

CHAPTER

1

MACDUFF'S RUN
SCOTLAND

“Where is she?” MacDuff asked impatiently. “I told you that she wasn’t to leave the castle without an escort, Fergus. Yet this is the third time this month that Jane MacGuire has slipped away from you.”

“It was the fog,” Fergus said quickly. “It was heavy this morning and the guards didn’t see her go out the gates. She didn’t stop to eat breakfast. She probably just took her sketchbook and went up to the hills to do some sketching.”

“And no maids or guards saw fit to question why it’s almost noon and no one has seen her yet?” MacDuff asked caustically. “I made a promise, and I don’t like the thought of breaking it. Do you understand?”

“Of course, my lord,” Fergus said. “I take full responsibility. Everyone was on alert, and I should have double-checked that Ms. MacGuire realized we didn’t want to interfere with her personal freedom.” He gestured to the courtyard that was still almost totally lost in fog. “Only watch for possible accidents.”

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He added gravely, “I didn’t believe I had the right to speak to her in those terms. Perhaps it would be better if you explained that to her?”

“Or perhaps I should place a call to Seth Caleb and let you explain to him why you didn’t take better care of her?” His voice was low and silky. “Yes, that might be a better way to handle it.”

“No, it wouldn’t.” They still couldn’t see Jane, but MacDuff could recognize her voice somewhere on the other side of the fountain. “Stop trying to intimidate him, MacDuff. We both know it’s my fault.” She was crossing the courtyard toward the steps. She was wearing a brown leather jacket over taupe suede pants and carrying a sketch portfolio over her shoulder. She smiled at Fergus as she climbed the steps toward them. “Sorry, Fergus. I thought I’d be back an hour before this. I got . . . involved. When I woke and saw the fog, I knew I wasn’t going to want company.”

“That’s quite all right,” Fergus smiled back at her. “But I’d appreciate seeing what involved you if I was going to suffer for it. Will you show it to me?”

She nodded. “Tomorrow. But you weren’t going to suffer. MacDuff was bluffing.”

“Don’t be too sure,” MacDuff said dryly. “I wasn’t going to be the one to take the brunt of Caleb’s irritation when he found out you’d disappeared for half the day.” He gestured for Fergus to leave. “But she’s right, it’s her fault, so we’ll let her handle Caleb.” He turned back to Jane. “Since you’re the only one who appears to be able to do it. You didn’t have breakfast? Would you care for tea and biscuits?”

She nodded. “I’m starved.” She followed him into the library. “And I really am sorry I caused a ruckus. I’ve just been

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surrounded by people ever since I got here, and I needed some alone time.”

“I might be persuaded to forgive you,” MacDuff said as he gestured to a seat on the couch. “As long as I get a glimpse of that sketch before you show it to Fergus. I refuse to be in second place. It must have been a masterstroke of inspiration that sent you out into the fog.” He buzzed for the housekeeper. “Was it worth it?”

“It was for me.” She leaned back on the cushions. “But I don’t know if it will be worthwhile to anyone else. We all have our own values.”

“Well, there’s evidently an entire art world that embraces your values,” MacDuff said. “I had to take out a loan to pay for that landscape I bought at your last gallery exhibit.”

“Bullshit.” Jane grinned. “Poor MacDuff. Remember, I was the one who went with you to the Royal Bank of Scotland when you deposited that family treasure. I believe you can afford to buy a few of my humble offerings.”

“Perhaps.” He watched her take the cup of tea the housekeeper served her. “But keeping it to a few is the problem. Every time you come for a visit you paint several ‘offerings’ that I want to buy.” He made a face. “And sometimes you won’t let me buy them. Not fair, Jane.”

“Very fair,” Jane said. “I’ve always loved MacDuff’s Run. I have a right to keep the ones that I have a particular fondness for.”

“And MacDuff’s Run has always loved you,” MacDuff said. “Did I tell you that Caleb tried to buy the portrait of Fiona again before he flew out after dropping you here? He never gives up.”

“Why should that surprise you? It’s always been difficult for

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Caleb to keep from taking whatever he wants. It's just been a matter of selection." Jane took a sip of her tea. "He's Seth Caleb and even MI6 comes knocking on his door when he lets them know he's available."

"Do I detect a little bitterness?" MacDuff's gaze narrowed on her face. "Was there some reason he brought you here rather than taking you to his house near Sky Island?"

"No bitterness. He felt safer about leaving me here with you." She smiled crookedly. "Because he knew he'd have someone to blame if anything happened to me. As evidenced by your totally unreasonable response to poor Fergus today."

MacDuff frowned. "Fergus should have known where you were. I gave him his orders when you walked through that door this time."

"As dictated by you and Caleb." She nibbled on a bun. "I told you, I didn't want to have company today. I've put up with having your very efficient employees trailing me around since I got here. I'll try to keep doing it until it's time for me to leave. But don't push it, MacDuff. I always enjoy being here with you, but I won't feel like a prisoner."

"Tell that to Caleb," MacDuff said bluntly. "You know that he has enemies galore who would like nothing better than to bring you down. Caleb has a target on his back whenever he's given an assignment. He's a unique weapon, and if they can't get to him, you'll do fine. It's happened before, it could happen again."

"I can take care of myself. What with Joe, Eve, and Caleb, I'm very well trained. You know that, MacDuff."

"Then why did he send you to me?"

"Could it be because you're an earl, you're a war hero, and you have Parliament at your beck and call? Those are

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pretty impressive credentials.” She grinned. “And I let him send me because I was feeling guilty. I’d asked him not to accept any assignments while Eve and Joe were going to be tied up with keeping their son, Michael, safe. They trust Caleb and their lives had become awkward, even dangerous, and they were really grateful to have him there as a safeguard.” She lifted her shoulders in a half shrug. “But now that they’re heading back to their lake cottage in Atlanta, there’s no reason for Caleb to refuse any more assignments. So, I told him I needed to work and to go away and not bother me.”

“And he immediately obeyed you?” He shook his head. “I don’t think so. The last time I saw you together he couldn’t let you out of his sight.” He was studying her face. “And you were thinking about marriage. What happened?”

“Life got in the way,” she said. “We had to delay quite a few things. But so did the entire world. We’ll get around to it.”

“Will you?” MacDuff asked. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

“Maybe I’ve changed.”

“Not that much. You’ve always been stubborn as a mule once you’ve made up your mind. And I tried, but I couldn’t change your mind about Caleb. All that passion . . .” MacDuff smiled. “He almost had you hypnotized. I believe I’ll have to study the situation. There has to be a reason. What did he do to you?”

“Nothing.” She finished her tea and set the cup in the saucer. “Caleb is almost perfect. I couldn’t be happier with our arrangement. Stop probing, MacDuff.”

“It’s my nature.” His eyes were twinkling. “And you calling Caleb almost perfect really annoys me. I prefer to be the only person given that designation. Particularly since I don’t like the

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tendency he has to order me around when everyone knows I'm far superior."

"I can see the problem," she said gravely. "But you'll have to take it up with Caleb."

"Sometimes that's difficult. Where did MI6 send him this time?"

"Somewhere near the Congo I believe. I really don't know. He doesn't discuss his business unless it directly concerns me."

"Until then you just sit and wait meekly for him to come back to you?"

"No, it depends how much it concerns me." Her lips were twitching. "I might go after him. After all, one doesn't let a man that close to perfection just wander off. There aren't that many around."

MacDuff flinched. "Wicked."

She chuckled. "You deserved it. Any other questions?"

He nodded at her leather art portfolio. "When am I going to get to see the new sketch?"

"Now." She unfastened the latch and pulled out her sketchbook. "But you might not even like it. It's different from what I usually do. It just seemed...right. I looked out at the fog in the courtyard this morning and something seemed to be waiting for me there..."

MacDuff's brows lifted. "Something?"

She shrugged. "*She* was waiting for me."

"Interesting." He added as he opened the sketchbook, "And familiar..." His expression remained impassive as he studied the black-and-white sketch of the little girl sitting on the bank of a creek. Her curly hair was tousled, and her face was full of wonder and excitement. "Charming. How old?"

"Six. Seven," Jane said. "How do I know? It's not as if

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I've ever seen her before. I was settling myself down by the creek and idly starting to sketch the trees when her face just appeared on the pad. The sketch was pure imagination. Which isn't at all unusual as far as I'm concerned. Sometimes it just happens." She frowned. "Though she looked familiar to me, too. I thought I might have seen her here at the Run. Do you recognize her? Does she live in the village?"

"Not as far as I know. I'll ask Fergus," he added absently as he studied the sketch. "Very familiar... maybe if I study it a little longer." He suddenly looked up at her. "And I do like the sketch. Will you let me buy it?"

"What?" She gazed at him incredulously. "Just because she looks familiar?"

"Why not?" He smiled recklessly. "You can't have any special attachment for it since it literally appeared out of the fog for you. I won't cheat you. You'll get your usual fee and I'll get a genuine MacGuire." He winked. "That was created on my property and might even be the child of one of my employees."

She stared at him uncertainly. "Or might not. If she is, it would only be a reason for me to offer the sketch to her parents. It would mean something to them."

He made a face. "Are you making this a bidding war? With anyone else I could have relied on pure selfishness. You've always been a great disappointment to me."

"Money isn't everything. Stop pretending that you think it is." She was studying the sketch again. "She's very young, and maybe her parents are also young. They might not have an opportunity to get a painting of her at this age again." She brushed her index finger over the child's cheek. "I believe I'll call the sketch the *Mist Child*. She looks like she was

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touched by the mist, and it's still clinging to her hair. She's so . . . alive."

He sighed. "And I've lost out on buying the sketch unless I can prove she's only your imagination and not one of my employees' progeny?"

"I'd consider it," Jane said. "But I've spent too many years watching Eve try to bring children home to their parents with her reconstructions to treat that search with anything but respect." She smiled. "I'd welcome the kid being my imagination. That can be magical to an artist, too. So why don't you ask Fergus, and you might get lucky." She took the camera out of her art bag, shot a few photos of the sketch, and texted them to MacDuff. "But you'll have to show him the photos. I'm taking the sketch upstairs to my room to work on a little more. Okay?"

"Okay," he said. "As if I have a choice. I don't blame you for not wanting to let her go. After I talk to Fergus, I'll call you and let you know if you're going to be rich or philanthropic." He gave a last look at the sketch. "She does look like the mist is clinging to her . . ."

Jane put the sketchbook in her case. "It has potential. Maybe I'll decide to finish it." She headed for the arched doorway. "It isn't often that a subject appears out of the blue to an artist with such precise detail. It's like being given a gift."

"Not precise detail," he said. "It's a black-and-white sketch. Lack of color always has limits. The eyes are dark, but so is that riot of curly hair the kid has. Is that how you saw it?"

"Maybe." She grinned back at him. "Or maybe not. I wasn't seeing much. I was only getting down whatever I could, as fast as I could, while I still had the fever. I'll take a look at it later. Or perhaps you can ask Fergus if he's seen the kid around the village."

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"I'll do that." He tilted his head. "Because it doesn't seem quite right to me."

"Now you're an art critic?"

"I know what I like." He was looking down at his photo. "And that usually satisfies me. So does this sketch. There's just something a little . . . off." He waved her out of the library. "Go finish the sketch. I'll see you at lunch. Maybe one of us will come up with an answer before that."

"Yes, my lord," she said solemnly. "Whatever you say. But I should remind you that I usually rely on my own answers when it comes to either my work or my personal affairs."

"That doesn't mean they're always correct," MacDuff said with a catlike smile. "I might trust your vision about your work. But what about Seth Caleb? There aren't many people who'd argue that he's not a threat."

"Except me," she said coolly. "And threat or not, we both know there's no one you'd rather have in your corner than Caleb if the going got rough. So drop it, MacDuff. See you at lunch." She closed the door behind her and headed for the grand staircase.

She wasn't really annoyed with MacDuff, Jane thought resignedly. They'd known each other far too long. Most of the time the barbed interplay between him and Caleb even amused her. MacDuff was everything a laird should be with his tall, well-muscled body and the intelligence that shone out of those keen gray-blue eyes. But that intelligence could be deliberately obstructive when he decided to exert the half-mischievous, half-mocking side of his character. Or perhaps it was just that

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she'd been aware from the moment she'd opened her eyes this morning that she hadn't seen or spoken to Caleb for the last two weeks, and it hurt more than usual. He'd told her that might be the case before he'd left, and it wasn't as if she wasn't accustomed to the demands MI6 and other agencies and world organizations periodically made on Caleb. Because he was totally unique, they called on him when there was a dictator to erase, a rogue government that needed taking down, a brilliant scientist to be extracted, or any other complicated situation that no one else could handle. And it wasn't as if he even accepted every assignment. As she'd told MacDuff, just recently he'd spent months with Jane guarding her family. He and Jane both had their own careers, and she was being unfair to ask any more of him. All he asked of her when he was on one of those damn assignments was that she let him make arrangements so that he'd know she was safe. Like this stay at MacDuff's Run, where she had MacDuff and his guards keeping a constant eye on her, she thought ruefully. But she hadn't kept that promise to Caleb today; from the moment she'd opened her eyes this morning she'd felt lonely and on edge and wanted desperately to see Caleb, touch him, be with him. It had been an emotion that she couldn't deny, so she'd played truant and gone out into the fog to try to forget everything but her own work. An action that had gotten poor Fergus in trouble, she thought guiltily. She'd have to make it up to him. Though it wasn't as if she couldn't take care of herself. She'd been raised by Joe Quinn, and her adopted father was not only a detective but a former Navy SEAL, and he had taught her well. She'd even taken her pistol with her this morning for additional protection.

And she was making excuses, she realized. Caleb had asked a favor and she'd made a promise. She didn't know why

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she'd been impatient enough to break that promise today. It was immature, not like her, and yet that impatience had been growing steadily for the last week she'd been here.

Forget it. She'd just be sure that it wouldn't happen again. Though she knew that she'd have to confess to him that she'd broken her word. Honesty was essential in their relationship. There were already too many hazards to overcome without risking another one.

Hazard. She felt a chill. Why had that word occurred to her? There had been no real threat to her today. She had felt perfectly safe. And certainly, she had not been worried about Caleb. The entire world knew what a badass he was.

But that didn't mean that he couldn't be touched. That might be why she had woken this morning with that sense of panic.

Steady. Only imagination. She started up the steps. She'd go upstairs to her room and finish her sketch. Then she'd go down for lunch and talk with MacDuff and perhaps Fergus. By that time, she'd be calm, and this foolish case of nerves would have vanished.

And maybe in a day or two she'd hear from Caleb, and he'd tell her when he'd be coming back...

SAVGARD AIRPORT CONGO

Caleb's phone was ringing.

Gavin Jennings.

He'd better take it. "You got my message about Zeller? Just

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get the hell out of there. I can't talk now. I'm going to check out the airport. I'll get back to you when I reach Rome."

"*If* you reach Rome," Jennings said sourly. "If you even get out of that hellhole before they cut your bloody head off like they did Zeller's. We all have to get the hell out of here. And you can't use the airport. I've heard it's been compromised. They have to know about you, dammit."

"I figured that out," Caleb said dryly. "I found Zeller's body and it wasn't pretty. They had a good time with him before they beheaded him. He would have told them anything they wanted to know." He paused. "But I was hoping that you'd just get out when I notified you. There was a chance that Zeller wouldn't have told Hugh Bohdan about anyone but me. You and Pasternak were part of his basic MI6 team. You were like brothers. He would have tried to save you."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Jennings said roughly. "All three of us had our orders to keep you alive until you took down General Rozkor. After you accomplished your mission naturally Zeller would have wanted to protect you."

"You're thinking of him only as a professional," Caleb said. "But I knew from the moment I met him that I'd have to probe deeper. It was clear people and relationships meant too much to Zeller. When a man is suffering torture, his motivation has to go beyond any mission or paycheck. He would have been loyal to me, devoted to his job, but he would have died for either of you. I was hoping you'd get out of Savgard airspace before Bohdan tied Zeller to you."

"Well, I didn't," Jennings said curtly. "I had to do my job. Just like you did yours. I noticed you took out Bohdan's four bodyguards outside the warehouse even before you eliminated

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the general. Nice job. Though it doesn't make up for what happened to Zeller."

"Stop talking and start moving. I told you to get out of the country."

"Pasternak and I are on the run. I just wanted to warn you not to head for the airport. The whole town is in an uproar. We'll pick you up and take you over the border."

"Too late," Caleb said impatiently. "No one is supposed to know I have anything to do with eliminating the general. I'm not going to be seen with you. I'll avoid the airport and get myself over the border."

"You know Bohdan has you on his hit list," Jennings said. "The crazy bastard will have everyone from his own men to Isis searching for you."

"Then I suggest you get your director at MI6 to send you far away to some deserted island so that they won't find you until I get rid of Bohdan. As soon as I reach Rome, I'll notify your chief I told you to go undercover."

"Yeah, sure." Jennings paused. "You mean it?"

"I mean it," he said flatly. "You won't hear from me after I hang up, but that might not help with Bohdan. He was the general's second in command, and he was lusting to take over the entire business. Now that I've eliminated his competition, he'll think he has to prove himself all over again. He'll be on the hunt, and he'll track you down because you'll be one of his only leads to me. The stakes on this job were too enormous. Bohdan bragged that no one could take down the general as long as he was in charge of his mercenaries. You know he was damn good at that. Any threat and they ended up like Zeller. That's why he has to make an example of me." His lips twisted. "So if Zeller also told him about you, then you'll be on his list,

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too. He'll be going after you. If you're stupid enough to stick around and try to obey orders and do your duty to save me, you'll be disappointed. Just get out of here. I don't need you. You'll be in my way." He paused. "Take care of yourself."

"We will. Who needs you? I'll report back to the director that you completed your mission when I get back to London."

"Send him a text from that desert island I mentioned. Good luck, Jennings." He cut the connection and took off through the woods in the opposite direction from the airport. It would take him about thirty minutes to reach Kelly's cabin, where he could steal a vehicle that he could use to get to the border. Unless the borders had already been closed, then he'd find another way. There was always another route if one failed. But it might be close, and he had to be very sure to cover his bases. Bohdan was the crazy bastard Jennings had called him, and he knew that the hunt would already be on. He'd prefer not to be cornered here where Bohdan had a virtual army to call on. Better to set up the conflict on his own turf.

But first make sure both his valuable assets and that turf were absolutely protected.

He reached for his phone and quickly dialed.

"Speak of the devil," MacDuff said when he answered the call. "I was just talking about you earlier today with Jane. But it's really not too interesting having discussions about you with her. She persists in defending you whether or not she really believes you're innocent of all the things we've all heard about you. Perhaps she feels sorry for you? What do you think?"

"I think that emotion doesn't enter into our relationship, and you're trying to find a way to annoy me," Caleb said. "How is she?"

"Well, she started a new sketch that I'm trying to buy from

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her. It's extraordinary. Different... Why don't you ask her yourself how she is?"

"I will. I just wanted to make sure that you hadn't bored her so badly she'd decided to run back to London."

"She's never bored here. She *belongs* here."

"That's what you've kept telling her since you first met her, when you showed her that portrait of Fiona. She does love it at MacDuff's Run, but she belongs where she wants to belong. And it's always been with Eve and Joe. Not with me, not with you. So stop pushing her, MacDuff. I don't want her bolting on you."

MacDuff was silent. "Bolting? Is that why you called me?" He paused. "I wonder why. Is there something wrong?"

"Possibly. Not at the moment, but I thought it wouldn't hurt to check if there are any signs of disturbance on the horizon."

MacDuff muttered a curse. "And warn me that you didn't want Jane to go on the run? What the hell are you up to, Caleb?"

"Letting you take care of Jane when I should be the one to do it," Caleb said roughly. "It's safer for her if I don't go anywhere near her for the time being. Though I was hoping that I'd have this problem completely eliminated before it would have a chance of touching her."

"What problem?" MacDuff asked. "And, dammit, she'll *know* about it. We both know that Jane has instincts that are super sharp. Why is it safer for her?"

Caleb paused. "Because MI6 convinced me that I should rid the world of General Niko Rozkor before he could give the orders to have his mercenaries butcher the opposition party in Savgard who have been trying to boot him out of power. He

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couldn't be touched by the courts or local government. They were all on his payroll."

"I've heard of the bastard. And you did it?"

"Yes, how could I resist? It was a challenge. I have a dislike for butchers. He'd set himself up as dictator and has already had Bohdan, his second in command, start drafting the young boys in the village to serve in his army. I agreed with MI6 that it was time to put a stop to it."

"But you still think they'll be coming after you?"

"Probably. Bohdan is a narcissistic bastard and I made him look bad. I didn't have the chance to take him out at the same time I went after the general. But he's not stupid, and I don't want to take any chances that he might find out about Jane and zero in on her instead. I'll get MI6 to keep an eye on your property and she should be perfectly safe there with you, but it wouldn't hurt if you arranged for additional security."

"Of course," MacDuff said curtly. "I won't let anything happen to her. But if you're calling on MI6, you're more worried than I thought." He paused. "And I can't believe you're leaving this entirely in my hands."

"I didn't say that. I only said it was better if I wasn't seen anywhere near her. I don't want anyone to believe she has any importance to me."

"Then you definitely shouldn't be seen with her," MacDuff said sourly. "You're fairly transparent."

"Am I? That's not the usual impression I give. Perhaps only to old and perceptive friends. I have to hang up now. Goodbye, MacDuff."

"What do you want me to tell Jane?"

"Nothing. I'll talk to her myself. I'm just in a bit of a hurry right now."

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“I can imagine,” he said flatly. “Are you going to tell her the truth?”

“Of course.” His voice was slightly mocking. “I always tell her the truth. No matter how difficult. I learned a long time ago that would be the only way I have any chance of keeping her. There are too many people like you ready to give her advice about sending me on my way.”

“Wise people.”

“Undoubtedly. And someday she might agree, but I’ll fight it as long as I can.” He cut the connection.