

Chapter 1

Inchnadamph, Sutherland, Scottish Highlands, June 17, 2023

He pulled her by her arm over the barren, rocky terrain of the Ben More Assynt Mountain. At this altitude there were no trees left to weaken the pounding wind from the Atlantic Ocean.

His heartbeat quickened as they got closer to his goal. From exertion, since she resisted fiercely, but mostly from the joy of knowing what was about to happen. He could barely contain his excitement and had to refrain from telling her what he had prepared. What he was about to do.

He was going to kill her on this barren mountain. End her pleas and her life. Again.

When he stopped by the large, flat rock that concealed the entrance to a narrow cavern he was panting heavily. *Here it is, this is her place.* The last time he had been here he had considered the cavern itself. But this rock, this altar, was better suited to her. As was the trickling sound of the small waterfall and the bubbling brook flowing through the human-stacked rocks into a small pond.

The sun broke through the clouds and its rays reflected on the rippling surface of the water, momentarily blinding him. It was the perfect place. Because this setting, this mountain suited her so well. She knew it here, loved it even. Her homeland. And therefore his. For a while.

He glanced at his watch and realised it was almost time. He had wanted to give her a bit more time to enjoy this carefully selected spot but the journey had taken longer than expected. And he was dismayed that she had made it so clear she did not want to be here.

He was surprised by her unwillingness, by the panic in her wide-open eyes, her screams that echoed off the rocks. Had she not explicitly asked him for this gift? Over and over again? For months he had been trying to determine the right moment. Months of selfless love – or vengefulness – of attention and contemplating where he wanted to give her the gift. The place had to suit her, had to be special to her.

Yet she fought him now that the moment had come. Screaming, shouting, clawing. It surprised him time and again but it did not stop him from giving her his gift. After all this time he knew her better than she knew herself. He knew what she wanted and what she longed for. She had told him herself. So clearly, so desperately, so often, until he had finally given in.

His hands slid lovingly from her wrists upwards. Over her forearms – where the red marks from his grip did not faze him – over her elbows, upper arms, to end purposefully on her throat. She was strong, stronger than she looked, stronger than he remembered. The past few days had exhausted her however, and her resistance was more perfunctory than determined.

He smiled, his love – and hate – for her flowing hotly through his veins as he slowly started to squeeze. Three more minutes. He focused on her features and savoured the way she looked at him. The look in those beautiful eyes, as the vessels burst as if she was crying blood. With that expression he longed for again and again. The one that drove him. That utter focus on him. As if he were the most important thing in her life. As if he was everything to her. Her number one.

Her fingers scratched and tore at his hands as she fought for air, for breath, for life. A feeling of pure joy surged through him like adrenaline, pulsing, intense, addictive, liberating. He squeezed a little harder. Two and a half minutes left.

The laird of the Scottish Murray clan had no interest in the scene below. From his position, high on the Ben More Assynt Mountain, he could almost see the coast. But he wasn't captivated by the coastline or the beauty of the rugged surroundings that were his home now, where he spent most of his time.

He had been lost in thought. Pondering recent events and mulling over how he could manipulate matters to his advantage. For the first time in a good long while he felt a spark of excitement. Even tension. And that was a damn good feeling. Almost as good as sex.

It was a long time since he, alongside other Scottish clans, had needed to fight for his country, for his ideals. For their right to exist. Those bloody Sassenachs, the English who thought they had the right to rule the Scottish, his clan and even him, the Murray.

His contempt for the weak Southerners paled in comparison to his rage against the traitorous Donnachaiddh clan. Did they not fight side by side? Had they not bled together, buried their dead, kissed each other's wives? Their betrayal had struck him to the core. Even though they said otherwise, even though they claimed they had remained loyal, he had heard differently.

For many, many years he bitterly watched while they changed their name from Donnachaiddh to Robertson, to Reid. As if a new name could erase their betrayal. But now, finally, he could get his revenge. His clan may doubt the justice of it, may doubt whether the betrayal had really occurred, but he knew what he knew. And he was still here for a reason.

He had to make sure that that man, Finlay Reid, came to Scotland. And unbeknownst would bring the opportunity for retribution with him. Here where *he* ruled, where *he* had decided the long-delayed reckoning should take place. Maybe he could stir things up a bit. That man, that Keykeeper he longed to face, must have weaknesses. Weaknesses he could exploit, push until they hurt.

In his mind a plan began to form, to which he kept adding pieces. It would mean mobilising some of his clan members and having them...

He had followed the odd movements of the man and woman below with little interest until the man placed his hands around the woman's throat.

Suddenly he was deeply intrigued, and watched attentively how the man dragged the woman to the flat stone, his hands still around her neck in a strangling grip. Her struggles, her desperate attempts to free herself came to nothing. She scratched, clawed, tried to kick the man to get away from him. A macabre dance that lasted for more than three minutes.

Her efforts weakened, her arms dropped to her sides and her legs dangled beneath a body that was held up only by the man's hands. For a frozen moment in time they stood entwined in a deadly embrace.

Then the man withdrew his hands and the woman fell abruptly and awkwardly to the ground. He lifted her up and laid her gently on the large flat stone. One of her shoes slipped off onto the rocky ground and rolled a few meters down to the edge of the lake. The man tugged at the top of her dress, pulled it down a little, and took a small knife from his pocket. After a seemingly satisfied glance at his watch he carved a few vertical scratches above her right breast. He lovingly stroked her hair, made sure her dress was neat again and turned to walk away.

The Murray cursed. Those damned Outlanders who brought their shambles to his Highlands only to leave it behind. He could think of dozens of techniques to kill and had used them all. The one he just witnessed below did not appeal to him. Too simple, hardly inventive and leaving too many traces.

For the strong man that he was, or had been, strangling had proven to be disappointingly easy. His first wife – God, how he had despised her – was the first he had tested that technique on. It had been too easy, took only a few minutes. Hardly worth the effort.

The man below started walking down the mountain and the Murray felt the urge to call him back. Instead he focused on the man's left leg and swept it out from under him. He grinned when the man crashed to the ground, jumped up cursing and looked around confusedly. Limping slightly, the man continued his way down.

Pleasure is so hard to find these days. The last time he had enjoyed a good time was when his clansmen came to tell him that the new Keykeeper and that arrogant Englishman, Damier, had fought each other. That had been interesting.

It was no surprise to him that the key had resurfaced after all this time. In the hands of Finlay Reid of Clan Donnachaidh. A Scotsman of course. If anyone could destroy the Maras, it would have to be a Scot he felt, even if it was one from the clan he wanted to obliterate.

He wanted that Finlay Reid here, he wanted to fight him. Scotsman against Scotsman. Clan against clan. Kai against Mara. Maybe he could arrange it so this Damier was destroyed in the fight as well.

That bloody *Blaigeard* had assaulted a girl from the Murray clan ten years ago. Raped her until she died and then carelessly dumped her in a ditch.

His revenge on that blond Englishman had been swift and brutal, with a sword straight through his deceitful heart. Unfortunately he returned as a Mara in an Armani suit!

The Murray looked down at his plain white shirt and chequered kilt. The cool wind pressed his kilt, sporting the proud colours of the Murray clan; green and dark blue with a red stripe, against his muscular legs. His sporran looked worn with the clan motto barely visible anymore, but the words were engraved on his heart. Just like his memories. It would be interesting. It would be thrilling. It would be the worthiest fight since his death on the battlefield of Culloden in 1746.