

Chapter 1

Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire, 1660

Marjorie skittered down the steep path, purposely descending too quickly to think. The specter of Dunnottar Castle felt heavy over her shoulder, looming in near ruin high atop Dunnottar Rock, a massive stone plinth that punched free of Scotland's northeastern coast like a gargantuan fist. Waves roiled and licked at its base far below. Chilled, she clambered even faster, skidding and galloping downhill, unsure whether she was fleeing closer to or farther from that grim mountain of rubble the MacAlpins called home.

She shook her head. She'd sworn not to think on it.

She'd done entirely too much thinking already. Much to her uncle's consternation, she'd chosen her gray mare, not his carriage, for her ride from Aberdeen. She'd realized too late that the daylong ride offered her altogether too much time to brood over what felt like a lifetime of missteps. And she hoped she wasn't about to make the grandest, most humiliating one of all.

She was going to see Cormac.

Whenever she'd thought of it—and she'd thought of

little else on her interminable ride—she'd turn her horse around and head straight back to home. But then those same thoughts of him would have her spinning that mare right around again, until her horse tossed its head, surly from the constant tugging and turning.

She reached the bottom of the hill, where the knotted grass turned rocky, its greens and browns giving way to the reds and grays of the pebbled shore. The beach curved like a thin scimitar around the bay, its far side concealed from view by the ragged hillocks and blades of rock that limned the shore as if the land only reluctantly surrendered to the sea.

Marjorie slid the leather slippers from her feet and set them carefully down. She wriggled her toes, leaning against the swell of land by her side. The pebbles blanketing the shore were large and rounded, and looked warmed by the late afternoon sun. She stepped forward, moving

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slowly now. The water between the stones was cold, but their smooth tops were not, and they sounded a soothing clack with each step.

She was close. She could feel it.

Cormac. *He* was close. Amid the gentle slapping of the waves and the sultry brine in the air, she sensed him.

She'd not needed to stop in at Dunnottar to ask his siblings where to find him. She and Cormac had known each other since birth, and Marjorie had spent every one of her twenty-three years feeling as though she were tied to him in some mysterious and inextricable way. Though they hadn't spoken in what felt like a lifetime, she'd spared not a penny nor her pride to glean word of him, writing to his sisters for news, aching for rare glimpses of him through the years.

She'd offered up the prayers of a wretched soul when he'd gone off to war, and then prayers of thanks when he returned home whole. And, God help her, the relief she felt knowing he'd never married. She couldn't have borne the thought of another woman in Cormac's arms.

No, Marjorie knew. Alone by the sea was exactly where she'd find him.

She screwed her face, shutting her eyes tight. There were many things she knew.

She knew that Cormac blamed her. To this day, he blamed her, just as she blamed herself for the foolish, girlish dare that had ripped Aidan from their lives. Because of her silliness, the MacAlpin family had lost a son and brother that day. And Marjorie had lost more still than that. She'd also lost Cormac.

She froze again. What was she thinking? She couldn't do this. She couldn't bear to see him.

But she couldn't bear not to.

The draw was too powerful to resist. Her feet stepped inexorably forward before her mind had a chance to stop them. She told herself she had no other choice. Events in her life had led her just there. She needed help, and Cormac was the only man with skills enough to come to

her aid.

The hillock at her side dropped away, revealing the far edge of the beach, revealing Cormac.

His shirtless back was to her, his *breacan feile* slapping at his legs in the wind. He was hauling in his nets. A fisherman now, as his sister had said. Hand over hand, the flex of muscle in his arms and back was visible even from a distance.

Gasping, Marjorie stumbled back a step, leaning into the rocks for support. She'd told herself she came because he could help her. But she knew in that instant the real reason she'd come. The only place for her in this treacherous world stood just there, down the beach: *Cormac*.

She'd willingly suffer his blame, suffer his indifference, yet still, like the embers from a long-banked fire, she knew Cormac would give her solace, despite himself.

She hadn't moved, hadn't spoken, but he turned, as though he'd felt her there. Her hand went to her chest, reminding her heart to beat, her lungs to draw breath.

He turned away abruptly, and tears stung her eyes. Would he spurn her?

But she saw he merely bent to gather his nets, dragging them farther up the shore where he carefully spread them out.

Relief flooded her. She scrubbed at her face, gathering herself, and tucked errant wisps of hair behind her ears. She knew it was purely a nervous gesture; the strong sea wind would only whip her curls free again.

She tempered herself. This meeting would not go well if she were this vulnerable from the start. But of course she was this vulnerable, she thought with a heavy heart, considering all that had recently come to pass.

She took a deep breath. He'd seen her. She couldn't go back now. She *wouldn't* go back—Cormac was the only one who could help her.

Marjorie picked her way toward him. He stood still as

granite, waiting for her, watching her. His dark hair blew in the wind, and his brow was furrowed. Was he upset to see her? Simply thoughtful?

Suddenly, she regretted the absence of her slippers. She loved the sensation of the smooth rocks beneath her feet, but now she felt somehow naked without her every stitch of clothing. She fisted her hands in her skirts. She imagined she'd always been a sort of naked before Cormac, and there was nothing that could ever truly conceal her. He was the only one who'd ever been able to read her soul laid bare in her eyes.

He was silent and still. What would he see in her eyes now?

She felt as though she'd forgotten how to walk. She made herself stand tall, focused on placing one foot in front of the other, but she felt awkward and ungainly, unbearably self-aware as she made her way to him. *Lift the foot, place it down, lift and down.*

He was not ten paces away. He was tall, but with a man's body now, broad with muscles carved from hauling nets, from firing guns. That last gave her pause. She spotted the fine sheen of scars on his forearm, a sliver of a scar on his brow. He'd been long at war. What kind of a man had he become?

Inhaling deeply, she let her eyes linger over his face. She was close enough to see the color of his eyes. Blue-gray, like the sea. Her heart sped. She forced herself to step closer.

She'd been unable to summon an exact picture of him in her thoughts, but now that he stood before her, his face was as familiar to her as her own. There was Cormac's strong, square jaw, the long fringe of dark lashes. But he was somehow foreign, too. The boy had become a man. A vague crook had appeared in his nose, and she wondered what long-ago break had put it there. Where had she been the moment it happened, what had she been doing while he'd been living his life?

She stopped an arm's length from him. Intensity radiated from him like the sun's glare off the sea.

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Her throat clenched. She couldn't do it. What had she been thinking?

He blamed her still. He didn't want to speak to her. He didn't welcome the sight of her.

The silence was shrill between them. She swallowed hard, wondering how best to get herself out of there, how to gracefully back out, never, ever to see him again.

For Davie. She had to do this for Davie. That thought alone kept her anchored in place.

Cormac opened his mouth to speak, and she held her breath.

"Ree," he whispered, in the voice of a man. "Aw, Ree, lass."

Her every muscle slackened. Her fear, her disquiet stripped away, leaving Marjorie raw before him. Hot tears came quickly, blurring her vision.

"Cormac," she gasped. "It's happened again."