



THE
HIGHLAND
ANGELS

PREQUEL

THE
BRUCE'S
ANGEL

CAROLINE
LEE

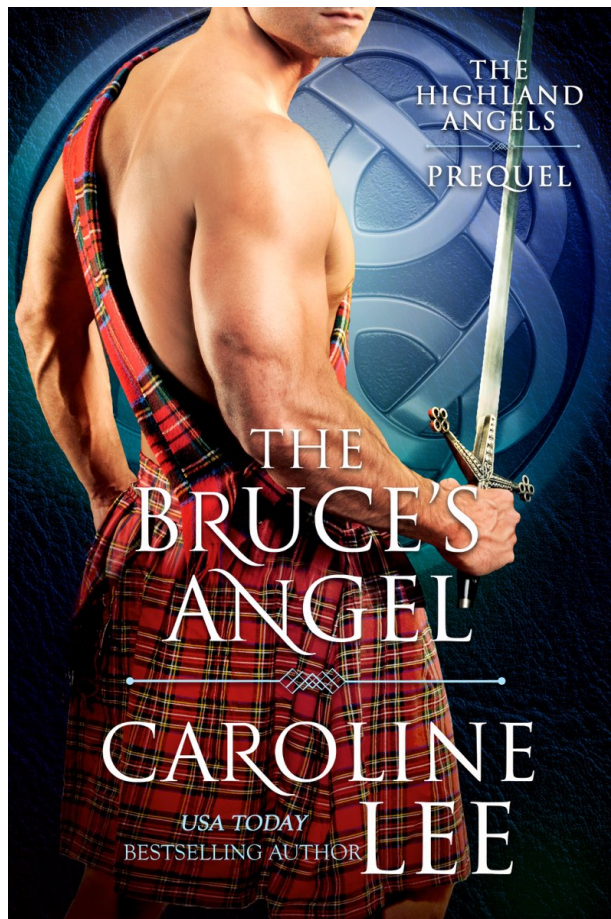
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THE BRUCE'S ANGEL
THE HIGHLAND ANGELS, BOOK 6



CAROLINE LEE

ABOUT THIS BOOK



Lady Charlotte MacLeod is desperate to escape marriage to a traitor, so she turns pirate. As the notorious Black Banner,

she's able to capture the Queen's ship, and finally get someone to hear her evidence. But she doesn't expect the Queen to be guarded by the man who once stole her innocence and her heart.

*L*iam Bruce has spent years serving his royal cousin. While he doesn't begrudge this latest guard duty, he does regret that it's keeping him from returning to MacLeod land and the fiery angel he can't forget. But when he unmaskes a dangerous pirate in the middle of a desperate battle, 'tis his Charlotte spitting curses at him!

*N*ow it's up to Liam to protect his love from charges of royal treason. Can he convince Charlotte to trust him again?

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PROLOGUE



The last time they'd made love had been on the deck of a pirate's ship.

Of course, at the time, Liam hadn't believed Charlotte when she'd told him of the birlinn's history, but that was probably because she had been giggling as she'd pulled him along the quay that evening toward the innocuous-looking boat. All she'd told him was she wanted to feel the motion of the waves under her, while he moved *over* her, and, well...

How in the hell was a man supposed to deny *that*?

"A pirate boat?" He hummed good-naturedly. "Ye expect me to believe the mighty MacLeod family, the pride of Lewes, harbors *pirates*?"

In the darkness, it was impossible to see the sparkle in her eyes, but he could hear it in her voice as they reached the plank offering access to the birlinn.

"Of course!" she teased. "Ye've never heard of the Black Banner?"

He snorted distractedly, paying more attention to ensuring she crossed over to the vessel safely. It wasn't necessary; Charlotte Mac-

Leod was many things—talented, passionate, capable—but clumsy wasn't one of them. She trotted across the plank and landed firm-footed on the deck, as if she'd done it many times.

Maybe she had. Her brother Tavish, who was also Liam's friend, was a sailor. Was this his ship?

"Is this Tav's boat?"

She giggled, even as she tugged him toward the stern. "I told ye, my heart...this is the Black Banner's birlinn."

Ah yes, the Black Banner: the child's horror tale, and the likely mythical pirate who stalked the merchants of the Western Isles. And Charlotte expected him to believe he resided here on Lewes.

Liam had arrived in the isles a month ago to formally court the Lady Charlotte, and was still just as delighted with her as he remembered being when they'd met in the Highlands. She wasn't at all proper and ladylike, but met him nose-to-nose.

She'd make a good wife—a good *partner*—and Liam looked forward to formalizing their betrothal with her father, the MacLeod laird.

Until then, he saw no reason not to continue learning all about the woman he'd spend his life with.

They reached the stern platform where the captain would stand, and the helmsmen could lean on the grand rudder.

"Well, my angel..." He pulled her into his arms, lowering his voice to a murmur. "Ye've supposedly dragged me out to the *Black Banner's* boat. Now what?"

She twisted about, managing not to step out of his hold, as she flourished a bundle, which she then shook out to reveal a blanket.

"Now, Liam..." She pressed up on her toes, until her lips were beside his ear. "Now you're going to make love to me."

It was her playful tease, more than her words, which set him hardening under his kilt, but the way she brushed against him as she squirmed out of his arms didn't hurt either.

Before he had time to catch his breath, or do anything more than groan in anticipation, she'd spread the blanket out on the deck, and was tugging at the ties of her gown.

His blood was pounding in anticipation, the way she always made him feel when she matched his passions head on this way, but he had the forethought to glance toward the shore.

This late at night, surely her pale skin and fiery halo of hair would stand out like a torch?

She guessed what concerned him. "That's what makes it *fun*, Liam," she whispered in that husky voice of hers, and he gave up caring about propriety.

If she, the willful and beautiful daughter of the laird, was willing to buck convention for *him*, who was he to argue?

"Aye, my angel." With a smile, Liam made short work of his own clothing, adding them to the pile on the deck beside the blanket. Truthfully, he was glad his kilt wasn't too complicated, because when she began to peel away her chemise, his fingers—and his mind—turned into lumps of rock.

His Charlotte had always preferred making love out-of-doors, but usually they made do without fully disrobing. It hadn't been often he'd been able to drink in the sight of her this way, standing nude and proud, managing to look strong and capable, even on the deck of a sailing ship.

Liam drank in the sight of her, grateful beyond measure to have found such an incredible woman.

I love you.

He needed her to know that, but he couldn't seem to make his voice work.

Then she was reaching for him, pulling him down beside her so they could cradle one another with their arms, and he had more important things on his mind.

"Ye're sure about this?" he murmured against her skin, as he trailed kisses from her neck to her breast. "Sure 'tis safe?"

She arched against him with a moan. "Can ye no' feel the power of the surf under us, my heart?"

He was too busy to focus on her poetry, but knew she was right. The boat rocked in time with the waves, the way he wanted to rock atop her.

"I need ye, Liam," she panted. "I want ye to be mine."

"Yer only."

"My only," she agreed, breathless.

His mouth was occupied for the next little while, and the sound of her small cries and mewls was enough to keep him standing stiffly at attention. He stroked her softly, marveling at her enthusiasm.

God Almighty, but she was ready for him.

When she curved against him once more, he knew she was as ready as he was. Grasping her thighs, he slid her closer, settling himself between her legs as she writhed on the thin blanket.

"Liam!" she cried, part plea, part command. "Donae stop, please."

"Aye," he breathed, his hand tracing up her chest to rest against her cheek. "Ye're so hot, so passionate, Charlotte. I'm afraid ye and I will both burn up, leaving nothing but cinders." It was a joke between them, when he called her *Char*.

"If we do," she panted beneath him, "'twill be your fault as much as mine. Now stop delaying!"

"As my lady commands."

When he finally pressed home, she cried out in pleasure.

Or mayhap it was joy.

She met him, thrust for thrust, as the familiar pressure built behind Liam's bollocks.

He'd been with other women, aye, but this was *Charlotte*, and making love to Charlotte was like nothing he'd ever experienced before.

He watched her face as she contorted, and marveled at how well he could read her, despite the near-darkness. Even without her wrapped around him, he could tell when she was close. The pleasure mixed with frustration he saw when she met his gaze told her everything he needed to know.

He dropped a hand between their joined bodies and stroked the pearl nestled within her curls.

She gasped his name, and he felt her muscles contracting around him.

It took everything in him not to roar her name, not to beg for God's mercy, the way she was doing, but as he spilled his seed deep inside her, his only indication was the way he stiffened against her.

Still, they both collapsed with groans, breathing heavily. Under him, she went limp, her arms and legs dropping their holds on his body to pool, boneless, against the coverlet. And she was grinning.

Reverently, Liam leaned down to place a kiss at the corner of her lips. Then another against her neck.

"I love ye," he whispered. When she didn't respond, he hoisted himself up on his elbows to meet her eyes. "I love ye, Char. I love everything about ye. Yer mind, yer passion. I'll love ye until my dying breath."

She cupped his cheek, her lips drawn into a smile glorious to behold. "Of course ye will. For I love ye, and nae one will say otherwise."

And he knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, he'd found his forever.



Charlotte would never forget the day her life changed forever. She was holding Liam's hand as they strolled through the courtyard, and a messenger arrived with a scroll. Her love had read it, then looked at her with pain in his lovely blue eyes. She took it from his limp fingers and read King Robert Bruce's summons.

Liam was an important man to their King. He'd fought beside the Bruce at Linlithgow and Dumbarton, and had been one of the first Scot warriors into Perth when the Bruce took back the royal burgh. King Robert trusted Liam, and she was proud of him.

Proud someone as brave and trustworthy as he had chosen to fall in love with her.

It was perfectly reasonable he'd be called back to his duties, and she loved him for it. Still, as she'd looked into his eyes, she couldn't help feeling...scared.

There was something in his expression, which seemed to be warning her, the simple future they'd planned might not come to be.

Saying goodbye to him was one of the hardest things she'd ever done, and as she stood outside the gates and watched him ride toward the shore, and the boat which would take him to his royal cousin, Charlotte reminded herself of their love.

Liam *loved* her and would return to her.

But never once did he look back.

A month passed, and no matter how certain she still was of her feelings for him, that little fact continued to eat at her.

She retreated to her room and curled up on her bed—the bed in which Liam had once held her in his arms and whispered such sweet words after one of the rare occasions they’d made love indoors—and let the tears fall.

She spent the afternoon there, which is why she hadn’t heard news of the visitor. It wasn’t until her father sent for her that Charlotte realized she needed to make herself presentable.

My life isnae falling apart. Liam loves me, and I love him. We will be together.

So why did her sense of dread only increase as she approached her father’s solar?

Da was waiting inside, holding a piece of parchment and paying her no attention, as usual. The same couldn’t be said of his companion.

“Lady Charlotte,” the man welcomed her, his eyes on her breasts under the rumpled gown. “When ye are my wife, ye will learn to comport yerself, I trust?”

Her hands curled into fists in the wool of her skirts. “What?” she asked hoarsely.

The man—wasn’t he one of the MacDonald’s younger sons?—waved one hand dismissively. “Ye look as if ye’ve *slept* in that thing, woman. And yer eyes are all puffy. Nae wife of mine will appear less than perfect.” He lifted a shoulder and turned toward her father. “I’m looking for a biddable ornament with admirable assets, MacLeod.”

“Ye’ll get Charlotte, and ye’ll be grateful,” Da growled, still examining the document.

Charlotte was having trouble breathing, and her pulse had become a dull roar in her ears. "Da?" she managed to choke out. "What...?"

What was going on?

Wife of his?

Was that a marriage contract her father was reading?

Marriage to a MacDonald?

But Liam...

Liam was the man she loved. The one who'd vowed to spend forever with her.

Her father finally looked up and met her eyes. "The MacDonald and I have decided yer future, girl." He gestured to the other man. "John MacDonald is willing to marry ye."

Charlotte's mouth dropped open.

Willing?

Was this another attempt to forge an alliance with a clan, who was their enemy more often as not?

Ignoring John—and the way he was staring at her chest and licking his lips—Charlotte stepped toward her father, knowing she had to convince him. "Da, Liam and I...we are in love." She heard the note of desperation in her voice, but couldn't silence it. "We have an agreement."

To his credit, her father *did* shift his weight awkwardly, as if affected by her words. But then he shook his head and slammed the contract down on the desk in front of him.

"Ye would put yer own wants ahead of yer clan's future?" he growled, reaching for the stylus. "John is an ambitious man and will do us all proud."

"I donae *want* an ambitious husband, Da!" She was torn between tears and anger, her nails pressing into her palms to hold back the

urge to scream or hit something. "I want Liam! He's kinsman to the King," she added in desperation, taking another step toward her father, her hand out in supplication. "Surely that makes him a good ally?"

Da had pressed his lips together then, his palm flat against the desk, as he'd leaned forward and seemed to consider her words. Charlotte held her breath and tried to stave off the horror with hope.

Even John quit his study of her *assets* and focused on her father. Her blood was pounding in her ears, and she found herself praying.

But when he finally shook his head, she felt her knees go weak with defeat.

"Liam Bruce cannae marry ye, lass, because he's betrothed to another."

That's when her knees gave out on her completely, and Charlotte sank to the floor. Her palms flattened against the cool flagstones, as if she could draw some of their strength into her shaking bones.

Betrothed? *Her* Liam? The man who'd sworn to love her until his dying breath...was engaged to another?

"Betrothed?" she asked weakly, tears threatening.

Da nodded brusquely, seeming uncomfortable with her display of emotion. "He's a Bruce, lass. Of course his royal cousin would see to his betrothal, some Lowland heiress with a powerful father."

Oh God.

Two fat tears trailed down her cheeks and plopped onto the back of her hands, as she stared down at what felt like her only anchor to the world.

Had her heart stopped beating altogether?

Betrothed to another.

I'll love ye until my dying breath.

Oh God.

Her father cleared his throat. "An alliance with the MacDonalds is what's best for me, and ye'll do as ye're told, girl."

John spoke up again then, his voice smug and oily. "I want a wife who understands her place."

A wife's place was beside her husband, was it not?

In confusion, still not entirely sure she understood what was happening, Charlotte lifted her gaze from the floor to stare at the stranger she was supposed to marry.

"Her *place*, John?" she whispered, allowing her anger to seep into her voice.

He didn't notice, judging by his smirk as he crouched beside her. "Behind me. Or *under* me, as the case may be." He reached out and grabbed her chin, forcing her to meet his eyes. "I want heirs, ye ken."

Before she could spit her defiance, he thrust her away from him and stood in one motion, turning toward her father once more. "Let us sign the betrothal, MacLeod, so I can escort yer daughter to her new home and start instructing her in her new duties."

Da grunted as he scrawled something across the bottom of the parchment and held the stylus out for the younger man to do the same.

Hollowly, Charlotte watched as her father reach for the wax to press his seal into the document, and knew her life would never be the same.

And she was right.

CHAPTER 1



*L*ate spring, 1315
The Western Isles

The knuckles of her hands were pale from the force of her grip on the bow rail, as Charlotte MacLeod peered toward the distant speck. It was near impossible to see from so far away, but if her intelligence was correct, she was sure it was another birlinn. And not just any boat, but one carrying a very important passenger.

Elizabeth Bruce, Queen of Scotland.

Whom Charlotte planned to kidnap.

"Calculating again, sister?" Tavish asked as he joined her at the rail, the wind playing merry hell with his auburn curls. "Ye've gone over the plan so many times, even Dane has it memorized, and he's a lad."

"He's six," she murmured, still staring at the distant boat. "And he's no' to come into battle."

Of all her family, Tav was the one she loved best. They were twins, the youngest of the MacLeod siblings. He'd been the one to

teach her swordplay and sailing, and had stood beside her as her biggest support, before she'd been sent to Finlaggan with John.

And when she'd needed help to escape...? Well, Tav had been there for her then as well.

But despite their mission, his tone was still teasing when he replied, "Dane's six, aye, but this is *my* boat and he's *my* son, so I get to decide what he does and doesnae do."

Frowning, Charlotte forced herself to release her hold on the rail and turn to her brother. They'd argued over this before; she couldn't bear the thought of her wee nephew being hurt if this went wrong.

"Ye swore this was my raid. I'm in command," she reminded him.

"Aye, once metal meets meat. Ye've planned it all and deserve to see it come to fruition. But ye ken fuck-all about actual sailing."

"No' true," she snapped. "I ken at *least* as much as Dane."

The grin, which was never far from her brother's lips, finally burst free. "Ye're no' wrong there. The lad cannae seem to put down his pipes long enough to learn a halyard from a forestay."

"He'll stay on the birlinn, aye?" she asked, her tone gentle. Wheedling. "I'll no' be able to concentrate, worrying for him."

With a great sigh, Tav rolled his eyes and braced his palms against the rail beside her. "*Fine*. But afore ye start crowing, ken I wasnae going to allow him aboard the Queen's birlinn. 'Tis safer here."

So he'd been merely teasing her about allowing Dane on the raid. How like her rarely serious brother.

"Now, the first rule of pirating is to pay attention to yer prize." He nodded toward the distant birlinn.

With a snort, she turned her attention back to the ship. It was closer now, close enough to see some of the more obvious details.

"First rule?" she murmured distractedly. "I didnae realize there were *rules*."

"Oh, aye," her brother scoffed. "The second is learning how appealing the deck of a pirate ship can be to a certain type of lass. Dane's mother was like that, as I recall."

Charlotte *knew* her brother was only trying to make her laugh. There was no way he knew of her secret dalliance on the deck of this very birlinn, well over a year ago.

And there was no way he could know how much her heart ached at the memory of her gullibility, the way she'd taken Liam into her body and believed his lies about loving her until his dying breath.

She swallowed down her shame and anger, and focused instead on their prize. She couldn't even bring herself to respond to Tav's flippant references to his many dalliances.

"By all the saints, ye're somber," her brother said as he nudged her shoulder. "'Tis a raid, no' a funeral."

Her fingers flexed against the wood of the rail. "Is that no' a danger, when pirating?"

"Of course," he quipped, with a snort. "Rule three, I believe."

She leaned forward, eager to get a better look at her prize. "Ye're a terrible pirate, Tav."

"I'm a brilliant pirate. The Black Banner is feared by fat merchants from here to Durness."

"So feared, ye'll no' even tell Da what ye do on those long months away from the keep, aye?" She shot him a smirk, knowing it was a sore point.

Sure enough, her brother scowled. "Da is a horse's arse, and I'll be happy no' to return to Lewes, after what he did to ye."

Her father had betrothed her to the very devil, and Charlotte wasn't sure she could forgive him either. But she couldn't go back to

Finlaggan, and no one in Scone would listen to her. If today's mission didn't work, she had no place to go, except back to Lewes.

Charlotte swallowed as she and her brother both peered at the distant ship in silence. Their birlinn was tacking toward the prize, who likely still didn't realize the danger heading their way.

Long moments passed before Charlotte allowed her shoulders to slump in relief.

"Is it her?" Tav murmured.

" 'Tis her." Charlotte examined their target. "She flies no colors, as Tosh said, but the sailors wear a bit of yellow, see? And the stern..." She trailed off.

The birlinn was larger than theirs, but not by much, and not at all worthy of the Bruce's Queen. But that was why he'd chosen it for her return, after all, for it was supposed to be a covert trip, with no announcements, until she joined him in Scone.

So her method of transport was not at all fit for a queen, but it was ideal for a woman who'd spent the past eight years as a prisoner of the English. All the same, having been kept in isolation and treated as little more than a pawn, it probably seemed quite luxurious to her.

From where she stood, Charlotte could see the tent erected in the stern of the vessel, a platform set high enough to catch the breeze, which missed the men on the rowing benches.

There were likely couches and tables set up inside the tent, filled with every sort of indulgence the returning Queen deserved.

Not for the first time since planning this mission, Charlotte swallowed down the spike of regret which pierced her stomach. Queen Elizabeth had endured much because of her role as the Bruce's wife, and even though Charlotte hated to add to the woman's pain, it was

that very role which made the Queen her best chance to complete this mission.

“Char?” her brother quietly prompted.

Charlotte swallowed again, then schooled her features into a determined mask and nodded firmly.

“Aye, it’s the Queen’s. I’m sure of it.”

From the way Tav watched her as he returned her nod and straightened, she knew he understood her hesitation.

“Are ye sure this is the only way, Char?”

“Aye,” she snapped. “Ye said ye trusted me. And donae call me that.”

It was a childhood nickname, one her brothers all used. Her brothers...and one other.

By sheer force of will, she ignore the memories the thought provoked—memories of the man who’d called her that with affection, as he’d playfully skimmed his fingertips across her breast, or kissed the sensitive spot below her ear, or held her gently after she’d collapsed, spent, atop him.

Liam Bruce was gone from her life. He’d run back to Scone when his royal cousin had snapped his fingers, and it was only after he’d long been gone, her father had told her the man was contracted to marry a Lowlander.

He’d been merely dallying with her.

Her brother must’ve seen the play of emotions across her face, because he grimaced and patted her hand, where it rested once more on the rail. “Aye, I trust ye, wee sister. Ye’ve a sharper mind than all of us, even if Da doesnae see it.”

She had to clear her throat to get the words out. “And donae forget it,” she rasped.

"Banner!" The cry came from atop the *birlinn's* single mast. Wee Robbie, a lad not much older than Dane, perched awkwardly on the cross-spar, one bare foot braced on the mast and one against the rigging, his sharp eyes peering at their distant prize. "They're pointing at us!"

Suddenly serious, Tav stepped away from the rail. "Are they running?" he called up to the lad.

"No' yet. They've nae reason to suspect."

Charlotte moved up beside her brother. "Except we're miles and miles from bloody land." It was why she'd chosen this spot, south of Mull, for the attack. "And they ken why *they're* out here, but why in the hell would *we* be out here?"

Tav's grin flashed. "Mayhap we like the fishing?"

She snorted as he moved down the center of the boat, calling out preparations. "Auld Robbie, hold our course until Charlotte says otherwise. I donae want to give them enough time to run. Rowers, to your benches." He tilted his head to peer up at the billowing white mainsail and the lad atop it. "Wee Robbie, when I give the word, ye ken what to do! Beware the black!"

"Beware the black!" the men roared in response, as they scrambled to their positions.

Like Tav, like Charlotte, they each wore black breeches and shirt. The clothing was expensive to dye, but traditional. Their uncle hadn't been the first Black Banner, the name which chilled the hearts of fat merchants from here to Reay, but he had been the one to teach Tavish what he'd known. She and her twin had spent hours sitting on Uncle Rory's knees, hearing stories of his adventures.

They'd been mere bairns when Tav had declared he'd be the next Black Banner, and their uncle had laughed and agreed. Since the man had married Aunt Citrine and retired from the sea to rule the

Sinclair clan, he often invited his “favorite niece and nephew” to visit.

It had been at the Sinclair keep where she’d first met Liam Bruce.

Tav nodded briskly to her as he returned forward, two long black scarves dangling from his fingertips. He tossed one to her, then began wrapping the other around his neck and lower face. It too was part of the tradition of the Black Banner; no one knew the man’s face, or what he looked like.

The Black Banner was part legend, part fairy tale. After all, the masked pirate had been terrorizing the Western Isles and further for generations. Many didn’t believe in him...which suited Tav just fine. He’d often laughed about the way merchants panicked when they saw his black sail on the horizon, just as the stories claimed.

When Charlotte had come to him with a far-fetched plan, her brother had chuckled, but had been polite enough to listen.

And when he heard *why* she wanted to take the Queen’s ship, he’d agreed.

Well, first, she’d had to talk him out of attacking the MacDonalds directly. If any of the MacLeods were to be found responsible for John MacDonald’s death, no matter *what* his sins may be, it would mean a clan war they couldn’t afford. So she’d convinced Tav it was better to make John pay through proper means...which is why she’d been to Scone twice in the last year, trying to convince *someone* to listen to her.

It hadn’t worked, but it explained why the Black Banner had started to target MacDonald ships exclusively. Tavish wanted to make John MacDonald pay for what he’d done, and that was why he supported her scheme.

And why, today, he’d handed control of his ship and his men—and his legend—to her.

No one on that birlinn would recognize her, all dressed in black as she was and her face hidden...but no one would mistake her for a man either, not with her build. Still, she would fight, if necessary, for what she needed Queen Elizabeth to know. And once she had the Queen on her brother's ship, she'd reveal her face and her plea to the woman, and pray it would be enough.

As she wrapped first her hair, then the crown of her head in the black material, she considered what Tosh's informant had told them. The old sailor relayed the Queen traveled with only five bodyguards. The rest of the men on her birlinn were sailors, who also presumably knew how to fight.

She supposed the Queen had been counting on that fact, were they attacked.

What Her Majesty likely hadn't counted on, was the fact that most of those sailors were MacLeods.

MacLeod sailors were legends among the Western Isles. Father had never shared Tavish and Uncles Rory's interest in the sea, despite Lewes being an island and the MacLeods' domination of the trading channels. Still, when the Bruce had requested a ship and men for a secret mission, Father had sent them.

And Charlotte had figured out why they were needed.

"Are ye ready?" Tav asked as he returned to the place of honor at the bow.

Charlotte nodded and finished wrapping the scarf about her red hair, leaving the tail dangling below her chin, to be pulled up across her face. "I never thought I'd be the Black Banner."

Tav's easy grin flashed as he winked. "I'll no' let ye take my place, wee sister. But for today, the ship—and all of us—are yers."

Taking a deep breath, Charlotte turned to survey the men. Their eyes were as bright as their blades as they sat easy on their rower

benches, looking for all the world like their Norse great-grandfathers must have.

"Ye ken the plan, lads?"

Most nodded, more than a few looking unsure about taking orders from their captain's little sister. But Charlotte was sure of them. They'd do what needed to be done, hopefully without too much bloodshed.

She needed to neutralize the Queen's bodyguards without killing them. Her Majesty would be far more amenable to Charlotte's request if she wasn't holding a grudge.

"Char..."

At her brother's prompt, she glanced over her shoulder. They were coming up fast on Queen's birlinn.

"Are ye ready, *Banner*?" Tav asked with a teasing smirk.

Aye.

She straightened her shoulders, took in a deep breath, and pulled her blade.

"Ship those oars! Wee Robbie, drop the banner!"

Atop the yard, the lad cut a line, and the Black Banner's signature black sail—painstakingly sewn from smaller pieces of wool—dropped in front of the white one. It wouldn't catch as much wind, but it was impressive as hell.

Seeing it luffing before it caught the wind and snapped filled Charlotte with a sense of certainty.

This *would* work. John MacDonald would *not* be her husband.

She whirled her short blade above her head. "Beware the Black!"

"Beware the black!" the lads screamed in return, as they pulled for all they were worth.

She thrust her sword forward, as if urging the birlinn toward their approaching prize, and grinned in excitement. Her brother

matched it, even as he fastened the tail of his scarf across the lower half of his face. She mimicked him, then stood at his side at the bow rail, one booted foot planted and prepared to leap over to the other boat.

He lifted his blade and bellowed, "MacLeod!"

Behind them, the men took up the cry, and Charlotte joined in.

"MacLeod! Beware the Black!"

CHAPTER 2



Liam Bruce's grip on the stern rail was tight enough to make the wood crack. It was utterly galling to be stuck standing there, unable to do a damn thing except *watch*, as the enemy inched closer in their lighter and faster ship. More than once, he'd considered pushing aside one of the rowers and taking his place on the benches—his shoulders were twice as wide as some of the sailors'—but the captain had glared him away when he'd offered.

" 'Tis likely nothing, cousin."

The quiet murmur startled him enough to throw an irritated glance at the beautiful woman beside him.

"Do ye really believe that, Yer Majesty?"

Queen Elizabeth, his cousin Robert's wife, smiled a little sadly. "Nay." She joined him at the rail, and he noticed her gloved hands were trembling as she gripped the wood as well. "I will not go back to England."

He resisted the urge to pat her hand. "I'll no' let them take ye back."

She drew in a shuddering breath, then nodded. In the month he'd spent with this woman, he'd come to admire her courage and strength...and her mind. She'd been little more than a pretty face

and an advantageous alliance when Robert had married her so many years ago, but Liam saw her differently now.

She was still beautiful, aye, but four years after her marriage, and three months after Robert declared himself King of Scotland, she'd been taken prisoner by Scotland's enemies. And had spent eight long years in captivity, where she learned strength and bravery and cunning.

Liam was impressed by the woman, and if his heart didn't reside on Lewes, he would be half in love with his Queen already.

They stood in silence, watching the approaching birlinn. The large white sail seemed to sparkle in the sunlight.

"Do you think it's from King Edward?" Elizabeth finally asked.

Liam frowned, watching the way the smaller boat moved. "Nay," he finally said, and realized he sounded as if he were lying to make her feel better, so he elaborated. "I donae ken what they're doing way out here, but England's King would have to ken taking ye back would be a mistake, no' when he gained so many earls and barons in return. Besides, that ship's smaller than ours and coming from the west."

"Fishermen?" she asked hopefully.

"Mayhap," he murmured, although doubtfully.

Stepping away from the rail, he raked his gaze over his men once more. The captain, a burly MacLeod man, was calling all sorts of nautical commands—gibberish to Liam, although the sailors seemed to understand. If an attack *did* come, either from the other ship or while they were anchored each evening, Liam counted on the sailors to fight to protect their Queen.

Under the awning set up for Her Majesty's use, Murtaugh and Tearlach were playing Nine Man Morris. The easy-going brothers

didn't seem to take anything seriously—including possible oncoming danger—and didn't mind taking advantage of the shade.

At the bow, Ross Fraser stood with his arms crossed. The loyal warrior was peering at the distant ship, and as Liam watched, he dropped his arms to adjust his sword. The last of their guard, Finn, was sleeping against the main mast. Because of course he would be.

With a sigh, Liam crossed to the lazy man, wondering yet again why Robert had saddled the mission with him. He nudged Finn in the side with his toe, not bothering to be gentle.

"Awake, ye slug. Danger approaches."

Credit where it was due, the lad sprung to his feet in a blink, his twin blades already in his palms, and an eager look in his eyes.

Acknowledging mayhap his cousin had chosen wisely, Liam sent the lad to the bow to watch with Ross. As he was turning back to the threat, he heard the Queen gasp.

And a moment later, understood the cause.

The other birlinn was close enough to see individual figures now, and what he saw wasn't encouraging. Two on the bow were dressed all in black, and the one atop the mainmast had just lowered a new sail.

A black sail.

"The Black Banner!" came the cry from a sailor mid-ships, uttered with far more terror than the English would've provoked.

When Elizabeth turned, her face was pale. Liam reached for her, prepared to catch her if she fainted, but she lifted her chin at the last moment.

"I thought he was but a legend, a myth to keep children in line."

As gently as he could, Liam took her elbow and hustled her toward her awning. "Ye've heard of him, then?"

“Aye,” she said in a shaky voice. “Ulster is not so remote we have not heard of pirates. Gallowglass mercenaries would often speak of him.”

She was speaking of her childhood, and Liam wasn’t surprised. He’d heard of the Black Banner—who hadn’t?—even near Linlithgow where his father had grown up. Liam’s mother had been a Cameron from Inverlocky, and in the years he’d spent with his grandda on the water, he’d heard all the Black Banner legends the old man knew.

Legends or not, it was clear the pirate not only existed, but was a threat here and now

By the time they reached her sanctuary, Murtaugh and Tearlach had stowed the game and were standing alert. Liam nodded approvingly, even as he led the Queen to a padded chair at the rear of the tent.

“Stay here.” He pushed her down. “If they have arrows, I want ye behind here—the chair back will protect ye somewhat.” He pulled a dagger from his boot and flicked it around in his palm, holding it out to her hilt first. “And take this.”

Elizabeth folded her hands on her lap and offered him a serene smile. Someone who didn’t know her as well as he did would’ve missed the tightness around her eyes, which belied her smooth expression.

“No need,” she said lightly. Then she pulled a thin dirk from one sleeve and tucked it under her arm, concealing it once more.

Liam grinned, even as battle-lust pumped within his veins. She was smart and brave, and he was proud to call her his Queen.

He nodded to his men, who’d all drawn their weapons now, and positioned himself with his back to Elizabeth.

If the pirates boarded this vessel, they'd find a fight waiting for them.

He was so focused on the coming battle, it wasn't until the damn black birlinn was almost upon them when he realized the sailors were still pulling strong. They hadn't armed themselves, and quite a few of them didn't appear to be one bit nervous.

Liam had just a moment to wonder at that, when the cry rose from the other ship.

"MacLeod! MacLeod!"

He didn't understand, until—as one—the men on the rowing benches lifted their oars from the water. Moments later, the other birlinn slammed into their side, cracking the rail where Liam and the Queen had so recently stood. Ross and Finn were already rushing back along the raised center ridge, but Liam knew they'd be too late.

Men dressed all in black—what kind of flashy gimmick was *that*?—swarmed across the space between the two birlinns. Had the MacLeod sailors not boated their oars, more than a few would've been broken by the impact. And the reason they'd done *that*, Liam realized, was because they knew their attackers.

So the Black Banner must be a MacLeod.

Mayhap Liam would've had time to ponder over this information, but their attackers came armed. Murtaugh and Tearlach threw themselves into the fray, their quick blades flashing. More than a few of the black-clad men fell back from the brothers' attack, but no one appeared to be mortally wounded.

Finn and Ross were doing their best to hack through the pirates from the rear, and Liam had to fight down the instinct to throw himself into the battle.

Nay. My place is here. Standing between my Queen and death.

The pirates left the sailors alone, focusing on Liam's men. The MacLeod sailors seemed confused by the attack, but many of them sat on their benches and merely watched. The captain was bellowing something, but Liam couldn't hear it over the shouts of "MacLeod!" and the clash of steel on steel.

Two figures broke away from the fight, and moving in perfect tandem, twisted and ducked as they rushed toward the Queen's sanctuary. Liam adjusted his grip on his sword, planted his feet, and prepared to meet this new threat head-on.

Unlike the other attackers, these wore masks—scarves wrapped around the lower half of their faces. They could've been twins, except one was much smaller.

Father and son? Brothers?

Stepping into the attack, Liam thrust his sword toward the smaller one's belly, but the man leapt aside with a surprised grunt. Unexpectedly, the larger of the two didn't counter, but twisted to one side with his blade up, as if keeping an eye on both battles at once.

He was *watching*?

Liam dismissed him for now, and raised his sword to block an attack which never came. The smaller pirate—was this the Black Banner then?—stood with his blade up and his shoulders back, but he didn't push the advantage. Instead, he simply stood, as if unsure.

Liam needed this over, sooner rather than later.

"Come, ye coward!" he taunted, certain the insult would goad the lad into attacking. "I have nae time for fools who hide behind masks!"

When the lad still hesitated, Liam grunted and threw himself forward, ready to lop the black-clad head from his black-clad shoulders. The lad got his blade up in time and blocked the next two

blows as well, before shaking his head slightly and going on the offensive.

And to Liam's surprise, he actually fell back under the lad's attack.

His gaze flicked forward in time to see Tearlach go down under a black-clad attack. His brother was already on the deck, and Ross was nowhere to be seen. Finn's whirling twin blades were keeping the pirates back, but their sheer numbers would overwhelm the warrior soon enough.

Damn these pirates! Damn the MacLeods for not fighting!

"What do ye want?" he growled, slamming his sword into the lad's. "Why are ye here?"

The figure didn't answer, but jerked to one side. "Banner!" he called. "The Queen!"

The other man—the Black Banner himself?—still stood to one side, and Liam could hear the laughter in his voice when he called back, "Nay, lass, this is yer fight."

Lass?

Her blade rose again, but Liam stepped inside her defenses. Instead of taking advantage of his longer reach to pierce her torso with his sword, he slammed his larger hilt down across her forearm and wrist, causing her to hiss in pain as he reached for her mask.

While she was distracted, he yanked down the black scarf covering all but her eyes...and froze.

"*Charlotte?*" he whispered incredulously.

That's when her dark eyes flashed with rage, and she head-butted him.

CHAPTER 3



If Charlotte hadn't grown up with older brothers, hadn't seen men train and fight and be wounded since the earliest she could remember, well then, mayhap she wouldn't have landed the blow. Mayhap she would've come up with some way to distract him, to use the mind she was so proud of for something other than percussive force.

But she'd needed a reprieve from the battle, a reprieve from the turmoil choking her gut and making it hard to breath...so she head-butted him.

"Damnation!" he growled as he stumbled backward, his palm cupping his nose as red began to leak through his fingers.

But he hadn't lost his grip on the sword, even if she wasn't an active threat. No, of course not. He was a warrior.

It was one of the reasons she'd fallen in love with him.

Liam Bruce.

She'd hesitated, there at the beginning, when she'd realized who it was protecting the Queen. Even Tav had noticed her pause, and she'd shaken off the indecision with a signal that she was fine once more.

Liam Bruce.

He'd gone running back to the King, forgotten all about her, and now she found him standing between her and her prize.

She tightened her grip on her short sword and stepped forward without raising it. He was shaking his head—trying to clear the fog-giness caused by her blow?—while blood still dripped from between his fingers and across his lips.

His lips...

Oh God.

This wasn't the time to be remembering the way they'd felt on her bare skin, or the way they had pulled up in a teasing smirk when their eyes had met across the supper table. This wasn't the time to think about the way he'd used them to pleasure her—

"Char?"

Liam's voice jarred her back to the present day, the pain of his betrayal still as fresh as it had been months ago.

He'd left her, run back to his betrothed, and now she found him here? Standing between her and the one person she wanted?

The one person she *needed*?

"Ye lost the right to call me that," she growled, raising the sword and allowing her anger to show as she advanced toward him. "Ye may no' use that name!"

To give him credit, Liam still knew how to meet her ire head-on. He dropped his hand, wiping the blood from his palm along the Bruce tartan covering his thighs, and raised a brow at her.

It'd been the same expression he'd had when she'd challenged him to a chess game or a horse race. It meant he knew he had an even chance of winning this competition.

Because they were well-matched, damn him.

"Why are ye here, *Char*?" he asked in that same low tone, hints of warning in his voice as he ignored her bold claim. "And with *him*?"

His gaze flicked to Tav and back, before she could take advantage of it. "Ye're a pirate now?"

"There are plenty of things ye donae ken about me, Liam Bruce! The same way there are obviously plenty of things I donae ken about *ye*! Now get out of my way."

He didn't. He wouldn't be the man she once loved if he had acquiesced to her demand, after all.

Instead, he planted his feet and rolled his shoulders, the movement drawing her attention to their width. He looked...*good*. Almost as good as he'd looked last year when they'd met at Uncle Rory and Aunt Citrine's table, where Liam had distinguished himself in the warrior games. Almost as good as he'd looked, laughing and care-free, at the MacLeod holding on Lewes, as he'd charmed her into his arms.

Arms which now held a sword, not-quite-raised against her. Arms which were still as sinewy and muscle-bound as she remembered. Arms which could hold her and stroke her, even as they coiled with suppressed power.

She swallowed.

"Char," he said again, softer, and she tried not to melt at his tone. "Char, please answer me. Tell me why ye are here. What kind of trouble are ye in? Let me *help* ye."

As she snorted with disbelief, her sword arm jerked upward, and she saw Tav take a step toward her. That must mean the battle had gone well, and the ship was theirs. She shook her head once, letting her brother know she was still in control of her feelings.

Mostly.

"Listen closely, Bruce," she growled. "Ye've hurt far more than ye've helped, and I'll *never* allow ye that opportunity again! I'm here for the Queen, and I'll no' let you lie yer way out of this again."

At the mention of her goal, she heard a startled gasp from behind Liam's broad back, but couldn't afford to focus on it. Nay, instead, she was watching his face, watching for an indication, before he attacked.

What she saw instead, was a flicker of confusion.

"I've never lied to ye, Char."

She couldn't help it; she snorted again. "Aye, ye conveniently forgot to mention yer *betrothed* when ye bedded me!"

"I'm no' betrothed."

Of course. Of *course* a man, who'd lied about it once, would lie again. Suddenly weary—from the battle? From her efforts to get John MacDonald's treachery recognized? Or from the last year of grief since she'd realized her idiocy with Liam?—Charlotte's shoulders slumped, the tip of the sword pointed down at the deck of the birlinn.

She sighed and took a moment to look around.

Her assumptions had been right; the Black Banner's men had been victorious. She saw Auld Robbie deep in conversation with the MacLeod captain, while a few others guarded the sailors. Tosh was crouched beside one of the Queen's bodyguards, and as she watched, he rolled the younger man to his back, then offered a sip from his water skin. The other three were receiving similar treatment from her men, although they were being restrained as well.

Good. No one had died.

Yet.

She pushed her shoulders back and turned to the man she'd once loved. "Aye, ye are," she said in a firm voice. "Ye're no' the first man to get what he wanted, they fly away without a second thought. But I will *no'* be lied to."

Liam's eyes narrowed, as if offended she was calling him a liar. "I'm no' betrothed," he said again, slowly and distinctly. "The Bruce called me back to Scone, but has given me permission to return to Lewes once my mission here is—"

"I care no' for yer reasons, Liam," she said wearily. "Just move aside and let me have at the Queen for a few moments, aye?"

"He's telling the truth." The voice, coming from behind Liam, was refined and delicate, with just a hint of accent from her native Ulster. "Liam has never been formally betrothed."

Formally.

So mayhap her father's claim had referred an informal betrothal, but that hardly mattered. Her own arrangement with John—or rather, their fathers' arrangements—proved informal betrothals were just as binding.

So Charlotte scoffed outright. "Stay out of this, Yer Majesty," she snapped, finally losing control. "This has naught to do with ye."

"On the contrary," the woman said as she stood, every inch royalty. "I believe it has everything to do with me. Why are ye here, Charlotte MacLeod?"

CHAPTER 4



*B*riefly, Liam wondered how Queen Elizabeth had known Charlotte's name, then remembered the conversations they'd had on the long days of travel from Carlisle. He'd confessed his feelings for the hot-headed MacLeod lass, chafing under his obligation to the Bruce, which kept Liam from returning to Lewes.

And, knowing the Queen, he shouldn't have been surprised she'd remembered.

Charlotte frowned when the Queen spoke, and knowing *her*, it was because she couldn't figure out the situation and was irritated by it.

But when Elizabeth stepped away from her chair and toward Charlotte, he had to act. He didn't know what his lover was doing here, or why she claimed to want access to the Queen, but he couldn't allow it. He shifted to put his body between the two women.

Elizabeth's hand rested briefly on his arm, and he didn't miss the way Charlotte's gaze dropped to glare at it.

Interesting.

"Easy, Liam," the Queen murmured. "Ye really believe the woman ye love could harm me?"

"I'm no' sure what I think right now, Yer Majesty," he replied. Then, raising his voice and piercing Charlotte with a hard stare, he repeated his earlier question. "Why are ye here, Char? What do ye want with the Queen, and why are ye associating with *pirates*?"

Mayhap she would've answered, had her companion—the Black Banner, who'd been standing so peacefully off to one side—not decided to interrupt.

"Oh, are we dispensing with the masks now?" He tossed a wink toward the Queen, and Liam almost groaned when he realized he now recognized those dark eyes. "I thought mayhap we were going to stand around and talk this arsehole into surrender."

The man pulled down the tail of his scarf, revealing the smiling face of Charlotte's carefree brother, Tavish.

Despite the presence of his Queen, Liam spit out a nasty curse.

"Yes indeed, my *once*-friend." Tav's mouth was still curved into a smile, but too many teeth were bared for it to be called friendly. That, and the dangerous glint in his eyes, told Liam he was in trouble.

The man Liam had called *friend* smoothly sheathed his sword, but didn't drop his glare, and Liam wasn't fool enough to think the man was unarmed now.

"Yes indeed," Tavish repeated. "That seems like something ye *ought* to say, when confronted by the woman ye lied to, stole her maidenhead and abandoned, *coward*."

Liam felt the muscles in his jaw pop as he clenched his teeth.

Lying?

There they went again, accusing him of *lying*. And worse!

He forced himself to exhale and relax, knowing he'd be no good in a fight. "I'm no' a liar."

"Ye *are* a cowardly arsehole though," his friend spit back at him.

“Liam?” The Queen’s tone seemed almost gossipy. “Is this true? Ye took this woman’s virginity, and then—”

And Char, bless her, interrupted in her own defense. “He *took* naught, Yer Majesty! I gave it, and willingly, to a man I thought loved me.”

Elizabeth merely hummed, then stepped around Liam. He moved to intercept her, but she held up one imperious gloved hand as she peered at Charlotte.

The two women stood the same height, but the similarities ended there.

Elizabeth’s sable hair was still thick and luxurious, despite being several years older, but was bound under a pearl-studded net in the latest fashion.

Charlotte was all fire and warmth, passion and gaiety. She’d worn her long red hair loose the day he’d made love to her for the first time, and Liam didn’t think he’d ever forget the way she’d looked with that fiery halo of curls cascading down around her pale breasts.

His angel had bound her hair today, but during their fight, strands had come loose.

The way he’d always loved.

Actually...

Liam narrowed his eyes as he glared at the two women he loved most in the world. They *were* similar. He saw the same quick intelligence and subtle wit in both of their eyes, and wondered at how well-matched they were.

“Charlotte,” the Queen finally murmured. “My cousin’s question is pertinent. Why *are* ye here? You said you wanted access to me, but surely not to return me to England?”

"Never, Yer Majesty." The quickness of the vow proved its honesty. "I just need to speak with ye, and an uninterrupted time and place to do it."

Liam lowered his sword. He felt ridiculous standing there, threatening the woman he loved with it. Despite her accusations of *his* lies, he believed her when she said she didn't intend to harm Elizabeth.

The Queen was nodding thoughtfully. "And the pirates?" Her gaze flicked to a still-grinning Tav, who blew her a kiss. Elizabeth merely raised a brow, before turning her full attention to Charlotte once more. "From Liam's stories, it appears he is unused to this new hobby of yours."

"I needed a way to get to ye," Charlotte said quietly. "And the Black Banner had the best opportunity."

"And you believed murder and violence were the best way to get my attention?"

Charlotte's chin jerked up. "We've murdered no one! Yer men all still live!"

"MacLeod men," Liam growled in reminder.

"Aye, MacLeod men," Charlotte snapped. "Ye're the one at fault, if ye were too dense to consider the implications!"

"Why in the *world* would I consider the possibility of being attacked by the woman I love, masquerading as a pirate?"

Tavish stepped forward then, his eyes hardening in anger. "No' a masquerade, arsehole."

Liam spun, almost wishing he hadn't sheathed his sword. "Stop calling me that!"

"Ye stop being so free with my sister!"

The Queen stopped them with her quiet words. "Well, Charlotte? Are ye a pirate? Ye might no' have killed anyone on this adventure, but are ye willing to?" She cocked her head and peered at the other

woman, as if seeing her in a new light. “Are ye willing to kill to complete yer mission?”

Tav grunted. “I nominate *this* asshole.”

And before Liam could blink, Charlotte had whipped her sword up and around, and had the tip resting on his shoulder right below his ear. One twitch would drag it across his throat, opening his skin and spilling his life’s blood.

In any other instance, Liam would’ve been angry. But here and now, the first emotion to course through his very-much-at-risk veins was...*pride*.

The woman he loved was smarter and faster than half the warriors he’d worked with over the years.

Her hand was steady, and her gaze clear as she glared at him. Still, he could see her subtle tells—the way her dark eyes were flickering between his, the way her lips were pressed a little too tightly—that she wasn’t entirely at ease with the situation.

Good.

Neither was *he*.

“Well, Charlotte?” the Queen asked again. “Could you do it? Could you kill a man?”

Charlotte’s pink tongue darted out to swipe across her lips, and Liam dropped his gaze to them.

Her lips...

He remembered the taste of them. He remembered the way they’d pursed to shush him, as she’d snuck him into her bedchamber, only to open with a giggle moments later. He remembered them tugged into a mischievous grin. He remembered everything about them.

So why couldn’t he guess how they’d answer Elizabeth?

“Well, Charlotte?” The Queen’s prompt yanked Liam back to the imminent danger. “Could you kill a man?”

To his surprise, Charlotte growled, “Aye, were the cause worthy.”

“And your cause now, my dear?” Elizabeth sounded merely curious. “You’ve attacked my ship, taken down my crew *and* my bodyguards, and stand ready to murder my cousin. Is this cause so important?”

Did no one else notice how Charlotte’s hand shook at the question?

The tip of her blade nicked the skin below his ear, but he didn’t react.

Finally, she swallowed. “Aye. ‘Tis important.”

Elizabeth’s brows rose. “Well, if you feel it necessary to kill Liam...”

He met Charlotte’s eyes once more, careful to keep his emotions hidden. Strangely, he wasn’t afraid. It wasn’t so much he didn’t believe her capable of killing him, it was that he could see how conflicted she was. If she was in so much trouble she felt *killing* him would further her mission, he wanted to know what was wrong.

Besides, he loved her.

If she killed him today, he’d never get the chance to help her.

He flexed his knees, ready to dive to his left and risk losing an ear, if it kept his throat intact and her soul unstained.

“Well, Char?” he prompted quietly.

As he expected, the name—once an endearment, yet now an irritation—caused her eyes to flash. She straightened her elbow to steady the blade and glared at him.

“Do ye have any last words?”

He exhaled slowly. “Aye. I love ye. I’ve never stopped loving ye.”

Their little tableau was frozen for a heartbeat, two, three.

Then she snarled and threw herself forward, shifting her grip on the short sword so it pressed against the front of his throat.

"How *dare* ye?" Her face was only inches from his. "How *dare* ye think to say something like that to me?"

His hands were free, and her body close to his. He spread his arms. "How could I no'? I've said it many times before."

"Lies!"

Before the word was finished, he'd grabbed her wrist and ducked from under the sword, forcing her arm up and around, so the blade—still in her hand—was thrust over his left shoulder. At the same time, he wrapped his other arm around her waist, pulling her flush against him, until they stood in a bizarre parody of a dance.

"I. *Do no'*. Lie."

He hadn't raised his voice, hadn't threatened her, but still her eyes widened. "Nay," she whispered.

"I love ye, Char. I always have."

And before she could shake her head in denial yet again, he slammed his lips down on hers.

CHAPTER 5



God help her, but he tasted of salt air and sweat and *rightness*...and anger. So much anger.

Under his lips, Charlotte felt her own resistance collapse. She was angry—just as angry as he was—and she wouldn't back down. But she'd missed this, missed the feel of his skin against hers.

That was why she was angry.

So she snaked her free hand around the back of his head, curled her fingers through his thick dark hair, and held him in place, while she kissed him right back.

Her blade still rested atop his shoulder, but his fingers around her forearm shifted their grip, until they were almost caressing in their firmness.

She smiled against his mouth.

With a groan, he broke away from her, but didn't retreat. Nay, he was Liam Bruce; he didn't retreat. Instead, he held her, their noses almost touching, as he stared into her eyes.

Her smile faded.

Was he married already? Is that why she hadn't heard from him for the last year?

But how could he kiss her this way? Claim to still love her?

He must've seen her thoughts in her expression—he'd always understood her better than anyone else—because his lips twitched.

"I love ye, Char. I've missed ye."

"Do ye love me more, or less, than ye love yer wife?"

He huffed a sigh. "I'm no' married *nor* betrothed, Charlotte. Ye're the only woman who has ever held my heart."

It was Tavish who spoke up in her defense, since Charlotte seemed incapable.

"Ye have a fine way of showing it, Bruce. No word from ye for months and months, then Da tells us about yer marriage contract."

Without looking at her brother—which was fair, because she couldn't seem to drag her gaze away from Liam's to look at him either—Liam said bitingly, "And yer Da would *never* lie, would he? I've been busy."

"With what?" Tav snapped, the irritation in his voice obvious.

Finally, Liam turned his attention to the other man, but kept his hold on her. "With *Bannockburn*. Mayhap ye've heard of it?"

Charlotte caught her brother's flush before he looked away.

The decisive battle, which had turned the tide of the Bruce's war, had taken place last summer, just a fortnight after Liam had been called back. It made sense that the repercussions of the battle would last much longer; it was the exchange of captured English Barons which had allowed Queen Elizabeth, her stepdaughter Princess Marjorie, and the Bruce's sisters to return home.

If Liam's orders had involved the prisoner exchange, that would account for his absence since last winter, most certainly. Possibly longer.

But was that all there was to it?

And had Da really lied?

It was the Queen who answered Charlotte's unspoken question when she stepped forward. "I have only known my husband's cousin for a few short months, Lady Charlotte, but I know he would not lie."

Charlotte's eyes searched Liam's face. Aye, she knew that fact, as well as she knew her own abilities. Liam did not lie. He was a good, honorable man.

So why had she been so quick to believe her father?

Because Liam hadn't been there when she'd needed him most.

Elizabeth was brave enough to place a gentle hand on Charlotte's, where it gripped the hilt of her short sword. "He is not betrothed, my dear," she said softly. "And he's spoken of no other woman but you."

Charlotte's gaze slammed back into Liam's. She didn't see anger in his bright blue eyes anymore, nor smugness.

Just certainty.

"I love ye, Charlotte MacLeod. I'm sorry I couldnae return sooner."

"Or write?" she managed to whisper.

Finally, a wince of regret. "Aye. I'm sorry I was only able to send a few missives. The Bruce kept me busy cleaning up after the battle, and I've been sworn to secrecy since November, when the exchange for the Queen actually took place."

Mayhap he continued to speak, but Charlotte heard little after "a few missives."

"Ye've written me?" she blurted, interrupting him.

He frowned. "Aye. No' often, but a few, telling ye I was safe after the battle, or asking ye to be patient with me, as I couldnae return yet."

Shaking her head, Charlotte released him and stumbled backward, sheathing her sword with trembling hands.

He *wasn't* betrothed. He *hadn't* abandoned her. He'd *written*, asking her to wait.

"I never got yer letters," she whispered hoarsely. "What happened—"

Her brother's loud snort drew her attention, but Tav wasn't looking at them. Nay, he cut an impressive figure, all in black, his arms folded as he frowned down at his men administering to the Queen's bodyguards.

He didn't say anything else, but he didn't need to.

"Da," she whispered, and caught her brother's faint nod.

Liam stepped forward, then halted, as if unsure if he should go to her or stay at the Queen's side. "Ye thought I'd abandoned ye? Ye didnae see the messengers?"

"I was at the MacDonald holding," she said dully, staring at the waves over Tav's shoulder. "Being told what a miserable piece of garbage I was, and listening to them plot treason. I believed my father when he told me ye'd used me and run back to yer Lowland lass."

When he took her hand, his fingers twining through hers, she glanced at him, then down.

"Why?" he whispered.

Why were they treating ye like that?

She understood his question, because she'd asked the same many times. "Because John MacDonald discovered I wasnae a virgin, and threatened to void the marriage contract my father had made with his. When our fathers refused, he..." She forced herself not to think of those days before she escaped. "He cast me aside on his own."

Liam made a noise, but as she was staring at their joined hands, Charlotte didn't know what it meant. She wasn't sure if she was angry, or embarrassed, to have to tell him all this with their current audience.

It was the Queen who saved her by sweeping up and folding her hands in front of her, poised and regal, as if she was standing at court, instead of on the swaying deck of a wounded birlinn.

"Well, I cannot say this has been the most normal return, what with the secrecy and the pirate attack and the lack of triumphant procession. But seeing the two of you reunite has certainly been... *interesting*." Her eyes hardened. "And now that it is through, you will give me an explanation and the return of my men. Immediately."

Swallowing, Charlotte pulled away from Liam's hold. She'd been the one to give the orders to attack her sovereign lord's wife. It could be argued her treasonous act deserved the harshest penalty, and now they could not even hide behind anonymity. Thankfully, although Liam knew who her brother was, they hadn't identified him in front of the Queen.

Would Liam keep the secret, even if Charlotte had to be punished?

Please God, donae let him be the one to take my head, if that's what Elizabeth decides.

She placed her right palm over her heart and sunk to one knee before the Queen, the way she'd seen her father's warriors pledge their fealty.

"I have evidence of treason, Yer Majesty. I've been to court twice since Hogmany, with excuses both times, and been refused access to the King."

“So you escalated to becoming a pirate and kidnapping your Queen? I simply *cannot* imagine why the King’s guards would not let you see him. Did it not occur to you that the King was not even in Scone?”

It was impossible to miss the amused note in the other woman’s voice, but Charlotte didn’t lift her gaze from the Queen’s knees. “Aye, Yer Majesty,” she whispered hoarsely. “But I got tired of being ignored.”

“I will have to remember that,” the Queen said dryly.

“As will I,” Liam rumbled.

Charlotte swallowed again, wondering if she might actually live through the day.

“Rise, Lady Charlotte,” Elizabeth demanded. “I will hear your reasons and see your evidence, *but*”—she hastened to add, as Tav lowered his arms and stepped toward their group—“not on your ship. Here. On my ship. Surrounded by *my* men.”

Slowly, Charlotte gained her feet, working through the implications. She glanced at Liam, whose expression was carefully neutral as he stood equidistant from the two women. Not an hour ago, she was sure she hated him, but now, she didn’t understand her own feelings.

If everything he’d said was true—and she had to admit he was no liar—then she had no reason to hate him.

And if he was still the man she’d fallen in love with, then she knew he wouldn’t hurt her.

But would he allow her to be hurt by someone else? Did his loyalty to Elizabeth run deep enough to stand by as his men took her and her brother down?

She met his eyes, hoping for an indication.

She received none.

It was as if he were leaving the decision up to her.

She swallowed, then nodded. No matter what came of today, she would show Liam she trusted him. And that she was sorry she doubted him.

"Aye," she croaked, then whirled on her brother. "Bring me the letters."

Tav rolled his eyes. "Are ye daft, lass? Ye may believe him, and his oh-so-logical reasons, but I've hated him right alongside ye for almost a year. I'll no' forgive him so easily, nor will I leave ye here alone with him."

"I will be here, Lord Banner," the Queen said imperiously.

Tav sketched a bow, as if reminding her she didn't know his name. "And ye may be my Queen, but ye have the same sharp look as Char, begging yer pardon. I wouldn't trust either of ye, as far as I could throw ye."

Elizabeth's lips twitched as her eyes raked over Tav's wide shoulders. "Probably a wise idea."

Tavish rose and turned to the watching men once more. "Tosh," he called down, "bring Her Majesty's guards up here and make them comfortable."

His second raised a brow, then shrugged. "Aye, Banner. But I'll keep 'em tied, if it's all the same."

"The Queen's invited them for tea and cakes, but she'll have to be disappointed."

Elizabeth snorted at Tav's quip.

Ignoring her, Tav cupped his hands and bellowed across to his own birlinn. "Dane! Bring the small casket!"

"Dane?" Liam blurted incredulously. "Ye brought yer *son* pirating?" He whirled on Charlotte. "Ye *allowed* it?"

It was Tav who answered with a nonchalant shrug. “The family business, aye?”

The two men frowned at one another for a long moment, before Tav’s gaze flicked to first her, then Elizabeth. Liam seemed to understand the man was daring him to reveal his identity to the Queen, and Charlotte watched the realization creep up on him—if he told Elizabeth the Black Banner was the brother of the woman he loved, he’d be complicit.

Liam sighed and rolled his eyes, crossing his arms in front of his chest and frowning at both MacLeods, as if blaming them for his situation.

Well, it is yer fault, lass.

Charlotte’s lips twitched at the thought.

When Elizabeth sank down onto the cushion-covered chair, it was hard for Charlotte to remember she wasn’t in a throne room. It was also hard to remember the woman had spent the last eight years in near-solitary confinement in England; she was just as poised and elegant as she ever was.

Tosh and a few black-clad men carried Liam’s men up to the dais, and were preparing to arrange them on the floor, when the Queen spoke.

“Release them. I will hear from them myself,” she commanded.

Everyone froze. Elizabeth’s demand countered Tav’s, and Tosh glanced at Charlotte for instructions.

She swallowed again, resisting the urge to look to Liam for a hint or suggestion. Releasing the Queen’s bodyguards would put Charlotte and her men at a severe disadvantage, and if Elizabeth planned to take revenge for their attack, that would be the perfect time to do it.

On the other hand, Charlotte *had* been at fault, and the woman *was* her liege's wife.

So she nodded to Tosh, who shrugged and sliced the bonds on the man he was carrying.

For better or worse, the die was cast.

CHAPTER 6



As soon as Ross's boots hit the deck, Liam lunged toward him, grabbing the other man's shoulders and helping to keep him upright. He was bleeding from a cut on his hairline, and was blinking woozily around him, but for the most part, he still seemed to be whole.

Murtaugh was unconscious, and Liam found himself praying it was from a blow to his head, rather than any unseen blood loss. Tearlach surged to his feet and stood between the pirates and his brother, his dirk held in his left hand as his right hung awkwardly. Broken?

But it was Finn who worried Liam the most. The youngest of their team thrashed against his bonds, his threats and curses muffled by the length of MacLeod plaid shoved in his mouth. Apparently, the pirates had grown weary of his voice.

When he was freed, Finn launched himself at Tosh, going from horizontal to vertical with all the speed and grace of youth. Arms outstretched, he seemed ready to strangle the pirate when Liam stopped him.

"Finn!" He used his voice as a whip, knowing the lad would remember his training. "Stand down. The Queen," he snapped, know-

ing Finn would understand.

He did. The lad halted his attack, glared at Tosh—who appeared more than a little amused by the threat—and dropped his palms to his empty sheaths, before moving to stand beside the Queen.

Liam took a deep breath, his eyes darting around their little scene. His men were alive and accounted for, and in a position to protect Elizabeth if something went wrong.

If Charlotte betrayed them all.

But she'd been in power, and there'd been no good reason for her to cut loose his men and give up that power, unless she meant what she'd said to the Queen. She really *was* only here to talk.

And so, when Elizabeth settled herself in her chair and raised an imperious brow at Charlotte, he moved to stand beside the woman he loved.

He might not be able to protect her from Elizabeth's wrath, and he might not be able to offer her comfort for whatever had pushed her to this course of action, but he could be there for her all the same.

What had she'd said about her time at Finlaggan?

Being told what a miserable piece of garbage I was.

His rage, at hearing those words spoken so neutrally, as if she'd long-ago accepted the affront, had been near overwhelming. Then, to hear her admit the marriage contract her father had made was void-ed because she wasn't a virgin...

Cold had slammed into him, at the realization of *how* John MacDonald had known that.

When Charlotte took a deep breath, her shoulder brushed against his, but she didn't glance his way, and he resisted the urge to touch her further.

Losing control in front of the Queen *once* had been enough.

“Yer Majesty, last autumn, regardless of what happened...between Liam and myself...” She shook her head and cleared her throat. “My father made a marriage contract with the MacDonald of Finlaggan, selling me to his youngest son. I am no’ my father’s only daughter, no’ even his eldest. My sister made an advantageous marriage two years ago, and I’d lost my value to him as an alliance broker.”

It was impossible not to hear the bitterness in her voice when she spoke of her father’s attitudes. Liam was relieved it hadn’t been there when she’d referenced what had passed between the two of them, but perhaps that was intentional.

What was interesting was the Queen’s response. Liam knew good and well she’d had an arranged marriage with Robert twelve years ago as an alliance between her father, the Earl of Ulster and good friend to King Edward of England, and the then-Earl of Carrick.

But despite her similar history, Elizabeth watched Charlotte dispassionately, not revealing her thoughts on the story she was being told.

“In an effort to facilitate the match, Da rushed me off to Finlaggan. Once there, I discovered I was to be treated as little more than —”

Her voice caught then, and when Tav stepped toward her—to offer support?—she shook her head and took a deep breath, straightening her shoulders and lifting her chin.

“My betrothed had nae use for me, nor any other woman, other than what lay between our legs. He told me so many times. He also did no’ bother hiding his sins, thinking me incapable of understanding.”

Slowly, Elizabeth moved, until her elbows were resting on the arms of the chair, and her fingers were laced before her. "You mentioned treason?"

Charlotte took another deep breath. "Aye, Yer Majesty. John MacDonald collaborated with the English prior to Bannockburn. He was in correspondence with the Warden of the Marches, discussing Scottish strengths and weaknesses. After his death during the battle, John contacted the Earl of Surrey, who now holds that position, and requested gold in exchange for his knowledge."

The silence stretched between the two women. Finally, Elizabeth ducked her chin. "I have been away for eight long years, but even I know how powerful the MacDonalds can be—both as an ally, and as an enemy. Accusing even a younger son of treason should not be done lightly. Ye have evidence of this?"

Tavish stepped forward again, holding a carved casket in his hands. Behind him, his illegitimate son—the lad staring wide-eyed at the Queen—looked taller than the last time Liam had seen him.

And as angry as it made Liam to think of his friend subjecting the innocent lad to such dangers, he had to admit his own father had taken him reiving at the same age. He and Tav had become friends during his time on Lewes, and he didn't like to think he'd lost Tav's regard for good.

But as long as he could regain Charlotte's, that's what mattered most.

From the casket, Charlotte removed an oilskin packet, then nodded to her brother. Tavish waited a long moment before returning the nod, then tossed the empty wooden box to his son and stepped back to rest with his hands crossed atop his sword's hilt.

Charlotte took a deep breath as she stared down at the packet in her hand, then turned and presented it to the Queen. "His letters, Yer

Majesty. He bragged of their existence, so before I fled to Lewes, I stole them."

Dispassionately, the Queen took the packet and removed the letters, flicking two of them open at random. Liam couldn't read her expression.

When she finished reading those two letters, she opened another, then another. In all cases, she took care to examine the signature at the bottom of the letter.

She revealed nothing.

Finally, she hummed and stacked the letters on her lap, atop the oilskin packet. She laced her fingers in front of her chin, and peered at Charlotte. "Earlier, you said John MacDonald discovered your lack of maidenhead. How?"

Damn the consequences!

When the Queen asked what he wanted—*needed*—to know, Liam stepped forward to stand beside Charlotte once more. There was a moment, just a heartbeat, when he thought she might sink against him and take advantage of his strength.

But she wouldn't be Charlotte if she didn't meet her troubles head on.

His love kept her attention on the Queen, and Elizabeth's gaze didn't waver. "I'm waiting, Lady Charlotte."

Finally, Charlotte looked away, but only to sweep her gaze over the gathered audience. All men. He read the significance in that look, and his heart began to slam against his ribs.

What had the bastard done to her?

When the Queen didn't rescind her order, Charlotte didn't back down. Of course not. She lifted her chin and met the other woman's eyes, as if to say, *Ye'll force me to say it in front of these strangers? Aye, then.*

"He raped me."

Liam jerked as if hit, and without looking, Charlotte reached for his hand.

To hell with that! He wanted to wrap his arms—his body! His soul!—around her, and swear to her he'd protect her, he'd avenge her.

It wasn't until she squeezed his hand that he realized *she* was comforting *him*.

"He bled for *that* particular sin, Yer Majesty, and I donae think he'll force himself on an unwilling lass again." When she shrugged, Liam could see the forced nonchalance in her posture. "Afterwards, I stole the letters and escaped. I kenned I needed to get them to Scone, but the only one who would take me was my—my brother, Tavish." She didn't look at the man in question, still trying to protect the Black Banner's identity. "So I went to Lewes, and then to Scone, before Da realized I was gone. When we returned in failure, my father told me the marriage contract was still valid."

It was not proper to speak while the Queen was deliberating, but to hell with propriety!

Liam gave into the urge he'd been fighting since her announcement, and pulled her into his arms. She didn't fight him, thank God, but allowed him to offer her what comfort he could.

"I'll make him pay, lass," he said, under his breath. "Ye'll no' marry anyone but me."

It was a vow he hoped he could fulfill. Their fate would be up to Elizabeth at this point.

Charlotte raised her head from his shoulder and took a deep breath. The sorrow in her eyes told him she knew that fact just as well as he did.

She was the one who looked away first, cutting her eyes toward the regal woman on the dais. Liam swallowed down his sigh and followed her gaze.

Liam respected Elizabeth and her husband, the King, and had pledged his loyalty to the Crown. But he *loved* Charlotte, and prayed he wouldn't have to choose between his two loyalties again. Almost a year ago, he'd put his loyalty to his liege above his loyalty to his heart, and it caused Charlotte untold grief. He couldn't do it again.

The Queen tapped the letters against her palm, as she stared at the two of them, and Liam couldn't read her expression. She was just as intelligent and cunning as Charlotte.

Would she understand Charlotte's desperation, and the drastic measures she felt she had no choice but to take, and overlook them?

Or would she hold Charlotte accountable for the crimes she'd committed today?

How could Liam do anything *but* stand with Charlotte, knowing what that bastard MacDonald had done to her?

He tightened his hold on Charlotte's shoulders.

Finally, Elizabeth hummed. "I have been held prisoner for eight long years, and I have not seen my husband. We are to be reunited after we land at Oban. I am hopeful today's delay can be made up, once you and your *pirates* have left us in peace."

Charlotte opened her mouth to respond, but Liam squeezed her in warning, and she remained silent.

The Queen inclined her head just slightly, as if in approval.

"Once I am reunited with Robert, I presume there will be quite a few topics we'll want to discuss, though the possible punishment of a traitor shall be low on that list, I'm sure. However," she said, cutting off Charlotte's objection, "I *will* get around to sharing this evidence with him."

Under his arm, Charlotte seemed to shrink as she exhaled in relief.

"Ye will take the letters, Yer Majesty?"

Liam understood the question. Although he hadn't seen them, those letters represented Charlotte's entire evidence against the man who'd attacked her. By giving them to the Queen, by trusting her to follow through on the prosecution, Charlotte was giving up her only weapon.

But then Liam remembered how well she'd fought—how she'd held him at sword-point and threatened his life—and his lips twitched.

Mayhap not her only weapon.

Elizabeth was already folding the parchment back into the oilskin packet, and once she was through, she lifted her chin and swept her gaze around the gathered men—guards and pirates both. "I will take this evidence, and I will make it known to my husband, the King. The decision lies with him, but I am vowing to all of you gathered here today, MacDonald's true nature will be made known."

Charlotte breathed another sigh of relief and dipped her head in acknowledgment.

"Da will no' force me to marry a traitor," she murmured, and he wasn't sure if the words had been meant to reassure him, or herself.

He twisted her in his arms once more until they were facing one another, and lifted her chin with one finger. "Angel," he said seriously, "ye *will* no' marry John MacDonald. Ye'll no' marry any man but me. I swear it."

She met his eyes, and the cautious hope he saw in their dark depths made him ache over what she'd been through in the last year.

"I love ye," he whispered, wanting her to remember that.

“Liam!” The Queen’s voice cut through the moment he shared with Charlotte, causing Liam to jerk upright. “Release her!”

As much as he wanted to kiss Charlotte again, there was no need...not after his vow. So he nodded once and stepped back, his hands still on his love’s shoulders, as if he could offer her support from a distance.

Elizabeth stood, the skirts of her ornate gown swirling around her. “Charlotte MacLeod, I have given you my word your King will learn of John MacDonald’s treachery. I have *not* stated what will become of you. You have attacked my vessel, threatened the lives and limbs of my guards and men, and forced me into a most difficult position.” Her eyes narrowed. “Your actions today...” She swept her gaze over the gathered men, lingering on Tav and Tosh. “Your actions were dangerous at best, treasonous at worst. You could pay with your lives, and if my husband demands it, I—a mere woman—can not gainsay him.”

The silence which met her words was so deep, Liam could hear Charlotte’s shallow breaths.

Elizabeth’s poise and cold glare were the very definition of regal. “You will leave now. You will leave *immediately*— Nay, do not even bid my bodyguard your goodbyes,” she hurried to amend her command as Liam attempted to draw Charlotte closer. “You will leave now, and *if you are very lucky*, you’ll not hear from myself or my husband again.”

Beside him, Charlotte swallowed, met his eyes, then flicked her gaze away again. She placed her palm over her heart, lowered herself in a bow—she would’ve looked ridiculous attempting to curtsy without skirts—and stepped toward the rail.

Tav, who was frowning—although just in general, not at Liam in particular—nodded to Tosh and grabbed his son Dane by the back of

the lad's black shirt.

"Get the men on board," Tavish commanded. "We're leaving *now*. Yer Majesty." He nodded in deference. "Liam."

And before Liam could nod in return, before he could draw Charlotte back into his arms and tell her he loved her again, the Black Banner's men were back on their own birlinn and rowing away.

Charlotte stood at the bow, facing him, as the boat retreated in the distance.

Never once did she lift her hand in farewell.

CHAPTER 7



A fortnight later

Charlotte folded her hands in her lap and did her best to emulate her mother. Despite her age, Lady MacLeod still sat straight and elegant, the picture of propriety and grace.

It was enough to make a wild lass such as Charlotte roll her eyes.

Tonight, Mother sat quietly with her head bowed, listening to Darrant about ungrateful children and unruly women who will wind up in hell. No one at the supper table—or in the great hall—could mistake who he meant, but few disagreed. Charlotte's brother's wives were just as biddable and sweet as Mother, and Tav wasn't in attendance.

After their adventure in the Western Isles, Tavish had returned her to Lewes. Not because she *wanted* to be subjected to her father's whims or—even worse!—forced to return to the MacDonalds. Nay, Charlotte had gone home because she knew, if Liam had been telling the truth about his feelings for her and his attempts to contact her, Lewes would be the only place he'd know to look.

As her father gestured emphatically with a leg of mutton, Charlotte tucked her chin near her chest—hoping it would make her seem subdued—and frowned in thought.

A fortnight ago, she'd been in Liam's arms once more, if only for a moment. She'd tasted him, held him, breathed in his scent. It was what she'd longed to do, what she'd given up hope of ever experiencing again.

She'd mourned her lost love for a time. But then she'd pulled herself up and reminded herself the world hadn't ended when she'd thought Liam had abandoned her. She'd reminded herself she was strong and capable, and would *never* be yoked to a cruel man like John MacDonald.

Aye, she'd done all that, and more, when Liam had abandoned her.

But now, it turned out he *hadn't*.

And she was still getting used to that.

Despite what she'd told herself for the last few weeks, seeing him—kissing him!—proved she'd never stopped loving him. She loved Liam Bruce, and for the first time in months, she harbored hope they'd be able to have a future together.

The Queen had taken on the responsibility, the onus, of seeing John MacDonald's treachery exposed. Charlotte had worked toward that acknowledgment for so long, that it felt odd not to have to worry about it anymore. Instead, she worried about Elizabeth's cold expression when she'd dismissed them.

Nay, Charlotte didn't have to worry about John's treason anymore...but she *did* have to worry about the Queen and King's vengeance.

Each evening, as she said her prayers, Charlotte alternated between praying she hadn't made things worse by bringing her con-

cerns before the Queen in such a violent manner, and praying she'd have the chance to see Elizabeth again.

Because Liam was with the Queen.

"Ye're no' even listening!"

Her father's bellow jerked her attention away from the nearly full trencher in front of her. Charlotte's spine snapped straight, and she smiled sweetly at the older man.

"I'm sorry, Da. I was contemplating my sins."

Her father frowned, unsure if his youngest daughter was mocking him. "And what did you decide?"

"That I'll likely have quite a few penances when I go to confession."

"Aye," Da growled, "for refusing to honor yer father."

"And mother," Charlotte helpfully pointed out. When he frowned again, she widened her eyes in innocence. "Father Thomas says the passage speaks of honoring my father *and* mother, which of course I would, if Mother ever gave me any commands."

Somewhere down the table, one of her brothers snorted doubtfully, but Charlotte just smiled wider. Beside her, Mother murmured something she didn't catch. Probably something encouraging and dutiful toward her husband, and not at all helpful to her daughter.

Da's fist banged against the table. "By refusing to honor the marriage contract yer father's arranged for ye, ye're showing the world ye defy no' just yer father, but yer clan and tradition! Ye're dragging yer entire family down, ye harlot! Ye want us all to rot in hell with ye —"

"And what were *ye* doing, when ye destroyed the messages Liam Bruce sent to me? He's a good man, and marriage to him would've been an even stronger alliance! So why did ye let me believe he wanted nothing to do with me?"

It was the first time she'd asked the question—shouted it, more like—and when Da's hands curled into fists, she knew he was angry. But it was something she'd been wondering about since that afternoon on the deck of the Queen's birlinn, and she needed to know if Liam had been telling the truth.

"I did it, *daughter*, because the MacDonalds offer a better alliance, and it's up to ye to show ye honor yer clan—and yer father!—by following along with my commands!"

Charlotte slowly exhaled. She hadn't been exactly sure what she'd expected, but hearing her father admit so baldly he'd betrayed her, had come between her and the happiness which might've been hers, just because he thought he knew better, well, Charlotte couldn't do much but sigh.

A fortnight ago, Queen Elizabeth had commanded her to leave her ship, without even the chance to say goodbye to Liam. Charlotte had been the one to follow that command, knowing if she'd left the choice in Liam's hands, he might've hesitated. He might've hesitated, or resented being forced to choose between her and his loyalty to the Crown again.

So she'd made the choice for him. And now she knew he'd been telling the truth, and her father had made a choice for *her*, she knew how it felt.

Da was still ranting about honor and duty, and Charlotte had had enough.

He was getting worked up again, and the silence which reigned in the hall around him, told her his audience would be no help. Charlotte sighed and placed her palms flat on the table on either side of her trencher.

"Da, I'm honoring my clan, by refusing to ally us with a traitor and a villain."

It wasn't the first time her father had heard her arguments, and he rolled his eyes with great exaggeration. "John MacDonald is a good lad—"

"A *traitor* by his own admission, and a *rapist* by my troth!"

As always, when Charlotte dared to use that word, Da's ruddy cheeks darkened. Not in anger, but a sort of blustery embarrassment. "Ye— I donae— Lads will be lads—"

"The church *also* tells husbands to honor their wives and treat them well."

Da frowned again. "When in damnation did ye become to be so devout?" he muttered uncomfortably.

For the first time, Mother spoke up. "Are ye considering holy vows then?" she asked hopefully, resting her hand on Charlotte's arm. "My aunt would welcome ye at the abbey, I'm sure, and a quiet life of contemplation and service would do ye well."

Charlotte met her mother's dark, naïve eyes, and did her best not to smile.

Did Mother honestly think she was suited for quiet contemplation? No sword practice, no sailing, no intrigue?

"Perhaps, Mother," she finally managed to say, as she patted the other woman's hand. "I'll consider it."

Da was still frowning. "Ye'd take *vows* just to avoid marriage, lass?"

Charlotte looked down the table where her brothers were involved in their own conversations, either with one another, or their wives. None of them had *bad* marriages, and although she didn't personally want the same life her mother had built with her father, Charlotte could admit it wasn't terrible.

There were plenty of women out there who'd welcome marriage to a laird's son, even a younger one like John.

But she'd wager if those women had ever *met* John MacDonald, they'd be less willing. And now with that scar she'd given him, mayhap he'd think twice about forcing an unwilling lass.

The Queen will make sure he's punished.

Elizabeth had promised. She had the evidence, and even if it took some time, Charlotte had to trust the other woman to use her power to do the right thing.

And hope it wouldn't mean doom for Charlotte and the Black Banner.

So she lifted her chin and met her father's eyes. "It will no' come to that, Da. But I will no' marry John MacDonald."

Mayhap he would've said more. Mayhap he would've ranted and raved and confined her to the dungeon without supper again—which had been a popular punishment when she'd done something particularly reckless as a child.

But they never had the chance to discover his response, because at that moment, a messenger rushed through the door to the keep, his cloak wet from the rain, and appearing as if he hadn't slept in some time.

And he wore the royal livery.

Da wasn't the only one in the hall who shot to his feet as the messenger hurried toward the dais. Charlotte felt her heart pounding in her chest, and laced her fingers together atop her heavy skirts to keep them from shaking.

Oh Lord.

She realized she was praying again, but wasn't sure what she was praying *for*.

For the message to have nothing to do with her? Or have everything to do with her?

The man pulled a scroll from a pouch and handed it to Da without a word. No announcement, no acknowledgment, no proclamation. Just a simple scroll.

With the King's seal dangling from it.

Da's expression was grim as he took the parchment, and he didn't bother sitting to unroll it. Everyone at the table seemed to be holding their breath, and Mother's hand dropped to Charlotte's laced fingers.

To offer support? Or to take it?

Not all Highland lairds could read, and Da wasn't as accomplished as some of his children. Charlotte watched his lips move as he read, and she tried to guess what the letter said.

"A summons," he finally said softly.

Beside Charlotte, Mother slowly stood, her hands shaking as she gripped the edge of the table. "For ye, husband? Again? What do ye think it means? Is the Bruce calling up his forces once more?"

"Nay," Da said in a hoarse voice, turning his attention to Charlotte. "No' for me. For *her*."

Around the table—around the hall—whispers broke out. Charlotte rose to her feet, not sure if she was relieved to finally have her question answered.

Queen Elizabeth had said Charlotte would be lucky to never again hear from her.

I guess I'm no' lucky.

But she couldn't be disappointed, because, aye, Elizabeth was at court...but so was Liam.

Beside her, Mother collapsed onto the bench, her fingers in front of her lips as if to keep from crying. She—and a few of Charlotte's sisters-in-law—were staring at her with pity.

Da's hand shook just slightly, the scroll's royal seal swaying, as he sank into his carved chair. His eyes were wide as well, but Charlotte couldn't tell if it was from shock, or disappointment.

And perversely, Charlotte felt herself grinning. She might be going to her doom, but at least Liam would be there. At least she would have answers to the question of what exactly had gone on months ago.

Aye, she was on her way to her future, one way or another.

Da swallowed, his voice hoarse when he waved the scroll toward her and asked, "What in the hell did ye do *this* time, Charlotte?"

CHAPTER 8



“*A*nd do ye believe the lass?”

The Bruce, King Robert I, had no trace of skepticism in his voice when he asked the question. He was leaning on spread fingers, peering down at the letters from John MacDonald to the Earl of Surrey, and the question hadn’t indicated he doubted their veracity.

Liam would’ve answered, except he knew the King hadn’t been talking to him.

From her seat by the cold hearth, Queen Elizabeth hummed. She was stitching something, a perfectly acceptable queenly pastime, but Liam knew she’d only begun to care about it while in captivity, with nothing else to occupy her time besides prayer. From where he stood, he admired the way she kept her shoulders straight and proud, as she frowned down at the green thread.

Finally, her chin dropped just slightly. “I do. I believe her. She is a bold lass, as you say, for certes. But she is passionate, and believed the MacDonald lad to be a traitor. I tend to agree, based on the evidence.”

Robert grunted an affirmative and pushed himself upright once more. He wasn’t a particularly impressive-looking man, being of average build and coloring, but it was the *belief* in those dark eyes,

which had united a nation. He might not have been the leader Scotland expected when he took power all those years ago, but he'd built a nation by sheer force of belief.

And many, many sacrifices.

Liam met his cousin's dark eyes and inclined his own head, pleased to be in his confidences once more.

"And ye, Liam?" Robert asked softly. "Ye believe her?"

"Without a doubt," Liam responded quickly. "Char isnae one to overact."

The King's brows rose. "Really? Then what was this I hear about her threatening yer verra life, due to a misunderstanding?"

Liam winced. When it was said like that, Charlotte sounded a wee bit unstable.

"It was understandable, Yer Majesty. As far as she kenned, I'd declared my love for her, taken what I wanted, and left her to face the consequences. I would've threatened to stab me too."

Robert's lips twitched as he crossed toward his wife. "I believe I might have as well."

"Aye," Elizabeth agreed solemnly, not looking up from her stitches. "'Tis almost as bad as leaving your lady wife in captivity for—"

"—*eight long years*," Robert finished, with a put-upon sigh. But he was smiling when he reached her chair and rested his hand on her shoulder. "How long are ye going to keep bringing that into arguments, lady wife?"

Elizabeth's lips twitched. "Likely until we are both old and grey."

"I'm *already* getting grey hairs, Elizabeth, and ye've been home less than a fortnight."

Finally, the Queen rested her embroidery on her lap and reached up to touch his hand on her shoulder. "Someone has to keep you

sharp, Robert," she said, with a slight smile. "Elsewise, your mind will turn to mush, and Scotland will fall."

As if emboldened by her teasing, Robert's grin grew, and he twisted his fingers through hers, lifting her hand to his lips. "I gladly give ye leave to keep me sharp and happy, my love."

When Elizabeth blushed prettily, Liam turned away.

It wasn't because he was jealous of his cousin, not exactly.

Aye, seeing the way Robert had welcomed Elizabeth back home, and seeing the way Elizabeth had taken command of so many things, had left Liam longing for a life he could build with Charlotte. Even a few months ago, he might've been jealous, might've resented Robert for being allowed such open devotion.

But now?

Now, Liam knew Charlotte was waiting for him.

Last year, when they'd parted, their future had been uncertain. He'd been answering Robert's call for men at Bannockburn, and she'd thought he'd abandoned her. The complications of her contract with the MacDonalds, her treatment at John's hands, and her father destroying Liam's letters, had all served to make their future anything but certain.

But Liam's duty was done. He'd delivered the Queen—*safely*—to Scone, and fulfilled his obligation to his cousin. While he'd always have a soft spot in his heart for Elizabeth, and would've given his life to protect her, he knew she couldn't be the only woman in his future.

Charlotte would be his wife, no matter what her father said.

He'd given her that vow, and Liam intended to make it happen...and soon.

But first, he needed to do what he could to help her. She'd risked so much—her and that idiot brother of hers—to make sure the King

knew of the MacDonald treachery. Liam would ensure it hadn't been for naught.

At the thought of what she'd endured at John MacDonald's hands, Liam's stomach roiled sickeningly. His hands curled into fists at his side, and he squeezed his eyes closed in an effort to banish the image of her lying helpless under a villainous man.

But she wasn't helpless, was she?

He took a deep breath, then another, forcing himself to relax. He'd been through this so many times over the last fortnight, since hearing of her ordeal, and the only thing which helped was reminding himself Charlotte was smart and strong and capable. She'd held *him* at sword point, after all, and she'd mentioned she'd made MacDonald bleed.

She'd avenged herself, and through her wits, was continuing to avenge herself.

Liam vowed he would do what he could to help.

Behind him, the King cleared his throat. "Back to the matter at hand, my love. This Lady Charlotte...tell me what ye ken of her."

Liam turned back to see Elizabeth pursing her lips—lips which looked well-kissed—thoughtfully.

"She is crafty," the Queen finally said. "Intelligent. Used to being underestimated, and knows well how to use that notion. A woman who knows how to get what she wants, and who, luckily, is also honest."

Not for the first time, Liam thought the Queen and his love would be quite good friends, if the circumstances had been different.

Perhaps the Queen suspected the same, because she nodded firmly. "Charlotte MacLeod is strong, aye, but more importantly, *smart*."

Liam's lips twitched. "Smarter than me, I ken it."

"Aye," Robert chuckled. "I suspect that's true of most ladies. Ye love her?"

His cousin's question was surprising, but Liam answered truthfully. "With everything I am, Yer Majesty. When this is over, when she has her vengeance, I will marry her."

"Will she agree?" his cousin teased.

"If she doesnae, I'll follow her until the end of time, trying to convince her."

The two cousins shared a companionable smile, but the Queen drew their attention once more.

"Interesting you call it *her* vengeance, Liam. You do not wish your own retaliation on this John MacDonald? For what he has done to *your* lass?"

It was obvious from the gleam in the Queen's eyes, this was a test of some sort, but Liam didn't bother puzzling through it.

"Ye've been with me every day for months, Yer Majesty. I'm surprised ye give me such little credit. I would kill MacDonald for what he's done to Charlotte...but it would still be *her*, and her soul, who needs this retribution."

When Elizabeth nodded in approval, Liam knew he'd answered correctly. He straightened his shoulders and turned to his royal cousin.

"Ye have the evidence in front of ye, Robert. Will ye act on it? John MacDonald is a menace to women, to anyone he sees as weaker than him. But he's also a traitor."

Liam was sure he'd known the answer to his question, but when Robert folded his arms in front of him and turned back to the letters spread on the table, fear settled in Liam's stomach.

After a long moment, the King shook his head. "Ye are my kinsman, Liam, and a member of my clan. The woman ye love deserves

vengeance..."

Liam mirrored his liege's pose. "But?" he prompted, dread making the word taste sour on his tongue.

Robert sighed. "But I'm also a king. The MacDonald patriarch is a powerful man, a powerful ally. He would also make a powerful enemy."

When his cousin turned to meet his eyes, sorrow evident in the older man's, Liam understood what he was saying. The evidence spread on the table was enough to convict John MacDonald of treason. Enough to hang him, or if Robert was feeling particularly nasty, an even worse fate.

But if he did that, if Robert condemned John to death, he risked making an enemy of his father, a powerful laird. The MacDonald clan was already in the King's suspicions, it wouldn't take much to set them all on John's traitorous path, if they had reason to hate the Crown.

Charlotte had risked everything to bring Robert this evidence, but the King couldn't act on it.

He couldn't give her the retaliation she deserved.

Liam lifted his chin and dropped his hand to the hilt of his sword. "Then let *me* make an enemy of him."

Robert understood, and when he shook his head, looked almost reluctant. "Ye mean to challenge John MacDonald to a duel of honor? Accuse him of treason?"

"Nay, I'll challenge him based on what he did to Charlotte. She announced his crime before the Queen and my men; nae one would be surprised."

For a moment, he thought the King would grant him leave to do so. But then Robert glanced at his wife and exhaled, shaking his head. He lifted his hand to rub the back of his neck, and seemed gen-

uinely regretful when he said, "I'm sorry, Liam. It would be honorable to do so, but then MacDonald would ken it was one of my men—my bodyguard, my kinsman—who'd killed his son. It would be just as bad as if I had executed the traitor myself."

Honestly, Liam hadn't expected his liege to rule any differently. Robert was a good man, but more importantly, a good king. He put the welfare of Scotland above any one person, including himself.

So Liam slammed his fist against his chest and bowed his head. "I understand, Yer Majesty. I'll no' challenge him."

"But...?"

When Liam met his eyes, Robert's were sparkling with what might have been disbelief.

Liam's lips twitched. "*But* his crimes will no' go unpunished."

His King watched him for a long moment, then exchanged a glance with the Queen. When she dropped her chin in faint approval, Robert nodded as well.

"I believe my lady has a suggestion which might help with that. Elizabeth?"

His wife lifted her chin, a cunning gleam in her eyes. "I'll not reveal all my secrets before I have a chance to discuss with my husband, but aye. I believe my idea will ensure John MacDonald's punishment to the fullest, and it will be unsanctioned by the crown. I will explain once the lady Charlotte arrives."

Liam's heart had leapt at the casual reference to Charlotte's arrival, and he barely heard the rest of her words. He stepped forward. "Ye've sent for her, Yer Majesty?"

The Queen's lips twitched just slightly. "Aye. One could argue *she* deserves punishment for what *she* did, but I believe she is too valuable an asset to be wasted."

"Ye'll no' punish her or her— Or the pirate?"

“Some might say what I have in mind for her is punishment enough.”

Slowly, Liam’s incredulity turned to hope. The Queen spoke in riddles, but he could tell from her wry grin, the punishment she had in mind wasn’t horrible.

At least, that’s what he hoped.

“And now...” King Robert crossed to the Queen once more, and when she gave him her hand, he tugged her to her feet. “Go away, cousin. I’ve been apart from my wife for much too long, and there’s the little matter of the royal succession to ensure.”

Rather than blushing, Elizabeth was grinning when she waved at Liam. “Aye, go away, Liam. The King and I have things to discuss.”

As Liam closed the door behind himself, he heard the two of them laughing, and the sound made him smile.

But as the gaiety faded behind him, he realized the next several days would carry the weight of his future. He had a duty to Charlotte, and she would be arriving soon.

She would have to face the King and Queen to hear their sentence.

God willing, it would be one both Charlotte and Liam could live with.

CHAPTER 9



“ ‘*T*is so exciting, my lady, is it no’? To be here in Scone once more and having an actual audience with Her Majesty! ‘Tis just as ye were hoping!”

Charlotte sat stiffly on the stool and did her best to ignore her maid’s chattering as the girl yanked and prodded her thick red hair into some kind of order. Charlotte’s mother had always despaired of her wearing aught more than a braid, and had instructed young Annas to ensure Charlotte was well-dressed and elegant when she was presented to the King and Queen.

Annas tugged particularly hard, trying to get Charlotte’s locks under control, and she pressed her lips together to keep from crying out.

Ye didnae cry when John pinned ye down, Char. Ye’ll no’ cry now.

Nay, this pain was nothing compared to what she’d felt then. Or what she’d felt when Liam had left her, and she believed he’d been using her.

But now she knew her father had lied about Liam being betrothed. Liam had been true to her, had even written to her...and he still wanted to marry her.

Would the Queen allow it? Or would Charlotte's beautifully coiffed head sit atop a spike on the battlements this time tomorrow?

As Annas prattled on about the honor of being presented to royalty, Charlotte closed her eyes and admitted the truth: She was *terrified*.

Not of dying, not really. When she'd proposed the outrageous pirating plan to Tavish, she'd known there was a very real chance she'd not live to see John punished. She'd trained with her brother as much as possible, and she knew well how to handle a blade. More importantly, she knew how to handle *herself*, and that—more than anything—meant she'd face any danger with the utmost confidence and pride.

Nay, she wasn't scared of dying. But she *was* scared of dying before she had a chance with Liam. A chance at even a *brief* future with Liam.

A month ago, she hadn't known that was even a possibility. Now, she was terrified it wasn't.

"Thank goodness yer lady mother sent this fine gown, aye, Lady Charlotte? The green is so vibrant, an' makes yer eyes sparkle like a lass's should!"

Her eyes were still closed, so how would Annas know if they sparkled? Charlotte stifled a sigh. They were of an age, she and her maid, but she'd never felt so old as she did now, listening to the girl prattle on about irrelevant details such as gowns and hairstyles.

The Queen must put up with this all the time.

The unexpected thought had Charlotte snorting slightly, incredulous. She'd met Queen Elizabeth so briefly, but in that time, had known her to be a kindred spirit. A strong woman, surrounded by men who thought her little more than a pawn, but who possessed a keen mind.

When the Queen had asked if Charlotte was willing to kill a man to complete her mission, it hadn't sounded as if it had been mere idle speculation.

Charlotte had never met the Bruce, but she'd be willing to bet his wife was just as dangerous as the stories she'd heard told of the King.

With a sigh, she opened her eyes and admitted the truth: If she'd met the Queen under different circumstances, they might've been friends.

Well, that's what ye get for attempting to kidnap royalty, lass.

"Char!"

Tavish's worry was palpable as he burst into the chamber she'd been given. "I just heard ye were here. I've been here waiting on—Well, it matters no'. What in the damnation are *ye* doing here, Charlotte?"

He reached for her hands, and Charlotte squeezed them gratefully.

"I'm so glad to see ye, Tav." She stood, pulling away from Annas's ministrations, not caring if her coiffure was complete. "Ye just arrived?"

"I was—" He shook his head. "It matters naught how I heard of yer arrival, sister. What are *ye* doing here?" Pulling her closer, he frowned down at her. "Were ye sent for? Did Liam contact ye? Or is it the Bruce himself? Why did ye no' call for me to escort ye?"

She exhaled, more pleased than she'd realized to have him with her. "No one kenned where ye were, *Banner*."

When Tav's eyes flicked toward Annas, Charlotte winced slightly, forgetting the maid was listening. Without releasing her brother, she turned to the other woman.

"Leave us," she commanded, her voice catching. "I need to speak with my brother."

"But, my lady!" the little maid protested, "I still need to pin up yer braids and smooth down yer—"

"I am dressed enough for Mass, therefore I'm dressed enough for the King," Charlotte snapped in return.

Annas hesitated, before curtsying and dashing from the room.

When Charlotte turned back to her brother, he was regarding her wryly. "I heard ye'd turned all religious on us, Char. From what I heard about that last dinner on Lewes—"

She had no time for his teasing. "I'm no' taking vows, ye clot-head! But the point is valid— Oh, why am I arguing this?" It mattered not what she wore to church, nor what she wore to hear her sentence from the King. "What were we speaking of?"

Her brother sobered instantly. "Ye were about to tell me *Liam* summoned ye here, rather than the King, aye?"

Charlotte had to wince again, and when she reluctantly shook her head and pulled her hands from his, she knew Tav's sharp intake of breath meant he understood.

"'Twas the King's seal on the letter to Da, Tav."

He muttered a curse and raked his hand through his curls. " 'Tis what I heard, aye, but I hoped mayhap it was Liam."

"Aye," she said dully, sinking into the chair once more.

"Is it a sentencing?"

She met his eyes. "I donae ken. I assume so."

"I'm going with ye," he said in a low voice, his gaze intense. "Donae argue."

"Of course I'll argue." She shook her head and turned slightly, giving him her shoulder as she reached for the pins on the dressing

table and began to arrange them in her hair with shaking hands. "Ye're my brother, and I'll do everything in my power to protect ye."

He snorted. "Ye're *my* little sister, Char. I'm supposed to protect *ye*."

"The scheme was mine, Tav," she reminded him in a whisper. "I'll no' have ye punished for it."

"And I'll no' let ye face the King and Queen alone."

"She willnae be alone."

Charlotte's heart leapt into her throat at the sound of the smooth baritone, and she twisted toward the door.

Liam.

He stood there, looking as clean and polished as any courtier in the royal court, his plaid proclaiming him a kinsman to the king, and his sword proclaiming him a warrior.

He *belonged* here.

And she belonged by his side.

She stood, and immediately, a sense of peace, of *certainty*, settled in her stomach. She inhaled deeply, and as she exhaled, she felt her lips stretch into a grin.

He was here. He was here with her, and together, they'd face the future.

No matter what it held.

"I missed ye," she said simply.

Liam stepped into the room, ignoring her brother. "As much as I missed *ye*?"

She wanted to rush across the room, to pull him into her arms, to feel his strength wrap around her. But when she took her first step, so did he, and they met in the center of the room.

He didn't reach for her. He just stared down at her, his eyes drinking in her features, as if he were trying to memorize them.

Her brother cleared his throat. "Liam...?"

Liam didn't drop her gaze when he answered Tav's unspoken question. "I'll let no harm come to her, Tav. Ye have my word."

No harm.

Did that mean...?

Charlotte sucked in a hopeful breath, and when his lips twitched in acknowledgment, she closed her eyes on a thankful prayer.

"Ye'll no' let the Queen punish her then?" Tav pressed.

She felt Liam turn away from her, addressing her brother, even as he reached out and took one of Charlotte's hands.

"The Queen's plan is unorthodox, but I know Char and I will both benefit from it."

She heard Tav's sigh of relief as she opened her eyes. Her brother was staring at both of them. When his gaze dropped to their clasped hands, he nodded thoughtfully.

"I spent the better part of a year hating ye for what ye did, Liam," he said, matter-of-factly. When he lifted his eyes to his friend once more, he shrugged. "But Char has forgiven ye, and I find myself trusting ye once more."

Liam inclined his head. "Thank ye."

Tav winked at her. "I'll leave ye be. Just donae tell anyone I'm such a poor chaperone I left the two of ye alone. In yer chamber." His eyes cut toward the canopied bed. "*Again.*"

"Ye're a terrible chaperone," Charlotte managed. "And I love ye for it."

"Go away, Tav," Liam growled.

Her brother probably smirked as he sauntered out, but Charlotte wasn't watching him. Nay, she couldn't tear her eyes away from Liam, and how...*strong* he looked.

When he turned to flick the latch on the door, ensuring no one would bother them, her eyes skimmed the width of his shoulders and the curve of his stubbled jaw. He was hearty and hale. *Noble*. Strong. Worthy.

The kind of man a woman would be lucky to have love her.

She tugged him back, willing him to meet her eyes. "Ye'll stand with me?"

"I'll stand beside ye, Char. Not in front of ye, nor in back of ye, but beside ye."

"When I answer the royal summons?" That's what he'd promised Tav.

"Forever."

Hearing the vow ripped a half-laugh, half-sob from Char's lips. She shook her head.

"Ye say we'll benefit from whatever the Queen has planned, and nae harm will come to me for my treason. But 'tis hard to believe Elizabeth just accepted my evidence and agreed to punish John—"

He cut her off with a shake of his head, and she damn near swallowed her voice, her heart leaping into her throat at that small action.

Which part was he disagreeing with?

Had she misunderstood what he'd said to Tav? Had her hope been premature?

Blue eyes bore into hers for a long moment—searching, challenging—before he glanced away.

Had she won their contest of wills? Or lost?

"The King would no' accuse him of treason, Char," Liam finally said, his attention on the stool where she'd been sitting so recently. "He couldnae risk making an enemy of the MacDonalds."

She nodded stiffly, her head aching already from Annas's pulling and prodding. It was hard to think with her hair all tied up like this!

"That makes sense, and I was afraid 'twould be his decision."

"Robert is wily, Char, and his wife is intelligent. Elizabeth has a plan."

"For John?"

He swallowed. "For ye."

His eyes met hers, and the hesitation—the *fear*?—she saw there, gutted her.

He was too strong to be afraid for himself. Nay, he was worried for *her*, and she knew what that meant.

The King's sentence.

Liam obviously knew the sentence his cousin was going to pass down on her, and if he was looking at her this way, it could only mean ...

He'd lied to Tav. He'd lied to make her brother think she'd be safe. She should be angry, but all she felt was gratitude he'd managed to keep Tav safe.

She swallowed. She'd accepted her own death was a possible outcome of her plan before she'd ever carried it out... But now she'd been given the possibility of a future with Liam, she found herself regretting it.

Her hand somehow found its way to his chest, and her fingers spread across the fine linen of his shirt under the swath of Bruce plaid. His heart beat strongly, and she closed her eyes on the bitter realization she'd not be able to enjoy it beyond that moment.

"The King?" she finally managed to ask.

Liam's hand covered hers, but she didn't open her eyes, knowing she would see the pity showing in his.

"Aye?" he asked, clearly not understanding her question.

"Ye... Ye ken his decision?" she whispered.

It was a long moment before he spoke. "He left it up to Elizabeth."

The Queen, who had even more reason to be angry at Charlotte than her husband did.

"Oh." It was all she could manage.

But Liam understood. Of course he did. "She's come to a decision."

Charlotte's knees went weak. Mayhap she'd have fallen, except Liam was there, his free arm wrapping around her waist and pulling her against his chest. There, she could finally open her eyes, her gaze locking onto the far window.

Would this be her last sight of the sun? Her last embrace with the man she loved?

The man who didn't even know she still loved him.

She was no coward, but she'd put off hearing the Queen's sentence a few more moments, if it meant savoring the feel of Liam's arms around her. The universe shrunk to this warmth, this safety. Each heartbeat lasted eons, each breath was a shared lifetime together.

But all too soon, Liam shifted. "Charlotte? Would ye care to hear her decision?"

Nay!

She'd *care* to spend the rest of her life wrapped in his arms, just like this.

But even as she thought it, her ears recognized the smile in his voice. She pulled away, just enough to plant her other hand against his chest and look up into his face.

Aye, he *was* smiling.

Her eyes widened at the sight, and her heart leapt, closing off her throat in a fierce, sudden *hope*.

Liam's lips twitched wider. "The Queen thanks ye for yer service, Charlotte MacLeod, and acknowledges yer bravery in bringing a traitor to royal attention. Furthermore, she'll pardon ye completely, if ye— Well..." Liam shook his head. "There's a few clauses in there, but the most important one is, she wants to offer ye a position at court."

Charlotte's mouth opened, but she couldn't manage to make any sounds emerge. She swallowed and tried again. "A position? A... *job?*"

He released her hand and lifted his palm to cup her cheek. "I did-nae ask particulars, love. I was too desperate to reach ye, to tell ye the news."

Her chest felt numb.

Why?

Was it because, after the terror and acceptance and hope of the last few moments, she wasn't sure *what* to feel now?

"A pardon?" Charlotte whispered. "She's forgiven me?"

"There are a few details remaining, but aye. Do ye ken what this means, Char?"

When he tipped her chin upward, their lips were only inches away. Her gaze landed on his lips, full and perfect, and even now pulled into a teasing grin. Liam *loved* her. He wouldn't grin, wouldn't tease, if there was anything less than what they'd planned so long ago...

"A future," she breathed.

"Aye," he agreed, with a solemn nod. "I'll be marrying nae one other than ye, Charlotte MacLeod."

And suddenly, she wasn't numb. Nay, instead, a *certainty* filled her, pouring down from the top of her head, through her chest and her limbs, and settling deep within her, the warmth of her core now pressing against his hips. She pushed herself up on her toes, thrusting that warmth, that ache, against the hard length of him.

"Mayhap ye should ask me first then, Liam?"

His grin faded slowly, his gaze turning serious. Against her cheek, his thumb began making small circles. "Have ye forgiven me for abandoning ye then? I meant what I said that day on the Queen's ship, Char. I love ye, and have never stopped."

He hadn't abandoned her. Her pain over the last year could be laid directly at her father's feet. Ignoring the pain and betrayal from her own father, which threatened to overwhelm her, she instead focused on Liam's words and grinned and wriggled her hips against him.

"Ye're no' at fault, my heart. And I wouldnae have been heartbroken, had I no' still loved ye so much."

He sucked in a breath, and she knew she'd been a fool to keep from declaring her love for him remained just as strong and as true as ever.

"Aye, Liam. I love ye."

"Thank God," he growled, right before his lips crashed down upon hers.

CHAPTER 10



The Queen had sent him to fetch Charlotte, knowing she'd be waiting, worried and afraid, for her royal audience. Aye, even now, Liam's liege and his sworn lord were waiting for him to bring Charlotte to them. Robert and Elizabeth were ready to discuss her future.

Their future.

And Liam couldn't make himself care, not with Charlotte finally—*finally!*—in his arms again.

She tasted just as perfect as he remembered, for all that their kiss on the birlinn had left him wanting. She tasted of summer afternoons and moonlit nights.

She tasted of his future and joy and *forever*.

"Thank God," he groaned again, his arm joining his other around her middle, so he could lift her tighter against him.

And when *she* moaned in response, as her arms snaked up from his chest to wrap around his neck and pull him even closer, he was lost. Liam was too busy focusing on the feel of her lips under his, to recognize anything more than the fact they had somehow ended up on the bed. Instead of plying her with the romance she deserved, he'd instead toppled over and pulled her atop him. But when he felt

her lips lift in a grin against his, he returned a rakish smile of his own.

One of her legs straddled his, the center of her being nestled exactly where he wanted it. His cock was already hard, straining against his kilt, and when she shifted against him, it gave another jump.

With a whimper, she pulled away from him, long enough to run one hand down his neck to his chest. Feeling her palm against his nipple was all he needed.

He used one hand to tug her closer so she fell against him, and his other began to hike her skirts up.

Why in damnation was she wearing such a bulky gown? Once they were married, she'd wear only linen and—

His determined planning swiftly left his mind as she moaned and lowered her head, her neck and shoulder thrusting toward his lips. Stretching up, he was able to mark the smooth skin of her neck with his mouth, at the same moment his questing fingers finally found her firm arse.

The noise she made was somewhere between a laugh and a moan, and as he squeezed her rear end, she began to rock against him.

"Liam," she panted. *"Please."*

Dimly, he remembered his duty, and thought it miraculous, considering how much of his blood was currently flowing between his legs instead of his brain. "The Queen—" he began, but bit off the reminder with a groan, as Charlotte reached between them to grasp his erection through his kilt.

"She pardoned me for treason, Liam," Charlotte managed, as she scrambled to one side, yanking her skirts up and out of the way as

she fumbled for his kilt. "She'll pardon me for being a few moments late."

"Moments, lass?" he growled, as he rolled, pushing her into the mattress as he went. "Ye think that's all this will take?"

And damn her, but her grin was impish when she looked up at him with those passion-dark eyes and swollen lips. "This time, ye'll have to just *make* it quick, love," she commanded.

And he was lost. "Aye, my lady."

She was already wet for him, as he'd known she would be. And as he dragged a finger across her core, she arched under him, and mewled under his ministrations.

He grasped hold of his cock, already thick with anticipation, and pressed it against her entrance, then paused there, knowing it'd been a year since he'd last sunk into her, and knowing she'd been violated since that time.

"Char?"

He wasn't sure if he was asking permission or forgiveness or *what*, but she took the decision out of his hands when she shifted beneath him, opening herself further, and pushing her heated core up around his cock.

They both sucked in a breath, then moaned simultaneously, as he sheathed himself deep within her.

"God, Char," he growled, dropping his forehead to hers.

"Donae stop now," she commanded, pushing at him as she wriggled her hips, forcing him even deeper. "I cannae— *Liam!*" She cried out with a moan, and he was all too happy to accommodate her.

He pulled out just slightly, before sinking home once more, and the noise she made was desperate.

"Now, *Liam!*"

He was chuckling as he pulled out once more, farther still. "Will ye always be this demanding, love?"

Her fingers gripped his shoulders now, as if she could control his movements. "Only if ye persist in treating me gently— Aye!" she cried as he took her hints and thrust into her tightness. "Like that! Again!"

It might've been funny, but he couldn't find the humor, not when she was moaning beneath him. Instead, his fingers crept to the place where they were joined, and his thumb circled the little pearl of her pleasure as he plunged into her. She cried out again, with joy this time, and he damn near spilled at that very moment.

It wasn't long before he felt her tightening around him, the once-familiar sensation tugging directly at the ache behind his bollocks, pulling him deeper into the center of her. She arched again, pressing her curls against his hand, and her knees—*God Almighty*, still tangled in that fancy gown—clamped on either side of his hips.

"Liam!" As her head fell back against the mattress, her breasts pushed toward him, and he wished he could taste *them* as well. But only a few seconds later, her inner muscles began their rhythmic spasms, accompanied by her own rocking and chants of, "I love you, I love you," and he ached to join her.

A few more thrusts, and he did, spilling against her womb and praying it would mean a future for both of them.

Had it only been a few minutes between their kiss at the door and now, lying tangled in their finery on her bed, their breaths mingling with panting and kisses and promises?

"I love you," he whispered, dropping a gentle kiss to the corner of her lips as he rolled to one side, pulling her into his arms as he went.

Her eyes were closed, and she smiled, but didn't answer. She didn't have too; he would always remember her chanted declaration as he'd made love to her. She loved him, and it was enough.

Almost.

"Char," he prompted gently. "Marry me."

Her eyes still closed, she hummed. "Was that a command, or a request?"

"A request, ye daft woman." He blew out a breath, half in frustration, half in laughter. "Ye have nae idea how it felt, hearing what that bastard did to ye. I wanted to track him down and rip open his heart."

"Will ye?"

Her question took him off guard, and after a moment, she opened her eyes and met his.

"Will ye take me with ye, when ye do?"

He tightened his hold on her, knowing he could never let her go. "I cannae kill the bastard if my liege forbids it."

"But if ye could?" Her fingers skimmed his jaw, before resting against the hollow at the base of his throat.

"I would. I will keep ye safe, Char." He swallowed. "If ye'll have me."

Her smile was a little sad. "Ye cannae *keep* me anything, Liam, any more than I could keep *ye*."

She was right.

He lifted her hand and pressed it against his heart. "Then let us keep one another. Together. Marry me?"

"That sounds lovely. Whatever the Queen has in mind for us, we'll stand by one another?"

"Aye. As God intended."

This time, she giggled a bit as her lips lifted, and she rolled away from him. "Then aye, Liam, I'd be thrilled to marry ye." She pushed herself to her knees. "I've wanted ye for my husband since we met, and I'm only sorry it took us so long to get here."

His own grin was rueful, as he pushed himself upright as well. "If ye're busy keeping me as a husband, I'll keep ye as a wife, and we'll do our best to put this last year behind us."

"Ye mean yer abandonment?"

She was teasing him, so he teased right back. "Aye," he said solemnly, "and yer foray into piracy and treason."

"Then I accept yer suit, Liam Bruce, and will be proud to be yer wife, come what may."

He clambered off the bed, then reached out a hand toward her. "Come what may?"

She took his forearm and allowed him to pull her to stand beside him. "I wonder what the King and Queen—no' to mention my father—will have to say about our union."

"Ah, *that*." He was grinning as he flicked her braid over her shoulder. "Let us make ourselves presentable once more and go meet with our lieges. I think they have something to tell us ye'll find acceptable."

She was grinning when she lifted herself up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his. "I love ye."

And he knew his heart was full.

CHAPTER 11



*H*er heart *should've* been pounding, the worries and fears *should've* been crowding out all other thoughts in her head. But as Charlotte stood, hand-in-hand, with Liam in the small antechamber, while they waited for approval to approach the royal couple, all she felt was...peace.

She was at peace, and it was thanks to the man standing beside her.

Beside her, not in front of her.

They'd go through life like this, the two of them, standing side by side.

And it was *that* knowledge which had brought her this peace. Well, *that*, and the magnificent climax she'd just experienced.

When Liam squeezed her hand, she glanced in his direction. From the twinkle in his eyes, and the smirk on his lips, she knew he was having—and feeling—the exact same thoughts as she was.

Thank Heavens he remembered how to lace me back up!

Charlotte was almost certain no one would be able to look at the two of them and guess what they'd been doing only a few minutes ago.

“She’s a good woman, Char,” Liam whispered. “And a good queen. She’s offered ye a pardon, and I think the two of ye—”

Charlotte never got to hear what he thought, because at that moment, the guard beckoned them forward, and Liam tugged her into motion.

The King and Queen had a grand chamber where they sat on their thrones and passed judgment. But this solar was much smaller, much more intimate.

Charlotte glanced at the large hearth, the colorful tapestries, and the table laden with fruits and cheeses, and decided she would have preferred this chamber as well, were she the queen.

The woman in question was seated in a fine tall-backed chair, her hands clasped on her lap, and her expression composed. The King, her husband, seemed to be ignoring them all, his grey-salted head bent over a scroll by the window. They were alone in the room, save for three of the Queen’s ladies, two of whom were sitting on a bench, bent over embroidery hoops.

“Lady Charlotte MacLeod.” Queen Elizabeth’s voice rang with command.

Liam squeezed her hand once, and Charlotte pulled away to sink into a deep curtsy before the Queen. “Aye, Yer Majesty. As ordered.”

When she rose, Elizabeth was frowning, her regal head cocked to one side thoughtfully. “You do not seem concerned to be ordered before your liege lord.”

Charlotte glanced at the King, who was still ignoring them, then back to the Queen. “Liam assures me ye see the honor in my actions, even if they were unorthodox. I trust him.”

When she shrugged, the other woman’s brows rose.

“And did *Liam* tell you aught else?”

It was Liam himself who answered, stepping up beside Charlotte and taking her hand once more. "Aye, Yer Majesty. My betrothed kens yer offer of a pardon is conditioned on her taking a position at yer court."

A position at court.

Would she be one of Elizabeth's ladies, relegated to sitting on a bench, perfecting her stitches, like those women over there?

It would be a boring existence, but better than a traitor's death, and at least she'd be with Liam. His role as guard to the Queen meant she'd be able to see him often, and they'd be able to hold one another each evening.

Aye, sitting about embroidering wasn't exactly how she'd pictured her future with her love, but if that's what it took to marry him and keep her head atop her shoulders where it belonged, she'd do it.

Elizabeth's eyes dropped to their clasped hands, and her English-tinted voice grew speculative. "'Tis that all your *betrothed* knows?"

It was Charlotte's turn to frown.

The Queen didn't trust Liam?

She was about to stand up for him, when he cleared his throat.

She whirled to face him, her hand tightening around his, as he shifted his weight. He didn't look at her, but kept his attention on the Queen, when he said, "Aye, Yer Majesty."

Now Charlotte's heart began to pound.

What hadn't he told her?

"Did she agree in order to save her head, Liam?" the Queen asked, her tone low and dangerous.

Charlotte hated the fact that particular tone was directed at the man she loved. "Agree to what?" she snapped, as she moved to press her shoulder against his. *Side by side*. "What are ye accusing Liam of?"

Queen Elizabeth's eyes turned cold as she glared at Charlotte. Beside her, Liam sighed.

He turned to face Charlotte, tugging her to look up at him. "Char," he said quietly, "Elizabeth plans to order us to marry. An alliance with the Bruces—and the King's kinsman—would appease yer father, who will be clamoring to have ye back, once he learns of MacDonald's death."

Order us to marry.

Charlotte frowned.

Was that why he'd offered for her?

Nay, he'd said long ago he wanted her for a wife. But still...

"And ye kenned her plan?"

Liam's nod was quick, decisive. "Aye, and I kenned ye'd balk if it was a command. I had to woo ye."

"Woo?" She frowned, not liking the implication.

But when he lifted her hand, their fingers still entwined, she flushed slightly, remembering how he'd been *inside* her when he'd asked her to become his wife.

As he brushed his lips across the back of her hand, he hummed low, and she felt that same delicious warmth spread through her.

"Aye," he murmured. "I had to convince ye I wanted to marry ye, and that ye wanted to marry me, *before* it was part of yer pardon."

"Ye do still, right?" she whispered, hating how weak she sounded.

His blue eyes bore into hers. "Always, my love."

When the Queen cleared her throat haughtily, they both turned, and Charlotte frowned.

"Ye think I would agree to marry a man just to save my head, Yer Majesty? Luckily, I didnae have to make that decision. I'd marry

Liam in any circumstance ye threw me in. I love him."

His fingers tightened around hers, lending her strength. She straightened, lifting her chin, and met the Queen's glare boldly.

It was Elizabeth who looked away first, blowing out a breath and relaxing back against the chair, as she glanced at her husband. "'Tis glad I am to hear that, Lady Charlotte. I've heard Liam speak of you as his angel, and I would hate to think you were anything less."

Charlotte snorted softly.

An angel?

Angels were pure and guileless and perfect.

Beside her, Liam chuckled softly. "An avenging angel, mayhap. When I saw ye coming at me with that blade..."

From his place by the window, Robert glanced at them all, his smile subdued, but his eyes twinkling merrily, proving he'd been listening all along.

"Angels come in many forms. Some we recognize, others we do not. Some we need, some we fear." Placing her hands on the arms of the chair, the Queen pushed herself to her feet. "Are you ready to hear your fate, Lady Charlotte MacLeod?"

With Liam's hand in hers, Charlotte knew she could face anything. She nodded.

The Queen's voice became regal, imperious. "You are crafty and intelligent, Charlotte. You approached the matter of the traitor in an unorthodox way, mayhap, but one guaranteed to gain our royal attention."

Nodding, Robert moved to stand beside his wife, the scroll clapped in his hands behind his back. He didn't speak, but waited for Elizabeth to continue.

"You've proven a knowledge of the martial arts, and of the home arts as well. And you've proven your ability to think quickly, to plan.

I have need of someone like you.”

Her lips tugging into a frown, Charlotte glanced at the Bruce.

Robert shook his head. “My cousin Liam has agreed to stay here at Scone, to continue leading my Guard and protect my lady wife. I have my men, Lady Charlotte.”

“And I have my women,” his wife finished. “Robert has spies and agents and bodyguards all over Scotland, but they are all men. I envision something...*more*.”

When she nodded to the three women, Charlotte truly studied them for the first time.

The youngest sat straight, her gown a modest green, her hands folded atop her embroidery, watching the proceedings from beneath lowered lashes. She seemed young, but was paying very close attention to everything going on around her. The look of piercing intelligence belied her youthful appearance.

Seemingly just as intelligent was the lady sitting beside her: A golden-haired beauty, with flashing eyes, and a red gown cut low enough to show off more than a little skin. She *lounged*, where her companion sat properly. This woman was eyeing Liam speculatively, one long finger idly tracing the upper curve of her breast, as if imagining it was *him* touching her.

Frowning, Charlotte turned her attention to the third—and most ill-at-ease—woman. Charlotte would’ve thought her a servant, based on her dull gown and simple coiffure. But the fact she stood with her arms crossed in front of her, scowling at the assembly as she braced herself against the wall, told Charlotte she was there for a reason. The unstrung bow at her side, and the thief’s brand on the back of her left hand, were even more intriguing.

The Queen’s voice was low when she explained. “Rosalind, Melisandre, and Courtney have agreed to join this little...experi-

ment. Some took a little more prodding than others.”

The golden-haired one smiled languidly, while the standing woman’s scowl deepened.

“All that’s missing, Charlotte MacLeod, is a leader.”

Charlotte’s attention swung to the Queen once more. Elizabeth was looking at her expectantly. “*Me, Yer Majesty?*”

“I know you to be intelligent and unorthodox. You have connections at court, and connections—*somehow*, and please do not explain, for I do not wish to know—to pirates. I believe you and I to be kindred spirits, and I want you to have the leading role of this new endeavor.”

Glancing at Liam, Charlotte saw the pride in his expression.

He was *proud* of her? Proud she’d gained this attention?

Nay, she realized. Proud she’d been offered such a role.

I can help shape Scotland’s future.

The realization slammed into her so hard, Charlotte’s head jerked upward. Only Liam’s grip on her hand kept her attention where it needed to be, and she used that touch, that warmth, to force herself to breathe deeply.

The chance to shape her country’s future. The chance to make history. The chance to do more than spend her days as a fine lady in the MacDonald keep.

A chance not to be executed as a traitor.

Her lips tugged upward.

Put like that, how could she refuse?

“What—” When her voice cracked, Charlotte shook her head ruefully and cleared her throat. “What exactly would ye have me do, Yer Majesty?”

Elizabeth’s sharp gaze jumped from her, to the women, to her husband, to Liam, then back to Charlotte. “Charlotte, my dear...I

would have you make *them* into Angels."

Angels?

Charlotte caught Liam's gaze, and when he began to smile, she joined him. "Angels, hmm? Beautiful, dangerous, hidden creatures?"

"The angels no one expects," Liam offered.

"The angels who work for good, but are willing to do whatever it takes," the Queen commanded.

And these "*Angels*" would be the Queen's? Not the King's?

Charlotte's gaze darted to the Bruce, who seemed to understand, because he shook his head.

"Yer loyalty no longer lies with me, lass. Ye'll swear fealty to the Queen, and take yer commands from her."

It was a novel idea, to be sure, but Charlotte's heart pounded in excitement. She could change history. She could make a place for herself at court.

She could lead the Queen's Angels.

"However, your first mission, Charlotte, will be without the Angels. You and..." The Queen nodded to Liam. "You, and your *betrothed*, will journey to Finlaggan and avenge yourself."

Charlotte's gaze flicked to the three women, not sure how much the royal couple had shared with them. She would keep her questions general.

"Avenge myself, Yer Majesty? So this isnae an official mission?"

"This is not a mission officially sanctioned by the crown, Charlotte. 'Tis a secret mission, delivering justice to a traitor who deserves it, although we are unable to condemn him."

The Queen's gaze was steady, and her meaning *very* clear: John MacDonald would die, but not on the King's orders. He would die in secret, in the dark...

Condemned by an angel.

Taking a deep breath, Charlotte released Liam's hand and stepped toward the Queen, her fist over her heart. Instead of a curtsy, this time she bowed; a symbol of fealty and obedience.

"Yer Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, I swear my pledge to serve ye as ye see fit."

Was it her imagination, or did the Queen breathe out a sigh of relief at her pledge?

Liam stepped up beside her once more, and as Charlotte straightened, offered his own bow.

"I swear it as well, my Queen."

After straightening, Liam snaked his arm around Charlotte's middle, and she—nigh overwhelmed by the last minutes—sagged against him.

Queen Elizabeth exchanged pleased glances with her husband, then turned to them with a soft smile. "Well then, Charlotte MacLeod, welcome to court. To the both of you, welcome to your future."

"Aye," Liam drawled, turning Charlotte in his arms. When she was facing him, he lifted her chin with one callused finger. "Welcome to yer future, my love," he murmured, right before his lips met hers.

EPILOGUE



“*H*ave ye ever been on a pirate’s boat before, Liam?”

Tav’s teasing question jerked Liam’s attention away from their distant prize. He glanced over at Charlotte, who stood beside him at the rail. She leaned forward slightly, as if she could hurry the birlinn toward the MacDonald boat, but he saw her lips twitch.

Was she remembering the last time she’d been a pirate? Or was she recalling that night a year ago, when they’d made love on this very deck?

Liam knew which memory *he* preferred, and he allowed some of his smug satisfaction to show as he twitched a brow in Tav’s direction.

“Aye,” he drawled. “Once or twice.”

His friend blinked. “Really? One as nice as this one?”

Pressing his lips together to hide his smug grin, Liam merely nodded.

Tav shrugged. “Well, it might be yer last time. I have a fondness for this birlinn, but she’s no’ as fast as some of the southern ships.”

Char leaned toward them, lowering her voice in a mock whisper. “My brother fancies a cog for himself, and means to take one afore

the year is out.”

“By next summer, at the latest,” Tavish said with an eager nod. “Nae ship in the Isles will be able to match us then!”

“As a representative of the Crown, and therefore law and order in the Kingdom, I donae think ye should be telling me this.” Liam managed with a straight face.

Tav just shrugged, jerking his chin toward the distant ship, carrying their quarry. “The two of ye—and Char’s new *Angels*—will have to get used to unorthodox methods, Bruce. I doubt this will be the last time ye’ll need the Black Banner’s help.”

Liam had to concede that point. With a grunt of agreement, he turned back to Char.

“Ye’re sure that’s the correct birlinn?”

She nodded. “He’s there. John MacDonald is on that ship, and has nae idea his hours on earth are limited.”

Tav moved up on Liam’s other side, holding a bundle of black material. “Trust her, Liam. She’s brilliant at bribes and research.”

“Aye,” Char agreed, eyes sparkling as she reached across Liam to snag one of the scarfs Tav offered. “ ’Tis how I learned the location of the Queen’s birlinn, remember?”

“ ’Tis *easy* when ye command the royal seal, and can ensure yer quarry’s route,” Liam shot back.

It had been Char’s idea to have John MacDonald summoned to court, knowing which route he’d be likely to take. From then, it had simply been a matter of bribes and messages, until she knew exactly which boat carried him.

She bumped her hip against his. “Aye, but no’ so different from watching for a MacLeod birlinn, crewed by my MacLeods, carrying a royal entourage.”

Liam snorted, even as he took the last scarf and began to wrap it around his head the way his friend was doing. “Ye’re bragging about what a piss-poor bodyguard I am, are ye no’?”

With a chuckle, Char pushed herself up on her toes to plant a kiss on his cheek. “Nay, my love. I cannae help it if I outsmarted—”

Her words were cut off with a gasp when he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her flush against him, capturing those sassy lips in a kiss.

For a moment, Tav and the MacDonald boat, and even the impending battle, all became irrelevant. All that mattered was the feel of his betrothed in his arms.

She hummed low in her throat as her arms snaked around his neck, and he smiled against her lips when their swords, hanging in their scabbards, clanged against one another.

He loved this woman, with everything he was and would be. And thanks to God—and Queen Elizabeth—he’d have a *forever* with her.

It was Tav’s muttered curse which finally broke them apart, and as Liam placed a small, reverent kiss at the corner of her lips, he heard his friend huff in exasperation.

“For the love of God, man, do ye no’ ken ‘tis rude to ravish a man’s sister in front of him?”

Her arms still around him, Char leaned sideways to smirk at her brother. “Mayhap ye should turn around then, brother.”

Liam snorted with laughter, just as a cry came down from Wee Robbie atop the cross-spar. “They’re turning!”

Just like that, Charlotte’s jovial manner turned serious, and she whipped the scarf up and around her head. Liam took her cue and finished tucking his in, even as Tav turned and called commands to his men.

Before she could tuck the last length of black material around her face, Liam reached out and touched her chin. "I love ye, Char. I want ye to remember that."

One dark red brow twitched. "Why? Ye think I'll do something reckless, otherwise?"

He hesitated, not sure how to explain his feelings. "What MacDonald did to ye was unforgivable, and I ken ye've made him pay already. What we do today is punishment for his treason."

She nodded, expression serious. "I've ordered the lads no' to kill indiscriminately. We're here to take John's life, but cannae make it look deliberate. Tav will ensure the birlinn is looted to make the attack seem ordinary."

Or as ordinary as a pirate attack could be.

"This will be one more death laid at the feet of the dreaded Black Banner, but..." He shook his head. "I cannae ask yer brother to kill him."

"I've already had to talk Tav out of killing John twice. I think my brother is looking forward to the opportunity." Her tone sounded curious almost, as if she were waiting to hear his reaction.

Slowly, he nodded, letting her know he understood. "I promise ye he doesnae want to slay John MacDonald any less than I do. The man abused the woman I love and deserves death. But..."

"But?" Her brow twitched in challenge.

"But ye have more reason to wish revenge than either of us. If ye have the chance to take it, and ye're comfortable with it, I'll no' stand in yer way."

Although he was constantly surprised by her determination, intelligence and ability, he had no idea how she'd react if called upon to kill a man. That had been what Elizabeth had asked her, and her response—

"Were the cause worthy," she whispered, proving she was remembering the same.

He slowly nodded, his palm moving to cup her cheek. "The cause is worthy. We do this for Robert and Elizabeth."

"And Scotland."

"And Scotland," he agreed.

She smiled at him, and he knew she'd do what was necessary, and would come through it the same woman he loved. Mayhap she'd have the opportunity to execute John MacDonald, or maybe Liam would. Mayhap it'd be Tav, or one of the other MacLeod pirates.

Either way, the man would be punished for his treason, and Robert's shaky kingdom wouldn't wobble because of his death.

Behind them, a cry went up, and both Liam and Char whirled toward the other boat. It was closer now, the men onboard obviously preparing for battle.

But there was no way they'd match the Black Banner.

The two of them tucked in the length of scarf hiding their features and unsheathed their swords in tandem.

"Beware the black," Liam whispered.

She echoed the motto, louder, and when the men behind them joined in, she brandished her blade at the enemy.

As their birlinn crashed into the MacDonald ship, Liam and Char jumped together into the battle.

"Beware the black!"



NE YEAR LATER

*L*etter, letter...transcript, letter...

Where in damnation is that report?

Charlotte shuffled through the documents on her desk, wondering if she should've allowed Liam to have that cubby system built for her after all. She'd always claimed it was easier to find things if she could see and touch them, but this was—

Aha!

Crowing triumphantly, she pulled Melisandre's report out from under a letter to the Queen. In her role as the Queen's confidante and spy-mistress, Charlotte intercepted much of Her Majesty's correspondence, or at least read it after the fact. But this report of recent brigand activity on the roads north of the city, was what she'd been looking for.

And even more interesting, was the curt addendum scribbled at the bottom in Courtney's rough hand: *Three ded. Five wounded. Will track.*

Charlotte insisted all of her agents—*Angels*, as the Queen had named them—know how to read and write. Courtney's upbringing meant she'd come late to these arts, and had never been at ease with a stylus.

She *was* at ease with a bow and a woodland trail, however, so Charlotte trusted her to track the brigands to their lair.

What she *didn't* trust was the younger woman having the sense to come back for the rest of her team. Although they'd only been together for a year, Court had quickly become the leader of their little band, and was constantly throwing herself into danger to protect the others.

Charlotte quickly scribbled a note to Rosalind, urging her to gather resources and follow her fellow Angel. Courtney would likely

need backup, and Rosa wasn't a warrior, but smarter than all of them put together.

Sighing, Charlotte threw down her stylus and scrubbed a hand down her face.

"Rough day?"

Her husband's voice jerked her attention to the door, and as always, when she saw that wry smile of his, her heart lifted. Liam's arms were crossed in front of him, and his hip was resting against the jamb.

As she stood, she stretched and affected a nonchalant air. "No' as bad as some. Ye?"

He shrugged and pushed away from the wall, prowling across the room toward her. "Nae threats to Her Majesty. Just boring arguments and pleas. We're expected to sit with her tonight."

Charlotte almost stumbled as she stepped away from her desk, but it was impossible to pay attention to silly little matters such as furniture when he had that *I need you* look in his eyes.

"Aye?" she croaked, her hands already lifting to her laces.

"Aye. It seems Her Majesty is determined to enjoy every last evening of revelry, before she enters her confinement." Liam halted before her, his hands settling on her hips, as he leaned closer.

When he inhaled deeply against her neck, as if tasting her, Charlotte's knees went weak.

"And— And she wants us—" she managed to squeak, thoroughly distracted by the feel of his shoulders under her palms.

"To dine with her again, aye. Ye ken ye're one of her best friends," he murmured, dropping his lips to her skin.

He was right; Charlotte and Elizabeth had grown close over the last year, and both enjoyed the other's company. Charlotte was look-

ing forward to finally meeting the royal prince or princess who'd be born soon, but was more looking forward to getting her friend back.

And maybe she would've said all of that, had Liam's tongue not rasped against the sensitive spot beneath her ear.

When she moaned, he yanked her closer, his hard member pressing against her pelvis.

God! The sensation—the knowledge he wanted her—made her warm and wet and breathless in a heartbeat.

"Dinner is an hour away," she said breathlessly.

Mayhap he heard the plea in her voice, or mayhap he was as desperate as she was, because his grin was wicked.

"There's all sorts of ways to spend that hour," he drawled.

Her solar was connected to their shared chambers, but they didn't need a bed. Hell, they didn't need a *desk* sometimes, when they stole moments to be together.

This afternoon, though...

"Just let me move some of my scrolls," she commanded.

A year ago, she'd thought her life simple. Without love or a future, she'd been focused on punishing a traitor and saving herself from a cruel marriage. Now, she had friends, a purpose, and a position in the royal court no one could even guess at.

And most importantly, she had a husband she loved with all her heart. A husband who would stand beside her, and allow *her* to stand beside *him*, for the rest of their lives.

As she turned to her desk and began to push letters out of the way—the last time they'd made love here, her admittedly haphazard organization had been completely ruined—she felt his hands reach for her skirts.

"Let's no' worry about the scrolls, love," he murmured against her hair.

She grinned wickedly. "Ye want me to just bend over and lift my skirts?"

"I *want* ye on the bed, but I donae think I can wait that long."

So Charlotte was laughing as she reached for the edge of the desk, feeling cool air against her arse. Aye, she had friends around her, a future changing history, and a husband who couldn't keep his hands off her.

Life was good.

AUTHOR'S NOTE ON HISTORICAL ACCURACY

Elizabeth de Burgh was Robert I's second wife, and was seized by the English shortly after he declared himself King of Scotland (and thus at war with the English). She was indeed kept prisoner for eight years before Robert was able to exchange her for hostages he took during the Battle of Bannockburn. (While Elizabeth was kept in solitary confinement, she was taken with Robert's daughter Marjorie, and a few more of his female relatives. Most of them were exchanged in 1314 with Elizabeth.)

The records indicate her journey home took her through Carlisle, and theoretically, from there, Scone. The most logical journey would've been overland, but then I wouldn't have the chance to introduce her to my pirate-turned-spy-mistress, Charlotte MacLeod.

So we're going with the theory that Robert, wanting to keep his wife safe, and Elizabeth, being cunning, devised a less-obvious route home. And that's how Elizabeth and her royal bodyguard ended up in the middle of the Western Isles! (As an aside, I have to point out that by the summer of 1315, Robert was already waging war in Ireland, so I scheduled this adventure for spring.)

Interesting note: There's not a whole lot of information out there on medieval birlinns! We know they existed (thanks to some archae-

ological evidence, and surprisingly, quite a few uses in clan crests), and it's probably best to think of them as a cross between a Viking longboat and a galley.

They were long and low, and likely didn't often make journeys of longer than a few days without stopping. Oars and sails were both used for propulsion, and the boats were primarily trading vessels between ports, or transport between islands (and Ireland).

Those islands—the Hebrides—were known as the Isles, and were ruled by a series of powerful chiefs. At the time of this story, they would've only recently become part of Scotland.

The MacLeods of Lewes were a relatively new clan (a branch of the older MacLeods of Dunvegan), but I couldn't pass up the chance to make the Black Banner hail from an island fortress!

Besides, you might recognize the clan—and the pirate!—from my book *[The MacLeod Pirate](#)*. The Black Banner is very much a hereditary title, and if you're curious about Tav and Charlotte's Uncle Rory and his adventurous courtship of Citrine, the last of the Sinclair Jewels, you'll want to pick up that story! But if you feel like starting from the beginning, *[The Sinclair Hound](#)* is only \$.99!

Clan MacDonald comes off looking pretty bad in this story, but I tried to localize the treasonous activities to just the son, John. Within a century of this story, there were seemingly dozens of MacDonald branches, so I tried to be as vague as possible in naming this branch of the clan.

Much has been written about Robert the Bruce's journey to a unified Scotland, and you can find any number of romances set during this tumultuous time. But little is known about his life with Elizabeth, or her world after her ransom from the English. We don't even know the dates of birth for her first two (female) children, but we do

know she became pregnant soon after her return to Scotland, so I'm choosing to believe Princess Margaret was born about a year later.

The few sources we do have seem to paint Queen Elizabeth as either a pampered noblewoman, or a not-quite-willing-supporter of her husband's campaign, they're paltry and inconclusive. I've decided to interpret them as the quips of a sharp-minded, witty woman, who was beloved by her husband and family.

Queen Elizabeth will most *definitely* be a force to be reckoned with! Now that she has her Angels, she'll make sure Scotland is protected from within.

If you're totally intrigued by the concept of Charlotte as a spy-mistress, and are super-curious about what someone like the branded thief, Courtney, is doing in the Queen's employ, then I've got some good news for you: *The Highlander's Angel*, the first book in the Highland Angels series, is waiting for you! Keep reading for a sneak peek!

SNEAK PEEK

From *The Highlander's Angel* (The Highland Angels, Book 1)

Available now!



When the giggling started, Courtney rolled her eyes.

She trusted Melisandre—and Court didn't trust easily—but sometimes her friend's methods were a little...*unorthodox*. Of course, that's likely why they worked.

From her spot in the shadows along the back wall of the tavern, Court watched Mellie shift her position on the Grant warrior's lap. He was big and brawny, and in possession of information they needed.

Which is why Mellie was employing her particularly bold brand of interrogation.

"Have ye met the Fraser? Personal-like, I mean?" Mellie tittered, twisting to throw one arm around the man's shoulders. "'Tis said he's handsome."

As she likely intended, the man's attention was caught by her low-cut bodice. It was a disguise Mellie had worn before—with great

success—but it appeared as if she'd un-laced it a bit further than usual tonight.

The Grant's face was only inches from her breasts, yet he leaned his nose even closer.

Was he *sniffing* her?

Court shifted her weight forward and tightened her hold on the bowstring, ready to whip the weapon up if needed.

She kens what she's doing. Stand down.

Court swallowed, the reminder necessary to keep her from charging in to save her friend and teammate. Mellie's methods *worked*, even if they were hard to watch.

A hungry-sounding growl came from the warrior's throat as he bent even closer to all that skin Mellie had on display. "Why d'ye care about that arse? I've got all the *weapon* ye need, lass."

Mellie giggled again—God help them all—and began to play with the hair at the man's neck. "I just thought, since ye kenned so much, ye might have met him." She shrugged nonchalantly, which caused her breasts to wriggle enticingly, and the Grant for certes noticed. "Is it true he's following in his da's footsteps? Because I only *play* with men who support the Bruce."

Holding her breath, Court leaned forward, intent on the man's answer. Mellie's question had been innocuous enough, especially playing the possibility of a tumble against a mythical rival, but would it work?

The man wrapped one beefy arm around Mellie's waist, pulling her against him, and lowered his lips to the skin falling out of her bodice. "Then ye don' have to worry about the Fraser, luv, he's..."

Whatever else he said was muffled as he burrowed his face into Mellie's cleavage.

In frustration, Court eased from the shadows, hoping the man's companions wouldn't notice or care about her. With the small bow held low, and her hair in a simple braid, she blended with the few other women in the tavern. Exchanging her customary trewes for a simple skirt, she was hopeful a watcher might mistake her for a serving wench.

It didn't work—she was still too far away to hear whatever the Grant was murmuring against her friend's skin. Mellie was making cooing noises and squirming convincingly, but if he'd given her the answer they suspected—that Fraser was a traitor, like his father—then she needed to extricate herself from the situation.

The Queen needed this information before her meeting with the Fraser delegation tomorrow.

Court glanced sideways to where the third member of their team was doing a convincing job of feigning sleep. Rosalind was dressed in a nun's habit; with the empty flagon in front of her, and her chin tucked low to her chest like that, everyone was respecting the "sister's" right to a wee nap. But Court knew her ears were trained on the conversation, and her sharp mind already working through the implications of the Grant's claim.

When Mellie gasped, Court's eyes darted back to her friend.

"Ow!" Mellie playfully swatted at the man's head as she pulled away. "A lady doesnae like to be *bitten*, sir!"

Her tone was still light, but Court could tell something had changed.

"Ye're nae *lady*, anymore than I'm a *sir*, and ye ken it, wench."

When the man lowered his head to her skin once more, Mellie squirmed back even farther, dropping her hand to his shoulder.

"I donae want ye to do that," she said, in a suddenly serious tone, "and I expect ye to respect my limits."

The man's arm was still around her, but his other hand rose to squeeze her breast. "Respect? Ha!"

Court could tell from the flicker of Mellie's eyes that it hurt, even if she didn't say so, and began easing toward the pair.

"Let go of me," Mellie said firmly.

The words weren't a request, but a *warning*, and when she shifted her grip to the sensitive spot between the man's shoulder and neck, Court knew Mellie had had enough.

When the man didn't heed her warning and release her, Mellie *squeezed*.

He jerked with a yelp, the arm around her going slack. But at the same time, he pulled her closer by his grip on her breast, causing her to hiss in pain.

Then Court was there, and without losing her left-handed grip on her short bow and nocked arrow, pulled another from the quiver at her hip and gripped it right below the point.

As Mellie dug her fingers into the man's neck, Court jabbed the arrowhead up under his chin, the point not-quite penetrating the skin.

"Release her," Court snarled into the man's ear.

That was all she needed to say. Mayhap it was her tone, or mayhap the man thought her weapon a longer blade. She didn't see his expression, but Mellie jumped up from his lap.

"Thank ye, luv," she said with a wink, reaching down to pat the man's cheek. "If ye learned to respect a lady, she might treat ye like a *sir*, if ye ken my meaning."

"Mellie," Court growled in warning.

Her friend merely smiled at her, then whirled out of the man's reach as she laced up her bodice. As Court hustled her friend toward the kitchen, she nudged Rosalind with her foot.

"Time to go, Sister."

"So I see," the younger woman murmured, as she jumped to her feet and slid from behind her table. "I was just contemplating sin and eternity, ye ken."

"Ye looked as if ye were contemplating the inside of that ale flagon," Mellie teased.

As Court slipped the extra arrow back into the quiver, and turned to cover their retreat, she heard Rosalind hum in agreement.

"That too."

"Next time, I'll let *ye* seduce the mark, Rosalind."

"Bless ye, my daughter."

The sound of Mellie's laughter accompanied them through the rear of the tavern and out into an alley, which reeked of mud and piss.

As always, her partners' laughter wrapped around Court's heart, making the weight of the mission seem not quite as heavy. She'd been with these two women, her best friends, for close to five years now...and she'd do anything and everything to keep them safe.

Which is why, as they sidled through the fetid alley between the tavern and a Chandler's shop, Court kept an arrow nocked, and her eyes open for danger. "Rosalind," she hissed over her shoulder, "ye slip out and fetch the horses." Their youngest team member's disguise would serve best for that task.

But it was Mellie who answered. "Too late."

The warning in her tone had Court whirling around in time to see Mellie's "sir," the Grant warrior, step from the tavern with two of his friends.

She already had a nocked arrow, so it was just a simple matter of wrapping the forefinger of her gloved left hand around it to keep

tension on the bowstring, as she dropped her right hand to her quiver.

Court grasped two shafts by the nocks above the fletching, tucking them into her knuckles, so when she swung her hand around, they protruded point-first from the outside of her fist.

From the corner of her eye, Court watched Mellie pull her long dirk from its sheath on her calf and step in front of Rosalind.

Good.

Dear Rosalind's *mind* was their team's most precious weapon, and Court and Mellie would use their more conventional weapons to protect it at all cost.

"There they are!" The Grant gestured to his friends to start forward. "The golden-haired one is mine."

"I was never yers," Mellie called out, as the three women began to back up.

One of the other Grants drew his sword, and the third, the one to her left, leered at Courtney. Carefully, deliberately, she moved her right foot backward, making sure her footing was solid, before committing to the step. As her friends and teammates retreated beside her, she took another cautious step.

"Well, Angels?" she murmured, wanting their input before she made a decision.

Rosalind immediately answered. "We don' have time for a fight, Court. The Queen's meeting with the Fraser delegation is tomorrow morn."

"And I don' particularly want to get close to that man again," Mellie said lightly, her tone belying the seriousness of the situation.

The two women shuffled backward toward the front of the alley.

"Take them down, Lady Ranged-Weapon," Rosalind teased.

Court grunted an acknowledgment and stopped her retreat. She planted her feet and lifted her chin. "Ye have a chance to turn around and forget ye ever saw us," she called, knowing the men wouldn't take her up on her wise suggestion. "Nae one needs to ken we were all here."

"I'll take ye down first, ye bitch," the one on the left called out.

Court shrugged. "Aye, fair enough," she murmured, just as she loosed her first arrow.

She had no intention of killing the man; she just wanted to make it impossible for him to follow. So when the arrow found its target in the Grant's knee, he went down with a pained grunt.

Years ago, Cam had taught her to hold her arrows this way: the second and third clenched upside down by the fletching. With minimal movements, she had the second arrow nocked against the bowstring and was pulling back with the same knuckle.

Her targets were moving ever closer, running now, and she had no need to pull hard; distance and speed weren't an issue at this proximity.

Accuracy was.

The second and third arrows found their marks in the knees of the other two warriors, and the second man actually screamed as he fell to the ground. They'd likely be able to walk again, but not for a while.

Whirling, Court found her friends watching the mouth of the alley for anyone who might've heard the disturbance. The Grant who had been after Mellie had begun to bellow and curse, and Court knew it was only a matter of time before someone came to investigate.

"Rosalind?" she prompted with a nod.

"Horses. On it," the younger woman called, as she slipped out to the main street.

"Bless ye, Sister."

Rosalind made a rude—and very un-nun-like—gesture over her shoulder as she hurried for the stables. With a chuckle, Mellie and Court followed at a more leisurely pace, knowing three running women would attract more attention than a single harried nun.

Court tucked her bow against the side of her leg, hoping the skirts of her drab kirtle would hide it. Mellie tucked herself up next to Court, her own skirts adding to the weapon's disguise.

"What do ye think?" Mellie asked in a low voice, her eyes scanning the surrounding buildings for signs of pursuit.

Court was doing the same, her knuckles white around her bow, wishing she could carry it openly. "What did he say about the Frasers? I thought I heard him say the laird wasnae loyal to the Bruce, but it was hard to hear with his face in yer tits like that."

Mellie snorted softly and bumped her hip against Court's in a playful move, which pushed the quiver deeper into their skirts. "Mayhap ye should try it sometime, luv."

"Having a man's face in my tits? Too distracting."

"Aye, it can be," Mellie agreed. "In all the best ways."

"What did he say?"

Mellie tsked. "Ye're a real grump sometimes, ye ken?"

"Aye," Court growled, her attention on the tavern they were passing, searching for dangers amid the shadows the torch out front couldn't penetrate. "What did the Grant say about the Frasers?"

"Just what ye heard: the laird followed in his da's footsteps and is a traitor to the crown."

Stifling a groan, Court shook her head. "Queen Elizabeth willnae like to hear that. No' with Robert dealing with the aftermath of

Faughart in Ireland, and her being *diplomatic* all alone.”

Ahead, Rosalind stepped into the road, tugging the reins of three horses. Her wimple hid her hair as well as the dark habit hid the rest of her, so all that showed was a circle of dark skin as she turned her worried gaze their way.

“Well then,” Mellie said, picking up her pace and tugging Court along with her. “We need to reach Scone by daybreak.”

It was possible the fate of Scotland depended on it.



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