

CHAPTER THREE

It was well into the evening when Duncan entered Colin's dining hall. The day had begun with the ride to Taymouth, then the tense but successful meeting with Colin. Duncan had finished outlining the peace treaty with the Duke's solicitor and the unsavory Keith Gray just an hour ago. He was tired, but this elaborate fete seemed somehow designed for his benefit.

The warm glow of a thousand wax candles beckoned. Musicians, in the background, strummed harps and lyres. The festive mood contrasted with the formality of the great hall. The room had ten windows that extended from the polished stone of the floor to high gilded ceilings. They were set with glass and hung with cobalt blue silk draperies. On the alabaster stucco walls expansive pastoral landscapes, some from the Flemish painter Rubeens, filled the open spaces. Duncan recognized the work of another master. Verrocchio. The rigid figures were not to his liking. But, in every corner of the hall, de Vries' strong sinewy men, sculpted in bronze and captured in meditative poses, gave evidence to the artist's genius. Duncan studied the wealth of art. He doubted the

monthly stipend to Colin would ever be enough. The man lived like one of the royals. He would forever want more to feed his expensive tastes.

Aromatic smells enticed Duncan further into the hall. Along the banquet buffet succulent roasts, just removed from the spit, hissed and snapped as the carver sliced into the meat. Next to the beef, a swan of great size perched on the table. On closer inspection, Duncan could see it had been baked, then reassembled to look as if it were still alive. Its once glorious covering of feathers sat atop its cooked skin like a wig. Poised on a platter next to the swan lay a wild boar surrounded by poached pears. A large red apple held the animal's mouth open. Onions, garlic, peas, and beans steamed in silver bowls arrayed along the buffet.

If that were not enough, the dessert table held a pyramid of pastries dripping with thick creamy butter. Fluffy sweet creams, pounded white sugar, and honey for dipping juicy strawberries and peeled plums came next. Almonds encircled a mound of dates, figs, and raisins. Sliced oranges and pomegranates were arranged to resemble a bouquet of flowers with a covering of violet and rose sugars.

Duncan stepped around servants, who streamed back and forth filling the plates of each guest. He meandered through the crowd, acknowledging familiar faces with a simple nod. Several men kept close to Colin, whispering in his ear, English spies, most likely. The Duke was well connected to the Protestant south. Several of Duncan's men, including Gilbert and Sean, sat below the salt, away from the more important guests. They looked content as they enjoyed hearty portions of a roasted boar. They raised their cups to him from across the room. Duncan gave a slight nod, wishing he could join his friends. Instead, he turned to acquaint himself with Colin's array of peacocks. The Duke motioned to an empty seat next to him. As Duncan approached, Colin rose. His warm greeting was imbued with too much drink. "Ahh, Lord Duncan, welcome."

"'Tis a lavish layout, Colin. Are you celebrating something?"

"My bond between families, of course. This is how I show my appreciation for loyalty."

"And all of these people owe you allegiance?"

"Almost everyone in this room." Colin's fixed expression reminded Duncan of a snake. "There are those who may join the fold at a later time."

Duncan's eyes narrowed. More shite coming from the man who seemed to love conundrums. "Don't deceive yourself, Colin. I'm not here to join the fold."

Colin's expression lost its warmth. "If I had raised you, Duncan, I would have beaten a few manners into you."

Did the Duke want a fight in the middle of his dining hall? If he weren't careful, he just might get one. Duncan cocked his head and looked into the older man's eyes. "If I had been your charge, Colin," he bit off the name as if it were a bitter taste on his tongue, "I would have beat you back, blow for blow." The two men stared at one another for a moment. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll get to know some of your other guests."

Colin laughed and called out as Duncan walked away. "I like you, Duncan. I really do like your spirit."

Duncan had to repress the urge to turn back on the Duke and smash him in the mouth. As stringed instruments played a lilting melody Duncan took a deep breath, concentrating on the music. Wine and liquor flowed with abandon. The room undulated on a current of excess.

"Take a seat to your liking," Colin called after him. "Wherever you sit, Duncan, try to enjoy yourself."

Duncan kept walking, not bothering with a reply. He didn't have to look to know that a nasty smile crossed Colin's lips.

The squirming Jacques caught Duncan's hand. He winked coquettishly. "Come, my lord, sit here. You look troubled, and I know I can ease your discomfort."

As Duncan leaned down a lock of hair fell over his shoulder and brushed Jacques' cheek. He could smell cognac on the Frenchman's breath. Duncan smiled, but his eyes showed no warmth. "No, thank you, my benevolent fellow. I'll choose my balm elsewhere."

As Duncan stood, Jacques fanned his face with a lace kerchief and whispered. "Mon Dieu. Il est magnifique."

Duncan understood these encounters were tests. He knew he had to pass without losing his temper. Malcolm was counting on him; his cousin had warned him to keep a cool head.

As he scanned the room, his gaze fell on three unescorted women. Perhaps he would enjoy himself after all. He strode around Jacques de Londe's chair, following where his eyes were drawn.

"Pardon me, lady, is this chair taken?"

A young woman with hair as dark as his own and clear white skin looked up. Her red lips parted in a welcoming smile. "Why, no, my lord. Please, sit down."

Duncan took the seat, inhaling her scent. Jasmine. On his right a lovely blonde, with eyes that reminded him of a mischievous cat, leaned into him.

"Good evening, my lord. To whom do we owe this pleasure?" Duncan introduced himself, then asked their names. The petite, dark-haired woman was called Angela. Theresa, the cat, was blonde, bigger, with well-proportioned breasts and hips. He could imagine her voluptuous body accommodating his. The conversation with Colin and then Jacques had fired Duncan's emotions, making him feel reckless. These women stirred something else inside him.

Theresa leaned around him to speak to Angela, her plump breasts pressing into his arm, causing a pleasant ache in his loins. Across the table a redhead, eyes sparkling with green fire, studied him. She introduced herself as Lila.

Immediately, a servant began to fill his cup with wine aged in oak casks, reminding Duncan once again that Colin had spared no expense. He picked up his glass and took a drink. The smooth liquid slid down his throat. He closed his eyes. Every carnal desire he might imagine was conveniently in the room; all he had to do was choose. Angela placed a gentle hand on his arm. "Taste this, my lord. 'Tis perfection on the tongue." She raised a small morsel of succulent lamb to Duncan's lips. He took it carefully and chewed it, relishing the flavor. He washed it down with wine.

Duncan smiled. "Perfection."

A young man appeared and placed several slices of the lamb on his plate along with vegetables cut in delicate patterns to resemble flowers. He then drizzled a creamy sauce thick with mushrooms over the meat, topping it all with a sprig of mint. Duncan ate his fill while becoming familiar with his female companions. The lovely, red-haired Lila sent welcoming glances, leaning seductively forward so that he could view the enticing swell of her small, well-formed breasts.

"My Lord Duncan," she cooed. "Do you find this room insufferably warm?" She ran a long thin finger across the edge of her bodice.

"Aye. A walk in the garden would be. . . ." He hesitated, ignoring all codes of proper conduct as he studied the creamy skin of her neck and shoulders, "pleasant." Long red tendrils curled around her face, framing high cheekbones and almond shaped eyes. He drank another goblet of wine, allowing the euphoric glow to warm him. The time had come to excuse himself and take Lila upstairs.

"Ladies," he said, standing and slowly pulling himself away from Theresa and Angela. "I'm afraid the hour has grown late and I leave early tomorrow."

"Ahhhhh," they chorused, disappointment evident in their voices. Then Lila came around the table. She was tall and lean, standing almost eye to eye with him. She ran a slender finger across his lips.

"But, Lord Duncan, you should not go to bed without a kiss from me." She pressed her body the length of his, pulling his mouth to hers, searching deeply with her tongue.

Not to be outdone, the other girls stood and reached out, caressing strands of Duncan's thick dark hair and massaging the expanse of his back. "Lord Duncan, please . . . you're leaving us out. Theresa and I suffer to watch Lila get your sweet kisses."

Duncan smiled and enfolded the three women in his arms. "Aye, but how could a man choose between such beautiful ladies?"

Angela, her dark tresses falling loosely over her shoulders, took both of Duncan's hands in hers. She smiled as she began backing out of the dining room toward the hallway. "Who said ya must choose?"

Lila and Theresa walked next to him with their arms around his waist. Duncan having given in to the opulence and seduction his host had set before him. He followed without hesitation.

Colin watched the four of them make their way up the stairs and smiled at the remembrance of his own days as a younger man. He grew hard and adjusted the crotch of his trews. Then a thought occurred to him. Later, when his other guests had drunk themselves into a stupor, he would sneak upstairs, take the secret passage, and have a peek at the lovers. That would certainly be a scene worth watching.

Inside Duncan's suite, Lila unbuckled the heavy leather belt from around his waist and tossed it aside. The kilted plaid unraveled, leaving the long end hanging over his shoulder. She unfastened the brooch that held the material in place. Theresa removed Duncan's shoes and knee hose. As she rose she untied the string that held his trews, then slipped them from his hips. Angela came around, displacing Lila to unlace his crisp white shirt, taking a moment to run her hands across the firm peaks of Duncan's chest. Lila had now moved behind him, loosening his hair from a band. He closed his eyes, savoring each sensual touch.

He stood naked in the middle of the room surrounded by three beautiful women. Theresa rubbed her well-endowed body next to his, bringing every nerve to life. Duncan walked away from their caresses to a large four-poster bed. He threw the covers back then reclined on a stack of downy pillows. He smiled with a mixture of playfulness and seduction. "Come, ladies, join me. 'Tis cold and I've nothing to keep me warm." Damasks rustled, cottons slipped easily away, and silks began flying through the air as the three women discarded every stitch they wore. Lila reached Duncan first, bounding on top of him. She kissed him once again as if they were the most familiar of lovers. Duncan laughed as the other two reached him. Angela tried tugging him from Lila's possessive grasp.

Theresa pressed close against his back. "You are delightful, Lord Gordon."

"Indeed, Theresa, indeed."

Roughly grabbing a handful of his dark mane, she pulled his head back. She nipped at the curve of his shoulder and neck with her teeth. Duncan liked her spirit. Rolling away from the others he pressed himself on top of her. He whispered in a husky voice laced with passion, "Gently, my darling, gently." He entwined his fingers through her silky blond strands. Theresa's eyes closed halfway as he eased himself inside her.

Angela curled next to him, almost innocently while he made love to Theresa. She seemed quite gentle compared to the other two. For an instant he wondered how old she was, until she began stroking him in places that only the most seasoned courtesans knew, then the thought faded into a burning need for release. Lila, too, knew how to touch him, but her fondling mimicked an erotic massage.

As the night progressed, Duncan made love to each one of them, concentrating on their beautiful forms as they wrapped around him. These women were not strangers to a man's needs. They delighted him with their searching mouths, the deep warm recesses of their bodies, and the provocative allure of their sex. He in turn gave himself over to them, doing whatever they desired.

Golden threads of sunlight filtered through the window. Theresa had finally fallen asleep, while Lila lay stroking the curve of Duncan's back. Angela curled next to his chest and he wrapped his arms around her. Duncan's eyes began to close. As he drifted into much needed sleep, something snapped on the wall near the bed. His lids shot open. An anxious knot formed in the pit of his stomach. No doubt he'd been careless. To let his guard down with the likes of Colin lurking behind walls could prove dangerous.

"I must go, ladies," he whispered. "The evening and your company were," he hesitated a moment, then finished in French, "le plus exquis."

Angela protested by clinging to him, kissing his chest, then moving her mouth over his stomach. For a second he almost stayed but the odd feeling that someone watched became insistent. He rose as gently as he could, trying not to wake Theresa or offend the other two. He kissed one, then the other. Duncan smiled and shook his head as he stood looking at their sad pouts. He found every woman amazing. Outside she might display the sweetest acts of innocence, but behind closed doors a tigress escaped her cage. That's when the true animal came alive.

He pulled on his trews and shirt, kilted the plaid in a somewhat haphazard fold, then raced to finish dressing in the chilly room. Duncan glanced back once more. Angela blew him a kiss. Lila continued to sulk. They looked beautiful with soft creamy skin aglow and hair wild from making love. He walked back to the bed, kissing them again. This time he placed a soft kiss on Theresa's forehead. "Perhaps we will meet again, ladies, but for now I must go. Au revoir." He slipped out the door, boots in hand.

He walked through the now familiar hallway, past the ancestral portraits, then down the long flight of stairs, through a salon where he noticed several people passed out on sofas of rich blue and green brocade. Clothing, pewter cups, and plates of food lay everywhere. Duncan looked askance, then stopped short. Colin lay half-naked on a large overstuffed chaise with a young girl by his side. He assumed the Duke's wife had grown accustomed to her husband's infidelity, leaving him to do his will while she kept a separate life.

Colin looked to be in a deep sleep, but Duncan was certain it was he who had just been upstairs spying. The thought lingered in his mind. As he hesitated at the door of the salon, the girl lying next to Colin raised her head. Duncan recognized the young chambermaid, Kathy, who had shown him to his room the day before. She couldn't have been more than thirteen. She looked quite young. But then, Duncan thought, how would he know? Women were all so different and this child might possibly be on the threshold of womanhood.

An odd sensation gripped his gut. He had never concerned himself with the dealings between other men and their women. He shuddered. Colin's perverse leanings were likely no worse than the passion he had just shared with the three beautiful women upstairs. Who was he to judge? Still, the girl seemed too young. Disappointment etched

across her face at having been seen in such an unsavory situation. She lay her head back with resignation.

Duncan fought an urge to go to her. Now was not the time. He had too much riding on the completion of the contract to start a row with Colin over a chambermaid. As he stood struggling with his conscience, his eyes began to droop. He sighed. A heavy feeling began to weigh on him. Bending down, he slipped on his boots, then, with his heels clicking on the white marble floor, walked outside and bid the groom fetch his men and their horses.

Duncan rode out from the estate followed by Gilbert, Sean and the rest. The young maid Kathy stayed rooted in his mind. She had looked hopeless. Duncan had seen it before in women of all stations; when they no longer had a choice and their every direction was dictated by someone with more power; always a man.

To cheer himself, Duncan replayed the romping good time he had with the three lasses. But instead of lifting his spirits, emptiness invaded his heart. He'd drunk too much. His head ached, and having little sleep blackened his humor. Perhaps it had come time for him to settle down. He had had many such nights in France, and since his return to Scotland there had been no shortage of women in his life. But as of late these escapades sometimes left him with regret.