



HISTORICAL

Nicole Locke

The Highland
Caird's Bride

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The Highland Laird's Bride

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Аннотация

At the gates of a Scottish keep...Lioslath of Clan Fergusson has defended her clan and her orphaned siblings against countless enemies. So when Laird Colquhoun, the man responsible for the death of her father, arrives at the gates of her crumbling keep, she'll fight him all the way!It's soon clear Bram's famed tactics of seduction and negotiation won't work on this guarded, beautiful woman. But when the sparks between them turn to passion, and they're forced to wed, Bram must do whatever it takes to win over his new bride!

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‘You need to leave. I’ve warned you.’

‘We haven’t begun, Lioslath. Why would I leave?’

He was so arrogant. Vibrant. Too full of life. She made another signal and Dog, with a noise deep in his throat, came to her heels.

The sound always raised the hairs on her neck, and she had no doubt it did the same to Bram. But he did not take his eyes from hers, did not see Dog as a threat, and so he forced her hand.

‘You need to leave because I was expecting you, Bram, Laird of Colquhoun.’

Lioslath stepped into the light and lifted the dagger, making sure it glinted so he’d know what she intended.

NICOLE LOCKE discovered her first romance novels in her grandmother’s closet, where they were secretly hidden. Convinced that books hidden must be better than those that

weren't, Nicole greedily read them. It was only natural for her to start writing them (but now not so secretly). She lives in London with her two children and her husband—her happily-ever-after.

The Highland Laird's Bride

Nicole Locke



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To my friends, for your chiding encouragement and constant bewilderment that I've survived this long. Here's my secret: I wouldn't have made it without you.

Renee, it is infinitely precious to me that we can still be five years old together.

Anita, I know you thought I'd never grow up and, as always, you were right.

Corrie, full of grace, love and life. Your vivaciousness and unheard-of-before cocktails are my sunshine.

Sue, I'd be lost without your meticulous brain and lists, but even more so without your laugh.

Karen, I know you didn't want your name in the acknowledgements but, alas, you can't edit this sentence as you have all the others. I want you to know how much I cherish our

friendship.

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Scotland—1296

‘You were expecting me.’

Lioslath of Clan Fergusson stopped pacing the darkness of her bedroom and adjusted the knife in her hand. From years of training, she knew simply on the utterance of his four words where Bram, Laird Colquhoun, stood in the room, and the precise location of his beating heart.

She knew it, even though her back was to him and she’d been caught pacing. Defenceless. Or so he thought.

The laird was right; she had been expecting him. Expecting him as one views a storm on the horizon. Ever since he and his clansmen, like black clouds, crested a nearby hill. Since he alerted her young brothers, who raced to the keep, giving them precious moments to lock the gates. All the while the storm of Laird Colquhoun and his clansmen gathered strength and lined up outside the keep with arrows and swords like lightning about to strike.

But they hadn’t struck. And it had been almost a month.

Which meant weeks of her climbing the haphazardly rebuilt platform to look over the gates; weeks of hearing the Colquhoun men below her even before she climbed the rickety steps.

It had been almost a month, and still they didn't strike. Although she barred the gates, though the villagers shunned him, Laird Colquhoun hadn't struck like the harshest of Scottish storms. Rather, he and his clansmen enclosed the keep. Surrounded, she felt choked by his stormy presence, suffocated by the battering wait.

But this morning, she knew the wait was over when she spied the carefully placed food at the outside entrance of the secret passage. Her captor had discovered her tunnel. She knew, despite the fact she locked the gates, the storm would get inside.

When he hadn't come during the day, Lioslath expected Bram of Clan Colquhoun this night. She was no fool.

But she hadn't been expecting his voice. Deep, melodious, a tenor that sent an immediate awareness skittering up the backs of her legs and wrapping warmth around her centre.

So she didn't immediately turn to see him, even though a man was in her bedroom. Forbidden and unwanted. She didn't pretend maidenly outrage as she had carefully planned, to provide a necessary distraction and give her an advantage before her attack.

It was his voice. It was...unexpected.

It didn't fit here, in the dark, in the intimacy of her bedroom. It didn't fit with what she'd seen of him so far.

Arrogant, proud, superior, Bram rode through her broken village to her weather-worn gates thinking himself a welcome benefactor with his carts of overstocked gifts. Or worse, as laird of the keep bestowing treasures to his people.

Since Laird Colquhoun began the siege, he'd been an abrasive force, from his vibrant red hair to the length of his strides as he walked amongst his men. His voice booming orders; his demands to open the gates. His constant laughter. Everything about him she instinctively rejected.

But not now.

Now his voice reverberated with some power, some seductive tone she'd never heard before. She felt his voice. And it shouldn't have felt like this. Not to her. She calmed her wavering heart.

Never to her.

Allowing the cool night air into her lungs, she turned and immediately wished she stood elsewhere.

The full moon cast light through the window and holes in the roof, but his back was to the light and Bram remained in darkness.

She knew the darkness would give his voice an advantage. She adjusted the knife, careful to keep it close and ready. Her plan might have changed, but not her intent. Bram of Clan Colquhoun was expected, but he was not wanted. He had arrived too late for that.

'Get out,' she said, without menace. Dog hid in a corner. She needed not to alert him to her tumultuous feelings; she needed to

remain calm and keep to their routine. For years they'd hunted together. Dog knew what the knife in her hand meant: for him to lie in wait for her signal—and surprise their prey. 'Get out of my room and away from the keep. Weren't the closed gates and the hurtled dung enough deterrent? Leave, Laird Colquhoun. You never should have come.'

* * *

Bram could only stare.

Weeks of being barred entrance to the keep of Clan Fergusson, of wasting time while determining the layout of the keep and the village. Of glimpsing the woman who, without schedule, would appear at the top of the gates. Visible, but never near enough to truly see her.

But now, as shafts of moonlight illuminated her form, he did see her. It was as if the night created another star. One brighter than those poised in the sky above this tiny room.

He glanced around. A single bed, a small table at the opposite wall. Something large, like a trunk, in the dark corner nearest her. A simple room and too meagre for her beauty, but at least they were alone.

'You were expecting me,' Bram repeated, now realising the meaning of finding this woman fully dressed and pacing. 'You received my gift this morning. You observed us today. You knew I was coming.'

'Your gift?'

'The deer and vegetables by the entrance,' he said. 'I didn't

know if you would take them.'

She frowned, a darkness marring her eyes.

He knew she'd been stealing their food for the past week. Until yesterday, he hadn't known how. When he discovered the tunnel, he knew he had to let her know his intentions. So this morning, he placed the food at the entrance. He only meant it as part of his negotiations.

But now he knew, instantly, he failed.

'You didn't want to take them,' he answered for her. He was a master at diplomacy, but his gift hadn't softened her towards him. She locked the gates against him and his clansmen. The food was only a reminder.

'Why aren't you leaving?' she said instead.

Because what he came to do wasn't done. He had to be here. Tonight. While he'd been waiting for the gates to open, danger came to his clan. His duty as laird necessitated he end this stalemate, but it wasn't duty he thought of now.

Lioslath's short black hair curled and spiked defiantly. It highlighted her sharp cheekbones and softly angled chin. Her skin was pale in the moonlight, and it emphasised the size and brightness of her eyes. And the colour...

They were blue, intense and startling against the blackness of her hair and thick eyelashes. It was as if under her finely arched brows shone the brightest of summer skies.

In the moonlight, he couldn't fully see the outline of her body, but he didn't need to now. Every time she stood on the

platform, the wind plastered her paltry clothing to curves that made beggars of men. Including himself.

His reaction to her wasn't in the plan he and his brothers devised: for him to make amends to the Fergussons, to wait out the winter and to hide from a certain English king.

A complicated plan made simple by the fact that all of it could be done on Fergusson land and that Lioslath needed to know only one of those reasons for his being here. The one he explained in the letter he wrote last April. To remedy the wrongs that had been done to her clan and family by lending aid and comfort to the Fergussons' orphaned children.

After all, he'd tried to ally the Colquhoun clan with theirs, when he had married his sister Gaira to Fergussons' laird and Lioslath's father. When Gaira had refused such a marriage and fled to their sister at Doonhill, Lioslath's father had been killed.

Unfortunately, the Battle of Dunbar had delayed Bram's arrival by summer. It would soon be winter, and his intent to help this clan would prove more difficult. Yet he was here now.

Here, now, and in her room. It had been a simple act to arrive here by a cleverly hidden passage. He'd been surprised the tunnel led to under her bedroom. When he found her here, he'd been pleased. After the political and personal turmoil of the past year, his brothers' fateful arrival and portentous messages, he needed something to be simple.

But there was nothing simple about Lioslath. A woman who was created as if the moon and sun deemed her beauty worthy of

them both. Had he known the quality, the sheer magnificence of her beauty, he would have breached the weak defences a fortnight ago. Any man would have.

He cursed himself at his use of reasonable diplomacy. The food he tried offering failed because he'd been laying siege to a decrepit keep instead of laying siege to the beautiful female inside.

Suddenly, everything became clear to him on how easy it would be to get her cooperation. And he needed her cooperation if his plan to remain here for the winter were to work.

'You want me to leave? After all, we need to...negotiate. This is your first meeting with Laird Colquhoun,' he said. Self-assured, he knew who he was, what his power meant to any lass. 'You couldn't desire this to be so brief.'

She was beautiful and probably used to men and flirting. He'd been a fool to stay outside the gates. A fool thinking not to frighten the children and families with force. All he had to do was to coax, to flirt, to please.

'Brief? I desire—' she put emphasis on the word '—for it not to happen at all.'

He liked the word 'desire' coming from her mouth. He liked the shape of her full lower lip, the deep dip on her upper one. Her lips were shaped like a bow, as if an angel had pressed its fingers there to keep a secret.

'But it has.' He shrugged, pretending a nonchalance his body didn't feel. 'I'm here to get past our introduction. You are

Lioslath, after all,' he murmured. 'The eldest daughter?' He'd introduced himself when he came to the gates, but she hadn't. Maybe some sense of propriety was needed, even here, in her bedroom.

In her bedroom, where she stood waiting for him. His anticipation tightened. Maybe she knew this game as well as he.

Her frown increased. 'You came to this room not knowing who I am?'

Satisfaction coursed through him. She did know the game. She was coyly, if not suggestively, asking him to guess who she was. Flirting would be easier than he thought.

'I know exactly who you are.' He stepped towards her as she held still. The room was small; it wouldn't take much to be right against her. 'The lass I will soon kiss.'

Her lips parted as her brows drew in. She shook her head once as if answering a question inside.

Did she think he wouldn't kiss her? Then she didn't know him very well. Another regret for his delay. She would soon learn that he kept his word.

'I am not fond of jests,' she said. 'Nor those who try my patience.'

She stepped outside the shafts of light and he felt the loss of vision. He might be within the gates now, but she continued to bar him with her sparring words. A game she clearly played well.

But it was late, and although he was known for his game playing, he knew when to steal forward, especially when he had

the advantage. She was a woman, after all. He always knew how to get his way with women. She would be no different.

‘Come now, enough of this game,’ he said. ‘It is night and we are alone. Isn’t there something else you’d rather play?’

Play? Games?

Lioslath didn’t understand this man.

At first she blamed the lateness of the night, the way his voice seemed to reach into her. Blamed her continual hunger and thirst for her addled mind. She knew she was addled, because when he mentioned game, her mouth watered with the wanting of succulent meat. But that wasn’t the type of game he meant.

‘I never play games.’ She found the very word offensive.

He waved and she followed the gesture. His hands were finely tapered, with a strength and eloquence that was as unexpected as his voice.

‘Come, I’ve seen this ploy before,’ he said. ‘In the past, it has made the reward sweet. But we have waited long enough, love. Trust that my willingness to participate in this game you play could not be any truer.’

Was this man flirting with her? Since childhood, and until only recently, she’d been ignored. She slept in stable lofts and no man flirted with her. Ever. They wouldn’t dare.

No, it couldn’t be flirting. It was merely his abrasive ease with words, with manners, with everything. A man who thought himself charming as he used words like ‘lass’ and ‘love’.

He didn’t charm her, yet he didn’t seem to be leaving. She had

a choice to make. The knife or Dog? It was late, a knife would make a mess she'd have to clean and she needed her sleep.

'You need to leave now,' she ordered.

With a wave of her hand, Dog rose. Bram's eyes widened, not with fear, but with surprise.

'That's a dog? I thought it was a trunk.' His grin changed. 'Hardly welcoming having a—is that a wolf?—in your room, since you were expecting me.'

He took his eyes off Dog, which was foolish, or arrogant.

It didn't matter. His time with her was over. It had gone on too long. She blamed her hunger, his voice, the fine movement of his hands. She blamed him for everything. It was time to remind him of it.

'Aye, I was expecting you,' she said, with as much scorn as she could paint the words. 'Expecting as one does a plague, or a pestilence. And I welcome you just as much.' She shifted her stance, getting ready to throw the dagger. 'You need to leave. I've warned you.'

'We haven't begun, Lioslath. Why would I leave?'

He was arrogant. Vibrant. Too full of life. She made another signal and Dog, with a noise deep in his throat, came to her heels.

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made sure it glinted so he'd know what she intended. 'But I do not think you were expecting me.'

Chapter Two

Waking in the morning and needing to relieve herself, Lioslath rose from bed, only to collapse as dizziness overcame her. She'd sat up too quickly. The lack of food, the continual hunger, had made her faint the past few days. Was her dizziness worse? If so, she knew who to blame.

Anger giving her strength, she slowly sat up. Anger that had only one direction: towards Bram...who had laughed. Laughed.

She still didn't understand what had happened the night before.

Dog at her heels, and a knife in her hand, she'd readied to strike. At her most dangerous, Bram laughed as if she told the funniest of tales.

Startled at the sound, she almost dropped the knife. So she hadn't, couldn't have, reacted as he shook his head, told her he enjoyed her games and would see her the next day.

She simply stood there incapable of comprehending his actions.

Worse still, Dog, who never let prey escape, who should have attacked, abruptly sat, canted his head and stared as Bram eased himself through the trapdoor.

She didn't know what was more incredible. Her own inability to attack or Dog's sudden meekness.

No, she did know. The most incredulous moment was when

Bram told her he'd see her today. He expected her to open the gates.

She might not have attacked, but she wasn't opening the gates today. His grating laughter had ensured that. If she could shut the gates more firmly, or again, and preferably right in his face, she would. At the idea, satisfaction coursed warmly within her.

Desperate now to use the privy, she walked out of the room. Dog only lifted his head as he stared in her direction.

She scowled at him. Bram had laughed, she had almost dropped the knife and Dog had sat.

Since weaning him from a pup, he had been her friend and protector. More wild than tame, no one dared approach Dog. She'd always thought they had an understanding. She slept in the stables when it rained and outside when it didn't. He'd never lost the wild side to him and she hadn't either. But at the moment he canted his head, he had been no more than a weak, useless, domesticated dog.

She leaned against the wall as dizziness overcame her. A well-fed dog at least, just like the rest of her clan. She ensured that. Or rather, Bram ensured that.

He had reminded her that it was he who hunted and provided the food. He who discovered the secret tunnel, and her anger at that gave her the strength to stand straight.

The tunnel was hers, maintained through sheer will. She told no one of it. When she was a child, there had been several of them, but time had passed and the residents either didn't

remember them or believed they had collapsed. But she had maintained one, had cleared and buttressed it for years. It was narrow and precarious, and a way of escaping from her punishments, from her family and what had become of them.

Simply knowing the tunnel was there kept her calm. And now, with the siege, it allowed her to steal much-needed food. But she hadn't been stealing. Bram had been leaving gifts.

She should have known—she had known—but it was a bounty she hadn't been able to ignore.

In the darkest part of the night before last, she had left the tunnel to steal, only to find venison hanging in the tree closest to the tunnel. And underneath? A sack of cabbages and onions.

Immediately, she had recognised it for the bait it was, but she had no caution as she cut it down. Caution didn't matter when necessity did. Her clan was starving and, even while she resented it, she took the trap.

So all day she looked over her shoulder, all night she kept herself dressed and pacing in her room. She thought of barricading the tunnel, but a mere day's effort wouldn't keep out a determined intruder and she didn't want to bring attention to the tunnel.

But she had vowed that would be the last time she stole food. Since it was their last stolen meal, she needed to feed the few people still in the keep; she needed to feed her brothers and sister. What she didn't do was feed herself.

It didn't matter. She didn't need her energy for much, since

she was trapped inside with no way to roam. Trapped, and she knew who to blame for that as well.

As she left the privy, Dog was waiting for her at the end of the narrow corridor. From there it was a short turn with a few stairs that led to the main Hall.

She wished she could avoid the central room even though the Hall's permanently rancid smell was weaker now, which was the siege's only benefit.

They had cleaned the keep when the gates were first barred. Old mouldy rushes, thrown bones and rotting food were swept clear to be thrown at the Colquhoun clansmen surrounding her home.

But even without the old rushes and food, the Hall stank from the rotting wood and stones that hadn't been scrubbed in years. When she was a child, the Hall had gleamed, the smells had been of home, of a time when her mother and father had been alive and happy. Now it held only mould, stains and regret.

She resented that she was forced to stay in the keep, forced to walk through the Hall that mocked her childhood memories. Patting Dog's head, she hurried outside to the low building that was the kitchens.

Cook, making a soup from the venison and vegetables, gave a cautious, respectful smile.

Ignored most of her life, Lioslath forced herself to nod a greeting in return. For over a month, her clan had treated her with loyalty, with...respect. Their tentative friendliness continued to

startle her.

It was difficult to change a lifetime of avoidance. With the siege, she was no longer left to roam free. She was forced to acknowledge her clan and her family. No. In truth, it was before the siege that she'd been forced to acknowledge her family...but she didn't want to think about that now.

As soon as Dog grabbed the generous bone from the preparation table, they exited out the back of the kitchens. Again, a change. Usually, this area was rife with rotting carcasses. But since the Colquhouns came, this area, too, had been swept.

She didn't take any pleasure in it, though. After meeting Bram last night, nothing today would bring her pleasure except his departure. He was all that she hated: conceited, arrogant, jovial.

Regretting not plunging her blade into Bram's heart when she'd had the chance, Lioslath walked to the platform that allowed her to see over the gates.

The structure was a hastily erected disaster they ripped from her father's stair extension. Stairs he ordered made, even though there were no walls, floor or ceiling to support them. Another impetuous folly of her father's, just like his marriage to the Colquhoun's sister.

She felt the weight of her loss rise and settle in her chest. Her father was dead. It wasn't the English knight who had killed him who bore the full brunt of her wrath. No, the man she hated above all had better be breaking his camp or she'd throw the first bucket of debris today.

‘You rise late again.’

Lioslath stopped to face Aindreas, the hunter’s son. As usual, Aindreas’s appearance was marred by his thickly tangled brown hair.

‘Does it matter?’ she retorted. But it mattered to her; she had never woken late in her life.

‘You’re rising later and sleeping in the keep. You’re becoming a lady of leisure. Already the men and I cleared the debris into buckets. They are ready to throw on command. I also checked and reinforced the snares in the back, and re-limed the branches to catch the birds.’

She snorted in derision, but she envied him his duties. They had given him a purpose. She felt lost in here. ‘You had to wake up early to do the snares because you’ve never been good at them.’

‘I’ve improved since we were five, and since you sleep late I’ll be a sight better than you the next time we hunt.’

Hunting. It was what she lived for. In her childhood, Aindreas’s father, Niall, had been the chief hunter for the clan. When Lioslath’s father had remarried, her stepmother had prohibited her from staying and then sleeping in the keep. She’d followed Niall like a shadow until he showed her his skills. Aindreas was only a year older and they had become like siblings.

‘You have been making snares for years. You couldn’t possibly become better than me in only a few weeks,’ she said. ‘You’d have a better chance using a handful of your own tangled hair.’

Aindreas cocked a brow. 'The lasses have nae trouble with my hair.'

She saw the curve to his lips that displayed the familiar dimple. The one that made all the Fergusson lasses sigh with want.

'That's because they didn't have to listen to your mother lament about you never combing it.'

Those years in childhood at the hunter's cottage had been the most precious to her. It had been a chance to be around a family, since she didn't have one of her own.

Except...she did have a family now. Maybe not her father or mother, but her half-brothers and half-sister. They were here.

'The whelps have already risen,' Aindreas said, seeming to know her thoughts. If her brothers and sister had risen, she had more pressing concerns.

'Have they been fed?' she asked, looking around her.

'Do you truly care?'

'Aye, if someone else looks after them, I doona have to.' She gave him a pointed glare. 'Your continual calling them puppies won't make me tend and care for them.'

He shook his head. 'They think matters are different now.'

She didn't want to think of her father's death or what that meant to her younger half-sister, Fyfa, and two half-brothers, Eoin and Gillean. She was still adjusting to being trapped inside the keep with them when, for her entire life, they'd been kept separated. 'Even if matters are different, what would I do with

them? They're...idle.'

'They're not idle. They play.'

'What would I know of play? Other than it accomplishes nothing.'

'Just because you weren't given the chance—' Aindreas's eyes softened. 'You wouldn't have to do anything with them. Simply be their sister.'

She didn't know how to play or be a sister because she'd never had a childhood. So how could she understand theirs?

'You can't avoid them forever, Lioslath.'

'I'm not avoiding them.' It was impossible to. They were always underfoot, playing, laughing. Her clan's tentative smiles and wary looks continued to startle her. Her siblings' open smiles and constant chatter terrified her. 'Will you take them today?'

'You know I will.'

'Just keep them away from the platform.' She didn't care how he took her words.

'Caring if they get hurt? You are becoming soft.'

'Nae,' she said, wondering if that was why she said it. 'I doona need the annoyance of tending injuries on top of everything else I have to do today.'

'What is it you're doing today?'

Turning away, she said over her shoulder, 'Saying goodbye to the Colquhouns.'

She heard the camp outside before she reached the steps. Grabbing a bucket, she listened as icy frustration and hot anger

coursed in opposing rivulets inside her body. Bram wasn't breaking camp. Already knowing which unstable steps to avoid, she bounded up the stairs. Before she reached the top, she heard his laughter and gave a feral grin. Bram made such an easy target.

Chapter Three

Bram found Lioslath in the kitchens. It was night and darkness blanketed every crevice of the long spaces surrounding them. Soot covering her hands and face, Lioslath slept curled up near a dying fire with that wolf next to her. Like this, she looked soft, inviting—

The dog suddenly growled and Lioslath woke with a start. Her hand reached out, but there was nothing there. If she were a man, he'd have thought she was reaching for a weapon.

The dog's ears twitched as if to flatten them and Bram pulled himself back. The dog was only a reminder of their differences, of why he was here.

'You didn't open the gates,' he said, more gently than he meant. Her softness was now gone, but his body hadn't caught up with his thoughts. How she barred him, denied him again, when she should be grateful he showed up at all.

He had not expected Lioslath to open the gates without a pretence of a fight. After all, it would make no sense if she were to open the gates after denying them access for so long. When she threw the bucket of debris and the others did the same, he thought it all for show.

Which was why he controlled his anger when some of it hit

his foot. But the entire day came and went, and he didn't see her again.

'Yet, you came anyway,' she retorted.

Wobbling, she stood. Like this, the fire's light illuminated what he hadn't seen before: a black mole, small and just above her upper lip. It was placed as if a mischievous faery kissed such perfection. He knew if he were such a faery, there would be others...

'What can I do to make you unwelcome?' she said.

Obstinate. Their encounter last night had been brief, but he thought he'd controlled the situation. After all, Lioslath was a beautiful woman and his flattering words had always been enough in the past, but it didn't seem enough for her. Maybe flirting wouldn't work with her. Difficult, when her beauty affected him.

No. More than that. It was her fierceness at the platform, her throwing the debris, her contemplative observing of them. All of it affected him. But if his flattery wouldn't work, there were other methods of persuasion.

She took his gifts by the tunnel and he saw the state of the clan and their lands. She needed his supplies and manpower, even if she pretended she didn't.

The current level of desperation should be enough for him to be accepted over the winter.

'Those gates are barred, but I can get inside,' he said. 'This is nae a real siege and it is time to end it.'

‘I never told you to come. I held a dagger to you and told you to leave.’

Her amusing threat of last night. At the time he thought it a jest. Now he was beginning to think she meant it. It was still laughable, but for other reasons.

‘I may be unwelcome,’ he said, ‘but my supplies are not.’

‘You stay because of the gifts?’ she retorted. ‘You could have left them and gone. I doona even know why you’re here.’

‘I sent you a missive. When your father died, I would come with help.’

‘Only because you feel guilty for the crimes you committed here!’

‘I committed nae crimes here. I forged an alliance.’

She pulled herself up, then wavered before she widened her stance to gain her balance. He looked at her feet. There was nothing that tripped her.

‘You bribed this clan, married my father to your sister, who at the first opportunity didn’t honour her vows and ran off!’

‘Careful, Fergusson. There was nae bribe to this clan. I offered a marriage and alliance between your father and my sister Gaira. I offered a total of forty sheep—twenty immediately, and twenty more after one year. It was a profitable and a stable alliance, and one which your father accepted.’

‘Which your sister didn’t honour! With nae possible reason, she ran away.’

He didn’t know how to answer this. Either way, it would not be

good. Something about this woman's father, Busby, frightened Gaira, but his sister had also been hurt when he forced her marriage. 'It matters not why she ran,' he said.

'Of course it matters why she ran. If she hadn't, my father wouldn't have pursued her and wouldn't have been murdered by an English knight.'

This conversation must be avoided. He hadn't lied in the missive he sent to her, but he'd skirted the truth regarding how her father died and by whose hand. He knew exactly who murdered her father and he wasn't an ordinary knight. He was also no longer precisely English. No, Robert of Dent, the famed Black Robert and King Edward's favoured knight, wasn't dead at all, but married to Gaira, and living in secret on Colquhoun land.

'My sister ran from him,' Bram said. 'I didn't order him to follow her.'

'Nae, you merely threatened to take the sheep and bring the force of Clan Colquhoun down on his head if he didn't find her.'

He hadn't known how else to keep Gaira, his only surviving sister, safe. When Bram made the alliance with Busby, he had concerns only for his own clan, for his own selfish desire to marry. When he made the alliance, the English massacres at Berwick and Doonhill hadn't yet occurred. The war against England hadn't been lost at Dunbar. How was he, how was anyone, to guess that the Scotland of only months ago would be so changed?

If he'd known, he would have kept his family close to him. He

would have spent the months preparing and fortifying his keep. He would have closed the gates and locked them all safely inside.

Instead, he forced a temporary marriage between Gaira and Laird Fergusson. Under normal politics it would have been astute. It brought strength for his clan by having someone in the south and Gaira would be nearer to their youngest sister, Irvette.

Irvette, the youngest and sweetest of them all, who married a man she loved. Irvette, who was murdered by the English at Doonhill.

Since April, his family had seen too much danger, suffered too much loss. And worst of all, he could have avoided most of it.

Now he needed to right these wrongs with this clan, but he could not be gentle any longer. Her stubbornness aside, he was laird and knew what was at stake. He wouldn't fail his clan and family again, and he fully intended for his new plan to work.

'What happened to those sheep, Lioslath? I didn't take them and I see scarce livestock on your land.'

'Why does it matter to you?'

He felt a roiling frustration and fought to keep his patience. He would not give up his power. 'I wrote to you. I told you that Gaira returned to Colquhoun land. I explained I'd come here to make amends.'

'But you're late.'

'Dunbar occurred. I am late because our country went to war!'

'Aye, but that doesn't explain why you were late. Everyone knows you didn't participate in Dunbar.'

No, he hadn't participated in that fateful battle against the English last April. Scotsmen had been slaughtered; the ones who survived hid in Ettrick Forest. His brother Malcolm was one of the survivors, but he carried a terrible wound.

Bram could tell no one why he hadn't participated in Dunbar. He made his choice not against his country, but for his country. King John Balliol himself ordered Bram not to participate, to stay on Colquhoun land and receive two messages. The messages, he had been told, would protect Scotland.

Bram stayed, had advised his family and clan to stay, but he never received two messages. Balliol was defeated at Dunbar and was now being held at the Tower of London. It was the English King Edward who ruled over Scotland now.

If Balliol expected Bram to protect Scotland, he was falling far short.

Then, his brothers, Malcolm and Caird, arrived whilst Bram waited for Lioslath to open the gates. The messages that were supposed to have come to the Colquhoun clan became clear. They were not actual messages, but a dagger and the legendary Jewel of Kings.

Though the jewel was safely in Malcolm's hands, he now fled to Clan Buchanan land to secure the dagger. He took a spare horse to make the journey faster for him. Bram was all too aware it might not be fast enough. As long as the jewel remained in the open, his brother, his clan, were in terrible danger.

For now Bram must stay on Fergusson land for the winter and

await news about the jewel. Come the spring, he would know whether he was to ride north to the safety of his land, or south and commit treason with Balliol in the Tower of London. Either way, King Edward would find him then.

‘It matters not whether I was at Dunbar. It delayed my arrival,’ he continued. ‘But I’m here now.’

‘And I want you to leave.’ She waved her hand towards the door and he knew he didn’t imagine her unbalance.

‘What is wrong with you?’

A hesitation. ‘Nothing that your absence wouldn’t cure.’

She lied. There were dark circles under her bright eyes, the natural angle of her cheekbones sharply exposed because of the hollows of her cheeks.

‘I’ve given you food,’ he said.

‘I took your food.’

He narrowed his eyes. ‘But you haven’t eaten it.’

‘What is it to you what happens to it?’

‘Have the others eaten?’

‘Again, I ask, what is it to you what happens to it?’

Too much. He never would have been waiting outside the gates if he thought anyone inside was suffering. ‘Answer me.’

She crossed her arms around her midriff, which outlined the smallness of her frame and...her ribs?

He cursed. ‘You little fool, you haven’t eaten.’

‘Fool? Better a fool than what you’ve become. You didn’t participate at Dunbar. You’re a traitor. So, too, what of your acts

for this clan? You probably knew your sister would run away and endanger my father!’

Traitor. He was no traitor, but he’d have to get used to being called one.

‘I could not prevent your father’s death,’ he said instead.

‘I’ll never believe you! Without him, without his protection, just look at what has happened here!’

‘What do you mean what has happened here?’

He knew it. Something worse than poor management had caused the damage here. For the first few days, he questioned the villagers, but they ignored him and his clansmen. So he observed them instead. Their homes were in tatters; the crops were burned. It was too early for the crops to be burned. He thought...he hoped...they harvested early. That the winter supplies of food were locked safely inside the keep. But Lioslath stole food from him and she looked half-starved. She had no food inside the keep. There could be no food anywhere.

This year, he committed more wrongs than he could ever mend. Irvette had died and he’d broken his trust with his sister Gaira. He was committing treason, but not because he hadn’t fought at Dunbar, as Lioslath or any of his fellow countryman believed. Still, he paid the shaming price of it. Now, with the jewel in their hands, his family held another secret and this was far more dangerous than he, than any clan, than a king, could prepare for.

Whilst Malcolm carried the jewel with him, the thought that

Bram wasn't there to protect him weighed heavily on him. And that didn't end the list of his wrongs.

Although he hadn't killed Lioslath's father, Busby would be alive if they hadn't made their alliance. He might not be able to bring her father back, but he could help this clan prepare for winter. He bore too many wrongs. For once, he would make amends and he would do that here with this clan.

'Answer me,' he bit out. He wouldn't be able to hold back his anger much longer, and if he did, he'd lose control entirely. He never lost control in negotiations.

Something seemed to snap in her as well. 'Answer you? The all-mighty laird wants me...depends on me...to answer him. You doona deserve my answers.' Swaying, she unfurled her arms and clenched her fists.

'You're not dependable, you doona honour your vows. You want to make amends? You're too late to make amends!'

She raised her fist. Her intent clear. She didn't have a dagger, but she would hurt him. She took two steps before her eyes suddenly closed, her legs crumpled beneath her and he rushed to catch her fall.

Chapter Four

Jostled, and held too tightly, Lioslath woke. With long strides Bram carried her through the Hall.

He was too close. She noticed the shades of red in his hair, the blonde tips of his eyelashes. She could smell the scent of leather, of outdoors...of him. It was almost as jarring as him carrying her.

‘Put me down.’

‘Nae, you little fool. How long have you been like this? How long did you think you would last?’

Bram cradled her against him as if she was no more than a babe. She shouldn’t have felt him through the layers of clothing, but she did. She felt the hard planes of his chest, and the grace and strength of his legs. His arms had no more give than the rest of him, and yet he held her gently.

She couldn’t remember if she had ever been carried or held like this. He was Laird Colquhoun and his holding her should have felt uninvited and unwelcome. At the very least it should have felt foreign. Instead, he felt...warm.

Fighting the warmth, she turned her head and saw the light through the Hall’s doors. A spike of fear woke her up. ‘Put me down,’ she ordered again.

The keep would wake soon. She didn’t need her two brothers seeing her. At six and five, they would ask too many questions. Her sister, Fyfa, at eight, would think it romantic. Lioslath knew that would be worse.

Brows drawn, Bram didn’t look at her, but she felt the flexing of his fingers against her arm and leg. ‘Not until we reach your bedroom.’

She was too weak to fight him, but she wasn’t too weak to hold herself rigidly. She felt the tightening of his hold and saw his frown, though he ignored her tiny defiance. When he laid her on the bed, she sat up, and his frown deepened.

‘Stay there.’

She wouldn’t take his orders. ‘This is ridiculous.’

‘You fainted.’

Forget the room or her siblings, her fainting was the most embarrassing bit of all of this. Worse, because an enemy had seen it and carried her. ‘I didn’t faint—’

He quirked an eyebrow.

‘Or if I did, it’s over with. It’s daylight. The keep will wake soon.’ Her eyes darted around.

‘Your dog stayed in the kitchens. Shouldn’t he be protecting you?’

‘As if you were a threat?’ How did he know she wanted Dog and why wasn’t Dog protecting her? The edges of her vision wavered and she put a hand to her head. ‘You need to leave or you’ll be discovered.’

‘We’re in your room. I’ll take the tunnel.’

By now the platform by the gates would be manned. ‘Someone will see you.’

He tilted his head, studying her. ‘Worried for me?’

Looming over her, he was everything arrogant and domineering. His red hair waved loose to his shoulders, but it didn’t hide the broadness of his jaw or his eyes, which were grey, like the colour of the sky before a storm broke. His sun-browned skin highlighted the soft dusty colour of his lips. His jaw was broad and square. His nose looked as though it had been broken and straightened many times, but it didn’t disfigure his face. In

fact, she found this part of him...interesting. It gave him a certain fierceness she wasn't expecting of the weak-kneed Colquhouns.

Like this, Bram looked like the warrior he was reputed to be.

She felt a fluttering in her stomach and her skin flushed. But was it from hunger or fear? It couldn't be fear. Her father had been a giant of a man and had ruled the keep with intimidation and punishments. When he loomed over her, never once had she felt this sort of helpless breathlessness before. It must be from hunger.

Bram shook his head. 'Not worried for me. You're worried for your tunnel. Why is there a tunnel and room beneath your bedroom?'

He didn't need to know about the tunnel, or the empty storage room beneath. He didn't need to know this wasn't her bedroom. All he needed to know was—

The door burst open. Bram, ready to fight, leapt in front of the bed.

Two muddy boys were chased into the room by an older girl. Lioslath's gasps of surprise and anger were drowned by the girl's shrieking. Gleeful, the boys taunted the girl until they were all fully around the bed. Just as the boys swerved to run out again, they spied Bram.

'The giant outside the gates!' the littler boy cried, dashing out of the room.

Bram lunged for the door to trap the other two inside, then turned to face his captives.

Curiously, the children hadn't run to Lioslath for protection. Instead, they stood on the other side of the bed, their hands locked together.

Unlike the boys, the girl's appearance was immaculate. Her hair was freshly brushed and a rudimentary ornament held back tiny plaits around her face. Her dress was thin, overly mended and far too short for her, but it was clean. As was the girl herself, except for one long drip of mud from her left cheek that stretched down and along her gown.

The boy standing next to her looked as though he'd emerged from a mud puddle; the girl looked as though she'd never seen a mud puddle.

There were now witnesses to his being inside the keep. He didn't know who they were, but he suspected.

Lioslath stood when he closed the door. She looked as though she'd never seen the children before, but there was no mistaking their similarities. The children had brown hair with golden highlights, but their eyes were Lioslath's.

She waved to the children. 'Leave now!'

'I think it's too late for that.' Bram heard footsteps. This would not go well.

'Are you smiling?' she choked out.

Bram stepped aside before a man stormed into the room with the littler boy at his heels. When the man saw Bram, he brandished his axe.

'Aindreas!' Lioslath cried.

‘Get away from her!’ Aindreas bit out.

Lioslath’s embarrassment over fainting was now swamped by frustration and fury and a helplessness she’d never felt before that made it all worse. Too late she realised that when Bram stepped away from the door, he’d stepped towards her. It only reinforced the damage done.

She felt like kicking Bram, shouting at Aindreas and shoving the children out the door, but she could do none of it. She was trapped.

‘Are you harmed?’ Aindreas kept his eyes on Bram.

‘Nae harmed—merely plagued.’

‘What is he doing here, Lioslath?’ Aindreas asked. ‘How did he get here?’

Neither question could she answer and already she saw the children’s comprehension that Bram was inside the keep, though the gates were closed. ‘It’s not as it seems,’ she said.

‘Not as it seems!’ Aindreas almost roared. ‘He’s in your—’

‘The children!’ she interrupted.

Aindreas clenched his jaw as his eyes, warning of retribution, returned to Bram. ‘Did you harm any?’

‘Nae harm and I came alone,’ Bram said calmly, yet there was no mistaking the silent challenge in his words. Lioslath and Aindreas had observed Bram training his men. He was daunting from afar, now, up close, he was formidable.

‘Why are you here?’ Aindreas said.

‘That is between Lioslath and me,’ Bram said.

‘Not while I have breath in my body, Colquhoun. You are leaving. Now.’

‘Why would I do that?’ Bram said.

Aindreas raised the axe again, his stance widening. He was skilled in axe throwing, but Bram stood too near to Lioslath and her siblings were here. He couldn’t throw it and he couldn’t attack. They all knew it, but Aindreas looked as though he was beyond caring.

‘He will go now,’ she said. ‘He knows by staying the consequences will be dire.’

‘You’re unwell,’ Bram said.

Did he think her a fool to believe that he stayed because of that? ‘I have care now,’ she pointed out.

Something about Bram’s demeanour said he didn’t like that. ‘Nae good enough. We need to negotiate.’

‘You’ll negotiate,’ Aindreas said, ‘only at the end of my axe.’

Lioslath knew it was up to her to end this. The room was brightening with the rising sun. She could hear people waking and she needed no witnesses to her fainting embarrassment.

‘Aindreas, you need to leave and take the children.’ She turned. ‘And you three need to keep quiet.’

‘Nae!’ Aindreas waved his axe. ‘He’s trapped. We can use him to barter. We have an advantage.’

‘Do you truly?’ Bram said, amusement lacing his words.

Lioslath’s insides roiled. Did he find nothing serious?

No, he did. She’d been watching him all these weeks, and

Bram was Laird Colquhoun and a warrior in every sense. The years, the authority and the training were ingrained in the way he held himself. Even without a weapon, he was too worthy a foe. And his all-too-knowing smile that belied a friendly easiness told her he wouldn't leave here quietly.

Her siblings, for once, remained still, but they were not silent. Increasing her alarm, they held hands and whispered something between them.

‘Aindreas, go, please. Keep them quiet and nae harm will come to me. I’ll converse with Laird Colquhoun and we can end this.’

‘Alone? You expect me to leave a man in your room alone?’

‘I was alone with her before we were interrupted,’ Bram said.

Lioslath’s breath left her lungs. ‘Mere moments and unwanted! Aindreas, only we know he is here. If we delay much longer, this cannot be kept secret!’

Aindreas eased his axe hold. ‘To negotiate?’

She nodded. ‘I trust this to you.’

Aindreas lowered his axe and nodded. ‘I’ll take them to the courtyard outside the Hall’s door. Nae more.’

It was the most she could ask.

‘Wait,’ Bram said, turning to the children. ‘Who are you?’ he asked.

‘This isn’t necessary,’ Lioslath interrupted.

‘I won’t go,’ Bram said. He meant it.

Her siblings visibly twitched, but Eoin and Fyfa faced this

intimidating man with their chins stubbornly set. She'd seen them like this when facing her, but never with someone they should fear.

'Did you... Did you hurt her?' Fyfa asked, a fierceness to her eyes.

'Nae,' Bram said, 'but it'll hurt your sister if I stay.'

Aindreas made some sound, while Lioslath tried not to reveal her surprise at her siblings' bravery.

'How will it hurt her if you stay?' Eoin asked.

Fyfa tugged on her brother's arm. 'I'll tell you later. Now they want us to pretend he wasn't here.'

'How are we to do that?' Eoin said. 'He's huge!'

'Later,' she hissed at her brother before turning her eyes to Bram again. This time there was a gleam to them. 'What do we get in return?'

Her siblings had been chattering to themselves and this was what they planned? It was confusing. Their protectiveness was confusing. As was Bram's increasing amusement.

'Do you know what you want?' he asked.

Eoin and Fyfa nodded, but Gillean, who remained by Aindreas's side, looked lost.

Bram pointed to him. 'When he knows, come to me to discuss your terms.'

'Are you finished?' Aindreas demanded.

Bram shrugged. 'For now. When you return, bring food. She needs it.'

Aindreas's lips thinned as he looked at Lioslath. She nodded. For now, she was safe. She'd deal with the Colquhoun's arrogance after the children left.

Keeping his eyes on Bram, Aindreas ushered the children out of the room.

The door latch clicked with an ominous sound and Lioslath felt more alone with Bram now than she had before. At the very least she was more...aware of him. Which made little sense, but she couldn't shake the feeling that he was suddenly, vibrantly here.

Had he always been this tall or broad of shoulder? He was a well-trained man and it showed in this morning's light. Showed...a little too much to her. And she didn't want to guess on why. Faintness or hunger. That was all this fluttering awareness had to be. She'd never felt it before and she hoped she wouldn't faint again.

To prevent it, she sat, but she raised her chin when she saw his brow arch. He wanted to negotiate and she'd do it. 'What do you want?' she said.

'What are the children's names?'

This information was useless to him, to her, and she wanted to argue. By his demeanour, she also knew it was futile. 'Fyfa, Eoin, he's six, and Gillean's the youngest at five.'

'Fyfa's age?'

'Eight, she's eight.' She had just had her birthday, which was something her father celebrated in the years before his death.

Lioslath hadn't known what to do to mark the day, so she hadn't done...anything.

‘Are there more?’

She shook her head. Her siblings were orphans like her. They had to learn the harshness of life, too. Except—

‘Why doesn't Aindreas know of the tunnel?’

Of course he'd notice that. ‘A conversation about the tunnel is what you want?’

He shrugged. ‘I am curious.’

She knew better. ‘Your reputation precedes you, Colquhoun. You are asking questions to obtain leverage for your famous negotiation skills. What do you do? Find facts to use against your opponent? I think you've harmed us enough.’

Bram clasped his hands behind his back and rolled on his heels. It was a casual pose, but she sensed his displeasure underneath.

She liked it. ‘Nae talking of kissing me now like you did last night? It took me a while to know what you did. Another manipulation from Laird Colquhoun. You won't find those weaknesses with me.’

A small smile. ‘I may find others.’

‘You won't be here long enough.’

‘Ah, but you make me want to find others.’ He released his stance. ‘You are...not as I expected.’

A play on their words last night or something else? He probably expected her to have courtesy, manners and a calm

demeanour befitting a lady of the manor. She had none of those skills. When she hunted, if she wasn't direct, she missed her target.

Oh, she wanted to argue more, but Bram had spent too much time in her room. Aindreas could become impatient. 'I'll open the gates,' she said, 'if you stay quiet on the tunnel.'

His head tilted as if he sensed a trap, but he didn't hide the smile of victory. 'Not expected, but you have, indeed, made me a curious man. A hidden tunnel, but also hidden from the keep's residents? A private tunnel for you only. Now, what use is such a tunnel to a woman?'

Irritated at his smile and the way it made something flutter inside her, she answered, 'Its use is to get you out of here so I can open the gates.'

He narrowed his eyes on her. 'This morning.'

She nodded.

'This seems sudden. I can't imagine keeping a tunnel secret would be so important to you. What trick do you play?'

Tricks. Play. She knew nothing of such things. Unlike this Colquhoun with his pampered existence, her life had always been hard work.

She would always remember when her father first set off to secure the wealthy Gaira of Clan Colquhoun as his wife. With laughter ringing out, her siblings clung to him. They had been joyous, as if he'd soon bring home their every childhood wish.

And her? Her father, with his head held high, gazed at her,

his arms full of children, the rest of his clan waving proudly. At that moment, her father looked at her as if he loved her again. Tears stinging her eyes, she hadn't wanted to break their gaze. She hadn't seen her father look at her with such emotion since before her mother died so many winters before.

In that moment it felt as if she had her father again. Not the man he had become since his second marriage and since their fortunes changed for the worse. After that he became bitter and the knot of hate that began with her mother's death grew until every word he ever uttered, every action he ever committed, was a reflection of that hate buried in his heart. His runaway bride only made it worse.

When he pursued Gaira, her father was killed. Then the English came and the Fergussons lost what little wealth and pride they had left.

Fate or God already played the cruellest of tricks on Clan Fergusson. Now this Colquhoun came to humiliate them further.

'I make nae tricks,' she practically choked on the word.

'This is too easy,' Bram said.

'Doona you like easy?' she said.

With no bride and only resentment, her father had boasted of the Colquhouns' decadent home and the excess of comforts strewn about. How their tables were laden with food and the freshest rushes were underfoot. He even spoke of laughter, jests...entertainment.

And the more her father spoke, the worse that knot of

bitterness grew until barbs slashed at his insides. When he left to pursue his bride, he was filled only with vengeance.

And he never looked at Lioslath again.

‘You like easy,’ she repeated. ‘It’s what every Colquhoun likes. So I’m opening the gates because that’s what you expect—everything comfortable.’

Gaira, the Colquhoun bride who was supposed to have saved them all, never arrived at Fergusson keep. Lioslath knew why: she was soft like the rest of their clan. No doubt she’d fled prettily to the safety of her luxurious home.

His frown increased. ‘Comfortable?’ he said the word as if he’d never said it before. Maybe he hadn’t. Maybe he was so used to food and entertainment he took it for granted. That thought made her angrier.

‘You insult me and grant me a boon,’ he said softly. Almost too softly. ‘Why are you doing this?’

She had work to do and she needed him gone. Barring him had not worked, so she would open the gates. Once he saw that there were no comforts, that there was only work here, and lots of it, he’d be gone, just like his sister. For once, she was proud of the wreck of a keep she lived in.

She shrugged as she’d seen him do. ‘Because it’s easy,’ she said.

Chapter Five

Bram dropped into the room below Lioslath’s and hurried through the tunnel. He was walking around the keep’s corner

when Finlay, his first in command, strode up to him.

‘Where have you been?’

Bram kept his eyes on the man he’d grown up with. ‘Walking.’

Finlay frowned. Bram never simply walked like his brother Caird did. He enjoyed activities such as hunting and fishing, but that would mean witnesses.

‘We heard activity inside the keep. I think the gates are opening,’ Finlay said.

That was fast, he thought. Had Lioslath ordered it done or did she have council? Too many unknowns. ‘The men?’

‘Preparing.’

They’d talked of the different strategies they should employ if the gates were opened, but something in Finlay’s voice made Bram’s heart thud. ‘Preparing for what?’ he asked, but he had his answer as he walked towards the gates. His men were preparing for battle.

Their weaponry was already in their hands. Their camp’s spiked fence was now raised and angled menacingly outward.

His men knew of Gaira’s marriage and alliance to this clan. When his best-trained men and carpenters followed him, they were as surprised as he by the lack of welcome. Since they now laid siege, for all they knew he could be preparing to take the Fergusson clan for his own. In these turbulent times, he was surprised no other clan had tried.

‘They have barred us for weeks and there was nae call out of greeting,’ Finlay said. ‘They cannot be friendly.’

He could see the villagers gathering in the few winding streets behind him. Most had their hands full of some form of weaponry.

He should have told Lioslath to wait. If the first sight Lioslath saw was his men prepared to fight, she would think he betrayed their understanding.

Understanding. They didn't have an understanding and he didn't need one either. He only needed her to cooperate and he expected his men to as well.

'Have the men stand down,' he ordered. 'Immediately.'

'The gates are opening. The villagers—'

'Are only reacting to what we have done. It's not the time for weapons, it's the time for the other plan we discussed.'

'There's been nae indication of why they are opening the gates now.'

'When those gates are fully open, I'll not have these people see fully armed men. I want them to see a feast and the full extent of our generous offerings we began yesterday. The boar's ready?'

'Aye, but as to the other?'

'I know it is short notice, but it must be done.'

Knowing Finlay would implement his orders, Bram strode through his men. There was little confusion when he told them to stand down. One benefit to idleness, his men were well-prepared. He did, however, order the spiked fence to remain up. He might have been careless when not asking for time, but he wouldn't be so when it came to the safety of his men.

When he got to the gates, they were fully opened. As he

suspected, the men inside held bows. No, not only men.

Lioslath stood in front with a bow and arrow in her hands. Two more arrows were strapped to her belt. She'd also changed her clothing. No longer was she in a gown, but in a tunic and hose.

He'd never seen a woman with weaponry and certainly none with her beauty. His instinct was to dismiss it, but it surprised him how natural she looked. She'd held a blade to him the first night as well. He didn't know what to make of it.

Regardless of her abilities, the men, including Aindreas, were also armed. Weeks of treading softly with this clan and it had all been for naught.

He looked behind him. Many of his men put their weapons down, but they did not give up their strategic positions inside the camp or their narrowed focus on the keep and the village. No hope for a bloodless solution unless he defused this situation and fast.

* * *

Bram's men were armed and facing the gates. He talked of tricks and of play, yet it was him all this time.

'Stand ready,' Lioslath cried.

She hid her quivering voice, knowing Aindreas would hear it and the others standing behind her would notice her unease.

Now, of all times, she must remain calm. Dog at her heels helped. His familiar warmth comforted her. Unfortunately, he was the only thing familiar to her now.

Certainly, standing in front of her father's clansmen with

weaponry wasn't familiar. Men who expected her to give orders, who had been looking to her for leadership since her father's death. Like everything, it continued to surprise her.

The Colquhoun men were shifting and Lioslath eased her stance to take advantage of the arrows at her waist. Their sole advantage was the narrow opening in the gates. If they were forced to engage Bram's men outside, they would not survive. Even as she thought that, she felt the familiar heat of a hunt flow through her.

When she'd requested Aindreas to prepare the men to open the gates, her friend hadn't been surprised that that was the result of her conversation with Bram. He had, however, been angry about Bram being in her bedroom.

Aindreas hadn't known of the empty storage room under her bedroom, nor of the derelict tunnel. When he'd argued further, she'd promised to tell him everything later. He hadn't liked that, but there had been no more time.

Now Aindreas stood behind her and she felt his tumultuous thoughts. She was in turmoil, too.

Suddenly, the Colquhoun men lowered their weapons. Walking amongst his men, Bram emerged. His hair and fine clothing were filthy from the tunnel. He carried no weapon and hadn't prepared for battle. As he swept through the men, a few swiftly left their positions, but with the narrowness of the gates, she could not see where they went.

When Bram faced her, she took a step forward. As if he didn't

have arrows pointed at him, he strode through the gates like a conqueror.

So she notched the arrow to her bow. It was pointed at the ground, but her position was clear. Bram slowed and appeared surprised. Did he think her tamed? He knew that he'd forced her to open the gates, but her clansmen did not.

When he reached her, she called out for all to hear, 'Welcome, Laird Colquhoun.' She knew her frosty tone did not match her words.

Bram gave a small bow, a quirk to his lips that only she could see. As he looked around at the arrows aimed at his heart, he answered, 'I feel most welcome, Lioslath of Clan Fergusson. Thank you for opening the gates and allowing my men respite within your dear keep.'

Her fingers flexed to draw the bow tighter. How cunning this Colquhoun was with his courtly ways and booming voice. This wasn't the man who'd stolen into her room armed only with smiles and coaxing ways. Nonetheless, his formality was equally unwelcome. She might have been forced to open her gates to him, but she didn't have to be gracious.

'I'm afraid you'll find nae respite here,' she said. 'Or did you know we have been recently ill-treated?'

He smiled then. That easy, carefree smile she hated and in reflex her arm drew back on the string.

Never lowering his eyes nor his voice, Bram said, 'Then perhaps you'll accept our humble offerings.'

With another courtly gesture, he turned towards the gates. Within moments, Colquhoun clansmen ceremoniously carried upon their shoulders planks of wood laden with food.

A whine in his throat, Dog restlessly lifted his front paw at the overwhelming smells and sights. Roasted boar, turnips, onions, parsnips, glazed over with...butter. All from the supplies Bram brought.

Her own men held on to their weapons, but their arrows now pointed down. None of them looked to her, their eyes were wide on the feast being carried into the keep; it would all need to be set down on—

She stopped short. Her Hall. The planks of wood would never fit. Then there was the filth and damp. She couldn't be in there today of all days. She'd conceded too much of her position to the Colquhoun today. She wouldn't give in any more.

She was just about to order them to stop when more Colquhoun men brought in trestles to support the heavily laden planks of wood. As if at her request, they set them down in the centre of the courtyard. They couldn't have travelled from the Colquhoun land with them.

So his men hadn't been idle these past weeks. She'd watched as they made the spiked fence and crafted additional arrows, watched as they trained and trained again. But secretly, surely, they'd been preparing for this banquet as well.

Returning her arrow to her belt, she looked to Bram, who was carrying a thick wooden bench as easily as if he carried an armful

of kindling. He said something to his clansman and they laughed as they gathered the other benches.

The morning was mild and it hadn't rained for days. She opened the gates, food appeared and now even the weather cooperated with this man.

Dog certainly was cooperating. Someone had thrown a hunk of venison against the furthest wall and he was busily dragging it outside the gates. She didn't know when she'd see him again.

When the food was all set, what would be expected of her? She was used to being alone, not surrounded by people with expectations. She hated these questions and doubts. Her weaknesses conceded even more power to Laird Colquhoun.

'He'll be done soon.' Aindreas stepped closer to her. 'Will you accept it?'

The food? Bram said nothing about it. But now that her clan saw it, she couldn't refuse. 'It'd be a waste, since the clan is hungry.'

'I doona like the way he looks at you,' Aindreas said.

She knew what he meant. Even though Bram organised the feast before her, it felt as if he was assessing her every move and emotion. Knowing him, he'd use it to his advantage. 'Nothing happened.'

'Aye, and I doona believe you,' he said. 'Still, whatever did happen, I didn't expect an apology from him.'

'Is that what this is?' She couldn't imagine Bram apologising. This had to be more of his famed diplomacy and negotiation.

Perhaps he expected her to let down her guard with his generosity. Ha! Generosity! More like strategy.

‘He’s doing this here, but also down in the village.’

She gasped. There was more food?

‘You need to let the villagers know whether you accept his apology.’

The villagers had looked to her for leadership since her father’s death. She tried to lead them, but failed, and when the English had ravaged, ordered, stripped away every—

She clamped down on her anger and helplessness. The English were gone now, just as the Colquhouns would be soon enough.

Aindreas’s expression darkened and she knew Bram approached from behind her. She wouldn’t have the strength to stop a fight.

‘Go, tell them to accept the food and see what Donaldo has baked,’ she said.

There would be precious little bread, but there would be some. They couldn’t have the Colquhouns controlling the entire feast. The Fergussons might be poor, but they had their pride.

With a look over her shoulder, Aindreas headed out of the gates.

‘Tell them what?’ Bram said.

She turned. He was closer than she thought and she barely stopped herself from stepping back. This close she was all too aware of his height, the way he held himself, the way he was just...there. She shook herself. ‘That your apology is accepted.’

‘I am grateful,’ he said, but there was an undercurrent, some hidden meaning she didn’t want to think about. He was always hiding something and resentment roiled within her.

She wasn’t used to being around people, wasn’t used to hiding her feelings or emotions, but if it kept her clan protected from the Colquhoun, she’d learn fast.

‘It’s easier that way, isn’t it?’ she said.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. ‘Aye, easy.’

So he didn’t like her reply. She didn’t like anything about this. She didn’t like that this close, and in the sunlight, his features weren’t glaring, but vibrant. Alive. This close she heard, but also felt, the low timbre of his voice.

The Colquhoun laird was handsome. No, more than that. Aindreas was handsome. Bram was more. It was the way he held his powerful body and those unearthly eyes that pierced right through her skin. Like now. She felt that fluttering again and knew it had nothing to do with hunger and weakness.

It was him.

‘Do you need to talk to your council?’ Bram pointed over her shoulder. ‘You couldn’t have had time to do so before now.’

Lioslath glanced behind her. Everyone from the keep was standing in little groups. Bram was gazing at the group of elders.

‘I’ll take care of your siblings,’ he said. ‘While you go and talk.’

‘My siblings?’

‘Aye, your brothers, who are already grabbing food, and your sister, admonishing them as she usually does.’

Despite the tension in the courtyard, and her men pointing arrows at his heart, he noticed the children. She felt a pang and knew it had nothing to do with hunger. In the mere moments he'd spent with her brothers and sister, he knew them better than she. Even after all these months, she still didn't know how to approach or talk to them.

Chuckling as Gilleán barely missed Fyfa's reach, Bram answered, 'I'll make sure they get enough before they scamper outside the gates.'

Was that what they wanted to do, to scamper? Maybe so. They had run into her room and they'd never done that before. But she couldn't blame them.

The keep and the courtyard weren't large. Hardly enough space for adults, let alone children used to running where they pleased. In fact, the children were almost frantic now, as they worked their way along the tables and towards the gates.

'There is nae council,' she said absently, contemplating Eoin's feet shuffling in barely restrained elation.

'Since when?' he asked.

Bram's sharp question pulled Lioslath's thoughts from her siblings. At Bram's assessing gaze, she cursed herself for admitting any weakness to him.

Clan Fergusson didn't have a council. A council meant order, trades and barter. It meant a keep that was well-run and fair. They'd had a council in her youth, but her stepmother, Irman, wouldn't allow any opposing opinions. The elders had been

ignored or shamed until none came forward any more to offer advice.

It didn't matter. No council would have been able to steer her father away from his follies. And she didn't need a council to steer her away from getting rid of the Colquhouns.

'In matters regarding this clan, you'll deal with me.'

For a moment, Bram stilled and she felt as if he laid a trap she couldn't see. Foolishly, she might have opened the gates to him, but it didn't mean she agreed to anything more.

'Shall we eat?'

She didn't want to sit. She wasn't the clan's mistress. He probably expected traditions and courtly manners. But she never sat with her clan and she didn't know what to do. 'Nae.'

'A walk, perhaps?' Bram said.

A walk would get them outside, where she could breathe. Once he said what he was here for, perhaps he'd leave her alone and she could have peace in the forest.

'Aye, a walk.'

Chapter Six

He'd done it. Satisfaction brimmed through Bram. The wait was over and the plan could be implemented. In the meantime, the obvious reparations to the keep and land could begin. Either something had happened here that Lioslath wasn't telling him or the Fergussons lacked decent farming and carpentry skills. The houses were riddled with overlapping patches, the roofs covered in thinning thatch. The keep was in worse shape.

There were many improvements to make before winter. They would need cooperation between the clans to get them done and getting the clans to cooperate would take time.

He knew this visit would not be a welcome one, but this clan's anger had an edge to it. Since they arrived, they'd kept extra guard to prevent bloodshed. Lioslath barring the gates for weeks had imbedded the animosity between the clans. Even now with the feast beginning, it was there. Beneath the sounds of scraping and tearing of food, and the adjusting of elbows and shuffling of legs, there was the air of anticipated battle.

He needed to come to some agreement with the clan's mistress. But would she be agreeable if she was hungry and fainting? Even more so, could he remain reasonable when she was so breathtakingly beautiful to him?

In the sunlight, her hair was raven black and just as incandescent. If it had been long, he knew its darkness would have consumed even the brightest of summer skies.

But its chopped length surprisingly pleased him. It didn't hide any of the womanly figure underneath. So he saw the graceful arch of her neck, the creamy texture along her nape. He could so clearly see the intimate spot where he might hover with his lips, where he might graze with his teeth, where he might kiss.

He'd teased her about a kiss. But what had started as calculated flirting, now, in sunlight, became something more like a truth.

It was a complicated attraction and one he didn't want, and

which she didn't reciprocate. She wasn't accepting his food and she didn't raise her eyes to his. In fact, she kept looking outside the gates.

'We can take food with us,' he offered.

'With us?'

'I want to know the extent of the necessary repairs to be done before winter.'

'Are you expecting me to show you around the...my clan?'

'Certainly.'

'Doona you have responsibilities here?'

He shrugged. 'Doona you need to eat before we go?'

'Aindreas brought me food while I dressed.'

'The venison. Do you not want to take some of what is offered today?' Bram asked. They may be talking of only food, but at least she talked. Sometimes, the most heated discussions started with banalities.

'Ah, aye, the food today was conveniently made.'

'There was more yesterday,' he said, letting her know he'd expected her to open the gates yesterday.

He caught the slight curve to her lips before she looked away. He'd let her enjoy her victory, since he didn't intend to give her others. 'You must be eager to leave the confines of the keep?'

'Very,' she answered with the expected anger in her eyes. But there was also vulnerability. A complicated emotion he didn't want to see.

It wouldn't do to feel more for this clan or this woman.

Curbing his tongue, keeping his patience, he stepped back so she could walk in front of him.

He had managed tough negotiations before; this was no different. When tempers were high, coming to any agreement was often protracted. But in the end, he always prevailed and he'd do so again. But how?

There were secrets here and he knew precious little about this woman. A woman who held daggers and arrows. Whose hair was black as night and whose eyes were bright as a summer sky. 'Are you averse to our making improvements and of using our supplies?'

'It would be foolish of me otherwise, wouldn't it?'

'But you do not like it.'

'Nae,' she said bluntly.

He'd get no further in that argument. 'The fences surrounding the keep and the gates need minor changes,' he said, changing the subject. 'What of the keep?'

'The stones hold, but much of the timber needs replacing.' She hurried her pace towards the gates. 'I doona want to talk of the keep today and I doona want to talk of improvements. What repairs are needed we'll make in the spring.'

They couldn't make repairs on their own. The platform by the gates was crooked. The entire village was riddled with haphazard structures as if the maintenances were hurriedly or half-heartedly done.

'Why are the keep and village like this?'

‘You knew of our clan’s poverty when you made the agreement with my father.’

He knew something of their poverty, aye, but now that he had a closer look, it appeared as if the damage was purposefully done. He couldn’t imagine any carpenters with so little skill.

‘You’re not telling me everything.’

‘Nothing has ever been easy or comfortable here. That is all you need to know,’ she retorted.

There had to be more to the damage here than her words belied. There were few horses, no sheep, and their fields were bare. There were too many repairs and winter stores to make up as well, if he was right about her lack of stored food. He knew what it was like to be hungry and he wouldn’t wish it even on this obstinate woman.

Their survival was precarious here, as was their future prosperity and stability. With King John Balliol now held prisoner at the Tower, the English King Edward began to set up many sheriffs and governors. This clan’s protection, and its alliances, would be more important than ever.

His brother Caird had warned him that there was a lot of work to do here, but even now he could feel his blood coursing excitedly at the prospect. Bram enjoyed hunting and he enjoyed play. But he also loved a challenge and the work needed here filled him with a sense of anticipation.

No. He had to stick with the plan, which meant, come springtime, he would be gone.

They walked around his camp, but Lioslath's eyes remained resolutely on the village ahead. If she continued to ignore him, he wouldn't be accepted by this clan despite the supplies he brought.

She said she would accept his help, but she clearly didn't want to. She was full of contradictions. He wanted to implement his plan, but she forced him to remain idle. He offered the feast in friendship and supplies in goodwill; she didn't want to eat or discuss repairs. There were too many contrasts and contradictions. Too many factors competing.

Competition. The thought sparked an idea.

They'd never mend relations with tempers so high. They had to make peace if he and his men were to stay the winter and he thought he knew how to do it. 'Winter is coming and some improvements can't wait until spring. Our clans must work together to begin these repairs.'

'Isn't that why you feed us?' she said.

'It isn't enough. What is needed after these many weeks is distraction. A faire. Some competitions.'

'You want us to do what?' Lioslath gasped.

'We must have a competition between clans,' Bram said.

Games. He wanted to play games in order to defuse a fight. 'How are games supposed to stop fighting?'

Lioslath could feel the air clearing since they'd walked out the gates. Near the village was the forest she treasured. Even though she was supposed to be showing him the fields and the village, already she was walking to the trees, to peace.

And he mentioned games?

She was done with this conversation. She didn't want to stay around listening to him until he twisted his words so she agreed with him. He wanted to talk of the village and of the fields, but to her the forest beckoned. She couldn't wait to get to the trees, to feel the soft dirt under her feet. To hear...silence.

‘Are you being wilfully obtuse or do you truly not realise?’

‘What will it take for you to leave?’ she said, not wanting him in the trees with her.

‘Go?’ He frowned as if trying to guess what truth she told. ‘As the clan’s mistress, doona you want to appease ill tempers?’

She wasn't the clan's mistress. The only temper she ever cared about was her own. ‘Nae.’

His frown increased, his eyes troubled. Then everything eased and he stepped back.

‘You're a lady, I apologise. You've never been in a situation like this before. However, I ken what will start riots and this competition will help.’

A lady? Clan's mistress? He might as well have been speaking French. Even his manner had gone all courtly. She wasn't gentle born. She had never cared about cookery or ensuring freshly swept staircases, or gentling tempers. She had given Aindreas her bow and arrows, but she felt the comfort of her small blade hidden in the folds of her tunic. The small blade she currently wanted to throw at Bram.

‘You cannot be sincere about these games,’ she said. Although

what else did she expect from a Colquhoun who laughed all the time? ‘This is a trick, a...jest.’

‘Nae a jest. Nae a trick. Simply games. A competition,’ he enunciated. ‘We need a swimming contest across the lake, wrestling, bowls, horseshoes and archery.’

‘With teams, scoring, prizes?’

‘Aye.’

He sounded relieved, as if she agreed with him! After everything she’d been through this year—death, vulnerability and soon starvation—he wanted to play games. ‘Frivolous amusements. They serve nae purpose.’

Bram rolled back on his heels. Lioslath understood nothing, or she wilfully battled against him. Neither would do. This woman wasn’t who he thought she would be. Her father died in April. Surely, by now, she had knowledge of clan affairs? After all, women cared about the temperaments of the people around them, even if they did not deal with the politics of leadership.

And now, in both of the clans, the men’s temperaments were too high. They needed cooperation and a way to release the tension.

‘They serve the purpose of men who want to fight each other. They give direction to their aggression so it is not spent on each other. We need to set it all up and fast or these men will be at each other’s throats by midnight.’

‘Those games will not feed my clan, or make their homes stronger, or provide—’

‘Those issues would have been addressed weeks ago if you had opened the gates.’

Lioslath winced and he knew he’d hit his target. Being blunt wasn’t normally in his nature when courteous words worked just as well. But courteous words were wasted with her.

‘We need cooperation and there’s nothing else more expedient to address raised tempers than a competition. What they need now is a test of wills.’

‘This isn’t a test of wills. I’ve hunted plenty to know when a prey is being manipulated from the safety of their lair. Come here, little vole, you’ll get some food for your belly and then I’ll get food for mine!’

‘I set this up so our clans doona start fighting!’

‘You make it all my fault. Aye, vole, it’s all your fault you’re in my soup because you were so hungry you ate the scraps in my trap!’

He would have his way in this. ‘Are you saying I manipulated you when I put the food outside the tunnel?’

‘Aye, what else was it?’

‘A peace offering. A gift to show nae ill will!’

‘And the fact that I took it? Didn’t that obligate me then to open the gates?’

He’d done it to soften her towards them. ‘You opened the gates to save your honour.’

‘Because you were in my bedroom,’ she pointed out. ‘Ah, I’ve been blind. You’ve done it over and over. Here, starving people,

here is some food. Here, Clan Fergusson, here's the promise of sheep and a strong alliance.'

Her words cut too close to the truth. 'Careful, Fergusson. Who is twisting words now? The deal we made was a matter of diplomacy between your father and me, made by consenting parties—'

'We're not consenting. You merely starve our bellies until we feel as if the starvation is somehow our fault! These games you suggest aren't a compromise, they're coercion!'

'I am Colquhoun. I am laird. I do not coerce!'

She smiled. 'Of course you wouldn't, how silly of me. We are only here for your pleasure.'

Shaking his head, he looked around. Their words were not going unnoticed. They were outside the gates now, past the camp and too near the village. There were no benches and tables here, but freshly cooked food lay on carts. Many villagers were taking the food and carrying it to the communal tables. Too many villagers who walked slowly and could hear their every heated word.

Bram ran his hand through his hair. Frustrating Fergusson! Did she not know women were meant to be gentle? To smile? To be meek? That was what was needed today, a biddable female. She was unexpected. And he was constantly guessing with her. It wasn't only her beauty he couldn't ignore, it was the mystery of her. How she hesitated around her siblings and clan.

How she ignored his status as laird and his coaxing smiles.

How she angered at his reasoning. Frustrating female!

He was again brought to a point he didn't want to be with her. So quick to lose his patience. She put him in a position of defence again and he would not have it. 'Are you saying you doona want this competition?'

Lioslath pointed to the village. 'Aren't we walking so I can show you what you so generously want to improve?'

He'd get no further with her. Stubbornness. She might have eaten, but he hadn't. He eyed their offered food, but the colour of the pottage wasn't appetising, so he grabbed two of their rolls and some boar.

Following Lioslath, he took a bite of the bread and quickly spat it out lest he risk breaking a tooth.

'Bread not fresh enough for you?'

'Nae, 'tis fine.' No bread should have stones and pottage shouldn't be grey. But he wouldn't admit that. She believed he liked easy and thought him pampered. Confirming this idea wouldn't get her agreement to the rest of his intentions for today.

The feast was only the beginning of mending relations with this clan. It would take the games event to truly achieve cooperation. Then his plan to remain for the winter would be secure.

As if she knew he lied about the bread, Lioslath smirked and hurried her steps towards the village.

* * *

Restless, agitated and still too far away from her forest,

Lioslath wanted the afternoon to end. It wasn't only Bram and his demands, it was their clans observing each other, observing her and Bram. Though she was outside, she felt trapped. Trapped by the role here that she didn't know how to do and trapped by her longing to be better.

Barely keeping her temper, she pointed to the roofs, and to the wood rot. Talked of the ploughing still to do in the fields and the trenching through the village. All needing to be done before the dirt froze.

Bram asked questions, and she knew he missed nothing. She felt the familiar prick to her pride. Fergusson keep and land were falling apart.

It hadn't always been so. When she was a child, her parents had worked tirelessly and the keep had been beautiful; the clan had been prosperous.

Then the wolves had come and raided the village right before a sudden frost descended. The wheat harvesting hadn't yet been completed and most of the bales of oats and barley hadn't been stored properly. They suffered too much as the harsh winter continued. Suffered more with her mother's cough and sudden death.

They'd never suffered a winter like that again, but they never recovered from it either. Her father most of all.

As the years went by her father took riskier chances. Desperation to recover what they lost engulfed his every action. The marriage to the Colquhoun clan was simply another attempt.

When the letters of agreement occurred, when her father left to secure his bride, he regained some pride. His sense of purpose, of optimism, returning.

But Clan Fergusson was cursed. For when her father returned from that fateful trip to Colquhoun land, he had no bride. Determined, desperate, he left again and never returned. Then Bram sent his letter offering help, but he never came. When the English garrison stormed the keep in July, they'd been too vulnerable to withstand the demands. The English caused far worse damage than an ice storm. They arrived just as the barley was harvested and they stayed to harvest the oats and wheat before burning the rest.

The clan was gleaning for remains when the Colquhouns arrived. Lioslath had had enough.

She was tired of being told she didn't understand. She was sick of feeling as though she didn't understand. She did understand. Laird Colquhoun wrote a letter saying he'd come with aid, but then days, weeks, months had gone by.

So it was up to her to help her clan. She hunted; she provided food. She confronted the English until they left and she intended to confront Bram until he left as well.

She thought closing the gates would be enough. She thought giving supplies to the English would be enough. She failed on both accounts. She wasn't ruthless like her father, or gentle like her mother. Bram's very presence was a bitter reminder of how inadequate she was.

When they turned a corner and she saw her siblings playing with Donald's children, she couldn't go any further. She couldn't walk through her land with the weight of Bram's pity on her shoulders like this. It would only be worse if he saw she couldn't talk properly to her siblings as well.

'I'm leaving!' she said, turning away from the villagers and their clans. Turning away from the decimated fields and the derelict keep, and a Colquhoun laird who noticed everything.

His eyes widened in warning, but she marched around him. She didn't need to see him to know he followed her. It was simply that awareness. Like when he spoke, the low timbre of his voice. It was something that curled inside her. She hated her acute awareness of him almost as much as she hated his accusations and pity.

All day she walked beside him, answered his questions and talked to her clan. All day she watched him. As a huntress, she admired how a man his size strode so stealthily, so deadly and silently.

She shivered. Why was she noticing him? Of everyone she had ever known, why did she feel this...desire for him?

She couldn't avoid it now. It wasn't hunger and it wasn't weakness. Her body was acutely aware of him. After all those weeks of watching him, she knew that her eyes were no longer filled with hate, but something like admiration. For Laird Colquhoun!

* * *

She was almost out of breath by the time they reached the forest on the south side. The forest was deeper and darker here. It was her favourite part of her land and one she could not see from the Fergusson keep.

A few steps inward and she smelled the musty earth and the sharp bite of autumn's leaves. The smell was freedom and home. Bram might have thought he trapped her in her home with his siege. In truth, he kept her away from her home, which she always found in her forest.

Bram remained silent, but his will was a force she could feel and its force was ruining her sanctuary. Bram practically hovered as he walked beside her and he almost blocked the sky through the trees. He looked wrong in her forest.

The brightness of his hair didn't blend, the broadness of his shoulders and bulk of his build like a boulder that suddenly appeared amongst the tall and graceful tree trunks.

He was wrong to be here as well. This forest was hers. Clan Colquhoun had no place here. But he was there, like a storm that kept battering against her.

Her hand fluttering to the hidden blade at her waist, she rounded on him. 'I showed you what you wanted to see. Why did you follow me?'

'We were in front of your clan and mine. My not leaving the village with you would have looked like a slight. So I strolled out with you as if we wished to talk privately.'

Stroll, she had practically ran here, but he kept his pace with

her and wasn't out of breath. To everyone, they probably did look as though they walked away from the village. Again, she made a foolish choice. She was unused to wondering what others thought or what appearances should be.

She had been hidden away most of her life, and for the rest of it, she hid herself away. She was hiding now, but the Colquhoun wouldn't leave her alone. She clenched the blade she'd hidden in her clothes.

'So we talked privately and now you can go!'

'Nae, we must truly talk. We must come to an agreement.'

The competition again. His tone changed until it was as blunt as hers. It wouldn't make her change her mind on its futility, especially when he used the word 'must'. The very word curbed her freedom. She had heard it from her stepmother and in the end from her father.

She knew he would continue to argue about the games until she couldn't refuse. However, what Bram couldn't control was how the competition would go.

Bram might bring his food and his supplies. He might order this competition. But she would choose who the winner would be.

Bram didn't move. He didn't even realise he needed to move, until she threw the knife just past his left ear.

She knew he hadn't seen the blade, but there was no mistaking the fury and the shock in his eyes when he heard the thunk of it embedding in the tree behind him.

Brutal silence as storm-grey eyes stared at her.

Lioslath smiled. ‘That’s my agreement to your competition. Satisfied, Colquhoun?’

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