

CHAPTER TWO

April 1st, 1605—One month earlier.

Duncan had ridden north out of Glasgow with Sean, Gilbert, and nine others. They would make the seven-hour trek toward Taymouth Castle, the palatial home and Campbell stronghold on Loch Tay. A warm, spring-like day spread out before them. Duncan he had uncovered information in Glasgow. Now he turned it over in his mind. He knew that as he negotiated terms with Colin Campbell, the Duke of Argyll he would need every bit of cleverness and cunning to win the Duke's approval. As Duncan rode past thatched cottages, each with its own little garden filled with spikes of new greenery, he calculated the losses the Gordons had suffered over the last several years and frowned at the waste of it all. Most of those losses came from Campbell's aggression.

"'Tis time, Sean," Duncan said, flexing the fingers of his right hand as he held the reins in his left. "These raids. The petty skirmishes. They're sucking the life out of our clan. The challenge now is to convince the Duke he can't afford to keep fighting us."

Sean was a few years older than Duncan, but his gangly limbs and an ever-present look of surprise made him seem younger. His skinny neck revealed a bobbing Adam's apple each time he spoke. The only visible muscle Sean possessed on his body was the well-defined sinew of his bowman's arms. "Aye, but how do ya' know Colin will abide by a truce even if he signs?"

Duncan sat atop Jacob. His long dark hair shone in the sun with the same glossy texture that rippled off the coat of his horse. "He'll deal, I imagine. Colin's always been greedy and now, well . . ." Duncan nodded back toward Glasgow. "My sources tell me he needs funds badly."

"Surely not Campbell?" Sean's brow creased in a look of doubt. "His holdings are greater than your own and he continually steals what he can from the MacDonalds, Lamonts, and us."

"Aye, but Colin's been reckless," Duncan said. "My agents tell me he's lost three ships this year. He put out one from Glasgow to Norway. It was successful, and thinking the money was easy, he bought and sent three more. Two were pirated and sunk, while the last hit a storm two days out. Already this year he's secured four ships with full cargoes. He thought he would start his own version of the East India Company, but just like those ships his plan rests at the bottom of the sea."

Sean shook his head. "Serves the fool right."

Duncan scanned the hills rolling like a blanket of green velvet toward the distant peaks of Ben Lomond, Ben Led, and Ben Venue. Three scouts fanned out in front of them. Turning back, he noted the remaining seven riders in their party. "I believe Colin will be friendly today."

Duncan had returned to Scotland from France one year ago only to find his king gone off to live in London, leaving the Gordons embroiled in battles with the powerful Campbell clan. While Duncan had been away seeing to his education, both of his parents had died. He inherited Cairn Castle and the responsibilities of overseeing his estate. King James, realizing the value of a highland ally, granted Duncan valuable charters, which Colin coveted.

Duncan shared another complex relationship with the Campbells. Before leaving for London, the king divided the office of sheriff of the highlands between Malcolm Gordon, Duncan's cousin, and Colin. The Gordons patrolled the north, while the Campbells kept order in the south-central lands. Despite, or perhaps because of, their shared duties as protectors of the highlands, the two families frequently found themselves on opposite ends of fatal clashes.

To compound matters, the Campbells were Protestant while the Gordons held fast to their Catholic faith. Colin Campbell had ties to the Presbyterian Kirk. The strong covenant movement, which had come about with the Reformation almost a century earlier, bolstered the Duke's strength. Martin Luther, the German monk who married a nun, started a spiritual rebellion. Duncan had to agree with the precept of "justification by faith alone," but how ironic to have power shift. Catholicism had come under the hammer of the Protestants who could dole out cruelties in the name of God just as savagely as the feared papacy. People were burned at the stake, beheaded, and imprisoned for not denouncing the Church of Rome. Scotland's fair Queen Mary suffered. Her religion as well as a claim to the English throne served to alienate her cousin, Elizabeth, Queen of

England, a Protestant. And Elizabeth put her fears to rest by beheading Mary in 1587.

The same year Duncan was born.

He realized that if the Gordons and Campbells could not put aside their religious differences they would never find peace. King James showed tolerance toward the Catholics but wealthy Protestants held the power. Duncan initiated a meeting with Colin and other Protestant families in Scotland soon after his return from France, but it wasn't until now that he had won an audience with the wily Duke. He understood the risks involved. He could be set up and killed. But if a truce were made, then the costly raids, cattle rustling, and senseless bloodshed might come to an end.

The heat of the day beat down upon his small group of soldiers as they rode toward the sprawling estate of Taymouth Castle. Loch Tay snaked through the countryside with the mighty Ben Lawers hulking over its western shores. As far as the eye could see bowed-limbed willows swayed in the breeze along the banks of the loch. Orchards with flowering apple and peach trees rose up along the hills in front of them, while rich barley fields lay in the distance. Duncan immediately thought of France and the estates he had visited there.

Before they could stop at the entrance of Taymouth, a sentry cried out, "Halt! Name yourself!"

Duncan's voice boomed, "'Tis the Lord of Cairn, Duncan Gordon. I've an invitation from the Duke." The thick iron and wood gate popped and creaked as guards pulled levers and ropes to open it. Just past the gate Duncan and his men were stopped by another armed guard. "Beg pardon, sir. We need to see the Duke's seal on your

invitation." Duncan produced the parchment and the guard seemed satisfied. "Go along this path. You'll find someone at the main house who'll care for your horses."

Duncan nodded and urged his mount forward around a corner wall. He stopped short, reining Jacob to a halt. Sean muttered something under his breath. Duncan guessed the road to the main keep to be close to a quarter of a mile long. The central structure looked large even at a distance. As they rode closer, Duncan began to understand the meaning of excess. Crystal blue skies and white billowing clouds set an appropriate backdrop for the glittering splendor of Taymouth Castle. The sweet scent of winter roses drifted from the ornamental gardens lining the lane.

As they drew nearer, its proportions became clear. The castle had been built out of white ashlar stone. It shone like a gem in the bright noonday sun. The main keep consisted of a large rectangular, six-storied building. Attached to the main house stood four-storied east and west wings. Extending forward from each wing were long, two-story buildings. An intricate stone-carved balcony graced the second floor of the west wing, but the east wing ended in a circular green house with a high glass ceiling that reflected the sun's rays. The main keep and the east and west wings surrounded a courtyard covered with clipped lawns, fragrant gardens, and hedges trimmed into exotic animal shapes.

They dismounted and several grooms immediately took their horses. Colin's estate manager stood on the front steps staring down his nose at the disheveled highlanders. His name was Keith Gray and he was thin with shoulders too close together that slumped inward, making his body appear no wider than his neck and head. His fine hair hung limply from his brow over beady eyes. He stood for a moment, staring open mouthed,

studying Duncan. "Lord Duncan, my name is Keith Gray," he finally said. "While your men are in the outside apartments I hope you will be comfortable in the main house with the rest of Colin's guests. A special room has been made up for you."

Duncan nodded approval. "Very well, Master Gray."

The estate manager cleared his throat, rocking onto his tiptoes and then settling back on his heels. Duncan stared, saying nothing. Gray fidgeted. "I hope you don't mind, Lord Gordon, but I have to report immediately to the Duke. Miss Kathy will show you to your quarters so that you can freshen up." He jerked his head toward a young girl who stood looking down at her feet.

Duncan thought it odd to have a young girl show him to his room but didn't question the man. He did notice Gray's nervous twitches. "I don't mind at all. 'Tis a pleasure to have the lass show me to my room." Gray harumphed and considered the air as if a foul smell had drifted to his nostrils, then turned on his heels. Duncan watched him for a moment, thinking the man squirmed as if he couldn't wait to tell a great secret.

Duncan turned to the girl whose wide brown eyes searched his own. Sheepishly, she said, "Please follow me, ma' lord."

She glided through the cavernous entrance hall, taking quick looks over her shoulder to make sure Duncan followed. A long tawny braid hung down her back to the curve of her slim hips. They climbed a wide stone staircase to the third floor where portraits of Campbell ancestors looked down upon them. Kathy opened an intricately carved wooden door into a room splashed with sunlight. She moved around the spacious suite, her small voice squeaking as she announced where he could place his clothes, wash himself, and take care of other necessary tasks. Her doleful brown eyes filled Duncan

with an unexpected sense of tenderness. This young lass reminded him of Anne, the quiet, pretty maid at Cairn. But Anne was probably a few years older.

"The Duke is out walking in the garden and would be most pleased to have your company if you're not too tired from the journey."

Duncan replied in a relaxed, friendly tone, "Thank you, Kathy. Tell the Duke that I'll meet him shortly. First I must change my traveling clothes. I'm afraid I'm none too presentable."

He noticed how the girl began backing away towards the door. Perhaps his size intimidated her. To put her at ease he stepped back, and turned to look around the room as if to check on the amenities.

In a rush she said, "Sir. I'll inform my lord that you'll join him later." She curtsied and turned to leave.

"Kathy." She stopped short, then looked around with expectant eyes. "Thank you," he said softly.

Duncan could see her exhale. She must have thought he wanted something else. He watched her go, suspecting this girl had been ill-used.

Duncan dusted the trail dirt from his clothes, then became aware of his own odor. He stripped to nothing, walked to the fine porcelain washbasin, poured out enough water to splash his face and arms, then proceeded to cleanse the grime from his body. From his leather satchel he took a crisp white shirt and pulled it on. Then he expertly kilted a green and gold plaid over a heavy leather belt and pulled both around his waist. He slipped on black knee hose and soft leather shoes. It had been sometime since he had actually paid attention to his hair so with trepidation Duncan ran his fingers through the tangled mass.

Usually one of the chambermaids at Cairn would wash and comb it for him, which he thoroughly enjoyed. He shrugged as he looked at his image in the mirror. Stubble covered his face, making him appear rugged and wild. He didn't spend too much time on his appearance, and was suspicious of men who did. Women were different; they could take all the time they wanted, and he reaped the benefit.

He left his suite and descended the stairs to the second floor. The ceilings were white plaster casts of various flowers outlined in ornate gold leaf. Along the walls portraits of past chieftains looked down in stoic silence. They were dark-haired men with noses like eagles and eyes of steely amber. Duncan fingered the sharp shape of his own nose before wandering down the hallway. An elderly servant pointed him toward the master's garden.

He proceeded through a labyrinth of stairways and hallways until he came to a room with higher ceilings than the rest. He gazed up at an erotic scene of Zeus and Hera playfully teasing childlike cherubs. In the distant corner, Aphrodite cavorted with her favorite lover, Ares, on a giant scalloped shell. Unusually tall glass-paned French doors stood on the opposite side of the room. Beyond the opened doors lay the shapes and clean fragrant smells of the central gardens. Duncan left the sensual scenes for the more natural opulence outside.

He took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet scent of roses. He strolled on smooth gravel paths through perfectly manicured lawns with flower gardens lining the edges. Their varied fragrances drifted to his nostrils and he could distinguish at least three; lavender, his favorite; gardenia, sweet but pleasant; and hyacinth, almost too sweet. Around a topiary shaped like a bird, Duncan spied Colin a short distance ahead, standing

with a group of young aristocrats. Most were men his age dressed in the latest fashions from Paris. They looked feminine with their powdered wigs, silk brocade waistcoats, and tight-fitting trews. The sly looking Gray offered a sharp contrast with his dour face and plain attire. His eyes shot from Duncan to the Duke in quick furtive movements.

As Duncan walked in their direction, silence fell over the crowd. Colin stood studying him as if he were a specimen under glass. Something in the older man's gaze made Duncan uncomfortable. He advanced the short distance toward the group. Colin came forward with his hand extended.

"Well, well, well, the ruthless warrior of the highlands graces us with his presence. Eighteen and already a strong leader." Colin smiled, showing yellowed teeth. They shook hands, both revealing a powerful grip. Colin kept his eyes on Duncan, then motioned him toward his other guests. "Here is a man you must never underestimate, my friends."

Duncan stood a fraction taller than Colin; a wry smile crossed his lips, "Quite an introduction, Lord Campbell. I hope I can live up to it." Duncan felt lingering looks from several of the young men.

A Frenchman in ruffles from his high-heeled shoes to his fancy lace collar boldly stepped forward, extending his hand. "I am Jacques del Londe. I understand you attended university in my country."

Duncan took Jacques's outstretched hand. The Frenchman's handshake was more of a caress than a grip. Duncan made the courtesy quick, then withdrew his hand, speaking in French. "Aye, I lived in Paris for almost three years."

"And," the Frenchman continued flirtatiously, "did you *enjoy* it?"

Duncan held him with a sharp gaze and flashed a smile that could delight the most cynical heart. "I enjoyed most of what France had to offer."

"I'm quite sure you did, monsieur. I'm sorry we never crossed paths."

"Monsieur del Londe, I said *most* of what France had to offer. I did not partake of its more exotic fruits."

Jacques sniffed, his nose high in the air, and shrugged. "Well, how unfortunate. They are quite good."

Duncan laughed with honest humor. "I'm sure they are. But being raised in the highlands makes me a different sort."

"Indeed," replied Jacques again, looking Duncan over with admiration.

Colin cleared his throat. "All right, Jacques, give me a moment with my guest. You can talk more about France and your . . . tastes at dinner."

Jacques cocked his head. "Very well." He winked mischievously and moved back to his circle of friends.

Colin turned to Duncan, studying him. The features were inarguably of recognizable and good stock, as was the lad's posture. He stood well over six feet tall. His stature seemed increased by the breadth of his shoulders and the strength that showed in his neck and arms. The aquiline slant of his nose, the well-shaped jaw, along with high cheekbones only added to his impressive presence. Colin could easily see how Duncan had developed a reputation with the ladies since his return from France, and Monsieur del Londe seemed quite taken with the young buck. What struck him most about his adversary, however, were Duncan's eyes. It wasn't so much the hint of gold intermingled

with the brown tint of the iris, but the brilliant white in which they were set and the sharpness and clarity of the entire eye that seemed to look right through him.

"Come, Duncan." Colin waved a hand. "Let's walk through the gardens where we'll have more privacy." They strolled down a lane filled with the cloying scent of hyacinth.

"Interesting guests, Colin. Close friends of yours?"

"Pay no mind to Jacques. He's irritating, but very rich, and well connected. If I can make Jacques happy then he is in my debt."

"And you need him in that vulnerable position?"

Colin stopped walking to face Duncan. He ignored the young man's pointed question. "I admire your initiative in setting up this meeting. I'm not so sure I trust you or your cousin. I'm taking a chance even to consider this peace agreement."

Duncan smiled with more contempt than humor. He looked over the man who was rumored to be the wealthiest person in Scotland. Wisps of white streaked Colin's dark hair. The thinning mane was pulled back and knotted in place at the back of his neck. Heavy black brows pinched together in a perpetual squint. The creases deepened at his temples. His sharp eyes missed nothing.

"Perhaps," said Duncan. "But if men didn't take chances, they wouldn't have fortunes."

"I don't take chances, Duncan. I don't venture to London where the plague has wiped out some thirty thousand people. I don't visit the king when his favorites are whispering lies about me in his ear, and I make certain that my ventures will profit me and my clan."

Duncan crossed his arms over his chest. He stared at the Duke. "And profit you do at the expense of everyone else, including my people."

Colin's face went slack. An uneasy silence fell between them. The knot of anger that had been forming in Duncan's gut rose until he could feel it sitting thick in his throat. He had never come face to face with the Duke before, but the man stirred his ire. "I have an offer. It may not satiate your greed, but it will, no doubt, add a small sum to your coffer. We want security. We're willing to part with a portion of our capital to see peace where our land borders Cathcart and Macadam territories. These two families have agreed to our boundaries."

Colin watched the lad with calm intensity. "Hmmm." He rubbed the hawkish bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "That is all? Well, why not?" Sarcasm oozed from his lips. "I'll be paid to mind my manners."

"Listen to what I'm saying, Colin." Duncan was impatient. "First, the cattle and sheep rustling must stop. Your men assault the villages within our borders. They kill my people and steal their meager possessions. I want it to cease." He took an intimidating step closer. "In return Malcolm and I will give you part of our profits from the export business out of Aberdeen. That can add up to a tidy sum. From what I've learned, you could use that right now."

Colin bristled. The lad had done a bit of devilish detective work. No doubt his cousin, Malcolm, had helped. The dilemma now was how to pull this young lord into the Campbell fold. Colin would be patient. Someone like Duncan, however sharp, was still inexperienced, as well as hot-headed. The lad would make a mistake. Then Colin would step in.

Duncan's unwavering stare brought the Duke out of his thoughts. "Very well. My solicitor can discuss the particulars with you this afternoon. Have you worked out how I might get this money and approximately how much of your profit would I get?"

"Benjamin Fraser, my estate manager, will be at the Gordon house in Edinburgh on the fifth of each month with no less than one hundred English pounds. Yours for keeping the peace."

"And how do I know that I'm not being cheated? Perhaps you could give two different tallies for your profits. I could be on the losing end."

Duncan narrowed his gaze. "You'll receive money that you never lifted a finger to earn. This is payment to keep you and your people from encroaching on what is mine." His tone grew colder. "I would say you win no matter what."

Colin knew the lad had been educated in the law while away in France. He had confidence and a clever mind in the most practical of matters, all of which impressed, but also intimidated. He needed this young man. He had one legitimate heir, but not a boy of much strength. His poor wife was once again pregnant, but she had miscarried twice after giving birth to their son. Producing off-spring like the man before him would be beyond her capabilities. "I'll insist this agreement remain in effect until I breathe my last."

A smirk revealed mischief behind Duncan's thoughts. "Why don't you come north? Bring your army, but come to Huntly and sign. We'll see about your lifetime agreement."

Colin chuckled. "You and your cousin would make sure my lifetime was very short. No, I think we'll do this in my territory."

Duncan's dark eyes sharpened to points. He knew Colin wouldn't go north, but it was worth a try. "The length is mostly up to you. Uphold your end, and we'll do the same. If we find the contract broken, then our generous allowance will be stopped, as will you."

"You dare to threaten me on my own soil?"

"No, Colin. I'm merely stating a fact. Once we sign this agreement, we'll hold you to it."

"You have little faith in my word, Lord Duncan. But let that be as it may. We'll work out the details later." Colin extended his hand, stating in a cold tone, "But we meet on the southern plains of Blair Atholl."

Duncan's jaw tightened. Long seconds passed as he calculated the risk. Colin could sense uneasiness in the otherwise calm exterior of his guest. Finally, Duncan nodded and they shook on the deal. "All right, Blair Atholl the first day of May."

Colin let go of Duncan's firm grip. "That's only a few days away."

"Aye, but we'll be ready." They continued on down the path. Duncan noticed the older man's pronounced limp. He gestured toward the bad leg. "A battle wound?"

Colin smiled a nasty smile with teeth the color of sand. "Aye. 'Tis a wound from one of your own."

Duncan's brow creased. "A Gordon?"

"Aye." Colin's response sounded edgy. "Your father, Duncan. Your dear father in a very insignificant skirmish gave me this bad leg. But I gave him something to live with as well. Unfortunately, I don't think he ever realized it."

Duncan's interest was piqued. "And what was that?"

Colin smirked. "You're a smart lad. You'll figure it out."