seana returned.

The child again shook her head.

Lord, didn’t anybody ever seem to notice she never wore clothes? People passed them by, hardly sparing the child a glance and Seana thought that when she wedded Broc, it would be her duty to give the child a proper home... and proper clothes.

Only the MacKinnon’s bride seemed to notice her lack. She came to where Seana and Constance were and said, “Constance where are your clothes, dearling?”

Constance peered up at Page and flapped her arms like a chicken. “I dunno!” the child persisted and Page reached down to scoop her up into her arms, smiling down at Seana.

Seana smiled back at her.

Page had never treated her unkindly, had always seemed pleased to see her. “I’ve not seen Broc at all this morning,” she informed Seana.

Did everyone notice her attention to Broc, except Broc? she wondered.

Sighing, Seana rose to her feet, dusting off her dress. “Oh, well,” she declared.

“Down!” Constance exclaimed. “Down!” And she wiggled out of Page’s arms, dropping to her feet. “Merry!” she shrieked.

Page let her go, shaking her head. “That child!” she proclaimed, and both of them watched as Constance ran after Merry who stopped suddenly, then turned and fled once more into the woods from whence she had come.

“There he is!” Page announced, and Seana’s heart began to pound. She had come to see him, but she suddenly felt like fleeing with Merry into the woods.

Constance ran giggling after the poor dog, and Page and Seana both turned to one another, laughing at the sight of her running naked as the day

she was born. Page shook her head, then said, smiling, "I'll leave you two to talk."

Seana returned a shy smile. By the time Broc reached her, Page had gone, and she stood, feeling like a fool.

"Seana!" Broc exclaimed, and reached out to hug her fiercely, though his gaze was still upon MacKinnon's bride. He swept Seana from her feet, and twirled her about, setting her down afterwards and patting her upon the head like he were patting his dog. "What are ye doin' here, lass?"

Seana shrugged. It would seem to her that the answer was obvious, but Broc never seemed to figure it out.

Tongue-tied, she sighed.

Even as long as they had known each other, there was lately an uncomfortable silence between them. Seana thought mayhap it was her fault. She never seemed to know what to say to him anymore. Broc's gaze sought Page once more, and Seana wished she were more like Page or Meghan. Neither of them ever seemed to starve for attention, though neither of them ever sought it.

He cocked his head in apology. "I need to speak with my laird's wife, Seana. Will you be around later?"

Seana shrugged.

"'Tis about Cameron," he explained, and Seana knew he was concerned about his cousin.

"Don't be silly!" She waved him away. "Go on with ye now, and I shall speak with ye another time. I need to go and see to my da, anyhow."

He reached out, seizing her head and embraced it. He kissed the pate of her head and released her. "I knew you'd understand," he said. "I'll talk to you later, sweet one!"

Seana nodded as she watched him go, and sighed once more, wishing she knew what to do to make him understand.

Much as she loathed the thought, Colin Mac Brodie seemed her only chance and for her sake and her father's, she mustn't put it off any longer. She didn't have to like him, she told herself. But she did need to speak with him, and bolstering her courage, she went in search of Colin Mac Brodie, determined to enlist his help once and for all.



“Eat, Da,” Seana commanded her father. “Leave the cat and feed yourself!”

Instead of going to Colin, she had come directly back to the cairn, telling herself that she would go find Colin just as soon as she cared for her da... and checked the *uisge*, of course... and fed the cat.

She couldn’t very well go to tend to her own business until she knew her da was cared for—at least that’s what she told herself.

But the truth was that she was a bloody chicken heart and deep down she realized that if she didn’t just go, she might never.

Her da coughed deeply, and Seana watched helplessly. She wanted to help him but didn’t know how. In the last few weeks, his condition had worsened, she thought, and he seemed to lack the energy to rise from his pallet.

His *uisge* had helped him before, but it no longer seemed to have any effect. She was at her wit’s end as to what to do and was beginning to feel a sense of urgency to get him away from this cold, damp place they rested their heads each night.

She eyed him impatiently as he continued to play with the cat who by the by never deigned to acknowledge her.

Och, but she loathed that cat!

At least she told herself she did.

In truth, she couldn’t hate anyone or anything... not even Colin Mac Brodie.

As though it had read her mind, the animal raised its gaze to stare at her, golden eyes gleaming from the deepest shadows of the ancient cairn. Her da seemed to like it there best, hidden in the shadows... where it was coldest, Seana thought peevishly.

Seizing up her own blanket, she took it to him. The cat scurried at her approach. Dropping the blanket down upon her da’s legs, she stooped to tuck him in. My Love mewed in what seemed like protest over her presence so near to her father.

“Rotten cat.”

“Nay, Seana!” her da protested. “My Love is sweet, child!”

“She willna even let me near her, Da!” Seana said plaintively.

She prided herself in her ability to charm the woodland creatures. They, after all, had been her only friends when people had all but forsaken her, but

that cat was impossible!

“She spies on me, too—I swear to Jacob’s stone!”

“Aye,” her da replied with a weak nod. “For me!”

Och, he didn’t really believe that, did he?

His fervent declaration lifted her brows. She peered into his face, trying to gauge his expression.

His face betrayed not a trace of humor. He was serious, she realized. He faced her, though he didn’t quite meet her gaze—couldn’t make her out well enough lately to do so—and the darkness of the cave didn’t help matters much at all.

He placed a finger to his lips, shushing her, and his gesture made her look about, though she hadn’t heard a sound. “It’s your minny!” he announced in whisper. “Come to look after ye once I’m gone.”

Seana scrunched her nose at him. “Och, Papa!”

“I wasna going to say, Seana, but aye! ‘Tis my dearest love come back to me!” He seemed to believe it truly.

Seana’s face screwed, not quite understanding, not quite wanting to.

She raised a brow. “That cat is my mother?”

“Aye! My Love!”

Seana rolled her eyes. “Och, Papa!”

“’Tis true, Seana!” he maintained. “This cat is no ordinary cat!”

Seana rose and peered down at her da. He looked so small to her lying there beneath his blankets now, but his face was aglow with his conviction. He believed it, no matter how ridiculous it sounded to her.

She wanted more than anything to get him out of this cold cavernous place, to take him somewhere he could talk to people instead of ornery old beasts.

“She watches o’er ye now that I canna!”

Seana refused to believe that moody cat was her mother! Och, but his wits were going as well!

Her eyes misted and she swallowed her grief.

It seemed to her that he was fading much too quickly these days. His cough had grown deep and his skin had grown pale. He would no longer even allow her to bring him into the sun to enjoy the day.

Her gaze turned toward the sleek black shape of the cat as it slipped from the cave into the sunlight. As though she sensed Seana’s regard, the elusive animal dashed into the brush, disappearing from sight, mewling.

Her da sighed. "She's gone," he lamented.

Good! Seana thought. Silly cat!

She frowned down at her da, wanting to berate him, though something held her tongue. If it made him feel better to believe that cat was her minny, what harm could possibly come of it?

Her da sighed once more, pathetically. "I know ye dinna believe me, child," he said sadly, "but 'tis true, nevertheless." He shook a finger up at her. "And now ye've gone and hurt her feelings!"

That cat had no feelings! But Seana refrained from saying so.

He began to cough again, and Seana fell to her knees at his side, fretting. She placed a hand upon his shoulder and then felt his head when his coughing subsided. It was cool, but then... what surprise was there in that... lying as he was in this dark cairn? She tugged the blankets higher.

He waved her away. "Lemmie be now, Seana."

"Nay, Da." She worried her lip. The spirits could certainly wait until later in the day, but the sooner she spoke with Colin Mac Brodie, the sooner she could woo Broc... the sooner she might be able to get her da out of this place. What was wrong with her? What was she afraid of? "Mayhap I should stay with you today?"

"Nay, go work," her father said, dismissing her.

"But ye dinna seem to be feeling so well this morning, Da!"

"Pooh! I feel well enough!"

She knew it was a lie. She could see it in the paleness of his face.

He grinned suddenly. "Only take care ye dinna sit all day and sip at my spirits!" he warned. "Because I would know it. My Love will tell me!" He cackled at that, amused by it somehow.

Of course he would know, but he didn't need a bloody cat to tell him. He would smell it the instant she walked into the room. His recipe made old men of little boys and white hair sprout upon the breasts of women! It choked Seana's breath away when she dared even to breathe it. She wouldn't touch the ladle to her lips ever if she did not have to.

"My Love tells me everything," he swore, and smiled shrewdly, waving a finger at her. His eyes shone with fevered intensity.

Seana sighed. "Aye, Da." What could it hurt to humor him when it him smile so brilliantly? If he needed to believe that ill-natured cat was her minny, so be it—though she grimaced at the thought of the ungrateful beast and shuddered to think her minny could have been so cold!

Seana didn't remember her mother at all, but her da had always spoken of her kindly. Nay, that rotten cat was nothing like her minny, she decided.

"Ye dinna have to believe me, my daughter."

Seana smiled and kissed him gently upon the cheek. "I shall return home late," she said, changing the subject, and felt a twinge of guilt for leaving him at all. But it couldn't be helped.

If all went well, she would be wed to Broc soon enough and her da would have a real bed to sleep upon.

Resolved, at last, Seana set out to look for Colin Mac Brodie. The spirits could wait, she decided. Her da could not.

Chapter 5



Colin couldn't seem to stop thinking of her.

She had appeared to him last night for mere moments, had impugned him and berated him, and then she had disappeared and he couldn't stop thinking of that lovely mouth.

He brought his axe down hard, splitting the wood for the new fence posts in one swift blow. It was rotten inside, too easily split, and he muttered a curse beneath his breath.

Who was she?

He didn't recall her from these parts at all. Where could she possibly have been hiding that he didn't recognize her face? She seemed to know enough about him, but he didn't know a bloody thing about her.

Dropping the axe, he stooped to lift up the wood and pulled the good log away from the rest, tossing it aside. They would use it for firewood later. He inspected the rotting wood, found vermin inside, and frowned.

Montgomerie had returned the animals he'd raided but the fence remained in disrepair. At this rate, they wouldn't have it fixed till winter. For every tree they brought down, it seemed the next was rotted. Tossing the bad wood aside, he muttered another curse.

Damned Montgomerie.

How could Meghan go and lose her heart to the wretch? Colin was going to miss her.

Of all his kin, Meghan had been closest to him. She alone had accepted him wholly, flaws and all, and she had known the worst from him, because he had told her all.

Gavin preached to him incessantly, and Leith... Leith was too like their da—at least in the sense that even perfection wasn't good enough for him. His eldest brother drove himself and everyone about him to death's bloody doorstep. In other ways, if Colin could be honest with himself, no one was

more like their da than himself. He could deny it if he wished to, but what good would it do? He saw the truth well enough.

Their da had had an eye for every wench he had ever laid eyes upon. Colin had learned the ways of women before most of his peers had come out from beneath their minny's skirts. His own mother had turned a blind eye to his father's roving ways. Though she must have known, she had never said a word. But it was no wonder that her heart had turned when another man had showered her with attention. It had been well and good for his da to plow every wench in his path, but his pride had been damaged by his mother's sole suitor and he'd challenged the man to do battle.

His da had lost his life that day.

And his ma had lost her wits.

To this day Colin had no notion whether his ma had ever betrayed his da, but he didn't think so. Her grief over his father's death had been too real. His death had stolen her will to live. He never remembered her smiling again after that terrible day.

He never wanted to see Meghan hurt like that.

It seemed to be the fate of Brodie women to suffer for their men—his grand minny Fia, then his ma, and Meghan... God's truth, if Montgomerie ever made her weep a single tear... Colin would strangle the English bastard with his bare hands.

Not that he himself was any manner of saint.

Colin's saving grace was that he didn't drink like his da had. Wenching was one thing, but who needed to wake up feeling the way he was feeling this moment. His head was still aching and his stomach churning and it was his own bloody fault for letting his mystery woman get to him.

Who was she?

The sun beat down upon him and he lifted his tunic to wipe the sweat from his face. The damned thing was soaked with his sweat so he removed it, tossing it upon the stack of good wood to dry under the heat of the sun.

Staring at the wood pile, he lost himself in thought.

So deep was he in his own musings that he didn't spy his visitor until she spoke.

She was watching him, hands upon her hips once more.

Colin blinked, surprised, and his spirits were at once lifted by the sight of her.

For an instant, Seana could only stare, transfixed by the sight of him. He was a fine specimen of a man. It was no wonder women melted at his feet. His dark skin seemed soft as silk, despite its abuse by the sun. She blinked, trying hard not to gape, and couldn't help but wonder why Broc had shoulders so wide or skin so smooth that it made one yearn to reach out and caress it.

She forced herself to remember her purpose here, recalling that he was a blackguard, and a wastrel of a man.

So what if he seemed to be the only one working here. So what if she hadn't imagined he spent his time doing anything more than chasing women.

"Where is Gavin?"

He turned to look at her and his blue eyes were for an instant sad, and then suddenly cheery.

He couldn't possibly be pleased to see her—could he?

Seana berated herself for even thinking such a thought.

His expression turned somewhat amused at the mention of his brother.

"Where else would Gavin be, lass? Studying his prayers and pleading for the souls of the lost."

Seana's brows lifted at his sarcasm. "Yours no doubt! And Leith?"

"Cooing o'er his new love," he replied matter of factly.

Seana didn't think she heard any note of resentment in his tone, though she was hoping he was regretful.

Her brows knit. "But there is much work to be done here." It was plain to see. "Why are you working alone?"

"Everyone is away feedin' their bellies. They'll return anon."

She frowned. "And why not you?" He couldn't possibly be so dutiful. She refused to think of him so!

He smiled and winked at her. "Are you fretting over me, lass?"

Seana blinked at the brilliant white of his teeth. Heat crept into her cheeks. "Of course not! But every man must eat."

"Aye," he replied, winking at her, "but my... hunger... is for something else entirely."

Wretch!

Seana refused to be flattered. Flattery came far too easily to his tongue!

"What's the matter, Mac Brodie?" she asked, and met his gaze lest he misunderstand her question. "Did you not get your fill enough last night?"

His smile vanished, and was replaced with a frown. "It was my sister's wedding. I am not so much a rogue as that."

Seana's brows lifted once more. Her hands went behind her back and she stood upon her tiptoes, challenging him. "Oh, nay?"

"Nay."

"That's not what I have heard."

He gazed back at her, but she didn't care if he knew that she was taunting him. She hoped it frustrated him.

"Well, dinna believe everything ye hear," he chided her.

Seana had to quash the desire to ask him if he'd heard any rumors last eve. She couldn't quite suppress the smile that came to her lips when she thought of the scandal she had likely begun: Colin Mac Brodie with shriveled nuts.

The thought almost made her laugh aloud.

Was that why he hadn't appeased his hunger last eve? Well, it served him right.

Still... rogue or no... he had the most amazing body... God help her, she couldn't stop staring, though she tried.

Colin didn't quite know what to make of her impish smile. It revealed a tempest within her eyes, piquing his curiosity. He'd seen lovers with that gleefully mischievous look, but always he'd been privy to their thoughts and their thoughts had always been for him.

What wicked thoughts were behind that lovely face of hers?

And then a thought suddenly occurred to him—she had sought him out—and his smile returned.

She liked him.

It wasn't any coincidence, he was certain—that he'd never set eyes upon her before last eve, but now suddenly she had appeared to him twice, materializing from nowhere at his side. He damned well wasn't going to let her vanish, as she had last night, without first discovering who she was because he liked her too.

All he knew about her as yet was that she had a mouth as saucy as it was beautiful.

He wondered if it tasted as delicious as it looked.

Silence.

She was staring at his chest, he realized.

“I was wonderin’,” she said suddenly. Her gaze lifted to his lips, then to his eyes, then dropped once more to his bare chest.

Colin felt a keen sense of satisfaction at the appreciation evident in her glance. She went silent once more, and his lips curved into a smile. “You were wondering?” he prompted, teasing her.

She shook herself free of her stupor, and managed to collect herself. “I was wondering,” she began once more.

Just to see how fully she had managed to compose herself, he flexed the muscles in his chest, making his flesh dance. She went silent again, and his grin widened. “Aye?” he prompted again.

“Aye,” she said a bit distractedly.

“Aye what?”

Her brows drew together when she met his gaze. “Huh?”

Colin suppressed his laughter at her bewildered expression. “There is something you were wondering, lass...”

She seemed suddenly to grow flustered. Color rose into her cheeks. She walked over to the pile of good wood and sat down upon it, staring at the ground.

For an instant, she didn’t speak, merely stared at her bare feet.

Adorable toes, he couldn’t help but notice... and a glimpse of fine slim ankles...

“Well, you see... I’m needing your help, Colin Mac Brodie,” she said at last, and she sounded so disheartened that Colin wondered at once what was wrong.

Sobering at her tone, he went to her, kneeling before her, wanting to reassure her. If something was wrong, and he could help, he would. “What is it, lass?”

She peered up at him, her green eyes dark and sultry, like dusk in the forest, and Colin was at once lost in them.

His mystery woman.

Her eyes mesmerized him.

More profound than any eyes he’d ever gazed into, they were filled with thoughts of which he had no knowledge. Her lips parted to speak, though her words would not seem to come. Obviously it was not easy for her to say whatever it is she had come to ask.

She took a deep breath. “I need you to teach me how to woo a man,” she said softly.

Colin wondered if he'd heard right. His face screwed. "You want me to do what?"

She nodded. "I need you to teach me to woo a man," she said again, a little firmer, a little louder.

He surged to his feet, taken aback by her request. "Och, lass, you've got it all wrong! It isna a woman's place to do such a thing!"

Her green eyes narrowed as she peered up at him. "Says who?"

His voice softened, and he reached out to touch her face. He lifted it to his gaze. "You don't understand. *You* have no need to woo any man, lass!"

Didn't she realize how lovely she was?

She shrugged away from his touch, and gave him a look he couldn't quite interpret. Colin had never had a woman reject his touch. It took him by surprise. He might have even pouted over it like a spoiled lassie had her expression not reminded him that something was amiss.

"But I cannot afford to waste more time!" she lamented, her eyes glazing with tears. "Everyone is getting married!" She cast him a beleaguered glance. "You're the only one who can help me now," she declared.

Colin's expression twisted with confusion. "Me?"

"Aye, Colin Mac Brodie! You!"

He sat down upon the grass and lifted his knees up, wrapping his arms about them, resigned to listen. He furrowed his brow. "How?"

"You know what attracts a man to a woman," she told him. "Right?"

Colin's brows rose. "*Everything* attracts me to a woman."

She shook her head, eyeing him pointedly. "Nay... not everything!"

Colin studied her a moment.

She seemed to be telling him something, accusing him even. But nay... accusing him of what? What could she possibly have to accuse him over when he had never set eyes upon her in his life before last eve.

Her expression remained somber.

Was she serious?

She seemed perfectly sober.

Or was this some sweet scheme to win his attentions? He'd had women fall into his lap, in fact; others baked and brought him sweets; still more had dragged him behind their father's stables and boldly offered him kisses and more. Perhaps this was merely her way of gaining his notice, he reasoned, and his lips curved into a knowing smile.

He thought it might be so—*wanted* it to be so—and damned if he could think of anything better he'd like to do than feel her melt into his arms.

He cocked his head as he looked at her.

Lovely eyes, lovely lips, lovely dark hair.

He'd like to teach her a few things all right.

He narrowed his eyes. If she was serious... she was either perfectly naive, or shrewd as the devil... and Colin intended to discover which.

He eyed her deliberately. "And what precisely did ye have in mind for me to teach you, lass?"

She averted her eyes, shrugged, looking flustered, and then met his gaze once more. This time, she did not look away, though he held her gaze intimately, willing her to see the danger she was courting by asking so boldly for his... help.

He never took a lass for granted... never assumed she understood the sway he held over her... never stole away innocence... not without forewarning.

She didn't look away, but rather, she seemed determined to enlist him, and some part of Colin shouted with glee. His body tautened with anticipation. His blood quickened in his veins. He wanted that mouth... wanted to feel his tongue slide between those lips... His gaze lowered. He wanted those breasts in his palms.

Swallowing, he peered up once more into her eyes... and wasn't entirely convinced she knew what she was asking for. There was confusion there, he thought.

Mayhap he should show her.

Holding her gaze, he reached out to wrap his fingers about her heel. Her feet were bare, soft with dust. She didn't protest, didn't even seem to realize he had touched her for an instant, and then he slid his hand up the back of her calf, gently caressing.

He heard her intake of breath when she realized, but she didn't pull away. She blinked. "What... what are ye doing, Mac Brodie?"

Colin grinned, unleashing the full power of his smile. "Teaching you, o' course," he replied.

Warring emotions flashed over her face before she drew her brows together and peered down at him. "So you'll do it?" Her expression was hopeful, though she swallowed as she glanced nervously down at his hand beneath her skirt. His grin widened as her expression grew more uncertain.

She slapped a hand over his suddenly, halting his progress, gripping his fingers as though she would break them did he move. “And what precisely are ye teaching me?” she demanded of him.

“Whatever your sweet heart desires,” he answered roguishly. His body hardened.

“Must you... must you do that?” she asked. Her voice faltered.

“Do ye want my help, or nay, lass?”

Her strangle hold upon his hand eased a bit. “I do... but... but...”

He had scarce moved an inch when her grip upon his fingers tightened painfully.

“Ouch! Rule number one,” he announced, letting go of her leg, and shaking off the pain. “Dinna break your lover’s fingers if ye want him to cherish you!”

“But you aren’t my lover!” she pointed out, and gave him a disgruntled glance.

He gave her one back.

“So, then,” he replied, “did ye have someone particular in mind... to woo?”

“Broc Ceannfhionn,” she announced without hesitation, and pushed herself off the woodpile.

Colin saw more than a tantalizing flash of shapely calves before her declaration registered. “Broc!” he exclaimed, and felt at once annoyed, though he couldn’t possibly comprehend why.

“Aye, Broc Ceannfhionn!”

“I heard ye the first time, lass!” He hadn’t meant to raise his voice.

She turned her back on him then, brooding.

Broc was his closest friend. He couldn’t possibly begrudge him anything, and yet he did. No wonder she had vanished when Broc appeared last eve.

He peered up at her, watching her. From behind, she was unmistakable, with hair as black as a raven’s wings and a body that made a man’s hands ache to wander over its luscious hills and dales. Not even her thin and tattered dress could detract from it.

Beautiful.

It was enough to spoil a man’s appetite.

“I have loved him forever!” she declared, turning to him, pleading with those deep green eyes. “And you’re his best friend, Colin Mac Brodie!”

There were tears welling in her eyes. "You can help me win his heart, if only you would!"

Colin suddenly felt less than charitable.

"And why should I help you snare my good friend? I dinna even know your name, wench!"

She gave him a wounded look, though he couldn't understand why that simple fact should bother her.

"What's more, I dinna even know what clan ye hail from!"

"No clan," she replied.

"You've no family?" he asked her suspiciously.

"Only my da."

"And who is your da?"

Her lips clamped together suddenly, refusing to speak.

"Broc can find his own bloody women!" Colin told her, refusing her. If she couldn't be bothered even to answer his simple question, he wasn't about to oblige her.

She took in a breath and Colin thought she was about to weep. Pride seemed to straighten her spine. "My da isna well," she said matter of factly. "I *must* wed! He needs a warmer place to sleep!"

"I will give ye all the blankets you need," Colin reassured her.

"But I love Broc Ceannfhionn! I can make him happy if only I've the chance!"

Colin held his ground. "Well, I canna help ye." Broc was his best friend.

"You know him better than any, Colin Mac Brodie! You could help me, if only ye would!"

Colin shook his head, refusing her. "I will not."

Would he have helped her had she not caught his fancy first? he couldn't help but wonder.

Was it merely his wounded pride that kept him from obliging her now?

How many times had he thought Broc would be better off if he only find himself a woman? Five and twenty years had the man lived and was a virgin still. His honor would be the death of him.

"I have something to give you in return," she said reluctantly. "Payment for your help."

He narrowed his gaze at her. For a moment, he thought she intended to pay him with her favors but her expression was far from seductive.

Och, but her sweet green eyes beseeched him, called up some long-buried sense of shame that made him feel wretched in her sight. It was something he hadn't felt so acutely in a very long time, and he didn't relish the feeling. "And what might that be?"

"My da's recipe for the *uisge beatha*."

Colin narrowed his eyes, inspecting her closer, her face suddenly growing familiar. He shuddered as a memory assailed him. "Your da's recipe?"

"Aye," she said. "'Tis all I have to give, but I would gladly give everything to win Broc as my husband!"

Colin swallowed uncomfortably, faced suddenly with his ugliest memory of himself.

He would like never to have recalled them, but here she was, after all these years, to smack him in the face with it.

"Donal the drunk is your da?" he asked, stunned by her transformation. Och, but the years had been very good to her.

He certainly didn't remember her like *that*.

Her eyes narrowed, and her hands went to her hips. "Dinna call him that, Colin Mac Brodie!"

Colin shook his head. He'd wondered where the hell she had gone away to, but had heard nothing except that the old man had gone blind and his urchin daughter was making his coveted *uisge beatha*.

Men traveled leagues to purchase his fire water.

Where the devil had she been hiding?

"I dinna need your recipe!" he told her. "Ye can bloody well keep it!"

She didn't bring out the best in him—never had—and he damned well wished she hadn't reappeared in his life. He snatched up his tunic from the woodpile and turned to go, dressing himself as he left her.

He didn't like the way she made him feel, and he wasn't going to linger to reminisce.

Like he had years before, he left her staring after him—could feel her gaze but didn't dare turn. He'd faced her that day so long ago, and had been left wounded by the silent accusation in those expressive green eyes. He wasn't going to stand about to watch her run away weeping once more. Even without her constant presence as a reminder, it had taken him years to escape the guilt he had felt over the wrong he had done her.

But this time, he hadn't done anything wrong, and he'd be damned if he was going to scheme with her to trap his best friend into wedlock.

Never mind that he was left suddenly reeling.

In the space of mere minutes, he had been rejected and then had relived his most ignoble moments—courtesy of the woman who had filled nearly every waking thought since the instant he'd laid eyes upon her.

Chapter 6



What was she supposed to do now?

Seana sat upon a stone near the contraption her father had built to distill his *uisge beatha*, listening to the sounds it made as it brewed.

As a woman, she was virtually invisible to Broc. She could tell by the look in his eyes that he still saw the pitiful little girl she had once been. That she had blossomed into a woman did not seem to register with him.

Och, but it was enough to make her weep.

How dare Colin be angry with her!

She had no notion what she had said to upset him so much, but he had stalked away from her, without even looking back. All she had done was ask for his help. What harm was there in that?

She had, in fact, even offered to pay him with the only thing of value she owned. That should have been enough for him to realize the great worth she placed upon his time—not to mention how very important this was to her.

What were her options now?

She chewed upon a nail as she contemplated. The sound and scent of the spirits somehow eased her mind. It was familiar and comforting, reminding her of all the times she had sat and watched her father at his labors.

With a heartfelt sigh, she slid from the stone down to the ground, watching the contraption clatter and remembering a time when her da had been strong and full of life.

Seana knew little of her mother. She had died giving birth to Seana. Though Seana oft felt guilty for the pain she had caused her ma and da, her da had never blamed her for it. He'd loved her no matter that his heart had been broken by his loss. And he'd spoke of Seana's mother so beautifully, telling Seana always that she was her mother's spitting image. The two of them had loved each other so much that they'd fled their homes to live together in solitude, because her mother's da had not wished to let them wed.

Her birth had been a difficult one, her da had said. She had been far too stubborn to be born. Her leg had been twisted within her mother's womb and had broken during her labor. The midwife advised her da to leave Seana to the wolves... claimed she was too small and weak and that her legs would never heal, that she would always be a burden. Her da had refused. Even in his sorrow after her mother's death, he'd loved and protected her, and when Seana had reached an age, he had worked with her leg to strengthen and heal it.

Seana had suffered greatly in those years, though she'd never complained, because she'd spied her da's pain in his eyes as he'd watched her suffer, too. Even when he'd broken her leg to reset it, he hadn't wished to hurt her, but it had been necessary, he'd said, to straighten it. And now, she was better, and her limp was barely noticeable, save at night when the air grew cold and in winter when the chill wind bore with it her pain once more.

A streak of black flew across her vision, drawing her attention. My Love appeared from the brush and sat watching her from a safe distance.

Seana frowned at the sight of the cat.

"Go away," she grumbled. "Go back to where you came from, ye ungrateful beast!"

My Love mewed at her, the sound a heartfelt grievance, and simply stared with yellow eyes that glimmered in the twilight of the forest.

Seana refused to acknowledge her further. Let her stay where she sat. If the bloody cat did not like her, well and good! The feeling was mutual! She had more important things to worry about just now.

Like winning Broc's attention.

Seana had no notion how to accomplish it now if Colin would not help her.

Did one simply walk up and pledge one's love? Or did one bat one's eyes until they went daft or blind and her lashes fell out?

What was the best way to gain a man's favor?

Would he think her silly if she preened before him? Or would he never notice her if she did not?

Was the way to his heart through his belly? Or mayhap she should simply get him drunk with her father's spirits and drag him before an altar...

The thought made her chuckle.

Like she could drag the gentle giant anywhere. Och, but if she had less conscience she might just get him drunk and lay with him and play upon his

sense of honor. But she could not.

Unfortunately, neither did she have the first inkling how to proceed from here. She had no one to ask such things—and she had no peers to watch them woo each other. She was completely at a loss as to what to do.

But Colin Mac Brodie knew.

Wretched man.

He knew Broc and he certainly knew about women. She ought to hound him wherever he went and spy upon his every conquest—he was certain to make at least one a day!

My Love sat before her, as though taunting her, watching through canny golden eyes, and Seana's attention returned to the rotten beast. Her black fur seemed so soft, shining even at this distance. Despite Seana's professed dislike for the animal and My Love's skittishness toward her, she moved toward the cat, slowly, intending to pet it. Surely if it came to see her so oft, it *must* have some small affection for her?

She got as far as halfway before My Love mewed a protest and darted away into the brush. Seana muttered an oath beneath her breath, and sighed.

“Brat cat!” she called after it.

Sad case it was, she thought, when not even the bloody cat wanted her company!

She sat and pouted.

She was *not* going to spend the rest of her life alone, by God! Her da would not live forever—he was hardly a healthy man—and while she certainly enjoyed her solitude, she craved a human touch. Companionship. She was not going to give up on Broc!

She couldn't walk away so easily.

Colin had refused her once. What was the worst he could do, but refuse her again?

Persistence was the key to success, was it not?

That's what her father had said when he'd worked to perfect his recipe—even after his first attempts had choked the breath from him and left him sputtering flames.

Aye, she decided, and resolved to try again. Even Colin Mac Brodie was not made of stone. He was flesh and blood and had a heart that beat within that oversized chest of his. Seana intended to appeal to it.



“Please!” she beseeched him.

By God, Colin wasn’t made of stone!

He was flesh and blood man, with a man’s desires, and unlike his brother Gavin, he had no aspirations to sainthood.

The brazen wench stood before him now, completely oblivious to the temptation she offered. She’d barged in upon his bath, demanding to speak with him, and Colin hadn’t gotten a word in edgewise to warn her of his present mood.

He was hungry.

Ravenous.

Despite who she was, or what she claimed to want from him, he was aroused by her... unlike he’d ever been before in his life. Whether it was her aloofness toward him that fired him, he couldn’t say, but he was hard as stone beneath the water’s surface.

She wasn’t helping matters in the least, sitting there upon the bank, talking to him as though he were some sort of virginal priest. He was grateful for the water’s depth, lest she spy his reaction to the sight of those beautiful slim legs.

Damned if those weren’t the most luscious legs he had ever beheld upon a woman—much less for one who had once been lame—long and lean and strong. He could see the muscles ripple in them as she stretched them out before her. How she had managed such a feat, was beyond him, but his eyes did not lie.

He swallowed convulsively at the view she unwittingly gave him, and his heart began to pound.

“Please, Colin!”

Colin winced at the impassioned tone of her voice. “I’ll give ye anythin’!” she swore, and he clenched his jaw to keep from blurting out the payment he wanted from her.

That delectable body.

She didn’t want anything to do with him, he reminded himself, and that fact gnawed at his gut.

Why should he care, when he could have most any woman he chose?

Because he wanted her, a little demon nagged.

It was his just reward, some would say, that she wanted his best friend, and not him. He didn't deserve her after the way he had treated her all those years ago.

"I don't want anything from you," Colin persisted, and tried to force his gaze away from the sweet feast that lay between her slightly parted legs. Och, did her ma never teach her to sit like a gentle woman should? Didn't she realize she was driving him insane with lust? Didn't she understand that she was making him so starved for the sweet feast between her thighs that even his guilt could not ward his hunger away?

He took a deep breath and peered up at the bright blue sky, trying not to look at her. The sun beat down upon his bare shoulders, drying the rivulets of water that dripped from his wet hair. The sensation of water sliding down his back made him think of her... fingers—he didn't dare think of her tongue... damp and soft sliding the length of his back. He swallowed hard, shuddering as he met her gaze.

Sweet green eyes met his hungry blue ones. "I'm not too proud to beg," she warned. "Not when 'tis something so important as this! I beg of ye, Colin Mac Brodie!"

Colin frowned at her.

She had turned from bartering to begging now, and she did it all too well. As she had all those years ago, her heart was plain to see in that expression she wore like a martyr at her crucifixion. It was a look that offered forgiveness all the while pleading, and was still somehow filled with far too much pride.

How could he turn her away? How could he refuse her?

Would he even think to refuse her were she someone other than who she was?

Aye, he would, he decided, because Broc was his friend, and he wasn't about to scheme with her to trap him—even if Broc were better off with a flesh and blood woman in his bed, rather than that flea-bitten mongrel.

But more than anything else... because he wanted her for himself.

"*You owe me*, Colin Mac Brodie!" she blurted, lifting up a small rock and tossing it into the water at him, far from where he stood, but still...

Colin met her glittering gaze, vivid green and fueled with something more than pride. "*You owe me*," she repeated, stomping a foot before her. The furious gesture tossed up her skirt just a bit higher, giving him a clearer

view of the prize she would offer his best friend, “and I’ll not be taking no for an answer!”

Impudent wench.

He was torn in that instant by a sincere desire to help her, guilt over the past, and a lust so intense he could feel it stir his loins, despite the fierceness of her glare.

Were he not so annoyed by her bold words, he might have laughed his fool head off in sheer joy over the challenge she presented him.

When was the last time he had felt so buoyed by the mere sight of a woman?

When was the last time he had felt his blood simmer even under the heat of anger?

And when the bloody hell had he ever been so wholly dismissed by a woman in favor of someone else?

Never.

And it damned well provoked him.

He wanted to kiss her, damn it—wanted to see for himself if those lips were as soft and sweet as they appeared. He started out of the loch, moving toward her with purpose.

He narrowed his gaze at her. “I owe ye aught at all,” he assured her, deciding upon a bargain. “But I’ll tell you, what...”

The anger in her expression fled at once at his hesitation, and was replaced with a look of such sheer hope that Colin wanted to smile. He didn’t dare, however, because he didn’t want her to think he was the least bit willing in this. She and his conscience were dragging him kicking and screaming all the way.

Her expression grew wary at his approach, and warier still the nearer he came, but he didn’t waver. He waded through the shallow water with purpose, never releasing her gaze. He had been about to say that he’d take her to his sister, that Meghan would help her, because he could not, but the words that came out of his mouth surprised even him.

“I’ll do it for a kiss,” he said.

She stilled, peering at him as though she didn’t quite believe her ears. Her face screwed with what seemed to be confusion, and mayhap a little aversion, when she decided she had, in fact, heard him aright. “A kiss?”

“A kiss,” Colin affirmed. “A simple kiss.”

She sat dumbfounded, watching his approach. He swam toward her, and she cocked her head at him as he lifted his head once more, looking beautifully bewildered still.

“I dinna want your spirits,” he declared, suddenly resolved in his decision. “You can keep the recipe. A kiss is all I want for my payment, or we have no bargain at all!”

If she truly loved Broc, he would know by her kiss. A woman’s mouth did not lie, nor did the beat of her heart beneath his hand. And if she did not love Broc... well, he would know it.

And he would spare her no mercy.

She shrugged, and seemed momentarily unable to speak. She blinked then and said after an instant more, “Verra well... a... a kiss...”

“To seal the bargain,” he assured her, and propelled himself toward the bank with new purpose.

She sat upon the grass, watching him still.

He rose up out of the water suddenly, standing in the shallows in all his full glory.

She gave a little startled cry.

Colin smiled at her reaction.

She leapt up at once, eyes wide. “Sweet mother of Jesus, I have to go!” she declared. “I forgot something verra verra important!” She turned to go, but not before taking another long flustered glance in his direction.

Colin couldn’t help himself. He grinned. “What about my kiss?” he asked shamelessly, and made no move to cover himself.

She stopped and turned to him, but took great pains not to look below his shoulders this time. “Och,” she exclaimed, “well... I... I would you see... but I have to... I have to—check the *uisge*! Yes, that’s right!” she declared, and nodded vigorously. She turned and fled, calling out as she ran, “I’ll kiss you next time! Have to go! Bye!”

Colin watched her go, and his grin turned as wicked as his thoughts as she disappeared into the forest.

He chuckled, quite satisfied.

So... she wasn’t so immune to him as she would like to think, and the discovery pleased him immensely.

Seana didn’t stop running until she reached the clearing near the ancient cairn where she and her da made their home.

Out of breath now, she leaned against a fallen pillar, panting softly.

These hills were spattered with the remnants of their ancestors, and their presence was tangible in the almost magical beauty of the land of her birth. Here, hidden in the deepest heart of the highlands, Seana could almost feel their spirits. She could almost believe in their magic. She could almost see them dancing in the blanket of mist that fell with night.

Though she had made her bed upon the soil they'd trod, she had never bemoaned their lack, for she felt rich in spirit. That she had no pillow to lay her head upon, had never been her lament. The scent of sweet loam had lulled her to sleep, and the breeze on summer nights had soothed the worries from her brow. Somehow, it had been a reminder that she was only a small part of something far greater than she.

But now... she did lament the lack of pillow for their heads, and feared the night. Because she loved her da.

He was all she had in this world.

Her gaze narrowed as she stared down at her bare feet.

Colin Mac Brodie was a shameless rogue! But she knew that.

She couldn't quite say for certain but she thought perhaps he'd been laughing at her as she'd fled. It brought back that terrible memory but she hadn't been able to help herself. She had panicked at the sight of him—standing there so bare!

His simple kiss to seal their bargain had seemed no great price to pay... until suddenly he had started toward her. Her heart had begun to pound and the next thing she had known she was flying away—once again running to escape him, and the reason hardly seemed to matter at the moment. His laughter had echoed in her brain, and she hadn't been able to tell in that instant of hysteria whether it had been the laughter of the boy or that of the man.

She swallowed hard over the memory that had wounded her spirit so long ago.

She had thought herself long over those childhood sentiments, but it was obvious to her now that she was not.

Suddenly, the notion of asking Colin Mac Brodie for help to win her a husband seemed utterly ridiculous.

She'd talked herself into it, she realized now... and she had to wonder why she would do such a thing.

Well, she thought she knew why.

As she sat, contemplating her motives, My Love crept into her line of vision. Her da's cat sat and stared at her with those beautiful slitted eyes. Seana stared back, hardly able to resist the comfort of her presence. It was piteous that her only friend should be a beast who had no interest at all in her save to taunt her, but it was true. My Love came as close to being a friend to her as Seana had ever had.

"Brat," she said, without meaning it.

The cat simply stared at her, unblinking, and Seana sighed.

The truth was... she sought out Colin because she had something to prove to herself. After all these years his cruel words hurt her still. She had denied it all, had told herself that she was immune to him. She had even set out to prove to herself that he could not harm her any longer, that she was far beyond his reach. She had convinced herself that he was her solution to win Broc—and she did want Broc!—but it was suddenly apparent that that was not her motive for seeking out Colin Mac Brodie.

So then, what had she really wanted?

For Colin to look at her and see the error of his ways?

For him to find himself hopelessly smitten with her so that she could smack the arrogance from his face after all this time with a heartfelt rejection? Why? So that she could say... haha... look at me now... I was not good enough for you then, but you are not good enough for me now!

Well, she'd failed miserably whatever her intent.

Colin Mac Brodie had been born with a face that made women kneel at his feet. She was no one to teach him lessons. And he would only play games with her heart and then toss her away like the core of an apple he had enjoyed and no longer had use for.

In that instant when he'd approached her, wanting his kiss for payment, Seana had felt as vulnerable as she had that day so long ago.

Mayhap she hadn't yearned for that kiss, mayhap her heart no longer pitter-pattered in his presence, mayhap she truly did not like him, but it had somehow, even now, managed to instill in her, for the space of an instant... sheer terror.

What a silly fool she was!

Nay, she was going to have to find another way to gain Broc's notice. If she must walk up to him herself and tell him to his face—och, it was preferable to suffering Colin Mac Brodie's presence!

“A kiss from Colin Mac Brodie is the verra last thing I want right now!” she assured My Love.

The cat blinked and continued to stare, unfazed.

“I dinna like that man!” she told the cat. “I dinna like him anymore than I like you!” she added irascibly.

My Love blinked again and lowered her head.

The devil animal had the audacity to look wounded by her words!

Seana knew better.

“Ye canna fool me with that woeful look!” she assured the beast, and silently berated herself for arguing with a bloody cat.

She needed a man. She needed a companion. And her da needed a softer, warmer place to lay his head.

There was but a sennight left before Alison MacLean’s wedding. If she did not see Broc before then, she would surely see him there.

It was time to form a new plan.

She didn’t need Colin Mac Brodie’s help—and to hell with his rotten kiss! Seana would rather kiss a bloody toad!

Speaking of which...

Pushing herself up from the stone, she said to My Love, “Let’s go’n find something for Da to eat. No offense to you cat, but I dinna think your gifts are quite the thing!” It disgusted her to find dead birds and mice at her da’s bedside. She didn’t know how he suffered it.

She hadn’t realized how long she had remained by the still, until the forest began to dim. My Love simply stared up at her, unwilling to move. As dusk fell, the trees began to shimmer with tiny almost imperceptible lights. If Seana hadn’t seen them a thousand times before, she might have questioned the twinkling apparitions, but she didn’t. She simply accepted them, as she did the irascible cat staring up at her. Her da claimed the twinkling lights were magical faery creatures. They looked to her to be no more than tiny winking bugs.

In any case, it was time to go home.

She made her way back to the cairn, certain of only two things that moment: One, My Love would follow when it pleased her. And two, she wasn’t going to honor that devil’s bargain—not tomorrow or any other day—Colin Mac Brodie be damned!

Chapter 7



He wasn't about to let her get away so easily.

Colin wasn't certain why he couldn't let it go, but he couldn't. He couldn't stop thinking of her.

He hadn't seen her for days now—not since she had so arrogantly interrupted his bath at the loch. Brazen wench. She would stand before him at his bath and boldly demand his help, and yet flee at the threat of a simple kiss.

In truth, he didn't know whether to be amused or feel slighted. No woman had ever fled his touch. And that she hadn't returned when she'd made her presence known every day before that, was enough to nettle him to the bone. He told himself now that curiosity had driven him into these woodlands to search out his vixen enchantress. And he'd convinced himself, after spending four hours searching for her elusive home, that it was concern for her well-being that kept him searching.

She couldn't possibly have been so horrified by the prospect of his kiss. He refused to believe it.

He was beginning to wonder if the village folk hadn't pointed him in the wrong direction. There was no sign at all of even the smallest hut to be found. These woodlands were uninhabited but for the creatures that dwelled here.

He cursed softly to himself with the realization that the sky was growing dusky once more. Once twilight fell, it would be dark within the blink of an eye, and he was at least an hour's walk from home. On top of that, he hadn't even thought to bring himself a snack and his belly was complaining mightily. He stopped beneath a heavy tree limb, stretched up his hands and shoved at the branch, thinking where best to go from here.

His belly said home.

His pride said no.

His belly rumbled a little louder, as though cursing at his infernal pride.

“Shaddap,” he said.

He smelled it before he heard her. The pungent aroma of her father’s spirits. It was unmistakable, for no other brewed such a concoction as did Donal the Drunk.

He followed its general direction, until he heard her—the mutter of a female voice.

“Bloody rotten evil thing!”

Colin pursued the voice and discovered the bearer hovered over a strange contraption the likes of which he’d never seen. Her hair was knotted at her nape, and her hands were soiled from working on the... contraption. She smacked it with a hand and the strange beast sputtered and choked.

“I dinna want to do this anymore!” she exclaimed. “I dinna even like the *uisge beatha*! Why could I not be a baker’s daughter instead!”

Colin tried not to laugh at the sight she presented. This instant, she appeared very much the same dirty waif he had once known, the one who had stolen tarts from window sills and then followed him everywhere with the remnants of her pilferage smudged upon her face.

“So this is where ye’ve been?” he asked, startling her. She gave a little shriek and spun to face him, her eyes wide with alarm.

The instant she realized it was him, however, her expression grew vexed.

“Did your minny never teach you manners?”

Colin merely raised a brow at her.

“Wretched man!” she said, and turned her back on him, dismissing him to work upon her ridiculous-looking contraption.

He ignored her barb. “What is that?”

“Well now, what do ye think it is?” she replied without turning. “Who is my da?” she added irascibly.

“Aye, but that doesna explain what that monstrosity is,” he told her. “I have never seen such a thing.”

She remained silent, and continued to work on the sputtering device. “I do not know what it is either,” she confessed after a moment. “’Tis my da’s invention... to brew the *uisge beatha*.”

“Aha,” Colin said. “And where is your da?”

“Home.” She fiddled with the contraption’s extensions. Colin could see now that a piece had broken and that she was trying to force two parts together. It was a coppersmith’s job. Her hands and dress were filthy with soot from the still, and he felt a sudden disgust with her father that he

should leave his daughter to make his drink, whilst he stumbled about with his *uisge*. “Drunk?” he asked her.

“Nay!” she replied, turning to him, those lovely green eyes all the brighter for the soot that darkened her face. “I make the rotten liquor, I dinna drink it!”

He’d meant her da, but he could tell by her mood that he wouldn’t win her favor by clarifying that point. He watched her fiddle with the device for an instant from where he stood, and then walked over to where she stood working, looking over her shoulder while she struggled in vain to join the two pieces.

“Ye canna do that,” he pointed out reasonably.

She released the two pieces at once and wiped her hands upon her skirt, making them filthier.

“Dinna tell me what I can or cannot do!” she snapped, casting him a rankled glance over her shoulder. Those pouty lips of hers were no longer pink. They were stained black, but Colin wanted to kiss them anyway. “Go away!” she demanded of him, and returned to her still.

Colin didn’t bloody wish to. He’d spent hours searching for her and he’d be damned if he’d just turn and go now.

“You’re an ill-tempered wench, did ye know?”

She didn’t bother to look at him. “And you’re a mean rotten bugger who breaks little girls’ hearts!”

Colin’s brow furrowed at her crude defamation of his character. Not even Meghan said such cruel things to him.

“That was a long time ago,” he protested.

She turned to glare up at him. “Oh? And ye dinna break hearts anymore, I suppose?”

Colin’s lips twisted into a grimace. He certainly didn’t mean to, but he had no defense ready for himself. In truth, he had broken his share of hearts... and still managed to though he tried not to.

“Would it help if I said I’m sorry?”

She turned back to the still. “Why ever for?”

Damned if she wasn’t going to make him say it.

Colin watched her, uncertain what to say now. “So where have you been?”

She didn’t respond, only continued to work on her wretched device.

“I was concerned,” he confessed. “Ye dinna come back, and I thought ye’d taken ill.”

She gave a little snort. “O’ course, Colin Mac Brodie! And that would be the only reason a woman would not fly into your arms to be kissed!”

Colin’s frown deepened.

She turned on him suddenly, frustration showing in her features. “Why did ye come out here?” she demanded to know.

“I worried,” he said, and thought for himself that it was a lame excuse. He didn’t know why he’d come out here. He’d been asking himself that same question for hours. As yet there was no answer.

He was drawn to her.

He couldn’t figure another reason.

“Well!” she assured him. “I dinna need your help, and I surely dinna want your kisses, Mac Brodie, so ye can bloody well go home now!”

He didn’t want to.

“I’d like to help.”

“I said I do not need your help!” she countered stubbornly. “I can manage alone verra well, thank ye verra much!” She turned back to her work.

“You cannot fix it like that,” he told her. “It needs a smith. Why will you not let me help?”

She kicked the base of the still. “Because you’re a rotten selfish knave who cannot do anything for anybody without wantin’ something in return, and I’ll not be kissing you—not today, nor any other day! That’s why! Blasted thing!” She kicked the pot still once more in a fit of temper.

That wasn’t precisely true, Colin protested, though silently because he could not come up with a single instance he had not profited from a situation. He was certain there must be an occasion, but it just wasn’t in his nature to pass over opportunities. Life was full with them, even in the darkest times. It was no crime to help oneself while helping others, too.

She spat out a string of oaths that would have made his sister blush.

“I do not even know why I asked you for help to begin with!” she confessed. “You’re a rotten bugger who does not care about anyone but himself!”

Colin’s brows collided over her low opinion of him. He damned well didn’t like it. “So why did you?”

“Because I made the mistake of believing you had a heart, Colin Mac Brodie!”

“Will ye stop calling me by my full name! You sound like my grandminny Fia! My name is Colin. I do not need to be reminded that I am Brodie’s son.”

She cast him a sour glance. “I dinna want to call you Colin! I do not like you Colin Mac Brodie!”

“Och, but I dinna even know your name!” he blurted, and then at once wished he hadn’t, because her green eyes bore into him like daggers.

“And why should ye remember the name of every little girl whose heart you break?” she asked, her jaw taut with anger.

He wanted to caress it till it slackened beneath his touch, wanted to kiss her until the anger melted from her body.

“Ouch!” he said, and felt suddenly like an insect to be squashed beneath her feet.

“Go away,” she said again.

He couldn’t.

How could she throw such accusations at him and then expect him to just walk away? If he could make up for the past he wanted to try. Obviously, she had been wounded by him, and it was his duty to make things right.

She was right, he did owe her.

“Och,” he relented, “I’ll help you... you don’t even have to kiss me, lass.”

Chapter 8



Seana gave Colin a disbelieving look. “You’re just now figuring that out are you?”

His cheeks colored.

Seana wasn’t sure whether it was from anger or chagrin. In either case, she didn’t care—the pot still demanded her attention, Colin Mac Brodie be damned!

Her father had fashioned the contraption long ago. He’d been a smithy in the town where he and Seana’s mother had first met. His own da had brewed the *uisge beatha* until the time of his death, from a recipe handed down from generation to generation.

Seana’s ancestors had all been distillers of the “water of life”—the *uisge beatha*. They had been keepers of the ancient recipe. To their ancestors, its power to revive weary bodies and failing spirits, to drive out winter chill and rekindle hope was a gift from the gods. Seana was the last of her family to know the treasured recipe—aside from her da. And now she had broken his still. She didn’t have the heart to tell him.

“You’re not going to fix that without a smithy,” he assured her. He was still peering over her shoulder, annoying her with his continued presence.

She couldn’t concentrate with him there... breathing on her...

He was too close!

“Go away, Mac Brodie!”

Seana wanted nothing more than to elbow him, out of sheer frustration, but she refrained from doing so. She’d never had a heart for violence, no matter what the circumstances.

“’Tis not so simple as simply giving it to the smithy!” she explained as patiently as she was able. “Each and every change in this pot still changes the flavor of the spirits!” No two pots tills, no matter were they made by the same two hands, ever produced the same spirit. There were those who

claimed the process a magical one, but Seana's da seemed to think the difference was in the still.

"So what do ye do when it breaks?"

"I dunno!" Seana answered a little hysterically, despite her resolve to remain calm. "I've never broken it before!"

It was all too much for her.

She plopped herself backward upon the ground, her skirt flying down around her, and pouted like a child. "I do not know what to do!" she said, feeling miserably helpless.

And Colin Mac Brodie was the very last person she wished to have witness the first attack of hysteria she'd ever had in her life!

"Go away!" she said again, and couldn't help herself. It came out sounding more a whine. Tears pricked at her eyes, and she made the mistake of peering up at Colin through watery eyes. He was staring at her, his expression full of pity or something like it, and Seana could not bear it. Her tears began to flow at once.

"I do not know how to fix it!" she sobbed, throwing her hand out in disgust at the mechanical beast. "I do not want to kill anyone!" The rest of her words came out less coherently. "My da... he canna... he canna see anymore to fix it... and... and I can be a good wife!" she wailed. She didn't need Colin's pity! It was the last thing she wanted. He didn't have to like her! He could dislike her forever for all she cared, but she didn't want his pity! "Damned cat!" she railed, and wasn't even sure why she said it. For once, My Love was nowhere to be found. But the bloody cat was never going to like her either!

Seana buried her face in her hands and sobbed pitifully.

She was vaguely aware that Colin approached and knelt at her side. She felt his hand upon the back of her head, tentatively at first, and then more firmly, consoling her. She didn't want to be consoled, not by him or anybody, and yet, she didn't move away from him. She let him caress her head, overwhelmed by the feel of another human touch. Her da had never been very affectionate in that way—no hugs or even pats upon the head, though his love for her had been evident in his eyes—eyes that could no longer see her very well.

"Dinna cry, lass," he whispered.

"I can cry if I want to!"

Colin smiled at her response.

All those years ago, when he had hurt her... flung his cruel words at her and then laughed with his friends.... She hadn't even cried then. She'd stood there looking at him, her heart in her eyes, and then had run away, but not before facing her tormenter, with such an expression of sorrow that his guilt had choked him.

She was a strong woman, he knew. She had to be strong to survive out here in these woods alone with her drunk of a da. Seeing her cry just now wrenched at Colin's heart. He knew it could not be easy for her to weep before him. He wanted to hold her.

He sat down upon the ground beside her and stroked her head, letting her weep. "Cry then," he whispered. "'Tis all right to cry sometimes, lass."

Her weeping subsided a bit, and Colin smiled. Contrary wench. If he asked her to breathe, he thought she might stop just to spite him.

"Go away!" she said again, though with far less meaning.

"What if I don't want to?" he asked softly. Two could play at this game. Stubborn wench. He withdrew his hand, lifted his knees, and draped his arms over them.

She peeked up out of her hands, peering up at him through teary eyes. Somehow, they seemed greener now—those eyes. They were the most vivid shade of green he had ever seen. They stood out, stark in color against her dirty face. Despite her weeping, she managed to give him a malevolent glare.

Colin smiled at her. "There ye go now, lass," he teased. "That's more like it."

"I do not like you, Colin Mac Brodie!" she said peevishly.

"Well, I don't like you either," he lied.

"Good!"

"But I do want to kiss you," he confessed, and winked at her.

'She turned to look at him. "Then you're a worse rogue than I even imagined!" She eyed him coldly. "How can you want to kiss someone you don't even like?"

"Easily... when she has the loveliest lips I've ever seen on a woman."

She blinked, and Colin didn't miss the little gasp of surprise she tried to hide. She hid her mouth behind her arms, then, depriving him of the luscious sight.

"'Tis the truth," he asserted, reaching out to wipe away a black smudge from her forehead. She didn't protest, though her eyes remained narrowed.

He yearned to place a thumb between her brows and soothe away the frown, but he withdrew again, not wanting to push his luck. Every advance was a victory, no matter how small, and patience had always been his greatest virtue.

Her brows twitched slightly, and he knew she was trying to read his thoughts.

“Why did you come here?” she demanded to know.

“I told you. Because I wish to help.”

It wasn’t quite the truth.

He didn’t know why the bloody hell he’d come.

But he had, and now he truly did wish to help.

She gave him a dubious look.

“Even if I believed you, Colin Mac Brodie, you cannot help me. It was silly of me to even ask you in the first place.”

“Mayhap,” he said, reaching out and wiping a tear that slid down her cheek. “But I think I can help, though first things first,” he said. “What about the still? Ye mean to tell me it has never broken before now?”

She shrugged. “My da used to fix it.”

“And why can he not now?”

“I told you, he’s not well.”

Colin was certain he understood her meaning. Unwell, was he? He felt a surge of temper at the thought of her father lying drunk somewhere, leaving his daughter to tend his spirits. He took in her dirty clothes, her solitary presence here in these woods, and his anger intensified. “Where is he now?”

Her lashes fluttered downward. “Sleeping, most likely.”

Colin’s jaw tautened with his anger. What manner of father allowed his daughter to work this way, only to satisfy his vices. His gaze fell to her bare feet. How could he sleep whilst his daughter went without shoes or food to eat?

His own da had had faults aplenty, and Colin bore the worst of them in his own person, but never had his da abandoned his responsibilities to his wife or his children—leastways not when it came to supplying their basic needs.

At first opportunity, Colin intended to face her da and to demand answers for his daughter’s sake.

“What if we take that... thing...” He indicated the still. “...to my smith... and you can oversee the repairs and be certain ’tis fixed as it should be.”

Her brows lifted. “You would do that?”

Colin nodded. “Aye, lass. I can take it with me tonight, and he shall begin repairs on the morn when you arrive to instruct him.”

Her gaze narrowed once more. “And what would you require in return?”

“Only for you to stop weeping.”

She gave him a wary glance. “Naught more?”

Colin shook his head. “As for Broc, when we finish with the still, I shall take ye to see Meghan. My sister will help you, because I cannot.”

She studied him a long instant. Colin thought she might be trying to decipher his motive. For once in his life he had none—save to ease his own conscience. And that was reason enough. Still, he couldn’t quite resign himself to help her win Broc—for two reasons. One, Broc was his friend. And two, even if he knew what to teach her, he was certain Broc would never have her after. Nay, Meghan would know better what to do. But he was determined to help where he could.

“And there is naught you want in return for your help?” She sounded as though she disbelieved him.

“Only one thing,” he relented.

Her answering expression told him that she’d expected him to name a condition. “Aha!”

“I’d like to know your name.”

She blinked, and the surprise that registered upon her face made Colin want to laugh. “My name?”

He winked at her. “Aye, your name, lass—and for you to forgive me for not remembering it to begin with.”

For an instant, she didn’t answer, and Colin wondered if she were going to tell him. “Seana,” she said after a moment.

He smiled. “Seana,” he repeated after her, testing the name upon his tongue.

They sat together in the fading twilight, surrounded by the potent scent of her father’s spirits, and Colin felt a heady rush at the tentative smile she gave him. No ale or *uisge beatha* could have made him feel so good as did the gratitude in her eyes at that moment. He sat with her for a while longer, without speaking, afraid to break the moment’s spell.

His body felt more alive in that instant than ever it had before. The burn of her father’s *uisge* upon the air mingled sweetly with the scent of forest green. He lapped at his lips gone dry. The night air tickled the hairs upon

his arm and teased the moistness from his lips. All his senses were heightened.

More than anything... he wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her...

The softest breeze blew through the woodlands, sweeping hair into her face, hiding those beautiful eyes. Colin had the most incredible urge to reach out and move the strands from her face so he would not be deprived.

At such times in the past, he might have done more. He might have reached out this moment and buried his fingers in that luscious black mane. He might have lifted her face for the kiss he'd craved from the moment he had first set eyes upon her.

His body stirred at the mere thought.

But he did none of those things, beyond savoring the thought of them. For the first time in his life, he took simple pleasure in the way his body felt in her presence, without the first intent to satisfy it.

And yet he couldn't help but wonder if she felt it too... that seductive languor in the air that made his breath more labored. That heat that stirred from deep within his own body and intensified his senses... the anticipation that quickened the beat of his heart.

She didn't speak, and Colin's body hardened at the images that came to play within his thoughts, teasing him, tempting him...

"Thank you, Colin," she said softly, and swallowed.

He could see the movement in her throat, and Colin knew she felt it too.

The sound of her voice, so deliciously low, like a lover's whisper, made his heart leap. His flesh tingled where the cool night air touched his hot skin.

He, too, swallowed with difficulty. "You'd better go home now," he advised her.

She didn't speak, only stared at him, her green eyes luminous in the fading forest light. He wasn't certain, but he thought there might be unshed tears within them.

"'Tis growing dark," he whispered, coaxing her.

She'd better go.

Before he changed his mind and seduced her right here where they sat.

Despite her angry words and all her bluster, the look in her eyes this instant told him that if he truly wished it... she would be his tonight...

She nodded. "Aye." And made to rise.

He set a hand upon her shoulder, couldn't seem to help himself.

He hadn't meant to.

He wanted to tell her to run.

He wanted to tell her to stay.

"G'nite," he said. "I shall see ye on the morrow?"

"G'nite," she said, and placed her hand over his upon her shoulder.

For an instant, she did nothing more, and then she brushed his hand aside, and bolted away. She stopped once to look back, and said, "Until the morrow." And then she smiled and was gone, vanished into the forest like a sprite.

Colin stared for the longest time at the place where she had disappeared, seeing that smile again in his mind.

It had been a perfect smile, one that had lit even her eyes, one that warmed his heart...

With the blink of an eye, night had fallen, and there was nothing there now but shadows where she had stood... and a pair of golden eyes twinkling back at him from the darkness.

They disappeared the instant he spied them.

Colin blinked, and looked again, but there was nothing there at all.

There were those who said these woods were filled with faeries and brownies and that at night their magic lit up the forest like falling stardust, but as far as Colin was concerned those were old wives' tales and he didn't believe a one of them.

It was probably just some wretched beast staring back at him... a fox or a cat, mayhap.

He shook his head, and took a deep breath to clear his senses, then gathered up what he could of Seana's pot still to take home with him.

She had obviously begun a new batch of her spirits because the pot still was heavy with the substance. He hated to waste it, but he couldn't carry it home like this, so he proceeded to empty some upon the ground. But he hated to waste it all.

Colin lifted up the pot still when it had lightened sufficiently and then emptied the rest into his mouth. It was a good strong spirit, still slightly warm. He choked a bit as it went down, but he didn't stop. He let it pour down his throat. A little spilled down his chin.

There were those who took their measure of a man by the way he drank his *uisge*. Colin had been drinking since he'd been old enough for his da to

shove it down his gob. A little burn never killed a man, his da would say, but he hadn't entirely been right.

A little *uisge beatha* sometimes did.

But it was all part of the game, and no man worth the name ever shied away from the fire water. You put your faith, not in God, but in your brewer, and your lips on the... mouth of the bottle... or was it that... you put your lips on the mouth of the brewer...

Och, but his brain grew fuzzy, even as he drank.

This spirit was strong.

He finished it, and gathered the pieces of the still, then carried it home, as he'd promised her, ignoring the itty bitty bursts of light that twinkled along the path to light his way.

Fairy dust, that's what it looked like—if he believed in such things, but he didn't...

Magic lived only in the minds of old women such as his grandminny Fia—God rest her soul—and in a wee dram of good *uisge beatha*.

And in Seana's smile.

He smiled, then, for the image of it was imprinted upon his mind... and damned if he didn't suddenly feel better than he had in years.

And it wasn't the *uisge beatha*.

Chapter 9



It was the damned *uisge beatha*.

Damn, but Colin was as sick as he'd ever been in his life. This was the second time in the space of a week that he'd found himself spewing his guts out over that damned drink of hers. He hadn't realized it until this morning, but it was her father's spirits he had drunk at Meghan's wedding. Who the devil had procured that waste? Not he, damn it all to hell. Leith, perhaps. He was going to have to talk to Leith and be sure they never bought that rotgut again. If he didn't know better he'd think she was trying to poison him!

Rolling over on his bed, he flung an arm over the side.

Christ help him, he was going to die.

That's what that secret smile was as she'd fled the woods, leaving him there with her vat of poison.

She'd known he would drink it and that he'd lie here in misery, waiting to take his final breath.

She hadn't managed to kill him the first time, so she'd devised a way to weasel into his head and stay until he'd been driven out by lust and madness to find her. And then she'd poisoned him again. It didn't matter that she hadn't forced it down his throat. She'd known he would drink it.

Just as she must have known he'd come after her.

He tried to remember... was Broc sickened by her spirits, as well? He didn't think so, but Cameron surely had been. The poor boy had gone into the woods and they hadn't seen him again until late in the day.

Colin groaned in sheer misery. He rolled over once more in the bed and threw an arm over his eyes to shield them from the light.

"Somebody kill me," he muttered to himself.

"Somebody will if Meghan sees you like this," Leith said from the doorway. "You're verra lucky she's in Montgomerie's bed just now and cannot be bothered anymore with tormenting her brothers."

Colin would have laughed at Leith's pitiful attempt to cheer them both, but he didn't have the strength. "Go and tell her to come home!" he demanded of his older brother.

"Aye," Leith said, "and she would take one sniff of this room and beat you o'er the head with a broom."

Colin groaned in misery. "But then she would return with one of her potions and I would be as good as new," he argued.

Leith laughed. "Where in damnation did you go anyhow... one minute you were there next to me working on the fence, and the next you were gone."

"To speak with Donal the drunk's daughter," Colin mumbled.

Leith lifted a brow. "Aha," he said, "I understand now!"

"Nay, ye dinna," Colin argued, covering his eyes once more.

Damn, but he was going to die.

"Anyhow, you've a wench here looking for you, says the smithy."

Colin peered up at the doorway at his brother.

Leith lifted a brow. "She wouldn't happen to be Donal the drunk's daughter, now would she?"

"He's fixing her still," Colin replied in self-defense... or mayhap it was more in defense of Seana.

"I see," Leith said, grinning.

"Nay, you don't," Colin protested once more. "It isn't what you're thinkin' this time."

"And you're not sleeping off a night's drunk either," Leith countered, and laughed without pity.

"Go to bloody hell!" Colin muttered. He tried to rise. "Damn," he said, and stumbled out of the bed.

Leith chuckled.

"I'm going to take the lass to see Meggie today," Colin explained.

"Well, you'd better be sobering up or you'll never get whatever it is you're after. Meggie will blast your arse!"

Colin cast him a rankled glance. "What makes you think I want something from her?" he asked Leith, offended by his brother's assumptions.

Leith shrugged.

Did everyone just expect him to want something? Did they never just assume he wished to help?

He thought about that, and was forced to ask himself... When was the last time he'd done something simply for someone else's sake, and not his own?

It was a cold hard question, but one he was still contemplating when he reached the smithy's.

"I don't want you to straighten it out! It *must* have that verra same kink when you're done!"

"Och, lass, it would be easier to make you a whole new piece than to try to fit this one together the way you want me to! I canna do it! If ye want the kink, I'll give you a new kink!" The smithy lifted up the copper tubing he'd been working with and bent it in one swift stroke over his knee. "There ye go, a kink!"

"Let me have my pot still back!" Seana demanded furiously. "I will fix it! You've no idea what you're doing, stubborn man!"

That was the sight that greeted Colin as he entered the smithy's shop.

The smithy held on to the still, preventing her from taking it. "Colin said to fix it, and fix it I will!" he told Seana, refusing to return it.

Seana tugged at the contraption, trying to wrest it away from him. "Nay, ye willna, ye big oaf! It doesna belong to Colin! It belongs to my da! Give it back!"

Colin was grateful his headache had eased, else he'd never be able to deal with the two of them now. He walked up to them, and took the pot still from the smithy's hands. Seana tried to grab it from him but he held it high.

She gave him a look that would have curdled his belly if her damnable *uisge beatha* hadn't already beat her to it.

He smiled down at her reassuringly. "I'll make him do it as you wish," he promised her. And then he handed the vat with all its copper limbs back to the smithy. "Fix it as she told you to."

"Och, but, Colin!"

"If anyone can do it, you can," he assured the smithy. "I have every faith you'll find a way."

The older man's face contorted with disgust. "As if I did not have anything better to do!" he complained, taking the pot still from Colin. He returned it to his workbench. "But I'll not raise a finger to it while she remains in my presence," he swore, and refused to work while they remained. He crossed his arms and leaned against his bench, waiting expectantly.

"Hmmp!" Seana exclaimed.

“Dinna fash yourself,” Colin told the man. “We’ll be out of your way this minute.”

“I will not!” Seana protested.

Colin leaned to whisper in her ear. “A man has his pride, lass.”

The scent of her skin was sweet, like fresh green grass and sunshine, momentarily distracting him. More than anything, he’d like to lay her down in some meadow and make love to her sweet body...

Och, God, how could she affect him so even in the miserable state he was in?

“He’ll fix it for ye as you wish. You have my word.” He gave her a pleading look, of the sort he reserved for Meggie when he needed her help and she didn’t want to give it. His sister had always been his greatest challenge. She couldn’t be swayed by his charms—she was his sister, after all.

“Verra well,” she relented.

Colin grinned and chuckled her beneath the chin. He gave her a wink, relishing the fact that she was not wholly immune to him. “Let’s go’n see Meghan, lass.”

All hope was not lost, he thought, but hope for what, he had no idea.

Chapter 10



It was a longer walk to Meghan's than Seana anticipated, but she didn't mind.

Truth to tell, she was rather enjoying Colin's company this morning. He was charming when he wished to be, and she could see why the girls were drawn to him, beyond that beautiful face of his.

She couldn't quite bring herself to tell him so, however. It wasn't even easy to admit to herself.

Something had changed between them, it seemed.

After last night, she felt a certain gratitude toward him that she hadn't expected to feel. But beyond that... something else was different as well. It was an easy companionship between them today, and she could tell that he, too, was enjoying their familiarity. Despite the fact that he seemed sick this morn, he was jovial and waggish, and hadn't complained the first bit when she'd refused to ride upon his horse. He dismounted and, holding the animal by the reins, walked patiently beside her, even when her legs grew tired and her limp grew evident.

Seana wasn't afraid of the beast. It was a beautiful black mare with a gentle manner, but she hadn't strengthened her limbs so well by allowing herself to be coddled and carried about. Nay, it was good to walk. If her legs pained her just a bit, it was a small price to pay for the simple joy of setting one foot before the other. The worst of it all was the slight hobble to her walk that betrayed her now, and she was certain that was what had quieted the mood between them.

Seana didn't miss the way he studied her legs, though he pretended to ignore it. It made him uneasy, she could tell by his silence, though she couldn't quite tell if he was repulsed by the debility itself or if it were simply his guilt that made him avoid her gaze.

In any case, it didn't matter.

It was his problem to overcome, she decided, because she had already dealt with it. It hadn't been easy, but she'd found a way to like herself despite her body's weaknesses... and mayhap even because of them.

Colin Mac Brodie had his own demons to overcome, Seana realized. But Colin wasn't her problem just now.

Winning herself a husband was, and finding her da a better place to lay his head.

"Are ye certain ye dinna wish to ride, lass?"

Seana cast him a glance. She smiled to ease the frown lines from his brow, and teased him, "Are ye so weary already, Colin Mac Brodie?"

He returned her smile, though his worry lines didn't quite disappear. "Mayhap I am," he answered, but Seana somehow knew it was for her benefit alone.

"Aye," she agreed, goading him, "You dinna look so good, 'tis true." She gave him her own look of concern, and tried not to smile when he took offense.

"What do ye mean I dinna look so good!"

"Ye just do not," Seana replied, in her most innocent tone.

His brows drew together.

"Ye look a wee bit puny, in truth." She continued to tease him, though it wasn't entirely untrue. She doubted he was accustomed to hearing such things from the women he was acquainted with.

"Puny!" he exclaimed, and seemed incensed that she would think him so.

"Well, ye dinna wish me to lie, now do you?" she reasoned, pursing her lips to keep from laughing at his answering expression; a mixture of surprise and bewilderment, and perhaps distress that she did not think him perfect.

Och, but he was perfect... that face... that mouth... that body...

Seana tried not to dwell on it.

He was trying to decide whether she was speaking the truth, and Seana resolved to let him think she meant it. It would do him good, she thought, to be a wee less certain of himself now and again. Everyone suffered uncertainty at some point... save for Colin Mac Brodie. Och, but it wasn't natural to be so self-assured. Seana decided a little humility would suit him better.

"Well, you dinna look so bloody good yourself," he countered.

Seana was certain she didn't, and that he thought so was no great surprise. "Nay?" she asked, her tone completely lacking in concern.

"Nay!"

"Oh, well," Seana lamented, and picked up her pace. She was not going to confess that she had good reason, at least, because her leg was, indeed, bothering her.

"I think we should ride," he persisted.

"No thank you," Seana countered stubbornly.

"Och, but ye said yourself, lass. I dinna look so well! Have pity on me, and ride this mare with me!"

Seana gave him her most pleasant smile. "Ye can ride, if you wish. I do not mind." She could tell he was growing frustrated, but she didn't need his concern. "I have never ridden a horse in my life," she confessed, trying to turn his attention from her leg, "and I do not need to begin now."

He seemed surprised by that. "Never?"

"Nay. Not everyone is born to such luxuries, Colin Mac Brodie!"

"She willna harm ye, lass."

Seana continued to walk, her expression cheerful, ignoring his appeals. "I know."

"Stubborn woman!"

Seana gave him a nod of agreement. "My da says so, as well. But if I were not so stubborn, I think, I wouldn't even be able to walk today. Stubborn is not such a bad thing to be, Colin Mac Brodie!"

She'd given him an opening, she knew, but she wanted it spoken between them at last. Her bad leg was not a thing to be pitied or feared or held in contempt. It was not something to be hushed about either. It was simply a fact of her life, an obstacle to be overcome—and she surely had done that!

Still, he didn't seem able to ask. He opened his mouth to speak, she saw, then closed it again, and returned to keeping his own thoughts. His brows remained drawn together, and he stared at the ground where he walked, brooding.

Was he so concerned about her comfort?

Or was he simply uneasy in her presence now that her limp had become discernible?

Neither thought pleased her, but the second disturbed her far more than the first. It brought back too many painful memories.

“It does not pain me at all,” she lied, giving him the benefit of the doubt. “Do not fret over me, Colin.”

Colin knew it was a lie.

He could tell by the way she winced a bit with every step she took. She wasn’t even aware of the telltale gesture, he thought, but it was there, nevertheless. He’d been trying to figure out a way to get her on his horse, but short of lifting her up and throwing her over his mount, he didn’t see a way of getting her to comply.

With every step she took, his conscience pricked him more.

All those years ago, he had never considered her at all—neither her physical nor emotional pain—and this moment he didn’t like himself for his lack of compassion. He was a selfish man, who only thought about himself. How could he not have considered her then?

All morning he’d been trying to remember an instance... a single time he had given his sweat for someone else without the first concern for what he would receive in return. He couldn’t think of one. It disturbed him. He knew his brother hadn’t meant to plague him this morn, but he’d been the second person in the span of these few days to imply that Colin was self-centered and self-serving. All his life he had been at the center of someone’s attention, but he had never asked for it. It was not like he begged for attention or favor. He had simply received it. It had not really occurred to him that he hadn’t returned it, because he simply assumed everyone else wore his shoes. But it was never more apparent to him, than at the moment, how unfair life could be to some, while favoring others so generously.

Seana had been given a cross to bear, and she had borne it with dignity. She bore it still with the same pride he had seen in her eyes all those years ago.

He admired her.

He wanted to help her.

But he felt helpless because she wouldn’t let him, which led him to realize how difficult it must have been for her to come to him and beg his help to win Broc. He felt rotten now for refusing her so meanly, particularly so because he had done so only because of his own wounded pride. There was truly naught wrong with what she was doing. She claimed she loved Broc, and what was wrong with trying to gain his attention?

Naught at all.

Broc would be very fortunate to have a woman such as Seana.

Colin was beginning to see just how fortunate.

Though it bothered him that she wanted his best friend, he intended to do what he could to help her. And if he couldn't help her directly, he knew Meghan would.

He wasn't quite charitable enough to hand someone else something he wanted for himself.

Right or wrong, it was the way he was. He couldn't help it—didn't want to help it where she was concerned.

Damn it, he wanted her for himself.

He just didn't want a bloody wife.

Stubborn wench.

How the devil was he going to get her on his horse?

Out of sheer desperation, Colin pretended to trip. He stumbled, gave a little yelp, and went down, rolling free of his horse. He damned well didn't want to spook the beast and kill himself simply to save her a walk, but it was just about the only thing he could think to do.

She rushed over to him, her look one of such concern that Colin had to force himself not to smile.

"Oh my!" she exclaimed. "Are you all right?" She scooped her hands beneath his head gently to cradle it.

Those lips were suddenly so close to his... so close, and he grimaced, though not in pain. He had to fight his instinct to pull her down and kiss her, slide his tongue between those soft, full lips.

His body stirred at the scent of her skin.

"What the devil was that?" he asked, dazed, though not by his fall. Damned if he had to pretend confusion. Her scent alone skewed his brain. Shaking his head to clear it, he peered back down the path from whence they'd come.

She peered back over her shoulder, as well, studying the ground for some offending rock or limb that might have tripped him.

His horse stood patiently by, watching them.

At the instant, Colin didn't give a damn if they ever moved from where they sat.

The sweet curve of her breast was a lovelier view than any he had seen in a long time. A man would give his life to protect those breasts, and gladly.

He swallowed, and mentally slapped his own hands from reaching out and taking those gentle swells into his hungry hands...

Her gaze returned to him after a moment, and her expression had become dubious.

Canny wench.

“What is it?”

“Naught,” she answered. “I see naught.” And her brows narrowed. “What happened?”

“What happened?”

Colin blinked, giving her a genuinely bemused look. He had hurled himself across the ground, without the first thought of a story to tell. How the hell was he supposed to know what had happened?

“I tripped,” he lied.

Those luscious lips curved into a shrewd smile. “I see.”

Colin pretended to grimace in pain. “I do not think I can walk now.”

She dropped his head upon the hard ground, without mercy. “Och, now, you poor thing!” she exclaimed, and gave him a look that told him she knew precisely what it was he was trying to do.

And she didn’t seem to like it.

Colin grimaced this time for real. He already had himself a king-sized headache from her blasted spirits, and now it was compounded by the smack against the ground.

“I’m supposin’ you’ll have to ride now,” she told him much too sweetly. “I wouldn’t want you to be uncomfortable,” she assured him, and batted her lashes at him.

Shrewd wench, but if it worked, he didn’t care if she knew his game.

He grinned, very pleased his plan had worked.

“You can ride, Mac Brodie, but I shall walk!”

And she smiled back at him, the most brilliant, knowing smile Colin had ever seen.

Gadamn wench! he thought, and frowned.

She and Meghan would get along just fine.

“Just one more thing,” Colin said and seized her arm when she tried to rise.

She peered down her nose at him, looking entirely too pleased with herself. “Aye?”

“Aye.” He jerked her down to where he lay, pulling her atop him.

Her hands pinned him beneath her as she braced her fall. He might lose her to Broc, but not before he tasted those sweet lips.

“Ayyyyyyy, what are you—”

Colin silenced her with his kiss, giving her no time to resist. He slid his tongue between her lips to steal the delightful nectar of her mouth. It was more heady than he'd hoped... sweet unlike any two lips he'd ever kissed in all his life...

She didn't kiss him back, but neither did she push him away, and he had to fight the urge to slide his hands down to test the luscious curve of her bottom.

“Forgive me, lass,” he whispered into her mouth. “I had to do it..

Seana blinked in surprise.

So stunned was she by his kiss that she forgot to protest.

Her hands had gone about his neck of their own accord. It wasn't until she needed a breath that she realized she'd offered him no resistance at all, and her cheeks warmed. She jerked her head backward in alarm.

Och, and she was lying atop him!

And more... she was out of breath entirely... and far too aware of every hard line of his body beneath her.

One leg of his snuck about her own, entwined about her calf, holding her. His body moved against her provocatively, and Seana grew dizzy at the sensations he aroused in her. She froze.

He grinned up at her, his smile far too engaging to allow her anger at his brazenness to remain.

With no small measure of self-disgust she realized that some part of her wanted to grin back down at him—the rogue! How could he make her want to forget her own resolve?

She lifted a brow.

Two could play at this game. She was no silly little lass whose brain would melt merely at his glance. He couldn't bear it that she didn't want him, could he? She could see it in his eyes. His pride was injured that she should dare want his friend instead of him. Well, if he hoped to give her something to think about... so, too, could she...

Seana smiled just a little and rested in his arms, letting him hold her. From the tips of her toes to her lips... she slowly pressed her body against him, watching his eyes turn from the glitter of amusement to a glimmer of surprise. When she pressed her lips against his once more, the groan of pleasure that escaped their joined mouths was his own.

“Och, lass!” he exclaimed softly, his arms going about her waist.

“How’s that?” she asked him a bit coyly.

It took him a full moment to respond. “Well,” he said, after a befuddled moment, “I do not think you need anyone to teach you how to kiss.” He sighed then as he looked up at her, his eyes twinkling a bit, and Seana thought for an instant that she had managed to addle him just a wee bit. He had the presence of mind to wink at her, however, and she knew he was playing with her. “Keep that up,” he told her, his expression a bit regretful if she didn’t know better, “and Broc will have nary a chance.”

Seana laughed softly, feeling quite pleased with herself over his reaction, despite his cavalier attitude.

Mayhap, just mayhap her teacher had yet a few things to learn? And somehow, the very notion pleased her.

Chapter 11



To look upon Meghan Montgomerie was to feel somehow like less, while to be in her presence was to feel like more. She was so beautiful even Seana could not help but stare, but Meghan had a way of talking to a person that made one feel important. They had never met before today, and yet, Meghan welcomed her with open arms, treating her as though she were a long lost sister.

One look in Meghan's eyes and Seana understood why Piers de Montgomerie hadn't paid the Brodie curse any mind. There was nothing "mad" about Meghan Brodie and hers were the most canny eyes Seana had ever peered into. In fact, those eyes made Seana just a wee bit uncomfortable, for they seemed to perceive far too much.

There were things Seana would as lief keep to herself.

She and Colin had arrived in time to share the noonday meal with the Montgomeries. From what Seana gathered, it was the first time Colin Mac Brodie had ever partaken at Lyon's table, and he was visibly uncomfortable with the occasion. Both men were. Och, but she wasn't certain why she should care to, but she resolved to make it as painless as possible for Colin.

She knew what it was like to feel alone, to be the one on the outside.

Putting aside her own misgivings for the time being, she gave Colin all of her attention, and hoped it gave him a sense of companionship.

It didn't matter to Seana if Montgomerie himself thought them lovers. Colin's sister would know the truth soon enough, and she would, if naught else, appreciate that Seana had looked after her brother.

The only problem was... Seana had never eaten such things in her life. She rarely ate meat, but she'd never even seen meat of this sort. She and her da had feasted only upon what the forest and rivers provided and Seana couldn't imagine how one was supposed to swallow a piece of meat of the size of this boar.

She stared at the carcass that was set before them upon the table and wondered, honestly, if it were only there for show. The beast's mouth was stuffed with an apple that was plumed with tail feathers made to look like a small bird.

Seana peered up at Colin, watching him speak with Lyon, wishing he would give her some clue as to what to do with the bloody food, but he began to speak at length about his fence. The two began a heated debate over who was originally responsible for their feud, and who should be held accountable for repairs. For Meghan's sake, she knew they kept the conversation civil, but Seana understood the undercurrents between them.

"Well, now... if we are assigning responsibility," Meghan interrupted, her tone blithe, "mayhap we should make Alison MacLean lay the fence?" She batted her eyes at her husband and brother and smiled.

Seana's brows lifted in surprise.

"After all," Meghan continued, "she started it. It was Alison who took the first goat, was it not? If ye ask me, I think she should be expected to lay the fence all by herself! Don't you think so, Seana?"

Seana didn't know what to reply. She blinked, bewildered by the question, until she looked directly into Meghan's eyes and understood her intention.

Seana had to resist the urge to laugh, then. Meghan was a woman after her own heart. Seana played along. "Oh, yes!" she exclaimed. "And I also think she should be expected to cut the wood for it, as well!"

Meghan nodded in agreement, looking quite serious.

Both men simply looked at them in turn as though they thought both Meghan and Seana mad.

"Och!" Meghan said, then, "And I believe she should have to do it while everyone else watches, too."

Seana agreed. "In fact, we should all bring picnic meals and sit about to be sure she does not do it wrong!"

Lyon and Colin both remained silent, watching them curiously.

"Aye!" Meghan exclaimed, sounding suddenly even vicious and Seana might have been terrified of the look that came into her eyes, save that she was certain Meghan didn't mean a word of it. "Oh, and someone should bring a whip in case she decides to stop for a drink of water!"

Lyon Montgomerie raised a brow at that, and studied his wife with a somewhat amused look upon his face.

Meghan winked at Seana, and then reached out with a small dagger and stabbed the boar's rump. "Let's do it!" she declared, and proceeded to slice a piece from the animal's back. She handed the meat to Seana and then returned to carve herself a portion of the leg, which she then proceeded to rip into with her perfect teeth... teeth as blinding white as were Colin's.

Seana couldn't help herself. She burst out laughing.

Meghan Montgomerie with her delicate beauty, looked absolutely ridiculous tearing into a hulking piece of meat like some lout of a man. She winked at Seana again, and then tossed the bone, still thick with meat, behind her at the cat, who walked over to sniff it, then blinked up at her mistress with as bemused an expression as Colin was giving her now.

Colin shook his head. "Women are a strange lot!"

Lyon Montgomerie nodded vigorously in agreement.

Meghan rose from her seat at the table. "Come, Seana!" She gathered foodstuffs to carry with her and motioned for Seana to do likewise. Seana rose a bit hesitantly, casting Colin a glance. He nodded encouragement and Seana gathered a few items from the table and then followed Meghan.

"Men!" Meghan exclaimed when they were out of hearing distance. "Och, if they wish to argue over nonsense," she added, "they can verra well argue alone!"

Seana really had no idea what to say.

She hadn't the least experience with families or arguments or any such things at all. She and her da had never fought that she could recall. Nor was it her place to speak out, when she didn't even know the circumstances.

"I have lived all my life with men," Meghan told her. "Whether they be brother or husband, they are all alike! Stubborn fools! We'll let Colin and Lyon work it out," she said, "and hopefully they will realize it does not matter who's to blame here. What is done is done, and now it is time to heal and move on!"

Seana agreed wholeheartedly, and yet, she wasn't certain those two men should be left alone. She peered back at the table as she climbed the stairs behind Meghan, thinking that men had been known to kill each other for far less.

"But do you really think we should leave them? They might do each other harm."

Meghan waved a hand, dismissing the notion. "They shall be well enough alone. Colin has a temper, truly—more so than any of my brothers—but

Lyon is more like to debate him to death. Now, tell me,” Meghan demanded, changing the subject and taking her by the arm as they fled up the stairs, “how long have you known my brother?”

It was apparent by the look in her eyes and the enthusiasm in her tone that she had wholly misunderstood their visit. Seana was warmed by the simple fact that Meghan would welcome her so easily, but she surely didn’t wish her to think that she and Colin—that Colin and she—the very notion was unthinkable!

Too long, she wanted to reply, but didn’t care to explain so much.

“We only just met at your wedding,” Seana said, and it was in many ways the truth, “but ‘tis not what you think!” she protested at once, and proceeded to explain.

She told Meghan everything... about Broc... about asking Colin for help... about everything except the stinging truth about how she and Colin had first met so long ago. Somehow, at the moment, it just didn’t seem to matter.

Seana turned once more at the top of the stairwell to peer down into the hall. Meghan didn’t miss her soft sigh as her gaze fell upon Colin. She turned to glance at her brother over her shoulder. He wasn’t listening to a bloody word Piers was saying to him, and Meghan smiled with delight.

She listened to Seana without interrupting, but after watching the two of them together at her table, she knew all was not as it seemed. These two shared something more—it was obvious in the way they looked at each other askance when neither thought the other was watching—in the way she touched her lips when she stared at Colin—and in the way she blushed just now as she assured Meghan over and over there was nothing between them.

“I really do love Broc,” Seana declared, and Meghan smiled.

Meghan thought perhaps Seana protested a wee bit too much.

“Of course you do,” Meghan said pleasantly. “Everyone loves Broc. Ye canna help but love the brute. Colin was right to bring ye here! We are going to do everything we can for you to win him!”

Seana blinked. “Broc?” she asked.

“Of course,” Meghan replied, and Seana turned a last longing glance over Meghan’s shoulder at Colin.

Meghan cast another glance behind her, and then nearly had to push Seana the rest of the way up the stairs, because it was obvious they would

stand there forever otherwise. Colin had yet to turn his eyes from Seana even once.

She smiled a secret smile as they made their way to her bower, thinking her brother had finally met the woman who would bring him to his knees.

And it was about bloody time!

Chapter 12



Cameron was going to spank Constance's wee little bottom when he found her. It was growing dark now and she was nowhere to be found.

She was off again, chasing Merry no doubt. The poor beast was beleaguered by her, though Merry seemed inclined to put up with Constance's antics somehow. She seemed to understand that Constance was but a child—a brat, no doubt—but a child nevertheless.

There was no hope for his little sister at this point. Since the death of his da she had run wild—even before that, because in truth they were men and had no notion what to do with a little girl in their midst. He could teach her to spit and to piss standing up, but that was about the sum of it all.

God's truth, he didn't even know where she was half the time anymore. If she didn't crawl into his bed each night to hug him, weeping her little eyes out, he wouldn't even know she was there. It was in those moments he most hated the English, for they had deprived his wee sis of the da she had loved.

For himself, he was a man already, and could fend for himself, but Constance... she needed winks and pats on the head, and sometimes a firm smack on her rump to keep her out of trouble.

Cameron loathed dealing with the English—murdering bastards that they were! But he was convinced FitzSimon's daughter had poisoned Iain's mind.

No one dared speak of Lagan's death since the incident. It were as though everyone together had decided to pretend he hadn't existed, that he hadn't died so violently and unjustly. The events of that night were surrounded in secrecy, and Cameron couldn't even get the details from his cousin Broc, though he'd asked a number of times. Broc answered him usually with silence, and when he did manage to reply, he would tell Cameron simply to ask their laird, and assured him that if Iain wanted him to know, Iain would say.

But Cameron knew he couldn't ask Iain.

It was Iain who had ordered this silence. Whatever had happened that night when Lagan and Page had gone over the cliffside, Cameron didn't know, but only Page had come back up. Lagan had not. And the simple fact that Iain could ignore Lagan's death so coldly when he and Lagan had been flesh and blood... the fact that he could carry on with his bride as though the two hadn't a care in the world... told him that Iain was not himself.

Aye, the sooner he removed the wench from their midst, the sooner all would return to the way it should be.

Page FitzSimon was no good for Iain—nor for Broc!

Never had he seen his cousin so enamored of a wench in all his life. Broc might deny it, but it was there in his eyes—he held her in such high regard. No one could speak a single ill word against her. It were as though he had appointed himself her guardian in Iain's name. But it was obvious to Cameron that his cousin was smitten and if it were obvious to Cameron it must be obvious to everyone else. And where would that lead Broc and Iain in the end? Page would soon have them tearing out each other's throats! Aye, it was best to get the wench away from all whom he held dear.

He felt guilty dealing behind Broc's and Iain's backs, but once Page was gone, and they could think clearly once more, they would thank him. He was certain of that fact.

Och, but her da was a bastard of the worst kind. He would certainly not wish to be FitzSimon's daughter coming back into his fold.

But that wasn't Cameron's problem.

Cameron found FitzSimon's camp easily enough. How it had not been discovered as yet was a mystery to him. The English were an arrogant, spoiled lot. As though he thought himself untouchable and did not care who knew of his presence, he flew his banner high from his gaudy silk tent.

Cameron might not have the experience of Iain or Broc but even he understood the stupidity in heralding your whereabouts in the middle of foreign territory. If a man did not wish to be caught upon enemy land, he slept upon the ground and covered himself with bracken. If he were idiot enough to make himself known, he would certainly bring more than seven worthless men into the fight.

But then, FitzSimon was an English moron who evidently cared more for his own comfort than he did for his life. If Cameron did not so heartily believe he deserved his bloody daughter back, he would be inclined himself

to show the Sassenach bastard what it was to deal with real men—call him a boy, did they!

“I’m here to see FitzSimon,” he told the three who greeted him—if it could be called a greeting. Making themselves a human barrier, they stood between him and their puny camp. Cameron eyed them with some measure of amusement. The idiots did not even know how to treat an ally.

“Are ye now?” the middle man asked, puffing out an oversized chest. He stared down at Cameron with bright beady eyes.

“I am.” Cameron spat upon the ground at his feet. He shook his head at them. “You’re not verra bright,” he informed them. “Are ye? Oof!” he exclaimed when one of the men gut-punched him. He wasn’t sure which, because they all at once fell upon him, beating him.

“What the devil is going on here—leave him!” a voice boomed. “Think, ye halfwits! We don’t need to give him something more to explain!”

Cameron recognized the voice, though he couldn’t see FitzSimon just yet with the mountain of men atop him. He struggled beneath them, and cried out when a knee was shoved in his groin as they rose.

“Scots bastard!”

“Bring him inside!” FitzSimon commanded.

They dragged him toward their master’s tent— lackeys all of them!

Cameron landed inside the tent at FitzSimon’s feet. The fat English bastard was seated in a bloody chair! What the hell was wrong with this? he thought. He peered up at the man through eyes that were already beginning to grow puffy from their blows, while the taste of blood lingered upon his tongue.

He heard a snicker behind him and decided he was going to kill one of these fools before they left. Aye, he’d help FitzSimon get his daughter, all right, because that was most important, but the blood of one of these English vermin was going to feed Scots soil before they left!

Cameron peered up at the blurry figure of FitzSimon seated before him. “Is this how ye treat yer allies, FitzSimon?”

FitzSimon leaned forward, coming clearer in Cameron’s line of vision. “I have no allies,” he said softly. He patted Cameron’s head. “Boy,” he called him again and smiled.

Cameron dragged himself up, wiping the sweat from his face. He peered down at his tunic. Blood. Gadarned Sassenach bastards! How the hell had

they extracted so much from him with such short work? He peered over his shoulder at them, eyeing them malevolently.

They burst into laughter.

Cameron's face heated with a mixture of chagrin and anger. They were standing guard at the tent entrance, blocking it. Christ but he'd come of his own free will. Idiots.

"Where is my daughter?"

"I told ye, FitzSimon! I would not drag her from Iain's bed. There has been no opportunity to bring her to ye."

"I grow impatient, laddie," he said, in a poor imitation of a Scot's brogue. It annoyed Cameron, but he said nothing. Something was very strange here. They had never treated him with a modicum of respect but something was not right.

"I came to tell ye of a new opportunity," Cameron began.

FitzSimon cocked his head, listening. "Aye?" There was a new gleam in his eyes, something that disturbed Cameron. "Well, speak, man!" FitzSimon demanded, though not in anger. If anything, his tone was filled with a patience that was disconcerting.

"Alison MacLean's wedding is in but a few days," Cameron began, all the while studying FitzSimon's expression.

"Is that a fact?" FitzSimon asked blithely.

Cameron screwed his face—och, but it hurt. "Aye," he replied. "'Twill be the most perfect opportunity to reclaim your daughter," he explained. "If you do not get her there, it will be nigh impossible—she and the MacKinnon are always together."

"I see," FitzSimon said, nodding. "The problem is... ye see... we are running out of time. 'Tis only a matter of time before we are discovered here."

Cameron agreed, nodding, working his jaw a bit.

Damn but someone had cast him a wicked blow.

"But I won't return to England without my daughter," FitzSimon continued. "Do ye understand that?"

Cameron nodded and met his gaze once more. FitzSimon was a cold man, he could see very well. There wasn't the least bit of warmth in those eyes.

"You want yer daughter returned. I do understand that. And she belongs with her da," he agreed, and felt it was so.

“I’m pleased we agree,” FitzSimon replied, his face growing florid. “No one takes what is mine! Do ye understand?”

Cameron nodded again, though he stared at FitzSimon now, contemplating his response.

For the first time he considered Page... whether it were truly the right thing to do, tossing her back into the hands of this man.

FitzSimon would like as not beat her to death for injuring his pride. Not once had he asked how she fared, he realized.

What manner of father was he to worry more about the return of his property over the wellbeing of his flesh and blood?

Mayhap Iain had done the right thing.

Mayhap Cameron had not given Page enough time?

Mayhap, but he didn’t like the thought of his laird wedded to the English—even if she were Saint Mary herself. Still, he didn’t have to help FitzSimon...

“Show him,” FitzSimon commanded his men.

Cameron heard them shuffle about behind him and turned in time to see something fly into the tent over his head. It landed between him and FitzSimon with a heavy thud.

His stomach surged into his throat, and his heart began to pound.

“Constance!” he shouted. He turned to the opening of the tent. “Where is my sister!” he demanded. The men answered with malicious grins.

“Bastards!” he shouted at them and turned to look at Merry’s body. Broc’s sweet dog lay before him. Her tongue lolled to one side and the tiniest bit of blood trickled from the side of her mouth. Her neck had been broken, that much was obvious.

Cameron felt sick to his stomach suddenly.

That dog had been his cousin’s constant companion for as long as Cameron could recall.

What had they done?

What had *he* done?

For the first time, he realized the mistake he’d made in dealing with men like these. The English could not be trusted. He should have known. Hadn’t his father’s death taught him as much? His stomach churned, and he thought he would spew his guts right where he stood. He stared at Merry, momentarily paralyzed with fear. Tears pricked at his eyes.

“Bastards!” he spat, and began to shake. He looked up into FitzSimon’s face.

The man was gloating. Cameron had to restrain himself from choking the life from him. “Where is my sister?” he demanded of FitzSimon.

“Not here, of course,” FitzSimon replied. He reached out and took a pinch of Cameron’s cheek. “Because we are not so bloody stupid as ye think!”

“Where is she!” Cameron persisted, rising up on his knees, ready to pounce upon FitzSimon. “Where is Constance?” His men moved into the tent, surrounding him.

FitzSimon’s eyes glimmered evilly. “Safe enough.”

Cameron wanted to cry with relief. “Where?”

“For now at least,” FitzSimon continued, ignoring his question. “Now,” he said, “I propose a trade...”

Cameron couldn’t think. He felt like a child in that instant, helpless. He wanted to weep! He wanted to kill the son of a whore! He stared down at Merry, blinking away tears he refused to shed. He reached out and patted Merry’s fur. She didn’t stir and his throat tightened. His da would strangle him if he knew what he had done. Broc would never forgive him. And if anything should happen to Constance...

He swallowed his emotions. “If ye harm a single hair on my sister’s head,” he swore, “If ye so much as breathe on her, I swear to God I will kill ye with my own bare hands—or I shall die trying!”

“You’re in no position to make threats, laddie,” FitzSimon taunted. “But I’ll tell you truly... get my daughter back to me and you’ll have your sister back safe and sound. If not... or if ye tell a soul about this... I’ll not even deliver her so neatly as I did this devil dog. I’ll send her to you in pieces. Do ye hear?”

Cameron nodded, understanding.

“Now go,” FitzSimon commanded. “And take that bloody dog with you... before I serve its entrails to my men for their supper.”

Shaking though he was, Cameron at once scooped up Merry into his arms. He wouldn’t have left the dog anyway. What was he going to tell Broc?

“Get the hell out of here,” FitzSimon demanded once more.

Cameron cast him a glare and turned to go, carrying the dog out with as much dignity as he could. Grinning malevolently, the men parted for him to

leave, and Cameron held his head high, ignoring the leers they gave him as he passed.

As he passed the last of them, a foot went out, tripping him. Amidst jeers and laughter, he landed atop Merry, but the poor animal no longer minded pain. Tears pricked at his eyes. Without a word, he dragged himself up once more, reminding himself that they still held his sister.

He could do nothing so long as they had Constance. He had no choice but to do as they said.

Chapter 13



Meghan stood at the window of her bedchamber, while her husband sat at his little desk, scribbling into his journals. It was a nightly ritual he had, one that she daredn't disturb because it gave him such inner peace. Sometimes he shared his musings, sometimes not, but Meghan didn't mind either way.

When he was finished writing, he returned his pen to the ink well and closed the manuscript, setting it aside. He turned to watch her. Meghan could feel his gaze upon her and it made her smile.

"'Tis a beautiful sunset!" she told him. Her brother had left long before with Seana—the two of them had ridden away together upon his horse—but she didn't seem to be able to walk away from the window as yet. The beauty of the landscape held her transfixed.

"Aye," her husband agreed.

"I swear I can feel something in the air!" She turned, leaning back upon the window sill, to face her husband. "I can feel things happening out there tonight!" she swore. "The night is alive with possibilities, dinna ye feel it?" She sucked in a breath of sweet night air. "I have never seen Colin so preoccupied with a single woman in his entire life!"

Piers smiled at her, and she knew he wasn't listening to a word she said. He was staring at her breasts. Well, she wasn't quite ready to come to bed. Let him stare!

It gave her pleasure, at any rate, to see the way he watched her, made goose flesh rise upon her skin.

"Do you know that he has never brought a woman home to meet us?"

Her husband blinked. "Uh-huh," he replied.

Meghan laughed to herself, knowing he hadn't the least comprehension of what she was saying. She might have asked for anything at all in that moment and his answer would remain the same.

"'Tis not like him," she continued, ignoring the way his eyes undressed her. In fact, she was in quite a wicked mood this eve herself. She took in an

exhilarated breath and slipped a finger inside the sheer neckline of her gown, caressing the curve of her breast with a finger, knowing that he could see everything through the gauzy fabric.

Piers had dressed her in the finest silks, cloth such as she'd never seen in all her life. It felt wonderful caressing her skin... soft and airy and delicate... seductive as the warm summer night breeze that blew in through the window. It billowed the sheer cloth about her body, teasing her, even as her husband's eyes caressed her. It made her feel wickedly bold.

"Really?" Piers slumped back in the chair, watching her.

Meghan had to think an instant to remember what she'd said. He had that way about him, of making her thoughts scatter, and her breath catch with anticipation of his touch.

He wasn't in any hurry, she realized. He rarely was. Her husband was a master of seduction.

Her mouth grew dry, and she wet her lips. "There is more to this woman than my brother is willing to reveal, I think. Did you see the way he watches her?"

Piers shook his head. "I saw only you," he assured her. "I think I like the way you devoured that leg at the noon meal. In fact, I have something else I'd like to see those lips upon just now..."

Meghan giggled. "Do you now?"

"Aye," he answered. "Come see."

Meghan grinned at him. She shook her head, denying him. She slid her hand further within her gown and took the weight of her breast fully into her hand, all the while smiling at him.

He swallowed, and his beautiful blue eyes filled with yearning. "Wicked wench," he said softly.

"I like her," Meghan said sweetly, feigning innocence.

"Like who?"

"Seana, of course!"

He removed his tunic, drawing it slowly over his head. Meghan watched the play of his muscles over his ribs as he shrugged out of it. "Of course." He tossed it onto the bed, and turned to look at her once more, winking.

"She claims to love Broc Ceannfhionn but I do not believe it."

"Ceannfhionn?" His eyes narrowed. "I don't know that name."

"'Tis not a family name. Ceannfhionn... it means the blond," Meghan translated.

“I see.” His brows rose, as though he thought it backward to take such a simple name.

“Do not look at me like that, husband of mine!” Meghan berated. “What of yer own name, Lyon?” she asked. “Or William the Conqueror, or any number of others. ’Tis no different to name a man Ceannfhionn than to name him Rufus or even Curthose, after the length of his legs! You English are no different from we Scots,” she assured. “So dinna ye look at me as though you think so!”

He grinned at her. “Point well taken, my love. But I don’t give a bloody damn about Ceannfhionn or William Rufus right now. Come here,” he commanded her.

Meghan cocked her head at him, giving him a coy smile. “I don’t want to now!”

He reached down, tugging the tie to his breeches. “Come here,” he whispered.

Meghan giggled. “Wicked, wicked man,” she returned.

He grinned at her, and crooked his finger, urging her nearer.

Meghan went to him. “I think she would be good for my brother,” she informed her husband.

He nodded, reaching out when she neared enough and pulling her into his lap. Meghan straddled him upon the chair. She curled her arms about his neck.

She cocked her head as something occurred to her and worried her lip as she contemplated it. “She never did eat anything” she told her husband. “She asked for a sack to carry her food home for her da. I find that strange, don’t you think so?”

“Perhaps he is unwell and cannot feed himself?”

“Perhaps,” Meghan agreed. “I know naught of Seana or her da—save what I learned today.”

He put his arms around her. “And what might that be?”

“Well... just that my brother has promised to help her win Broc’s attention... and that she loves Broc...”

“And that her father makes the most god-awful spirits.” Piers kissed one breast, then the other. “We mustn’t forget that.”

Meghan’s brows knit. “He does?”

“Aye... ’twas his spirits that was served at our wedding, my dear... so bloody strong it crossed your eyes after a single dram. I tossed mine away

because I was already drunk... on you." He bit into her breast ever so softly.

Meghan giggled. "You're a shameless rogue," she accused him, and smacked him upon the back.

He laughed. "Poor Baldwin never knew what hit him," he continued, "nor the rest of my men... they were flat on their arses after a few measly tankards. Did you not notice all the poor souls passed out on the ground when we left? They fell into their cups and never stirred again till morn, I hear."

"Aha, so that was why they were all ill the next day," Meghan surmised. "Well, serves them all right!"

"Uh-huh," he agreed.

Meghan sighed as he closed his teeth about one nipple through her gown, teasing it. She held her breath at the sweet sensation it brought her. A shiver coursed down her spine. She never knew what to expect from him. Each night was a journey into the unknown. He touched her body as though it were the finest treasure, and brought her pleasures she had never known existed. He drew her nipple deeper into his mouth, suckling it through the cloth.

Meghan gasped in delight.

He peered up at her, his lips curved into the roguish grin she had come to cherish. "You were saying?"

"Mayhap I shall ask Colin tomorrow," she relented. "Perchance he knows."

"Perchance he does," her husband said, and slid his hand down the length of one leg. His fingers closed about the gown and he drew it up. His smile turned playful instead of wicked just a moment and he tossed the sheer material over her head.

Meghan giggled. She peered down at him through the ivory-colored material, and shuddered when his mouth closed over her breast once more.

"Much better," he said as he suckled. "Not nearly as dry without the gown... and so... so much more tender," he murmured.

"Whatever shall I do with you?" she asked him, though she knew very well what he would answer.

"Feed me, of course."

"Of course."

“I love you, Meghan,” he whispered against her skin. His breath, hot and delicious, sent shivers down her spine.

“I love you, too,” she whispered back, and meant it with every last piece of her heart. She lifted the veil from her face and fell against him, forcing his head up, kissing his neck. He let his head loll to one side, baring his neck for her, allowing her to do her will.

Meghan sank her teeth into his flesh ever so gently. “Just one more wee thing,” she told him coyly. He slid his hands down to cup her bottom in answer. Meghan smiled, and lazily lapped the salt from his skin.

“And that would be...”

“Well... I think mayhap you should send a few men to help my brothers rebuild that fence...”

“Ummmmmmhhhhhh,” he agreed, and shuddered when she bit him once more. Meghan inhaled the scent of him into her lungs, taking pleasure in his body’s response to her touch.

Cupping her bottom, he lifted her up, standing. He turned and tossed her upon the bed. Meghan laughed softly.

“I will go myself,” he promised her, grinning down at her. “Tomorrow!” And he flung himself over her upon the bed, somehow managing to trap her beneath him without landing atop her. Meghan was overjoyed at his enthusiasm and told him so.

“Shaddap, wife!” he commanded her, though his boyish grin spoiled the mandate. “Show me how grateful you can be.”

Meghan giggled, lifting her legs up to lock about his waist. “No no no no, you greedy, greedy man!” she exclaimed. “’Tis *your* turn to show *me*!”

“Damn but you drive a wicked bargain!” he said and winked. He reached back, unlocking her legs, and guided them down upon the bed. “But I thought ye’d never ask,” he said, and slid down her body while lifting her gown.

Meghan sighed with delight and closed her eyes, anticipating the heady kiss of his mouth. There was no greater pleasure than this... to lie within the arms of the man she loved.

Chapter 14



The waning sun cast a golden hue over the horizon, as though God had lit a candle and placed its gilded light within their little corner of the world. Darkness lingered somewhere beyond its bounds, but here in this little province, all shadows were banished.

It was almost surreal.

It was surely perfect.

It was an unusually warm evening, as well. Even the breeze that rifled through Seana's hair carried a whisper of the sun's lingering breath. Mingled with the soft sounds of Colin's sighs at her back, and the gentle current of cooler wind, it confused Seana's senses, sent tiny shivers down her spine.

Colin's mare seemed in no hurry at all. The animal took lazy strides that mellowed the mood even further, allowing Seana and Colin the leisure of conversation. And yet, neither of them spoke to breach the silence.

Not for the longest time.

"'Tis a lovely sunset," Seana said after a time. She lifted her head to the heavens, admiring the view.

"Aye," Colin agreed.

His breath upon her shoulder sent a quiver through her.

"Are ye cold, lass?"

Seana shook her head. She wasn't in truth, only far too aware of the man at her back. He put his arms about her, tentatively at first. Seana's heart leapt a bit at his touch.

"What if I am?" he asked her then. "Would ye deny me warmth, lass?"

His voice was so soft and silky that Seana swallowed, unable to speak, even to tease him. She turned to look at him, and his blue eyes glimmered at her. Seana averted her gaze, staring ahead. When she didn't protest, he tightened his hold upon her and leaned his chin upon her shoulder.

"Ye can see now that I do not bite," he said jovially.

He was referring to her hesitation to ride with him upon his mare, despite the lateness of the hour. Meghan had talked her into it, telling her that her brother wouldn't bite... Seana wasn't at all certain he didn't.

"Aye well... we shall see, now, won't we? Mayhap you're just biding your time," she told him, in an attempt to keep the conversation light.

"And mayhap you would even like it?" he teased back, and lowered his lips to her shoulder. He opened his mouth ever so slightly, preparing to bite, she thought, to sink his teeth into her.

Seana shuddered and ducked away from the tantalizing touch of his teeth.

"Och, Colin! Dinna even try it," she warned him.

"Why not?" he asked, and his tone was far too waggish for Seana to take offense. He sounded like a mischievous little boy, and it managed to disarm her, when she thought he could not.

Was that how he wooed his women? she wondered—made them feel so at ease in his presence that they were not aware of the danger to their hearts?

Well, she was not interested in being one of Colin's conquests, though she no longer felt any anger toward him.

Today, she had spent far too long beside his sister, listening to tales of Colin's childhood. She understood now why Colin had been so repulsed by her, even if he didn't understand himself.

Meghan had told her of Colin's relationship with his da—how their da had demanded perfection from Colin and Leith, never relenting in his expectations. Meghan had not known her da so well, and neither had Gavin, but Colin, far more than even Leith, had been his da's golden son. From the instant, Colin had been weaned from his ma's breast, his da had carried him at his side, and Colin had been subject to his da's every waking deed and thought.

Their father, it seemed, had been obsessed with beauty and perfection to such a degree that it had affected each of his children, as well as his wife. And in the end, it had killed him. Meghan claimed her da had died battling her mother's assumed lover but that it had been his own jealousy that had made him believe such a thing of her. Her mother had been innocent.

Seana heard the tale a bit differently.

Seana had heard that Colin's da had been cuckolding MacLean's brother, and that MacLean's brother had turned about and tried to repay him in kind—the vanity of men—but that Meghan's mother had been much too in love with her wayward husband even to note another man's attentions. The poor

woman had done no more than smile at MacLean's brother, and for that she had blamed herself the rest of her life.

In reality, Meghan's da had been a bastard who had not been content enough with his own beautiful wife. He had cuckolded every man in these highlands and broken more hearts than his son could begin to know. He had valued only perfection and had rejected anything less. He had left his son's and daughter with a bitter legacy that had affected each of them in their own way.

Seana had a gift for seeing things as they were. It amazed her da, but there was little wonder about it. It came simply from listening to people's words and comparing it to what she saw in their hearts.

As Seana saw it, Meghan was afraid of her own beauty—she was bright enough to know it would not last, and so her greatest fear was to be cast aside. From what Meghan said, in response to their father, Gavin and Leith both seemed to impose perfection upon themselves, both in their own ways—Leith through his duty and Gavin through his God.

And Colin...

Seana contemplated that a time.

Colin... imposed perfection upon others... perhaps fearing the lack of it in himself. He was, in truth, his father's son, but he saw clearly enough to know what that meant and to know the evil in it, and the pain it inflicted upon others. Seana thought, perhaps, that he saw himself as a blasphemy against perfection... perhaps he surrounded himself with beauty as a manner of denial.

In sum, Meghan's father had had a reputation that surpassed even that of his son.

Colin hadn't had a bloody chance.

Like father like son.

Seana could no longer hate him for that.

In fact, the day had been a pleasure, and Colin had been a friend to her in ways that no man or woman ever had before.

Not even Broc.

She was beginning, even, to see the truth of what had attracted her to the behemoth blond.

It had been Broc who had come after her that terrible day, and had set her down upon a stone and wiped away her tears. To a young girl with scarce a

friend in the world, and no one but her da to keep her company and show her kindness, Broc's simple act had endeared him to her.

Seana had thought she loved him.

By the same token... to one who felt herself ugly and maimed, Colin's childish cruelty had imprinted itself upon her heart.

She had thought she hated him.

Now everything was confused.

She no longer hated Colin, but neither did she dare to love him.

And yet, neither did she love Broc.

She *could* love Broc, but it wasn't love until it was shared by two. After seeing Meghan and her new husband together, Seana understood what love was.

That wasn't what she felt for Broc.

Or was it?

So what did she feel for Broc?

She thought about it a long while, summoned her feelings into her heart to feel them at their fullest degree.

Gratitude.

She felt much gratitude to Broc. Through the years, he had been the only man who had really ever smiled at her and spoken to her as though she were worth anything at all. He hadn't turned his head in disgust of her whenever he'd spied her—even when she'd been a skinny, ugly child with a limp walk.

What else did she feel for him?

She tried to think of his lips... tried hard but they were blurred by the lips of the man at her back.

She tried to conjure his face but Colin's twinkling blue eyes stared back at her.

What color were Broc's eyes?

Och, but she did not even recall!

Seana frowned.

She didn't dare explore her feelings for Colin—didn't want to! Somehow, she felt it wouldn't lead to any good at all.

Colin was Colin, and no one could change him now. Seana didn't even pretend she might be able to heal his troubled heart. His life, to anyone who considered it, seemed filled only with pleasure, and he would likely die with a smile upon his face and some woman's breast suckled in his mouth.

She frowned at the vision that came to her suddenly.

Well... it wasn't any of her concern what he did. She couldn't be the least bit jealous.

Broc was a fine and good man, and Seana would be a fortunate woman if she could manage to win his heart.

Broc could give her everything she ever wanted; a home, children, and security unlike any she'd ever had. Aye, she could do much, much worse than Broc.

"Why so quiet, lass?" Colin murmured at her back.

Seana shrugged. "I am only worried about my da," she said, and it was the truth. She would not feel such an urgency to wed anyone at all, save that she wanted to give her da a better home. The cairn had served them well enough, but now he was far too frail. Seana was certain he'd never make it through the winter there. He seemed as helpless as a bairn. She leaned to feel for the sack she had tied to the saddle of Colin's mare, and sighed in relief at finding it still there. Her da had likely not eaten the first bite since she had left him this morn. Guilt suffused her at having abandoned him so long.

"I'm certain he's fine, Seana."

It was the first time since he had asked her name that he had spoken it to her, and the sound of it upon his lips, surprised her. She turned to look at him.

Colin would have given much in that instant to know her thoughts.

It felt good to touch her, though for the first time in his life, he was uncertain his embrace was welcomed, and it kept his baser thoughts at bay. He might have allowed himself to savor the scent of her skin, but didn't dare give himself the pleasure. He might have buried his lips in her hair and let his hands test the weight of it, but didn't wish to upset her. It didn't stop him, however, from dwelling upon her mouth... and craving the taste of her lips.

Watching his sister and her husband together had made him yearn for something more than an empty bed come morning. Had he ever spent an entire night with one of his lovers? Had more than stolen moments? He didn't recall ever seeing a single sunrise in the sleepy arms of his lover. Nay, his kisses had all been hurried, lest he be caught by someone's father... or brother... even a husband or two.

Colin had vowed never to marry, but suddenly he was rethinking his decision.

The thought of going to bed each night and looking forward to lazy morning kisses with the woman he loved seemed a powerful image for a man who crept into his own bed, alone, long after the sun had gone down, and woke, alone, to the sound of his two troublesome brothers.

Meghan had added a softness to their home, a gentle voice to soothe them after a tiresome day. He missed even her morning tirades, where she came in, berating him for his night's carousing. But Meghan was gone now, and their home had grown cold. Where his sister had picked flowers to liven his room, the vessel sat now with withering stems protruding from it, surrounded by fallen petals that no one cared enough to clean.

Alison would be there soon, but Colin wasn't certain which was worse—living with two ornery men, or waking to the sound of his brother and new wife making love within their room.

Not that he begrudged his brother a little happiness, nor did he want Alison for himself, but it would only serve to emphasize his empty bed.

He wasn't precisely looking forward to it.

The walls were far too thin in that house.

How oft had he fallen asleep, listening to his mother's weeping?

Too oft.

It had rent his heart, knowing she'd wept for a man who hadn't deserved her undying love. How many times had he wished to tell her so, and not been able to bring himself to do it?

How many times had he crawled out of his bed, only to watch her from the hall... bury her face in her pillow and weep bitterly over his faithless da... and all the while knowing he was cut from the same cloth.

His da had been hard on him, to be sure—on him and Leith both. Colin understood that his da hadn't wanted them to become like him. And fortunately for Leith, he had not, though his da's unrelenting reprehension had neither left him unscarred. Even Meghan and Gavin... both had been far too young to remember their da, but not so young they were not influenced.

How could Colin have blasphemed his da, when he was no better, in truth?

His da must have recognized in Colin the same sickness he'd had within himself, because he'd been hardest toward Colin of all.

Colin tried not to be as his da was, but he struggled in vain. He didn't know how to be anything else. He was drawn to the same things his da was, and so he understood his da in ways his brothers never could. It was a sickness inside of him. Somehow, it filled a void he didn't otherwise know how to fill.

He didn't know if his da had ever loved his minny, but he thought so. And yet he had hurt her, nevertheless. Colin was afraid of doing the same, and so he loved everyone from afar, and no one in truth. And yet he was well aware that somehow he still managed to hurt them. He tried to make them feel good, tried to make them happy, and somehow left them brokenhearted.

"Meghan says I should tell him to his face," Seana announced.

Colin blinked. "Tell who what?" he asked, momentarily confused.

He had been so lost in his own thoughts.

"Broc... Meghan says I should tell him outright that I love him and that I wish to be his wife."

Colin winced a bit to hear it put so concisely... not to mention the images that came at once to mind... Seana and Broc together... the very thought was becoming as distasteful to him as the aftertaste of her da's *uisge*.

"Meghan says that men are too blind to see anythin' but what they wish to see," she continued.

Colin rolled his eyes. It sounded just like his shrewish sister. Beautiful Meghan certainly was, but Colin pitied her husband because his baby sister was going to lead him about by his Sassenach nose.

"And Meghan says—"

"Dinna listen to everything Meghan says, lass."

"Meghan is wonderful!" Seana exclaimed. "Thank you for takin' me to see her, Colin." She looked up at him then, and smiled, and Colin's breath left him for an instant.

Somehow, she grew lovelier every time he saw her, and this moment with the fading sunlight falling across her face, her skin was golden in color, and her green eyes sparkled with an inner light. Her black hair was rich and deep. A few strands tickled his face but he didn't brush them away, instead he savored the silky feel of it and tried to catch the scent into his lungs.

"Meghan is wonderful," he agreed, reaching out to brush a few wayward strands of her hair behind her ears, "but so are you, Seana."

She blinked, and seemed surprised by his declaration. Her lashes lowered. He reached out and lifted her face to his.

“’Tis true,” he insisted, when she would not look at him. He knew what she was thinking, and loathed the child he had been, that he could wound a person as lovely as Seana so terribly that she could not see herself as she truly was. He didn’t believe for one instant he had been alone in his cruel tyranny against her, but he had certainly wounded her enough that she had never forgotten... and neither had he.

“You’re lovely, Seana,” he assured her. And though it wrenched his gut to say so, he added, “And Broc would be a fortunate man to have you. He’ll be a stupid man if he does not carry ye away at once to his bed.”

She winced at his words, and he thought perhaps the prospect of the marriage bed frightened her.

Her cheeks pinkened; he could see the color rising even in the fading light.

“Not every marriage is based upon *that*, Colin Mac Brodie!” she exclaimed. “Do you never think of anything else? Och!”

Colin laughed softly, and confessed honestly, “Nay, lass.”

“Men!” she declared, though Colin knew very well she meant him.

“There is naught so wrong with making love.”

“That,” she countered, “is not all there is to love!”

“I beg to differ. Do not tell me that you are afraid of a lover’s touch, Seana. Och, but ye dinna strike me as a woman who is afraid of much.”

“Of course not!” She turned away from him, stiffening.

“But if ye are, o’ course... I can surely help with that!” Colin smiled at her back.

She cast him a glance over her shoulder. “I’m quite certain! I am not,” she swore, and Colin wanted very much to do just that—he wanted to be the first to show her pleasure, wanted to make up for all the wrong he’d done... he wanted to give to her, and for the first time in his life he didn’t care what she had to give back. That elusive smile of hers was reward enough.

“The only help I need from you, is the one thing you will not give!”

What would she do if he put his arms about her waist? Would she push him away?

He didn’t dare try.

He leaned forward to smell her hair. “Aye?” Colin asked, “And what might that be, lass?”

She turned once more, catching him far too near, and Colin pretended to find something in her hair. He plucked it out... though there was naught

there.

Her brows knit. "What was that?"

Colin shook his head. "A bug mayhap, 'tis gone now. And you were saying?"

She gave him a puzzled glance, though his explanation seemed to satisfy her well enough. "I want to know about Broc. What sort of woman does he like?"

Colin thought about that a moment. God's truth, he'd never heard Broc Ceannfhionn mention a woman ever at all... save for his laird's new wife...

He truly didn't know what sort of woman Broc enjoyed, but would he honestly tell her even if he did?

"He likes pale-haired women," Colin said, knowing very well she was not. He peeked around at her breasts. Nice and full, perky, too, but hardly large. Perfect for his own hands. "With ample breasts," he added.

He felt her stiffen before him, and he smiled.

"What else?"

"A sturdy back," he replied, trying to keep a sober expression. "To work hard. He does not like frail women."

"I'm not such a wee one!" she protested.

Colin smiled. "I did not say you were, now did I?" Silence fell between them an instant, as she considered his revelations. "Oh, and blue eyes," he added, though he hadn't the least notion what sort of eyes appealed most to his friend. He only knew that Seana had green eyes... lovely green... the sort he could stare into for the rest of his life.

"What color are mine exactly?" she asked, and turned to face him, her expression hopeful. "Mayhap a little blue?"

He shook his head regretfully. "Not at all, I fear."

She sighed, and turned away.

"He likes them more like Page," he added then, just for good measure, though in truth, he had not the first inkling what color Iain's MacKinnon's wife's eyes were.

She turned to look at him once more, blinking. "He likes Iain's wife?"

"Aye," Colin answered, nodding soberly. "Almost as much as he likes his dog."

She screwed her face adorably, and Colin wanted nothing more in that instant than to kiss the bridge of her nose and tell her not to worry, that she was lovely, but he didn't. No way was he going to spoil his handiwork.

“His dog?”

Colin nodded. “The true love of his life.”

Seana’s brows collided. She cocked her head suspiciously, and stared at him. “Are you teasing me?”

Colin merely smiled.

“Wretch!” she said, and turned around.

He chuckled at her back.

They left the hillside then, and entered the woodlands. He wasn’t certain precisely where she lived. He asked, but her reply was vague.

“Just leave me here,” she directed him, when they had reached the place where her father left his pot still, and seemed antsy for him to stop. Colin did and she leapt down from his mount. She at once untied the sack she had attached to his saddle and thanked him profusely for the day.

Colin wasn’t ready to say good night. Not quite yet. “Wait!” he said, but she shook her head, turned, and fled.

“I’ll see ye come morn!” she shouted back at him and once again slipped into the shadows of the woods.

Colin sat there, feeling as though he should follow, to be certain she made it safely home.

But she obviously didn’t want him to, and he assured himself she knew these woods as intimately as he knew his lovers’ bodies. He let her go, though reluctantly, and consoled himself with the knowledge that he would again see her on the morrow.

Chapter 15



Seana didn't really know why it suddenly bothered her so much so that she lived in what was basically an oversized grave. Until now, it had seemed perfectly suitable and she hadn't worried much what others thought.

She'd been sleeping in the old cairn for as long as she could recall. Her da had found the monstrous tomb before Seana's birth. Initially, it had served as shelter from a storm, but her da and her ma had never left it.

Then her mother had grown ill and Seana had come into the world, and her ma had passed away. She and her father had been here ever since.

Little more than a hollowed pile of rubble set against the side of a cliff, it served its purpose well enough. From the outside, it appeared little more than a carefully laid pile of rocks, but from within, it was cavernous. In ancient times, her da claimed the dead were laid to rest here, entombed with their finest possessions and sometimes, Seana thought she heard their voices behind the earthen walls. Partially buried beneath the ground and deeper yet into the cliffside, its walls were made of soil, while the roof was constructed of stones, large and small, braced with wooden slats that were set into the cliffside. The earthen walls kept the wind from pummeling their backs, though the roof seldom kept them dry enough. And yet, she had never had any complaints. She didn't have the first clue why suddenly she should feel ashamed of her home.

Mayhap because no one had ever come to see her before.

Och, but why should she care what Colin thought? It wasn't any of his affair where she laid her head at night!

So why was she running through the dark woods, casting glances over her shoulder in fear that he would follow?

She reached the cairn and found it dark but for a single lit candle. Seana opened the door her da had built and ducked within. She went at once to check on her father. He was lying upon his pallet with his eyes half open, staring at the ceiling.

For an instant, Seana's heart stopped.

"Da!" she exclaimed, and fell to her knees.

He seemed to rouse from his stupor and turned to look at her. He smiled. "Och, lass, I was but remembering..."

Seana reached out to touch his face, to brush his hair aside, but he seized her hand and brought it to his heart, pressing it there.

"Do ye remember, Seana... the time I left you alone here in this cairn..."

Seana did. Without his speaking another word, she knew the night of which he was speaking. Heart aching, she pressed her hand against his chest. "Aye, Da."

"I would never have left ye alone, child—not all night—but I fell asleep by the still—and came back to find ye weepin' yer sweet lil' eyes out."

Seana sat beside him and held his hand, remembering too. She had been naught more than ten summers. "I was afraid you'd gone and left me, but I was a silly little girl, da. Now I know ye wouldna have ever gone!"

"I laid here tonight," he said, "and heard ye weepin' as though ye were a flesh and blood wee one again. I had to remind myself it was not you, and that ye were nay longer a child."

Seana frowned. He was hearing things now. She swallowed the grief that rose to choke her.

"You stay alone far too much, Da!" she complained. "I wish you'd come with me sometimes to check the still and keep my company ... like we used to do."

"The sunlight does not love me, child."

The sunlight could never be so terrible, Seana wanted to argue, but she was not him; she could not know how it hurt his eyes as he claimed, so she said nothing.

He patted her hand and smiled at her. "I wasna the best da," he confessed.

"Och," Seana exclaimed, "you're a wonderful da!"

"Nay." He smiled up at her. "But you are a wonderful daughter!"

For an instant, there was silence between them.

It was a cold quiet silence, one that gave her a feeling of unease. Never had she looked upon this place so distantly. After being with Meghan all of the day, and watching her household so alive with people, this cavern somehow seemed exactly the tomb it was.

"I made a friend today," she told her father. "Meghan Brodie."

Her da squinted his eyes as though trying to remember, and then peered up at her.

“Do you remember the Brodies, Da?”

“Dunno,” he answered with a frown.

Seana’s brows drew together sadly. There wasn’t much of a chance he could forget them—not the Brodies, nor the MacLeans, nor the MacKinnons, any one. They had survived on the outskirts of these families, had made their living through them. That he could not recall told Seana that his mind was growing feeble.

Tears stung her eyes. Once more she tried to reach out and touch his face, to caress his gaunt cheek, but he stayed her hand, not allowing it.

She needed so desperately to find him a better place to rest. A sense of urgency filled her. *Tomorrow*. Tomorrow she would go to see Broc. She could not waver in this, could not delay. She didn’t know what she’d do if she lost her da.

Meghan Brodie might live in a house filled with light, and she might have brothers to laugh and fight with, but from what Meghan had revealed, they had not had the love of their father. Seana had.

No matter that her da had had his troubles, that he’d drunk a bit too much betimes, or that they’d lived in a cairn, he had given her all the love any little girl could ever hope for.

And she had her da to thank for the use of her legs. She would never forget the tears in his eyes as he’d broken her leg in order to mend it.

Seana had come home weeping over Colin Mac Brodie, and her da had patted her head and rocked her, cried with her, and then... when they were done, he’d sat her upon the ground and told her what he intended to do. Seana remembered still the fear that had filled her, but she’d trusted him. He was her da, after all.

He’d hardened his resolve, then, and he’d spoken to her harshly to keep her from struggling, but all the while... tears had coursed down his face. And after he was done, he had bandaged her leg and he had hugged her and he, too, had wept.

Seana loved him more than anything in this world.

“I would not wish for anythin’ different in my life,” she told him.

Without warning, My Love pounced upon a small table at her side, and Seana yelped in fright. The haughty cat mewed at her, and her da grinned.

“Save for that rotten cat!” Seana exclaimed. “Arggggh! Why does she do that?”

Her da laughed, then began to cough.

Seana didn’t like the sound of it.

“Go on, you love that cat,” her da told her when finally he could speak again.

“Nay!”

“Ye do, and when I am gone she will be your faithful companion.”

“Och, Papa, dinna say such things!” Seana berated him. “Ye will *never* leave me!” she told him, well aware that it sounded more like a demand.

“You’re too bloody stubborn ever to die!”

He looked up at her a bit sadly, then, and sighed. “One day,” he began, and peered up at My Love. The two shared a queer glance with one another, one Seana could swear they each understood. My Love blinked down at him, and her da smiled, then returned his gaze to Seana. “One day... you will see a cat... mayhap with My Love... and it will be me watching over you.”

Seana’s heart felt weighted. “If you treat me as My Love does, Da, I shall likely smack you o’er the head and bury you a second time,” she warned.

Her father laughed.

My Love stared at her with slitted eyes. Seana glared back. Och, but she was becoming as deranged as her da!

Her da reached up and patted her knee. “Dinna say such things in front of My Love, child. You’ll hurt her feelings.”

My Love sat placidly not more than two feet from where she sat tending her father. Seana wondered whether she should even bother to try to touch her.

She decided against it.

Just because she seemed in no hurry to flee at the moment didn’t mean the bloody animal wouldn’t immediately dash away the instant Seana made an advance.

Seana gave the cat an evil glare.

It stared back at her, blinking.

Her da’s hand went lax within her own.

He’d somehow fallen asleep. She could hear his labored breath and was comforted by the rise and fall of his breast. She drew the blankets up and bent to kiss him upon the forehead.

“G’nite, Da,” she whispered. “May the dream faeries give ye pleasant dreams tonight.”

He didn’t stir.

Seana sighed and rose, but it wasn’t until she stood looking down on the slight figure of her da, that she noticed My Love had gone. The table was empty of her presence. The cairn was still, as well. Seana peered about and found no sign of the cat at all.

Stupid animal.

Like a shadow she was simply there at times, and then gone. To this day Seana had no inkling how she appeared so silently. Shaking her head, she made her way to her own bed.

Her last thought before she drifted to sleep... was of Colin Mac Brodie... the expression upon his face when she’d turned and caught him smelling her hair... something like tenderness... something like longing... nothing like anyone had ever looked at her before.

Dinna even think about it, she scolded herself. Colin was a rotten rogue, who chased after every woman with two good legs—and she reminded herself how he had looked at her once upon a time... when her legs were not yet strong. It was that expression she should well remember until the day she died... else Colin Brodie would once more break her heart.

She drifted into a troubled sleep... And dreamt.

She saw herself alone in the cairn... as a wee child... curled up in a corner... alone and waiting for her da to return... afraid he might never. The lone candle had long since burned out and the cairn within was as black as the night... and she was weeping... weeping...

The sound of her childish whimpers haunted her dreams all night long.



Tears poured down Broc’s cheeks as he shoveled the last of the dirt over Merry’s grave. He lovingly patted it down, grateful for the cover of darkness to his face.

He was ashamed to weep so baldly, like some silly girl, but he couldn’t help himself. Merry had been his faithful companion since he’d been a child of Cameron’s years. His cousin stood now, watching him from a distance,

and Broc wondered what the devil Cameron was going to tell his sister Constance.

Constance had been nearly as close to Merry as Broc had been, though Merry hadn't always shared that notion. Poor Merry had oft run away to rest, because Constance had plagued her incessantly.

Broc patted the grave with his shovel and stood there staring at it in the darkness, his tears continuing to fall. He didn't know how long he stood there, but it was Page who intruded upon his thoughts.

"I am sorry, Broc. I know she was dear to you."

Broc nodded, unable to speak.

He peered up to find Cameron watching them.

"Come to the house," she urged him. "Iain will pour you a tankard of ale."

Broc shook his head, refusing her. He threw his shovel down and sat upon the ground beside Merry's freshly dug grave.

Page stood there an instant and then sat down beside him.

"You'll catch a chill," Broc told her. He didn't wish to talk just now. Nor did he wish to be comforted. He felt silly, as well, because in truth Merry was only a dog, but the thing was... she had been all he'd truly had in the world.

Page didn't move to rise. "I shall be fine," she assured him.

"It appears to me as though Cameron could use some company as well," she suggested, peering over at his cousin.

Broc shrugged. "It wasna his fault."

"Mayhap you should go tell him that?"

"He should not blame himself," Broc added stubbornly.

"But he does," Page countered. "One can see that."

Broc cast a glance at his cousin.

It was true.

Though Cameron stood some distance away, and had done so since delivering the dog to Broc, he would not leave. His cousin remained to watch him bury his dog, long-faced, only watching, saying nothing. Broc had understood his cousin's reluctance to leave, but he hadn't been quite man enough to set Cameron's mind at ease. Aside from that... he wasn't certain he believed Cameron's tale. Something struck him as rotten.

"It will do no good to remain angry with him, Broc."

"I'm not angry."

“You are,” Page argued. “I can see it in your eyes. You are, and he knows it as well.”

“He’s lying,” Broc told her. “He’s lying and I dinna know why.”

Page reached out and lovingly patted Merry’s grave. “Aye,” she agreed. “He is.”

“He says she went over the cliffside, but Merry wouldna go near the bloody cliffs!”

“That is not that what troubles me just now,” Page admitted.

Broc met her gaze.

She nodded at his cousin. “You do not get a face like that by falling over a cliff, black eyes and bloody lips and swollen nose, and little else,” she pointed out. “Remember Lagan’s body when it was finally recovered... broken, all of it.”

Broc thought about it only an instant, and knew she was right. His cousin had been acting far too strange lately, disappearing for long lengths of time and reappearing only to lurk in the distance, watching, always watching...

Page rose then, brushing off her skirts. “I’ll leave you be,” she relented. “Talk to him,” she persisted, and then added, “You’re a wonderful man, Broc, and my verra, verra best friend. I don’t like to see you so sad.”

She came to him, then, and bent to kiss him upon the pate of his head.

Broc couldn’t respond. His throat was too thick to speak.

“I know what it’s like to feel all alone in this world. I only came to remind you that you are not.”

Broc dared to look up then, though his tears had begun to flow once more. His Laird’s wife smiled down at him.

“You’re not the sort to wallow in pity,” she told him, and shook her head. “There is no crime at all in shedding tears, Broc. Remember that. Cry all you need to, and then get your arse up and go talk to your cousin,” she charged him.

Broc remained stubbornly silent. He averted his gaze, staring once more at Merry’s grave.

“Iain and I shall not go to sleep for some time if you wish to come talk,” she told him. He nodded. And with that she left him to ponder her words.

Chapter 16



“I’ll be damned!” Leith exclaimed.

Colin shared his sentiment, but words failed him at the instant. He stared in shock at the sight that greeted them this morn.

The field was swarming with men, all working on their fence. But they weren’t Brodies.

“What the hell?” Leith said again and Colin thought he might be in shock.

“These are Montgomerie’s men.”

“Aye!” Meghan’s voice chimed in. “They are my husband’s men!”

Colin and Leith both turned to see Meghan approach, her smile brilliant as ever.

Leith’s brow rose. “And where is your husband,” he asked her, ever suspicious.

Meghan cocked her head up at him, clearly enjoying this. Colin didn’t blame her. He was rather stunned by the sight of so many of Montgomerie’s men, but after being together with his sister and her new husband, he wasn’t the least bit surprised that Montgomerie was so willing to mend fences.

Meghan’s hands went to her hips. “My husband, dear brother...” She nodded in the direction of the field of workmen. Colin turned and spied him. “... is out there. Where else would he be?”

Leith turned as well, and spotted Montgomerie amidst his men, shirt off, and working alongside the rest. “I’ll be damned,” he said, and shook his head.

“Our wedding gift to you and to Alison!” Meghan said. “And peace offering as well.”

Leith was clearly speechless. He didn’t bother to thank her. He stood there, scrutinizing Montgomerie and his men, and said not a word.

Colin eyed his eldest brother in reproach. “’Tis a verra nice gift, Meggie dearlin’.”

Meghan's enthusiasm dimmed a bit, when Leith did not respond. "He is not a bad man," Meghan said, and her voice seemed pitiful suddenly, as though she would weep any moment.

Colin reached out and dragged her into his arms, hugging her.

"I love him," she said, and Colin patted her back.

"I know, Meggie, and I dinna blame ye, lass."

She peered up at him hopefully. "You don't?"

Colin shook his head, while Leith ignored them. Meghan cast their older brother a glance and then lowered her lashes.

Colin cleared his throat, and Leith turned to look at him. Colin gave a meaningful glance at Meghan, and Leith frowned.

"It was good gift, Meghan," Leith said, if reluctantly.

Meghan peered up at him. "You think so?"

"O' course," Colin assured, tightening his embrace. Her smile returned. Colin nodded at his brother, urging him to say something more, coaxing him without words. He knew very well that Leith's pride, most of all, was injured by her decision to wed Montgomerie. He had stood ready to do battle for her, as they all had, and she had come out of the chapel, clinging to his neck, forswearing them all, and had fled with Montgomerie that very night. Leith was having the toughest time of them all dealing with that perceived disloyalty.

"Truly," Leith answered, at last, as he turned to watch Montgomerie at work. There was no denying Montgomerie was trying. He could have sent merely a handful of men, a small token, and yet he had not. He had sent what appeared to be an entire legion. And he was working right alongside them. With luck, the fence would be finished by the end of the day. "In fact," Leith added, "we'll butcher a lamb to celebrate peace this eve."

Meghan's eyes lit once more. She pushed Colin away in her enthusiasm and leapt upon Leith, clinging to his neck. "Ye are the most wonderful brother in the whole world!"

Leith embraced her and laughed. "Och, Meggie," he protested, but Colin knew she had successfully pierced his armor.

Colin laughed, as well. "What about me?"

She peered back at him over her shoulder, still hugging Leith, and grinned. "Aye, well, ye are as well," she assured him.

"I should go help," Leith told Meghan, and winked at her. "I cannot stand here and let that bloody Sassenach do all my work for me, now can I?"

Meghan giggled. “Aye,” she agreed, but before he could go, she stepped up on her tiptoes and gently kissed Leith’s cheek. “’Tis a verra fine gesture, Leith Mac Brodie, to work beside my husband, and I thank you for it!”

“Aye, Meggie, but it is my fence,” he reminded her. His expression grew sober. “All I want to know is are ye happy?”

Meghan’s expression sobered. “Happier than I have ever been—I swear to heaven and below!”

Leith smiled down at her. “That’s all that matters, then.” He bent to kiss her upon the nose, and then pried her hands from around his neck. “Now, I’m off to build a bloody fence,” he told her.

Colin remained with Meghan, wanting to speak with her privately. She watched Leith until he joined her husband. They spoke but a moment, and then together began to work.

Meghan sighed happily.

Colin almost did, as well, though he was loathe to admit the moment moved him.

His sister turned to face him with tears in her eyes.

“I knew he would not turn Piers away! After all, you’re the most stubborn, ill-tempered brother I have,” she told him, nearly sobbing as she spoke. “I knew if Piers could win you, he could win Leith, as well.”

“Och, Meggie!” Colin protested. He wasn’t certain he liked her description of him, but he had to admit it was mostly true. Still, it didn’t sit precisely well with him. Leith and Seana both had all but accused him of being selfish, and now his dear sister accused him of being ill-tempered and stubborn, as well. Damn, but what was there to like of him? No bloody wonder Seana wanted Broc instead.

Meghan laughed. “God’s truth, I don’t know what Seana sees in ye, ye big lout!”

“Ouch!” he said, because she’d hit so near to his own thoughts. “Aye, well, it is not me she wants,” he reminded his sister.

She peered up at him. “Silly man!” she declared. “You’re all as blind as bats!”

Colin frowned down at her. “You’re not verra good for my sense of pride,” he told her.

Meghan grinned up at him. “Aye, well... ye could do with a little less o’ that anyway, Colin Mac Brodie.”

Colin gave her a warning glare, but ruined the effect, he knew, with his smile.

Meghan pushed away from him, giving him a sly glance. “Where is Seana?”

Colin shrugged. He hadn’t seen her all morning. He’d thought for certain she would come to retrieve her still.

“I wondered about her da,” Meghan said. “What is the matter with him that he cannot feed himself?”

Colin cocked his head. “What do ye mean?”

Seana inhaled a breath and turned to watch her husband at work. “She did not eat a bloody thing yesterday.”

“Och, well, ye dragged her away from the table, Meggie.”

“Nay, but she brought food with her, dinna ye recall, but she did not eat it. She asked for a cloth and then tied it all up very neatly and set it aside. She said it was for her da. Is he unwell?”

Colin tried to recall what she’d said. His brows drew together. “She did say he was getting old, but she didna tell me he was ill... or at least I do not think so...”

Meghan lifted a brow. “Mayhap ye should go and check on them?” she suggested.

Colin eyed her with narrowed eyes. It would be a perfectly good excuse to go and look for her. He’d been trying to talk himself out of it all morn as it was. He wanted to see her, but he didn’t have a reason—he eyed his shrewd little sister—until now.

She had said she would go see Broc today; his gut turned at the thought. He didn’t want her to see Broc.

Damn it, he didn’t want her to want Broc—he’d be damned if he was simply going to stand by and let her go to him without a bloody fight.

He gauged the time. It was morning yet, but growing late. If she hadn’t come after the still, as yet, it must be because she was going to speak with Broc.

Suddenly, he felt antsy to go. Mayhap if he hurried, he could catch her before she went. “You know, Meggie, I think you’re right. Besides, I do need to return her still,” he reasoned and hurriedly pulled Meghan into his arms, his mind already made up. He gave her a quick kiss upon the forehead. “Aye, that’s what I’ll do—I shall go’n return her still,” he reiterated, “and see in the meantime if all is well.” He turned to go.

“Wait!” Meghan exclaimed. “What of the fence? Leith will wonder why ye left without helping with the fence! What shall I tell him?”

“Tell him I went to return the still—tell him I went to see a sick friend—hell, I don’t care what ye tell him, Meghan!” And with that he hurried away.

Meghan stood there grinning after him, watching him go. And then humming a merry tune, she went to see how her brother and husband fared.

“Where did Colin run off to?” Leith asked, as she knew he would.

Meghan smiled sweetly. “He’s in love,” she disclosed, and winked at her husband.

Leith made an impatient face. “Och! Again!”

Meghan cast a glance in the direction Colin had gone.

He’d forgotten the still.

He’d fled into the woods without Seana’s still.

She smiled to herself. “Mayhap for the last time,” she said, and then kissed her husband full upon the lips.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“For serving *uisge beatha* at our wedding,” she replied.

Piers screwed his face, clearly confused, and Meghan giggled.

“Women,” Leith said. “Confusing lot they are.”

“Aye,” Piers agreed, sharing a companionable look with her brother, “but hell, for kisses like that, if ’tis whiskey she wants, ’tis whiskey she’ll get.”

The two of them laughed together, and the sound of it was like a balm to Meghan’s soul.

Life was verra good, she decided.

Verra verra good.

Chapter 17



Seana slipped out of the cairn before her da awoke. She'd checked on him quickly, left him some food to eat—everything that was left from yesterday because she didn't have a chance to give it to him last night before he'd fallen asleep. He had no idea what she was doing, and probably wouldn't like it if he knew she was campaigning for a husband in order to give them a better life. She couldn't tell him, but after all was said and done, she was certain he would be happy if Seana was happy.

And Seana would be very, very happy.

She was bound and determined to be happy.

So why did she suddenly feel so sad over the possibility of wedding with Broc Ceannfhionn?

Och, and he hadn't even agreed to have her!

She stared at what remained of her da's still, contemplating her own idiocy.

She really should have gone to retrieve the pot still this morn, but she hadn't the heart to go. Seeing Broc seemed more important. The *uisge* could wait. Her da could not. Though, in truth, she felt guilty for selling *uisge* so poor in quality. She hadn't even given the last few batches time to age. Her da had warned her time and again, that if she did not give the faeries their fair share of the water of life, that their wrath could be terrible to those who drank the spirits.

In fact, her da had chosen this place in the forest, because he'd claimed to feel their presence strongest here, and though Seana thought it ridiculous, she had to admit, that betimes, she thought she felt them, too. And on clear, warm nights, the forest seemed alight with their twinkling magic. Skeptical though she might be, she couldn't begin to explain what her eyes sometimes saw. For some things in life... there was simply no explanation.

For example, she had no idea why she felt nothing but emptiness right now.

Even the absence of her da's pot still seemed somehow to add to her sense of displacement.

Och, but she *was* a bloody chicken heart, she chided herself. And sitting here wasn't going to get her any nearer to her goal.

So why couldn't she make herself get up and go?

She sat on her favorite log, and contemplated that very question.

Without forewarning, My Love suddenly leapt up onto the log beside her and mewed in greeting.

Seana gasped in startle, and only kept from scolding the imperious little beast for the sheer fact that the cat had never come so near as it was this instant. She held her breath, afraid to move even, lest the cat hiss at her in outrage and flee.

Seana stared at the cat.

My Love stared back, blinking up at her, and then dismissed her to gaze at the empty place where her da's pot still had been.

"Rotten cat," she said, not quite able to allow herself to hope it had come to her out of any sense of kinship. For all Seana knew, it was just another way for the scraggy animal to try her nerves—to come so close and then to hie away, leaving her with her hand in mid air, spurned again.

She turned away, determined to ignore it, but the wicked beast mewed and brushed against her leg. Seana peered down at it in surprise.

Hesitantly, she reached out to place her hand atop its sleek black coat. My Love did not move, nor did she flee as was the usual case, and Seana found herself holding her breath as she stroked the cat's back.

"Well, I'll be!" she declared, and grinned. My Love nuzzled her leg and Seana dared to lift the animal up into her arms, cuddling her.

"Ohhhhhhh, my!" she exclaimed, overjoyed. "Oh My Love!" she cooed. "I knew ye'd come to me some day!" She truly did not know why she should feel so deliriously happy that the cantankerous beast had finally deigned to approach her, but she truly was.

Despite all the times the silly beast had enraged her with its aloofness, she felt a surge of love for it. "My sweet Love," she murmured joyfully, lifting the cat to her face, nuzzling it gently.

She couldn't wait to tell her da!

"Soooo long I have waited to hold you!"

Colin stopped cold at the sound of Seana's voice.

His heart sank into his stomach.

He was too late.

She had gone to Broc and Broc was no fool. How could he possibly turn his heart from Seana?

“I knew ye’d come to me, someday,” he heard her say with a breathy sigh, and her voice came directly from beyond the brush where he stood.

He listened for Broc’s voice, and didn’t feel the first inkling of relief when he didn’t hear it.

Gadarned bastard was probably nibbling at her throat like some bloody leech! He ought to put a fist against that bloody mouth!

“Oohhhhhh,” he heard Seana exclaim, and he didn’t think, only reacted at the sound of it. He burst into the glade through the bushes, and tripped over the log where she sat.

It landed him flat on his face.

Seana shrieked in startle.

There was a mew of outrage and something landed atop his head, scratching the devil out of him. It dug its claws into his brain, ready to leap away, but Colin yelped and turned, covering his face, rolling over the animal in his surprise. With a yowl, the beast freed itself and bounded away. Colin saw its black arse disappear into the brush and turned to look at Seana, bemused.

She was standing there in shock, staring down at him.

Colin stared back.

It was a cat.

A bloody cat!

Relief surged through him. It wasn’t Broc.

He couldn’t keep from grinning up at her in relief.

“I’ll be damned,” was all he could think to say in that moment. He felt too giddy with relief even to be embarrassed that he was left with a mouth full of peat and bloody claw marks in his back.

Seana turned to stare longingly at the bushes and bracken where the cat had vanished. Her gaze returned to him and her expression didn’t reveal the least bit of pleasure in seeing him.

God’s truth, he didn’t even care about that.

She wasn’t with Broc.

“Och, Colin!” She cast her hands up into the air and spun away, obviously disgusted with him. “Look what ye’ve gone and done!” She sat again upon the log and set her elbows upon her knees, her face in her hands, and pouted

beautifully. She cast him a harassed glance, and Colin would have laughed in sheer pleasure at the sight of her save that she might have swung her foot to kick him then, and he truly would have shriveled nuts.

“I’m sorry,” he said, though he wasn’t even precisely certain what had happened, nor why she was so irritated with him—or for that matter what he should be sorry for. He couldn’t be more pleased with her this moment and his grin was insuppressible.

Nor could he possibly wish to kiss her any more than he did this instant.

She pursed her lips, still pouting, and her expression was as sullen as that of a child who had been deprived of her tarts. “That was the first time in two years that cat has deigned to come near me and ye’ve gone and spoiled it, Colin Mac Brodie!”

She was back to calling him by his full name.

He lifted his brow.

“She’s like to never even look at me again, so just wipe that stupid grin off your face!” she demanded of him.

Colin tried. He truly did. To no avail.

“What are ye doin’ here anyhow, Mac Brodie?”

Colin’s grin turned wry, then, and his cheeks warmed just a bit. “I came to bring ye the pot still,” he disclosed, feeling rather sheepish all of a sudden.

She lifted her head from her hands and cocked her head, inspecting him.

“Aye, well, where is it, then?”

Colin’s lips twisted. “Hmmm... that’s a verra good question.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “And the answer is?”

“I forgot it.”

She lifted a brow, suddenly looking far too smug for Colin’s liking. “You forgot it?”

Colin nodded.

“Och, and just when did ye notice that, Mac Brodie?”

“Well, now, I was distracted by worry,” he told her, in an attempt to avert her attention.

“Whyever for?”

“Because ye were supposed to come and get the pot still this morn,” Colin reminded her. “Or did ye forget?”

Seana shook her head, and cradled it once more within her palm, looking suddenly hopeless.

“I was going to get the pot still later this noon,” she disclosed, sounding disheartened. “I wanted to see Broc this morn... but I could not bring myself to go,” she confessed with a dispirited sigh.

Colin sat up to face her. “Why not?”

Not that he particularly wanted her to go see Broc, but he did wish to know why she’d not been able to. And he dared to hope it had the tiniest bit to do with him.

She shrugged.

Colin found himself staring at her lips whilst she spoke.

“Because I’m a coward,” she said low, but didn’t avert her gaze. “That’s why!”

Colin’s heart began to beat a little faster.

He dared to move nearer, drawn by those delicious lips as though he were a poppet with strings.

“Nay, lass,” he murmured. “Ye are not.”

There were not so many women who could overcome so much and end so strong and full with life. She was beautiful from her heart to those luscious lips of hers, and he had been a foolish, foolish blind lad who could not see past her imperfect legs. What a dolt he had been, then... and what a price to pay now.

She would not even consider him, and he didn’t blame her. He was beginning to see himself through the eyes of others and he wasn’t certain he liked what he saw.

“Aye,” she argued. “I am! Ye dinna know how important this is to me,” she revealed, “and still I cannot do it!”

Those green eyes of hers turned liquid, and Colin wanted to kiss them closed, to taste the salt of her tears on his tongue. “You’re no coward, Seana.”

“I will never be wed,” she lamented.

“Och, lass... any man would be a fool not to want you.”

She blinked at his words, and then her brows twitched and she lowered her gaze. Colin knew she didn’t believe him.

He reached out to touch her chin with a finger, intending to lift her face to his, to make her see the truth of his words, but he found himself caressing her soft skin.

She didn’t protest, and he didn’t withdraw.

His heart began to hammer now, and his belly fluttered.

What would she do if he pulled her down into his arms?

Would she fight him?

Would she slap his face and hie away?

Or would she melt into his body and let him make love to her?

Her stark green eyes met his, and for an instant, Colin lost his breath. Nor could he find words to speak.

Her guard was down. Desire was there; he recognized it in her eyes, but there, too, he saw confusion. There was a vulnerability in those vivid green eyes that made him yearn to protect her from everything and everyone—including himself.

She deserved better than him.

She wanted better than him.

She wanted Broc Ceannfhionn.

Seana's heart stopped at the gentleness of his caress. She leaned her face into his hand. Never in her wildest imaginings would she have envisioned this moment between them. And to feel it... the tenderness in his touch... to see the warmth in his eyes... stole her breath and left her without rational thought.

Her belly fluttered when he moved to cup her entire cheek in his palm. The gesture was such an affectionate one that she was momentarily dizzy with it. Not even her da had ever touched her face with affection... no man had ever even looked at her that way.

Seana closed her eyes and placed her hand upon his, slipping her fingers between her face and his hand, only beginning to pry it away for she had not the will to wrench it free. Her heart beat frantically.

"Seana," he whispered.

Seana opened her eyes, facing him. He had once been her tormenter, now he was her friend...

The look in his eyes implied so much more... and Seana had to still her pounding heart lest it betray her.

This was Colin Mac Brodie, she reminded herself—the very man she should *never* trust.

What was wrong with her that she could forget all that had passed between them over a simple touch?

How could she react to him so foolishly?

And the very worst of it was that... it was apparent that, though she denied it, she longed for him still and it terrified her.

Seana swallowed hard.

She couldn't, for an instant, breathe.

"You're beautiful, Seana," he whispered.

Seana's hand trembled over his. She wanted more than aught to wrench it away from her face—wanted more than that to feel his caress forever.

She was weak—Oh, God—and far too hungry for what his eyes seemed to promise.

"And you're the bravest lass I know," he assured, his eyes piercing the armor of her heart. "Look at you," he demanded. "Ye have regained the use o' both your legs..."

She jerked his hand away, her heart twisting over his words.

"I have always had the use o' my legs," she reminded him bitterly, "you just didn't like the way they worked!"

"Och!" he continued, ignoring her, "and ye have a da who willna leave his cups long enough to even feed his daughter—"

That was exactly what Seana needed to hear to push him away. Anger filled her. She surged to her feet.

"What do ye know of my da, Colin Mac Brodie? Ye know naught about my father! Ye have no right to even speak o' him!"

He didn't respond, but merely sat there, daring to look dumbfounded by her outburst and Seana wanted to slap his arrogant face.

"Let me tell ye about my father," she said. Tears sprang to her eyes. She couldn't help it. "It was my da who wiped away my tears when *you* called me a lame witch!" He winced and Seana continued. "Aye, and it was my da who found the strength to break my leg!" She motioned to her limbs. "To make me better! And it was my da who nursed me 'til I was strong. Aye!" she shouted down at him, when he blinked in surprise. "So dinna ever speak another bloody word against my father, Colin Mac Brodie, or I... I..."

Seana wanted to kick him, but he sat there looking so bloody regretful and so full of apology that she couldn't even find the hate she had once used to protect her heart from him.

"I dinna ever wish to speak to you again!" she told him, using anger as her shield. "Get away from me and dinna ever come near me again!"

And with that Seana left him—before he could speak to defend himself—before she could be persuaded to believe him. She fled the glade, running back to the cairn as fast as her legs could carry her.

She didn't need his help.

She didn't wish to ever see him again!

It wasn't safe.

Colin Mac Brodie was a rotten scoundrel and she'd do well never to set eyes upon him again.

It was Broc she wanted, Broc who would make the best husband.

So why couldn't she stop her tears?

Seana could scarce see the path before her for through her tears. She made her way home by instinct, needing more than anything to seek comfort from her father.

Her da would know what to do. He would know what to say to dry her tears. Och, but she truly didn't know what she would do without him.

Chapter 18



Reluctantly, Colin let her go.

He sat and watched her disappear yet again, feeling powerless to stop her. He didn't know what to say. He had been a rotten bastard to injure her so deeply but he didn't know how to set things right.

His heart felt heavy and his conscience was heavier than his heart.

Seana deserved better than he could ever give her. He was his father's son, wholly, and she deserved to die an old woman in her bed, without the grief in her heart that his mother had borne. She deserved a devoted husband at her side, cherishing her always.

If he could give that to her, he would... but he couldn't.

But he could help give it to her...

Broc was a fine man, with a pure heart—even if he was too focused on his duties to notice a woman's affections lest it smack him in the head.

Well, Colin intended to do just that... to give Seana what she wanted so desperately.

Lifting himself from the bracken soft ground, he went in search of Broc the blond.



"Da?"

Her father didn't respond, and Seana's chest tightened painfully.

She'd found him lying in utter darkness and she lit another taper to bring to his bedside, her heart hammering with fear as she inspected him.

He lay as still as Seana had ever seen him lay and she had to put her hand to his breast to even sense his heart beat. His face was pale, as well. She placed a hand to his forehead and found his skin damp and hot.

Fever.

“Father,” she whispered and still he didn’t respond. Seana shook his shoulder gently, trying to wake him, needing the reassurance of his gaze.

He stirred, then, but scarcely.

“Nay,” he said to her, and the sound was almost a rasp.

Heart pounding, Seana leaned closer to hear him. “Da,” she prodded him.

“Dinna... cry,” he told her a bit deliriously, though he didn’t bother to open his eyes. He shook his head. “Dinna cry, Seana...”

“Da...” Seana whined softly, fear taking a greater hold upon her heart. “What’s the matter, Da?” She shook him again, harder this time and his lashes fluttered open.

Seana thought he saw her, but he gave her the queerest look. She had never seen him appear so... incoherent. Even when he’d been sodden with drink, he’d never appeared so confused.

“Seana... child... I did not mean to...” He stopped to swallow, and it seemed difficult for him. “I dinna mean to leave you so long,” he finished, and gasped for a breath. He reached out to touch her face. “I dinna like to hear you weepin’,” he said in a whisper, his old green eyes cloudy.

Seana tried not to cry. She patted his face lovingly. “Tell me what to do,” she demanded of him. “Tell me how to help ye,” she begged. “What ails ye, Da?”

“I’m... tired,” he murmured, and closed his eyes again. His head lolled to one side.

“Da!” Seana cried out. Her heart thudded to a halt. “Da!” He didn’t respond and she slapped a little more firmly at his face. She had no notion whatsoever how to help him—particularly when she had no notion what ailed him to begin with.

Panic set in.

He wouldn’t wake up, and Seana didn’t know what to do. She knew nothing at all about nursing the sick!

She took his jaw into her hand, and almost burst into tears once more because he felt so frail. “Da!” she cried again. When he didn’t waken, she tried to bundle him to her in an attempt to lift him but frail tho’ he might be, he was still far too heavy for her to lift. Seana set him back down and tucked him in, her mind reeling.

What was she supposed to do now?

She couldn’t just let him lay there and die!

If she couldn't lift him, she had to go for help. It was the only thing to do, but she didn't wish to leave him. What if he should perish while she was gone?

Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Da," she said on a sob, and then rose to her feet, staring helplessly down at him.

What should she do?

If she stood here doing nothing then he would surely die. She had to go after help. It was the only solution.

He shivered and she gathered all his blankets at once, then piled them over him, tucking him in as securely as she was able. He had to stay warm. And she must hurry! Where to go for help? Her first thought was of Colin. For her father's sake, she couldn't afford to harbor anger toward him. She couldn't think of anyone else to ask for help.

The MacKinnons were nearer. Maybe Broc would be there? Her heart beat frantically as she tried to decide what to do.

The MacKinnons were nearer, she acknowledged again.

She gave her da a kiss upon the brow and caressed his cheek with a trembling hand. "I'll be back verra soon," she promised, and ran to seek help, praying she wouldn't be too late.



"Aye, Seana. Do ye recall her?" Colin asked.

Broc sat upon a stool, whittling away at a stick, and seemed deep in contemplation, despite that he was taking great pains to appear pleased by Colin's visit. "Who?" he asked, glancing up.

Colin frowned down at him. Broc's stick was quickly becoming naught but a stubby little point. "Seana."

Broc continued to whittle fiercely... almost as though he were venting frustration and Colin watched him curiously, wondering at his thoughts. He had been quiet from the moment Colin had arrived, pleasant, but contemplative. His attention had been for his cousin alone, who was now seated upon his arse against a stone wall, looking just as preoccupied as Broc appeared.

“Donal the drunk’s daughter,” Colin replied and felt a pang of guilt repeating the epithet, despite that Seana was not around to hear it. She had been so defensive of her da. Colin had not meant to hurt her, merely take her defense against her da’s neglect. He’d only intended her to see how extraordinary a woman she had become.

Broc nodded now. “Oh, yah,” he said, giving Colin a strange look before returning his attention to his cousin.

Not that Colin truly wished to speak to Broc about Seana, but he was growing annoyed over their present conversation... or lack of it.

“What of her?” Broc asked suddenly.

Colin peered down to see that Broc was watching him curiously now. “What do ye think of her?” he forced himself to ask.

“She’s a sweet lass, of course,” was Broc’s immediate reply. And he winked up at Colin.

Colin grit his teeth at the wink. She certainly was sweet, but he suddenly found himself wondering just how much time the two of them had spent together, and the possibility of what they had done during that time gnawed at his gut.

“Pretty too,” Broc added.

Colin frowned. “Aye... how well do ye know her?” he couldn’t keep himself from asking, and knew he sounded territorial.

Broc’s expression turned more curious still. “Well enough,” he replied.

Colin felt suddenly impatient with his friend’s answers.

“What do *you* think o’ her is the question?” Broc countered, suddenly eyeing him pointedly. One brow rose... in challenge, Colin thought.

He suddenly didn’t wish to discuss Seana any longer. Damned if he wanted to fight with his old friend, but God’s teeth, neither did he want Broc to have any interest in Seana. In truth, he didn’t think he wanted to know what Broc thought of her.

He *did* want to help Seana get what she most wanted—the problem was... it was in direct opposition to what *he* most wanted and he couldn’t quite bring himself to cast his treasures into another man’s arms.

“What’s with Cameron?” Colin asked, in an attempt to change the subject—before he grew angry enough with his best friend to twist off his nuts. He didn’t like what he was feeling this moment. Never in his life had he been so gut-wrenched with jealousy over a woman—and over a woman that wasn’t even his, nor did she want to be, at that! What the devil ailed him?

He'd never been a jealous. He wasn't even certain whether he'd ever experienced the emotion, but in any case he damned well didn't like it.

"I'm not sure," Broc said, returning his attention to his brooding cousin.

Colin returned to his brooding as well.

As far as he had always been concerned, if any woman wanted him—and he hadn't met many who didn't—that was fine with him. And if they didn't want him, there were too many who did for him to pine over one he might not.

Seana was different.

Seana was... Seana.

She wasn't at all like other women.

She was brave and she was bold and she was bright and full of passion. She was stubborn, too—and she made him smile, even when she wasn't trying to...

He found himself smiling now, simply at the thought of her...

Her sauciness amused him, and her decisive way of dealing with her life made him admire her as he hadn't admired many men. She hadn't taken her lameness as an excuse to sit and wither in some dark place until she was old and too haggard to care how people felt about her. Nay, but she didn't seem to care what anyone thought. She made her own way, will ye, nil ye, and to hell with whomever didn't like it.

"He's been acting strangely," Broc disclosed.

For an instant, Colin was too lost in his own thoughts to realize of whom Broc spoke.

"How so?" he asked, once he understood it was Cameron.

The lad was sitting there, tapping fingers together and looking impatient and angry. Colin wondered what the hell was going on.

Broc shook his head, and said, "I canna put my finger on it, but something isna right with that boy... ever since he returned with Merry..."

"Your mutt?" Colin asked, confused now.

Broc's head fell. He stared at the ground. "Aye... she's dead," he disclosed, and seemed almost to choke on the declaration.

Colin blinked in surprise. "Och! How?"

"I dunno," Broc said, and peered up at Colin, his eyes glassy with tears. But Broc didn't weep. He said again, "I dunno." And then he straightened himself and wiped the grief from his expression. He dropped his whittling at his feet, and returned to stare at his cousin.

“He ought to be tending his damned sister!” he remarked, “instead of sitting about feeling sorry for himself.”

Colin hardly knew what to say. Broc’s mutt had been his constant companion for as long as Colin could remember. “His sister?”

“Aye,” Broc said angrily. “He tells me she is ill, and he sits there sulking like a selfish bastard.” He stood suddenly. “I should go see to her myself!”

He started toward his cousin’s home, and Colin stood, wondering if he should follow. He didn’t care to involve himself in family affairs. It wasn’t any of his business.

Broc stopped and peered over his shoulder at him. “Coming?”

Colin shrugged and pushed away from the wall.

“She’s like to be weepin’ over Merry is all.”

“Broc!” Cameron called after them.

Broc kept walking, ignoring his cousin, though Colin stopped.

Cameron started after them. “Where are ye goin’?” he asked, sounding distressed.

“To see to Constance,” Broc said without turning.

“Ye dinna have to!” Cameron told him. “I’ll do it!”

Broc kept going, still ignoring him, and Colin remained where he stood, staying clear of the two of them.

“Dinna bother her!” Cameron shouted, and Broc stopped suddenly, turning to face him.

“Dinna tell me what to do, Cameron,” Broc said. “I said I’m go’n to see Constance, and go’n to see her I bloody well am.”

The two of them stood glaring at each other, and Colin thought they would come to fists.

“What are you hiding, Cameron?” Broc accused him.

Cameron’s face turned red—with anger or chagrin, Colin knew not which.

“Who says I’m hiding anythin’? Just leave my sister be!”

Neither of them spoke then. They stared at each other, both of their expressions full of frustration and anger.

It was then he heard her voice.

Seana.

She came tumbling out of the forest, calling Broc’s name as she ran.

Colin bolted toward her at once—despite that it wasn’t him she was looking for—knowing instinctively something was wrong.

Seana nearly wept with relief when she spied Colin's face. She ran toward him, out of breath and terrified that she was going to be too late to help her father.

"It's my da!" she told him hysterically, falling into Colin's arms. Her face burned with her tears and her eyes stung, but she didn't care.

Colin seized her head, forcing her gaze up to his. "What's wrong, lass? Tell me!"

The concern in his eyes made her tears start anew. They poured down her cheeks. She tasted them on her lips. Never in her life had she begged anyone for anything, but she had no pride this moment. For her father, she would have sold her soul.

"My da," she sobbed. "He's so verra ill!"

Colin held her, else she would have collapsed, so much did her leg pain her from the long, hard run. "I dunno—I dunno what's wrong!" She shook her head hysterically. "He was laying in the dark!" she explained. "I thought he wasna breathing but he was! Och, I dinna want him to die!" she cried out, her heart wrenching painfully.

"Where is he?" Broc asked.

Seana reached out to seize Broc's arm. "Home," she said. "Help me, please, Broc! I dunno what to do! He is feverish and I dinna know what to do!"

Broc drew her into his arms as he had all those years ago. He held her reassuringly, and patted her back. "Dinna worry, Seana, we'll do what we can! I promise, lass—we'll do what we can!"

"Hurry, please!" she begged, and he took her by the hand. "We'll take our horses," he told her and pulled her after him.

She shrieked in surprise when Colin lifted her up suddenly into his arms. "She'll ride with me," he said, and his tone brooked no argument. Seana was too relieved at being held to protest his handling of her. Her legs hurt far too much to insist he put her down. She sagged against him and wept softly against his neck, clinging to him. She was so afraid they would be too late. The scent of his skin soothed her somehow, and the salt of his flesh mingled with that of her tears.

"Thank ye," she whispered to him and hugged him fiercely.

Colin squeezed her in answer. "Everything will be all right, Seana," he whispered. "Dinna worry."

Nothing seemed all right, nothing but the arms that embraced her. Seana held on tight and prayed with all her might.

Chapter 19



Colin let her weep even as they rode, allowing Broc to take the lead. He gave in to a moment's irritation that Broc seemed to know where they were going without needing to be told—though only for an instant, because Seana's pain was tearing at his heart.

He had spied the look upon her face just before she'd collapsed into his arms. Though she'd tried to hide it, he'd known. That more than aught else was the reason he'd lifted her into his arms and carried her to his mount. Only for the briefest instant had he experienced a pang of jealousy to see Broc dragging her away. There was no time this moment for petty male pride, and he refused to allow it to command him again. When Broc reined in his mount just beyond the woodland's edge, at the place where the cliff rose high above Chreagach Mhor—the MacKinnon's ancient druid fortress—and came to pull her down into his arms, he let her go to him, and dismounted to follow.

For an instant, he was nonplused, for he saw no hut anywhere within sight. Only when Seana led them to a small entrance along the cliffside did he realize where she had brought them.

It was an oversized cairn, one of many that were spattered across this land. This particular cairn, however, was significantly larger, almost like a cave, though it was not. The only difference between this and a cave was the numerous cracks that let in sunlight where the stones met one another. He ducked to follow Seana and Broc within, and breathed in the scent of damp loam.

The single room was dimly lit and sparsely furnished. Dust motes danced wherever the sun's rays pierced the ancient druid crypt. Seana's da lay upon a narrow pallet in the rear of the room, and Seana made her way toward him, and fell to her knees beside him. A black cat, the same perhaps that had landed atop him in the forest, sat at Donal's side, curiously watching their approach.

“Da,” Seana whispered. She reached out and gave the cat a single stroke, as though grateful for her presence.

Her father didn’t stir.

Colin was momentarily appalled at the place where she lived. Something like anger surged through him, but he wasn’t certain at what, or whom. How could anyone live like this for all their lives? He felt sick to his gut as he knelt beside her next to her father.

Seana cast him a tearful glance, and he tried to reassure her, but words failed him.

“Help him... please,” she begged, and rose to give Colin the room he needed. She stood and Broc pulled her into his arms, comforting her.

Colin at once inspected her father. The man didn’t move. He lay as still as stone, and just as cold, as though he’d long ago been entombed within this ancient crypt of his. Colin had to set his hand against the man’s nostrils to feel the faintest breath.

“He’s verra ill,” he told Seana, worry etching his brow. “We need to get him out of here!”

“I tried,” Seana told him tearfully, and began again to sob. “I could not.”

“We’ll take him to Meghan, Seana. Meghan will know what to do for him, lass.”

Knowing there wasn’t time to waste, he lifted her father into his arms, and carried him out of the cairn into the sunlight, wincing as his eyes adjusted. Only when his lungs filled with warm air did he realize the cold that had seeped into his body while in that hovel.

Words escaped him at the realization of how she had lived—at his own cruelty. Her expression of long ago—the wounded look she’d given him—came back to haunt him a thousand fold.

The cat followed them out. Sitting like a sentinel at the portal, it mewed after them.

Colin’s first coherent thought was that he wasn’t going to let her go back. Not ever.

If he had to give them both a bloody home, she wasn’t going to lay her head not even one more night against that sodden ground. It was a wonder the both of them hadn’t died long ago in that place, and it occurred to him suddenly that he understood why Seana had never let him follow her home. His heart twisted for her.

Anger and shame clawed at his gut. How could he have dared to add to her grief? How could he have treated her so cruelly all those years ago. Seana was the bravest person he would ever know. There wasn't an ounce of self-pity in her body, and he vowed never to let her see the pity in his eyes. He loved her too much to hurt her ever again.

Aye, he loved her, damn it!

He loved her and he didn't care if she didn't love him back. It didn't matter.

All that mattered to him this instant was Seana. He would do anything, he believed, to see her happy—even if it meant letting her go to Broc.



Colin was right.

With the benefit of her grandmother's lessons in medicament, Meghan knew exactly what to do.

Seana was grateful to her for the way she treated her father, as though he were part of her family. She laid him within a room inside their manor and cared for him diligently, giving him potions to ease his pain and cooling his fever with damp rags. He swung from hot to cold and cold to hot and Seana was afraid at the pallor of his skin.

"Will he be all right?" she asked Meghan. She stood watching, worrying her lip until it was tender.

Meghan shook her head. She cast Seana a glance over her shoulder. "I dunno," she said gravely. "He is verra ill, Seana."

A sob caught in Seana's throat, and she wanted to weep, only she knew it wouldn't help matters at all. Meghan didn't need the distraction just now, and Colin and Broc were away speaking to Meghan's husband.

"I have tried everything I know to do," Meghan admitted, casting Seana another worried glance. Meghan's green eyes met Seana's and they shared a look. Meghan conveyed both comfort and strength to prepare Seana for the worst. Seana swallowed hard and walked to the other side of her father's bed. She sat down, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible and yet needing to be as close to her da as she could.

"Once before, I tended such an illness." Meghan peered across the bed at Seana as she dabbed a cloth over her father's forehead. Seana was grateful

for the gentle way Meghan drew the rag down over his gaunt cheeks. “My grandminny Fia...”

Seana barely recalled the old woman. She sometimes had come across her as she’d foraged in the woodlands for herbs. Sometimes, even, Meghan had been with her, but Seana had been far too shy to speak. She had hidden in the brush, watching from a safe distance, wishing she’d had a grandminny who had patted her head so lovingly and kissed her so gently upon the cheek.

Her gaze returned to her father. Her da had not been so affectionate, but he was all she had in the world. Seana didn’t know what she’d do if he were to die.

“What happened to your grandminny?” Seana dared to ask.

Meghan shook her head sadly, Seana lowered her gaze, understanding. She reached out to pat her father’s hand, and then dared to take it into her own, holding it gently.

Her heart leapt as he suddenly opened his eyes. He looked straight at Seana and spoke.

“My Love,” he said, though his voice was weak and Seana had to strain to understand him. “You’ve come...”

Seana swallowed and squeezed his hand. “You’re going to be well soon, Da,” she promised. “Won’t he, Meghan?” She glanced hopefully at Colin’s sister.

Meghan nodded, though hesitantly, and Seana dared to believe.

He shivered. “I left Seana weeping,” he rambled, and Seana realized he did not recognize her. He must think Seana was her mother. “We have to go... go g-get her...” He closed his eyes. “She’s just a wee baby,” he said and drifted off once more.

“I’m right here, Da,” she tried to reassure him, and his eyes fluttered open once more.

This time, Seana thought he recognized her.

“Seana?” he asked weakly.

Seana smiled. “Aye, ’tis me, Da.”

He smiled up at her, and then sighed somewhat contentedly.

“You’re going to be all right, Da.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Aye!” she countered firmly. “You will be!”

He gave a shuddering breath and reopened his eyes. "I will join My Love now... but one day," he told her, "you'll see me again, dearlin'..."

Seana refused to listen to him. "Nay, Da, ye willna leave me!"

"Aye," he argued weakly. He seemed to realize suddenly that she was holding his hand and he gave her fingers a squeeze. "And you will see me again," he promised. "You will see My Love, and there will I be next to her. She's waiting for me now, ye know?" He gave a feeble smile and then coughed over the effort of speaking.

"Da!" Seana protested. Tears streaked her cheeks.

He cast Meghan a glance. Meghan remained silent, removing the rag so he would speak without distraction.

"Two cats," he told her, turning back to Seana. "And we shall be your shadows, looking over ye always, my daughter. You shall see..."

"Nay, Da," Seana protested, holding his hand tighter, as though to keep him from leaving through sheer will. "You will not die yet!"

"Look for me," he commanded. He coughed, then closed his eyes, drifting once more into a troubled sleep. When he opened them the next time, he seemed not to recognize her at all. His eyes were glazed with fever and faraway.

"My Love," he whispered hoarsely, and reached up as though to touch her face.

Seana swallowed, for he'd never called her that in all her life, and she knew who it was he thought he saw. Her mother. Grief held her tongue.

"Dinna leave Seana to cry all alone," he begged of her, then tried to rise.

Seana urged him back down upon the bed. "Nay, Da, rest!"

"Dinna leave her to weep!" he said urgently. His gaze focused suddenly upon her.

Seana shook her head. He didn't recognize her. Tears welled in her eyes and she gulped back her grief. "She... I willna," she promised.

"Go to her now!" he demanded.

Seana tried hard not to burst into tears. She didn't know what to do, what to say.

I'm here, Da, she wanted to cry out. I'm here!

Meghan once more began to cool his face with the cloth, and he settled himself, drifting once more into a fitful sleep. Seana laid down at his side, weeping softly while she listened to his labored breath.

“I should have brought him sooner,” she lamented. “I should not have left him so long...”

“You did the best ye could,” Meghan reassured.

“I should have taken him out of there,” Seana sobbed, blaming herself. If she had only been brave enough to find a husband sooner...

If only she had gone directly to Broc, instead of going to Colin.

But, even then there were no assurances that Broc would have had her, and she had been helpless to do anything at all. Broc was good and kind to her to be sure, but he didn’t look at her the way Colin did...

“Colin,” she murmured without realizing, suddenly needing desperately for him to be there next to her.

She was vaguely aware that Meghan looked at her, but she didn’t know why and didn’t care. Her eyes were swollen from crying so much and her head ached almost as much as her heart.

The door to the room opened but Seana didn’t lift her head or open her eyes. She heard Meghan whisper to whomever it was that stood behind her, but Seana refused to accept what she heard. He couldn’t die. She wouldn’t let him.

Somehow, she fell asleep sobbing at her father’s side.

The last thing Seana remembered was the touch of a hand upon her cheek, but it wasn’t Meghan’s, she knew. It was a male hand, rough but gentle in its touch.

Somehow, she knew to whom it belonged and she reached up, daring to press it against her cheek.

The tears that slipped through her lashes were almost as much over that revelation as for her da. Somehow, he had managed to warm her heart and his presence alone comforted her—his touch fortified her. His whispered “g’nite” eased her to sleep... and just before she drifted... or mayhap she’d only just dreamed it... his soft kiss upon her brow soothed the worry from her face, if not from her heart.

In that instant, she knew Colin Mac Brodie was not such a heartless knave after all.

Chapter 20



Seana's father died during the night whilst she slept.

They buried him the next morning in a lone grave by the forest's edge. Colin, along with Meghan's husband and Broc, dug the grave where they laid him to rest.

Seana had never felt so alone than she did the instant they lowered his body into the soil he'd loved so well.

All her tears had been spent the night before, and she was stoic as they shoveled the last of the dirt over her da's body.

The sun was bright, like days long gone when she and her father had spent hours sitting in the sun together... when his eyes had not been so poor and the light did not bother them so.

These people were good and kind, to be certain, but no one spoke to remember him. No one here knew him at all. They knew him only as Donal the Drunk, but Seana knew him as the most wonderful da any little girl could have known. Aye, he drank far too much and he passed out betimes and forgot to come home. And mayhap he hadn't provided for Seana the way other fathers had, but Seana had always known he'd loved her, and he'd accepted her unconditionally.

She had been perfect in her da's eyes—even when others had seen her as something pitiful. He hadn't fixed her legs for himself because he was ashamed of her. He'd fixed her legs because Seana had begged him to.

"Will ye stay with me?" Meghan asked her, and Seana suspected that Colin had spoken to her about her home. She could see it in Meghan's eyes, and yet... though pride made her want to refuse the offer, she couldn't bear the thought of going back to that dark place all alone. Her father had made it a home. Now it was naught more than an overlarge pile of stones.

Seana nodded, and tried to thank her, but the words would not come.

"You're welcome to stay as long as ye will, Seana." She cast a glance at her brother, and then looked once more at Seana.

Tears stung Seana's eyes, though she would not shed them.

Alison MacLean had come to pay Meghan a visit and stood at Meghan's side as well, nodding her agreement. Seana didn't know her, but the look in Alison's eyes told Seana that Alison's heart was as good and kind as Seana had always supposed. There were tears in her eyes, as well, though she hadn't known her da at all.

With the last of the dirt shoveled and patted down, many of those who had come to pay respects began to wander away, giving her nods of condolence as they went... a few others, pats upon the arm. Colin stood there with his shovel in hand, leaning upon it, speaking low to Broc. The two of them talked at length together, about what Seana had no idea.

"If there is aught I can do," Alison added.

Seana nodded in appreciation and tried to be brave in front of so many strangers.

"I shall be fine," she assured them both.

Alison cast a glance at Broc. "Meghan told me how you feel about him," she offered, "and I think he's a fine man. It speaks well for him that he came to comfort you o'er the loss o' yer da."

It was kind of him, to be sure. He had always been there to help Seana when she had needed him. His presence this morning didn't surprise her, but neither did it comfort her... as Colin's did.

It was Colin who held Seana's gaze more oft than not, and Colin who cast her reassuring glances while he worked beside Broc and Piers. It was Colin she yearned to have comfort her now. Colin's arms she wanted to run to.

If he offered them now, and called her without words, Seana thought she would cast herself at him without the least hesitation, and crumble into his embrace. She yearned for him at her side and felt most reassured when he met her glance.

"I know what will cheer you," Alison announced, and reached out to take her hand to pull her away.

"Oh, but I should stay," Seana protested and resisted as Alison tried to drag her away. A very practical woman, Seana knew it was pointless to remain here weeping all day long when life must go on, but she needed to be near Colin. She didn't dare say so, but she didn't wish to leave him.

"Come," Meghan demanded, and her tone brooked no argument. "We'll visit together and sup soon. God's truth it willna do ye any good to stay here."

Seana relented, and let them take her away, but not without turning and seeking out Colin's gaze.

He was watching her, and when she met his eyes, he smiled softly. Seana could not tear her gaze away; she held his eyes until she could no longer and they fell out of sight over the hill.

"Broc will not leave without bidding you farewell," Alison promised, tugging at her hand.

But it wasn't Broc she wished to see.

It was Colin.

Her heart cried out for Colin.



"'Tis the fashion of English women," Alison was saying, as she covered Seana's face with powder that made Seana sneeze.

"It feels like mud," she said, wrinkling her nose as she reached up to feel the texture upon her fingers. Her face was soft, and finding it so surprised her. It felt as though her skin had weathered a decade of drought, and had half expected to find it cracked and parched.

"Close your eyes," Alison demanded of her next. Seana hesitated, casting her a wary glance. Alison thrust her finger into a small pouch and withdrew it now with some black substance upon her fingertips. "They say men cannot resist a woman with a painted face," Alison told her.

Seana wasn't certain she wanted any man who needed her to cover her face with paint. She frowned at that thought, and Meghan smiled at her, and winked.

Seana closed her eyes, and Alison smeared the black ash around her eyes.

"Och, but you'll be lovely!" Alison exclaimed.

"She *is* lovely," Meghan assured her. "Any man would be a fool not to want you!"

Seana's heart twisted a bit, for Colin had said the very same thing to her.

Next, Alison removed from her pouch something that looked to Seana like dried blood. Seana panicked as Alison's hand drew near and she caught her wrist.

"Och, what is that?"

“For your lips and cheeks,” Alison disclosed, and Seana had this sudden vision of herself looking like a court fool.

“Aye, but what is it?”

Alison peered curiously at Meghan, questioning her.

Meghan shrugged. “I dunno,” she confessed, “but it was in the trunk Piers gave me that was filled with silk cloth.”

Seana swallowed and decided to trust them.

Meghan continued to smile, however, and Alison looked so pleased to be helping that Seana let her come near with the red paint. “I wonder what virgin was sacrificed for *that*,” she muttered beneath her breath.

“What did ye say?” Alison asked, preoccupied with her task.

Seana lifted brows that were stiff with drying paint. “I said... thank you for the time you’re taking to help me,” she fibbed, but Meghan had heard her, and began to giggle.

Her laughter was infectious and soon she had Seana giggling as well.

“If he doesna wish to kiss ye now with these ripe berry lips, I think he is a silly fool,” Alison declared.

Seana only hoped Colin didn’t laugh at her.

She suddenly didn’t care much what Broc thought. She no longer had a reason to wed with him, and didn’t have the heart to tell Meghan and Alison that they were wasting their time.

She didn’t need a man to care for her. She had her pot still and she knew how to brew. She could take care of herself just fine.

“There!” Alison declared and stepped back from her masterpiece.

Seana held Meghan’s gaze, waiting for her reaction, but Meghan merely tilted her head and said quietly, “Oh my.”

Seana wasn’t sure what that meant precisely. There was little about her expression that gave away her thoughts.

“Colorful,” she said, and smiled.

“Like a butterfly newly burst from her cocoon!” Alison declared.

Seana felt like she was about to burst all right, and she would have wiped away the mess upon her face at once, save that she didn’t wish to hurt Alison’s MacLean’s feelings. She rather thought by Meghan’s carefully bland expression that Meghan felt the same as Seana about Alison’s labors, so Seana merely smiled appreciatively and thanked Alison.

“You’re verra welcome!” Alison told her with a wink. “Broc willna be able to resist you!” she promised. “Just wait and see.”

Seana could scarce bear the thought. She smiled wanly and hoped again that Colin wouldn't laugh when he saw her.

She needed a hug.

She needed her da, too, but that was impossible now, and it terrified her that the person she was most attached to now was Colin Mac Brodie.

He had broken her heart once, and he could do it again. He might not intend to but he was certainly capable of it. All she needed to remind her of that fact was to examine the trail of broken hearts he'd left in his wake.

Keep yer distance, Seana, she warned herself. Colin Mac Brodie's heart belonged only to himself.

Perhaps he was not the cruel, selfish boy she recalled, but he was not about to open his heart and pledge eternal love either—certainly not to the poor daughter of a *uisge* brewer.

Chapter 21



Seana appreciated all that Meghan had done for her. Although her kinfolk had not known Seana's da, Meghan bade them all take a day of mourning in respect for him and for Seana. And though Seana knew very well they hadn't known her da enough to shed a single tear for him, seeing their show of respect somehow soothed her.

She left the manor, filled with people, to come outdoors and find a moment's solitude to reflect upon the day's events.

She had always supposed her da would die some day and that she alone would be the one to bury him and to mourn him.

Having braced herself for his death long ago had not made the reality of it any easier. Colin's presence and comfort, and Meghan's care, had been the keys to keeping her sanity today. Meghan had told her a thousand times, if once, that she was brave, but she was not. Inside she felt terrified and alone. For the first time in Seana's life... she was truly alone.

The night was foggy but warm and she slipped away, into the mist, unobserved. No one would miss her, she was certain. Two of Meghan's maids were flirting with Colin and Meghan was deep in conversation with Alison, who had decided to remain overnight rather than venture home in the fog. Her da, she had said, would understand, and would wish her to remain safe with Meghan rather than endanger herself on the path home.

At that thought, Seana allowed herself a moment of self-pity. At least Alison had someone waiting at home who would miss her... and soon... she would have Leith... and lots of little children... little boys, mayhap, who would bear resemblance to her father... who would carry on his legacy and make everyone proud.

Her da had not lived, even, to see his grandchildren—not that Seana would for certain have any. Right now it didn't appear that she would. She was suddenly without heart, and Broc Ceannfhionn didn't seem to stir it at all.

Broc had long gone, mumbling apologies and something about his cousin Cameron and his dog, and Seana had had no idea what the devil he was talking about, nor had she had the wherewithal to ask.

She found a secluded spot in the field before the Montgomerie manor and sat upon the grass.

Seana had no notion how long she sat there, brooding. It could have been minutes, or it could have been hours.

The moon above shone bright, but the night clouds veiled its light. All about her mist swirled, like the twirling hems of dresses...

Any other night it might have seemed eerie but not tonight. Tonight she needed the cloak.

Her heart felt both heavy and as though it beat too fast... as though it couldn't quite decide whether to stop or go on. She swallowed hard and looked up at the stars... so vast... that sky... almost as though it went on for an eternity.

She began to sing...

*O'er Coolins face the night is creeping
The banshee's wail is round us
sweeping.*

*Blue eyes in Duin are dim with weeping
Since thou art gone and ne'er
returning...*

It was a song her da had sung to her as a wee one, only the look in his eyes had been wistful and Seana had known he'd been singing for her mother. Well, he was with her now, and she hoped the two of them could hear her song... and know she was well.

The song soothed her and she continued, her voice soft in the night...

*The breeze of the bens is gently blowing.
The brooks in the glens are softly flowing.
Where boughs their darkest shades are throwing,
Birds mourn for thee who's ne'er returning...*

Colin had followed her out from the hall, but with the mist so thick tonight he'd lost her.

He heard her before he saw her, and followed the sound of her song. Her voice was so sad, but there was a strength in her that he admired and loved.

He found her seated upon the meadow and might have missed her entirely except that her song, like a siren's melody, lured him. The night mist surrounded her, enfolded her, curled around her like a lover's embrace.

"Seana?"

Starting at the sound of his voice, she stopped singing and turned to look up at him, her eyes wide.

"I dinna mean to frighten ye," he said.

She took a gasping breath, giving lie to her words. "You did not."

"I thought ye might need some company," Colin offered, and hoped it were so. Never in his life had he known a woman so independent from any man.

She nodded, and turned back to the stars, giving him her back. Colin came to her side and sat beside her. His knee inadvertently touched her thigh and he held his breath, hoping she wouldn't ask him to move it. He felt like he had when he'd been but a lad with his first affection—excited and nervous to be beside her—as though she were the first woman he had ever touched.

His heart beat a little faster.

"I know ye miss him, lass." His mouth felt too dry suddenly even to speak. He felt foolish and perhaps a bit guilty at the thought of becoming aroused simply by her presence, when she obviously didn't see him as a lover, and she was in mourning besides.

She was probably completely oblivious to him—she certainly acted it—and it was the first time in his life he had ever felt so invisible to a woman.

He didn't like it.

"You look lovely in that dress," he said, and didn't like the way his voice trembled, betraying him.

She turned to face him, with those beautiful green eyes and luscious lips... and he wanted to reach out and wipe away every trace of powder and lip tint his sister and Alison had marked upon her body. She didn't need it. Her face was perfection in his eyes.

"Och!" she exclaimed, and must have sensed his thoughts because she averted her gaze suddenly, staring at her lap, where she wrung her hands. "I feel silly," she confessed. "I did not wish to hurt Alison's feelings but I feel silly to be painted so lavishly."

Colin smiled at her. "You surely do not need it."

She shrugged. "Alison said it would make me irresistible to Broc."

“HMMMM,” Colin said, and grinned. “Let’s see.” He moved closer, pretending to inspect her face, aware of her every breath, her every gesture. He took in a breath and captured her scent, drawing it into his lungs, savoring it. His eyes closed. He’d meant to tease her, to come close and then to... he didn’t know what he’d intended... only that it felt too good to breathe in her scent... and he never wanted to stop.

His body shook with desire, but he forced composure, lest he push her down into the grass and make love to her this very moment. She didn’t want it—didn’t want him, he reminded himself.

She wanted Broc.

His gut wrenched at the very thought.

He peered up at her to find that she was watching him warily.

“Well?”

Colin blinked innocently at her. “Well what?”

“Quite resistible, I think,” she concluded, when he didn’t move toward her. She laughed softly and need clawed his loins.

His grin turned crooked. He couldn’t help it. He was a rogue at heart, and he was too old to deny it.

“Aye, but that scent...” He sniffed the air. “Now that is enough to make a man stupid with lust.”

Her sweet brows drew together in confusion. “What scent? They used no scents on me.”

Colin sniffed the air again, teasing her. “Surely they must have.”

“Nay!” she swore when he got upon his hands and knees and played like a puppy, sniffing the air around her.

She giggled and it encouraged him. He wanted to hear her laughter, see her smile. He lunged at her, sniffing her ribs, and she shrieked in momentary alarm.

She threw out her hands, but didn’t push him away. Colin continued to sniff her... moving to her neck.

“Colin Mac Brodie!” she protested. “What are you doing?”

“I canna seem to help myself,” he confessed, nudging her back against the grass with his nose.

Her laughter escalated. “That tickles! Och, Colin Brodie what are you doing!”

Falling in love with her, that was what he was doing.

Deeply and madly in love, and he couldn’t resist.

She fell back against the dewy grass, giggling, and it did his heart good to hear it.

Like a hunter with his quarry, he sensed her vulnerability and moved over her, trapping her beneath him. He wasn't going to fight fairly. He knew how to woo a woman, knew how to please her and he wasn't going to lose her without a fight. He could make her happy, if only she would let him.

He wanted the chance to do that more than he wanted even to breathe.

He grinned down on her as she laughed.

Her hands were on his shoulders now, keeping him at bay, pushing him gently away, though without real intent. Colin refused to budge and then she stopped pushing at all, leaving those long, lean fingers upon his skin... taunting him...

She stopped laughing abruptly, and he heard her intake of breath, a startled gasp, as though only now realizing their position.

His body hardened, though he tried to keep his lust restrained.

Seana peered up at him, startled to find herself beneath Colin so easily. Her heart began to pound, the sound like drums in the night. His skin was hot to the touch where her fingers met flesh, and she held her breath at the sensations that spiraled through her with the realization.

His blue eyes were luminous by the moonlight, piercing her heart, his hair silvery. It spilled, like molten gold, against her, caressing her face. His skin was pale against the darker beard that had begun to grow, making his face appear all the more chiseled.

Seana swallowed.

"'Tis good to hear ye laugh."

Seana's heart tripped against her ribs. She swallowed again. "Aye, well... 'tis good... to laugh," she whispered back.

"You are so beautiful, Seana," he told her, and Seana had no chance to protest. She held her breath as he reached out to touch her. "And ye dinna need this..." He wiped his thumb against her lips, removing the paint, firmly at first, but then slowing to gentle caresses that Seana wouldn't have stopped had she been able.

She was scarce able to keep her thoughts from scattering at his touch.

She couldn't speak at all.

Closing her eyes, she savored the feel of his finger's caress upon her lips. It stirred something deep inside her with every soft stroke, bringing her body to life in ways she'd never imagined.

Suddenly, everything seemed heightened... her sense of smell... the feeling of cool night air upon her skin... the dark sultry colors of night... the seductive mist... touching her body like cool whispery fingers... the deep blue-black blanket above them...

Seana drew in a breath, and lost herself in the imagery his touch evoked.

For the moment, it didn't matter that Colin's hands had loved so many women. At the instant, he was making her feel as though she were the only one. His touch cherished her, made her feel as she never had before...

She lifted her lashes to find him staring down into her face, his expression so intense that it made her want to weep. She couldn't help herself... tears welled in her eyes.

"I'm afraid," she said, and watched him swallow. Her lips began to tremble and she had no notion why. In that moment, she had no control over her emotions at all. It was as though they suddenly surged up from the depths of her to choke away her breath, and overwhelm her.

"I know." He parted her lower lip tenderly and Seana opened her mouth for him... parted her lips unconsciously. Her head lolled backward as she felt him lower his body over her, until he was laying gently atop her. The sensation of it was so deliciously warm and heady that she swallowed hard enough to taste her tears in the back of her throat.

"What are ye afraid of, Seana?"

You, she wanted to cry out.

She felt dizzy with the heat of his body. "Being alone," she confessed, though with difficulty, because it betrayed more than she wished... if he only knew...

If only he understood that it was him she didn't wish to live without...

He would flee with his tail between his legs to the next woman's arms.

Och, God, she needed him in her life and the realization frightened her more, even, than her father's death did. Colin had somehow managed to find a way into her heart.

"You'll *never* be alone," he swore. "You'll die some day with grandbabies gathered all about ye."

She couldn't see that vision.

It wouldn't appear to her.

A tear trickled down the side of her face, spilling into her hair.

"Dinna cry, lass." His voice was soft and tender. "Dinna cry."

And then he lowered his mouth to her cheek and gently lapped away the tears with his tongue.

Seana's body quivered at the shock of his touch.

Desire warred with fear.

He kissed her cheek then, and moved to her lips, and Seana's heart thudded to a halt.

Chapter 22



He couldn't help himself.

The desire to kiss her was too great, his need uncontainable.

Slowly, he lowered his mouth to hers, anticipating the first warm touch of her lovely tongue against his fevered lips. Her lips were softer than he imagined... and trembled sweetly for him.

She didn't press her lips together to deny him, but neither did she part them, and he thought perhaps she didn't know what to do.

"Open for me," he whispered, and shuddered when she obeyed. "Och, lass," he murmured and rolled his hips against her, savoring every delicious curve of her. "You feel so good..."

He sank his hands into her hair, cradling her head between his hands, pressing deeper into her mouth, tasting her, needing to be inside her.

Never had he wanted someone more.

He closed his eyes and deepened the kiss, unable to stop himself, and groaned with pleasure when she offered him her sweet soft tongue.

Sweet.

Delicious.

He took her offering greedily, suckling her tongue gently, drinking in the heady nectar of her mouth. He wanted to devour her. Like the night mist, the scent of her surrounded him, weaving about his senses, filling his head with possessive thoughts he had never experienced so acutely.

He wanted her—wanted her to be his.

Only his.

Need clawed at his loins, demanding that he appease it. He wanted to so badly—needed to so desperately.

More than anything, he wanted to take this woman and make her his own, wanted to fill her body with his life.

He wanted to give her pleasure... wanted to show her that he could give without taking...

His heart beat ferociously, until it pounded like a war drum in his ears. She moaned softly and it hardened him fully. He was on the edge, he knew... the edge of reason...

He slid a hand down her body, testing her curves beneath his touch... beautiful... her waist so small and hips so perfectly curved... made to cradle a man's body... made to cradle only his...

How must it feel to sink within her body... to feel her sheathe him fully...

He could have her, he knew.

The dazed look upon her face told him so.

Seana's heart thumped a merciless beat in her ears.

Her body was no longer her own to command.

Like some piper calling forth every sensation, her body obeyed his every whisper, his every touch.

God, but even the soft groans he gave thrilled her. It was music for her heart. It filled her, lifted her spirits, and made her yearn to give him all he wanted of her...

She wanted to make him happy, wanted to please him.

She wanted to give him children and caress his face whilst he slept.

She wanted to give him everything in that instant, anything at all...

If he wanted her heart, she would have handed it to him.

If he wanted her breath she would give it gladly too.

He kissed her throat, and Seana instinctively thrust her head back, allowing him all he would take of her. His tongue worked magic upon her flesh, taunting her... tasting her...

"Colin," she said with a whimper.

He didn't reply, continued to kiss her, and Seana thought she would die if he ever stopped. Without warning, he opened his mouth against her neck and sank his teeth gently into her flesh, biting tenderly.

Seana cried out in pleasure, and her hips surged instinctively upward... seeking something more...

He pressed her down again, rolling his hips against her, groaning against her throat, and her body quivered with pleasure.

Och, but she wanted more... needed more... wanted him to help her find it. She parted her thighs, feeling him hard where she needed him most desperately, and he slid between her legs, forcing them further apart.

Seana responded wantonly, entwining her legs with his, feeling with every nerve in her body. He moved gently against her, and she thought she

would die from the pleasure it gave her. In that instant, she loathed the clothes that stood between them... wanted something deeper... closer...

Oh, God... she wanted more... something she knew instinctively only he could give her.

But he drew away in that instant, and Seana thought he had ripped her soul from her breast with the simple withdrawal.

He looked down at her, staring, his blue eyes pale in the moonlit darkness, and his thoughts unreadable behind them. He was so beautiful, it made her want to weep.

Confusion filled her.

His gaze had seduced her... his lips made her yearn for their tender touch... his hands made her quiver with desire...

She wanted to draw him back, wanted to cry out that he never leave her... but she didn't dare.

"Beautiful," he whispered. Her heart pounded within her breast. "You're beautiful, Seana," he said again.

But he couldn't possibly mean it.

Tears sprang to her eyes.

The way he was looking at her now was far different from the way he had looked at her so long ago...

Seana couldn't speak, couldn't move, could only stare into his eyes like some helpless animal when faced with a merciless hunter... only this was not fear that held her. It was a longing so great that it overwhelmed her. His gaze filled her with emotions that bewildered her.

She didn't want to feel grateful for this...

Her heart squeezed within her breast as she sensed his withdrawal.

Och, God, he had so easily snared her.

And now he could so easily stop and she was left wanting.

Seana swallowed the emotions that rose to choke her breath away. He soothed her now with sweet words, but in her heart he had rebuffed her once again, and she could not bear the pain of it.

There was desire in her eyes—unmistakable—and Colin shuddered to see it. But there were tears as well... tears he knew she was trying hard not to shed. He didn't wish to hurt her.

More than anything he wanted only to please her.

Desire was not love, and he didn't want regrets later.

It was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do, but he tore himself away somehow. Arms shaking with restraint, he lifted himself from atop her, rolled to one side, and then lifted a hand to brush the hair from her forehead.

He wanted to see her... wanted to hold her... wanted to love her... always... but he couldn't force her... couldn't seduce her.

Not her.

She must come to him of her own free will.

And it was far too soon.

She was far too vulnerable tonight with her da only just buried this morn. Nay, he wanted her, but he wanted her to want to be with him. He didn't want her simply because she needed someone to hold her. In the past, it may not have mattered to him why she chose to let him love her, but it mattered to him this moment.

And it mattered far too much.

He willed himself to master his desire, tried not to think about how much he wanted her... the throbbing ache at his groin.

He swallowed, caressing her cheek with his thumb. "Never hide that lovely face again," he whispered.

Though the night was cool, he reached back, dragging his tunic over his head, shrugging out of it. He lifted the cloth to her face and began to wipe away the color from her face.

"Dinna listen to Alison," he commanded her, wiping away her tears along with her powder. He chuckled softly, trying to lighten the mood between them. "And while you're at it... dinna listen to Meggie, either."

He was going to kick himself later, he knew.

Never in his life had he walked away from something he wanted so desperately—and never from a woman who wanted him back.

"My sister isna a champion of men," he disclosed, winking at her. He bent to give her a chaste kiss upon the bridge of her nose.

"I dinna need your pity, Colin Mac Brodie!" she exclaimed, shoving his face away. She pushed away from him and made to rise.

Colin sat there, stunned by her reaction.

Seana couldn't bear it.

How could she have allowed herself to fall prey to his kisses, to his sweet tongue and his gentle caresses?

She was weak and she loathed herself this moment for putting herself in a position to let him hurt her once more.

She had been so proud of herself... had thought herself so strong, and it was obvious she was not!

She rose to her feet, brushing off her dress, choking back sobs that threatened to betray her. She turned away from him, tears coursing down her cheeks.

“Seana?”

“I do not need your pity!” she told him, and swore she would not be weak again.

He reached out for her, grasping the hem of Meghan’s dress. Seana jerked it away. “Do not touch me!”

“Seana,” he entreated. “What did I say? What did I do?”

“Naught!” she said, and her voice nearly broke.

He had said naught at all! And neither had he done anything—and that was the problem! and Seana was furious at herself for wanting that he should have continued. What madness was that?

What a fool was she!

How could she be so hurt that he had so easily abandoned her to her desires, forsaking his own! It was what Colin Brodie did best of all—love women and leave them! Only with her, he hadn’t even bothered to seduce her. She wasn’t good enough for him—never had been!

She couldn’t go back to Meghan, couldn’t bear to be near his sister. “Tell Meghan I will return her dress on the morrow!” And she hurried away, before she could shame herself further by breaking into sobs.

“Seana!” he called after her.

She didn’t stop, couldn’t face him.

Tears flowed down her cheeks and she swiped them away, trying to see through the thick night fog.

She didn’t belong here.

“Where are ye going, lass?”

“Home!” she replied, and fled into the woods before he could stop her.

Chapter 23



Cameron had disappeared into these woods and Broc was determined to find him.

Broc had arrived home, after paying his respects to Seana, only to see his cousin slip into the forest. Late as it was, Broc couldn't imagine what the devil he would be doing wandering about. He was behaving suspiciously, as well, peering over his shoulder to see whether he'd been followed. Though he'd cast a glance in Broc's direction, it was clear to Broc that Cameron hadn't spied him, because his cousin had hurried into the woods without the first sign of recognition.

The night was misty and likely hid Broc from Cameron's view. The problem was that it also hid Cameron from him. There was scarce a sound to be heard in the woods tonight—nor a beast to be spied. It was almost eerie in its stillness.

He made his way deftly through the forest, relying upon his memory to guide him. These woods were familiar to him only because he'd spent so much time here as a child. These were the border regions between the MacKinnon, MacLean, and Brodie lands—and now Montgomerie's as well. It was unclear to which clan these woods belonged for they had long been in dispute, and belonged foremost to the bigger sword of the time. For the moment, it seemed, they belonged to Montgomerie, but Broc hardly considered that set in stone.

As children, they had battled in these woods, each clan against the other—the MacKinnon's and Brodies in particular, raising sticks instead of swords. It was how he and Colin had come to be friends, despite their divided loyalties. It was where he had first met Seana, as well.

It was obvious to Broc that there was something between his two friends, though neither seemed to realize it. He might have never imagined the two together all those years ago, but Seana had grown to be a lovely woman, and it was, though Broc liked Colin immensely, a sort of poetic justice to

see her hold so much sway over Colin. It was about damned time his friend was laid low by a woman. And it was all the sweeter to see it was Seana who was Colin's downfall.

Though his mood was somber, thinking about his cousin, he couldn't stifle a private chuckle at the thought of the two of them together.

Colin and Seana; who could have figured.

Perhaps there was a God after all.

"Serves you right, ye smooth-tongued bastard!" he whispered to himself.

He hoped Seana snared him by his ears and hung him as her trophy by his ever-loving balls.

A rush of footsteps caught his attention. They seemed to be coming in his direction.

Cameron!

Broc hadn't time even to hide, before the figure came rushing through the trees at him. He froze where he stood. First the silhouette was unrecognizable, and then, he saw her. She wasn't watching where she was going and she burst into his sights and directly into him, never stopping, never spying him, until it was too late.

She knocked the air from his lungs though he didn't budge under the impact. She cried out when she slammed into him, and he had to catch her lest she fall backward upon her rump.

"Seana!"

She was weeping, almost hysterically, too upset even to be afraid. Broc seized her by the arms, shaking her gently.

"Seana! What's wrong, lass—tell me!"

Seana could scarce see where she was going, but she recognized Broc's voice and thrust herself at once into his arms, grateful to see him.

"Colin!" she sobbed, though she hadn't meant to speak a word of her heartache, and he drew her closer into his embrace.

"Och, Seana!" He patted her back. "What's he done now, lass?"

Seana had worked herself into tears, never expecting to encounter anyone that might see them. Her heart hurt, but it wasn't Colin's fault; it was hers. She tried to reassure Broc, patting him back, remembering the last time he'd come to her rescue where Colin was concerned. She didn't wish to come between them—and truly, Colin hadn't done anything at all.

She was the fool who had let him into her heart, even knowing what he was... who he was.

Colin hadn't done anything more than simply be himself.

Seana dried her tears with Broc's tunic and straightened. "He's done naught, Broc." She reached up, patting his great chest. "He's done naught," she assured him, peering up at the gentle giant she had thought she could love. She couldn't though. Now that her da was gone, and the urgency had left her, she saw Broc with a clarity she hadn't possessed before.

She had surely hoped she could love him, and mayhap she could have... but for Colin.

Silly heart.

"'Tis all my fault!"

Broc didn't love her either—nor even did he look at her in such a manner that made her feel he could.

Certainly not the way Colin looked at her.

She swallowed hard.

"Och, Seana," he said again, and reached down to pat her head as he had once done so long ago. It was a friendly gesture, affectionate, even, but hardly one to be given a hopeful lover. Seana smiled at the confirmation. "He must have done something for ye to be so sad! Tell me and I'll give the bloody bastard a broken nose. He hurt ye once, and once was enough!"

Seana laughed a bit hysterically. "Nay! Ye willna harm him!" she demanded of her friend. "I swear he's done naught! 'Tis me!" she swore. "Colin has done naught at all, save be himself, and I am only a fool!"

He seemed to understand her meaning, because he tilted a sympathetic look at her. "Awww, ye are not!" he protested, and hugged her once more. "You are not a fool, Seana dearlin'!"

Seana began again to weep, despite her resolve not to.

"Och, ye've had a hard day," he said, comforting her. "Let me take you home."

Seana nodded, and he peered into the woods, hesitating only a moment before urging her to follow. "Come," he said, frowning.

Seana didn't protest. The night was mistier than she'd ever seen it, and her heart ached as never before. She needed a shoulder, and Broc had always been generous in offering his to her.

The fog was so thick Seana could scarce see the path before them.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked as they walked.

Seana shivered, and shook her head. He didn't press her, only hugged her nearer.

“’Tis a bloody rotten night,” she said, changing the topic. “I have never seen the mist so thick!”

“Aye,” Broc agreed. “’Tis a rotten night.” And he peered about again, as though looking for someone... or something.

Seana shivered again though she wasn’t cold precisely. A feeling of unease passed over her. “What are you doing here, anyhow?”

He squeezed her gently as they walked. “The question is... what are *you* doin’ out at this hour? I thought ye were going to remain with Meggie, lass? Dinna ye ever worry about yourself at all?”

“I live here, Broc! I know my way about these woods—fog or nay. I have walked these woodlands many a night to check the spirits. And anyhow, whatever will happen, will happen,” she told him, and believed it wholeheartedly. “Ye canna live your life afraid!”

Her father had taught her that much. Poor though they might have been, he had faced each day with the greatest of hope.

“Nay,” Broc agreed. “You cannot. Tis true enough.”

She was going to miss her da, terribly, but he’d left his hope with her, and for that Seana was grateful. Black as the night might seem, Seana knew the morning light would come.

“Your da would be proud of ye, lass.”

Seana smiled up at Broc. It was a kind thing for him to say to her, and mayhap the only thing that might have cheered her this moment. “You are the only one who didna ever belittle him, Broc. He liked you verra much!”

“I liked him, too,” Broc said. “He was a good man.”

Seana smiled. “Och, you just liked his spirits!” she teased. “But aye, he was...” She swallowed the knot of grief that rose in her throat, and tried hard not to weep again. “...a verra good man.”

They walked in silence, and Seana was grateful for it, because she didn’t think she could keep her composure and speak of her da, as well. The mood between them was as somber as the woodland air.

“So what will ye do now that he is gone?”

Seana contemplated her options only briefly, few enough that they were. “Make the *uisge beatha*,” she said without hesitation. “It was my da’s legacy, and I do not see why I shouldna continue. There are not many who know the spirits as he did.”

“Verra true,” Broc agreed. “But Seana,” he began, his tone mindful, and Seana knew what he was about to say. “Lass...”

He didn't wish to hurt her feelings, she knew, but her spirits had been but a mere shadow of her da's. In fact, her da would likely have dumped it all upon the ground rather than serve it to another living soul, so guarded was he of his cherished recipe.

"I know, Broc," Seana said, grateful for the distraction. "But it is not my fault. There have been too many celebrations and not enough time to age the *uisge*. 'Tis what happens when ye dinna give the faeries their share."

Broc clutched his stomach, and Seana didn't miss the defensive gesture. It made her smile, despite her mood. She almost laughed, even.

"Anyway, it serves ye well, Broc! 'Tis what a man gets for drinking so much!"

"Och!" he exclaimed. "Ye sound like Iain's bloody wife! No mercy at all for a man's plight in life!"

Seana did laugh then. "I like her already," she told Broc. "She sounds like a woman after my own heart!"

"She's a woman after mine, as well," he confessed. "Too bloody bad Iain got to her first." He laughed. "If he werena my laird and friend, I'd have to make her a widow, I think."

Seana laughed with him. "Liar! Ye wouldna harm a fly, Broc Ceannfhionn!"

He shook his head in wonder. "Why does everybody say that?"

Chapter 24



He'd let her go, but it was a mistake. The night was far too dangerous for her to wander these woods alone.

She was far too emotional.

Colin followed her into the forest, calling out her name, but she refused to answer. He had no idea at all what he had done to upset her. He had tried so hard to do the right thing... to protect her... even from himself.

"Seana!" he called out.

No answer—and Christ, he did not know these woods as well as she did. For all he knew, he was running in circles. Muttering a curse beneath his breath, he stopped to gain his bearings and stood contemplating the woods.

Bloody rotten fog!

Where had she gone?

"Seana!"

No answer.

"Gadamn me!" he swore softly to himself. What the hell had he done to hurt her? He stood there, trying to understand, and couldn't. "What the bloody hell did I do?" he asked no one in particular, and was startled half out of his wits when a hiss sounded just above his head.

Colin yelped in startle, and stumbled backward.

His gaze sought out and found the culprit.

It was a cat.

The same bloody cat that had landed atop his head the day he had found Seana by her father's pot still. The hair on the back of his nape stood on end, and he spat a string of oaths.

"Devil cat!" he said, glaring at it. It merely stared back at him, its eyes glowing softly in the darkness, blinking.

It was a black cat... not that he was the least bit superstitious. He left that nonsense to his long dead grandminny and his sister. Still, he couldn't help

but note its color, for it blended almost imperceptibly with the night. Anything could be hiding out here.

Shuddering, he turned from the cat, feeling suddenly a little desperate to find Seana.

The woods were silent... too silent...

Something felt wrong in his gut... something more than just the way things were left between them.

He called her name again, and ran after her, hoping she was all right.

He would never forgive himself if something happened to her.



The cairn was just as Seana had left it.

Of course it was; why wouldn't it be? There was no one here now to change things—not that her da had risen much from his bed in the last weeks. Nor did they own enough to muss up their little home. Their house was sparse compared to the way others lived.

Seana had oft peeked into the windows of others and envied their cozy rooms, with blankets strewn about and lovely furnishings. This minute, however, she couldn't find any of that envy. Their own furnishings were crude, but lovingly made by her father's hands. Seana had helped him whenever she could, and he had never complained when she did something wrong.

She walked over to the little table where she and her da had supped together, and ran her fingers over the rough wood. One corner was lopped off, noticeably so... from Seana's effort to help. In her zeal, she had wielded the axe far too wide and had removed a goodly portion of their proposed table. Her da hadn't been pleased, but neither had he been angry. She wasn't supposed to have handled his axe, so tiny was she, but she had, and she'd split the wood in one fell swoop.

She smiled at the memory.

Her da had been torn, she recalled, between pride and disappointment. Seana had been such a weakly child... her strength with the axe had pleased him immensely. And yet... he had already carved the table top and even smoothed the sides to keep from giving them splinters whilst they sat to sup.

Och, he hadn't even scolded her. His brows had furrowed only an instant before lifting with appreciation at her handiwork. Seana had beamed with pleasure, filled with pride.

She sighed.

He'd left the table as it was... only smoothed the place where she had cut, and Seana had oft caught him running his fingers over the rough edge, with a slight smile upon his lips.

Nay... she had not had all the comforts others had... and mayhap her dad had drunk a bit too much betimes... but he had given her something no one else ever had. And she doubted anyone ever would.

Unconditional love.

"You'll miss him?" Broc said. It wasn't a question.

Tears pricked at her eyes, but she didn't shed them. "Aye," she said, and sighed.

Broc came up behind her and then drew out one of the little stools her da had fashioned to go with the table. He sat in it, and Seana's brows lifted at the expression upon his face as he tumbled backward, and fell onto his arse.

Despite the tears in her eyes, she couldn't suppress a giggle. "It has a leg too short," she told him too late.

Broc didn't bother to rise. "Och, now ye tell me!"

Seana laughed. "Well, ye dinna ask!"

Broc chuckled, and then peered about, inspecting the cairn. "Bloody hell, Seana... I never understood how ye could live here," he admitted, shaking his head in obvious disgust.

"It wasna so bad!" she swore. And then she laughed softly, changing her mind. "Save in winter and when it rains."

Slivers of moonlight peeked in wherever the stones were loosely fit. No matter how one looked at it, it was a poor place to lay one's head by night, but there were some who had no roof at all, and Seana would not, looking back at her life, have changed a bloody thing.

Broc was still peering about, brows raised. "Hmmm," he said only. And Seana laughed again, because she knew he had no idea what to say in response to her fervent defense of her home. But Broc could hardly appreciate the things about it that Seana could. He had not lived here. He had not known her da as she had.

Nay, he couldn't possibly understand.

“Aye, well...” He cast her a glance. “Ye dinna have to stay here anymore.”

“I know,” she replied, and walked over to the rows of oaken barrels her da had lined up against the far wall. Most were empty now, for there had been far too much celebration in far too short a time, but a few were still full, and the pungent odor of aging spirits filled her lungs. She lovingly patted a barrel, thinking that for the first time in her life she didn’t have to do anything at all. There was nobody anywhere who needed her. She could do anything she wished, go anywhere she liked.

But none of it needed to be decided now, and she didn’t really care to discuss her future plans with Broc.

She turned to face him, leaning against the barrel. He was watching her, his expression full with pity.

“Och!” she exclaimed, and approached him, shaking a finger at him. “Do not dare feel sorry for me, Broc Ceannfhionn!”

Broc blinked, taken aback by her unexpected rebuke.

“Why, I believe I am the luckiest woman I know!” she told him, and thought it might truly be so.

Broc nodded, humoring her, daunted by her outburst.

Seana’s brows drew together, thinking how different his response was from Colin’s. Colin, the arrogant cur, would have grinned at her, and his reaction would both infuriate her and amuse her as well.

She shook a finger at him. “I have me no man to tell me what to do now, and I have the means to support myself! What more could a woman wish for?”

Broc continued to nod his head, his expression sober. “Ye have the means... unless ye kill all your bloody customers with that rotten *uisge* ye’ve been making,” he pointed out.

Seana’s brows lifted.

Belatedly, he grinned up at her.

“Och, ye big lout!” She stomped his toe with her foot.

“Ouch!” he exclaimed, but spoiled his complaint with a bigger smile. And then added, “Och, but ’tis some rotgut *uisge* if ever I’ve drunk it, Seana! And ye know I’d not say such a thing were it not true, lass.”

Seana bit into her lip, and grimaced over the truth of it. “I know,” she confessed.

He sniffed the room, and then grinned again, softening the blow of his words. “Strike a flame,” he said, “and there would be naught left of us to worry about!”

Seana wanted to smack him. Och, it wasn’t that bad! But she laughed despite herself, adding, “Hush yourself, Broc!”

Though he did have a point, and she drew out the other stool to sit upon, considering it.

Her *uisge beatha* was far too strong for man or beast—nor even the hardiest Scotsman. She was lucky enough not to have had deaths on her conscience, though she hadn’t really considered the strength of her spirits until now. She had been far too concerned with simply supplying the demand.

“Dinna worry, Seana. I will help you... until ye have a better batch to sell. Dinna fash yourself o’er it, lass.”

Pride dictated that she refuse. Common sense told her she could not. She tilted her head to look at him there upon the floor. “You’re a good friend to me, Broc. A verra good friend.”

He winked at her. “And you’re a verra sweet lass. And will do verra well, I think.”

If only her heart were not aching.

If only she did not yearn for the one man she could not have.

She sat contemplating her options, trying not to think about Colin or how close she had come to giving him all that she possessed.

It wasn’t so much her name she would have ruined, for she had no name to speak of. She was Donal the drunk’s daughter, after all, and no one had ever expected anything of her—save that she might rob their pantries and steal their laundry!

Nay, but tonight she had come close to losing the one thing she couldn’t bear to. She had very nearly lost her pride.



She was fine.

Colin stood outside her door and listened to the voices within.

Seana and Broc.

Broc must have come here to wait on her, and Seana had obviously never intended to stay at Meghan's. How else could the two of them find themselves together so quickly, when she had only just left him?

No wonder she had panicked and fled. He had very nearly seduced her and her heart belonged still to Broc.

"Aye, well... ye dinna have to stay here," he heard Broc say.

Colin couldn't help himself. He tried to walk away, but he couldn't. He stood there eavesdropping, feeling like a lout, his heart squeezing him all the while.

"I know," Seana replied.

Their voices muffled for a moment, and Colin strained to hear them, swallowing his pride.

"Why, I think I am the luckiest woman I know!" Seana said, and Colin heard the truth in her tone.

She believed it.

She was in love with Broc.

She had been telling him so from the first, and he hadn't wanted to believe her.

He didn't bother knocking. He didn't wish to intrude. He'd been fooling himself to believe he had a chance to win her at all. And it served him right. He didn't deserve her. She deserved far more than what Colin could give her.

Their voices faded behind him, and it was all he could do to keep himself from turning back and bursting like a madman into her home.

Fight for her, a little voice declared. Go back and fight for her if you love her!

Broc was his best friend.

He couldn't.

Seana was surely worth it, but he couldn't go back after hearing the joy in her voice.

Why, I think I am the luckiest woman I know! he heard her say once more, and he winced.

He wanted that for her. He truly did. She deserved happiness and if Broc could give it to her, then he wanted even that...

God help him, he would find a way to be happy for her, because Seana was the finest woman he'd ever known.

But she had spoiled him forever.

He couldn't imagine now kissing another pair of lips... couldn't imagine running his fingers through softer hair...

He didn't want anyone else.

His heart squeezed within his breast as he walked away. With every step, the forest grew darker, like a somber blanket that would never again be lifted.

Without her, nothing seemed to matter anymore.

Chapter 25



The sound of weeping caught Seana's attention.

For an instant, she thought she might have imagined it, but she cast a glance at Broc to see his expression perked as well. Her brows drew together as she listened.

She couldn't quite tell if it were far away... or near... but it was definitely a child's sobs.

"Dinna leave Seana to cry," her da had said.

Could this be what he had been speaking of?

Could he, in his fevered state, have imagined this child to be her? Except that... Seana did not recall the weeping when she was here last.

"Do you hear it?" Broc asked, cocking his head.

"I do!" She rose.

"Where is it coming from?"

"I dunno," Seana replied, wandering the room as she listened to the distant sound. It was a wee child, she was certain. It didn't sound anything at all like an animal, though that had been her first thought. She walked nearer to her father's pallet, following the sound.

It grew louder—barely, though it did.

Reaching out, she tentatively touched the dirt wall beside her father's bed. The sound stopped. She turned to look at Broc. He was lying still upon the floor, listening intently, his expression curious.

Every sort of thought flew through Seana's mind—everything, from those of the spiritual, to those more mundane: She didn't believe in magic... or brownies. Neither did she believe in spirits—or that My Love could possibly be her dear minny come back to life as a bloody cat! But her da was certainly of a different mind, and the sound of the child weeping sent a quiver down her spine.

"It stopped," he said, and Seana raised a brow at him for stating the obvious. His expression remained thoughtful.

Seana moved away from the wall, and at once the weeping started again. "Och!" she exclaimed. "It sounds as though 'tis coming from the other side of this wall!"

"And what's there?" Broc asked.

"Naught," Seana answered, becoming as confused as Broc appeared. "Naught at all."

She moved toward the door, just to see if the sound remained strong, but the weeping grew more distant... though still it was an echo in the room. She moved toward it again, and it grew stronger. Puzzled, she touched the wall again, feeling it... contemplating it...

The weeping continued, and Seana knelt upon her father's pallet and placed her ear to the wall.

After a moment more, the weeping stopped. "'Tis verra strange." She shook her head, turning to face Broc. "This wall... it sounds as though it is hollow behind..."

"Is that possible?"

Seana shrugged, and turned once more to place her ear against it. "I did not think so... but mayhap. There are many cairns in this area. My da used this one, because it was overly large, but there are many others. Only I did not think any others were so near!"

Broc rose from the dirt floor and came to stand beside her. The crying began once more. "Is there an entrance, mayhap... from this room?"

Seana peered up at him and gave him a chiding look for his question. "Och, but if there were, dinna ye think I would know it after all these years? Nay," she assured him.

"It sounds like a child," he said, concern in his voice.

Seana agreed.

Both listened to the sound, and though Seana knew better, she groped at the wall, looking for some way in... some crack in it... something...

The cairn's walls seemed solid. The stones were piled high against the cliff that bore Chreagach Mhor, forming a roof of sorts over this cave... a roof that was riddled with cracks. But much of the room itself was actually below ground, keeping them sheltered from the wind. This wall, however, besides being solidly of dirt... sat flush with the cliff... or so she had thought...

"What's behind this, Seana?" he asked once more, and Seana knew he was frustrated with her first answer. But if he intended that she should

enlighten him, it wasn't going to happen. "I thought it was the cliff wall. I dunno, Broc... I truly dunno..."

Broc pushed against the wall suddenly, trying to dislodge it by sheer force. Big as he was, it wasn't going to move, and Seana waited for him to discover that on his own. Or mayhap some part of her hoped she was wrong. The weeping was surely not her imagination, and whoever it was, was certainly in distress.

And if it were a child...

Seana pushed at the wall, as well, entirely in vain, desperate to help.

"There is no way in there!" she told Broc with certainty.

The child's weeping increased...

If they could hear it, the thought occurred to her suddenly... perhaps the child could hear them, as well?

"Is anybody in there?" Seana called out, and felt silly for asking the question. If both she and Broc heard the weeping, there was obviously someone there.

"Who's there?" Broc shouted at the top of his lungs, tilting his head up to the stone roof. The sound of it reverberated throughout, startling even Seana.

The weeping stopped suddenly.

"Hallooooo!" Seana called out, and pounded the wall with her hand to no avail. "Is anybody there?"

No answer, but Seana wasn't satisfied. She had heard the weeping, and so had Broc, and there was somebody in there! If it were a child, it was no wonder they would not answer. They were like to be frightened out of their wits! She pushed away from the wall and rose to her feet.

Hurrying outside, she peered up at the cliffside, inspecting it.

Far above them, barely a silhouette against the night sky sat Chreagach Mhor, MacKinnon's fortress, in all its glory. Its walls composed the only stone fortress in these highlands, but all of it... these cairns... the druid stones that guarded them... had been here for far longer than Seana could say. They were remnants of a time long past... relics of the ancients... shrouded in mystery... like the *uisge beatha* her father made.

The cliffs were, indeed behind her home... the stones piled high against it... Seana didn't see how it was possible anyone could be there...

She studied the construction in the darkness. Broc followed her out, and stood beside her.

“What is it?”

“Is she still weepin’? I canna hear it any longer from here.”

“Aye,” he replied.

Seana shook her head, confused. “’Tis as though she is *buried* in the cliff,” she mused aloud. “The sound is coming from the other side of that wall... but there is naught there.”

Broc remained silent, studying the cairn’s construction along with Seana.

“I thought mayhap I would hear her out here, but nay...”

The cliffs were nestled against the woodlands. It was difficult, then, to see anything more than what was immediately visible to the eye. To explore the cliffside thoroughly, one would have to search it through bracken and forest, and Seana had never really done so...

Might there be another entrance? Another cairn that adjoined with this one? It didn’t seem probable, but that weeping was coming from somewhere. She couldn’t hear it very well outside, so it couldn’t be merely an echo carried down from the cliffs above. Betimes she could hear the sound of voices from above.

“Come with me, Broc,” she demanded of him, her tone filled with determination, and he followed her inside the cairn. She lifted two torches, fairly unused, from within their braces and lit them from a third that was beginning to flicker. She handed one to Broc and motioned him to follow outside once more.

“Ye search the right side o’ the cliff. I shall search to the left,” she directed him. “If ye find something, then call me, and I shall do the same.”

Broc took the torch from her, nodding. Seana didn’t wait. She left Broc looking a bit bewildered, and she wondered if he were unused to taking direction from a woman. Well, it couldn’t be helped. There was a child out there needing to be found, and they weren’t going to accomplish the task by standing inside the cairn, asking each other silly questions.

She began searching the cliffside, wading through bracken and woodland, hoping to find some other entrance, some aperture through which a child might wander. She knew this land far better than Broc did, and so she had sent him in the direction of the loch, where the woodlands cleared and the cliffside itself was far more apparent.

In this direction, the forest grew thicker, and the cliffs were covered with overgrowth. This land was beautiful, so filled with variance... the meadows and hills and lochs and rivers... the majestic cliffs that stood like a proud

grandfather, looking over his generations. But at this hour the night was black, and the mist was too thick to use the moon's light. Her torch flickered and spat in protest of the damp night air, but Seana knew it would burn strong. The peat her father had used to fashion them made them burn long and bright.

She kept her ears perked for some sound of the child's weeping, but heard naught at all.

There was no way anyone could fall into a pit so deep so as to be heard within the cairn... not from the cliffs above... certainly not without killing themselves. It was almost as though they were buried within the earth itself, and Seana had to believe there was some other way inside...

Resolved to find it, she searched furiously, her own troubles forgotten for the instant.

Later she could feel sorry for herself... later when she was alone and there was no one to see her...

Chapter 26



“Where is he?” FitzSimon asked.

“In the forest,” his man replied. “Very near the place we’ve hidden the brat.”

FitzSimon’s thick brows collided. He leaned back within his chair, contemplating that fact. “He’s searching for her.”

“It would seem so, my lord.”

“Stupid bastard.” FitzSimon’s jaw worked in anger, though he continued to recline within his chair, his body relaxed with a languor born of arrogance. “Well, he’s wasted enough of my time,” he said, after a moment’s contemplation. “He might have reclaimed her easily enough had he simply found a way to return what is mine.”

“What would ye have us do, my lord?”

FitzSimon shook his head. “Stupid Scots bastard,” he said again, and lifted a hand to his face, clutching it in frustration. He sighed, resigned. “Kill him,” he ordered the man, and then added, “the girl as well.”

The man’s brows twitched. “My lord?” he said, uncertain he had heard correctly.

“Better yet,” FitzSimon said, noting the gesture and considering it a weakness. None of his men had better cower from their duties. “Bring Cameron and his brat sister to me,” he directed. “I want to see his face as he watches his sister die.”

The man swallowed visibly. “Aye, my lord,” he said, and nodded.

FitzSimon smiled, pleased with his man’s reaction.

It would serve all of his men to see the way betrayal would be met by him. It had been far too long since he’d made an example for them. Cameron might serve him well after all. As for Page, he would have to find another way to reclaim his traitor bitch of a daughter.

He nodded at the door, kicking his foot up on the chest before him. “Go get them,” he ordered the man. “And waste no time. I’m tired,” he said,

though he was anything but. The prospect of what was to come washed away his boredom.

The man turned to go, and FitzSimon smiled.

Mayhap even, he would dare to send both heads upon embroidered pillows—his wedding gift to MacKinnon and his bride!

“Ungrateful bitch!” he said aloud, when the man had gone and he was alone. “Just like her gadamned mother!”

He fully intended to make her pay—until the bloody day she died!



The sound of weeping surprised him.

These woods were hardly the place where anyone wandered by night, and tonight above all.

Colin followed the sound, cautious in revealing himself because it didn't sound like a woman's sobs at all. He stood back in the shadows, trying to make out the figure seated upon the damp ground. The boy... it looked like a young lad... had his head cradled within his arms, and his arms upon his knees... but Colin didn't recognize him, until the lad lifted his head, startled by the crunch of bracken beneath Colin's feet.

“Cameron!” Colin exclaimed. “What the devil are ye doin' here, lad?”

“Who's there?” Cameron asked, squinting to see better. He quickly swiped the tears from his eyes.

“Colin Brodie.”

Cameron buried his head within his arms once more. “Go away!” he demanded.

Colin stepped out of the shadows, and stood before the boy, looking down on him curiously. “What the hell are ye doin' out here in these woods, Cameron?”

“Same thing you're doing here, 'tis my guess!” the boy answered acidly.

“Making a bloody fool of yourself, chasing a woman who does not want you?” Colin replied honestly.

Cameron peered up at him, his brows colliding.

Colin gave him a sheepish look.

Cameron arched a scornful brow. “I thought every woman wanted Colin Mac Brodie?”

Colin let it go, knowing the lad was distraught. At least he damned well better be distraught, because Colin's mood was far more sour than the boy could have bargained for.

"I guess not."

"Hmmp!" Cameron declared. "I dinna believe it! What?" he added bitterly. "Did Broc send you after me? Cause if he did, you can bloody well go'n tell him that I do not need a nursemaid!"

Colin lifted a brow at that. "Why would he send me to get you, Cameron?"

"Because I'm not stupid!" the boy spat up at him, his eyes shooting daggers. "I know he was following me. But he's not as sly as he likes to think he is!"

Colin wasn't in the mood to deal with sniveling little boys. "And you're not quite the man you obviously think ye are, now are you?"

"Why you!" Cameron stood, his fists balled at his sides.

Colin lifted a brow. "Dinna even think it, lad, or you'll be spitting teeth for a week."

Cameron stood, shaking in his anger, though he did not move. He didn't dare, Colin knew, for the boy was far from capable of taking Colin—not merely was he lacking in size, but in strength and skill.

"What the hell are ye weeping over, Cameron?"

"'Tis none o' your concern!"

Cameron's face was taut with anger, but Colin could see far more in the lad's eyes. There was fear there, as well—and not fear of Colin. He was wary, aye, and smart enough to know when not to wield his fists, but afraid of Colin, nay.

And yet, there *was* fear in those eyes of his.

"I want to help," Colin offered, "but I cannot if ye willna allow it."

He lunged at Colin suddenly, arms flailing, and Colin growled in disgust. He stopped the lad in one swift motion, restraining him with an arm about his neck.

Cameron made a choking sound, and Colin squeezed a bit harder, not intending to hurt him but wanting Cameron to understand his predicament.

"You're lucky I like Broc so well," he told Cameron, his tone fraught with warning. "Because I'm in a verra verra bad mood!"

Cameron made another choking sound, his hands trying in vain to pry Colin's arm from around his neck. Colin dropped him to the ground.

“Now,” he prompted once more, “what the hell are ye doin’ out here?”

Cameron fell to his knees in a fit of coughing, and Colin frowned at him. He had hardly held him so tightly that he should be behaving so. And then he broke into sobs suddenly, and Colin stood there awkwardly, uncertain what to do.

“Bloody hell! Why are ye weeping like an auld woman, Cameron?”

Cameron shook his head, sobbing in earnest now, and Colin wasn’t certain what to say.

“Och!” Colin exclaimed, and fell to his knees beside Cameron. “What is it, lad?”

Cameron peered up at him, the red in his eyes visible even in the darkness. “’Tis Constance,” he relented, tears pouring down his cheeks. “My little sister.”

A shudder went through Colin at the fearful look in his eyes.

“FitzSimon,” Cameron added, and Colin saw his lip quiver at the mention of the man’s name... a lip that was only now beginning to heal from the looks of it.

“FitzSimon?” Colin blinked in confusion. “Iain’s wife?”

“Nay,” Cameron said, and swallowed his tears, his throat bobbing with the effort. “Her rotten Sassenach bastard father!”

Colin still did not understand, and Cameron told him everything then—from Cameron’s part in a plan to return FitzSimon his daughter, to FitzSimon’s betrayal... taking his sister, killing Broc’s dog. The tale left him reeling. Not even his own encounter with Montgomerie had been so cold.

“Gadamn bastard,” Colin whispered. He placed a hand upon Cameron’s shoulder.

“I have been searching for her all night!” Cameron told him. “I have watched them and they come here to feed her. I know she is here somewhere, but I cannot find her. I must find her, Colin!”

“Och, I know, lad.”

Cameron swiped at his face again, drying his tears. “You did not see Merry,” he said, and couldn’t help himself. He began to weep again. “Rotten bastards!”

Colin nodded, and shook him by the shoulder. “Does Broc know?”

Cameron shook his head, once again wiping away his tears. “Nay. I didna have the heart to tell him... and they said they would kill Constance if I

spoke a word of it. I could not take the chance.”

“It’s time he should know,” Colin told the boy. “Do this for me, lad... go’n tell Iain. I know where Broc is and I shall tell him myself and together we’ll find Constance.” He patted Cameron’s shoulder. “I swear to God we will find her. Now get yourself up, and be strong for Constance.”

Cameron nodded and rose from his knees, and Colin did as well. “I swear if he has harmed her...”

“Dinna even think it,” Colin told him. “Go get Iain, and I’ll go after Broc.”

“Nay! I’m coming with you!” he said. But Colin didn’t waste time arguing. He turned around and hurried back to the cairn.

Chapter 27



It was getting cold, the wind was blowing hard, and she hadn't heard a thing from Broc.

Seana didn't know how long they'd been searching, but as of yet, she'd found naught, and she was beginning to feel there was naught to be found. She listened closely for the sound of weeping, but the only sound to reach her ears was the soft howl of the wind through the ancient stones.

It was on nights such as this that one had to believe in banshees and ghosts, Seana thought—a weeping child who could not be found... the wind shrieking like a banshee calling her lover to his death. These were not the sort of nights one wandered about. It was the sort of night one locked one's doors and hid beneath heavy blankets. It was the sort of night one forgot it was summer.

But Seana didn't believe in ghosts and she wasn't mad. She knew what she'd heard. There was a child out there who needed help, and that kept her searching.

At last, her perseverance rewarded her. She heard the child's sobs before she found the cave opening.

"Hallooo!" she called out. Before going in, she shouted for Broc. But the weeping became more frantic, and Seana didn't wait to see if Broc had heard her. She went in after the child, carrying the torch before her. Its light cast dancing shadows along the ancient walls, making eerie shadows leap out at her. The cave was small, but very deep, and Seana hurried through the passage, thinking it must run perpendicular to the cairn.

"Och, God!" she exclaimed, spying the child at the end of the passage. Her heart twisted to see her. She was bound, her little hands behind her back, her feet as well, and her mouth, too, though the cloth had worked itself free just a bit. Seana set the torch against the wall, willing it to remain upright, and untied the muzzle first. It was soaked from tears and saliva, and the little girl shook with fear as Seana moved to untie her hands.

“It’s all right, dearlin’!” she crooned, peering over her shoulder at the entrance. “It’s all right. All is well now... all is well... dinna worry.” She reached out to pat the child’s head, hoping Broc had heard her and was on his way.

In truth, she didn’t feel all was well at all. Someone had left her here and whoever it was was certain to return. Making quick work of the ties at her wrists, Seana then untied her legs, wincing at the sight of the markings the bindings had made upon her tender flesh.

The poor child was filthy and frightened, and looked vaguely familiar though her face was far too dirty to recognize. She wanted to call out to Broc again but didn’t dare. What if her abductors were near. The child continued to cry, and Seana lifted her up, then the torch and comforted her as she carried her out. The child clung to her, sobbing hysterically.

“Shhhhh,” Seana said. “Shhhhh, dearlin’... let’s get out of here, then ye can tell me everything. Shhhh...”

She hurried out of the cave, exhaling a breath of relief when she emerged into the foggy night air and there was still no one in sight. The entrance to the cave was far enough from her home that she doubted anyone would look for them there, thus she started toward the cairn, hoping no one would come upon them in the meantime, hoping Broc had heard her cries. She didn’t dare call for him now, didn’t dare draw attention to herself. Whoever could do this to a gentle child could not possibly have a heart.

“I want... I-I want my brother,” the child whined, and it was the first thing she had spoken.

Seana patted her back, soothing her. “We’ll go’n find him soon,” she promised. “Dinna worry!”

She began to run as best she could, carrying the torch and the child.

She was in such a hurry and the fog was so thick that she didn’t immediately see her visitors until it was too late. They spied her first, their gazes drawn by her torch. Seana’s heart very nearly leapt from her breast in fear before she realized it was Colin... and someone else.

“Och, God!” the boy with Colin exclaimed. “Constance!” He rushed at her, but Seana wouldn’t have given the child up had she not shrieked in recognition and very nearly leapt into his arms. She clung to him, sobbing frantically.

“Where did you find her?” Colin asked.

Seana couldn't help herself; she cast herself into Colin's arms, her heart beating frantically. "Hidden in a cave," she said, clinging desperately.

She was so happy to see him, so glad he had come! She didn't know what had brought him, but she didn't care at the moment. She needed him to hold her.

"Broc and I heard her weepin' from within the cairn," she hurriedly explained. "We went in search of her. I found her in a small cave, bound with rope and gagged."

Colin winced, and peered about. "Go inside," he told Cameron, nodding toward the cairn and the faint light that shone within. "Take her with you and put out the light!" he commanded the boy.

For once, Cameron obeyed and ducked within the cairn, soothing his wee sister as they hurried inside. He held her so tightly, Seana thought he might break her.

"Who could have done such a thing?" Seana asked, shivering.

"FitzSimon," he told her, holding her close.

Seana never wanted him to let her go.

Colin swallowed the knot that rose in his throat.

God help him, he never wanted to let her go.

He pressed his chin against her temple, daring to hold her, daring to breathe in her scent, wanting to protect her.

Always.

"Where is Broc?"

"Still searching. We separated," she explained, "to search more quickly." She clung to him, and Colin's heart pounded against his ribs. "Who is FitzSimon?" she asked, shivering again.

"Page's da."

Her fingers dug into his shoulders, clutching him and Colin reveled in the passion with which she embraced him. She was afraid, he knew, but the reason didn't matter. He relished the feel of her in his arms.

She peered up at him. "MacKinnon's bride?"

"Aye."

Her expression screwed with confusion, and she tilted her head. Christ, but he wanted to kiss her in that instant. He wanted to take her head in his hands, and lower his mouth to her lips and taste the sweet nectar of her mouth.

“He wants his daughter back,” he explained, “and will stop at nothing to reclaim her it seems—Sassenach bastard!”

She clutched him suddenly in a moment of terror. “Are they coming? Dear God—Broc!” she exclaimed, and Colin’s heart twisted to see her dread at the thought of Broc faced with FitzSimon and his men. “He doesn’t know, Colin! What if they should happen upon him?”

The last thing he wished to do was leave her, but Broc was his friend as well, and he’d not see him come to harm. He slid his arm around her neck, drawing her close, daring to embrace her, knowing it would likely be the last time. She was not his woman, never had been.

She didn’t love him.

“I’ll find him,” he swore. “I promise I shall find him. Dinna worry, Seana!” The wind lifted her hair, striking him like whispers against his face. He would find Broc, because he loved her.

Because he wanted her to have everything she deserved and all that she desired.

For the longest instant, he couldn’t tear himself away. His heart ached over the loss of her, though in truth he’d never had her to begin with. He wanted to remember the feel of her in his arms, the scent of her skin... the feel of her hair in his face. He wanted to kiss her...

He couldn’t restrain himself. God strike him down, but he couldn’t stop himself. He lowered his mouth to hers and took her lips without asking.

She cried out, and tried to push away, but he groaned in protest. “Please,” he begged, whispering feverishly against her lips. “Just one kiss, Seana...”

Seana was too weak to resist him.

She wanted it far more than he could possibly know—more than she dared reveal. She melted against him, trusting him to hold her because her legs suddenly would not. His kiss seared her lips, his tongue hot against her mouth...

She opened to him, letting him taste her, letting him in—and och... God... it was the sweetest surrender she could ever imagine.

Her head reeled and her heart pounded, as she dared to kiss him back.

Colin shuddered at the feel of her tongue against his lips... he suckled it hungrily... greedily taking all that she would give.

A rotten bastard he might be for doing it, but he hoped she remembered this kiss every time Broc held her in his arms.

He hoped she remembered the taste of his mouth, the feel of his tongue...

He tore himself away, pecking her lips one last time with a soft kiss, whispering into her mouth...

He thrust her away, then, lest he never go. "I'll find him, Seana," he promised, "but he'd better treat you well, or I'll bloody well kill him, too!"

He left her standing there, watching him go, her eyes glazed over the words he'd whispered into her mouth.

Seana lifted her fingers to her lips, bruised now from the passion in his kiss.

Her heart beat madly, and her head reeled.

I love you, he'd whispered.

I love you, Seana.

She blinked, certain she'd only imagined it.

He couldn't possibly have said those words to her... It had to be the wind playing cruel tricks... it just wasn't possible.

Her lips still tingled with the feel of him... It bewildered her so that she forgot to go inside.

She stood there, staring into the darkness long after he'd disappeared from her sight...

And dared to hope.

Chapter 28



Colin was too late.

He hid at the forest's edge, in the shadows of the trees, watching the scene unfold upon the meadow, not quite ready to reveal himself.

There were four of them, heavily armed, to Broc's one. Broc was far bigger than any of them, but against all four his size was nothing. Broc had nary a chance unarmed as he was, save for the dagger at his belt. Colin had little more. He hadn't left Meghan's home intending to do battle. He hadn't intended to leave Meghan's at all... had it not been for Seana.

He winced as they forced Broc to his knees. One of them kneed him in the back and he crumpled at the blow. Colin started after them, his fury welling. But he hesitated, weighing his options, his body rigid with anger.

His choices were few: He could walk away and let them kill his best friend... the man Seana loved... or he could wail off a battle cry and fly at them, take his chances and fight beside Broc... and likely die beside him as well.

The second was certainly an option, distasteful as it was, but the first, not at all. He couldn't leave Broc to their mercy. And neither would Broc have left him, he knew. Still, even with the two of them, the odds were high against them.

Neither was there time to leave and get help. Broc would be dead before Colin ever returned, and the Sassenach bastards long gone.

Nay, whatever needed be done, needed be done right now.

He could hear them speaking, but their voices were too low. One of them drew a sword and moved to Broc's back. "Bastard!" Colin whispered fiercely. Coward! He couldn't even face a man when killing him!

The image of Seana weeping over Broc's death wrenched at his gut. She had suffered far too much already.

What could he do, unarmed as he was... what could he do?

Tension overwhelmed him as he watched them questioning Broc, pressing him. One of the men kicked him in the back, knocking Broc forward while another kicked him in the face. Colin's fingers dug into the bark of the tree he was hiding behind.

When the man at Broc's back raised his sword, Colin didn't think, he merely reacted.

"Stop!" he called out.

All four men, and Broc as well, glanced in his direction. They couldn't see him, he knew, hidden as he was. He swallowed, suddenly afraid though he'd never felt such a weakness before. Then again, he'd never handed himself over to be murdered in cold blood without the least chance to put up a fight.

Strength, he reminded himself. Never bargain from a position of weakness.

"Sassenach bastards!" he spat at them, and their gazes sought his voice.

The man with the sword took a step forward, lowering it, but only slightly. "Show yourself, coward!" he shouted at Colin.

Och, but Colin bloody well felt like a coward at the moment. His heart pounded faster than a virgin's on her first night. His sword arm was good, but he'd hardly spent the time practicing as he should have—not nearly as much time as he'd spent wielding a more private sword. That one he wielded verra well, but that one wasn't going to get him out of this mess.

"Come get me!" he taunted them, and laughed. "But do so and you'll find yourselves with a bloody arrow through your black hearts! You might get me, aye, but I'll take ye all to hell with me when I go! Sassenach bastards!"

They stood there, looking from one to another, and then back into the woods.

Och, but he hoped this worked. If it didn't, he was going to end up with a bloody sword up his arse.

"Come on, now! Give me a reason to let this fly!" he demanded of them, hoping they would think he carried a crossbow.

None of them moved.

Colin's heart pounded fiercely. "Let him go!" he shouted.

The man with the drawn sword scoffed at his demand. "Why should I?" he asked, and Colin searched his brain for a response.

Why should he, indeed?

Och, but how the hell was he supposed to know! Were he in their place, he hardly thought he'd give in to some bowman hidden in the woods. Not so easily, anyway.

Gadamn, he was in a predicament.

"Because you're a smart man!" he replied, and winced at the poor response. He was going to get them both killed at this rate.

"Is that so?" the Sassenach leader scoffed.

"Aye, FitzSimon," Colin countered.

"'Tis not FitzSimon!" Broc shouted suddenly. "'Tis one of his stupid lackeys!" For that he was kicked in the head. He fell over and Colin knew Broc was nearing his breaking point.

If FitzSimon was not with them... they would need return to him with something. Seana and Cameron had the child safe... Broc had no idea where the child was, nor would he have revealed it had he known... but did they realize the child was gone?

He doubted it... They must have happened upon Broc on their way to retrieve the child...

"I have the child!" he blurted.

He could tell that caught their attention. Adrenaline shot through him, as they at once began to confer with one another. Unable to read a damned thing from their body language, Colin continued. "We're alone for the moment," he warned, "but not for long! MacKinnon will see your arses flayed and skinned," he promised, and wished like hell Cameron had gone after help.

Damn!

He could tell they were considering his words, because their conversation grew more heated. What the hell was he supposed to do now? In truth, he was only buying time. His only chance was for them to decide to let Broc go, and retreat...

"Let him go!" he shouted at them once more. "Let him go now while ye have the chance to leave with your heads and your bodies intact!"

The Sassenach leader lifted his head suddenly, staring in Colin's direction. "Scots bastard!" he spat. "Who the hell do ye think ye are!"

A stupid man with no bloody plan, that was what he thought he was.

The Sassenach leader raised his sword. "Ye want him back?" he railed. "I'll give him back!" He motioned to his men to restrain Broc, which they did easily enough, though Broc gave them a fight. "I'll toss you his head

and ye can carry it as a message for the MacKinnon! FitzSimon wants his daughter back, and he'll not leave without her!" He spun toward Broc and raised his sword.

"Nay!" Colin shouted. "Don't! Take me instead!"

The man stopped, and stared in his direction. "Why should I care which of your heads I remove?"

He had no idea where the hell it came from. "Because Iain MacKinnon is my brother!" Colin lied.

Broc tried to raise his head—in shock, Colin knew—but they kept him restrained.

But his lie had caught the leader's attention. "His brother, ye say?"

"Aye!" Colin lied again, this time with more resolve.

"If that is true, why should ye wish to give yourself in return for this man?"

"Because he has a woman who would mourn him, and I have not!"

"Colin!" Broc shouted, enraged that they restrained him still, furious that he was helpless amidst so many. "Dinna do this! Ye canna trust the bastards!"

"Let him go!" Colin reasoned with them, ignoring Broc. "Let him go and I will drop my bow and walk out in plain sight in trade for his life!"

"What assurances have we that you'll not turn and run?"

"Because I give you my word as a MacKinnon," Colin replied, and thought he must be half mad.

"Not good enough!" the Sassenach declared. "A Scotsman has no honor—and a MacKinnon even less!"

"And do you?" Colin countered. "You're using a wee lass to fight a man's battles! And if ye dinna let him go," Colin bluffed, "you will be the first man to die! I'm an excellent marksman!"

Silence.

Colin persisted. "If you'll release him, I'll drop my bow and come stand where you can see me," he offered, making note that they had no bows, only swords.

By Jacob's stone—he was surely insane.

"Colin, nay!" Broc shouted. "Dinna be a stupid bastard! They'll kill us both!"

"Nay," Colin argued, shouting back at Broc. "They willna... because they no longer have Constance to barter with, nor Cameron either. They need to

send a messenger back to Iain with their offer and the two of us are all they have! Let him go!" he persisted, shouting his demand at FitzSimon's men. "And ye can keep me as your hostage, instead!"

The man considered it a long moment. And during that moment, the moorland was an echo of silence. The druid stones stood witness to his insanity.

Colin grit his teeth as he waited.

"And ye say ye are the MacKinnon's brother?" the Sassenach leader shouted finally.

"Aye!" Colin replied, and hoped to hell that Broc would not call him a liar.

He suddenly *needed* to do this.

All his life he had taken, taken, taken—Seana was right. He had never given anything to anyone without expecting something in return. For once, he wanted to do something selfless. He wanted to show her he had changed.

Silence answered him.

His chest pounded, and his palms began to sweat. In truth, he had no one to mourn him. But Seana would mourn Broc and Colin's life would not have been lost for naught if Broc would return to her. He had no delusions. He knew the chances of staying alive were minimal. Iain was hardly going to give up his bride, not for Broc or Colin either. Either of their lives would be forfeit. Colin's was more expendable.

Damn, but it was.

"Very well!" the Sassenach agreed. "Show yourself!"

Bloody hell.

What assurances did he have they wouldn't kill them both? Broc was right.

"Drop your bow," the man demanded, and Colin grimaced, wishing he truly did have one. He'd have given them each a hearty farewell.

"Release Broc first!" Colin shouted at them. "Let him stand free of restraint and walk toward me!"

They let go of him, letting him rise. Colin could tell by Broc's rigid stance that he was entirely opposed to Colin's ruse. Colin stepped out from the trees, well aware that they couldn't see him very clearly. But they could see him.

"Move away from them, Broc," he directed.

Broc did so, but reluctantly. “You’re a stupid son of a whore, Colin! Stupid!”

“Mayhap so,” Colin agreed as he walked into the meadow, into plain view. “Walk toward me, Broc, and go tell Iain!”

Broc didn’t bother to peer back at his captors. He simply obeyed, coming toward Colin.

The Sassenach leader shouted at Broc. “Tell Iain MacKinnon that if he wants his brother back, he’ll hand over FitzSimon’s daughter. If he does not, his brother will surely die!”

Colin winced at the threat. God’s truth, MacKinnon wouldn’t be trading with FitzSimon. Colin was a dead man.

He passed Broc. “Tell Seana... tell her to remember what I told her.”

“Iain loves his wife,” Broc returned fervently to him in warning. You will die.”

“I know,” Colin confessed, and continued to walk toward FitzSimon’s men, not wanting to give them reason to go back on their word. The trade was tenuous at best, and they were watching warily, ready to fight if the need arose. He and Broc might make a run for safety, but neither of them were willing to risk the other—at least Colin was not and Broc seemed to sense it.

“This is not your battle, Colin!” Broc hissed at his back, stopping and turning to give him another opportunity to change his mind. “Run—both of us now! We might make it!”

“And we might not. Seana loves you,” Colin said calmly, without turning. “Treat her well, Broc.”

FitzSimon’s men rushed forward suddenly, pouncing on him like rabid wolves.

The Sassenach leader raised his sword, hitting him with its butt. And the last thing Colin heard before he crumpled to the ground, was Broc at a distance, shouting...

“You’ll bloody well pay for that ye gadamned bastards!”

Then he saw Seana’s smile... her hair black as midnight and those luminous eyes.

Chapter 29



It was a grand moment, one that would be remembered for ages to come, for it was the time all feuds were set aside to come together and stand united—the MacKinnons, and Brodies, and Montgomeries, and MacLeans.

They were gathered together, all of them, in the meadow where Colin had been taken, surrounded by the great stones that had been carved by their forefathers. MacKinnons were seated with MacLeans, whose feud had begun long before anyone could remember, and had escalated with the death of Dougal MacLean’s eldest daughter Mairi. She had flung herself from a window rather than bear her husband’s touch, it was said. And the Brodies were conferring with Montgomerie—the Sassenach lord who had dared to come into their midst and steal Mad Meghan Brodie from beneath her brothers’ noses in retribution for a stolen goat.

And then there was Seana... who belonged to none of these clans, and yet felt a part of all of them, somehow.

“How many are they that we should tread so lightly?” Dougal MacLean, laird of the MacLeans, asked. “Look about you, Iain! Together we would crush them beneath our feet!”

Iain MacKinnon stood in the center of the united clans. His was by far the strongest of these highland tribes. Descended of the powerful sons of MacAlpin, he had long been the unspoken leader of them all. Neither Dougal MacLean, nor any of the Brodies, nor any of the other clans would confess it, but they gave him deference even so. It was evident in the way they had gathered about him now, forming a circle of sorts to hear his counsel. Even Montgomerie, who had not been born to this history, gave him his due respect.

FitzSimon’s daughter sat quietly at the MacKinnon’s side, her expression stricken, and full of concern. Her husband’s hand lay beneath her hair, caressing her neck unconsciously as he considered Dougal’s proclamation.

The gathering cheered Dougal's words, echoing his sentiments, each spouting some dire tragedy sure to befall FitzSimon and his men.

Leith Mac Brodie leapt upon a stone suddenly. "'Tis my brother he holds!" He shouted over their din. "'Tis easy enough for all o' ye to say such things when 'it is not your own flesh and blood that would be spilled! If we take him as ye wish to, what's to stop the bloody bastard from murdering my brother?"

Seana's heart wrenched at the truth of his words.

She clutched at her chest with a hand, and tried not to weep before all these people. Och, but she could not bear it... if she never had the chance to tell him she loved him.

Aye, she knew now that he loved her too. He had sacrificed himself when he did not have to. He might have simply gone to get help, unarmed as he'd been. Most men would have, Seana was convinced. But Colin had stepped forward, saving Broc's life, and risking his own so Seana might have Broc returned to her.

"He willna know what struck him!" Dougal countered. "I say we take him whilst he sleeps and slit his Sassenach throat!"

"Nay!" Meghan protested. She stood and appealed to the gathering. "I will not let you bear my brother's blood upon your hands!" She began to sob and her husband took her into his arms, consoling her.

Tears pricked at Seana's eyes.

She was torn with so many emotions: She wanted to go and comfort Meghan, wanted to be comforted as well, and yet she didn't even truly have a say in how this was to be fought. She swallowed hard.

Iain MacKinnon had moved behind his wife. He held her by the shoulders, squeezing them in a consoling gesture. "We are strong enough," he interjected. The crowd hushed though he had not raised his voice. "To take FitzSimon per force..." His gaze met Dougal MacLean's, then Leith Brodie's, and finally Montgomerie's. "But at what price?" he asked them all collectively. He turned to MacLean. "What is your stake in this?" he asked the elder laird.

Dougal MacLean frowned in response. "I want no Sassenachs upon my land!" he answered finally.

The gathering remained silent. A few echoed his sentiments with simple nods, but no one else spoke out.

Page FitzSimon spoke then, her expression filled with pain and sorrow. "My father will... he will not hesitate... to kill Colin."

Her husband drew her against him protectively. Whatever anyone felt for her father, it was clear that Iain MacKinnon would not tolerate its direction at her.

The mood between them became more somber still.

Iain MacKinnon turned, then, to Leith Brodie. "We understand ye want him returned to ye unharmed, Leith... it only seems we've no choice. From experience I know that FitzSimon is ruthless." He glanced down at his wife.

Any man who, when speaking of his own daughter, could say, "keep her or kill her, I care not which" was not to be underestimated.

Leith's jaw remained clenched. The anger, clearly written upon his face.

"It should have been me," Broc Ceannfhionn declared, standing up beside his laird. He faced Leith Mac Brodie, then Dougal. "I do not know the best way to do this, but if it were me... I would want to live to see that bastard die!"

Page gasped softly, her hand flying to her mouth, and Broc realized, belatedly, the import of his words.

No matter what else he was, he was still her father first.

"Och, he doesna deserve ye, Page," he said quietly, though only Seana and Iain might have heard his awkward apology.

Tears welled in Page's eyes. "This is all my fault!" she declared, her tone filled with regret.

"Nay!" Iain said. "It is not!" And he shook her gently, as though trying to persuade her to believe it. "It is not!" he told her once more.

Seana met Page's gaze, and she dared to reach out and place her hand upon Page's hand. "It is not your fault," she said, and meant it truly. "Ye canna be blamed for what your father does or doesna do."

Page smiled softly and turned her hand to accept Seana's gesture. They sat there, holding hands, then, and Seana's heart twisted with agony over Colin.

Page somehow interpreted Seana's wretched expression.

"You love him?" Page asked in whisper.

Seana nodded, tears in her eyes, her heart in her throat.

Page gave her hand a little squeeze.

"Well, he risked his life for me," Broc said to the gathering, "I'll not be a party to sacrificing his!"

“We’ll bloody well not barter with him either!” his laird said, holding his wife close, looking as frustrated as everyone else.

They had gone round and round with this discussion all morning and were getting nowhere. Seana knew everyone was feeling as helpless as she was. She only wished there were something she could do. She couldn’t stand the thought of losing Colin, and loathed this feeling of utter helplessness.

There must be something they could do...

There must be something *she* could do...

Och, but she couldn’t just sit about like some witless fool and lose him forever whilst these men debated his fate. None of them could agree on a plan, and nobody seemed inclined to do anything at all until they all agreed together. As Seana saw it, they were losing precious time. If FitzSimon thought his opportunity was lost, he would kill Colin and flee.

“I need a bloody drink!” auld Angus declared suddenly. “We all do,” he added when everyone turned to look at him.

Seana turned to face him and blinked, staring at his ruddy face, a seed of an idea germinating...

Aye... but mayhap there was something she could do. Mayhap the women here could accomplish something these men could not.

Angus’ thick white brows drew together. “By the bloody stone, what did I say?”

Seana’s heart began to pound with hope. She leapt up from the stone she was seated upon and exclaimed excitedly, “I have an idea! Och, God! I know what to do!” And she might have even jumped up and down with joy, save that for an instant, her declaration was met with stony silence and even disapproval. The expressions of the men were at best bewildered.

Dougal MacLean was the first to speak. “Sit down, lass.” He waved her down, dismissing her. “Let the men settle—”

“But...” Seana couldn’t do it alone. She needed help. They must at least let her speak!

She met Meghan’s gaze, pleading

Meghan’s husband, too.

“Hush, Father!” Alison MacLean said suddenly, standing. Her hands went to her hips. “Let Seana speak!”

Meghan Brodie stepped forward, then, her expression hopeful. “Aye,” she demanded, “let her speak!”

“Aye!” came an outcry from the rest of the women. One by one they stood, defying their men. A mumble of protest answered them, but Seana suddenly felt hope.

“Go on... tell us,” Iain MacKinnon beseeched her.

Seana’s heart beat frantically within her breast. She peered up at Iain MacKinnon, thankful for his support, and then at Page and smiled. Page smiled back at her.

Encouraged, Seana told them her plan. “But I would need help,” she begged everyone.

Silence was her answer.

Her gaze met Meghan’s once more... then Alison... and Page...

“I will do it!” Meghan declared, and without hesitation. “And my husband has the supplies!”

“Me too!” Alison agreed, stepping forward.

“It’s a verra good plan, Seana,” Page said, reaching out to touch Meghan’s soiled dress. “Though he would know me... I will help however I may.”

Seana smiled. “Thank you,” she said. And turned to the gathering for any more volunteers.

“I will help too,” said a woman, stepping forward from the back.

“And me!” exclaimed another.

“And I will!” said another.

And another.

And another.

And another.

Seana clutched at her breast, grateful for the first time for all of Colin’s women. She couldn’t help herself. She chuckled with joy and then shouted with glee, “Let us go to Meghan’s, then!”

One by one, the women moved toward Meghan, some abandoning fathers and others their brothers, and even a few their sons and husbands, as well. All of them ignoring protests and doomsaying, resolved in their desire to help.

Seana shook her head, marveling at the numbers that stepped forward, young and old alike.

Her hands went to her burning cheeks. “Ye rotten rogue!” she said of Colin beneath her breath, but she smiled as she said it...

Chapter 30



Colin awoke with a headache.

Sassenach bastards.

They hadn't needed to hit him. He hadn't intended to run. He tried to work his hands and legs free of his bindings but his effort was in vain.

Hell, at least he was still alive.

And this way, at least, there would be time enough to try to figure out how to free himself... or time to contemplate his imminent death.

He grimaced over that thought, and tried to roll over, groaning with the effort. His entire body ached, and he thought it was because they'd bound him and tossed him into a corner of this fat lord's tent without the least concern for his comfort. His limbs were twisted into the most ungodly positions, and there was no telling how long he'd slept that way... or what hour it was now...

He'd yet to meet FitzSimon, or if he had, he sure as hell didn't recall the momentous event. Judging by the meager light in the tent, it was night still... or mayhap again...

He peered under the tent... night...

Christ, how long had he slept?

He lay there, trying to gain his bearings... thinking about Seana...

He wanted her to be happy—hoped she would be very happy with Broc.

The faint sound of the reed reached his ears and he closed his eyes, thinking he'd only imagined it... thinking it was some memory come back to haunt him... the first time he had met Seana again... the night of Meghan's wedding... the music had been just as lively... but then, it had been a celebration.

There was hardly a reason for celebration tonight.

Or mayhap there was.

If it was true, as they said, that he had broken so many hearts... mayhap all the women he'd known were now celebrating his death.

But he wasn't dead yet.

Colin groaned at the thought, hardly pleased with the life he'd led.

Och, but he wanted to be a father. He wanted to come home to Seana and have her meet him with kisses and... *uisge*, blah! Did she know how to make anything else? He grimaced at the thought of drinking even a dram of her spirits. The stuff was rotten enough to kill a man. And if he didn't die while drinking it, he would surely wish he had the next morn.

Well, it didn't matter. He didn't care if she didn't know how to cook. He loved her anyhow.

The sound of the reed grew stronger... and merrier, and Colin drew his brows together as he considered it. Voices accompanied it... female voices... and revelry...

What the hell were they doing? Having a bloody festival in truth? Christ, Colin, thought. He'd known MacKinnon wasn't going to barter with FitzSimon, but he wasn't even dead yet!

In frustration, he tried his bindings once more, but in vain. He couldn't even loosen them. He slammed his head back against the ground, cursing beneath his breath.



FitzSimon cocked his head as he listened. "What the devil is that?"

Women, laughter, and music assailed the otherwise peaceful night. Tonight, unlike the night before, the skies were clear, affording them a perfect view... but there was no sight of women as yet. Their revelry carried upon the night air, their music sweet but jubilant.

"I don't know, my lord."

"Go and see, then, you idiot!" FitzSimon demanded.

His man bounded to his feet at once, abandoning his meal.

FitzSimon nodded at another man, as he took a hearty bite of his mostly charred hare. "Go with him," he ordered.

The man froze in the middle of his own bite. "Aye, my lord," he said, and set down his fare. He rose and hurried to do his lord's bidding.

"Damned Scots!" FitzSimon railed. "A man cannot even eat in peace!"

"Should we feed the prisoner?" another of his men asked.

“Hell no!” FitzSimon replied. “He’ll either be back with his brother soon enough and he’ll fill his belly then, or he’ll be dead and have no need. ’Tis as simple as that!”

“True, my lord,” agreed the man, and returned to his plate, resolving to mind his own affairs, lest he end up having to sacrifice his own meal.

FitzSimon smiled as he ripped off another bite of his meat. Respect was what it was all about.

The two men he’d sent to investigate returned quickly, swaggering, grins on their faces.

“’Tis only a bunch of women, my lord.”

FitzSimon’s face screwed. “Women? Doing what?”

The man shook his head and shrugged. “Dancing.”

“And how they are dancing!” exclaimed the other, with a dreamy look in his eyes.

“Mayhap they are camp followers?” suggested the man who had inquired about feeding the prisoner.

“Are ye sure ’tis only women?” FitzSimon expression was puzzled. No self-respecting man would send a woman to fight his battles. He hardly took MacKinnon for a coward.

Their merrymaking remained at a respectful distance, or he might have grown suspicious...

He tossed his meat down and rose, curiosity getting the better of him. All his men rose with him.

“No, no, no, no!” he railed at them. “We can’t all bloody go!” He nodded at the man who had offered to feed the prisoner. “You stay,” he commanded, and motioned for the others to follow.

It was easy enough to follow the sound, but the sight of them swirling about in their sheer gowns was hardly what FitzSimon had expected. Lithe sweet bodies danced to the reed under the light of the moon...

It was as ethereal a sight as any he’d ever seen, and for an instant... he thought he had died and gone to heaven.

Or hell.

He watched dancing around the ancient stones.



Seana danced for Colin's life.

She danced though she didn't know how.

Somehow, with the beautiful music and the dresses Meghan had provided, she felt beautiful for the first time in her life.

She knew they were watching now. There were men positioned in the trees, watching from the woods, unseen by anyone, save by the women who danced in this field. Their signal had come minutes before, and Seana had begun her dance in earnest then.

They had decided upon this field, because FitzSimon's camp was near.

Hopeful that her plan would work, she and Meghan and Alison and the others danced about her *uisge* barrels, as though in some pagan ritual to the spirits of the drink. They were a flurry of gossamer silk together, flying about in a dance that seemed as old as these stones surrounding them.

Two of the girls began, as they'd planned, to remove each other's veils, and Seana knew this would be the moment. If FitzSimon's men were going to reveal themselves now would be the time.

But what if they did not?

What would they do?

Cameron had said there were merely seven or eight of them—no match for their greater numbers, and yet they must be lured away from their camp in order for her plan to work. And worse, what if they should suspect and kill Colin at once?

Seana couldn't let herself think of that. She couldn't bear to lose him so soon after losing her da—couldn't bear to lose him at all.

Nay, they must not fail!

Chapter 31



“What the devil are they doing?” FitzSimon whispered.

“I don’t know, my lord.”

“It looks like some sort of pagan ritual,” one of his men suggested.

“Aye, it does,” FitzSimon agreed. “Bloody savages.”

“Aye,” my lord, said another man dreamily, “but lovely savages, at that. Have ye e’er seen so much beauty in one place in all your days?”

“Nay,” FitzSimon was forced to agree.

“It seems they are praying to those barrels,” his captain pointed out.

“Nay,” replied another man. “It seems to me they are partaking of what’s inside them. See the one... how she tilts her head back as though drinking. There must be some sort of tap there.”

“What could be inside them?”

“Who knows. Could be anything at all. Blood, for all we know.”

“God’s teeth!” FitzSimon declared. “Look at them!” His body couldn’t help but respond to the vision before him. Two of them were undressing one another now, lifting off veils, one at a time. One of them was already bare breasted, and the other danced about her seductively. He took a deep breath.

“Holy hell... I see them, my lord. I see them!”

“It must be some sort of devil’s dance,” FitzSimon declared. “Witches, mayhap?”

“Mayhap so,” agreed his captain. But the rest of his men remained silent, open-jawed at the sight presented before them.

“But those are the loveliest witches I have ever seen,” sighed one of his men.

FitzSimon couldn’t gather his own wits enough to rebuke him. Damned if his breeches weren’t suddenly growing too snug.

The two women were practically naked now, the rest dancing lithely under the moonlight, completely unconcerned with their audience.

FitzSimon’s men all grew dizzy at the sight of them.

“Do ye think they will... right here?” his captain asked.

FitzSimon swallowed. He couldn't speak. His lust had gotten the better of him.

“Should we join them?” one of his men asked, a hopeful note to his voice.

“Nay, what if it is a ruse?”

“Bah! They are only women,” FitzSimon declared. “And harlots at that... no respectable woman owns gowns like that. And no respectable man would let his woman out looking like that.”

“Aye, but as you said, these are savages, my lord!” argued his captain.

“Those are *not* gowns a savage wears,” FitzSimon countered, contemplating their manner of dress. “I have seen women bedecked that way only in the East. Nay, these are no savages... gypsies mayhap.”

“Or witches,” his captain reminded him, “bent upon seduction and sacrifice.”

The two naked women began to pet each other, writhing together in a wickedly sensual dance. FitzSimon had never seen anything like it... not even in the East.

“Aye, and they will feast upon our bodies and dine upon our hearts!”

“Balls of the saints! Let them feast upon my body,” declared one of his men. “If I die tonight, I'm going to die a happy man!” And he rose from the bracken and strode into the meadow toward the dancing women.

The rest of the men all peered up at FitzSimon, whose hand was quite conspicuously cupping his loins. His face burned but his lust was too great to give a damn. None of them could have said a word because they were all as hard as bloody stones.

“They are only women,” FitzSimon said again, and his men all agreed. They turned to watch their companion, and waited to see how he would be received.

He reached the circle of women, and at once they rushed toward him, devouring him into their ritualistic dance, pulling and tugging at his clothes. He seemed in ecstasy under the onslaught of their kisses and caresses.

Once again they all peered up at him, and FitzSimon swallowed convulsively. The bulge in his breeches was noticeable now, and his heart was pounding in his ears.

But something was not right...

“Let's go,” he told them, but they misunderstood him completely. All at once they rushed onto the field, after the women and their now ecstatic

companion. The women had led him to their barrels and he was lying with his face beneath the tap, drinking while they caressed his body.

“Bloody hell!” he exclaimed, and went after them, telling himself that he would not succumb... nay, he merely meant to retrieve them. And then he would have their arses, all of them—weak-kneed sucklings that they were!

No sooner had he started toward them when it seemed they assailed him in the same manner they had his men, surrounding him at once... touching him, seducing him. He tried to resist, but it seemed there were suddenly more of them... and more of them... so many damned hands and naked breasts...

He went down fighting, he told himself. They were surely witches—his men were right!

Seana slipped into the woods, determined to follow their men to FitzSimon’s camp. It wasn’t part of the plan but no one could have kept her from it. She reached the woodlands as Broc was climbing down from his treetop post, and followed him.

“Go back, Seana,” he commanded her.

“Nay,” she refused and followed, whether he liked it or not. She would not rest easy until she saw Colin’s face.

He gave her a frown, but didn’t make her go back—nor could he have done so had he tried. She would have latched herself to his legs and made him drag her along.

They found FitzSimon’s camp easily enough, and the lone soldier they had left to guard Colin fled when surprised by their greater numbers.

Auld Angus chortled in amusement as they watched the man scurry away, and Leith shook his head, chuckled, and said, “Idiot Sassenachs!”

Seana couldn’t find any humor at all in the situation until she saw for herself that Colin was alive and well.

They found him in FitzSimon’s tent, bound, and hobbled in a corner. At the sight of him, she released the breath she hadn’t realized she’d held and rushed to his side, wanting to be the one to free him, needing to hold him.

“Seana!” Colin exclaimed, once she untied his gag. “What the devil are ye doin’ here?” He gave her a bewildered glare, as though he could not fathom her part in his rescue.

Male pride be damned! The sooner his arms were free, the sooner she could thrust herself into them. Tears of joy coursed down her cheeks as she

worked the bindings loose. “Saving you, Colin Mac Brodie! What does it seem I am doing?”

There was no hurry now, so the men held back, allowing her to help Colin. FitzSimon and his men were all likely well on their way to getting drunk on her *uisge* and would be bound and gagged at the first opportunity—and gagging again come morn if Seana’s *uisge* did its work. This batch was far more potent than any she’d ever made! A few drams and they’d be far worse for the wear. And the women outnumbered them ten to one. They hadn’t a chance against them. But in case that failed, the majority of the men had remained to guard them, ready to come down from their posts in the trees.

“I’ll be damned,” Broc said, seeming to realize suddenly that Seana’s plan had been a success. “She saved your worthless arse, Mac Brodie!”

Seana freed Colin’s hands and cast herself into his arms. She held him and never ever wanted to let him go. Colin returned her embrace, still bewildered by her presence, it seemed.

She laughed joyously and didn’t care who heard her. “I love you, Colin Mac Brodie! Dinna ever scare me like that again!”

“You love *me*?” Colin asked, peering up into her face, lest he mistake her. She nodded.

Colin suddenly didn’t give a bloody damn who witnessed his joy.

He drew her into his arms, kissing her fiercely. “Och, you love me!” he exclaimed and kissed her again. “She loves me!” he announced to his brothers. And he kissed her one last time... oblivious to the grins surrounding them.

“Looks to me as though we’ll be having ourselves another wedding,” Leith remarked, shaking his head in marvel.

“Damned right!” Colin said, nodding, and rose to kneel on one knee. No time was better than the present. No woman could ever please him so well. He pulled her to her feet before him and peered up into her beautiful face. “Seana,” he began, losing his nerve for the briefest instant at her drawn brows. He inhaled a breath, gazing up at her with all his hope in his eyes... all his dreams. “My darling...”

For an instant, she looked bewildered, then staggered as she seemed to realize his intent. A little gasp escaped her and her eyes welled with tears. She swallowed, as they began at once to stream down her face.

Colin reached up with one hand to wipe them gently away. "Be my wife!" he begged. "Be my lover, Seana!"

She shook her head, but Colin somehow understood that she wasn't refusing him, that she simply could not speak.

"I shall pledge you my heart and my soul!" he continued. "And I shall ne'er let you regret me one single day!"

Not a breath stirred within the tent. Everyone waited to hear her response.

"Aye!" she said.

"It's about damned time someone settled his arse down!" Gavin said.

A cheer went up from those about them.

Except for Angus. "Somebody aught to be checking that gaddamned *uisge* o' hers!" he declared, disgusted by the sight of the lovers. "In all my years I have never seen so many wedded men! I told that boy not to be gettin' himself wed!" He turned and left the tent, complaining, "Och, There must be something in that bloody *uisge*!"

Broc's hearty laughter was joined by the others, but Seana and Colin no longer heard them.

Colin kissed her, oblivious to their banter.

This instant, he cared only about Seana.

Outside the tent, the sound of the reed in the distance stopped, and voices rang out in triumph.

It had been more than half a century since the MacKinnons, Brodies, and MacLeans had celebrated together.

Tonight, a new pact between them was forged... and a new clan was born into their midst...

The stars seemed to grow brighter with the sound of their revelry.

It might have been a trick of the eyes, for Seana's *uisge* was not left to waste, but the stars seemed to twinkle down like fairy dust into the woodlands.

Everyone saw it though no one claimed to. They rubbed their eyes and blamed the vision on Seana's *uisge*.

But in the misty shadows of the forest, alight with dancing faeries, two pairs of golden eyes blinked knowingly at the tent so filled with laughter.

After a moment, two black cats pounced away into the brush to play.

Epilogue



It was about time he seduced his wife.

Colin had waited just about as long as he would. Never in his life had he gone so long without lovemaking, but he hadn't wished Seana to believe he'd married her for any reason other than the simple fact that he cherished her.

"To the lovely bride!" Lyon Montgomerie said in toast, and lifted his goblet high.

Everyone followed his lead, lifting their glasses in honor of Seana.

Colin lifted his highest of all, and his wife gifted him with a brilliant smile that caused his heart to flutter.

It was a mannered gesture, slightly more subdued than his people were accustomed to, but Lyon Montgomerie had stepped forward to give Seana away in place of her father, and Colin had stood back and allowed him to assume the role in its entirety. It seemed to please Seana.

His sister and her new husband had taken Seana into their home, had treated her as though she were kin, and the smile upon Seana's face just now was worth any measure of discomfort he might feel at their foreign influence. The wedding had been celebrated indoors, and four clans now stood packed within Montgomerie's hall. How the hell everyone managed to get inside, Colin didn't know. A harp played the fine English ballads meant to make lovers swoon into each other's arms, though there wasn't any room to dance.

He wanted to hold his wife in his arms.

She was lovelier than he'd ever seen her.

Her wedding gown was the same Meghan had worn, and God's teeth, though Meghan was his sister and lovelier than she had a right to be, Seana somehow managed to take his breath away. Her long black hair spilled down over the ivory cloth, shining beautifully. Her rosy cheeks bloomed with health and her smile was brilliant. She laughed with his sister and her

husband, thanking them profusely, looking every bit the English princess, with her goblet of fine English wine that left him craving the wild woodland spirit he knew dwelled beneath the finery.

He couldn't wait to get the hell out of here... couldn't wait another moment to carry his wife up to their wedding bed.

He grinned then, for that was the one part of this Sassenach ceremony that pleased him immensely—the part where she was to be carried up the stairs to the room they would share. Only Colin had no intentions of allowing anyone else to touch her tonight. He'd damned well carry his own wife to bed!

With that in mind, and without warning, he bent and swept her into his arms, apologizing to his sister for spilling Seana's wine all over her dress. Seana shrieked in startle. Her goblet clattered to the floor at his feet.

He ignored Seana's protests. "Time for bed!" he exclaimed.

"Och, but you're a brute!" Meghan accused him, scowling fiercely.

Colin merely grinned at her. "Well ye know patience was never my greatest virtue," he reminded his sister, and kissed her upon the forehead. "G'nite, Meggie, dearlin'."

Seana shrieked again, this time with laughter, as he started through the crowd. "Out o' my way," he demanded of the guests.

Seana curled her hands about his neck, clinging to him. "And what do ye think ye are doing, husband of mine?"

"Taking ye to bed!" he told her, his tone brooking no argument. He winked at her, ignoring the jeers and leers he received as he passed by his kinsmen. The crowd parted for them, shouting out bawdy advice for the newlyweds. Montgomerie's men were a polite lot, compared to his own, but he didn't miss the gleam of appreciation in their eyes as he passed them by as well.

Seana laughed as he started up the stairwell. "Och, but we have not even eaten yet!"

Colin grinned at her, feeling quite merciless. "I had another feast in mind, *wife*." He bent to kiss her mouth, not caring who saw, who heard. Laughter and ribaldry followed them all the way to their chamber.

"Dinna even think to follow us in," he said, without turning. But he knew the men were there because he could hear them panting at his back.

"Awwwwwwww," came the reply in unison.

"Greedy bastard!" said auld Angus of the MacKinnons.

“Damn right!” Colin said, and slammed the door on their protests. He carried Seana within. He didn’t care how the English did it. No one was going to set eyes on his bride, but him. He walked to the bed, and tossed her upon it, then returned to bar the door... just in case.

This feast was his alone to enjoy.

Her heart leaping within her breast, Seana held her breath as she watched her husband’s purposeful stride.

She had both been anticipating this moment and dreading it, as well, for she was certain he would find her lacking. Och, but he had been with so many women!

He was so beautiful a man... how could he possibly want her? How could he look at her as though she were perfect, when she was so very far from it?

Trembling despite her desire for him, Seana watched him bar the door. He turned to her then, smiling mischievously.

Her gaze was drawn suddenly to the open window. She blinked in surprise at the sight of two black cats sitting so primly upon the window’s ledge.

“My Love?”

How the devil had they gotten up here?

“The sound of that is so beautiful from your lips,” Colin said, kneeling upon the bed.

Seana peered up at him, bewildered. “Not you!” she exclaimed. “The cat!”

He peered at the window now, following her gaze. “What are they doing up here?”

“How the devil should I know!” Seana replied, nonplused. There were two of them. *Two cats*. As her da had claimed there would be—but nay, she would not believe it. Could not. She shook her head, bemused by the sight of them.

“What is it, Seana?”

She peered up at her husband once more. What could she possibly say? He’d never believe it either. “Naught,” she fibbed, wrinkling her brow.

Caressing her thighs over her lovely borrowed gown, he dismissed the cats better than Seana could. Though she had never been happier in her life, she really couldn’t consummate her vows... not while her... ma and da could be watching.

“What is it, my love?”

Och, but it sounded ridiculous even to Seana. How could she possibly speak it aloud?

“Naught,” she said again, and grimaced as she peered up at her husband. He was her husband now, and why shouldn’t she be able to make love to him in front of two scrawny cats? His hand slid down her gown... to her ankle, caressing her softly, then slid back up her skirt, his lips curving roguishly as he watched her.

Seana backed away from him. Damned cats were spoiling her wedding night!

“Dinna be frightened, my dearling,” he coaxed her, obviously misunderstanding her skittishness. “I love all of ye,” he assured her, his voice dropping to a silky murmur. “Every last inch of your lovely body...”

Her heart pitter-pattered against her ribs as he pushed up her skirts, his fingers stroking her softly.

Seana groaned and laid back upon the bed, torn between wanting to scurry away from him to close the shutters... and wanting him never to stop...

His touch was making her dizzy.

“Colin,” she murmured, losing her will to resist him.

“Hush, Seana,” he said, and slid his hand further up her calf, baring her legs.

Seana held her breath, as he slipped down the side of the bed to the floor, kneeling before her. Gazing at her first, he removed one slipper then the other... tossing them aside.

“Colin,” she whimpered in protest, but her heart beat faster as he pulled her to the edge of the bed. “Och, Colin,” she exclaimed, and swallowed the lump in her throat as he bent to kiss her feet with his mouth. He kissed each of her toes then... her ankle... then moved up to caress her calves with his soft warm lips.

Seana swallowed the emotion that welled in her throat, for his intention was not lost to her. She knew what he was doing, and the gesture moved her as nothing else ever had in her entire life.

Her legs... there were no visible scars upon them, but she was self-conscious of them all the same. Save that he wasn’t allowing it... he pushed her gown up higher... higher, loving her without reservation.

“Beautiful,” he whispered, and Seana’s eyes stung with tears. He met her gaze then, and whispered, with such affection, “I love you, Seana.”

Seana's heart felt near to bursting with the adoration so apparent in his eyes.

"I love you, too, Colin," she whispered back, and closed her eyes. She moaned with shock and pleasure as he parted her legs and moved between them once more, kissing her in that most private place...

"Let me," he begged her when she wriggled in protest, and buried his face between her trembling thighs.

Seana wanted to... oh, God, she wanted to! His mouth was delicious, doing wicked things to her, making her body writhe beneath his tongue.

Her heart beat furiously, and her head fell backward... and then she remembered the bloody cats.

"Ack!" she exclaimed, and tried to sit up.

Colin held her fast, but peered up at her, his tongue still moving softly upon her, and Seana's face heated. She jerked down her skirts over his head.

"Seana?" he appealed, not bothering to come out from under her dress.

"What are ye doing, lass?"

"We cannot do this now!" she declared. "It isn't a good time!"

He chuckled. "O' course we can," he argued, and his tongue darted out playfully, tasting her in such a scandalous manner, that Seana thought she'd die... of pleasure... or mortification.

My Love, at least Seana thought it was My Love, gave a little mew from the windowsill, and Seana told herself she would be mad to think it anything more than a silly cat.

Colin slid his hands beneath her bottom suddenly and jerked her nearer, teasing her once more with his tongue... deeper.

Seana moaned in protest. "Colin!" she cried. "Ye dinna understand!"

Och, but it was just a silly cat, she told herself! No more than a cat!

Two cats.

As her father had said.

"Oh, but I do," he assured her. "And I give you my word I will be gentle, Seana."

He kissed her once more, intimately, the same way he'd kissed her mouth... and Seana pleaded with him, "Please... oh, please... Oh, God, please don't stop," she begged. "Nooooooo... but not in front of the cats!"

He pulled the skirt off his head suddenly and gave her a bewildered glance, his blue eyes narrowing. "What the devil are you talking about, Seana?"

Seana shrugged, and nodded sheepishly at the window.

“We cannot in front of the cats!” Her cheeks burned with chagrin.

“Whatever would they think?”

For a moment, she feared he would think her mad, but he seemed more amused than anything else.

“They would not think anything at all, my darling wife, but if it will make you feel better, I shall put them out at once.” And he rose from the bed, plucked up the cats from the windowsill, before they could flee him, and carried them to the door. He opened it, and tossed them out, onto the heads of two auld men who were listening at the keyhole. He barred the door once more and turned to face her.

“Thank you,” Seana said, and giggled at his expression.

His brows lifted. “Anything more?”

Seana reached down and lifted her skirt playfully, inviting him under once more. At the look of sheer lust he gave her, she felt suddenly emboldened.

“Och, Seana,” Colin said, and couldn’t take his eyes off the treasure she offered him. He closed the distance to the bed in a few easy strides, and would have dove at her, save that he wanted to be gentle with her on her first time.

He wanted to please her, wanted her to feel cherished...

He liked the way she looked at him... with that mixture of little-girl impishness and womanly pride. He lifted off his tunic, and stood before her, wanting her to see all of him, wanting her to know how much he wanted her.

Her eyes widened just the slightest, and Colin’s smile turned wicked. He stood before her, crooking a finger at her, coaxing her to stand.

He helped her with her gown, shrugging it up and pulling it over her head, leaving her bare to his hungry gaze.

Beautiful.

He touched her breasts reverently... testing their luscious weight against his palms.

Lust clawed at his loins.

Her body was a feast for his senses.

He couldn’t think any longer. Pushing her down upon the bed, he climbed atop her, reveling in the nakedness between them... warm soft flesh caressed him as he lay down over her.

“You’re mine!” he said, lest she forget somehow, and bent to kiss those lips that had taunted him for far too long.

His bold words sent a quiver through her, but Seana couldn’t speak to reply. She swallowed convulsively at the weight of his body atop her, and closed her eyes.

She moaned softly as he took her mouth, kissing it softly first, then deeper, offering her his tongue. Seana suckled it greedily, her arms going about her husband, and he groaned his approval.

Satisfaction filled her at the sound.

She trusted him fully... knew he would not hurt her, and so she boldly spread her legs for him, pulling him closer.

He shuddered in response and Seana smiled softly.

“Och, God!” he exclaimed, and began to move against her with such wicked purpose that Seana thought her heart would stop. Warmth seeped through her body, filling her deeply.

She moved with him... their bodies dancing together in an age-old lovers’ ritual.

And then she felt him there... hard and full with his desire... and held her breath as he pushed inside... slowly... so slowly Seana thought she might die.

Not thinking, only feeling, she thrust her hips upward, sheathing him fully, and he fell atop her, his arms buckling under the onslaught of his pleasure. The pain was minimal... her body wanted this so desperately. Whatever pain their joining inflicted was swiftly replaced by a coupling so sweet that Seana no longer felt separate.

Now they were one.

He made love to her then, holding her close, cherishing her with his kisses, bringing her to the edge of reason... pleasure... ecstasy...

Seana cried out, her body shuddering joyfully beneath him.

He gave an answering cry and his own body shook in release. He fell against her, then, holding her tight. “This moment, I give ye my heart and soul, Seana... ’til death us do part.”

Seana sighed, no longer afraid of the truth.

“I would give ye mine,” she whispered back, lazing in his arms, her hands tangling in his hair, “but ye already had it, Colin Mac Brodie.”

Seana felt him smile against her breast... and she smiled in return.

“I will cherish it always,” he swore.

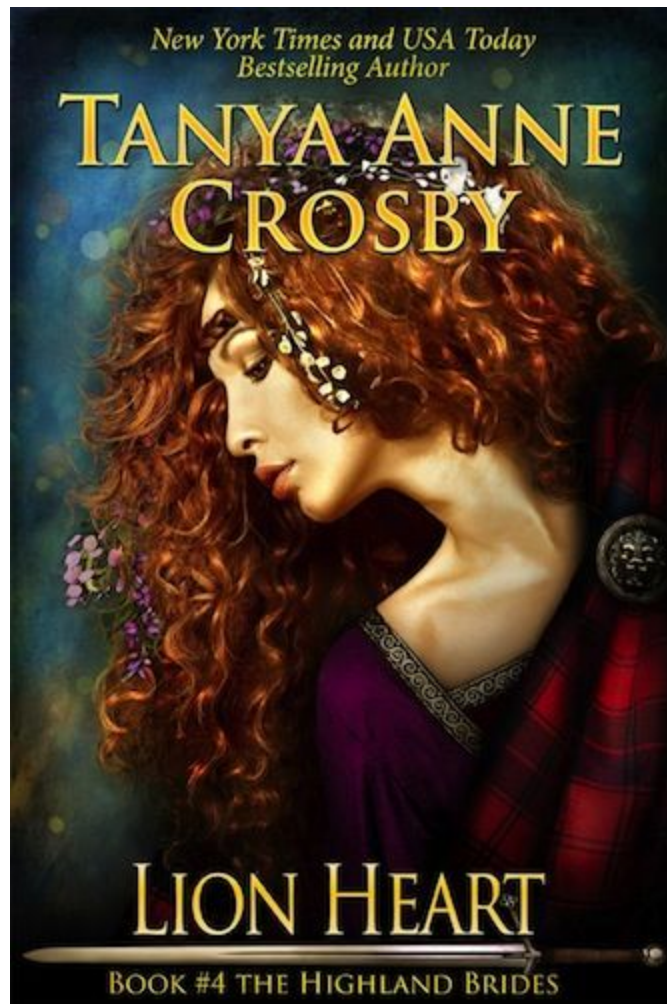
And cherish her he did... twice more that night before the sun blinked
into their window...

And every day of the rest of their lives.

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Author's Note

Uisge beatha, pronounced “ooshkie bayha” is the Gaelic term for water of life, or more commonly known to us as whisky. For the ancient Gaels, whisky was initially thought to hold healing properties and cherished (even today, how many Scots—or Irish!—do you know who jealously guard their bottles of Jameson!). The origins of whisky distilling are obscure, but there are documented attempts in Asia as long ago as 800 BC. No one really knows when the practice came to Britain, but the earliest documented record of distilling in Scotland occurs in 1494 in an entry in the Exchequer Rolls calling for 1500 bottles of the *aqua vito*, which implies that the practice of distilling whiskey was already long established. Sometime in the 17th century, *uisge beatha* was abbreviated to *uiskie* and by 1715 it was termed *whiskie*. In my world (and in this book), Seana is exactly the sort of person who would have been born to brew ... “*Here’s to the heath, the hill and the heather, the bonnet, the plaid, the kilt and the feather!*”

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About the Author

Tanya has written seventeen novels, all of which have graced numerous bestseller lists including the *New York Times* and *USA Today*. Best known for stories charged with emotion and humor, and filled with flawed characters, her novels have garnered reader praise and glowing critical reviews. She lives with her husband, two dogs and two moody cats in northern Michigan.

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