

Chapter One

The Sound of Sleat

It wasn't that I disliked Rory Mòr MacLeod. What I felt was more akin to pure hatred. I watched as the boy my cousins and I had all called the wee terror of the glen skipped along the banks of the Sound of Sleat as if he owned them. My stomach turned. My father warned me not to mess with the MacLeod scum, and I knew his warning was not without cause. Rory was the favorite son of his father, and the MacLeod clan had been warring with my family forever. What's more, I had cause of my own, for the spoiled brat liked nothing better than to tear my skirts and pull at my braids.

He scampered along, driving an ancient, scrawny cow ahead of him. Rory held his head high, like a strutting peacock, all the while urging the decrepit beast on from the lush green pasture located a short distance from the shore. I had no time to spare for the black-haired, black-fingered, ill-mannered ruffian that he was, so I turned away, pretending I hadn't seen him, and carried on with my work.

"I see you, Bonnie MacDonald. 'Tis a fine day, is it not?"

"Aye, it was, before you came along, Rory Mòr MacLeod."

He paused, a cocky grin spread across his young face, and he leaned upon his staff and looked down at me. "Now that's no way for a lass to talk to a Highland clansman."

"Away with you, you gormless fool." I looked at the poor beast at his side, noting the sharp contours of her bony ribs. "I see that your betters have entrusted you with the pick of the MacLeod crop. It would be better to put that poor animal out of her misery, would it not? What are you thinking, driving such a wretched thing this far south and in this heat? 'Tis a wonder she doesn't die of old age before she makes it home."

He shrugged and watched as I continued to wash the wool in the sea. I kept my head down, hoping he would go away, afraid he would set on me as he had so often done before and make me cry. His silence made me uncomfortable.

"What are you doing so far from the safety of Dunvegan? These lands were taken from you long ago, you've no business here now."

He looked across the land to the distance peaks of the Red Cuillin. Swinging on his staff, he addressed me as if I were still a child.

"A traveler has the right of passage, whichever way his path takes him, does he not? If you must know, the cow is old, and belongs to a kinswoman who lives not too far from these parts. She bade me slaughter her, for she could not. I'm taking her to the market in Saaisag, as I'll get a fair price for her there. As you see there's not much meat on her bones, but she's added plenty of calves to my aunt's stock over the years; so don't judge her by how she looks now, Bonnie."

"It's not the cow I'm judging. What is your aunt thinking, living this far south, so far away from the protection of her kinsmen?"

"The MacDonald's have their people in the north, do they not? Or would you draw a line across the island and keep everyone in their proper place? Any road, if it were not for my childless aunt's love of me, you would like as never have had the good fortune to meet me. Many a summer she begged me play at her heels, to drive out the loneliness in her heart. I was glad of it. She's a fine woman, and I do whatever I can to ease her burdens, no matter how far beyond the castle wall she lives."

I looked up, my hands still in the cool water as I scrubbed the freshly cut fleece. There was a swagger about him I didn't like and I wished with all my heart he would go away and leave me to my business.

"Look, is there something you're wanting or are you going to make that wretched cow stand in the sun all day?"

"Ah, well, she'll be well enough, I'm thinking. I was wondering about your good cousin, Donald? He has been the talk of my clansmen of late."

My eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I can tell you he's not been asking after you. Why would he? Are you up to more of your treachery, Rory MacLeod? Do you and your clansmen have nothing better to do than continually plot against mine?"

"Oh, our business would be nothing to a wee sprite of a lass like you." He cocked his head to one side. "You look different. Your hair? You used to braid it."

"I'm not a little child anymore."

"No, Bonnie, I see that you're not."

In an instant I was self-conscious. I pulled the fleece out of the water and stretched it out

on the grass to dry. All the while I prayed he would go away. Whatever his words, if my father or cousin saw him here with me, we'd both be in for it. The MacLeod's were our enemy after all. I kept my head down, squeezing the excess water out of the wool, yet the obstinate ruffian just stood there, watching me.

I looked up. "Talking of my cousin, he said he might walk by this way. He could be here at any moment."

Rory stiffened in mock defiance. "Oh, he's going to claim my girl, I suppose? I shall have to fight him for you, to the death if need be."

I gave him the evil eye. "Your girl? Ha! If you're referring to me, you should get that nonsense out of your head. Who do you think you are, any road? Making such statements as you've no call to be making."

His shoulders slumped a little. "You're sweet on this Donald then?"

I rose to my feet and put my hands on my hips. "I never said I was, and I never said I wasn't. I'm not seeing how this is any business of yours. Now, get off to market and return to your fine castle at Dunvegan as soon as you can. And if its love you're looking for, I'm sure that old cow by your side has some life in her yet."

He laughed. "You've a wicked mind and a sharp tongue, Bonnie MacDonald."

I could see his eyes running the length of me, and his gaze made me uneasy. I decided to brave out my fears with words.

"There's no point you hanging about any longer. My kinsman Donald will run you though first, and ask questions later. If you want to reach your maturity then I suggest you scurry back to whatever hole you crawled out from."

Rory looked over my shoulder, as if the man himself would suddenly appear out of thin air behind me.

"I've no fear of the MacDonalds."

"Then tarry a while, so we can see the class of your sword arm. I must say Donald is adept with the claymore. But no doubt you've wielded a few weapons in your time. Either way, it will be a pleasant diversion, and then I can get back to washing these fleeces." I looked down at the half-finished pile at my feet, and Rory followed my gaze.

To give him his due, he didn't run away, as I thought he might. Instead, he laid his hand down on the old cow's rump as she chewed quietly at the grass. I was surprised by the gentleness

with which he stroked her, but was in no mood to pay him compliments.

"Well, I'll be seeing you, Mistress Bonnie MacDonald, have no fear."

I snorted. "I'll try not to."

I remained standing as he drove the cow on, and only when he was out of sight did my mind return to my work. Of the four fleeces I had set out to clean, I had only finished the one. Throughout the whole exchange my poor pony had stood quietly in the shade of a tree, occasionally drinking his fill from a stream beside him.

"Now what do you think to that?" I asked the tethered beast.

Barley paid no heed to me; instead he just pulled his head out of the cool stream and grazed on the grass at his feet.

"Much help you are," I chided. "Och, will you look at all this work! If I don't get them done my father will flay me."

I dropped to my knees and dragged the next fleece from the pile to the bay. Though well-respected members of the MacDonald clan, my late mother and I had the gift for cloth making, and our family were famed throughout Scotland for the quality of our yarn. But if I didn't get these fleeces washed and hanging before the heat of the day went, I'd be for it. So for the next hour I put my back into the task, cleaning out all the dirt and excrement matted into the fibers. I liked the work, for it gave me the chance to think and dream, something that I rarely had time for back at our little cottage set into the hillside. There were altogether too many chores to be done to allow peace and quiet in my day.

I had just thrown the last fleece over the branch of Barley's tree when I heard horse hooves approaching. I turned and, sure enough, my cousin, Donald MacDonald rode directly toward me. I smiled as he stopped beside my Barley, and he tipped his cap to me in greeting. He looked at the wool as it dried on the branch, shook his head, then dismounted.

"Good day to you, cousin," I said. I had rinsed the last of the wool off my hands and now dried it on the folds of my dress. "Have you come to check up on me?" I said it without malice, for I was happy to see him. Donald was a handsome young man, with blond hair and eyes that reflected the sea before him. As always I hid my calf-love eyes behind my sharp mouth. "I can more than take care of myself."

He ignored the bravado and moved to inspect the fleeces as they swayed on the light breeze. "Do I need a reason to visit my dear cousin, the most beautiful daughter of Skye?"

I rewarded his flattery with a smile. "No, dear Donald, you do not, though the same cannot be said for all."

He turned, those beautiful eyes narrowing, his warrior mind sensing a threat. "Someone else has been to see you?"

"Not just someone. It was Rory Mòr MacLeod himself, the wee terror of the glen, on his way to market from Dunvegan."

"He's a long way from home, then. What did he want from you?"

"Nothing more than to taunt me, as ever."

I walked to stand beside him. My first fleece had almost dried in the heat, so I lifted it off the branch and tossed it over Barley's back.

Donald clasped the hilt of his sword a little too tightly. "You must be watchful of such encounters, Bonnie. You're not a young girl anymore, and the MacLeods are not the kind to treat our kinsmen with respect."

"I have nothing to fear from that ruffian, Donald. I've known him all my life, for he was often in these parts as a child."

He put his hand on my shoulder, and I looked up, fighting the blush as it crept into my cheeks. "Rory MacLeod has come of age now. He's a man. He'll have a man's appetites." He took a lock of my hair in his hand and pinched it between his thumb and forefinger. "You need to be more careful, Bonnie."

He stooped low and, just for a moment, I thought he might kiss me. I held my breath and rose on my heels, leaning toward him, waiting for his lips to brush mine. But instead he just smiled and veered away. In an instant I felt awkward, clumsy, a little girl once more. I looked down to the floor, trying to collect my thoughts.

"I'll, er, I'll be more careful, I promise, cousin Donald."

He was already remounting his horse. "Come. I promised your father I would bring you back. Gather your work and follow me; there is a gathering of the clan this evening, and I don't intend to miss it."

There had been many gatherings of late. Tensions between the MacDonalds and the MacLeods had never been more fraught, and whispers of a fresh clan war were heavy on the air. As a woman it was not my place to comment, so I set about pulling the damp fleeces from the tree and tossing them onto Barley. Let the men make idle mischief; I had work to do. As soon as

I was done, I led my little pony by the bridle and walked as fast as I could behind Donald. We lived on the outskirts of a small village called Saaisag. My father's cottage was not very far from the shore, but we traveled at such a pace, and the late afternoon was so hot, I was short of breath when we got home.

My father was at the door, already looking out for me. He smiled as we approached, and the natural anxious set of his brow eased a little.

"Thank you, Donald. I was beginning to wonder what you two were about." He spoke jovially, though I knew him well enough to know there had been real anxiety behind his words. He always fretted after me when I was late returning home.

"Och, wist, your daughter is safe with me, James, as well you know. If there was anything to fear, it was from the MacLeod boy. It seemed he stopped by to taunt her."

"Rory MacLeod?"

"The very same."

"What business had he here in the south?"

My father looked me up and down appraisingly, as if looking for some injury. While the men had been greeting, I had started to hang the fleeces over a bar made specifically for this purpose. I looked fixedly into my father's eyes, hoping my boldness would reassure him.

"T'was nothing, Father. He was just passing by and stopped to talk for a while. I can handle the likes of Rory MacLeod, have no fear."

"But I do fear, child. You're not a wee lass anymore."

"So everyone keeps reminding me today. Now if you're done with your blathering, I have my work to attend to as well as a dinner to get on the table. I'll leave you two men to talk your nonsense."

Donald had climbed off his horse and was now standing just a few feet away from me. As I pushed past him he gave me a broad grin.

"There's a wicked tongue on that daughter of yours, James. She'll lead a husband a merry dance, I've no doubt of it."

"Aye. Her mother was the same, God rest her soul." It was said with affection, and when I knew Donald wasn't looking I shot my father a mischievous smile. He stood to one side and ushered Donald into the cottage. "Will you stay and sup with us, Donald? She's a fair cook, in spite of that sharp little tongue."

Donald was a tall man, and he had to bend down to pass through the doorway. I quickly finished what I was doing and followed them inside. The cold stone walls of the cottage made it cooler inside than out, but I left the door open to allow fresh air to pass through.

Both men were already seated at the table, so I went over to the fire and spooned them both a bowl of the venison stew I had cooked earlier.

"Ah, it smells divine, Bonnie. My stomach has been lathering since we crossed into the dale. But just a small bowl for me. We men have much to discuss, and I find too much food addles a man's mind. I want to keep my wits about me for this gathering."

I looked into his wooden bowl, already filled to the brim. I set it down before him and straightened my back.

"You'll take what I give you and be thankful, Donald MacDonald!"

"Mind your manners, child," said my father.

I rolled my eyes and served my father, though did not say another word. Instead, I set about fixing my own supper, and was soon sitting beside them at the table.

"Do you think this business with the MacLeod's will ever be settled?"

My father looked to Donald, who was his clan superior, for an answer. Donald put down his spoon and looked at me thoughtfully.

"Perhaps. Though the clans have been at each other's throats for so long I can scarce remember how it all began. You, James?"

"Nay, we've been warring for a hundred years and more. Like most battles, whatever the true cause, in the end it's about power and land, mark my words. Why, the MacLeods built even our stronghold at Knock Castle. But we took it from them more than a hundred years ago, so you can be sure the fighting started long before then."

I pushed my bowl away, not hungry. "Well I think it's stupid. Nothing ever comes of it, save a line of fine corpses in lieu of our strong Highland men. I say 'tis nothing but a pity and a lot of foolishness."

"Aye, well, those are the words of a woman, and I'd expect nothing different. While we do the warring, you do the weeping. That is and always shall be the way of it."

Donald's words irked me, but to argue would be futile, so instead I rose from the table and made myself busy cleaning my plate. The men would have it their way, whatever I said to the contrary.

In a few minutes, both kinsmen had taken their fill, and the scraping of chairs on my stone floor heralded their imminent departure. In spite of my words, I was sorry to see them go, and moved to the open door, ready to see them safely off. I kissed my father cordially on the cheek, and as Donald passed through, I reached up to do the same. He accepted my embrace cordially, but passed me by more quickly than I had hoped he would. My heart sank, though my smile remained fixed on my face.

"Have a care, the both of you," I said. "And try not to get carried away by any foolishness."

"We are both men of honor, Bonnie," said my father. "And will do whatever needs to be done. But have no fear, my sweet child. Neither Donald or myself will do anything rash."

With that assurance, the two men mounted their horses, and I watched as they rode slowly away toward the MacDonald stronghold of Knock Castle, where the gathering was to take place. I would not see them again that day, and possibly not the next, so I looked at a casket beside the door, which contained other washed and dried fleeces. As always, I had work to do. So while the men went off to talk of war, I pulled a fresh fleece from the barrel, and took it inside to my spindle. As I settled down for the evening, I thought of Donald MacDonald's crystal blue eyes, and was soon lost in pleasant thoughts of how it would be if he kissed me.