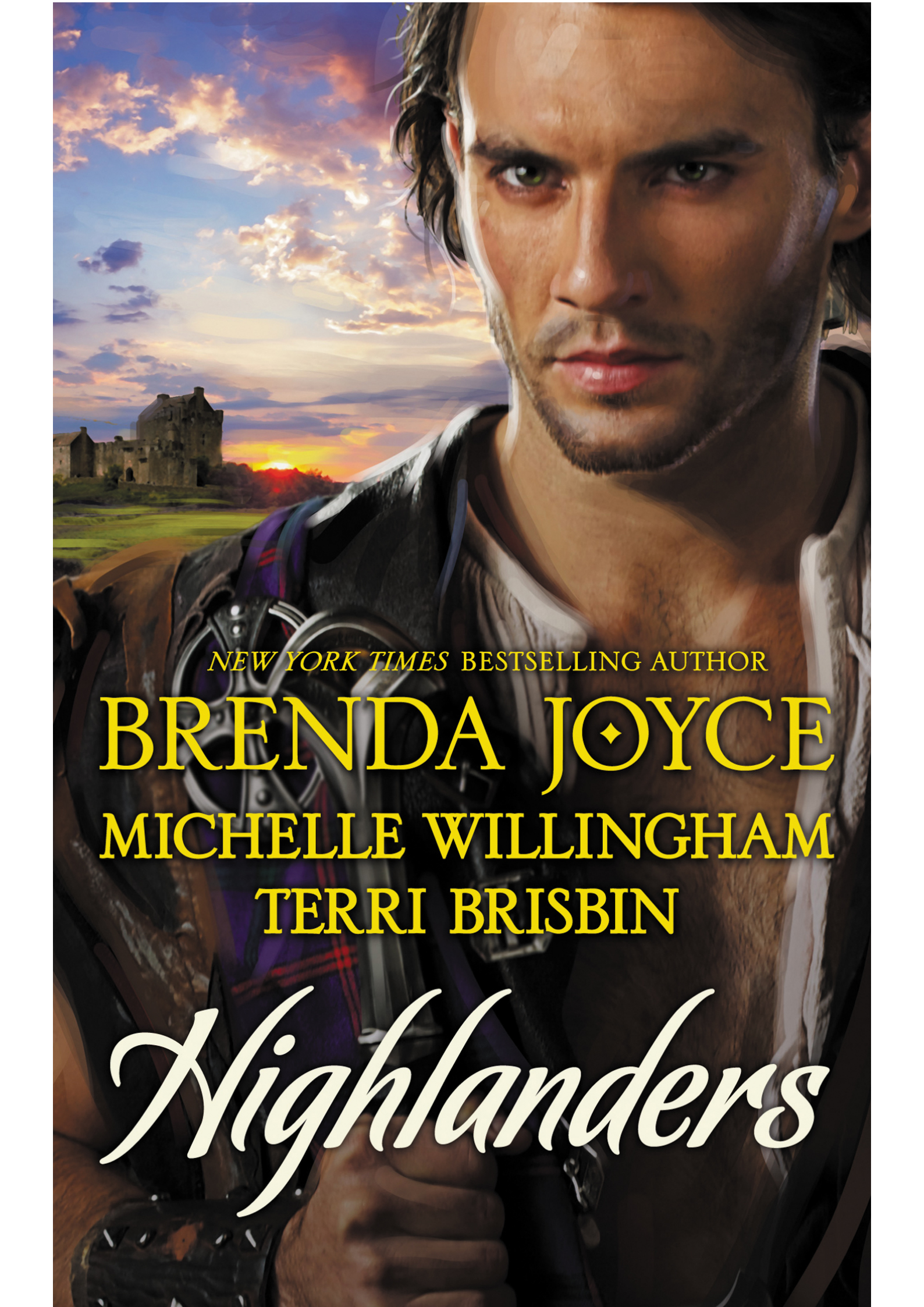




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Highlanders

Michelle Willingham

**Highlanders: The Warrior and the
Rose / The Forbidden Highlander /
Rescued by the Highland Warrior**

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Highlanders: The Warrior and the Rose / The Forbidden
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Join New York Times bestselling author Brenda Joyce for an epic story of undying love and forbidden desire in the Highlands...WHEN RIVALRY BECOMES PASSION With warfare blazing through Scotland, the fate of the Comyn-MacDougall legacy depends on one woman. Recently orphaned, young Margaret Comyn must secure her clan's safety through an arranged marriage. But when an enemy invasion puts her at the mercy of the notorious Wolf of Lochaber, her every loyalty—and secret want—will be challenged.AND A KINGDOM IS AT STAKELegendary warrior Alexander “the Wolf” MacDonald rides with Robert Bruce to seize the throne of Scotland. But when he takes the fiery Lady Margaret prisoner, she quickly becomes far more than a valuable hostage. For the passion between them threatens to betray their families, their country...and their hearts.

Highlanders
The Warrior and the Rose
Brenda Joyce
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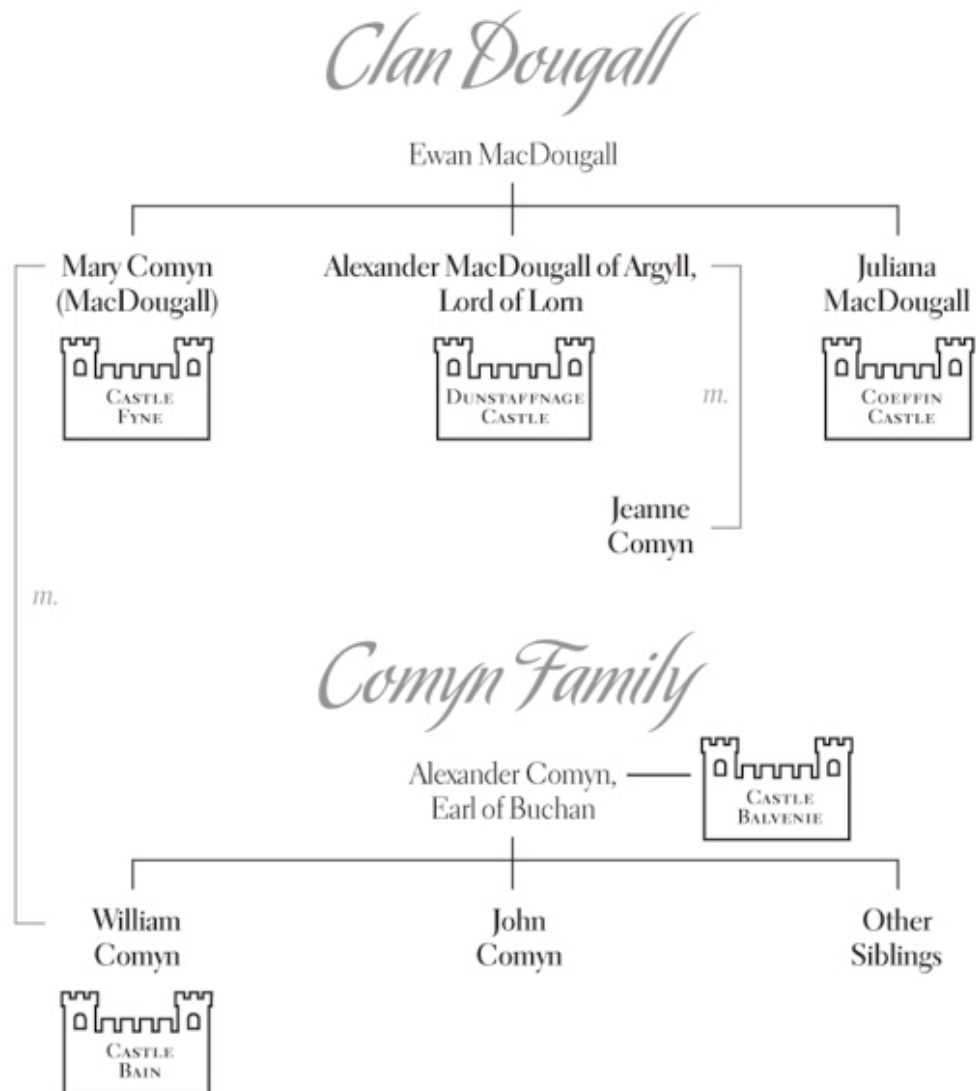
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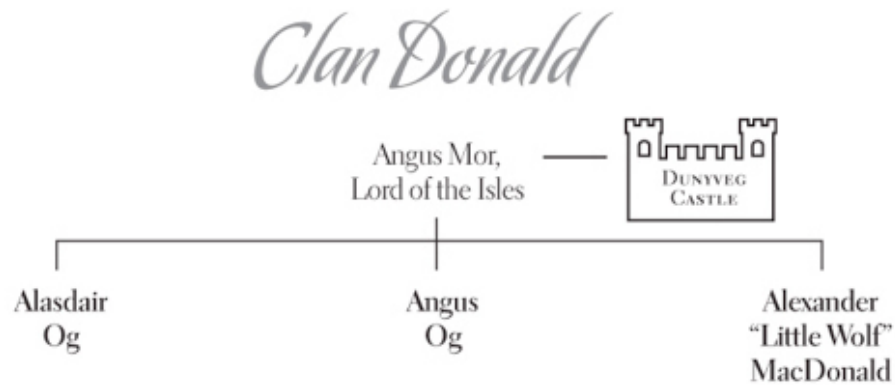
About the Author

Brenda Joyce is a New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author of more than forty novels and four novellas, including the bestselling de Warenne Dynasty and Masters of Time® series. Her first novel, *Innocent Fire*, won a Best Western Romance Award from RT Book Reviews. She has also won a highly coveted Best Historical Romance award for *Splendor* and two Lifetime Achievement Awards from RT Book Reviews. There are more than 14 million copies of her novels in print, and she has been published in more than a dozen countries.

A native New Yorker, she now lives in California. Brenda divides her time between her twin passions—writing powerful love stories and showing her reining horses. For more information about

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Family Tree





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CHAPTER ONE

Coeffin Castle, Lismore, Scotland—February, 1287

THERE WAS NO sound in the hall other than that of the two children galloping about on make-believe ponies, waving sticks at one another as if they were swords. Juliana MacDougall adored her little nephews, but just then, she could not smile. She trembled, but not because it was the dead of a cold winter. She could not shake the knot of fear within her.

She glanced across the great stone hall at her sister. Mary was seated at the table, breastfeeding her youngest son, and it was such a beautiful sight that Juliana softened upon seeing it. Mary Comyn was nine years older than she was, yet they were more than sisters; they were the best of friends. Juliana was always thrilled to have her sister in residence with her. And she adored her children, as she had none of her own.

Yet she wished Mary's current visit was a strictly familial one. It was not.

She was at Coeffin Castle because the land was at war.

Scotland was at war because she did not have a king.

God, would there ever be a time of peace? Juliana's temples ached. How she hated war—and how she hated awaiting news of those she loved!

Mary glanced up. She was a very beautiful woman with sky-blue eyes and red-blond hair. Her grace was natural, and it drew both men and women to her like bees to honey. She smiled, the expression warm, yet worry filled her eyes. As she did, she shifted the year-old boy aside and adjusted her surcote. "I will have to wean Thomas soon."

“Yes, you will.” Mary was expecting her fourth child in the early summer. She was delighted, and so was Juliana. She hoped for a little niece.

Mary’s small smile vanished. “I cannot believe Buittle has fallen,” she said tersely. Buittle Castle had belonged to John Balliol, a great estate brought to him by his wife. News had just reached them of its fall.

The boys were suddenly shrieking, and violently swiping their sticks at one another. The aching in Juliana’s temples increased and she marched over to them. “Roger! Donald! Enough!”

Laughing wildly, both little boys, aged four and five, paused, giggling at her. Roger was redheaded and freckled, Donald blond. Then Donald raised his stick at her. “A Comyn!” He cried the battle call, shaking his pretend sword threateningly.

“Donald,” Mary warned.

“Clearly, you will be a great warrior like your father,” Juliana said, deftly removing his stick from his hands. “But you will soon learn you must not raise your sword—or your hand—to a lady, and especially to your aunt.”

Donald was crestfallen. “I’m sorry, Auntie,” he whispered.

“Good, you should be.” She then took Roger’s stick, as well. “If you must play like barbaric Norsemen, go outside.” Laying the sticks on the table, she sat down beside her sister. “Maybe it isn’t as dire as we think,” she said, speaking in a low tone. But it was dire and she knew it—and not just because of the close ties between their families and the Balliol family. The land was at war because the king had bequeathed his throne to his granddaughter, a mere child, and there were those who would not stand for it.

“Bruce took the royal garrisons at Wigtown and Dumfries—and now he has taken Buittle?” Mary said, ashen. She was referring to the Earl of Annandale, the powerful magnate, Robert Bruce. Last April, he had declared that he was the legitimate heir to King Alexander. It was not the first time he had stated as much. He even claimed that, decades ago, King Alexander had declared him his presumptive heir—but no one believed that.

And just a few months ago, he had taken up arms with his supporters, attacking Dumfries, Wigtown, and now Buittle. Clearly he meant to seize the throne of Scotland.

But he was not the only possible successor to King Alexander. John Balliol had also asserted his legitimate right to succeed to the throne. In fact, a dozen claims had been made from nobles across the land and even without it—and why not? No one thought, for even a moment, that a three-year-old would ever take the crown.

Scotland was, it seemed, ripe for the plucking.

And without a regent, with only six guardians to rule the realm, Scotland had so quickly become divided into bitter and ancient rivalries. The Comyns and the MacDougalls were age-old enemies of the Bruce family, even without their loyalty to the Balliol claim. And Bruce’s most ardent supporter was Angus Mor, Lord of Islay and the Isles. Two of his sons, Alexander “Alasdair” Og and Angus Og, followed him. And Clan Donald was every living MacDougall’s worst enemy. The blood feud went back centuries—when one of Juliana’s ancestors, Dougall, had been murdered by his own nephew, Donald.

Mary’s husband William Comyn had gone to war with their brother, Alexander MacDougall, along with a great many other Comyn and MacDougall kin, to keep Robert Bruce from the throne—in the hopes of one day crowning John Balliol, instead.

“Maybe the news isn’t true,” Juliana said, aware that she was grasping at straws. “Or maybe, as we speak, our forces are taking Buittle Castle back for John Balliol.”

Mary stared at her grimly. “I don’t really care who has Buittle, and I am not being disloyal! I only care to learn that William hasn’t been hurt—or worse.”

“I know,” Juliana said softly.

“I am only twenty-seven years old,” Mary whispered. “And I have already lost three husbands...I love William so, Juliana. I cannot bear it if I lose him, too.”

Juliana squeezed her hand. Her sister had been briefly married to the king of the Isle of Mann, to the Earl of Strathearn, and to another Scottish baron. War and illness had taken each of her husbands in turn. But six years ago she had fallen in love with the Earl of Buchan’s third son, William Comyn. The Comyn family was the most powerful dynasty in the north of Scotland. Their brother had been pleased to allow the match.

Juliana knew that Mary was as loyal as she was, that she cared deeply about the fortunes of their family, and that of course, she wished for Bruce to be defeated. Should Bruce ever triumph, the MacDougall and Comyn families would suffer—the loss of lands, titles and lives. But just then, her fear for her husband overrode her every other sensibility, and Juliana did not blame her.

Secretly, she admired her sister so much, not for surviving her three previous husbands, not for making such a fine fourth marriage—but for finding love. Juliana did not know of another married couple that genuinely loved one another as Mary and William did. After all, marriages were about politics and power.

“Let’s go to the cathedral and pray,” Mary said, standing. She gestured at a maid, who came forward to take the now sleeping Thomas from her. “Thank you, Elasaide. Praying will calm us both,” she added.

An hour later, the boys were all settled in their chamber, and the two women were wrapped in furs. Ian, captain of Juliana’s guard, was outside, waiting for her, as she had instructed him earlier. Four other Highlanders were also attending them.

Juliana was accustomed to having her own guard. Lismore was a portion of her dowry. It was a very fertile island, with abundant fisheries and grazing, but its true importance were Coeffin Castle, with its oversight of the Firth of Lorn, St Moluag’s Cathedral and Achanduin Castle, which was the seat of the bishop of Argyll.

Lismore was a safe haven, and it had never been attacked seriously in her lifetime. Her brother had his greatest castles just to the east and to the southwest. As a result, it wasn’t easy for another clan to control the route into Argyll from the firth. However, the MacDonalds, the MacSweens and even the MacRuairis had been fighting them over that route for as long as she could recall.

Last year, she had been about to marry one of Alan MacRuairi’s sons, Lachlan. Clan Ruairi could be convinced to ally itself with them, and her brother had hoped to solidify that inconstant bond. But Lachlan had died in a battle at sea last summer. No other union had yet to be put forth, and because Juliana was now eighteen, she was becoming anxious. Most women were married by the age of fifteen. She would soon be considered well past her prime, if her brother did not seriously seek a husband for her.

As they exited the castle, Ian was standing by to help her mount, and Juliana smiled at him. When both women were astride their small mares, the cavalcade set off. In spite of the cold, it was a beautiful winter day, the sun bright, the sky blue and cloudless. Snow was melting on the hilltops and on the path they traversed. Squirrels had come out to forage. Juliana glanced at Mary, saw that she was deep in thought, and decided to remain quiet.

The cathedral finally appeared ahead, surrounded by thick pine trees. It was a small square building, a century old, no larger than a village church, flanked by two gray stone towers. A large stone cross, the height of two men, rose up from a mound in front of the building. The St. Moluag monastery was below the cathedral, behind an orchard. It could not be seen from the courtyard.

Juliana slid from her mount, as did Mary. Hand in hand, they left their small group of soldiers outside and pushed open the heavy wood door, entering the vestibule. From there, they could see down the nave—two village women were standing in prayer, not far from the podium, at its far end. Bishop Alan stood before the sacristy, his back to them.

It was stunningly quiet within. Juliana glanced up at the high ceiling above. She had always found majesty and peace in St. Moluag's Cathedral, from the first time she had ever entered its hall, as a little girl with her mother. God was there, to hear their prayers, to keep William and Alexander safe. She had no doubt.

Alan Frasier, the Bishop of Argyll, had seen them. He was a man of medium height and girth, with brown hair and kind eyes. He smiled, leaving the apse, as they approached him. "Lady Juliana! Lady Mary! I am so pleased you are here."

"I cannot wait for Mass to pray," Mary said, managing a smile.

"One should never wait to pray," he returned. He glanced at Juliana. "Has there been news? You seem distraught."

Juliana had known the good bishop for most of her life. He knew her well. "Have you not yet heard that Buittle is now lost, too?" Juliana asked.

Bishop Alan turned white. "How is that possible?" he cried. "Bruce has actually defeated your brother and the great Comyn family?"

Juliana started. "It is one battle, Your Grace, and I imagine the war has only just begun. My brother is usually triumphant—he will surely triumph in time."

"We must hope so," Alan said.

As Mary began lighting tapers and kneeling to pray, Juliana touched his arm. "I am distraught," she said softly, "but so are you."

He hesitated. "I just never expected Bruce to take Dumfries or Wigtown, and defeat the English armies there. And now, Balliol has lost Buittle. This does not bode well, Lady Juliana, not at all. Well, at least we are far from the fighting."

Juliana wished he had been optimistic—she did not need to worry even more, now. And she thought his last remark odd, very much so, but before she could reflect upon it, war cries rent the day.

She went still and Mary cried out.

They had heard the war cries of Highland warriors too many times in their lives. The sound was shrill and barbaric—and terrifying. Shocked, Juliana turned, as outside the cathedral swords rang violently as soldiers fought one another. Horses neighed in panic and men screamed in murderous rage. In that instant, time seemed to stop as she realized the cathedral—or her men—were under attack.

Juliana grabbed her sister, who had leapt up, thinking to propel her towards the back of the cathedral, where a side door would let them exit the south transept. But just then, the front door burst open and Juliana saw Ian and another of her soldiers rushing inside. "Lady Juliana! Lady Mary!" Ian shouted, his eyes fierce and wide, his sword in hand, dripping with blood.

Before she could move, either towards him or away, she saw a dozen Highland warriors streaming into the cathedral—a jumbled image of tall, long-haired men, clad in furs, bare-legged, wielding swords and daggers.

Juliana and Mary screamed. Ian whirled to confront the invaders, but too late. His sword was knocked from his hand, and then he was run through the chest.

Choking on a sob of anguish, Juliana did not wait to see him collapse. She seized Mary, and they raced towards the right side of the cathedral, intent on fleeing out the transept's side door.

As they ran toward it, it burst open.

Juliana stumbled, halting, as a Highlander erupted through the entranceway. All she saw was shaggy black hair, blue eyes, and dark blue tartan striped with red. The colors of their worst enemy.

She and Mary were frozen as the Highlander faced them, sword in hand. A horde of his men were rushing inside now, past him. Juliana's shock became horror as pale blue eyes set in a hard face met hers.

MacDonalds were attacking the cathedral, her men, her land!

Suddenly the towering Highlander was racing past her. Juliana turned and cried out as he seized Bishop Alan, pressing a dagger cruelly against his throat.

Juliana wanted to scream at him to stop. But no words came out—the MacDonald was going to murder her bishop, she was certain, just as his men had massacred her soldiers. She saw the ruthless, murderous intent in his cold blue eyes.

“Spare me, Alasdair! I beg you!” Bishop Alan sobbed.

“Don’t,” Juliana heard herself gasp, but as she spoke, she was seized brutally from behind by her hair. She was jerked backwards, into a man’s arms, while beside her Mary was also grabbed. Her captor pressed a knife to her throat.

Juliana went still. The Highlander—Alasdair—still holding Alan, shifted to look at her.

“Don’t hurt my sister!” Juliana cried, her gaze locked with Alasdair’s. “She is with child!”

“We’re not here for women,” he said coldly, and he pushed Alan hard, so he fell face first to the floor. He then laid one spurred and booted foot on his back. Revulsion briefly covered his face, and then he looked at Juliana again. “Release both women.”

His men obeyed at once. Juliana rushed to Mary, and they instantly clasped hands. But she could not take her eyes off of Alasdair, who continued to press Alan into the floor with his boot.

She began to shake. Her men had been murdered, and she knew that this Highlander meant to murder her bishop, too.

Her fear intensified. Was he Alasdair Og, the eldest son of Angus Mor, Lord of the Isles?

His father was a ruthless warrior who considered himself a king. And in effect, he was just that. Angus Mor commanded not just Islay and Kintyre, but other, smaller islands, lands in Argyll and Galloway, and a great deal of the high seas. No other regent dared to assert authority there. The kings of Scotland, England and Norway had tried and failed.

Angus Mor was an older man now, but she had heard it said that his son was as ruthless, as fearless, as ambitious, and one day, perhaps soon, he would be Lord of the Isles.

He was not just tall, a head taller than most, but he was hewn like a statue of stone. His broad shoulders, chest and arms were those of a Highlander who had spent his entire life hefting axes and swords. And his hair needed to be cut. It was well past his shoulders. Now, she saw a blue feather woven into a braid, the color almost as pale as his eyes.

Juliana jerked, for she realized she was staring—and she saw that Alasdair was staring as intently back at her.

She suddenly flushed. He did not appear as ruthless just then, for his gaze was narrowed, and he was staring at her red hair, which had come free of its braid and now spilled over her chest.

“What do you want?” she managed to ask.

His mouth curled and he removed his foot from Alan’s back. Alan scrambled across the floor, crawling frantically away from him but Alasdair took two steps towards Alan, reached down, seized his shoulder and dragged him to his feet. “Can ye not crawl away faster?” he mocked.

“I have done nothing ill, my lord!” Alan gasped, his cheeks stained with tears.

Juliana could not stand such abuse. “Stop!”

Mary seized her hand and gave her an incredulous and warning look.

Alasdair faced Juliana, and suddenly it was so still and silent in the cathedral that Juliana could hear her own breathing, which was labored, and her sister’s, which was as harsh. “I beg yer pardon?” One black brow slashed upwards.

She now noticed just how even his features were, and that he had a crescent scar under his right eye. She wet her lips. She could hardly order Alasdair MacDonald around. “Please, reconsider what you intend to do.”

He smiled, amused, and turned to his foremost soldier, a Highlander with long, curly red hair. “Take him outside. Shackle him. I’ll be out to dispose of him in a moment.”

“I didn’t betray you!” Alan screamed.

“Liar.” Alasdair struck him with the back of his hand, across the face. The slap was made effortlessly but was so powerful that bone and cartilage cracked, blood streamed, and Alan was propelled across the nave. Another soldier caught him before he fell and forced him outside.

She could not allow this! Juliana rushed forward. “Stop! What quarrel do you have with the bishop? Why do you torment him so?”

His eyes wide, he looked at her anew. This time, speculation was clear in his gaze. “The bishop has betrayed me, lady. If ye must ken.”

“Could there be a mistake? I have known the good bishop for ten years, if not more. He is a good man.”

“Ah, why am I not surprised that ye, lady, would think so?” He slowly smiled, and she shivered because she did not care for the way he was regarding her—he was looking very carefully at her every feature and at her figure. “Ye must be the lady of Lismore.”

He had been bound to realize her identity, sooner or later. It was common knowledge that Lismore was her dowry. She was clearly a noblewoman, and her red hair was always the cause of interest and admiration—it often gave her away. “I am Lady Juliana MacDougall.”

“The bards have not done ye justice, lady,” he said, very softly. “They have sung of yer beauty, but not well enough. Their songs cannot match it.”

Juliana trembled. Ian lay dead not far from the vestibule, as did another of her knights. And he dared to flatter her now? “You have attacked my lands, you have killed my men!”

“And I am sorry—but the bishop must pay for his treachery.”

Juliana did not want to argue with him. “Bishop Alan does not have a treacherous nature.” She did not add what she wished to state—that he must be wrong.

“I am not surprised ye’d be loyal—yer a MacDougall.”

She tensed, breathing hard. “Are you Alasdair Og?” she finally asked.

He smiled. “The very one.”

So she was confronting her worst enemy. “I thought you were in the south—fighting with Robert Bruce.”

“I returned—for revenge.”

“What do you think he has done?” she cried.

Mary now hurried up to her. “Juliana, leave it be. You cannot save him.”

Her sister was so pale, and her hand was on the protrusion of her pregnant belly. She knew what Mary truly meant to say—leave war to the men. Their brother would hunt down Alasdair for what he had done today. Of that, there was no doubt.

But she had to do something, to try to save Bishop Alan’s life. Juliana took Mary’s arm and guided her to the steps before the altar, pushing her to sit. “I do not want you to jeopardize the babe,” she said low.

“You are placing yourself in jeopardy. You will never persuade him to leave the bishop in peace,” Mary whispered back, but her gaze was on Alasdair.

He hadn’t moved, and from the end of the nave, he stared at them.

Juliana turned back to her sister. “Too many have already died! And he has attacked my land!”

Before Mary could rebut, Juliana straightened and walked back to Alasdair. He shook his head. “Ye should heed yer sister—she is wise.”

“What did he do?”

“I will not debate ye, Lady Juliana. But I am pleased to tell ye the truth. The good bishop came to me, claiming to support Bruce as king. But I am no fool. I tested him and discovered he was naught but a spy sent by your brother. He spied on me, he spied on my brother and he spied on my father. I cannot let such treachery go.”

Juliana knew her brother—he was a man of great ambition as well. He had played kings against one another—and he had won. It was probable that he had pushed the good bishop to spy.

“I see ye believe me.”

She met his gaze, which wasn't as ice-cold as before. “Please spare him,” Juliana heard herself whisper.

His stare was piercing. “And what would I gain from such an act of mercy? Yer brother will have won. He will think to send another spy—and another one.”

“I am not my brother.”

He shook his head, as if perplexed—or amused. “When I leave here, ye will run to yer brother, and even if ye do not, others will.”

“I can hardly ignore this attack.”

“Ye have courage, Lady Juliana, but ye should not be in the midst of wars between men.”

“You have put me in their midst. And you are in God's house. Maybe God will forgive you for the blood spilled here, today, if you spare Alan. Maybe you will gain God's grace.”

“I have no use for grace, not even from God.” And he whirled and strode down the nave, vanishing into the vestibule.

Juliana felt her knees buckle. As she fought to stand, her mind spun. She looked at her two dead soldiers, and another dead Highlander, one of Macdonald's.

Mary reached her, taking her arm. “We cannot save him.”

“We must save him!”

“How can we manage that? Juliana—you cannot stop Alasdair Og, a warrior well versed in revenge, by every account I have ever heard! And you heard him yourself. He doesn't care whether he goes to hell or not!”

Mary was right. Juliana had tried to reason with MacDonald, but she had failed. She could not think just then, not at all, and certainly not of another way to beg for the bishop's life.

“We should go—we should get back to Coffin Castle,” Mary said, “where we will be safe.”

Juliana looked at her, suddenly afraid. She had not considered that Alasdair might also mean to harm them.

They hurried outside. Clouds were gathering, and the bishop was hanging from a makeshift gallows on the other side of the courtyard. Juliana felt sick, and she purposefully averted her eyes. Mary put her arm around her and held her close. “He will go to Heaven,” she whispered.

Juliana blinked back tears. She could hear a crowd whispering nervously amongst themselves. She wiped her eyes and looked up.

The monks from the monastery had rushed up the hill once they had heard what was happening. A great many villagers had also gathered, mostly fishermen and their wives. None of her soldiers had survived, she saw, and it was too soon for any other soldiers from Coffin Castle to have arrived. They would not have heard of the attack yet.

“Oh my God,” Mary cried, jerking on her arm.

Juliana turned and saw MacDonald's men throwing brush, wood and faggots around the cathedral. He meant to burn St. Moluag's Cathedral down. She could not believe her eyes.

“Surely, he does not mean to burn down a house of God,” Mary gasped.

Juliana wondered if she looked as wildly frightened as her sister. And then she saw Alasdair striding to her. “Why would you burn the cathedral?”

“A message fer yer brother,” he said flatly. “And he canna but receive it.”

“Please don't!” Juliana cried, seizing his arm.

His eyes widened and he stared at her, as if shocked by her touch.

She realized she was holding his muscular forearm—and she released it as if burned. “Bishop Alan is dead. My brother will surely understand that.”

“Yer too brave fer yer own good.” He paused, his gaze frighteningly cold. “The next time yer brother thinks to play me for a fool, he'll think twice.” He turned. “Burn it.”

His men began lighting the wood with torches. The fire caught instantly, consuming the kindling, while licking at the century-old cathedral walls.

In horror, Juliana watched the walls catching fire. Tears filled her eyes as she thought of Bishop Alan, who had died for naught.

Mary took her hand. She was crying, too.

“Alasdair!”

Juliana jerked as a rider appeared at a gallop, halting his horse before Alasdair. “MacDougall is at sea—and almost upon the beaches.”

Alasdair turned. “We go back now!” he shouted at his men.

Juliana could barely assimilate what was happening as Alasdair leapt swiftly upon a gray warhorse. All of his men were mounting as quickly. She had not yet exhaled before his men were galloping away—but Alasdair paused his stallion before her.

Stunned, she looked up.

As his horse danced wildly about, he said, “I am sorry ye were here today.” And he spurred the steed, galloping after his men.

Suddenly Juliana and Mary stood alone. Not far from them, the dead bishop twirled from his noose. Her dead Highlanders lay scattered about the courtyard and the end of the road. The crowd hadn’t moved, equally stunned as they all watched the cathedral burn.

CHAPTER TWO

JULIANA STRODE BACK and forth across her great hall. Her mind would not stop racing. She kept seeing Bishop Alan swinging from that noose, just as she could not shake off the memory of her dead men as they lay scattered about the cathedral’s nave, the vestibule and the courtyard outside. Finally, she could not get Alasdair Og’s dark, frightening image out of her mind.

Her desperate pleas had fallen upon deaf ears, she thought grimly.

But had they saved the cathedral? She, the monks and the villagers had been frantically fighting the fire when her brother and his men had arrived. Alexander MacDougall had immediately ordered both of his sisters back to Coeffin Castle, taking over the effort to save the cathedral. Juliana had not wanted to go, but Mary had been feeling faint and she had accompanied her sister back to the castle.

Mary was resting now, and comfortably. Juliana thanked God for that.

Juliana heard Alexander and William’s voices and she whirled as they came marching through the door, shaking snow from their mantels, followed by two dozen of their best soldiers. As they came into the hall, Alexander smiled at her.

He was a tall man in his late thirties, with strong features and brown hair. Like most Highlanders, he wore a simple short-sleeved linen leine, belted, his legs bare except for knee-high boots. Today he wore a shirt of mail over his leine. His wool brat was red striped with white—the MacDougall colors. “It is done. Yer cathedral is but a wee worse for wear. She stands.”

Juliana was flooded with relief.

“Mary?” William rushed forward. Three years younger than his wife, he was a tall, blond man with attractive features, clad in a long-sleeved red tunic, a brown surcote, hose and boots.

“She is resting upstairs,” Juliana told him and William rushed from the hall.

Juliana began to shake, thinking once again of Bishop Alan—thinking of Alasdair Og.

Her brother no longer smiled. “Tell me everything, Juliana.”

She inhaled. “No—you tell me!”

He was taken aback. “I beg yer pardon?”

“Did you urge Bishop Alan to spy? Did you send the poor bishop into that den of wolves?”

“I dinna ken what ye speak of!” he snapped angrily.

She felt like striking him, but he was chief of their clan, and she knew better. “You sent him to spy upon the MacDonalds—knowing how dangerous they are—knowing poor Alan is a man of peace, not war!”

“Ye blame me?” he cried.

She bit her lip, hard. Her brother was a ruthless man. She cared for and respected him, of course she did—but she also feared him. “He is dead because of it.”

“Ye go too far, Juliana,” Alexander said, his blue eyes dark. He now strode past her and threw his gloves down on the table.

He was right, she thought with trepidation. She would gain nothing now by accusing her brother of sending Alan to his death. “I need an army,” she said.

He whirled. “Ye what?”

“I want revenge.”

Alexander finally smiled—and then he laughed. “Yer mad!”

She had been thinking of revenge ever since leaving the burning cathedral. She did not think she had ever been so angry. “Vengeance is mine, said the Lord.”

“Yer a woman.”

“I’m your sister.”

He eyed her. A long moment passed. He finally said, “Do ye really think I’d let ye take an army and attack him? Ye ken nothing of war!”

Alasdair Og’s image flashed in her mind, hard, cold, proud—frightening. Her brother was right. She knew nothing of war, except that it so often took the lives of the innocent and the young. “He attacked Lismore,” she said, sinking to sit down on the bench. “He killed my knights, our bishop. He tried to burn down the cathedral.” She felt ill—as if violated. “Mary could have lost her child.”

“But I did not,” Mary said softly, from the threshold of the room.

Juliana turned to see her and William, arm in arm. Her sister’s color had returned, and she was smiling, her blue eyes alight. She looked very much like a woman in love.

“Ye dinna need an army,” Alexander said to her, and he was final. “I’ll make him pay for the bishop’s murder, Juliana. I’ll attack Ardtornish castle.” He suddenly paced, thoughtfully. “It’s a new stronghold. Strong, well built, with thick walls. ’tis said they’re proud of it. He’ll be furious to lose it.”

“Will you burn it?” she asked.

“Aye.”

As Mary and Will came to sit down beside her, Juliana stared at her brother. The one thing she knew was that Alexander usually attained his ambition. He had taken over leadership of the clan and its extensive lands at the age of seventeen—twenty-one years ago, before Juliana was even born. In the past two decades he had fought off every major threat to his power, from rival clans, from Clan Donald, and even from the kings of Scotland and England. Alexander MacDougall was a ruthless but excellent warrior—and he had proven it. His control of Argyll and Lorn had never been greater.

“When will you attack?” Juliana whispered.

“Soon—as soon as I can.” His smile was savage. “The bastard will pay, Juliana—ye’ll have yer revenge.”

Mary took her hand. Juliana did not look at her. For suddenly there was dread—and she wondered if she had just set a new and terrible feud in motion.

* * *

“YOU HAVE BEEN behaving oddly—ever since the attack on the cathedral.”

Juliana was helping Mary to dress. It was early morning, and a fire roared in the hearth of her sister’s chamber, but it did not chase the winter chill away. Nor could it calm her ever-racing thoughts. Almost a week had passed since Alasdair Macdonald had attacked the cathedral and murdered Bishop Alan.

Almost a week had passed since her brother had sailed away toward Ardtornish Castle. And he had attacked two days ago—a messenger had been sent to tell them.

Juliana finished braiding her sister’s long, thick hair. Her stomach churned. “I am wondering what has happened.”

Mary turned, understanding her. “No news can be good news. And an attack on a castle like Ardtornish could take days or even weeks.”

Juliana did not point out that her brother had said he would destroy the castle, not besiege it. And because Mary was staring far too curiously at her, Juliana walked away.

“What is wrong with you?” Mary asked quietly. “You are so anxious. Are you worried about Alexander?”

Juliana hesitated. Every time she considered a confrontation between her powerful brother and Alasdair Og, she was filled with an odd dread. Too late, she did not think any good could come of pitting two such men against one another. “I am worried,” she finally said. “But not about our brother—he is invincible.” She smiled, then hoped she had not misspoken. “I don’t know what is bothering me so much...I cannot get over Bishop Alan’s murder.” That much was true, for she felt guilt every time she thought of him. At night, she dreamed of the damned attack. She saw her dead soldiers. She saw Alan, begging for his life. And she saw Alasdair Og, his blue eyes as cold as ice.

He had been impossible to forget.

“I know we are already at war with the MacDonalds,” she finally said, “but I feel as if I have just started another war.”

“You did not start anything,” Mary flashed. “He attacked us.”

Juliana decided not to point out that their brother had sent the bishop to spy upon them, and in a way, he had triggered the attack. She still did not know which man she should be angrier with—her brother or MacDonald.

“I am glad you are still here,” she said impulsively. Because William remained loyally at their brother’s side, Mary had decided to stay at Coeffin Castle with her. Once the battle was finished, she and her husband would adjourn to her lands at Loch Fyne, and then travel on to Castle Bain, William’s stronghold that he inherited from his father. Mary intended to give birth there.

“We will have news soon,” Mary assured her. “Ardtornish is but hours away.”

That evening a second messenger came. Juliana and Mary were having dinner when he arrived. Both women leapt up as the young, freckled Highland lad hurried breathlessly into the room. It was snowing outside, and he left clumps of melting snow on the floor as he stomped it off his boots and shook out his plaid.

Juliana handed him a mug of wine. “What word?”

He took a gulp. “Alasdair Og was at Ardtornish when we attacked. He held us off, lady, for two entire days.”

The boy was shivering, and Mary took his cloak from him, handing it to a maid to lay it before the fire.

Juliana was in disbelief. “But surely, my brother will prevail?”

The boy grimaced. “My lady, Alexander has taken his men and is returning to Dunstaffnage as ye speak. And he has ordered ye to join him there, as soon as ye can go.”

Her astonishment increased. Alexander’s attack had failed—Alasdair Og had triumphed again! Was there no justice to be had?

And why was her brother ordering her to his seat? Did he fear for her safety at Lismore?

The young Highlander now turned to Mary, handing her a rolled-up parchment. “From yer husband, my lady,” he said.

Juliana walked over to Mary. “What does William say?”

Mary looked up, unsmiling. “The Earl of Buchan has summoned him directly to a war council in Lochaber. Alexander is going, as well. William wants me to go immediately to Dunstaffnage—there will be more fighting soon, to stop Bruce’s rebellion.”

Juliana rubbed her forehead, which suddenly ached. “More fighting, where? Is Lismore in danger?”

“William did not say.” She stared at Juliana with trepidation. Then she clasped her small belly.

Juliana knew she dreaded the outcome of this war—that she still feared for her husband’s life. “William is a warrior, Mary. He cannot sit out this fight.”

“I know that.” Mary glanced at the messenger, who was no more than fifteen or sixteen. “Come sit down and sup,” she said.

When the boy was seated and feasting on venison, Juliana and Mary walked over to the hearth and stared at it. Mary spoke first. “We should prepare to leave.”

“Yes, we should.” Juliana sighed. She did not want to leave Lismore, but she could not disobey her brother. And there was no hardship, truly, in residing at Dunstaffnage. It was a strong fortress and a magnificent estate. “Alexander must be worried, to order me from my home.”

Mary gazed back at her. “Yes, he must be worried, but is he concerned about the war with Bruce, or about reprisals from Alasdair Og?”

Both women fell silent then, lost in their own thoughts.

Mary finally said, “I will need a day to ready all of our belongings.” Because of her three children, she traveled with a large entourage.

“We can have our trunks sent to us and leave at first light,” Juliana said. She was beginning to feel some anxiety that their brother indeed feared reprisals from Alasdair Og. She had only met him once, but she felt certain he would be thirsting for revenge, after the attack on his new stronghold.

Mary shook her head. “I don’t think lingering a single day will matter; neither Alexander nor William said we must rush. And you do not know when you will return. You must prepare the keep for your absence.”

“You’re right,” Juliana said, deciding she was foolish to suddenly become nervous. “I am going to find a pallet for the boy, and retire early. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

* * *

THE FOLLOWING DAWN both women were up, each involved in the vast preparations necessary for their departure. Juliana took her steward, Walter, aside to go over her many lists. Winter was a quiet time, and she hoped to be back in the spring, when the usual repairs would have to be made to her castle and her galleys, when the cellars, depleted during the winter, would have to be filled, and when cattle and sheep began birthing, and when she would be needed for dozens of baptisms—there were so many children born in the spring.

“Lady!” One of her Highland soldiers rushed into the great room. “Two dozen ships are approaching.”

Juliana leapt to her feet with her steward. “Fergus—is it my brother?”

“They are too far to remark, but they come from the west.”

Juliana froze. Ardtornish Castle was to the west.

As she stood there, her heart racing, Mary hurried into the hall. “What is it?” she cried. “I heard that a fleet approaches us!”

Juliana did not answer. She rushed past Mary, going up to the tower, Fergus, the steward, and Mary behind her.

The watch was outside the tower, on the ramparts, both men peering out to sea. A number of her archers had gathered, as had women and children. Juliana rushed through the tower and outside.

It was a gray wintry day, with poor visibility, the sky and the sound very much the same dreary color. Shadows were slowly, inexorably approaching, their shapes distinct enough to know she was watching a fleet of galleys.

And then the fog suddenly shifted, a part of it lifting, a ray of sun pouring through the clouds. The fleet was suddenly illuminated.

More than two dozen ships approached. And then she saw the huge blue-and-red flags of Clan Donald blazing like fire into the gray skies.

Alasdair Og was bent on reprisal—and he meant to attack her.

“Ring the bells,” Mary ordered. One of the men rushed inside to obey, and instantly, the bells began to toll.

“Can we defend ourselves?” Juliana heard herself ask. Her heart slammed as she watched the fleet, sailing ever closer.

“We will defend ye, Lady Juliana, I vow it,” Fergus cried.

Mary confronted the soldier. “That is not what she has asked. Can we thwart Alasdair Og and his army? Do we have enough men, enough arms, enough munitions?”

Fergus flushed. “The truth, lady?”

“Yes, of course we want the truth!” Mary cried.

“We can defend Coeffin Castle, I think, but not Coeffin Castle and Achanduin at once!”

Achanduin Castle had been the seat of Bishop Alan. Juliana must decide between defending her home, or that of the now deceased bishop. But if that were the case, there was no choice to make. She looked at her pale sister. “Maybe he does not want Achanduin Castle.”

“If he is here to strike at us, we will soon know it, and we must prepare.”

Juliana nodded. “Fergus, if he attacks Achanduin Castle, we will let it fall. But we cannot allow Coeffin Castle to fall.” She could barely breathe.

“Summon every archer to the ramparts,” Mary said. “Make sure our catapults are ready, and we must start fires. We must also send word to Alexander.”

“I am prepared to defend the castle, Lady Mary,” Fergus said. He signaled to several men and hurried away.

Juliana inhaled. Her sister had endured several sieges in her life. Fergus was an experienced soldier—one of her best men. But, dear God, she had lost her five best soldiers already. What if they could not defend themselves?

Alexander would come, even if he had already left for Lochaber, but what if he was too late?

What did Alasdair Og intend? To seize her home—or to destroy it?

Juliana was frightened. He had murdered Bishop Alan without remorse, as if he did not have a conscience. But surely, she and her sister were not in danger—they were noblewomen.

“There is no point in standing here, freezing,” Mary said. She took Juliana’s arm and they hurried back inside.

In the hall, Juliana grabbed her hand. “You should disguise the boys—dress them as village children—and warn them not to tell anyone who they are.”

Mary turned white. “You think he will take my sons hostage?”

“I don’t know what to think!” Juliana cried. “But we should prepare for even the worst possibility.”

Mary nodded and ran off. Juliana blinked back tears. If there was one thing she must do, she thought, it was protect her sister and her children.

CHAPTER THREE

AS NIGHT FELL, THE castle was prepared for an attack. Fire burned atop the ramparts so boiling oil could be thrown on any invaders, Piles of rock and stone sat beside the catapults, and archers and soldiers stood upon the walls. The sisters waited as the moon rose, but no attack came.

In the great hall, Juliana stood up. “He isn’t coming.”

“No,” Mary said, “not tonight.”

Juliana wondered as her sister did—had he taken Achanduin Castle? She imagined Alasdair there, his men celebrating the easy victory in the great hall, mugs raised in laughter, in triumph.

Would he come tomorrow? Or would Achanduin Castle be enough?

Mary stood. “I am going to get some rest. You should, too.”

Juliana somehow smiled. She would never sleep that night, not when she was afraid of what the dawn would bring.

But Mary paused. “There is one thing I cannot comprehend. It was our brother who attacked Ardtornish Castle. Not you. So why is he here?”

Juliana stiffened. “I don’t know.”

Mary gave her an odd look and left.

Juliana sank back down onto the bench, staring across the great room, where many of her soldiers slept upon pallets. A huge hearth was on the opposite wall, and a fire raged there.

I am sorry ye were here.

She suddenly recalled Alasdair’s parting words, and felt frozen. She did not even want to try to comprehend what he had meant, or if he had been truly remorseful.

She laid her cheek on her arms on the table. He was at Lismore not because of Alexander, but because of her—she somehow sensed it.

Tears burned her closed eyelids. She wished she had never asked her brother for an army, she wished she had never dreamed of revenge!

But mostly, she wished that she and her sister had left for Dunstaffnage that morning—that she had insisted they depart immediately. For then Mary and her three children would be safe.

And to make matters worse, Mary was five months pregnant. If something happened to the babe—or any of the children—Juliana would never forgive herself.

Juliana started awake. She hadn’t meant to fall asleep. But she saw now that the fire in the hearth was burning, having been stoked by the maids. The light outside the windows was pale from the dawn.

She leapt up from the bench and ran into the corridor and up the narrow stairwell. The two men in the tower turned as she ran past them.

The dawn was gray, snow falling. The barest light stained the day, with no sign of the sun. And there were no ships on the horizon.

She was in disbelief. Was he gone?

“Lady Juliana, ye must come to the entry tower.”

Juliana whirled around to face the watchtower, away from the east ramparts and the sound. She took one look at Fergus’s pale, grim expression, and knew Alasdair Og had come.

She inhaled, praying for strength and courage. Then she nodded and followed him inside, downstairs, and across the castle. Mary appeared and fell into step beside her as they went outside.

It was snowing more heavily now. A light dusting covered the courtyard. Ahead was the entry tower, the drawbridge below closed. All of her archers and soldiers were on the ramparts on each side of the castle gates.

Juliana went up the exterior stairs with Fergus and Mary and pushed inside the tower. She went to the window and gripped its ledge.

Perhaps a hundred mounted warriors, fur-clad Highlanders and mail-clad knights, formed a line between the western hills and the castle, like a barricade, facing her.

Juliana felt sick. She could not see behind the front lines, but she knew hundreds of archers and foot soldiers armed with swords and spears were there. Three blue MacDonald banners sporting sinister red dragons waved above the army.

“What are we going to do?” Mary whispered.

Juliana could not speak. She watched one rider on a gray warhorse separate himself from the army, slowly coming forward. She felt so much tension, it was choking her.

“It is Alasdair Og,” Mary said tersely.

He halted his mount at some distance from the entry tower. He was too far away for his features to be visible, but he clearly stared at the tower—Juliana knew he stared at her.

“If ye can lure him closer, our archers can murder him,” Fergus said thickly.

“No. Do not shoot at him,” Juliana said, so vehemently, Mary and Fergus looked askance at her. “We are not murdering him in cold blood.”

“Then he will murder us,” Fergus said flatly.

Mary stared at her, and Juliana knew her thoughts—he had certainly murdered Bishop Alan in cold blood. But, oddly, she did not believe that Alasdair Og would murder her or her sister. But he was bent upon revenge. She knew that. And suddenly there was no choice. She knew what she must do to protect her sister and her nephews.

As if he could fathom her silent thoughts, he suddenly rode closer. She could make out his long dark hair, tangled about his shoulders as he stared up at her. Their gazes met.

It was time, she thought. Juliana asked Fergus for his dagger. In surprise, he handed it to her. She instantly reached down beneath her blue surcote and sliced off a strip from her linen cote. Mary gasped as Juliana handed the dagger back, realizing now what she intended.

Juliana turned and walked out onto the ramparts, Mary and Fergus behind her, their expressions grim. As she started towards the crenellations, a group of archers surrounded her. “Stand back,” she ordered.

“Lady Juliana, ye cannot put yer life in jeopardy,” Fergus protested.

“He will not hurt me.” She pressed against the edge of the wall, knowing she believed this.

Looking down at him, she raised her hand and dropped the linen flag of surrender over the wall. They both watched it float toward him, very much like the falling snow.

* * *

JULIANA STOOD BEFORE the hearth in the great hall, her hands firmly clasped before her, stiff with tension. It was unbearable.

She knew that Alasdair would walk into her hall at any moment, claiming it as his own.

She glanced at the stairwell. Mary had gone to check on her children, who were dressed as common Scottish children. Elasaïd was going to claim that they were hers.

Children were used as hostages all the time.

She heard heavy booted steps, followed by deep, masculine tones. Her heart lurched. Someone laughed. The same voice said, “Mayhap this bodes well, eh, Alasdair? Mayhap our next fight will be as easy and as bloodless. Mayhap all our enemies will turn tail when we next approach!”

Juliana trembled. She was frightened, but she was also furious. She was being accused of cowardice.

Alasdair stepped through her door and his gaze found hers. “I dinna think Lady Juliana has ever turned tail, Neil.”

Juliana simply stared.

He strode towards her, a towering Highlander. His blue-and-red plaid was thrown back, the skirts of his leine swirling about his bare thighs, his swords bumping there with his every stride. His blue gaze was piercing as he halted before her. “Was the choice to surrender yers?”

It was hard to speak. “Yes.”

He softened. “So quickly, ye become wise.”

She felt like striking him. “What do you want with me? Why did you come back?”

His smile vanished. “Yer brother attacked my castle, Lady Juliana, no doubt with yer blessing.”

“He attacked, not I.” She felt her temper rising, was aware that she should fight it, but did not even try. “It would not be as easy to attack my brother. That would take courage. I am an easier opponent. Attacking a woman is a laughing matter.”

He darkened and seemed incapable of speech. Behind him, his men seemed astonished and uncomfortable. “’tis no laughing matter, I assure ye. Lady—do ye accuse me of cowardice?”

She began to shake. “I was just accused of cowardice.”

His mouth curled, but without mirth. “I dinna think ye cowardly, I think ye far too brave and bold fer yer own good.”

“Do you flatter me now?” she cried. “Or do you insult me? It is cowardly to attack a woman!” And the moment she had cried out, she wished she had not done so.

He stared in disbelief. A shocked silence fell. And Mary came into the hall, her face ashen.

She looked back and forth between them, several times. Then she hurried over to Juliana. “My sister is distressed,” she said tersely. “She doesn’t mean to insult you.”

“She means it,” he said flatly. “I attacked ye, Lady Juliana, because ye have a great value to me.”

What did he mean? She glanced at her sister, certain her consternation was shared. Mary looked as distraught as she felt.

Alasdair turned to Neil, the tall, blond Highlander at his side. “Search the keep. Account fer everyone. Make sure no weapons are hidden.” He faced the women. “Ye will feed my men. We will depart tomorrow on the first tide.” His expression cool, he walked past them both, taking a seat at the table. The castle maids rushed to serve him.

Juliana cringed as his men rushed upstairs, others going down into the cellars. She and Mary exchanged more worried glances and Mary seized her wrist. Fear was reflected in her eyes.

Juliana knew she was frightened because the children would soon be discovered. But she had one more pressing matter. She hurried over to the table, taking a deep breath for courage.

Alasdair turned to face her, one leg on each side of the bench. His expression became wary.

“What do you intend?” Juliana asked, trying to keep her tone calm. It was impossible. “Will you leave a garrison here, when you leave on the first tide? And what will you do with me and my sister?”

“I beg yer pardon—we leave on the first tide. We go to my home on Islay.” His stare was unwavering.

Juliana hugged herself. “Are you taking me captive?”

“Ay, I am taking ye—and yer sister—hostage.”

“Why?” she cried. “Why seek revenge upon me? You attacked us!”

“Yer brother attacked Ardtornish Castle.”

“I am not my brother!”

He suddenly stood up, towering over her. “Ye should not have gone to the cathedral last week.”

She could not comprehend him. Instead of questioning what he said, she asked, “Do you wish to escalate this war between Clan Donald and Dougall? For that is all you will accomplish!”

“You think to advise me? Yer brother should have thought twice about sending a sheep to spy upon me.” Then, “It hardly matters. We were already at war. We have been at war for a hundred years, even longer. I am taking ye hostage, Lady Juliana, and no begging, no tears, will change my mind.”

“It matters!” Tears filled her eyes. “If you must take a hostage, take me—but please, leave my sister here. She is with child.”

“So ye have told me. I canna leave Lady Comyn here. She is the Earl of Buchan’s daughter by marriage—in the end, she may be a bigger boon than ye.”

With real dismay, Juliana glanced at Mary as she approached them. Before either one could speak, he held up his hand. “Enough. Make sure yer ready to journey at sunrise. And make sure the children are ready.”

Mary paled.

Juliana said, “The children?”

“Lady Comyn has three sons.”

Mary seemed ready to collapse. Juliana seized her arm to keep her standing. “They are not here, Alasdair. They remain at Castle Bain, her husband’s home.”

He folded his muscular arms across his chest. “I heard that there were children here, Lady Juliana.”

How had he heard that? Then she remembered that he had spent the night at Achanduin Castle—most of the island knew that her sister was in residence with her boys.

Neil came downstairs with Elsaid, the dark-haired maid pale with fright.

“Who is that?” Alasdair demanded.

“That is my maid,” Mary whispered.

“She was in a chamber above,” Neil said. “With three children, claiming they are hers.”

“I have three boys,” Elasaïd whispered, trembling.

Neil said, “And the blond one saw me and cried, ‘a Comyn.’” He actually chuckled.

Alasdair turned his piercing stare on Mary.

Mary stepped forward before Juliana could stop her. She was breathing hard. “We cannot deceive you, then. The boys are my sons, but I beg you, do not take them hostage.”

Before he could answer, Juliana rushed between them. “You want me—not my sister, not the boys. Please,” she said. She gripped his arm. “Take me, but leave Mary and the boys. Surely, somewhere inside you, there is kindness and compassion.”

His eyes widened. He looked down at her hand. Juliana released him.

His eyes dark, he said, “Ye, yer sister and yer nephews will be well cared for—on Islay. I may kill the enemy in battle, but I do not harm women or children, Lady Juliana.” And with that, he turned his back on her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dunyveg Castle, Islay, Scotland—the next day

“IF THERE IS anything that you need, you must only ask,” Lady MacDonald said. “I know these are difficult times.”

Juliana had walked to the single window in the tower chamber she would share with her sister and the children. Dunyveg sat upon a cliff that protruded into the ocean, and the seas below were black with the coming night, but frothing with whitecaps, the skies above heavy and turning purple. There would be no stars that night, and no moon. The night would soon be black.

Torches had been lit, both within and outside the castle. There seemed to be lights below them, on the beach.

They had just arrived at Islay an hour ago, at dusk, having left Lismore just after sunrise. She was frozen from the wind, the mist and the snow, and she remained disbelieving. As she stared at the Atlantic Ocean, she thought, this is a godforsaken place, one well deserved by a godforsaken man—one who takes a pregnant woman and her small children hostage.

How could she attain her sister’s freedom?

The sooner he demanded a ransom, the better.

The three boys had all climbed onto one bed, and Mary now sat down with them, still wrapped in her fur. “Thank you,” she said softly to Lady MacDonald.

Juliana turned to look at Alasdair’s mother. She was gray-haired, blue-eyed, of medium height and build, still pretty and very soft-spoken. She seemed kind—she even seemed concerned. How had she given birth to such a cold, ruthless man?

And what had he truly meant that she should not have been at the cathedral when he attacked it?

Did he regret her involvement in his war?

Juliana shook herself free of such fanciful thoughts. Alasdair Og had no regrets, no doubts, just ruthless ambition.

She took a breath. “What we need is to be freed, so we can return home,” Juliana said, a bit sharply.

Lady MacDonald’s smile faltered. “I hope you are soon freed, Lady Juliana. “

Juliana stared, realizing that she was kind, and that she meant it. Would she be an ally, then? “I do not understand why your son captured us. If only he would release my sister and her children—I would gladly stay as his hostage.” As she spoke, she heard a movement in the corridor, and she tensed as Alasdair leaned against the open door. He slowly smiled at her.

Lady MacDonald said softly, “I gave up trying to understand the ways of men—and their need for war—long ago, Lady Juliana. But my son will make certain you are well cared for while here.” She turned to Alasdair. “Isn’t that right?”

“Yer always right.” He came forward, kissed Lady MacDonald’s cheek as she left them, and turned to stare at Juliana. “If ye think to move my mother to plot against me, ye might think again.”

Juliana hugged herself, her heart racing. She was acutely aware of being in this man's complete control—she was his hostage, imprisoned in his stronghold, surrounded by the enemy. “Your mother seems kind.”

“Unlike me?” He was amused, and somehow very different now that he was at his home. His eyes had changed, for they were no longer cold and hard. Then she realized his very posture had changed. It was as if he was no longer braced for war.

“She is very kind, but she will not cross me,” Alasdair said. “So ye will gladly remain here, as my hostage?”

“Yes, if Mary and her children are freed.”

He laughed. “Ye might come to enjoy my hospitality, Lady Juliana—be forewarned.” He gave her a sidelong look and turned to Mary, his smile fading. “How do ye fare, Lady Comyn?”

Mary started. “It has been a very long day, but other than being very tired, I feel fine.”

He moved closer to the bed and both Roger and Donald gazed up at him wide-eyed. They had been staring at him with open fascination all day while upon his ship.

“Ye boys must be hungry,” Alasdair said, shocking Juliana.

Roger nodded, his eyes as huge as saucers, and Donald said, “Did ye really hang the bishop?”

“Donald!” Mary said, seizing him and pulling him close.

“I did. Treachery is not a good idea—neither is spying,” Alasdair said matter-of-factly.

Juliana marched over to stand between him and the bed, where Mary and the boys sat. She gave him a dark look.

Alasdair ignored her, smiling at Mary. “Shall I have my mother send ye some supper? I ken the day has been long and difficult.”

“That is kind of you,” Mary said. “I think we will all retire early.” Roger was yawning as she spoke. Thomas was already cuddled up next to her and deeply asleep.

Alasdair slowly faced Juliana, his expression wry. “Ye will stay with yer sister?”

“If the choice is stay with Mary, or sup with you, there is no choice,” Juliana said. “And it is a little late for kindness.”

He shook his head, amused, and left.

“Juliana!” Mary struggled to get up. Juliana rushed to help her, as Thomas murmured in his sleep. “Do not fight him now! Do not provoke him! We are at his mercy. I am happy if he can be kind, even for a moment.”

Juliana knew Mary was right. She wished she had held her temper. Berating him would not bend him to release her sister!

“We are hostages,” Mary said, taking her hand. “If you accept that, maybe we can endure this ordeal with as little difficulty as possible.”

“You are asking me to change my nature,” Juliana said. But even as she spoke she knew her sister was right. Even though she rarely acted upon the knowledge, she knew one always got more flies with honey than with vinegar. “I will be back.” Before Mary could protest, Juliana ran into the corridor.

Alasdair was at the far end, by the landing, and he vanished into a chamber there without seeing her.

Juliana faltered. Surely he did not have his chamber in the tower where she and Mary slept? Surely he was not directly down the corridor from them? And why did that bother her? Perhaps he merely wished to make certain that she and her sister did not escape—even when there was really no chance of ever doing so. Islay was an island, one could not merely walk off!

She recovered her composure, walking over to his door, which was wide open. She paused on the threshold.

Alasdair had his back to her, and he was removing his sword belt. His navy blue-and-red brat was already tossed across the bed. He was clad only in the linen leine he wore, and his leather boots.

She could not help but notice how broad his shoulders were, how muscular his arms, how narrow his hips. The tunic left so little to the imagination.

“So ye follow me to my chamber?”

She tensed. “Do you have eyes in the back of your head?”

He slowly turned. “Yer a noisy woman.” He was smiling. And his gaze was drifting down her lilac surcote, past the gold girdle she wore, and then back up again.

She did not smile back. “I don’t like it when you look at me in such a manner.”

His dark brows rose. “In what manner... Juliana?” He started slowly towards her.

Her tension increased. He knew what she meant! “I am here to...” She stopped.

“Yer here why?” He was laughing at her, but without a sound. She saw the amusement now in his eyes. And he had halted so close to her that she could see golden flecks in his blue eyes.

She stepped slightly back. “I’m here to apologize.” The moment she had spoken, she wished she had not. He had attacked her, not once but twice, he had taken her and her sister and nephews hostage!

“I can imagine how hard it is, for ye to say yer sorry. I accept.” He chuckled.

She felt like striking him, as nothing was amusing now, but knew better. “I am also here to beg you another time to spare my sister and her children from this ordeal! You have me—you do not need them.”

“My hospitality is only an ordeal if ye make it one, and Lady Comyn seems disinclined to do so. But ye, lady, love to fight.” There was no mistaking his look now—it was one of male admiration.

Juliana took another quick step backwards. As she did, his hand shot out, and he seized her wrist, preventing her from moving any farther away from him. “What are you doing?” she gasped.

“Why does my admiration distress ye so?” His tone had become so soft, and so seductive.

“I do not want your admiration!” Her heart was slamming. “What are you doing?” she managed to say. “Release me!”

“What do ye think?” he said, no longer smiling. His gaze was on her mouth. “Yer beautiful.... I’m a man.” He pulled her close. She was in disbelief—or was she? For she had known from that first day in the cathedral that he wanted her. A woman always knew when a man was smitten. And yet she had come to his room, all the same.

He was compelling. She had to admit that now. He was powerful, proud, arrogant and ruthless... a prince of the isles....

But that did not matter. They were enemies.

And yet, when Juliana found herself in his embrace, and she pressed her hands on his hard chest, trying to think coherently was impossible. He held her body against his, and he was all hard, huge muscle, straining against her softness.

But she had come to plead for her sister’s freedom another time...or had she? She couldn’t think with his scent enveloping her as it was.

“I think ye came here for more than an apology,” he whispered roughly. He wasn’t amused now. His eyes were dark with heat.

She did not bother to deny it. “Damn you,” she gasped. “If I kiss you, will you release Mary and the boys?”

“Lady, I want more than a kiss.”

Her hands curled into fists on his chest. She could barely breathe. Desire was unfurling within her at a shocking rate. “You will not get more than a kiss!”

He suddenly caught her face with one hand. “Ye challenge me and I gladly accept,” he said roughly, and he kissed her.

Juliana froze as his mouth covered hers—hard and fierce, forcing her lips apart, his tongue thrusting inside. Shock evaporated. Something huge—terrible and wonderful—fisted deep within her.

She relaxed against him, her fists opening, sliding over his chest.

He grunted in satisfaction, his hands moving down her back and over her buttocks. He pushed her against the wall.

Crushed there, Juliana felt nothing but the onslaught of his mouth, the pressure of his body, and a stunning desire. She moved her hands into his tangled mane of hair and kissed him wildly back.

Their tongues entwined, their lips locked, and he pushed one huge thigh between hers. Then he broke the kiss.

Juliana looked into his blazing blue eyes, overcome by urgency and shocked by it. No man had ever kindled such disturbing desire in her before. She was clinging to him, hard.

“Ye kiss the way ye fight. Do ye love the same way?” he asked thickly.

She began to realize what they were doing—what she was doing. He was Alasdair Og and she was Juliana MacDougall. She braced against his chest as her mind raced. What if she could persuade him to release her sister and her nephews? Wouldn’t his lovemaking be worth it?

“Ahh—dinna think now.” He kissed her deeply again.

Their mouths mated and fused, wildly. The desire built to another crescendo. She was breathless and faint, and as he tugged on her braid, freeing her hair, persuading him became a distant memory, because her blood was on fire as never before.

He suddenly caught her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. As he laid her down there, he paused before coming down on top of her. “Juliana? I’m about to go mad, so if ye wish to leave, ye had better run from me now.”

He was breathing hard, poised on all fours above her. As he spoke, he settled one knee between her thighs.

Of course she should leap up from the bed and run away. But Juliana reached up and clasped his jaw fiercely. She wanted to kiss him again.

His eyes blazed. He moved on top of her, lifting her skirts to her waist. Juliana cried out as she felt his manhood against her sex, stunned by the powerful sensation.

As his mouth covered hers, she threw her arms around him. She arched against him, the movement an invitation as old as time. He growled roughly, his mouth on her neck, her collarbone, her breast.

All thought had vanished. There was only his hard, heated body and her raging need. Juliana reached down and ran her hand over the back of his hard thigh, beneath his leine, and then up over his hard buttock. He began moving his mouth over her rib cage, her belly. He went lower and Juliana went still, paralyzed.

She felt his tongue. Desire exploded.

She wept in pleasure and, when he rose back over her and moved hard within her, she wept in ecstasy.

* * *

JULIANA WAS AFRAID to move. She listened to Alasdair as he left the bed and moved about the dark chamber, carefully tugging her cote and surcote down. She heard him stoking the fire. Then she heard a whoosh, and the chamber blazed with light.

She instantly saw him standing by the hearth, his back to it, as he stared at her.

She felt her cheeks flame. Her heart slammed. Slowly, she sat up. Her sanity had returned. He was Alasdair Og and she was Juliana MacDougall. Worse, she was his hostage. What had she done?

“Did I hurt ye?” he asked quietly.

“No, you did not hurt me.”

What had just happened? How had it happened? When she had never done more than kiss a man before? And she did not want to speak with him now. She stood up. With her fingers, she raked through her long hair, hoping he would not see that she trembled, and then hurriedly braided it.

He walked away, opened a chest, returned. He handed her a ribbon.

She tied the braid, not looking at him. The ribbon was blue, of course it was, him being a MacDonald.

Damn it, she thought. Why had she just experienced such uncontrollable desire? Why now, with her worst enemy, of all possible men?

And he was staring. She wanted him to stop. She wet her lips. “Will you free Mary and her sons?” At least some good might come of this horrible mistake.

But he did not reply. He simply stared at her.

Her heart sank in shock and disbelief. “I slept with you!” she cried. “You will not free them?”

“Ye slept in my bed because ye wanted to be with me. Yer a passionate woman and we both ken.”

She could not deny either claim. “You deceived me,” she began.

He raised his hand, his face hard. “I did not plan this. I made no promises. Ye followed me into my chamber.”

She froze. And too late, she knew she had erred by daring to approach him in this room.

“But I will free yer sister when her ransom is paid, that is my promise.” With that, he strode to the door. Then he turned. “Will ye come to dine?”

She was ravenous but she hesitated.

“There is no point in starving,” he said, “or in crying over what we did. ’tis done. Why dinna ye check on yer sister and come downstairs. Ye can meet my father. My mother will be pleased to have yer company.” He gave her an intense look and left.

Juliana trembled. It was done. She had thrown all caution to the wind by following him into his chamber, and then she had acted like a common harlot. She might have hoped to free her sister, but, if she dared be honest with herself, Mary had not been on her mind once they had begun to kiss. Even though it made no sense, she had been overwhelmed by her desire for Alasdair.

CHAPTER FIVE

JULIANA WISHED SHE had a looking glass. She hesitated on the threshold of the chamber she now shared with her sister and her nephews. She felt disheveled and untidy, and she worried her appearance might give her transgressions away. Mary would disapprove if she ever found out what had just happened. Worse, she would be disappointed. Juliana dared not consider how her brother would react, if he ever learned of her disloyalty. But it had been a mistake. She would never be so foolish again.

Juliana peered carefully inside.

All three boys were asleep in the bed, covered by one large fur. Mary stood before the fire, warming her hands. She turned when Juliana entered. “Where have you been?”

She could not claim she had spent the past hour or so begging Alasdair for their freedom. “I went to speak with Alasdair, and then I spoke with his mother,” she lied uneasily. She averted her eyes and was afraid she flushed. How she hated deceiving her sister.

Mary was quiet.

Juliana looked up. Now she saw the trencher on the chest, the plates there mostly empty. If Alasdair’s mother had brought their supper up by herself, she was caught in her lie.

“What did he say? Or should I even ask?”

“He said you and the boys will be freed when your ransom is paid,” Juliana said quickly.

“But what about you?”

Juliana started, recalling his exact words—he had not mentioned her ransom or her release. “Of course he will free me, too,” she said slowly. But as she spoke, she thought about the wild and shocking passion they had just shared—and suddenly, she was uncertain. Hadn’t she sensed that he had returned to attack Coeffin Castle because of her?

“What is wrong?”

She quickly smiled. “Nothing. I am simply...distraught...and I am tired, too.” She decided she was jumping to conclusions. He had not attacked Coeffin Castle in order to capture her. He had done so as an act of revenge against her brother.

“Maybe you should rest.”

“I intend to. Would you be disappointed with me if I went down to the hall to eat?”

“No.” For one moment, the sisters stared at one another. Mary added, “Be careful, Juliana.”

Juliana smiled and turned away. Her smile vanished as she went down the hallway. Her sister knew what she had done—she was certain.

* * *

JULIANA DID NOT go into the great room. She paused just beyond it, staring inside, instead.

Alasdair was seated beside his father, and as she looked at him, her heart thundered. No wonder she had leapt into his bed—he was a powerful and attractive man. She could not deny it now.

He was eating with a ravenous appetite while his father spoke to him. Angus Mor looked like an older version of his son, a big, muscular man, his cheekbones high and hard, although his long hair was mostly gray. He wore the same blue-and-red plaid about his shoulders, pinned there with a gold brooch. Lady MacDonald was also at the table, as were several Highlanders, all of whom she now recognized.

Angus Mor was speaking, but then he saw her and became quiet. All conversation stopped instantly, every pair of eyes turning upon her.

Alasdair leapt up, so quickly, it was almost comical. “Lady Juliana.”

She knew she blushed, and heatedly; worse, his gaze was very warm upon hers. “I am interrupting,” she said.

“Nonsense.” Lady MacDonald stood and came around the table, walking over to her. Alasdair remained standing—staring. She took her arm, guiding her back to the table. “I brought Lady Comyn and her boys their supper. I wasn’t certain if you would stay with them or join us.” She smiled.

Was she also wondering where Juliana had been during the past hour? Juliana now avoided looking in Alasdair’s direction, aware of him sitting back down. But unfortunately, she kept thinking about the passion they had just shared.

“You have not met my husband,” Lady MacDonald continued.

Angus Mor did not stand up, but he smiled at her. “Welcome to Dunyveg, Lady Juliana.”

Juliana met his blue eyes, which were cool and assessing. This man was the Lord of the Isles and her brother’s worst enemy. Unlike his son, he felt no admiration or affection for her. She knew from the course of her lifetime how dangerous he was. He and her brother had been at war almost incessantly since she was born, although she did recall a brief truce a few years ago, in which they had rebelled together against King Alexander, over some grievance they had briefly shared. “My lord,” she said uneasily. Suddenly she wished she had remained upstairs.

“Alasdair tells me ye are fearless,” he said.

“To the contrary, I am very frightened.”

Her comment did not appear to affect him. “Do sit, Lady Juliana.”

Juliana sat down at the table, Lady MacDonald between her and Angus Mor. She faced Alasdair, and she stole a quick glance at him. He was staring and not bothering to hide his interest.

“How is the Lord of Lorn, Lady Juliana?” Angus Mor asked.

She tensed. “I would not know, I have not seen him in a week.”

“Of course not. He planned his attack on my son from Dunstaffnage, and now, he is on his way to Lochaber.”

She flinched. How did Angus Mor know that? “Do you have spies amongst us?”

“Did ye not have spies amongst us?” Angus Mor returned.

She trembled, for Angus Mor was frightening, in a different way than his son.

“Juliana would not ken if her brother has spies amongst us,” Alasdair said.

She jerked at Alasdair's hard tone, and her gaze flew to his. He would defend her to his father?
"It canna hurt to ask. Ye should demand their names as part of the ransom," Angus Mor said flatly.

"I'll think on it," Alasdair returned.

Juliana looked at him and then at his father. She hadn't realized that Alasdair managed his affairs independently from his father. And there was some tension between them, some rivalry. But his father was an old man—he had to be well over fifty—and Alasdair was in his late twenties, or so she assumed. He was mature enough to lead Clan Donald now. He probably wished to do so.

"Why dinna ye eat?" Alasdair said, surprising her.

A trencher had been placed in front of her, but now she had no appetite.

Alasdair valued her as a hostage and he admired her as a woman. And they were lovers. She might be his captive, but he would not truly hurt her. She had no such confidence in regards to his father.

Realizing Angus Mor was staring at her, Juliana ate.

* * *

DONALD AND ROGER were running up and down the corridor, chasing one another back and forth with loud shrieks. It was midday, and the boys had been cooped up in the chamber since they had awoken. But Juliana and Mary rushed in an attempt to quiet the boys before the entire castle complained.

"Roger! Donald! You cannot behave as barbarians!" Mary cried, running after Roger.

Juliana chased Donald down the corridor. "We are guests," she cried, finally seizing him by the back of his leine. As they halted, they came face to face with a boy of seven or eight years old.

He must have just come up the stairs, and he was staring coolly at them. "Yer not guests. Yer hostages. Alasdair said so."

Juliana was incredulous. She knew he was related to Alasdair instantly, and not just because of his demeanor. He looked like a childish version of him, with the same dark hair and blue eyes. "And whom might you be? I am Lady Juliana MacDougall," she said, her tone deliberately imperious.

"I am Alexander—the second Alexander." As he spoke, she heard footsteps behind him.

Alasdair appeared on the landing. "I see you have met my little brother, Alexander—we call him the little wolf." He smiled and ruffled the boy's hair. "Even ye must be kind to a captive—she is a lady."

The boy shrugged and slipped away, hurrying back down the stairs.

And suddenly they were very much alone, and she was acutely aware of it, as she felt her heart racing.

He said softly, "Ye vanished so quickly last night."

She had fled supper, with the intention of making certain she got safely to her own bed.

"Did my father frighten ye?"

She said carefully, "Yes, he did."

Their gazes were locked when suddenly Mary appeared with Roger and Donald in hand.

She looked back and forth between them. "Good morning," she said to Alasdair.

He smiled at her. "I hope ye slept well. Ye need not confine the boys. Ye can take a walk in the courtyard, or upon the beach, with my guard."

"Thank you," Mary said. She looked at her sons. "Please go into the chamber and tell Elasaide to get your cloaks." When they were gone, she stepped closer to Juliana—as if to protect her. "When will you ask for ransoms?"

"I am sending a messenger this afternoon," Alasdair said. "I am about to write the missive."

"You are asking for ransoms for us both?" Juliana asked.

He smiled at her. "Why would ye think otherwise?"

She felt like kicking his shin. "Because I hardly trust you."

“I am writing both Comyn and MacDougall, have no fear, Lady Juliana. I could hardly keep ye here without asking for a ransom.”

Of course he had to ask for a ransom. An even greater war would result if he simply held her captive, against her will. “And will you also do as your father asked—will you ask for the names of any spies?”

He slowly smiled. “As a sign of good faith, I will.”

Her heart sank. Ransoms took months to pay, or years, if they were excessive. But to demand the identity of any MacDougall spies would only anger her brother and complicate matters.

“Do you want to walk with us?” Mary asked her.

Juliana realized she was hesitating. If her sister were out for a few hours, she would be free to do as she wished.

An image had flashed in her mind—of being in Alasdair’s arms. What was wrong with her? They had spent an hour together. That tryst was not to be repeated. Alasdair might admire her, and he might lust for her, but he was a ruthless man. She had seen that herself. She would be deluding herself if she came to believe that he might sincerely protect her. That he might forget she was Alexander MacDougall’s sister. That he was any less ruthless than Angus Mor.

“Of course I will walk with you.” Not looking at Alasdair, Juliana turned and hurried away.

* * *

JULIANA APPROACHED THE great hall and saw her sister seated at the table with her boys, Elasaide, and Lady MacDonald. , Alasdair’s brother, the little wolf, was with them. While the women conversed, the boys were in a fierce discussion, and Juliana could not imagine about what. But she smiled, pleased that the second Alexander was being friendly to her nephews.

None of the men were present.

She suddenly heard a great commotion in the entry hall, which was flanked by two towers. She heard men’s voices, booted steps, the jangle of spurs, doors closing, bolts being jammed. Juliana hurried to the end of the corridor and peered around it into the stone entry chamber.

A great many men stood there, all shedding snow from their furs and plaids. She had already known Alasdair was present, because she had recognized his voice immediately. Now she saw him embracing another man—a man as tall and muscular as he was, with similar dark hair, a blue-and-red plaid visible beneath the fur he wore. As she watched the two men, she knew that Alasdair was greeting his brother, Angus Og.

He and his Highlanders had clearly just arrived at Dunyveg, never mind the late hour and the snow. Angus Mor shouldered through the men to clasp his son’s shoulder. “Yer late,” he said, but warmly.

“Hello Father,” Angus Og said. “The snow is even worse in the east.”

Juliana could now see his face. He was so obviously Alasdair’s brother—he had the same high cheekbones, the same blue eyes, the same strong jaw, and even a similar mane of dark hair. “Did ye succeed in convincing Lennox to support Bruce?” Angus Mor demanded.

“The Earl of Lennox will think about it and he will decide in a week or two—before he meets Menteith,” Angus Og said.

“We will never take the throne for Bruce without Lennox and Atholl,” Angus Mor said grimly.

“Maybe I should seek out Atholl.” Alasdair was as dark. “I am impatient, awaiting his reply.”

Angus Mor scowled. “Are we being played? Do they truly think to prosper under John Balliol?”

“There is more,” Angus Og said, his blue eyes heating. “Richard de Burgh failed to attend the council. He sent word instead that he was delayed.”

There was a surprised silence.

Juliana’s mind was racing as she listened to them. She hadn’t meant to spy, but the information she had discovered might be valuable to her brother. She could not believe they meant to rally the earls of Lennox and Atholl, or that the Irish magnate, de Burgh, was also on their side. She knew

she should retreat before she was seen. As she was about to flee back around the corner, Alasdair turned and looked at her.

His eyes widened in disbelief.

Instantly, Angus Mor looked in her direction, and Angus Og turned fully around, espying her as well.

Juliana stiffened in fear; Alasdair strode over to her. “Lady Juliana?” he asked tightly.

She met his gaze and saw the warning there. “I heard voices. Your mother wished for you to join her...” What kind of an excuse was that! She swallowed. “I told her I would find you.”

Angus Mor strode to her, his face hard, his eyes ice-cold. “Do we have a bold spy in our midst—yet again?” He turned to Alasdair. “Did she deceive ye, Alasdair? Perhaps she is not yer captive after all—perhaps yer her captive. Perhaps she has gotten ye so besotted, ye cannot see her for the spy that she is?”

Juliana cringed. She looked at Alasdair, who was dark with anger. “I am not her captive, nor will I ever be. She is no spy. She is my captive.”

“Ye had better make certain,” Angus Mor warned. In anger, he left.

She trembled, alone now with the two brothers. Angus Og was studying her, but not with hostility—he seemed curious. He nodded once, then followed his father into the great room.

Juliana was awaiting Alasdair’s rage—his attack. His face was cold now, as cold as his father’s had been. “We will speak of this later,” he finally said. “Go into the hall.”

Juliana nodded and rushed to obey.

Angus Mor was already at the table, and fiercely eating. Angus Og was embracing Lady MacDonald before sitting down between her and his father. Mary was seated on the other side of the table with her children. Juliana avoided Mary’s questioning look as she squeezed onto the bench beside her nephews, as far away from Angus Mor as possible. She wished she were not at the table at all.

She quickly began filling her own trencher with fish and game. Tears felt as if they were imminent.

What had she inadvertently done? It was one thing to be Alasdair’s prisoner, another his father’s. Alasdair remained the enemy, but he was rational and just compared to his father. And he had an interest in her, one beyond that of a captor toward his captive.

She worried that Angus Mor would interfere and assert his authority over her. She must not forget that there would never be mercy from the older man. In his eyes, she was his worst enemy’s sister and nothing more, a pawn to be ruthlessly used.

Alasdair strode into the room. Juliana avoided looking at him. He did not sit down with his parents and his brother. He went to her side of the table, and sat down on the end of the bench next to her, not giving her a single glance, either. He began piling food upon his plate. He looked up at no one and he did not speak.

No action could be clearer. She was his prisoner, and he meant to make certain that there was no doubt. But it also felt as if he had staked a claim, as if he meant to indicate that she was also under his protection.

Oddly, she felt reassured by his gesture.

But his father was angered, she could see that, as he ate in dark silence.

She meant to force herself to eat, but it was impossible. It was Angus Og who broke the tension, as he began telling his father about a feud involving land in Jute. Angus Mor turned his full attention upon his second son, asking him questions about the dispute, and Juliana felt some small relief. She hoped to never attract the chief’s attention again.

When the meal was finally over and they had politely bid everyone good-night, the sisters hurried upstairs, shooing the boys up ahead of them. As Donald and Roger ran inside the bedchamber,

Mary took Juliana's hand, halting her on its threshold. "What is going on?" she asked quietly, but with strain. "Did you argue with Angus Mor?"

Juliana shook her head. But as she did so, she saw Alasdair approaching. Mary turned and saw him, too.

"No, she did not argue with my father," he said. "She spied on him, instead."

Mary gasped.

"Juliana, I wish a word with ye."

Juliana stiffened. "I think we should speak on the morrow," she began.

He took her arm, his hold uncompromising. "No. We will speak now." He looked coolly at Mary. "Good night."

Mary did not move, her eyes wide, and Juliana was certain she thought that she was in trouble, and more, that she might even be worried about Alasdair's ultimate intentions.

"Good night, Lady Comyn," Alasdair said firmly.

Mary suddenly hugged her. "Please, do not be reckless!" and then she hurried into their chamber.

Alasdair did not hesitate. Still gripping Juliana by the arm, he closed the door after Mary. He gave Juliana a sidelong look and pulled her down the corridor with him. She had to run to keep up with him.

The moment they were within his chamber, he shut the door. He released her, went to the fire and stoked it. It blazed.

Juliana bit her lip hard. He was angry with her, and she expected his wrath, but she also knew exactly how he meant to end the night. And that knowledge made her blood hum hungrily within her veins, even though she knew she must resist him.

He straightened and faced her, slowly removing his plaid. "Do not ever spy upon me or mine again."

She stiffened as he threw the plaid onto the room's single chair. "Alasdair. I did not intend to spy."

"Ye realize," he said, "that I cannot allow ye to communicate with yer brother now." He unbuckled the belt and tossed that aside, as well.

She was dry of mouth. "I did not understand what you were speaking of," she said, though she had understood everything.

He laughed, sitting on the bed. He pulled off one boot. "Ye ken. Ye ken we need our allies to take the throne fer Bruce."

She trembled. "I cannot stay here tonight."

He pulled off his other boot and stood up. "Ye can—and ye will." And he walked to her and seized her shoulders, hard. "Ye ran away last night. Ye will not run away now."

Her hands found his hard chest. "Mary will know."

"Yer sister will never betray ye." And then he kissed her, hard and open-mouthed.

Juliana closed her eyes, her senses rioting, pressing every inch of her body against his, as closely as she could, her arms around him now. She kissed him wildly back. Alasdair made a hard sound, and he carried her to the bed.

CHAPTER SIX

"I HOPE I pleased ye enough last night that ye will not think to spy on me today."

Juliana clutched the fur covers to her chest. It was not yet dawn, and she had spent the entire night in Alasdair's bed—making love with him. She had thought the first few hours they had shared wildly passionate, but that had been a mere prelude to the frightening levels they had later reached.

She gazed at him, reeling. How could she find such enjoyment in her enemy's arms? And how was she to define their relationship now?

They were lovers, but that did not change the fact that she was his hostage. Did he care for her at all? Wouldn't he release her if he did?

"Yer staring."

If she were not his prisoner, she would flirt with him now, as he was so gloriously naked. "What does last night have to do with today?"

He shrugged his leine on, covering his magnificent body, and gave her a hard look. "Everything."

She wet her lips. "So last night had some significance?"

He now became wary. "Are we in a negotiation, Juliana?"

She inhaled. "If last night had anything to do with today, you would release me and Mary—or at least, you'd free my sister."

He finally smiled. "Most men find stubborn women annoying. I happen to like yer obstinate nature."

"Are you insulting me?"

"I am flattering ye."

She was not to be deterred. "If my kisses mean anything to you, if last night affects us today, then you would release me, Mary and the boys."

He had thrown his plaid about his shoulders. Irritation covered his face. "Enough. Yer kisses mean a great deal to me, otherwise, I'd have spent a brief hour with ye and sent ye from this chamber. But I cannot release ye and yer sister, not yet, and I am not going to be weakened by a woman, Juliana—not even a woman like ye."

"So we remain enemies by day, and lovers by night?" She trembled with anger and disappointment. But had she truly expected more?

"Are ye not well fed? Protected? Clothed? Are yer sister and her children lacking?"

"They lack William—her husband—the boys' father!"

He was in disbelief. "We spent most of the night together—and ye fight with me now?"

She flung the fur off and stood up, entirely naked—and aware that she had never before flaunted herself this way. "Last night meant nothing, and we remain enemies." She walked past him to retrieve her clothes. She looked over her shoulder at him. "And that, of course, is your decision."

He seized her and pulled her into his embrace. "Witch," he said, kissing her. "I have many enemies, Juliana, and yer not one of them."

She looked into his blue eyes and whispered, "Prove it."

He darkened and released her. "Ye had better leave or I will take ye again."

Juliana seized her clothes, shrugged on her leine, and girdle and boots in hand, she ran from the room. In the hall outside, she faltered, feeling as if she wished to cry. But had she truly expected him to free them, in return for sex?

She was reminded of the huge ransom Mary would eventually bring, a far greater one than her own. She was the Earl of Buchan's daughter by marriage, as well as MacDougall's sister. Of course he wished to keep Mary as a hostage until her ransom was paid.

And now, she wondered why his feelings for her seemed to matter so much.

"I thought I heard you," Mary said quietly.

Juliana started and flushed. She had been caught outside Alasdair's chamber, her hair down, her girdle, mantel and boots in hand.

"Come inside, Juliana, before the fire, or you will catch cold," Mary said softly.

Juliana followed her sister into the chamber, taking a seat before the fire and putting on her boots. A pale gray light was finally easing into the chamber, a harbinger of the sunrise.

Mary moved the room's other chair close to hers and took it. The boys remained asleep in the bed. "Do you love him?"

Juliana gasped.

Mary took her hand. “You have always been my wild little sister, but you have never been a flirt. You have kept the men away. Yet you spent the night with him.”

Juliana trembled. “He is a difficult man to resist,” she managed to answer. “Oh, Mary, are you terribly angry with me?”

“I am frightened for you,” she said. “And you did not answer me.”

Juliana began shaking her head. “How can I love him? He is the eldest son of our worst enemy. We have been at war for years and years. Hundreds of good MacDougall boys and men have died at their hands!” Falling in love with Alasdair was unthinkable.

Mary sighed. “I never expected to fall in love with William—Buchan’s third son who was intended for the church!”

“I am not in love,” Juliana said tersely.

“Did he seduce you?” Mary was incredulous.

Juliana knew how dangerous such an accusation was—especially if her brother ever heard it. “No! I wanted to be with him. Mary, I am eighteen years old. I should have been married last year, and most women would have been married years ago! I simply don’t know why I desire Alasdair, but I do.”

Mary studied her. “And what happens when we are freed? When you go home? When our brother arranges the right marriage for you?”

Juliana stiffened. She had not considered any of Mary’s questions. “I will be pleased when we are freed, and I cannot wait to have a husband,” she said, but as she spoke, she felt as if she were responding with rehearsed answers, ones her sister wished to hear. “You know I want children of my own!”

“If Alexander ever learns of your affair, he will be furious. But he will forgive you, I am certain, and I am as certain that he will kill Alasdair Og.”

Juliana shook her head as she imagined her brother and Alasdair in the worst blood feud imaginable—one fought over her innocence—or lack thereof. “I know you will never tell him.”

“Of course not! But will you be able to deceive your husband when the time comes? How can you hope to have a good marriage, when it starts with a lie?”

Juliana leapt to her feet. “I don’t know! I haven’t thought about any of this!”

Mary also stood. “I know you haven’t. I love you so, Juliana, but you are impulsive and reckless, and I am afraid for you.”

“He won’t hurt me.” She felt certain of that.

“I think you are right. He is our enemy, but he is an honorable man. Still, I am worried. You must be careful with him.”

Juliana did not understand. “What are you saying?”

“Alasdair does not strike me as a casual man.”

Mary smiled grimly, as Juliana realized that she was right. There was nothing casual about Alasdair. He was a man of careful ambition and keen intellect. He would not behave recklessly, or undertake any path lightly. His choices would be deliberate ones.

Even the choice of having an affair with the sister of his enemy.

* * *

THE NEXT FEW days passed without any major incident, as both sisters awaited word from their brother and William, to learn their response to Alasdair’s ransom demands—to learn of their fates. Of course there was little doubt that the ransoms would be paid, sooner or later. However, Alasdair had not revealed his exact demands, and neither Juliana nor Mary had dared to directly ask him.

The women were allowed to move freely about the castle, the children to play upon the beach. Lady MacDonald was an amiable hostess, sharing tales with the women and the boys about life in the isles, and including Mary and Juliana in many household tasks. Because it snowed heavily for several

days, an unusual occurrence for March, everyone was kept indoors most of the time. And with such weather, it was unlikely any messenger would be able to arrive.

Alasdair gave the boys small carved horses and men, toys that kept them occupied for hours. And at night, when everyone was abed, Juliana stole into Alasdair's room, where he was waiting impatiently for her.

It finally stopped snowing one late afternoon. Juliana stared outside her chamber window, pleased to see the gray clouds dispersing, revealing patches of blue sky. Tomorrow might be sunny.

Mary came to stand beside her. "Maybe now we will receive word from Alexander and William."

Juliana put her arm around her. "Of course we will. I am going down to help Lady MacDonald and the maids in the kitchens. Will you come?"

Mary hesitated. "I think I am going to lie down."

Juliana hugged her. "Rest." In the ten days they had been held captive, Mary's girth had obviously increased. No one could mistake that she was pregnant now.

She went downstairs. Realizing her mood was as bright as the next day promised to be, she sobered. She was beginning to feel like a guest, not a hostage, and maybe she had better remind herself that was not the case.

Then she heard Alasdair shouting.

She stiffened, as he so rarely raised his voice. But now his brother, Angus Og, was shouting back at him. What could they be arguing about? Shocked, she hurried forward, intending to end the dispute.

"Are ye a madman now?" Angus Og cried. "Or perhaps, ye think yerself immortal, like an old Celt god!" His blue eyes flashed and he stood as if braced for battle.

"I think ye speak too freely, or, mayhap, yer filled with envy!" Alasdair snapped. "Achanduin Castle is a fine stronghold!"

Juliana had been about to go inside and step between them, for she feared they might come to blows, but she paused, stunned. What did Achanduin Castle have to do with them?

"I am not jealous, Alasdair," Angus Og warned. "I think to protect ye, ye fool, from yer own grand and blind ambition!"

"And ye have no ambition? We both ken ye'd be King of the Isles if I let ye take Islay!"

She had seen nothing but camaraderie and affection between the brothers. Her resolve became unshakable. Juliana stepped into the great room.

Both men whirled to face her. Each was flushed with anger and now, they were incredulous that she dared interrupt.

"Ye wish to speak with me now?" Alasdair demanded.

"Let her stay," Angus Og smirked.

Juliana trembled. "I heard you speaking—shouting. How can two brothers fight so?"

"'tis not yer affair, Juliana," Alasdair warned.

Juliana glanced at Angus Og, blushing. Alasdair was so angry that he had failed to address her as Lady Juliana—he had sounded as if they were intimate, which, of course, they were.

"Perhaps Lady Juliana wishes to ken why we argue over Achanduin Castle," Angus Og said, eyeing her.

Juliana stared back at him. She had hardly spoken to him in the past few days since he had arrived at Dunyveg. But she had observed him from afar, and in many ways, he reminded her of Alasdair. He was shrewd, arrogant, powerful and aware of it. He was also good-looking, and he knew that, too. She had caught him flirting with her maid and she was fairly certain he had seduced her.

He would inherit most of Kintyre from his father, making him a powerful Highland lord. He was a few years younger than Alasdair, whom she had learned was twenty-seven, and he had yet to marry.

"Of course I wish to know why you argue over Achanduin—which is on my land."

Alasdair smiled tightly at her. “Ye never cease to amaze me with yer boldness.”

Angus Og laughed without mirth. “My brother flirts with ex-communication.”

Juliana went still. Had she misheard?

Alasdair cursed, the very first time he had ever done so in front of her.

“The Pope thinks to excommunicate Alasdair?” she cried.

“Bishop Wishart has written us, demanding Alasdair return Achanduin Castle to the church, as the next Bishop of Argyll has been elected. Wishart was very direct—he will next write the Pope, describing Bishop Alan’s murder on holy ground, the attack upon the cathedral, and the theft of Achanduin Castle.”

Juliana began to shake. “Men have been excommunicated for fewer crimes against God.”

“I did not murder the bishop on holy ground, he was hanged outside the cathedral,” Alasdair said tightly.

Juliana was incredulous. “No one will care about such a minor detail! You must return Achanduin Castle immediately!”

He stared coldly at her. Then he turned to his brother. “She did not need to know any of this!”

“Why not? Perhaps she has some affection for ye, enough to persuade ye to a sane course.”

Angus Og nodded at her and strode from the room.

Alasdair turned his back upon her and paced to the hearth, where he stared darkly at the fire.

Juliana walked hesitantly over to him. She laid her hand on his back.

He started.

“You do not want to go to hell.”

“I am not excommunicated yet.”

“Alasdair! You cannot play such a dangerous game—return Achanduin Castle!”

He eyed her. “And should I return it to save my soul, or to enrich yer lands?”

She felt hurt. “I am not thinking about myself. Fool that I am.” She turned away.

He seized her arm, whirling her back to face him. His blue gaze was searing. “So ye do hold me in some affection?”

She hesitated. “I don’t know.” She was frightened for him, and did that mean she truly cared? Did she wish to save him, and his soul?

He made a harsh sound, then released her.

“But I do know this: keeping Achanduin Castle is not worth an eternity in hell.” Juliana turned abruptly, shaken. And she saw Angus Mor, standing on the threshold of the hall, watching them like a hawk. He still suspected her of treachery.

She hurried past him as she left the room.

* * *

JULIANA HAPPENED TO be in Alasdair’s room, where she was replacing the wool blankets on his bed with fresh ones. He hadn’t asked her to do so, and as she folded up the fur at the foot of the bed, she was aware that it pleased her to take some small care for him.

She turned and walked to each window in turn, opening the shutters wide. It was now mid-March, and it was a cold but brilliantly sunny day. There was no snow left about the castle or on the beaches below it; she could just see some snowy ridges in the north.

She paused, inhaling the fresh air, as birds chirped from the treetops outside the stronghold. Why hadn’t a messenger come yet? Why wasn’t there some word from either Alexander or William? And was she truly dismayed?

She glanced about the stone chamber, which had almost become her own. She never slept in the chamber with Mary and the boys. She was becoming accustomed to sharing Alasdair’s room.

“Juliana? Have you seen Roger?” Mary asked worriedly from the doorway.

“I thought all the boys were downstairs.”

Mary shook her head, one hand on her now swollen belly. “He has vanished.”

Juliana hurried to her. "He hasn't disappeared, I assure you of that."

"No." Mary plucked her sleeve. "He has begun to ask me where William is. He has started to complain that he wants his father—and he wants to go home."

Juliana was surprised. Roger, although the eldest, was far quieter and more steadfast than his mischievous brother, Donald. He was so clearly the thoughtful brother—which would serve him well when, one day, he became lord of Castle Bain. "Roger has been complaining?"

Mary nodded. "Just this morning I tried to tell him that we will go home soon, but he refused to listen—he ran out of the chamber. Now, I cannot find him."

Juliana was mildly alarmed. "I will find him, Mary. Just rest. He cannot have gone far." She left her sister and hurried downstairs. It took a half an hour for her to realize that if Roger was within the castle, he was deliberately hiding from them. No one had seen him since they had all broken the fast that morning.

Juliana was alarmed, but she had no intention of worrying her sister. Having taken up a warmer mantle, she was about to go outside to look for him when Alasdair came striding inside.

He was disheveled from the wind, his long hair tangled about his shoulders, the bright blue feather more visible than ever, patches of mud on his boots, the skirts of his leine, and even his bare thighs. He grinned at her. "We will have venison tonight."

She smiled back. Her heart turned over as it always did when she first saw him, after not seeing him for a few hours. Perhaps it was time to admit that she had truly become fond of him. "Then everyone will be pleased. Alasdair—have you seen Roger?"

"Isn't he with the other children?"

"I have just searched the entire castle—if he is here, he is hiding. But perhaps he is outside."

He was bewildered. "Why would he hide?"

"He has started to behave oddly, with distress—he has been asking to go home to his father."

An odd look that she could not decipher crossed his face. "I'll help ye look fer him."

They went outside into the bailey, Alasdair telling her to search the area by the front gates. As they headed off in opposite directions, Juliana became dismayed when she saw the front gates were open. But even a small boy would be remarked if he walked out of Dunyveg—surely.

Another hour passed, in which Juliana became extremely alarmed. No one had seen Roger, and she had searched every nook and cranny of the bailey. She asked a passing lad if he knew where Alasdair was, and she was told he was in the stables.

Trying to reassure herself, Juliana hurried across the bailey and into the stone stables. It was dark within, smelling pleasantly of hay and horses. As she entered, a dog ran up to her, its tail wagging, and several mares nickered.

Alasdair stepped out of the shadows and placed a finger upon his lips, then nodded to his right.

Juliana rushed forward. Alasdair took her arm and guided her to where an old mare was stalled, a young foal suckling at her side. Roger was curled up in the chips and hay, in a far corner of the stall, asleep.

She inhaled in relief. Alasdair put his arm around her and pulled her close. She looked up at him, feeling a rush of gratitude. "We have to wake him. I'm surprised that mare allowed him inside with her colt."

"Let me do it," he said.

Juliana assumed that he did not want her to go within, in case the mare decided to behave protectively towards her foal. She watched him step inside, pat the mare, then carefully sidestep her and kneel by Roger. He lifted him into his arms and carried him outside.

As he did, Roger awoke.

Alasdair smiled at him. "Did ye come to see the newborn colt?"

Roger became widely awake. His eyes huge, he shook his head.

Alasdair stepped outside the stall, closed it, and set Roger down. “Did ye think to find a horse, then, and ride away?”

Juliana started. Why would he ask such a question!

Roger was tearful and belligerent. “I don’t like being a hostage.”

“I ken.” He stroked his hair. “No one likes being held hostage, but it’s the way of men.”

Roger shook his head fiercely. “I hate it here!”

Alasdair knelt. “I ken. But ye have a duty to yer mother. Ye frightened her, Roger, hiding as ye did, and thinking to run away. Ye frightened yer aunt. Yer duty is to be strong and brave like yer father. Do ye not wish to be like William?”

“Yes,” he finally said, his gaze riveted upon Alasdair. “Will I ever go home?”

“Of course ye’ll go home. But until ye do, ye must take care of yer mother. Ye canna worry or frighten her again. I ken, ’tis hard being brave. Even when yer grown like I am. But a man dinna have a choice, Roger. Every man has a duty to his kin to be strong and brave.”

Juliana was moved. She had not known Alasdair could be so gentle and kind with children.

Roger continued to gaze keenly at him. “But you’ve never been afraid. You’re Alasdair Og!”

“Sit with me.” Alasdair sat down on a bale of hay, and Roger sat down beside him, enraptured. “A long time ago, when I was much younger than ye, I was sent away from my mother and my father. I was a hostage too.”

Juliana started. She had never heard a word of this before!

Roger’s eyes popped. “You were a hostage?”

“Aye, the King of Scotland held me hostage, for he was very angry with my father. I was sent to him with only a maid.”

Roger bit his lip. “You did not have your mother?”

Alasdair laid his hand on his shoulder. “No. But ye have yer mother, yer aunt, and yer brothers with ye. Ye must remember that.”

Roger nodded. “Were you scared?”

“Yes. It was very hard being strong and brave.” His regard serious, he added, “I dinna ken I would ever go home, but I did. And as soon as yer ransom is paid, ye will go home, but ye must vow ye’ll not run away again.”

“I promise.”

“Good.” Alasdair stood up. He suddenly started, as if he’d forgotten that Juliana stood there.

She could barely breathe. How was it that he had never mentioned this to her before?

He smiled slightly at her, allowing Roger to precede them out of the stables. As they crossed the bailey, Juliana’s mind raced. She finally took his arm and halted; he faced her, his expression wry.

“I did not know you were a hostage when you were a child!”

“My father went to war for the King of Norway and Haakon and he lost.” He shrugged. Then, “I ken what the boy is feeling.”

Her heart raced. “How old were you?”

“Almost two.”

He had been sent away as a hostage, without his mother, at the age of two? Of course he understood Roger.

“Dinna look at me that way,” he warned, but mildly.

“How long were you held hostage?”

“Close to three years.”

Juliana bit her lip, tears rising. She seized his hand. “Your poor mother! You must have been so frightened! And to be kept hostage for so long!”

“Dinna feel sorry for me.” He shrugged her off, his look filled with warning. “Little boys grow up.”

Of course she was stricken—and she felt sorry for what he must have endured. But Juliana found her composure. “Alasdair. Thank you for being so kind to Roger.”

He softened. “Did ye think I’d be unkind?”

“I didn’t know,” she whispered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A MESSENGER FINALLY arrived—with letters from the Earl of Buchan and Alexander MacDougall.

Juliana was in the great room with her sister and Lady MacDonald, seated before the hearth, sewing. Roger and Donald were outside, playing on the beach, and little Thomas was asleep upstairs. The moment the men came inside, their loud voices and heavy booted steps could be heard. Alasdair walked in first.

Juliana saw that he was holding several rolls of vellum, and that a man she did not recognize was behind him with Angus Mor. That Highlander wore Buchan’s green-and-red plaid.

Word about their ransoms had finally come. She slowly got up, her heart thundering, as Alasdair walked directly to her. “Yer brother has written us both,” he said.

She could barely look away as he handed her the roll that was hers.

“And William? Did he send me a missive?” Mary cried.

Alasdair handed her a parchment roll. “Aye, that is from William. But before ye read it, Buchan has agreed to pay yer ransom, Lady Mary, and ye will probably be free by June, as soon as the payment is made.”

Mary nodded, her eyes wide, her cheeks flushed. “June,” she whispered. It was April the second now.

Juliana tore her gaze from Alexander’s. June was not far away, and would she be free then, too? And if so, why did she feel an odd dismay?

Juliana glanced at Mary, who remained seated, and was now eagerly reading William’s letter. Tears fell from her eyes. Juliana hurried to sit beside her, still clutching her own parchment roll. “Is everything well?”

She looked up, nodding, as she wiped at her tears. “He is fine. He misses me. He misses the boys. He has been told I am in good health. And he does not say a word about the war that will surely come soon.”

He did not want to worry her, Juliana thought. “June is not far away,” she said, patting her hand.

“I will not see William in June. The baby is due in July. I will not be able to travel.”

Juliana twisted to look at Alasdair, darkly. He was reading his letter, but he glanced across the room at her. She knew he understood her meaning—he should release Mary now, so she could have her child at home.

“What does our brother say? When will you be released?” Mary asked softly.

Juliana unrolled the parchment and smoothed it out upon the table. Mary set a taper closer, so it was easier to read.

“My dear Juliana,” he wrote, “It aggrieves me to no end that Alasdair Og attacked Lismore behind my back, taking you, Mary and the boys prisoner. Buchan has agreed to pay the sum demanded for Mary’s release and I am thankful for that. Your ransom is another matter. Alasdair Og has demanded more gold for your release than I have, and I must beg for help from our allies. I do not know how long it will take to raise the funds. I have been told you are in good health, so I beg you to be patient. God keep you well. Your brother, Alexander MacDougall.”

Juliana was in disbelief. She looked up. Alasdair had been watching her closely and their gazes met instantly.

He had asked for a reasonable ransom for Mary, but an excessive one for her? So excessive that her brother needed to seek help with the payment from their allies? She realized she was standing—and that she was shaking.

“Juliana?” Mary asked with alarm.

She somehow smiled at her sister. “I do not know when I will be released. Alexander does not have enough gold to pay my ransom. Not now, anyway.”

Mary gasped. She glanced sharply at Alasdair. “How much did you ask for her?”

Juliana also stared, but coolly. “Yes, how much did you ask?”

Alasdair’s face had become an impassive mask. “I have asked for a ransom commensurate with yer value to me.”

Juliana became aware that everyone in the hall was staring at her, and their regards were oddly knowing. Angus Mor seemed pleased.

What did everyone know that she did not? And was this truly possible? She had trusted Alasdair to ask for a simple ransom—she had, until then, believed she would be justly released when it was paid! Had she been a fool?

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