



Gideon's Pride

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DEDICATION:

Gideon's Pride is dedicated to my mother, Leola. Her little Alpin has finally found a home.

GIDEON'S PRIDE**Celia Collier****Prologue****Scotland, July 1333**

"If I fall, so falls Scotland. Give me your vow that, should I perish at the hands of the bloody English, you will hasten the king from this country."

These words, spoken two days past, echoed through Gideon of Ross' tired brain. Douglas, the appointed protector of this land since the death of Bruce, had procured the vow minutes before they rode into battle.

Halidon Hill.

A shiver touched Gideon's spine. The battle had lasted less than half a day.

Gideon closed his eyes and swallowed the bitter bile that rose in his throat. Through the pages of his mind the shrieks of wounded horses melded with the cries of dying warriors. The pungency of blood filled the air and, once again, he saw bodies scattered across the blood-soaked hill, their limbs twisted into unnatural positions. Douglas lay among the dead.

Now, leaning on a staff to ease the wound in his thigh, Gideon stood on the shores of Dunbar and stared at the distant ship that carried young King David and his court away from Scotland.

The crisp, fresh scent of salt air did naught to dispel the stench of blood that lingered in his nostrils, nor did the light mist of ocean water alleviate his pain.

"You have served your country well, my friend."

Pulled from his thoughts, Gideon turned to Alpin, his most trusted companion. The small, wiry man who barely reached the center of Gideon's chest, gave a disgusted snort and nodded toward the fading ship.

"Alas, through your actions, you are now an outlaw," Alpin continued.

A weary sigh escaped Gideon's lips. He shoved a bloodstained hand through his hair and, ignoring the throbbing pain in his leg, turned away from the ship that disappeared into the horizon.

"I gave my word to Douglas." Heather crushed beneath the cork soles of his shoes and the end of his makeshift crutch as he climbed the knoll that separated their horses from the sea. "As time passes, so will the memory of my deed this day."

Again, Alpin snorted. "You would stand a better chance of having angels fly out your arse than Balliol forgetting your actions."

Edward Balliol. The name churned disgust in the pit of Gideon's belly. At this moment the bastard, together with the rebel Scots labeled the Disinherited,

were moving onward toward Edinburgh. Once they arrived, Balliol would lay claim to the crown of Scotland.

At the top of the hill Gideon paused and met his friend's cold blue stare. "Balliol is a coward who may enjoy the spoils of Scotland for a time. Yet, our king will not always remain a lad. When he reaches an age to lead an army, he will return and claim his rightful throne. When that day arrives, what is now viewed as treason will be seen as courage."

"Make haste!"

The frantic whisper drew Gideon's gaze. At the base of the knoll stood Brodic, a man who nearly matched Gideon in height and size. If not for him and Alpin, Gideon would be alone.

The reins of their horses secured in his large gloved hand, Brodic glanced about and motioned the men onward.

"Make haste, I say. 'Tis a long ride to Dornoch, and Balliol troops continue their search for you and our king."

"The king is safe. I have kept my promise. The bastards who serve Balliol can search for me until doomsday for all I care."

"They will," Brodic affirmed as he tossed Gideon his reins. "Balliol thirsted for the head of King David. You have deprived him of that. He will want yours instead."

"Aye, 'tis to the Highlands we must go," Alpin said as he mounted his steed and took the reins from Brodic. "Balliol may be able to seize Skibo, but he canna commandeer the mountains."

Sadness touched Gideon's heart. Skibo, the estate granted him by Bruce, was now in the hands of Balliol. Yet, matters such as estates and titles seemed trivial compared to the death and treachery that currently infested this land.

Weariness spread through Gideon's bones as he settled into his saddle and tossed aside the branch he used for a crutch. The Highlands. His lands. He feared they would see more bloody battles before Scotland knew peace again.

"Mark my words, my friends," Gideon said and turned his mount northward. "Scotland will rise again. If I must conceal myself, then so be it."

"If?" Brodic said, a fierce frown upon his brow. "Do you forget the rumors we heard as we hastened toward the shore?" He grunted and shook his head. "You will be arrested, trussed like a Yule bird and presented to Balliol on a platter should you dare show your face."

"The deed is done and I would do naught to change my actions." Gideon spurred his mount toward the protection of trees that covered the valley.

As the sun kissed the earth goodnight, he slipped through the forest like the brigand he now was. Yet, deep in his heart he knew this exile would be brief. Very brief.

Chapter One

Easter Ross, Three Years Later

Barbarians. Savage, ruthless heathens. All her life Sharyn of Nottingham listened to tales about the heinous Scots. England's marauding neighbors of the north were rumored to drink the blood of their dead and hold life with little regard.

Yet, naught but beauty surrounded her now. Green rolling hills set against a backdrop of majestic snow-capped mountains, their tops reflected in the smooth waters of pristine lakes. Mist clung to the air and brought with it the scent of a land that had changed very little since the time of its creation.

A land of mist and heather. A place rumored to be as wild and untamed as any animal found in the forest. A place that hid those who did not wish to be found.

A land she would now call home.

Scotland.

With a frown Sharyn adjusted the dampened folds of her cloak and observed the dozen men in her company. The finest English guards in the king's service escorted her and Bridget, her maid, to a husband Sharyn did not want and tried valiantly to refuse. Nor did she wish to occupy this land, lovely as it appeared. Through countless tales related by troubadours she knew of the blood that stained this earth. Blood of kinsmen and kings.

Had only a fortnight passed since she departed her country estate? It seemed years had elapsed since then.

King Edward the third, to strengthen his alliance with Balliol, had arranged a succession of marriages of English noble women to the barbaric men of Scotland. Aye, the men were titled and close to Balliol, yet Sharyn felt no allegiance or alliance to this king of the north.

For that matter, she felt no loyalty toward Edward either.

What Sharyn would not give to escape these men and thwart their mission. Marriage to such disgusting creatures as these Scots held little appeal.

A shudder passed through her soul. Once the marriage was performed, the heathen would touch her body. Most likely he would toss up her skirts at their marriage dinner and take her on the table.

Nausea swirled through her belly and soured the air in her mouth. She could not tolerate that, no matter what the king commanded. If Edward wished an alliance with the Scots, then let him wed and bed one of the savages.

"Lady, don your gloves, for the air grows chilled the deeper into this land we travel."

Bridget's tender voice drew Sharyn from her troublesome reflections. Absently, she accepted the offered gloves and tugged them over her chilled fingers.

"I pray we soon reach our tavern for the night," Sharyn said, more to hear her voice than anything. "I long for naught but a cup of mead and a warm bed."

Although the month was July, a time of warmth and sunshine in England, naught but chilly rain, followed by a nippy breeze, greeted her from the moment they crossed the border.

'Twas a premonition of what lay ahead.

This man, chosen at random by a king once as close to her as a brother, probably had lice in his beard and rats in his cellars. Sharyn grimaced. Murdoch Mackenzie. Even his name sounded disgusting.

Now, two days north of Inverness, with the setting of just one more sun, Sharyn would reach her destination.

Trepidation spiraled through her veins. There had to be a way to stop this unwanted marriage to a Scottish Baron.

"Halt, milady and draw in your reins!"

The concerned voice of an English knight pulled Sharyn from her thoughts. Slick reins clutched in her gloved fingers, Sharyn drew her mount to a halt then scanned the horizon.

Naught seemed amiss. Yet, the men were alert, and her own horse grew restless.

"Milady, do you think the brigands we heard rumor of are about?"

Bridget's question sent shivers along Sharyn's spine. "Nay," she replied and searched the countryside again. "'Twas naught but a tale to frighten us."

Her words may have comforted her maid, but they did little to ease the tension from her own body. Two guards drew their blades and nudged their mounts down the lane.

Fear lodged itself between her ribs. She swallowed hard and glanced at Bridget. The maid looked worried. To ease her distress, Sharyn lay a hand on her maid's and smiled. "There is naught to worry yourself about. I promise."

At that moment a wild, uncivilized shriek pierced the air. A group of unkempt savages emerged on foot from the terrain, swords raised. The scraps of green cloth that covered their bodies allowed them to blend into the scenery and go undetected.

"Milady!"

Bridget's shriek barely reached Sharyn's ears. Beneath her, the horse pranced and pawed the earth. Frightened by the onslaught of heathens, the animal reared and tossed its head. Sharyn lost her grip on the slippery reins. The animal lowered its head and ran.

Above the pounding of her heart, Sharyn heard Bridget scream. She gripped the pommel and tried to grab the reins.

'Twas useless. They dangled just inches from her fingers.

The horse sprinted through the marauders. One man grabbed her skirt. Sharyn screamed and tightened her hold on the pommel. Beside her racing horse, the man struggled to maintain his pace and tug her out of the saddle. Terrified, Sharyn lifted her foot and kicked him in the face.

The man stumbled and released his hold moments before he tumbled against the earth. She could spare no more than a glance over her shoulder as her horse fled for its life. Sharyn glimpsed two brigands riding after Bridget while the remainder stabbed at the bodies of her chain-mailed escort.

A scream tore through the heavens and it took a moment for her to realize 'twas her own voice that shook the earth.

The horse bolted up the side of a nearby mountain. Trees lashed out at her as the animal continued its frantic flight. The hood of her cloak snagged on a limb. The weak clasp broke and the garment ripped from her body.

She was going to die. All along she had known she would never see England again, yet she had not foreseen her death so soon.

The horse slid down a brae. Her heart in her throat, Sharyn did her best to control the animal and keep herself in the saddle at the same time.

At the base of the incline, a flash of red emerged from the trees. Her skittish horse reared. Sharyn promptly lost her grip on the pommel and tumbled backwards. Her bottom landed in a puddle of icy water that splashed over her velvet clad body.

"Fetch the beast. I'll tend this one."

The man who spoke sounded as rough as the terrain she traveled. Sharyn shoved her wayward hair aside and looked into his face.

He was, without a doubt, the most terrifying human she ever laid eyes on. At least, she thought he was human. From the amount of scruffy dark hair that covered his face and head, she couldn't be sure.

The red clad giant turned his gaze on her. He lifted himself from the saddle and waded through calf deep water toward her.

Panic clawed at her chest. Sharyn scrambled backwards, away from the giant. "Stay away from me," she warned.

Beneath the shield of whiskers, the giant grinned. Clearly, the quiver in her voice betrayed her true fear. When her back hit the slope of the brae, she clambered to her feet and began to climb. Dirt, loosened by the ever-present mist, slid through her gloved fingers and her slippers offered no support in her escape.

"Still yourself, wench."

She felt him grip her gown and tug. Tears stung her eyes as she fought to find a hold on the pliable earth. Arms and legs flailing, she vowed not to die without a fight.

"I said still yourself!"

Her captor flung her onto her back. Sharyn screamed and tried to claw her captor's face, realizing too late that she wore gloves.

No longer amused, the giant gripped her wrists in one hand and pressed them against the earth above her head. Held prisoner by this barbarian, his thighs straddling her hips, she could do naught but stare up into his dusk blue eyes.

"You smell as bad as you look," she grunted and wiggled beneath the beast. "Unhand me!"

"Och, aye, 'tis a hand I will take to you if you continue this tussle, wench."

Anger churned in her belly. "Wench! How dare you slander --"

"Hush!" The barbarian clamped a grimy hand over her mouth and glanced up the side of the brae. "Brodic, what do you see?"

Sharyn struggled beneath the weight of her captor, to no avail. If she could only get her teeth around one of his disgusting fingers --

"A dozen Englishmen, dead or injured, Gideon," drifted a voice from above. "Four horses, loaded with wares, it seems. One of the men carried off the shrieking maid."

Bridget! The mere thought of her loyal maid being harmed brought tears to Sharyn's eyes. Determination slid through her limbs and she managed to loosen the hold the barbarian had on her mouth.

"Take Alpin with you and -- ouch!"

Deadly blue eyes snapped to hers. Despite her resolve, Sharyn swallowed hard, yet refused to look away from his glare.

The man called Gideon snatched away his hand and examined his wound. "You bit me!"

"Serves you right," she said and wiggled beneath him once more. "Now, be so kind as to remove your foul carcass from my person or I will bite you again."

She meant every word. The barbarian named Gideon must have believed her for he released the hold on her wrists. Long slow seconds elapsed before he lifted his body from hers.

The moment she was free, Sharyn rolled to her stomach and again scrambled up the brae. Shrubbery and stones, which she failed to notice earlier, aided her climb.

Another man, the one Gideon called Brodic, she presumed, lay near the apex and peered over the crest to the lane below. Sharyn ignored him as best she could. Although, 'twas difficult not to give a man his size a second glance.

She reached the summit and, breathless, peered over the edge. Her gaze followed the path of broken brambles and tree limbs left behind by her wayward horse.

Like a velvet flag to mark what had transpired, her cloak hung from a branch not fifty feet from where she lay. It caressed the breeze and danced around the limb that held it captive.

Sharyn grimaced as her thoughts flashed to Gideon. A few moments ago she had been his captive. With a firm shake of the head, her gaze moved along the mountain to the lane. Blood stained the earth and ten guards lay dead. The brigands were nowhere in sight.

Bridget. Tears stung her eyes once more. Sharyn rested her brow against the soft earth and closed her eyes.

The maid never wished to leave the borders of England. Then again, neither had she. Now the maid was in the hands of those ruffians. She could only imagine the indignities the maid would suffer before the heathen Scots killed her.

What was she to do now? Her escort was dead. Those who survived were nowhere to be seen. Her maid was gone and she was utterly alone in this wild, untamed land.

"Take Alpin and gather the horses."

Gideon's voice drew Sharyn from her thoughts. She lifted her head, wiped a soiled glove over her eyes and looked up at him.

Heavens, that was a mistake. From where she lay, and where he stood, she could see right up his skirt! A small gasp escaped her. She averted her gaze and rolled into a sitting position. Fire crept into her cheeks. He was a young man, from the bare cheek she had glimpsed.

"You were lucky to escape."

Sharyn knew he spoke to her, yet, she could not bring herself to look at him again. Not up, anyway. "I must find my maid."

The big man chuckled and crouched beside her. Still, looking at him was the last thing she wished to do.

"Clan Mackenzie is a nuisance to my highlands."

The mention of her betrothed's name drew her gaze to his. "Mackenzie?" she whispered. "They are brigands?"

Gideon scowled. "Not in the eyes of Balliol." Without another word, he rose to his feet and descended the steep embankment.

Surely the man did not intend to leave a statement such as that unfinished. She scrambled to her feet and attempted to follow his path. The earth slipped beneath her feet and she landed on her behind once more.

Sharyn skidded down the brae and promptly settled at Gideon's feet. Not risking another look upwards, she gained her footing and grabbed his arm.

"Mackenzies are outlaws?"

His cool, blue gaze rested on her and a smirk touched his chiseled lips. Being this close, Sharyn couldn't help but wonder what he looked like under all that hair.

"Tell me, wench, what color plaid did your attackers wear?"

Sharyn stepped away from him. "Plaid?"

"Aye, plaid." He grabbed the edge of his skirt and shook it. "Kilt, plaid. What was the color?"

The man was daft as a horse. "Green. I fail to see why the color is so important."

A mirthless chuckle escaped his lips and he raised his gaze toward the darkening sky. "And the English call us daft."

"How did you know I am English?"

He leveled his gaze on her and a small smile turned up the corner of his mouth. "How do you ken I'm a Scot?"

The man was as mad as a monk. She let her gaze travel his length then boldly met his gaze. "You are wearing a skirt, which, I might add, is a most improper length."

All signs of merriment fled his features. Sharyn swallowed hard and retreated a step.

"First of all, wench, 'tis not a skirt! 'Tis a plaid." He drew in a breath, then added, "Each clan has their own colors and pattern. Mine is red. The pattern and color identifies my clan to any who reside in Scotland."

Sharyn retreated another step. The man needed to take a few more deep breaths, for clearly he was still angry.

"And this is a sporran." He jiggled a repulsive looking bag that hung around his hips. "It holds what possessions one may need in travel. And this item, dear lady, is a dirk." He leaned over and withdrew a small, deadly looking blade from the top of his mud-spattered boot. "We use these on any Englishman, or woman, daft enough to call a kilt a skirt!"

Sharyn's knees trembled against each other. She retreated another step. The look in his eye was unreadable. At this moment, she did not know if he would truly kill her.

With a swallow for courage, she moistened her lips and said, "I am not a wench."

Confusion flitted across his periwinkle eyes. He blinked, re-sheathed the dirk, folded his arms across his chest and frowned. "Aside from trouble, what be your name?"

She wasn't amused, nor was she foolish enough to reveal her true identity to this heathen. "Sharyn of Nottingham."

One dark eyebrow lifted toward the tangled mass of his hair. "Och, a highbrow English miss you are then?"

The long lean fingers of one hand rose to stroke his chin. Sharyn could only imagine the vermin that would surely cling to his skin. There were lots of places pests could hide in all that unruly hair.

"Why were you traveling in Easter Ross?"

His question drew her gaze from his fingers. One look into those questioning eyes and she had to avert her gaze.

"The king, Edward of England that is, has arranged marriages for English women to Scottish lords." She swallowed hard then dared a glance at him. "I was given to wed Murdoch Mackenzie."

His brow knitted. The expression that crossed his face spread unease through Sharyn's veins. As quickly as the look appeared, it vanished and a broad smile curled his lips into a most alluring smile.

Sharyn trembled. Her belly tumbled toward her toes. "You find my news amusing?"

Laughter gathered in his chest and rumbled from his throat. "Och, lady, I couldna be happier." He walked away from her and said, "You and Murdoch deserve each other."

Chapter Two

Women, Gideon thought as he waded across the shallow, frigid sea that fed the brae. The Mackenzie and an English miss. How fitting.

Around him the sounds of twilight filled the air. The droning chirp of crickets melded with the lonely croak of a toad.

He emerged from the calf-deep water and approached his horse. The animal was well trained indeed. It stood its ground and awaited its master's return.

"Why did you laugh?"

Gideon pulled himself into the saddle and settled his gaze on the English miss standing on the opposite shore. Fists planted firmly on her hips, she glared at him in the twilight.

Trouble. That was an appropriate name for her, he decided. One look into her fathomless violet eyes and he knew naught but misery would accompany her.

'Twas something he could do without.

"I can think of no grander sentence for a Scots traitor than to be wed to an English shrew."

Anger touched the corners of her full lips and her chest swelled with agitation. Gideon almost smiled.

"Mount your horse, lady. You wouldna wish to keep the Mackenzie waiting, now would you?" A sound toward the apex of the inlet stole her reply and drew his gaze.

Brodic and Alpin returned, four packhorses in tow. Gideon nudged his mount in the belly and guided the animal through the icy water. He reached the opposite bank and awaited his men.

"Were there any survivors?" he asked as the men drew near.

Brodic frowned and handed the reins of two horses to Alpin. "Nay. All who did not escape lay dead." He retrieved Sharyn's cloak from the back of one animal and approached Gideon. "The lass is fortunate we were in the area." He tossed the garment to Gideon.

Damp velvet crushed beneath his fingers. Unbidden, his gaze moved to Sharyn. The woman trembled from cold as she tried to mount her horse unaided.

Gideon frowned. Having an English woman in his midst was the last thing he needed. With a sigh, he nudged his mount and guided the beast toward her.

Hair the color of a midnight sky clung to her flush cheeks as she wrestled with her horse. The animal was not cooperating with her efforts at all.

Typical of the English, he thought, and paused beside her mount. Her gaze sought his. Eyes with the glimmer of a thousand stars in their depths stared at him. She looked uncertain, lost, tired and alone. Yet, he noted, she did not look frightened.

"Here," he said and tossed the cloak her way. "Don this afore you catch your death."

The weight of the cloak caused her to stumble. In the dusk he noticed how slight she truly was. He would bet his sword arm she stood no taller than Alpin.

Again, Gideon frowned and dismounted. Her height, or lack thereof, was no concern of his. The moment his feet touched the earth, the lass retreated a step. He ignored her and grabbed her wayward mount by the bridle. When the animal tried to escape, Gideon tightened his hold and gave a firm tug. Immediately, the animal stilled.

At least the beast knew when to obey. Gideon's gaze slid to Sharyn. She stood staring at him through soulful eyes. A pang stabbed his chest.

Pity. Anyone who endured what she had this day deserved an ounce of sympathy.

But, she is English, he reminded himself. He forced the feelings aside and nodded. "Don the cloak then mount."

As if she realized she clutched her cloak, Sharyn glanced at the fabric a moment, then did his bidding. Her hood pulled in place, she approached the horse and settled her gaze on Gideon.

"What fate awaits me at your hands?" she asked.

The tremble in her voice niggled at something deep within his chest. No doubt she thought him and his men would violate her then slit her throat. Clearly, in her eyes, all Scots are barbarians.

Again, he shoved aside his thoughts and nodded. "Mount."

The dusk and her hood hid her face from his view. All he could see were the starry reflections of her eyes. Tears? Could the woman be on the verge of a weeping fit? God's blood! An English woman, much less a weeper, was the last thing he needed.

A moment later, Sharyn bowed her head and pulled herself into the saddle.

Gideon gathered the reins and handed them to her before releasing the bridle. He stepped back and looked up at her, sitting so small and timid astride her mount.

"The Mackenzies will not return this night." He glanced toward the top of the brae. "You will be safe until you reach a tavern, less than an hour's ride from here."

"My things," she said and nodded toward his waiting men. "I go nowhere without them."

A mirthless chuckle escaped his lips. "It seems the loss of a few wares is a small price to pay for saving your life."

He turned on his heel and approached his horse. 'Twas all he could do for her. 'Twas more than he should do. She was, after all, English. Gideon pulled himself into his saddle once more and dared a look her way.

She sat still as stone against the backdrop of the darkening sky. Guilt gnawed at his belly. He frowned and turned his mount away. She was not his responsibility.

Brodic and Alpin awaited him. The men had gained their mounts and tied the reins of the packhorses to their saddles.

"What about her?" Alpin asked the moment Gideon drew near. "We canna leave her here."

"Aye, we can," Gideon replied and glanced toward the west. "I have no room nor patience for one such as her in my midst."

"You have been in hiding overlong, my friend. She may be English, but she is a woman." Brodic's words drew Gideon's gaze. "You ken what Mackenzie will do to her."

"He will not harm her."

Brodic snorted. "'Tis a liar I call you, Gideon of Ross. You ken as well as I that 'twas Mackenzies who attacked this day."

Being called a liar should have angered him. Yet, he could not argue with the truth. How he detested it when his men were right. Gideon glanced at the woman. She would cause him naught but strife.

"Methinks the lass was never meant to reach her destination." Alpin added. "You ken Mackenzie. If the lass would perish before her arrival, he would gain her dowry without the burden of marriage."

Hell. Alpin was correct, and he knew it. Gideon glanced at his men. "I will grant her quarters for one night only. Understood?"

Both men started to smile. Gideon frowned and they averted their gazes and coughed to disguise their laughter.

"Och, aye, Gideon. She leaves with the rise of the sun." Brodic's words and Alpin's amusement did not appeal to Gideon.

"One night," he said and nudged his mount toward the lass he dubbed trouble. A tug on his reins halted the beast near hers. "You have a choice. Journey to the tavern on your own, or follow me and my men. We will grant you a safe haven until the morrow."

Without waiting for her reply, Gideon tugged on his reins, turned, and rode away.

Vermin. She could feel them crawling over her flesh. No doubt Gideon the giant shared a few of his lingering pests with her when he dared touch her cloak.

Sharyn scratched her head through the thickness of her hood and stared at the back of the man in question. If he gave her lice, she would snatch him balder than a monk.

Through a cloud spattered sky, the mysterious glow of the moon offered glimpses of the terrain. With no marked path to follow, the men led the way through dense trees, around glimmering lakes and up steep inclines. It seemed hours had passed since the attack on the lane.

By choice, Sharyn stayed a good ten feet behind the men and wondered if they would ever reach this haven Gideon mentioned.

Gideon. Again her gaze moved to him. Was he friend or foe? God's truth, she didn't know. At first she thought he was part of the group that attacked her escort.

Her gaze flitted to the fabric around his hips. Although the color blended with the darkness, she knew it was red.

The men who attacked wore green.

A shiver slid through her veins. Sharyn pulled her damp cloak more securely around her shoulders.

Bridget. What had the savages done with her?

Her horse stumbled and drew her from her thoughts. Below her stretched a valley. Moon-kissed waters of a lake winked at her through the pale glow. Nestled near the shore were two crude constructions that, as best she could tell, looked ready to tumble down with the first strong wind of summer.

The men continued toward the lake. Sharyn followed at a slower pace. Could this be the haven they offered?

The closer to the structures Sharyn drew, the lower her heart sank. The buildings were naught but crofters' huts and the thatch on one was near gone.

Before the entrance of the most intact croft, the men drew in their reins and dismounted. Sharyn's horse slowed to a stop. Her gaze shifted from the men, who retrieved her possessions tied to their saddles, to the building itself.

"Is this where you plan to stay?"

Silence, broken only by the distant splash of a fish in the lake, echoed in her ears. Although the light was poor, she felt Gideon's stare clear to her soul.

"If a croft is too simple an abode for your ladyship," Gideon said, his voice laced with intolerance. "Then, by all means, return the way you came."

Sharyn frowned at him. "That is impossible, as well you know." Resigned to her fate, she dismounted and shook out her skirt. "I dare say I can survive one night in primitive surroundings."

Relieved to be out of the saddle at last, Sharyn approached the door of the roofed croft. As she passed Gideon, he grabbed her arm. "Where are you going?"

How she wished he would not touch her. The mood she was in, answering his senseless questions held no importance. She met his gaze and tugged on her arm. "Inside, if it pleases you to know."

He refused to release her arm. "This is my croft, lady." He nodded toward the other hut, the one with the missing roof. "You sleep over there."

"Gideon! We may be living the simple life, but she is our guest." Brodic's disapproval did naught to release Gideon's hold.

"Och, aye," Alpin agreed. "Heard you invite her here with me own ears, I did."

Sharyn almost smiled. Gideon frowned.

"It willna kill you to share a croft with us for one night." Brodic continued and released one of the baskets from the saddle. "Alpin snores a bit, and passes wind in his sleep, 'tis why we have no roof."

Insulted, Alpin turned an angry glare on Brodic. "Pass wind, do I? Your arse plays a fair melody itself after a serving of haggis."

"I -- " Brodic flashed a glance to Sharyn and, although there was naught but the moon for light, she swore she saw him blush. "Beg pardon, lady."

"Granted," she said and tugged upon her arm, still held in Gideon's grasp. "Release me or I swear I will bite you again."

Slow minutes ticked by before Gideon finally spoke. "One night," he said and yielded her arm.

"Right this way, lady," Alpin said and carried his load from the saddles into Gideon's croft. "Wait right there whilst I light a candle."

Sharyn stood in the doorway and stared into the darkened interior. She heard Alpin deposit his items on the floor, then listened as he fumbled for a flint. A moment later a spark flashed through the dwelling, followed by the timid glow of a candle.

"There now," he said, and turned toward the hearth. "I'll get a fire going and you can warm your bones before you retire."

In all her dreams, Sharyn never expected to see the sight before her. The croft was tidy and clean. The floor was hard-packed dirt, yet free of debris. In the center of the neat room stood a sturdy table and four chairs. Near the simple stone hearth rested a table that held cooking and eating utensils plus a few food supplies.

At the other end of the croft, centered beneath a shutter closed against the chill of the night, sat a comfortable looking bed with a warm wool blanket over a fluffy mattress. A wardrobe occupied one corner and a narrow table stood between that and the bed.

"If you would be so kind as to step aside, it would make my burden that much lighter."

Sarcasm laced Gideon's bellow. Sharyn turned and stared into his dark eyes. He adjusted the packs slung over one broad shoulder and raised an eyebrow.

Heat flushed her cheeks and she stepped into the cozy croft. In silence, she watched the men place her wares along one wall of the room.

Alpin, finished with the fire, stood and moved toward the door. "I'll tend the horses."

Gideon nodded then turned his gaze on her. Sharyn swallowed hard yet refused to back away. Without a word, he approached the wardrobe, removed a clean tunic, then left.

"Pay him no heed, lass," Brodic said as he followed Gideon's path. "He is a good man at heart."

Assuming he has one, Sharyn thought as Brodic closed the door. Alone at last, she looked around the croft once more.

Gideon's presence filled the air. It emitted from the hearth and clung to the fabric of his bed. His spirit haunted the table and flowed from the walls.

A shiver climbed up her spine. Sharyn tossed off her cloak, rubbed her arms and approached her things. If it took her all night, she would fix the croft to suit her. This was one part of Gideon she could easily defeat.

Chapter Three

Dawn. Crisp highland air greeted Gideon as he emerged from the croft he shared with his men. Across the awakening sky, the heavens stretched its wings and yawned the world to life.

Naught on earth could compare to Gideon's highlands.

Peace surrounded him as he made his way to the nearby loch. As he passed his croft, his gaze darted to the shutters closed against the beauty of nature.

Gideon frowned. Sharyn. Because of her he had spent a restless night beneath a tattered roof. In place of his warm bed, he had slept on straw. Between Brodic and Alpin passing wind and snoring, his quiet moments were spent thinking of Sharyn.

The stars that had winked at him through the holes in the roof reminded him of her eyes. The shadows held the color of her hair.

He pushed aside all thoughts of Sharyn and knelt beside the smooth surface of the loch. Hands cupped together, he dipped them into the frigid water, then splashed the liquid over his face and hair.

Water skidded along his skin and chased the warmth from his body. Shivers slid across his flesh. The waters of a highland loch would pull any man from slumber.

Or woman.

Sharyn. Again he glanced toward the croft. Was she snuggled in the warmth of his bed at this very moment? Would her hair be unbound and spread across the pillow?

"God's blood!" he swore and turned his thoughts away from the troublesome English woman.

Again he splashed water over his face and shook his head. Droplets scattered and left their brief mark on the surface. As the water settled, Gideon noticed his reflection.

He did indeed look wild. With little thought, he touched his rough cheek and frowned at his likeness. Before Balliol and the Disinherited invaded this land, he had kept himself well groomed and cleansed.

Lassies had once called him a handsome man. Yet, look at him now. Hair uncombed, his beard tangled and matted, Gideon looked a fright. He wondered how Sharyn managed to gaze upon him without fear.

Sharyn. She was trouble, not to mention English, and he would rejoice being rid of her this day.

The sound of water splashing drew him from his thoughts. Near the center of the loch he saw the ripple where, clearly, a fish had emerged to make its presence known.

With a shake of the head, Gideon again splashed water over his face and neck. Sharyn's features drifted before his tired eyes. The lass was comely, he'd give her that. Images of her large violet eyes, and hair the color of raven's wings, flitted across his mind.

She must be of noble birth, he mused, to be chosen by her king to unite with the Mackenzie. Was she used to being pampered by servants and fawned over by fops? Did she enjoy luxuries, as Gideon himself had once known?

He frowned. She said he stank. Did he truly? With a quick glance around the glen to ensure his privacy, Gideon turned his head and sniffed the pit of one arm.

God's blood! That stench would curdle milk.

Without another thought, he removed the length of plaid from his shoulder and stripped off his soiled tunic. For one brief moment, he considered entering the loch, clothes and all. Yet, water that cold would shrivel more than just his skin.

His chest bare, Gideon did his best to bathe himself in the icy waters.

"Jesu," he swore, and decided he was clean enough. He grabbed his discarded tunic and used it to dry his damp skin. If he had known he would be half-naked this morn, he'd have brought his clean tunic along.

Laughter from behind him made Gideon pause. Damn. He thought those two would sleep for another hour yet.

"Och, what sight beholds me?" Brodic's cheery voice grated on Gideon's nerves. "Gideon cleansing himself. Can it truly be?"

"Och, aye, 'tis what it appears," Alpin chimed. "And all for an English miss he claims to dislike."

Anger coiled through Gideon's belly. By Christ's blue eyes, his men would rib him about this for a month. He climbed to his feet and tunic clutched in his hands, glared at the duo.

"My claim is true, or do you forget the lass leaves this day?" He stalked toward his men, and the distant crofts, and tugged his plaid back into place. "From the smell emitting from your croft last eve, it wouldna hurt the two of you to splash a bit in the pond."

"Nay, we have no lassie to impress." Alpin chirped, a grin as broad as the highlands on his face. "The Chief always gets first choice."

Gideon paused and considered shoving his fist into Alpin's face. With great effort, he resisted the bait and the urge.

"Our journey is long this day. Be ready to ride by the time the sun crests the mountain." He continued his progress toward the croft. "I want that woman gone from my sight by nightfall."

Wrapped in the warmth of a velvet robe, Sharyn retrieved a bucket and opened the door to her croft. The first sight that greeted her was Gideon. Hand

poised to knock, his presence startled her. How did a man his size move around in silence?

The fact that he wore a clean tunic did not escape her notice. Something else seemed different about him as well. His hair did not appear to be as unruly as it had the night before.

Gideon lowered his hand. His gaze swept her briefly then settled on her face. The strange glimmer in the periwinkle depth of his eyes made her heart thump against her ribs.

Was something amiss? Had she only dreamt she wore a robe the color of England's greenest hills? A quick glance away from him assured her she was properly covered. Her gaze shifted from the bucket, to Gideon's mysterious eyes.

"I was about to fetch some water from the lake," she whispered, and inwardly frowned. What was it about the man that stole her voice, and her thoughts? "You may do it for me."

His brow furrowed and he lowered his gaze to the bucket. "First of all, wench, 'tis not a lake nearby, but a loch." His unfathomable gaze swept past her. "Second, fetch your own water. I am not your ..."

The furrows between his brow deepened. He stepped forward and Sharyn retreated, perplexed by the sudden change in him.

Gideon entered the croft slowly, as if seeing it for the first time. The coarse rope of the bucket clutched in her hands, Sharyn could do naught but watch him survey the room.

Pleasure spread through her veins like the warmth of a fire. It had taken most of the night, and a great amount of effort, but she managed to arrange the croft to her liking.

The bed no longer rested beneath the shutter, but further away from the window where the small table once stood. After the attack, she held a fear of someone shoving open the weak barrier and pulling her from her bed.

The large table and chairs were also misplaced. She moved them more toward the center of the room and away from the heat of the hearth.

Beneath the shutter, and beside the wardrobe, was the small table that once held Gideon's crude items. Now, her possessions covered the surface. A polished mirror, her comb, scissors, hair ribbons; all things a lady used in daily life.

Her gaze flashed to the wardrobe, now void of all traces of Gideon. Through the slightly ajar doors she could glimpse her gowns.

Beside the hearth rested baskets that now held his belongings. He would need to remove them and make himself comfortable in the other croft.

Along the mantel she displayed her family pewter. Although she exhibited her plates and goblets, one item remained tucked away. If Gideon glimpsed her precious chalice, it would be lost to her forever. She would kill him before surrendering such an heirloom to his grasp.

Still, Sharyn could not help but smile. She lowered her gaze to the dirt floor and awaited his words of praise.

"What the hell have you done to my croft, wench!"

The anger in his voice drew her gaze. One look into his stormy eyes, and Sharyn retreated a step. Hands planted on red clad hips, Gideon glared at her as if she were the spawn of the devil. Her fingers began to tremble and her throat suddenly went dry.

What was he so angry about? All she had done was arrange things to her liking. Not an easy task on her own, yet she had managed.

"You best answer me afore I toss you in the loch and let you drown."

Somehow, Sharyn found her voice. She moistened her lips and replied, "First of all, you will refrain from cursing in my presence. Second, I am not a wench, and I will thank you to remember that in the future."

"Future? We have no future, you daft, English -- " Whatever words he wanted to say never passed his lips. He took a menacing step toward her. Sharyn refused to succumb to her instincts and retreat. "I granted you a haven for one night. That time has drawn to a close."

Determination unfurled along her spine. She raised her chin. "I am not leaving."

"Och, aye, you are." Another step closed the distance between them. "If I have to haul you to the Mackenzie dressed as you are and draped over my shoulder, you will depart this day."

Sharyn's chin rose another inch, as did her determination. "Someone tried to kill me yesterday, my fine barbarian, or has that escaped your notice?"

She expected him to advance. When he didn't, she drew on her courage and continued. "'Tis you who made a grand display over the color the men wore." She couldn't be positive, but she swore his anger ebbed just a bit. "You dubbed them Mackenzies and brigands. I cannot proceed until I find Bridget and learn why I was set upon by my betrothed's family."

Nostrils slightly flared, Gideon stared at her as if he wished the earth would open beneath her feet and swallow her whole.

Eternal seconds passed before he finally spoke. "Clan."

Confusion clouded her brain. "I beg your pardon?"

An aggravated sigh escaped his lips moments before he shoved his fingers through his hair and turned away. "In Scotland, those who are related are called clans, not families."

"What is the difference, if both words mean the same?"

Again his gaze flashed to hers. "'Tis the same as the deviation between a kilt and a skirt." He approached the hearth and rested an arm against the crude wooden mantel. "'Tis our way."

These Scots certainly had a lot of ways about them. Sharyn settled the bucket on the ground and studied his backside a moment.

"Do you have any idea where those men may have taken my maid?" she asked.

From over his shoulder he gifted her with a brief glance. "Your maid?"

Sharyn nodded. "Aye, Bridget." His anger appeared to be gone, so she dared a step toward him. "She is not very strong. I fear for her safety."

He turned his full attention on her then. "You should." With a scowl he again shoved his fingers through his hair and sighed. "I have a fair idea where she may have been taken. 'Twas my plan to deposit you in the same place and be rid of you."

Sharyn's heart tumbled to her toes. Was she such a horrid person? All she longed for was to avoid marriage to a barbaric Scot and return to England. Instead, her escort was slain, her maid captured, and Sharyn herself was in the midst of the barbarians she hoped to avoid. Trouble was Gideon and his men did not seem quite as uncivilized as she envisioned.

"Be ready to ride before an hour passes."

Gideon's voice drew her gaze and swirled despair through her soul. He meant to take her to this Mackenzie and drop her in his lap.

Their gazes locked for the space of a heartbeat, then he looked away and approached the door. Each step heightened her desperation.

"Gideon." Her voice paused him by the door. When he turned a glance on her, she swallowed hard and forced her thoughts to words. "The attack nullifies the betrothal."

He frowned. "What -- "

"If you rescue Bridget and return us to England, my family will reward you handsomely," she said in a rush, lest she lose her nerve. "They can make you wealthy beyond your wildest dreams."

A mirthless chuckle escaped his lips and he gently shook his head. "Lady, afore the English placed Balliol on the throne, I was a verra wealthy man." Gideon walked through the door and silently closed it behind him.

Chapter Four

He was not Sharyn's keeper, Gideon told himself each mile they traveled. Whatever fate awaited her on the other side of the mountain was none of his concern.

None.

"You are being such an arse, I hope you ken," Alpin commented as he rode beside Gideon toward the land of Mackenzie. "The lass is naught but a wee thing. What harm can she cause you?"

Plenty, Gideon thought. He shot Alpin a narrow look and frowned. "An adder is small too, but quite deadly." He shoved aside his rising guilt and turned his gaze back to the lane ahead. "'Tis best for all concerned if the lass arrives at her destination."

"'Tis best for all concerned," Alpin mimicked.

Gideon was not amused.

Sharyn. He could not force himself to take a backwards glimpse. Though she rode proud and tall in her saddle beside Brodic this morn, defeat had touched her eyes and the corners of her tempting mouth did not lift with a smile. Seeing her again, with the few possessions he allowed her to keep clutched before her, was more than he could bear to witness.

There was naught he could do for her. This turn of events was out of his hands. With a price upon his head, and Balliol's troops still searching for him, Gideon could allow no one, aside from Brodic and Alpin, in his midst. It would be unfair of him to place Sharyn or any lass into a life of exile.

"She fancies you."

Alpin's voice drew Gideon from his thoughts. He frowned and glanced at his friend once more. Dismissing the strange tightening in his chest, he knew he could not have heard the man properly. "What?"

A firm nod accompanied his next words. "Aye, 'tis true. The lass fancies you."

Gideon chuckled and gently shook his head. "And I'm the king of England."

"Pleased to meet you, Your Majesty."

"Alpin," Gideon warned, his patience thin. "Proceed with this ill-humor and I will knock you from your saddle."

Unconcerned by the threat, Alpin continued. "Mayhap you should retire to yonder trees and remove the thistle that is clearly stuck up your -- "

"Alpin."

"Arse."

Without so much as breaking the stride of his horse, Gideon hit Alpin in the jaw.

Damn that hurt, he thought as he rested his throbbing hand on the pommel. From the corner of his eye he saw Alpin shake his head and steady himself in the saddle.

Served him right, crowing like a cock about something he knew naught about.

A moment later, an ear-piercing cry broke the rhythmic plod of the horses. The next thing Gideon knew, he was kissing the ground.

Disgruntled, Gideon struggled with Alpin and finally gained his footing. One hand wrapped in Alpin's hair, Gideon pulled the man to his feet and held him at arm's length.

"By Christ's blue eyes, cease acting the fool," Gideon said, his patience gone. "I am in no mood to fight with you this day."

Alpin continued to struggle. "'Tis you who will bear the marks of a battle, not I."

Gideon sighed as Alpin's scrawny fists struck naught but air. There was but one way to put an end to this tussle.

With one swift move, Gideon jerked Alpin toward him, spun the man around and held him captive with an arm across his windpipe. Duly subdued, Alpin ceased his struggles.

"Are you ready to ride again?" he asked, and waited for Alpin to nod.

The man choked and sputtered and clawed at Gideon's arm before he finally agreed.

"And," Gideon added. "Do you swear not to mention Mistress Trouble to me again?"

More incoherent murmurs filled the air along with the scuffle of Alpin's feet.

"Some men never outgrow the need to tussle." Brodic's voice directly behind him stole Gideon's anger. Dreading to see Sharyn when he turned around, he eased his hold on Alpin.

The moment the small man had an opening, he fled Gideon's grasp and turned a glare on him. "He started it," the man accused.

Gideon frowned.

Alpin averted his gaze and straightened his clothes. "With a wee bit of prodding."

Satisfied, Gideon turned to regain his mount. His gaze met and held Sharyn's.

Why did she have to look so beautiful despite the fate that awaited her? The depths of her fathomless eyes swept his and stirred things in his belly that were best left ignored. When she looked upon him like that, he felt lower than the belly of an adder. Could she not see he had no choice? He must deliver her to Mackenzie.

He forced his gaze from hers and strode to his waiting mount. She was not his concern he mentally chided as he pulled himself into the saddle. A woman, any woman, was the last thing he needed in his life.

While Alpin regained his mount, Gideon dared another look at Sharyn. He would have a talk with Mackenzie before he departed. If the bastard so much as harmed one hair on her head, Gideon would come for him.

He could not think of that now, lest he lose his senses and carry her back to the croft.

"Onward," he said and turned his mount in the direction of the Mackenzie.

The sooner he found this Bridget, and deposited both women at the feet of the Mackenzie, the sooner his life would return to normal.

"Stay here," Gideon commanded.

Sharyn grimaced and considered hitting him with her bundled chalice, presently tied to her saddle. Most likely her actions would do more harm to the goblet than Gideon's thick head.

Although the hour was late, the sun had yet to set completely. Brodic led the horses into the protection of trees at the base of a large knoll. As the men climbed the hill, Brodic and Alpin drew their blades.

Despite Gideon's orders, Sharyn lifted the hem of her skirt and followed. If Bridget was on the other side of this mound of heather clad earth, she wanted to know.

At the top of the knoll, the men paused and lowered themselves to their bellies. Curious, Sharyn crept up behind them.

The valley below inched into view the higher she climbed. In the fading sunlight, a stream sparkled and a croft lay nestled in the curve of its banks. Four horses grazed on the sweet grass and smoke from the chimney held the tempting aroma of roasting meat.

Her stomach rumbled and promptly drew the gazes of her companions.

Gideon frowned. "Do you never obey?" he asked, then grabbed her roughly by the wrist and jerked her down beside him.

Sharyn landed with a thud against the earth. Her temper flickered to life. Despite the masterful gleam in his eye, she'd had enough. She lifted her free hand and hit him.

"You plan to deposit me in the midst of the barbarians who tried to slay me last eve," she said and tugged upon her wrist. "What difference does it make if I obey you or not?"

"He is the king of England and used to being obeyed," Alpin whispered. He glanced at Gideon, then to Sharyn and grinned. "He loves to be called, your majesty."

"Alpin," Gideon warned.

"No time for a tussle now, lads" Brodic said and nodded toward the croft. "Is that your maid, lady?"

Sharyn tugged free of Gideon's hold and, her belly pressed against the earth, peered over the top of the knoll.

Below, four men dressed in the wretched green that swarmed her companions a day past, emerged from the cottage. Bridget followed. Hands tied before her, she stumbled behind a crude looking man who held the end of the rope.

Tears stung Sharyn's eyes. She'd gut the bastard for daring to harm her maid. With a groan, she pushed herself away from the earth.

"Nay," Gideon said, and pulled her down once more.

"Release me," she seethed, and struggled to be free of his hold.

"Christ," he swore, and rolled his big body onto her back. "Hush yourself." Sharyn could scarcely breathe, much less think.

"Is that your maid?" Gideon asked.

His voice rumbled in his chest and vibrated through her soul. Unable to answer, Sharyn nodded.

Gideon sighed and adjusted himself slightly. "Alpin, you and Brodic slip around to the west and approach from behind." He crept over her again, easing away some of his weight. "I'll take Trouble here and distract them."

Trouble. Sharyn frowned and squirmed against the earth. Once she was free, she would show him trouble.

Without a word, the men did Gideon's bidding. The moment they disappeared over the knoll, Sharyn turned what she hoped was a deadly glare onto her captor.

"Pray, remove yourself from my person and cease calling me names."

"I only speak the truth." He lifted himself from her body and, hand clasped around her wrist, pulled her to her feet. "'Tis time to be rid of you."

Before Sharyn could think, Gideon jerked off her cloak and tossed it to the ground. His fingers gripped the fabric of her gown and, for the space of a heartbeat, their eyes met. Sharyn started to speak, but before the words could pass her lips, Gideon ripped the sleeve of her gown.

Mortified, Sharyn's heart raked her ribs and fear skidded along her spine. Did he plan to violate her before turning her over to the barbarians below? "Cease this."

"Hush," he said, and rubbed a big hand over her hair. Strands yanked free of the braid and fell across her face. "There, that should do it."

Without another word, he turned his attention to the croft and whistled. The sharp, short tone echoed through the glen and drew the attention of the people below.

"Are you completely daft?" she asked in a heated whisper, and tugged upon the wrist held in his captive grasp. "If you refuse to help, then release me so I may try for freedom on my own."

Gideon ignored her. "You forgot one," he yelled, and proceeded down the knoll, Sharyn in tow.

Dear Lord, he was indeed a heartless bastard who had every intention of giving her to the Mackenzie. Tears stung her eyes as she stumbled over the coarse heather and the hem of her gown, never ceasing her struggle to be free.

The men, now mounted, nudged their horses and approached the base of the knoll. Bridget, forced to walk, moved behind the one who held her captive. Sharyn did not miss the fear and despair in her maid's soft eyes.

Gideon's long strides halted near the bottom of the hill. His grip tightened around her wrist, yet his gaze remained on the men clad in green.

"I am finished with this one. Mackenzie can have her now."

Four pairs of barbarian eyes slid to Sharyn and moved over her body with great leisure. In all her life, she had never seen such disgusting, rough looking men. Even Gideon looked good compared to these ruffians.

"Murdoch willna want sampled goods," said the man who held the end of Bridget's rope. His gaze slid over Sharyn once more. "He had grand plans for the lady."

Sharyn trembled so badly, she was certain the men noticed. Grand plans, indeed. "Gideon, please -- "

"Gideon?" one man said, a frown emerging through his hair-covered face. "Are you the outlaw named Gideon of Ross?"

"Outlaw?" Sharyn whispered and turned a gaze on her captor.

At that moment Brodic and Alpin emerged. The little man gave an uncivilized shriek as they ran toward the mounted men, swords raised. Surprised, the horses snorted and pranced while the men tried to draw their blades. The barbarian who held Bridget released her rope in the confusion.

"Take your maid and flee to the horses," Gideon whispered moments before he shoved Sharyn away from him and drew his sword.

Sharyn stumbled, yet maintained her balance. She turned in time to see Gideon pull one man from the saddle and run him through with his blade.

"Milady!" Bridget cried.

Alarm spurred Sharyn into action. She ran to her maid, grabbed the rope and tugged her toward the knoll.

"Who are those men?" Bridget asked and followed Sharyn's urging. "Where are we going?"

"To safety," she replied and continued her struggle to get them up the hill. "Trust me. These men will cause us no harm."

Amid the thunder of clashing swords, the grunts and cries of the men, and the beat of her own heart, Sharyn climbed the hill with Bridget. At the top she paused and struggled for breath. Her gaze moved to the melee below. Two of the Mackenzie lay dead. Alpin and Brodic fought one man while Gideon dealt with the other.

"Dear Lord, please keep him safe," Sharyn whispered and briefly closed her eyes.

"Keep who safe?" Bridget asked, her voice a cracked whisper.

Realizing she spoke aloud, Sharyn averted her gaze, retrieved her discarded cloak and tugged upon Bridget's rope. "Come, our horses are hidden. We will be safe until the men return."

Thankfully, Bridget did not persist with her questions. Once they reached the haven of the trees, Sharyn dropped her cloak, turned to her maid and started to work on the bindings.

"What happened to the guards who were not slain on the road?" she asked.

Bridget trembled. "Those beasts slit their throats then hung them from the trees."

A shudder passed through Sharyn's soul. She said a silent prayer for the men sent to guard her, then focused her attention on the rope. "Did they harm you in any way?"

"Nay, I was spared. Clearly, you were not."

Sharyn looked up into her maid's worried gaze.

Bridget nodded toward Sharyn. "Your gown and his words." She paused and sniffed. 'Twas a habit Sharyn was most familiar with. "How horrid it must have been for you. To be violated -- "

"He touched me not," Sharyn said and resumed her task. "'Twas naught but a ruse to distract those men."

The rope fell free and Bridget rubbed her chaffed wrists. "He did not harm you?"

Sharyn did her best to smile. "He did not harm me." She led the woman to a tree near the horses. "Here, rest until Gideon returns."

Bridget lowered herself to the ground and Sharyn settled beside her. No sounds of fighting could be heard and she wondered if the skirmish was over.

"Does he know who you are?"

The whispered words stole Sharyn's breath and tingles tickled her spine. She lowered her gaze to the heather clad earth and shook her head. "Nay."

"Milady!" Bridget's hand covered Sharyn's. "He will hold you for ransom, should he learn you are sister to the king."

Sharyn grimaced. "We share naught but an acquaintance through our parents."

"An acquaintance? Lady, Mortimer was viewed as king by all."

"Fat lot of good it did him to be lover of the queen." Sharyn rubbed her brow and shut out the troublesome memories of nine years ago. "Neither his title, nor alliance to the crown, could save him. He still lost his head."

"At the hands of the Scots," Bridget reminded.

"Enough," Sharyn whispered and raised her gaze to the darkening sky. "Gideon will return soon. He need not hear of this."

The horses became restless and snorted their displeasure. Nearby, bushes rustled. Alarm swirled through Sharyn's belly. She climbed to her feet and peered between the trees and the bracken.

"Gideon?" she asked, her voice hushed. Bridget joined her and the women backed toward the horses. "Brodic, Alpin?"

Through the twilight, an animal grunt echoed through the quiet. 'Twas a sound Sharyn recognized all too well.

“‘Tis a boar,” she whispered, and shoved Bridget toward a tree with a branch she prayed was low enough for them to reach. “Climb!”

“You should go first, milady.”

“Will you climb before that animal enters the clearing and kills us with his tusks!” Sharyn shoved the maid against the tree and fought to remain calm. The bushes shook and trembled, followed by more annoyed grunts from the animal.

“The branch is out of my reach,” Bridget cried.

Sharyn braced her shoulder beneath Bridget’s bottom and helped lift the maid enough to reach the branch. The moment the maid gained safety, she clung to the limb and offered Sharyn her hand.

Inches separated their fingers. Terror gripped her heart as the beast emerged from the bushes. Snout lifted in the air, his beady eyes rested on her.

Sharyn retreated a few steps then ran for the tree. She leapt and managed to grab Bridget’s hand. “Pull,” she said as the animal lowered its head and ran toward her.

Her slippers hit against the rough bark of the tree. Bridget sobbed and tugged so hard on her arm, Sharyn thought it would jerk from the socket.

With her last ounce of strength, Sharyn wrapped an arm around the limb Bridget straddled and pulled herself onto her belly. Below, the boar butted the tree and snorted his anger over her escape. The branches shook and the dreaded echo of cracking wood filled the air.

Bridget screamed as if the devil himself were upon them and clung to the weakened bough. Heart in her throat, Sharyn maintained her hold and glanced at the animal. The beast retreated and prepared for another attack on the tree. Eyes closed, Sharyn clutched the limb tightly and prayed for help.

For the first time since meeting Gideon, she fervently wished for him to appear.

Chapter Five

The echo of a woman's scream stilled Gideon's heart.

"Sharyn," he whispered and scanned the knoll for a sign of her. No doubt she had fallen foul of his wishes and disobeyed him once more.

Naught but a lone thistle framed against the sky greeted him.

He withdrew his sword from the body of the slain Mackenzie and tossed the man to the ground. He ran toward the knoll, calling for Alpin as he went.

"Right behind you, Chief," came the small man's reply. "Brodic can tend the dead."

The dead. Dear Lord, what if there had been more Mackenzies in the area that had escaped his notice? Sharyn could be in the clutches of Murdoch at this very moment.

Apprehension slashed through his veins as heather flattened beneath his feet. He reached the apex of the hill and slid down the other side toward the trees that sheltered their horses.

Another scream stabbed the air, quickly stifled by the terrified scream of a horse. Gideon ran hard toward the noise, certain he would find both women slain upon his arrival.

He skidded to a stop at the edge of the clearing. A boar, with large curved tusks, ran circles in the open area. Shreds of emerald cloth, that was once Sharyn's cloak, clung to the blood covered snout of the beast. Gideon's heart tumbled to his belly.

Sharyn.

"Damn! Ruined a perfectly good horse," Alpin said.

Gideon's gaze flashed to the horses. The smallest of the animals would have to be destroyed. Its legs were shredded from the boar's sharp tusks and deep gashes covered its belly.

The boar squealed, followed by a thud as it slammed its head against the base of a tree. Gideon looked up. Relief surged through his veins when he saw Sharyn hanging on to a bough.

The beast had not killed her.

"Put the horse out of its misery and calm the others," he said to Alpin. "I'll take care of the boar, but watch yourself. He could turn for the horses again."

Sword held firmly in one hand, Gideon circled behind the beast. The animal was in a frenzy and eager for a kill. Gideon drew his dirk and crept toward the beast.

Above the noise from the horses and the boar, the sharp crack of wood filled the air, followed by the frantic shriek of Sharyn's maid. Gideon glanced up and noticed the bough was about to break away from the tree.

Determination slid up his spine. He had hunted boar before and knew what the animal could do when cornered. He would not surrender Sharyn to such a fate.

The animal moved away from the tree and paused. Head lowered, it prepared for another attack. Gideon leapt forward and cleaved the animal behind the neck with his sword.

The beast shrieked in pain and bolted. The hilt of the sword jerked from Gideon's hand. Dirk at the ready, he waited as the animal squealed and ran in a tight, bloody circle around him. In the next instant, the boar, enraged by pain, charged straight at Gideon. He sidestepped the animal and in one swift movement, brought the dirk around and into the beast's heart. The boar staggered once and dropped to the ground, dead.

"Gideon!"

Sharyn's frantic call drew his gaze. She dangled from the unsteady branch, her feet suspended over the earth. In all his life he could never remember being this scared. He pushed himself away from the ground and ran to her.

Her bottom swayed level with his eyes. Gideon placed his hands on her waist and tugged. "There now," he said as he pulled her into his arms. "I'm here, lass, I'm here."

He felt her tremble against his chest. The frantic beat of her heart melded with his. He closed his eyes and held her close.

"I -- thought -- I -- would -- die," she gasped between breaths. Her arms circled his neck and she clung to him. "What -- took -- you -- so -- long?"

Gideon smiled. "I was preoccupied." He carried her to another tree and settled himself on the ground, Sharyn cradled in his arms. How long had it been since someone looked to him for protection? He could not remember.

"Come now, lassie, I willna drop you."

Alpin's voice broke through the oblivious world where Gideon had retreated with Sharyn. He looked over to the tree where Bridget continued to cling to the branch. Alpin stood below, arms outstretched, a mighty scowl on his face.

"Me arms are getting weary, lass. Be good now, and turn loose of the bough."

At that moment the branch broke. Bridget screamed moments before she landed on Alpin. Both of them sprawled against the earth, the limb still clutched in her arms.

Despite himself, Gideon chuckled. Sharyn lifted her head. "What amuses you?"

He looked down into her violet eyes and for the first time, realized she wept. Something twisted deep within his chest. He lifted a bloodstained hand and wiped away the moisture that clung to her cheeks. "Your maid just spread Alpin against the earth."

Sharyn turned her face toward the tree where she had sought refuge.

"I pray Bridget did not harm him." A moment later the gentle brush of her sweet sigh caressed him and she rested her cheek against his chest once more.

A torrent of emotions Gideon could not identify sped through his heart. Relief that he had arrived in time to save her overwhelmed him. Sitting here, with this troublesome woman nestled in his lap, felt good. Too good. Yet for the life of him, he could not bring himself to move her away.

It had been so very long since he held a woman like this. Surely there would be no harm in indulging for just a few moments.

For, once they rose from this spot, Sharyn would belong to the Mackenzie again. For now, in this scarce moment in time, she belonged to him.

The plod of horses and groans from Alpin and Brodic sliced through the dusk that kissed the earth goodnight. Bone weary, hungry, and still frightened by the incident with the boar, Sharyn did not protest riding with Gideon.

The man was a mystery. One moment he said he wanted to be rid of her, and the next, he held her as if she were as priceless as the goblet tucked behind the saddle.

"He called you an outlaw."

"Who did?"

"That Mackenzie, back at the croft, before all the chaos started." Sharyn turned in the saddle and looked up at Gideon's dusk-kissed face. "Are you?"

The darkness could not disguise the frown that marred his brow, nor the resignation that touched his eyes, moments before he looked away. His arms moved around her as he adjusted the reins. "That would depend on which side of the crown you stand."

Sharyn grimaced and squirmed against him. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"'Tis simple," he said, and continued to peruse the lane ahead. "If you stand on the side that supports David, Scotland's true king, then I am naught but a loyal subject. If you side with Balliol, I am a brigand."

His modest words stirred sympathy in Sharyn's heart. 'Twas a similar fate the people of England faced not so long ago. After the death of Longshanks, the people stood either in favor of the queen and her lover Mortimer, or the deposed king. There was no middle ground.

She studied him in the light that wavered between the lush branches of trees. With care, she lifted her hand and gently touched his beard.

Instantly, his gaze snapped to hers. The look in his eye caused her no fear. She silently wondered what lay behind the facade of hair.

With care she moistened her lips and asked, "Is that the reason you wear this?"

Eternity seemed to pass before he replied. "'Tis the reason for many of my actions."

Sharyn lowered her gaze and let her fingers slip through the coarse hair that covered his face. She adjusted herself against him again and tried to alleviate the press of the pommel against her side.

Warmth seeped through the thin tunic and wool that encased his body. It warmed her as a cloak could never do. And, while he could still benefit from a scrubbing, he did not offend her as much as he had before.

In fact, she found herself liking the feel of his arms around her and the beat of his heart against hers.

Again Sharyn vied for a more comfortable position.

"Would you cease twisting about?" His rough voice brushed the top of her head.

"If you had allowed me to ride astride the saddle, I would have no need to squirm," she replied and tried once more to escape the bothersome press of his blade. "Your sword is jabbing my hip."

His arms tightened and a frustrated sigh escaped him. "That, my fine lady, is not my sword."

Sharyn looked up at him. "Then what, pray tell, is it?"

A smile curled his lips and one dark eyebrow rose. "Continue to move that shapely bottom of yours against me, and I fear you will find out."

Heat flooded her cheeks as his meaning sank into her weary brain. She lowered her gaze and tried very hard not to move. "Mayhap you should have tied my things to the front of your saddle, instead of the rear."

"Mayhap I should have left them in the woods to rot with the horse."

Sharyn grimaced and glanced up at him. "'Tis not my fault I was set upon by a boar."

"I dinna say it 'twas." He groaned and adjusted himself in the saddle. "You place a high value on a parcel that surely contains naught but a few hair ribbons and a mirror."

His words stirred her anger. Did he think her so vain that she would not part with such frivolous items? "I -- " she stopped herself from telling him what was tucked in the bundle. If he learned of the chalice, she would never see it again.

"Aye," he prompted.

Sharyn frowned at him. "Think what you will, Gideon of Ross." She squirmed in the saddle once more. "One day you will learn that I am not vain."

"You willna be in my company long enough for me to learn that." He tugged upon his reins and nodded. "Mackenzie awaits."

Trepidation slithered through Sharyn's veins. Slowly, her gaze followed Gideon's.

In the distance, set against the backdrop of a large loch, the harsh outline of a fortress assaulted the starry sky. Orange light glimmered from openings slashed through the stones. Torches flickered an eerie dance over the earth before the keep. Four men lay still upon the ground while others milled about, preparing to ride.

"I see the dead arrived safely at their destination," Brodic said as he halted his mount beside Gideon's. "Mackenzie will be out for blood."

Sharyn trembled and pressed herself against the firm warmth of Gideon's chest. The men on the ground were the ones from the croft. She lowered her gaze

to the pommel. Did Mackenzie prepare to search for Gideon and his men? For her?

Alpin pulled his mount along side and grimaced at Bridget, who sat behind the small man and clutched him tightly about the waist. "I have need of me spine, lass. Ease your hold."

"You canna leave the women here, Chief," Brodic said, his voice a quiet whisper in the still night. "Mackenzie will -- "

"Continue his search for them," Gideon said. "I have no choice but to leave them here and ride away."

"Aye, you do, you stubborn fool," Alpin frowned.

Sharyn turned her gaze to Gideon. He looked rigid and hard as stone in the faint light of the moon. Still, she felt safe with him and would rather take her chances with him and his men than with the Mackenzie.

"I will fall to my knees and beg you if I must," she said, her voice soft. "Please do not abandon me here."

Gideon shivered moments before his gaze met hers. What thoughts ruled his brain? How could he so casually leave her and Bridget to a man who tried to slay her before she could arrive at his door? And, now that she was within Mackenzie's grasp, if Gideon should leave her behind, what fate would await her beyond those walls?

"Please," she whispered and lifted a hand to his rough cheek.

Slowly, he raised his hand and covered hers. Through his touch she felt the despair and doubt that clouded his thoughts. "I -- "

"God's teeth, 'tis Balliol."

Brodic's harsh whisper drew Sharyn's gaze toward the fortress. Her fingers slipped from Gideon's as she watched a group of men ride around the edge of the fortress and halt beside the dead. How Brodic knew their identity was beyond her. The distance shrouded their faces.

"We will be butchered," Bridget shrieked and began to sob hysterically. The wail startled Sharyn, spooked the horses and drew the attention of the men at the fortress.

"Christ," Gideon swore and tugged sharply on his reins.

One arm wrapped firmly around Sharyn's waist, Gideon spurred his horse into a gallop that carried them away from the Mackenzie.

Sharyn clutched the pommel and tried to squelch the fear that caused her heart to beat in rhythm with the flight of the horses.

"They are in pursuit," Brodic shouted as he raced past Gideon. "I will lead the way to safety."

A shudder passed through Sharyn. Gideon's hold tightened around her as he followed Brodic. From behind she heard Bridget's frightened sobs and Alpin's gruff voice trying to silence her.

The horses topped a knoll then skidded down the other side. Sharyn clung to the pommel and prayed the horses would not stumble. Brodic led the way through the shadows of trees, around a shimmering loch and up another steep

incline. The moon dipped behind some clouds and shrouded the area in darkness, yet the horses never slowed, nor faltered in their stride.

Through the shadows echoed the haunting cry of an owl. Moments later, light spilled through a pair of tall gates that slowly opened for them. The trio raced through the opening and drew to a halt.

Terrified, Sharyn looked around the area. A tower fortress stood in the center of a bailey. Crude buildings lined the wall that enclosed the area. Men who looked as if they cleaved children daily for sport ran through the small bailey and closed the gates. They lifted a thick wooden bar into place to keep out unwanted visitors.

Gideon dismounted then roughly pulled Sharyn from the saddle. The moment her feet touched the earth, the horse was hurried away by one of the men who occupied this tower.

"Where are we?" she asked as Gideon pulled her behind him. "I need my things."

"I dare say you can survive without your ribbons for now," Gideon barked.

Sharyn stumbled over the hem of her gown in an effort to keep up with his long strides. They rounded one corner of the tower and descended a set of narrow stone steps. At the base, a woman stood in the doorway bathed in an orange glow of light. Her expanded girth and ample bosom heaved as she urged them forward.

"Make haste," she said and stepped inside far enough for them to enter.

The moment Alpin hauled the weeping Bridget through the opening, the woman slammed the door and hurried across the rough stone floor toward another barrier near Brodic.

Sharyn trembled so badly she had difficulty thinking. Clearly 'twas a kitchen they entered. The heat of the room, combined with the aroma of food, caused her stomach to roil.

"Get yourselves below," said the woman as she halted beside Brodic. "I will join you as soon as I ken 'tis safe."

Brodic smiled, pinched the woman's ruddy cheek, then led the way through the narrow opening. Gideon ducked and followed. Light sputtered from sparse torches that rested in iron rings. The weak fire danced over another set of narrow steps that coiled downward. Brodic plucked one of the torches from its ring and led the way.

The damp, musty smell of a cellar assaulted Sharyn's nostrils. This, combined with the events of the day on an empty stomach, surged bile to her throat. She forced the bitterness aside and tugged upon the wrist held in Gideon's grasp. "Where are we?"

At the base of the steps, Gideon pulled Sharyn through yet another doorway, hidden in the stones. Once inside, he released his crushing hold.

She shoved her hair out of her face and looked around the room. Shelves along one wall held blankets, candles and pewter ware. In the center of the room sat a crude table and, beside it, a circle of smooth stones, its center piled with fresh wood.

“Shriek like that again when enemy troops are near and I will leave you to them!”

Gideon's angry voice drew Sharyn's gaze. He stood before a weeping Bridget, who did her best to cower behind Alpin's small frame.

“Och, now, Chief, she was frightened,” Alpin said and did his best to shield Bridget. “Besides, we got away. Balliol willna find us here.”

“Where is here?” Sharyn's voice drew Gideon's gaze. The anger in his dark eyes made her retreat a step.

Brodic cleared his throat. “‘Tis the keep of Munro.” He knelt before the stones and used the torch to start a fire. “He has no loyalty to Balliol or Mackenzie.” He climbed to his feet and placed the torch in a nearby ring. “We seek refuge here when needed.”

Gideon grunted and began to pace. “‘Twould not have been needed had the woman kept her bloody mouth shut.”

“I see that thistle is still firmly in place,” Alpin said and led Bridget toward the fire. “Remove it whilst I settle the lasses and await Agnes' return.”

“Agnes?” Sharyn asked as she rubbed her arms and moved toward the fire.

“Aye,” Brodic replied, a slight grin on his face. “Me woman, you see. She runs the house of Munro and tends us whilst we are here.”

Across the small fire, Sharyn met Gideon's gaze. The troubled expression in his eyes sent shivers through her soul. ‘Twas clear he wanted no part of her, Bridget, or their plight, and silently cursed the day they met.

She lowered her head and turned away. On the morrow she would think of a way to return herself and Bridget to England. Then, at last, Gideon would have what he wished.

Chapter Six

At this moment, Gideon did not know if he should strangle Bridget or thank her. While her untimely shrieks had drawn Balliol and his troops upon them, she also saved him from a harsh decision.

What to do about Sharyn.

From his position on the floor beside the door, his gaze slid to the woman who haunted his every waking moment. She lay curled in sleep on the far side of the glowing remains of their fire. With her arm tucked beneath her head, her lashes fanned against alabaster cheeks, she looked young and vulnerable.

He could not wipe away the image of her sitting before him, her eyes reflecting the pale moon as she pleaded with him not to abandon her to Mackenzie.

God's truth, at that moment, he had almost granted her plea.

What a fool he was to have his thoughts swayed by a comely lass with eyes more enchanting than the sea. Her gentle touch disturbed him in ways he had never experienced before.

Gideon closed his eyes and rested his head against the cool wall. Should she stay with him, Mackenzie would discover his haven by the loch. Should she leave -- he shuddered at the mere thought.

A quiet whimper drew his gaze back to Sharyn. Even in the dusky light, he saw her shiver and curl herself more tightly into a bundle of torn skirts. Gideon frowned. The daft woman would catch her death in the cold bowels of this ancient keep.

With care not to wake the others, Gideon climbed to his feet and retrieved a blanket from the shelves. The musty odor of seldom used cloth filled the air as he shook the folds from the blanket. He knelt beside Sharyn and eased the cover over her slender body.

In her sleep, she continued to shiver so Gideon tucked the blanket snugly around her. As if his fingers had a mind of their own, they strayed to her head. Hair the texture of fine silk slid beneath his caress.

A shudder passed through his soul. God's blood, she was merely a woman, naught more. Yet, he had never felt hair such as hers before.

His touch strayed to her cheek. The feel reminded him of velvet warmed by the sun. Sharyn moaned and moved against his hand.

Lord, she was so tiny. How had she endured two days of hard riding with nary a complaint? He knew men who would be hard pressed to maintain the rigid pace he set.

And she was naught but a slight Englishwoman.

The sound of a body passing wind filled the chamber. Gideon frowned and glanced at the source. Alpin. He had half a mind to make the man ride down wind

from now on. Bridget slept on, blissfully unaware of the little man curled at her feet. She did not so much as twitch when Alpin rolled onto his back and began to snore. God, they were all exhausted.

A weary sigh escaped Gideon. He climbed to his feet and resumed his position by the door.

Sharyn would love Skibo. The view of the sea and wide expanse of land rich with game. The beautiful stained glass and polished marble.

He prayed all would be clear on the morrow and he could return to the croft by the loch. 'Twas there he knew peace. Aye, it was not Skibo, yet that keep was lost to him. One day he would reclaim what was so wrongfully taken.

Again, his gaze slid to Sharyn and his heart kissed his spine. Years could pass before David could return and reclaim his throne. Until that time, all Gideon had to offer any lass was a leaky croft and worn wool.

He closed his eyes and shut out his foolish thoughts. Clearly fatigue had softened his brain. After all, Sharyn was an Englishwoman and him a loyal Scot.

'Twas all that ruled his life from the moment of his birth. He could not change now. Not for Sharyn. Not for any lass comely enough to catch his eye.

His country was worth more to him than a life of torment twined around a woman's slender finger. Hell would freeze before he succumbed to such a fate.

Pain lured Sharyn from slumber. Her eyes drifted open. She blinked to clear her vision.

Across the glowing embers of the fire, her gaze settled on Gideon. He slept sitting up, his head propped against the cold stone walls of their haven. One leg outstretched, the other bent at the knee with an arm laid over it.

The man had to be freezing. She frowned and forced her cramped, sore body to move. Every muscle screamed in protest as she pushed herself away from the dirt floor.

A blanket tumbled from her shoulders and pooled in her lap. She rubbed the kinks from her neck and frowned at the cloth.

Who had covered her, and why? Again her gaze slid to Gideon.

Through the haze of her mind she recalled feeling warmth seep through her bones and the gentle brush of calloused fingers against her cheek. In the fanciful world of dreams, the tenderness of a giant Scot brought comfort.

She shivered and lowered her gaze to her lap. 'Twas no dream, yet why would Gideon show such care toward her? Her memory was not so short that she had forgotten the events of yesterday.

His anger and harsh words. His unyielding pride.

As quietly as possible, Sharyn struggled to her feet. The blanket fell to the floor as she stretched her aching body to life.

The sight of her maid paused her. Though Alpin had lain some distance from Bridget when they had bedded down, he now slept beside her and the maid had curled herself against his backside. Sharyn frowned. 'Twas most improper

for a lady, or a maid, to sleep in such an intimate position with a man who was not her husband. She took a step to awaken the woman, then halted. They all needed their rest.

Again her gaze moved to Gideon. She remembered the warmth of his body against hers as she rode before him last eve. His strength and power assured her all would be well. 'Twas a feeling that granted her peace and solace. At the time she wished it would never end.

And he wanted only to be rid of her.

Sharyn grimaced and retrieved the blanket from the floor. The man may be a heartless barbarian, yet he had shown her an ounce of kindness. The least she could do was return the favor.

Each step increased the rhythm of her heart. Should the man waken, no doubt he would bark and growl at her like a rabid dog.

If that happened, she would bark and growl right back.

With care, Sharyn knelt beside Gideon and gently draped the blanket over him.

Lord he was large. 'Twould take two of these sparse blankets to properly cover a man his size. Being careful not to wake him, she slid the blanket so it covered his torso. With the amount of his legs showing, that would be the part most chilled.

Images of what lay beneath his kilt drifted through her mind. Heat flooded her cheeks with the memory. How did the Scots justify wearing such indecent clothing?

"I fetched this for you."

Gideon's hushed voice snapped her gaze to his. Through the poor light, she saw his eyes glisten as he watched her.

Sharyn swallowed hard and told herself to look away. Her eyes refused to obey. "I thought you must be chilled," she managed to whisper.

Silence filled the air and rang in her ears. Still, Sharyn could not look away from his mesmerizing gaze. Even with the hair that covered his face, she felt drawn to him, familiar with him in a way she did not understand nor could explain.

Foolish is what she was, she chided. With extreme effort, she forced her gaze to the ground and started to rise.

"Come, sit beside me until Brodic and Agnes return." He lifted the edge of the blanket in invitation for her to join him.

Never, was Sharyn's first thought. Her mother would turn in her grave if she entertained such a notion.

"I promise to keep my hands above the cover."

Her gaze flashed to his. She wasn't certain, but she thought she saw a sparkle of merriment in his eyes. The shelves held additional blankets, yet the rapture of his eyes implored her to ignore their solitary warmth. With a swallow for courage, she crawled forward and settled herself beside him.

The weight of the blanket caressed her legs. Sharyn stared at her hands, clasped in her lap, and tried to ignore the giant Scot by her side. 'Twas a difficult

task to accomplish. The length of his leg touched hers and the heat from his arm seeped through her shoulder.

With a swallow for courage, she dared a glance at him. "What will you do with me now, Gideon of Ross?"

His gaze held hers. Through the faint light, she watched an array of emotions cross his face. What they were, she did not know. Yet, the look he bestowed upon her lured butterflies to life in her stomach.

"I do not know," he finally replied. With care, he lifted his hand and gently cupped her cheek. "You are so delicate and soft. 'Twould be a sin to see you crushed at the hand of the Mackenzie."

The caress of his thumb against her cheek sent her pulse skittering through her veins. This is what she remembered in the hours when she dreamt. The gentleness in a touch from a man used to wielding a sword and vanquishing the foe.

"Yet, I know not what else can be done." His thumb strayed to the corner of her mouth. "I need to be rid of you, Sharyn of Nottingham."

The hush of his voice touched her soul and she knew then that he struggled with himself over what should be done, and what was right. Her hand rose to cover his. Staring up into his eyes, she knew if she chose her words properly, Gideon would do as she asked.

"Keep me with you -- for a short time, so I can learn why I was set upon by the Mackenzie."

He frowned and his fingers stiffened beneath hers. "Lass, I cannot -- "

"Would you prefer to have me beg?" she asked and held his hand against her flesh. "I vow to cause you no strife if you help me learn the truth."

The handle of the door rattled moments before it swung inward to allow Brodic entrance, followed by his stout wife.

Sharyn released Gideon's hand and looked up at the couple who roused Alpin and Bridget from slumber. Gideon tossed aside the blanket they shared and climbed to his feet.

"What is the word?" he asked as he brushed the creases from his clothes. "Is Balliol gone?"

"Aye, yet I canna say for how long," Brodic replied. "He kens Munro hides you."

Sharyn stumbled to her feet and leaned against the wall. Gideon turned to her and frowned. "You swear you will cause me no strife, yet what do you call this?"

Tears stung her eyes and frustration coiled through her veins. "'Tis not entirely my fault you are a hunted man. Balliol would search for you whether I was in your company or not."

Alpin's chuckle echoed off the closed in walls of the chamber. "Och, aye, she has a point there, Chief."

"Silence!" Gideon snapped. Although he held a quieting hand in the direction of his man, his gaze did not stray from her. He needed no additional words. His contempt for her shone clearly in his eyes.

Inside, Sharyn trembled and her anger surged to life. If the man wanted to quarrel, she would not disappoint him.

"I grow weary of begging to be in the presence of a man who would rather see me dead than set aside his pride for the sake of an Englishwoman." Sharyn wiped a hand over her eyes and clenched her jaw to keep from sobbing. "You are not so very special, my fine barbarian. Flee with your men and leave me behind. I would rather risk all the troops in Scotland, unarmed and on my own, than to be in your company a moment longer."

Sharyn fled through the door and stumbled up the stairs. Damn Gideon to hell and back. Right now, she wanted to go home, to England, and she would not allow Gideon or anyone else in this fortress to stop her.

Tears hampered her vision as she pushed through the door at the top of the steps. The heat of the room engulfed her and she felt she would suffocate if she did not reach fresh air soon.

"Lady, you should not be in here."

Sharyn ignored the person who spoke to her, whoever it may have been. One thought ruled her brain at the moment. Putting as much distance as possible between herself and the giant Scot who called himself Gideon.

"You are such an arse!" Alpin snapped.

Gideon ignored him. He clenched his jaw and stared at the doorway through which Sharyn had fled. Christ, what was the matter with him? His emotions were as fickle as a woman heavy with child.

A kick to the backside caused him to stumble. Fury raced through his veins. He drew his dirk and turned to face Alpin.

Bridget screamed and began to cry, but still managed to have the presence of mind to hide behind the scrawny man. Damn it all, he was in no mood for her, Alpin, or the condemning silence of the others.

"You push me too far, my friend." With extreme effort to gain control over his temper, Gideon returned his blade to his boot. "Silence the weeper or I will toss her out the gates."

Without another word, Gideon turned on his heel and followed the path Sharyn had taken.

Triple damnation to any man who had such a woman cross his path, he thought as he climbed the stairs to the kitchen. He was not wrong here, no matter what Sharyn, her maid or his men thought. With half of Scotland out for his head, the best thing for all concerned would be for them to part company.

He stepped into the smothering heat of the kitchen and promptly drew the curious gazes of a dozen women at work.

"The poor dear ran through here and mumbled something about the stables," one of the women offered.

The information lured giggles from those gathered. Gideon ignored their bait and continued on his quest. The men of Munro would not let a flighty English lass out of their gates, not without his approval.

Thick highland mist clung to his skin the moment he stepped through the door. The murky dawn matched his mood perfectly, he mused, and mounted the steps that led to the bailey.

Sharyn. One moment he wanted to kiss her, taste her lips, feel them part beneath his. The next, he wanted to wrap his hands around her ivory throat and squeeze.

Why should he feel like a fiend for his actions? By Christ's blue eyes, he was the injured party here, not her.

He crossed to the stables and stepped into the dim interior. Through the haze of dust motes that danced in the obscure rays of light, Gideon heard Sharyn sob.

His gut twisted and pulled his mouth into a frown. This was not his fault! In silence, he followed the echo of her woeful cry. Each step churned regret through his veins. Mayhap he had been a wee bit harsh with the lass. Then again, if Brodic had not entered when he had, Gideon may have gotten the taste of Sharyn he craved.

At the last stall, he paused. Sharyn struggled with a saddle, doing her best to place it on the back of -- his horse! Not only was the wench foolish enough to carry through her threat to leave, but she thought to take his horse to boot!

Lips pressed together, he expelled a breath through his nostrils. The daft woman did not realize the back of the animal was taller than she. 'Twould take her all day to saddle the beast.

"Drop the saddle, Sharyn."

She gifted him with a teary glance from over her shoulder. "Go to the devil." A soft hiccup escaped her as she tried once more to toss the saddle over the back of the horse.

Gideon raised an eyebrow. "And you chastise me for cursing," he muttered. His anger subsided, he stepped behind Sharyn and plucked the saddle from her grasp. "I said, leave it be."

She stumbled away from him, the fire of Hades in her eyes. "Then saddle the beast for me."

"I will not," he said and tossed the saddle back onto its post. Hands planted on his hips, he met her gaze and grimaced. "You are not going anywhere, especially on my mount."

The laughter that bubbled from her throat bespoke her anger. "Oh, you cocksure fool. Would you care to place a wager on that?"

Gideon couldn't help himself. Something about her temper, her fire, pleased him, lured feelings to life in him he had never known before. "Aye, lass, I would." He stepped toward her. This was one argument he would not lose.

Sharyn retreated. "Stand away from me you -- you -- heathen!"

She moved away from him, along the side of the stall, until she reached the corner. Gideon smiled. He moved with care toward her, never pausing until mere inches separated them.

"Heathen," he said, his voice soft. For some reason, he liked seeing her temper, even if it did dampen his a bit. "Is that the worst you can think to call me?"

Her lower lip trembled and large tears seeped from her eyes. She wiped them away with angry fingers and growled. "Dare not mock me."

She planted her hands in the center of his chest and shoved. Her rage caught him unaware. Gideon grasped her arms as he stumbled backward. His feet entangled with her gown and he lost his balance. He landed against the earth with a thud, Sharyn sprawled across his chest.

"Release me," she snapped and squirmed against him.

The horse snorted and twisted in the stall. Gideon braced himself and rolled them toward the wall, away from the deadly hooves of his horse. He settled on top of Sharyn, effectively pinning her to the ground.

Fresh tears seeped from her dark lashes as she struggled beneath his weight. "Lift your oversized carcass off me so I can knock that empty head of yours off your shoulders before I leave."

"Lass, you are not leaving without me."

An angry growl lodged in her throat. She freed her arms and proceeded to beat her fists against his shoulders. "I despise you, Gideon of Ross. I loathe you, your pride, and this wretched country where the sun never shines."

Gideon pressed his body firmly against hers and tried to capture her flailing fists. 'Twas the only way to subdue her, to let her vent her pent up wrath.

"You rob me of my breath, you overgrown barbarian." The fingers of one hand gripped his arm, followed by the bite of her nails. "Get off me!"

Damnation, those nails hurt! "Still yourself," he said and pinned one wrist against the hay strewn floor. Impatience licked through his veins as her claws sank deeper into his cloth covered skin. The lingering scent of lavender mingled with the tang of crushed hay. More than anger began to stir in his blood.

"I want to leave," she sobbed and continued her battle. "I hate -- "

Unable to bear hearing her utter another misplaced vow of hatred for him, Gideon covered her lips with his own. As he swallowed her contemptible words, the salt of her tears swirled around his tongue.

Her body tensed and her struggles intensified. Still, Gideon kissed her. His tongue swept her mouth and explored the warm depths that haunted him overlong.

Sharyn's tender whimper inched through the haze that surrounded his brain. He eased his hold on her and reveled in his first taste of her, the only taste he would most likely ever have.

Beneath him, the tautness eased from her body. His tongue touched hers and she responded. The movement, so innocent and provocative, surged blood to his loins. Her claws extracted from his flesh and he felt her arm creep around his shoulders.

God's blood. Never in his life had a lass responded to him like this. Nor had he felt so senseless about a woman before. 'Twas foolishness, yet it was a folly he longed to explore further.

"Och, I told you the Chief and the lass fancied each other."

Gideon paused as Alpin's words echoed through the stall. He lifted his head and stared down into Sharyn's beautiful eyes. Lord help him, but he wanted to kiss her again, witnesses and all.

"Och, aye, 'tis how I subdue me woman when she has her dander up and is ready to flail the flesh from me bones."

Alpin laughed. "Now, we ken which bone she wants when she acts like that."

Mortification touched Sharyn's eyes moments before a beautiful blush colored her cheeks. She turned her face toward the wall and whispered, "Let me rise."

Reluctantly, Gideon lifted himself off Sharyn, then helped her to her feet. He brushed straw from his clothes and fixed Alpin with what he prayed was a deadly glare.

"Watch your tongue in the presence of a lass." His gaze flitted to Bridget. Her mouth agape, she peered over Alpin's shoulder, astonishment etched upon her face. "Say a word and you remain here."

The maid met his gaze and promptly clamped her mouth shut.

Gideon dared a glance at Sharyn. Her eyes sparkled, whether with tears, or ire, he could not say. Flushed cheeks and full lips swollen from his kiss called to him, begged him to go to her and take her in his arms. But, he could not. 'Twas a mistake to kiss her like that, yet she left him no choice. And, in the end, she had returned the kiss they never should have shared.

Disgusted with himself for his lack of control, Gideon frowned and shouldered his way past his men. "Saddle the horses and prepare to ride. I want to be home by dark."

Chapter Seven

"You have straw tangled in your hair."

Sharyn grimaced as Bridget's fingers snatched at the unseen obstacles that clung to her tresses.

She and the maid shared a horse on the journey back to the croft. The men rode ahead of them, for which Sharyn was most grateful. As it was she did not know if she could ever look any of them in the eye again.

Each plod of the horse reminded her of what had transpired in the stables of Munro. For the life of her she did not know how it came to be that Gideon kissed her.

One moment she wanted to kill him. The next, she returned his kiss with a fire that she did not understand, and knew she could never control if unleashed.

"'Tis shocked I was, milady, to see such a display," Bridget sniffed and tugged at Sharyn's hair. Sharyn could just imagine the lift of the woman's nose and the condemnation that would touch her eyes should she turn and look.

"For a lady of your station, 'twas most improper."

Anger flickered to life in Sharyn's belly. She snatched her tousled braid from the woman's grasp, glanced over her shoulder at Bridget and frowned. "You are a fine one to spout morals at me. 'Twas just this morn I saw you snuggled up to Alpin like a familiar lover."

"Milady!" Bridget gasped.

"Throw no stones at me unless you are prepared to have some tossed back."

Silence lingered between them as they traveled through a valley shrouded in mist. Blasted country. How did the grass remain green when there was no sun to coax it to life?

Movement from the men captured her attention. Gideon halted beside a loch and lifted himself from the saddle. The moment his feet touched the earth, his gaze sought hers.

Heat flooded her cheeks as her horse approached and slowed to a stop. She averted her gaze and stared at the pommel. Looking into his eyes, knowing how tender he could be if he so desired, was more than she could tolerate.

"We've stopped to let the horses drink and give them a rest," Alpin grumbled as he helped Bridget to the ground. "Mayhap the sojourn will dislodge Gideon's thistle. Until then, come rest yourself by the water."

Sharyn's heart lodged in her ribs. An interlude was the last thing she needed right now. All she longed for was to lock herself away in the croft and avoid the overbearing Scot.

"Lass?" Gideon's voice made her start and drew her gaze. "I offered my assistance."

The moment he touched her, Sharyn's mind assaulted her with memories. His touch, his kiss, his tenderness. She trembled, yet allowed him to pull her from the saddle. The moment her feet touched the earth, she lowered her gaze and tried to step away. 'Twas difficult to do with the giant still holding her and the horse at her back.

"Sharyn?"

She swallowed hard, yet refused to raise her head. "Aye?"

"Look at me, lass."

"I would rather not."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I have had my fill of cocksure Scots for one day."

One arm slipped around her waist while he cupped her cheek with his free hand. He lifted her face toward his. Sharyn closed her eyes.

Displeasure laced his sigh. "If you do not look upon me, I vow to kiss you again."

Sharyn's eyes snapped open.

Gideon smiled.

She was not amused. "You gained what you wished, now release me. My maid already thinks ill of me."

"She thinks ill of you simply because we shared a kiss?"

Sharyn placed her hands on his chest and tried to move out of his grasp. "We shared naught, my fine barbarian. You kissed me."

"Aye, and you kissed me back."

"I did no such thing!" She shoved against his chest once more and managed to break his disturbing hold. With a deep breath to calm her erratic heart, she walked toward the loch and prayed he would not follow.

"Och, now that I recall the events, you are correct. 'Twas not a proper kiss by any means."

Sharyn knew she would regret it, but she paused beneath the swaying branches of a willow and turned to him. He stood so close she nearly bumped her nose on his chest.

She swallowed hard and pressed her back against the rough bark of the tree. "What do you mean, 'twas not a proper kiss?"

A coy smile touched his lips. He rested an arm beside her and leaned toward her ear. "Och, lass, when I truly kiss you, you will know."

A shudder passed through her soul and she closed her eyes. Merciful heaven, if that was naught but a way to stop her from leaving Munro, she was not sure she wanted to know what a true kiss was like.

"This talk of kisses that were or were not is of no importance to me," she said and opened her eyes. Did the man have to stand so close to her? "What does matter is what you plan to do now? About Mackenzie, I mean."

Gideon frowned and the merriment fled from his eyes. A weary sigh escaped him and he pushed himself away from the tree.

Relief tumbled through her veins, yet at the same moment, she longed for him to return.

"My men think ill of me for taking you on this wayward journey." He paused and cast her a sidelong look. "If they had their way, we would have never left the croft."

Sharyn's heart tickled her ribs. At least she had someone on her side in this hideous land. "Yet, you ignored them. Why?"

A sad chuckle passed his lips. He shook his head and stared across the mist-covered loch. "There is a price upon my head, lass. I thought you understood that." His gaze returned to hers. "The choices I face are few. Until David returns to his throne, I am a hunted man."

Sharyn stared at the hem of her tattered gown. Guilt gnawed in her belly. Since the attack on the lane, which now seemed ages ago, her thoughts had centered around herself. She'd expected Gideon and his men to halt all things in their lives and tend to her.

"'Tis no doubt Balliol will continue his search." Gideon's voice drew her gaze once more. He looked so very tired, sad and alone. The life of a brigand was clearly not a desirable one. "Now that Mackenzie's mission has been thwarted, he too will be roaming this land, with you and I as his prey."

"The men who held Bridget perished," she said and dared a step his way. "Will he know 'twas you and your men who slew his guards?"

Another sad chuckle passed his lips and he gazed into the misty sky. "He will ken."

She did not ask how he was so certain, for she was not sure she wished to hear the reply. Sharyn stopped beside him and twined her fingers before her. How had things gotten so out of hand in such a short time?

"I'm sorry, Gideon," she whispered and stared at the vivid green beneath her feet. "I have been naught but trouble to you since the moment I tumbled from my horse. You should have left me in the bracken at the brae."

The gentle brush of his hand against her cheek drew her gaze to his. "Lass, do not ask my pardon for events you had no control over."

"But --"

He placed a finger over her lips. "The choice was mine. My men voiced their opinion, yet in the end, 'twas my decision to bring you along."

And your decision to be rid of me, she thought, yet did not say. Without another word, he lowered his hand and glanced toward his men. Alpin waited patiently while Bridget sipped from a gourd dipper. Brodic stroked the mane of a horse while it drank its reflection from the loch.

"We best resume our journey," he said and turned his gaze on her. "Would you like some water before we begin?"

She shook her head and wondered at the change that had come over him. Since this morn, he was different, yet the same. 'Twas puzzling indeed to try and figure out a man such as him.

"Do not fret so, Sharyn of Nottingham. Once we have eaten and gained sufficient rest, the answer to our dilemma will present itself."

He turned and whistled for his mount. The animal lifted its head and trotted to where Gideon stood. Reins gathered in his hands, he mounted and turned his

gaze on her. The depths of his periwinkle eyes glimmered with a reserved light that caused her knees to tremble. What thoughts ruled his brain, she wondered.

With the grace of a raven spreading its wings for flight, Gideon offered her his hand. Sharyn quivered at the mere thought of sharing a saddle with him again.

In a tender voice he said, "All will be well, lass. I promise."

Sharyn believed him.

Of all the men who had ever been born, Gideon knew he was the grandest fool of them all.

He was naught but a malleable, simpering, dolt. One kiss from a comely lass and he spouted promises of grandeur and could think of little else but kissing the lass again.

Having her tucked before him in the saddle was foolish as well. Yet, for the life of him, Gideon could not bring himself to ride alone. There was something bewitching about the lass, something that called to his lonely soul and tugged at his secluded heart.

"How long will the reprieve be this time?" Sharyn adjusted herself in the saddle and turned a violet gaze on him. "Balliol and Mackenzie will continue their search for you."

And you, Gideon thought, yet refused to form into words. He tightened his arms around her and followed a narrow path cut through the forest. "'Tis for me to worry about, lass, not you."

Again Sharyn squirmed against him, vying for a better view of him, he assumed. Her tantalizing mouth turned into a frown and the tip of her moist tongue dampened her lips.

"Yet, worry I shall, my fine barbarian. Part of your troubles are my doing."

Gideon trembled and tried to force his thoughts onto the concerns at hand. Yet, God's teeth, if she did not cease looking upon him with such soulful eyes, or tempting him with the press of her body against his, he knew he would carry her off into the woods, far away from the others, and sate his growing hunger.

"I can send word to Edward," she said and turned so her back rested against his chest once more. "When he hears of the massacre, he can remove the Mackenzie thorn from your side."

"Edward?" Gideon's heart stilled in his chest.

Sharyn bowed her head a moment. "Aye, Edward." Again she turned a gaze on him. "Despite Alpin's claims, I know who truly rules England."

Edward! Unease spread through Gideon's soul like a hot sword. "Are you well acquainted with your king then, to use his Christian name with such familiar ease?"

The guilt of a person who confessed secret words flashed across her face. She turned away from him and lowered her head. "You call your king David. 'Tis no different for me when speaking of mine outside his presence."

He did not believe her for a moment. "Aye," he said, choosing his words with care. "Yet, I am not familiar enough with my king that the arrival of one missive can change current events."

"Your king is deposed -- "

"At the hand of yours." He tugged on his reins and halted his mount. "How intimate are you with your king, to gain such favors with the flair of a quill?"

"Something wrong, Chief?" Alpin drew his horse alongside, Bridget tucked in the saddle behind him. The reins of the spare horse were secured to his pommel.

Gideon kept his gaze on Sharyn's bowed head. "The lass and I need a private word. Ride on and prepare the croft for my arrival. We shall not be long."

"'Tis improper for my lady -- "

One glare from Gideon silenced the timid maid.

"She is correct," Sharyn whispered. "There is naught else to discuss."

"Och, you are mistaken, lass. This conversation is far from over."

Brodic reined in alongside Alpin and shot Gideon a questioning glance. "What is amiss?"

"Naught," he said and did his best to keep his anger at bay. "The croft is less than an hour from here. Journey onward. The lass and I will join you directly."

The men exchanged glances, yet did as they were told. Gideon watched them disappear through the trees. Once they were out of sight, he dismounted and reached for Sharyn.

She pulled away from him and clung to the pommel. "I said there is naught to discuss. You make too much out of one simple statement."

"Nay, I do not." He placed his hands on her waist and tugged. Her bottom slid from the saddle yet the stubborn wench refused to release her hold. "Damnation, woman, cease this folly."

Still, Sharyn clung to the pommel. Gideon wrapped an arm around her waist and reached for her hands. Growls and mumbled curses drifted between them as each struggled to gain their way.

"By Christ's blue eyes," Gideon swore and applied pressure on her wrists. "Let go!"

She did. Gideon stumbled backwards and promptly landed on his behind, Sharyn on his lap. The woman struggled from his grasp and gained her footing. She looked down at him and wiped the disarray of her hair from her face.

"'Tis twice in one day you have pricked my temper," she said and labored for breath. "Do not try for a third."

With a lift of the nose and toss of the braid, she turned toward the horse. Angry, Gideon lunged to his feet and blocked her path. He dared her to try and ignore him now.

"How intimate are you with your king?" he asked, his tone clipped.

Gideon was no fool. While Edward's sire may have preferred men, Edward did not. Rumors of his trysts were legendary, even this far into Scotland.

Fire flickered in the depths of her eyes and mingled with a touch of regret. "Let the matter rest, Gideon," Sharyn said, her tone controlled.

She asked the impossible. The mere thought of her being a conquest of the English king was more than he could tolerate.

He grasped her arms and pulled her against him. Her body pressed against his fueled the hunger she stirred in his veins. A hunger another could have felt and sated. "How intimate?"

"Gideon -- "

"Answer me!"

Tears shone in her eyes like the crown jewels. Jaw tense, she tugged upon her arms and growled, "Not nearly as intimate as my sire was to the queen, you jealous boor!"

The air rushed from his lungs as if he'd been struck. He released his crushing hold and took a step away from her. Jealous? Him? Surely not.

Wounded feelings shone in her eyes. "Before you badger me further, let me assure you I have shared naught with Edward but friendship since the age of three."

She turned her back to him and approached a nearby tree. All Gideon could do was stare at her. The words she spoke tumbled through his brain. Her sire was lover to the queen? Then that meant her father was -- "Mortimer," he whispered, barely aware that he spoke aloud.

Sharyn cringed and placed a delicate hand against the tree, as if she drew strength from its closeness.

Through the pages of his mind Gideon recalled vague tales of a battle from a decade past, a battle where the queen's lover was conquered and hanged, his head the trophy for the victors.

He closed his eyes and called himself an arse. One image of Sharyn sharing her favors with another sent him into a rage. Gideon opened his eyes and carefully approached.

"Lass," he whispered and laid a hand upon her shoulder. She recoiled. A weary sigh escaped his lips. "Who cared for you after your sire died?"

Sharyn wiped her eyes and turned to face him. Lord she was lovely. Why had he pressed her so?

"Edward was my guardian." She lowered her gaze and drew a trembling breath. "Now that you know, will you hold me for ransom?"

The suggestion fanned his aggravation. That was not his way. Surely the lass knew that by now, with all they had shared. With extreme effort, he quelled his temper.

So much made sense to him now. Why Sharyn was given to the Mackenzie, and the presence of Balliol at the estate. The king's ward would warrant a high marriage. Yet why would Mackenzie jeopardize things with an attempt on her life?

"Edward will pay whatever price you ask."

Her voice drew his gaze and all anger fled his body. Nestled in her shimmering eyes he saw the truth of her heart. She genuinely thought he would

hold her against her will for ransom. This disappointed him, yet he could not say why.

“‘Tis time to return to the croft,” he said and turned toward the mount. He gathered the reins in his hands and cast her a look from over his shoulder. “If we tarry much longer, that maid of yours will send Alpin out on a quest.”

“Bridget would come herself.” Sharyn’s reply sanctified his thoughts.

Gideon pulled himself into the saddle then looked down at her. The shoulder of her gown torn, her hair mussed, she looked bone weary and ready to drop. Guilt gnawed in his belly as he stared into her red-rimmed eyes. Hurting her was the last thing he wanted.

“Come, I promised you all would be well.” He offered her his hand. “I always keep my vows.”

Eternity seemed to pass before she stepped forward and slid her fingers against his palm. Once she was settled before him, Gideon nudged his mount and headed for the croft.

Somehow he had to get Sharyn out of his life, and out of his blood, before all was lost.

Chapter Eight

"You told him your identity?" Bridget gasped.

Sharyn grimaced and ignored her maid's shocked tone. The hem of her ruined gown in hand, she stepped through the tall grass beside the loch and followed Alpin and Brodic.

Since their return two days past, Sharyn had seen very little of Gideon. He stayed sequestered in the cottage he shared with his men.

For the first time since her arrival, the sun shone bright and all signs of mist were gone. The men decided to take advantage of the weather and repair the roof with fresh thatch. Sharyn volunteered to help. At the very least it would remove her from the croft, and her worries about Gideon.

"You are now a valuable pawn to him, milady," Bridget said and followed Sharyn across the spongy ground. "He will use you -- "

"Cease this!" Sharyn snapped, and turned a glare on her maid. "Having you harp upon my misdeed causes me naught but grief. I cannot change what has transpired. 'Tis in Gideon's hands the decision rests."

Gideon. The mere thought of him made her insides quiver. Why had he remained behind? Could he no longer stand her presence, or did he compose a ransom missive to Edward?

"This is a fine spot, lassies." Alpin's voice drew Sharyn from her thoughts. The small man dropped the length of rope he carried and withdrew a sharp dagger from his belt. "Brodic and I will cut the reeds."

"Will you not need your blade?" Bridget asked. Sharyn nearly groaned when the maid lowered her lashes and looked coy.

"Och, lass, I can use me sword," Alpin proclaimed and swelled his chest like a rooster clucking around the hens. "'Twould be a grand help if the two of you would gather and bind the reeds we cut."

"'Tis why we chose to accompany you," Bridget blushed and took the blade from Alpin. "To help, that is."

Sharyn lifted her gaze to the sky and shook her head. Help indeed. All the maid had done for the past two days was speak of Alpin. God's truth, Sharyn did not know how she tolerated the man. Aye, he was kind enough and his wit quick. Yet the offensive odor the small man emitted on a regular basis would be enough to put her off looking at him in a fanciful light.

The quiet rustle of spring grass falling beneath a blade drew Sharyn from her thoughts. While Alpin and Bridget giggled at each other, Brodic began cutting the tall weeds that would make up their roof.

Sharyn ignored her maid and began gathering the piles Brodic cut. Once she collected an armful, she returned to where her maid continued to preen over the small Scot.

"I believe Brodic could use your help, Alpin," Sharyn said and laid her sheaf on the ground. "Bridget, busy yourself with the bundle. Many will be needed to cover the roof." She turned away and began to gather more.

"I see Gideon has shared his thistle with her," she heard Alpin say. Choosing to ignore him, Sharyn continued her work. The less she thought of Gideon, the better. She had enough worries in her life. Adding a giant Scot to the pot was one she could do without.

Gideon pushed open the door that was once his croft and looked around the room. Sharyn. Her very presence engulfed him, stole his breath. He closed his eyes a moment to gain his senses.

The haunting scent of lavender filled the air. It slid through his veins and coiled around his heart. With a frown, he opened his eyes.

The lass was driving him daft. The memory of her body pressed against his, the taste of her lips parting for him, gave him naught but sleepless nights and disagreeable days.

For the sake of his sanity, he avoided her since their return. Yet, removing himself from her presence did not banish her from his mind.

"Enough," he muttered and stepped into the croft. Since the women would clearly be with him and his men a while longer, Gideon needed his things.

With determination to gather what belonged to him and leave, he approached the far wall where Sharyn had carefully placed his possessions in baskets that once held hers. While he would continue to try and avoid her, he still needed fresh clothing and blankets.

He paused beside the table that now held her effects. Unbridled, he let his fingers lightly touch the items scattered across the rough surface.

Her comb held strands of her midnight hair. Ribbons that restrained her tresses during the day lay in disarray beside a mirror that just this morn must have shone her reflection.

Gideon glanced toward the door, then lifted the mirror. The man who stared back at him was a stranger to his eyes. He looked old, weary and beaten. Mayhap he was. Lord knows he certainly felt aged. One hand rose to the hair that shielded his face. He frowned. It had been so long since he had seen himself without whiskers, he had forgotten how he truly looked.

A pair of scissors caught his eye. Again Gideon glanced toward the door. Surely they would be gone most of the day gathering thatch. He collected the items he would need and moved to the hearth. Adjusting the articles in his arms, he moved aside the pewter Sharyn had placed there and propped the mirror at an angle so he could clearly see his face. He placed his dirk on the mantel and fetched a pail of water and a bowl.

With care he gathered the scissors and lifted them toward his face. 'Twas weary he was of hiding behind this fur. One snip led to another and another. Coarse hair fell from his fingers and inch by inch his face came into view.

Sharyn. He could just imagine the look on her face when she saw him again. Gideon smiled.

Never in her life had her back hurt so, Sharyn thought as she dropped her tied bundles beside the door of the men's croft. She rubbed her back and moved toward the croft she shared with Bridget.

The thought of her maid made her frown. The woman was acting like a lovesick fool. She lagged behind on their return to the croft and walked beside Alpin. Although Sharyn could not hear their words, the expression on both their faces told her much.

The duo were besotted with each other.

Again she frowned and pushed open the door to her croft. They could have one another and the misery that would surely follow.

Sharyn took one step into the croft and stopped. A strange man stood before the hearth, his back to her. Neatly groomed hair brushed his shoulders and he dabbed a cloth against his face.

Her heart tumbled to her belly and her pulse skittered along her spine. Where the devil was Gideon?

As if he sensed her presence, the man turned. Sharyn's breath caught in her throat. In all her life she had never seen such a handsome man. Sensuality emitted from his body and tried to pull her forth into his web. Square jaw, full lips and beautiful blue eyes that held the glimmer of a thousand candles beckoned her to touch. He wiped his chin once more then draped the cloth over one broad shoulder.

"Did you gather all the thatch we will need?"

Sharyn's mouth dropped open. The voice, the eyes. Nay, it could not be. She swallowed hard and whispered, "Gideon?"

One dark eyebrow lifted in bold arrogance. "You sound disappointed, lass. Did you expect someone else?"

"Nay -- that is -- I -- " Flustered, Sharyn frowned. "You startled me."

He chuckled and turned away from her once more. 'Twas then she noticed the disarray before the hearth. A fair pile of hair littered the floor beside the pail she used for water. She watched him gather her things in his large hands and return them to her table.

"I pray you forgive me for using your belongings uninvited," he said and carefully placed them on the wooden surface. He gave her a slight grin and returned to the hearth. "I felt as if I had more wool on me than the sheep grazing in the hills."

"You looked it as well." Her words drew his gaze. Sharyn swallowed hard. "I mean to say, whiskers have never appealed to me overmuch."

Gideon grimaced and plucked his dirk from the mantel. "Nor to me." He wiped the blade on the cloth then slid it into the top of his boot.

Sharyn could not stop gaping at him. He was striking, to say the least. Unable to look away, she watched him cross the room and stop before her. Lord he was handsome. How she longed to lift her hand and touch his smooth flesh.

"'Twas a sin indeed to hide your looks behind a shield of hair."

Gideon smiled. Mortified, Sharyn realized she had spoken her thoughts aloud. Heat rushed to her cheeks and she averted her gaze.

"I'm glad you approve."

The soft tone of his voice sent shivers along her spine. She ignored him and stepped around his large frame. "It matters not to me." The mess he made caught her eye. "I pray you clean up after yourself."

"Well, I'll be dipped in sheep shit." Alpin's voice, followed by Bridget's moan of disapproval, broke the silence of the room. Sharyn turned and frowned at the little man who walked a circle around Gideon, a most serious look upon his face. "Damned if you don't look human again."

Gideon crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. "I fear I canna say the same for you." He plucked the cloth from his shoulder and tossed it at the small man. "You could use a shearing yourself, not to mention a dip in the pond."

He turned on his heel and left the croft. Sharyn cast a curious gaze to Bridget. The maid visibly blushed and ushered Alpin toward a chair.

"I have a fair hand with the scissors. 'Twould be no bother to straighten you up a bit."

The man fell into the chair and grimaced. "Now, halt just a moment," he said and tried to rise. Bridget shoved him back down again. "No lass is going to doll me up like an English fop."

Bridget stood tall and rested her hands on her hips. "If you hope to gain my company you will sit yourself still as a stone and let me at that fleece atop your head."

"Fleece!" Irritated, the little man hopped to his feet and jutted his chin at Bridget's chest. "I'll have you ken my hair has brought many a lass hours of pleasure." He shoved his fingers through the mess and promptly got them stuck.

"Aye, I see," Bridget said, one delicate eyebrow raised.

Sharyn had all she could stand. "I will leave the two of you alone to quarrel," she said and moved toward the door. The pair did not seem to notice her at all, much less hear her words.

"What is that tone supposed to suggest?" Alpin groaned to Bridget.

Sharyn closed the door and shook her head. If she knew Bridget, the little man would not leave the croft until he was properly groomed.

She turned away and was gifted with a glimpse of Gideon. He stood tall and proud atop the roof of the nearby croft while Brodic tossed the bundled thatch up to him.

Each movement of his body held Sharyn enthralled. His arms handled with ease the bundles she had struggled to carry. The edge of his kilt brushed his knees as he deposited each sheaf over the bare spots in the roof.

He wiped his brow and turned. The distance that separated them seemed to vanish. She could feel his presence as if he stood a touch away.

A slow grin crossed his face. Again, heat flooded her cheeks. She lowered her head and turned toward the loch. Perhaps she should jump in clothes and all. Then, mayhap, the heat Gideon roused in her so easily would be quenched once and for all.

Chapter Nine

Gideon sat on the stump of a tree at the edge of the loch. Above him, stars shone like splendid jewels across the velvet sky and reflected the full moon on its surface. The radiant brilliance reminded him of Sharyn.

He closed his eyes and recalled the way she looked this night. Her hair hung loose from its normal braid. Combed until it glistened, the haunting mass tempted him to touch it and remove the tiny ribbon that held the front away from her angelic face.

The color of her gown also teased his senses and roused his body in ways best left idle. Yet the velvet, surely dyed to match the color of her eyes, hugged each tantalizing curve of her delicate form. The vision so enticed him, he had begged his leave from the meal and adjourned to the loch.

"Gideon?"

Had he imagined her voice or was she truly here? He opened his eyes and was gifted with the beautiful vision of Sharyn bathed in the moon.

She lowered her head a moment then offered him a goblet. "I thought you might like a taste of my wine."

The thoughts that sped through Gideon's mind were ones which should have shamed him. Yet, he could not chastise himself for feeling attracted to a comely woman.

"I see wine does not appeal to you," she whispered and turned away. "I am sorry I bothered you."

"Nay," he said, a little too quickly for his liking. Still, he could not let her walk away, not when he had her here alone. "That is, I thank you for thinking of me, lass."

She paused and turned to him. The light in her eyes, and the way her hair lifted on the gentle breeze, lured his restless lust to life.

Without a word he held out his hand. She hesitated a moment, then stepped toward him and placed the goblet in his grasp. Before she could move away, he covered her hands with his own and guided the cup to his lips.

The wine could have been bitter for all he knew. The liquid slid over his tongue and down his throat while he drowned in the haunting depths of her eyes.

He lowered his hands and stood. Did she have any idea how lovely she was this night? The way she tilted her head to look up at him, an eloquence of wonder on her face. God's teeth but he wanted her in his arms.

"Is your thirst sated?"

Her quiet whisper spiraled his thoughts along the path he had fought to avoid. Still, she was asking questions that held a double meaning, for him anyway. 'Twould be a pity to allow such a moment to pass.

"Nay, lass," he whispered and lowered his head toward hers. "My thirst is far from quenched."

She lowered her head and tried to turn away.

"Och, pray do not leave," he said and lifted a hand to cup her cheek. His fingers trembled against her warm flesh as he lifted her face toward his. "I only wish to thank you."

Her lips parted moments before he claimed them as his own. The heady aroma of lavender mixed with heather assaulted his senses and swirled his thoughts into oblivion.

His fingers slid along the line of her delicate jaw and drifted beneath the shield of her hair. He groaned and dipped his tongue into the sweet recess of her mouth.

Silk slipped through his fingers as he turned her head to deepen his kiss. The gentle curve of her velvet clad breast brushed against his other hand, still wrapped around the goblet. Gideon shivered and knew he would never get enough of Sharyn.

Never.

He plundered her mouth like a man dying of thirst. The moment she responded, his loins surged to life. Her warm fingers brushed his nape and held him in a way that bespoke her pleasure.

The goblet fell forgotten from their grasp. Gideon slipped an arm around her and pressed her fully against his aroused body. She fit him as if she had been created for him and him alone. The taste of her, smell of her, very essence of her, made him weak with need and wild with wanting.

Sharyn trembled against him and returned his hungry kiss with a passion he thought did not exist. Until now, this moment, and with this woman, he thought desire such as this only lived in tales.

"God's blood, lass," he whispered against her lips. "You make me senseless."

His tongue lightly touched her flesh and moved to the erratic pulse that beat in her throat. Fingers tangled in her silken hair and held her captive for his torturous exploration. One hand cupped her bottom and pressed her firmly against his hard body.

Dear Lord he wanted her.

"Gideon," she gasped and pushed at his shoulders.

He covered her lips again and swallowed her words of protest. This was heaven and he had no intention of denying himself.

Sharyn moaned and pried free of his kiss. "Gideon, fire -- "

"Aye, lass, I feel it too," he murmured and captured her lips once more.

The heat she raised in his body resembled a wildfire and the knowledge that she felt the same fueled his lust even more. He wanted her, all of her, right here and now.

With a distressed groan, Sharyn placed her hands upon his chest and pushed. Her actions broke his kiss once more. When he tried to taste her again, she leaned away from him and struggled in his arms.

"Gideon, there is a fire!"

The harshness of her voice, and the worry upon her face, caused his passion to die and be replaced with alarm. With her still in his grasp, he turned.

Flames flickered to life along the top of the mountain that hid his haven. The orange glow shrouded the moon and swallowed its reflection on the loch.

"Balliol," he whispered

"Or Mackenzie," Sharyn said.

Dread washed through his soul. He grasped Sharyn's hand in his and ran for the croft, calling for his men as he went. Before he reached the door, it opened to reveal Brodic.

"What is amiss?" he asked as Gideon ran inside, dragging Sharyn with him.

"Fire on the mountain," Gideon said and tried to stamp down the fury that slithered through his veins like an adder. He turned to Sharyn and wished she was still in his arms. "Gather clothing and anything else that can easily be tied to the horses. We must retreat."

He fled the croft, his men on his heels. Gideon would fight the devil himself before he allowed Mackenzie to take Sharyn.

The woman was his.

"Do we return to Munro?" Sharyn asked.

Nestled before Gideon in his saddle, she had no fear of falling to the ground. Although the pace since leaving the croft was harsh, the circumference of Gideon's arms assured her she was safe.

"Nay, lass," he said, a frown upon his brow. "If the fire was caused by Balliol or Mackenzie, Munro would be the first place they searched."

Sharyn rested her cheek against his broad chest and closed her eyes. It mattered not where they traveled. Gideon had her complete trust where her safety was concerned. If he carried her into Hades, 'twould be with good reason.

She opened her eyes and removed a strand of unbound hair that fluttered across her face. Unable to resist, she looked upon him again. The moonlight cast planes across his face, which only enhanced how handsome he was, now that he had no offending whiskers hiding his features.

"Where do we travel?" she whispered and raised a hand to lightly touch his smooth chin.

He glanced down at her and, the look shimmering in his eyes sent her heart racing against her ribs. Mercy, the man was too appealing for his own good.

"Skibo."

Sharyn's fingers paused against his warm flesh. "Skibo?"

"Aye," he whispered and kissed her fingers. "'Tis the last place any would think to look."

"I see," she replied and let her fingers trace a path from his chin to his chest. "Gideon?"

"Aye?"

"What is a Skibo?"

His laughter rumbled in his chest and vibrated her soul. "My estate. That is, what used to be my estate. The land is rich with game and several hunting crofts are scattered through the mountains. We can safely conceal ourselves among them, for a few days at least."

Silence lingered between them. Sharyn closed her eyes and lost herself in the rhythm of Gideon's heart beating against her cheek.

"Gideon?"

"Aye, lass?"

"Edward is in Edinburgh." His body tensed against hers. She frowned and smoothed a hand over his chest. "Do not get angry or I will not tell you my thoughts."

"I am not certain I wish to hear them," he said, his tone clipped. Sharyn ignored him.

"His group followed me by mere days. 'Twas his plan to attend my -- marriage."

"I fail to see how this -- "

"Brodic can carry a missive to him," Sharyn continued, refusing to allow him to argue. "Once Edward hears my plea, he can return your lands to you and remove the price on your head." She leaned back in his arms and stared at his stony face. "His grandsire may have been a bastard, but Edward is not."

Her words drew his gaze and a raised eyebrow. "And you chastise me for cursing?"

She shrugged and smoothed a hand across the plaid draped over his chest. "When the word fits, 'tis different."

He sighed and asked, "What do you ken of his grandsire?"

Sharyn frowned. "Longshanks may be long in his grave, yet our country still shudders from his wrath." She took a deep breath and dared another appeal. "Will you allow Brodic to deliver my plea?"

The corners of his chiseled mouth turned down and he gently shook his head. "I canna, lass. I refuse to beg an English king for my life or my land. Doing so would make me no better than Balliol or the group of Disinherited who currently infest this land."

"You would not be begging, my fine barbarian, I would." She adjusted herself in the saddle and tried to get eye level with him. "I thought you wanted your land and your riches returned?"

"I do," he said, his voice laced with anger. "Yet, when it happens, 'twill be because I deserved it, not because I had some lass go begging on my behalf."

"Some lass!" Hurt raked its sharp nails through her heart. If she had a club at this moment, she would gladly thrash him. "After all we have shared these past few days, I truly mean no more to you than any other woman who roams the land?"

"Sharyn," Gideon said, his tone low on tolerance.

“Do not scold me,” she said and squirmed in his arms. “Stop this horse at once and let me off. I would rather walk than ride another mile with you.”

“Still yourself,” he commanded and tightened his hold. “You startle the horse.”

“Hear me well, my fine barbarian -- ”

The next thing Sharyn knew, Gideon kissed her. One hand tangled in her hair held her captive for his lips. She struck at his chest, yet could do naught to break his masterful hold.

The moment his tongue invaded her mouth, her knees turned to water. Each sensuous stroke of him inside her dulled her anger and lured her disturbing desire to life. Her struggles slowly ceased and she wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders.

All too soon, he withdrew his lips from hers and stared down at her. “Methinks you rile me just so I will kiss you senseless.”

When he looked at her like that, and spoke to her in that soft, rough accent of his, she had a hard time remembering her name. “Methinks you provoke me so you can silence me with a kiss.”

“You stay,” he whispered and eased her against his chest.

Sharyn did not protest. His actions called his previous words liar. She decided to let the matter of her missive rest for now. Two mind robbing kisses from her giant Scot in one night was nearly more than she could manage.

A secret smile touched her lips. Gideon had been right, she realized now. When he truly kissed her, she knew it.

Chapter Ten

Dawn spread its colorful wings across the sleeping sky and enticed the world to life. Gideon paused his mount at the apex of the mountain that sloped down into a breathtaking valley he once called home.

A stream shimmered in the morning light as it wound its way through a path cut in the forest. The hungry cry of birds awaiting their morning meal hung on the mist and reminded Gideon once more of all he had lost.

He looked down at Sharyn, asleep in his arms, and his heart twisted. This is what she deserved, an estate such as Skibo. Not a life on the run.

The thought of losing her wrenched his soul. Somehow, in a matter of days, this little Englishwoman had wormed her way into his life. Clearly, he had gone overlong without a woman. 'Tis why he was captivated with this creature, who he could not rid himself of no matter how he tried.

And he no longer wanted to try.

The thought should have scared the devil out of him. Instead, it brought him pleasure and a feeling of peace. For some reason he wanted her with him, despite all the arguments why he should deposit her shapely bottom back in England.

"Chief?"

Alpin's whisper drew his gaze. The sight of the groomed little man trying not to collapse beneath the weight of Bridget made Gideon smile.

"Seems the lass is more than you can handle, my friend."

Alpin bristled. He swelled his chest and tried to adjust the woman draped over his back. "She is no more a burden than your lass."

The smile faded from his lips. His lass. Aye, Gideon admitted, with a look at Sharyn, she was his lass and he would be damned if he would let her go.

"Brodic doubled back to try and discover who started the fire," Alpin said and twisted beneath the pressing weight of Bridget.

Gideon nodded. "Once we get settled, you join him." Without another word he gave his mount a gentle nudge and guided them down the mountain.

Red deer drank from the stream. The gentle plod of the horses alerted them to the presence of humans. Ears pushed forward, bodies poised, they hesitated a moment, then bolted through the crystal water and disappeared amongst the trees.

Near the base of the mountain a large croft came into view. Gideon chose this location on purpose. Not only was it the largest of the hunting crofts Skibo boasted, 'twas also the most secluded. They would be safe here for a few days. 'Twould offer a reprieve, long enough to discover who started the blaze. More importantly, Gideon could determine if Balliol and Mackenzie were still on the prowl.

He drew in his horse before the croft. Sharyn stirred in his arms.

"Gideon?" she whispered, her voice thick with sleep.

"Hush now," he said and lightly stroked her cheek. "We have arrived."

"You must be exhausted," she yawned and, eyes closed, pressed her cheek against his heart. "I know I am."

Exhausted was not a strong enough word to describe how truly weary Gideon was. It seemed he had been on the run forever, instead of mere years. He slept little, ate little and stayed away from populated areas.

Since the moment Sharyn tumbled into his life, she awoke long buried needs and desires, things he cast aside for honor of king and country. Things he would most likely go without for years to come.

"How long can we stay?" Sharyn asked.

"Until I ken 'tis safe." He stared down into the violet dusk of her eyes and wondered if she grew weary of hiding. "I realize 'tis a harsh pace I've set -- "

Sharyn silenced him with a gentle hand to his cheek. "I was not complaining, my fine barbarian."

Dear Lord, he wanted to kiss her. He stroked her cheek with the back of his knuckles and desire surged through his veins. He lowered his head toward hers, intent on satisfying his craving.

"Come now, lassie. Me neck has a crick in it and me bones are near snapped." Alpin's pained voice reminded Gideon they were not alone. He frowned and glanced at his companion. The little man squirmed beneath a sleepy Bridget and tried to rouse her. "I canna be your pillow any longer."

Sharyn fidgeted in Gideon's arms. "I suppose I should relieve you of your burden as well," she whispered and fluttered a gaze up at him. "I never thought it possible to sleep in such a position."

The sheer innocence of her words played havoc with his mind. His body tightened in all the wrong spots and he longed for nothing more than to carry Sharyn inside and lock the door behind them.

"Go indoors," he said and eased Sharyn from his lap. With care he slid her to the ground. "I will be there shortly."

She looked up at him and smiled. Lord help him, but he could stand no more of her sweet torture. He wanted her and he wanted her now. His gaze held hers as he dismounted.

"God's blood!" Alpin's growled curse halted Gideon from pulling Sharyn into his arms.

He turned in time to see Bridget tumble off the back of the horse, Alpin in her grasp. Kilt flying, the duo landed on the dew-kissed earth with a thud. The horse snorted and pawed the ground.

"Did you have to drag me off with you when you fell?" Alpin struggled to his feet and straightened his clothes.

Bridget shoved down her skirts and scrambled to her feet. "'Tis not my fault you are so scrawny that a strong wind would blow you away. If you had some brawn to you, I would not have fallen."

Alpin's face turned red. "So, 'tis scrawny I am, is it? You dinna complain about the size of me last eve."

"Mercy, those two remind me of a couple of crowing fools." Sharyn shook her head and approached the croft. "Methinks they enjoy bantering, for any man with eyes can see they are smitten with each other."

Alpin was not the only man present bewitched by a lass, Gideon thought as he watched Sharyn mount the steps to the croft. Every move of her delicate body tempted his bereaved mind into conjuring pictures of her naked in his arms.

A shiver passed through his soul. He closed his eyes and banished the wayward thoughts from his brain. Ideas such as those would do naught but toy with his sanity.

"Gideon?"

He opened his eyes to the vision of Sharyn standing in the threshold of the croft, a curious look upon her brow.

"Will you join me?"

By all that was holy, the woman chose her words with purpose. Surely she knew the temptation she offered with statements that held two meanings.

One look into her fathomless eyes and he knew she was as innocent as a lamb. She had no idea of the turmoil she caused him with just a glance or a touch.

A slow smile touched his lips. If all went well they would have a few days of immunity to rest and relax. Perhaps he could bestow a bit of havoc of his own upon this little English miss.

For once in his life, Gideon appreciated being a brigand and having to hide. The status gave him the time he craved to explore his Sharyn.

Sharyn tossed within the confines of her bed and tried once more to get comfortable. 'Twas a useless effort. Bridget slept on a pallet at the foot of Sharyn's bed, and from the way the maid snored, 'tis a wonder she did not wake the dead.

A weary sigh escaped her lips and she laid a hand across her brow. Even when Bridget was quiet Sharyn could not sleep for thoughts of Gideon that sped through her brain.

The man was unnerving, to say the least. He had not touched her since their arrival two days past, yet there was no need. With one hooded glance he could cause more chaos in her belly than all the caresses in the world.

She felt his nearness every moment between dawn and dusk. In his presence, a sensation she could not describe, nor ever felt before, slid through her body. She would turn and see him watching her. Then a seductive grin would curl his lips and her heart would spiral to her toes.

Bridget cursed Alpin in her sleep and continued to snore. The little man left in search of Brodic and neither man had returned.

Sharyn sighed and stared up at the ceiling. With one passing wind and the other snoring the rafters down, Bridget and Alpin were a perfect match.

She tossed aside the covers and pulled on her robe. No sleep would be hers this night. She left the room and closed the door against her maid's insistent snores.

How Gideon kept from waking was beyond her.

Gideon.

Her gaze slid across the moonlit lodge to the door of his room. Was he awake? Were his thoughts troubled as well?

With a frown, she made her way toward the front door of the croft. Shadows hid pieces of furniture and she took care not to stumble. Her toe struck the hard leg of a chair. Pain shot up her leg and she bit her lip to keep from crying out.

Blasted Scot, she thought with a glance toward Gideon's door. Any civilized person would keep a candle burning through the night. Not Gideon. Aside from the threat of fire, he did not wish the light to be seen by any who happened by, as if that were possible. For two days all she had seen were deer.

The pain subsided enough for her to limp to the door. Naught would help her foot, save for a dip in the stream.

Quietly, Sharyn opened the door and slipped into the night. Crisp highland air kissed her cheek and teased her senses. The distant croak of a toad melded with the lonely cry of an owl. Sharyn knew how they felt this night, as if each were alone with creation.

She crept down the steps and soft, dew-soaked grass crushed beneath her feet. Bridget would chastise her for moving about without her slippers. Sharyn did not care. She needed this time alone, with the serenity of the outdoors.

At the edge of the stream, Sharyn eased herself onto a large stone. The velvet of her gown bunched beneath her fingers as she slid the garment up to her knees. Once her skirts were properly adjusted, she dipped her sore foot into the water.

The icy liquid stole her breath and spread goose bumps over her warm skin. Several moments later, her body acclimated to the cold and the pain began to fade.

Sharyn braced her hands behind her on the rock and lifted her face toward the moon. A gentle breeze caressed her body and absorbed the tension from her soul.

Although Mackenzie and Balliol searched for them, Sharyn felt safe here. This peaceful slice of highland heaven offered solace. The reprieve cleared her mind and allowed her to think of things other than Gideon.

Gideon. Sharyn closed her eyes and welcomed the shiver that touched her spine. She felt as one with him, as if their lives were destined to intertwine.

"Do you ever wonder what causes the moon to glow?"

The whispered voice startled her. She leapt off the stone and stumbled in the rocky depths of the stream. Heart racing, she whirled around to face her invader.

Gideon stood near the stream with naught but a tartan draped around his lean hips. The moon danced across his broad chest and gave a blue hue to his dark hair. Eyes as mysterious as the moon settled on hers.

Sharyn swallowed hard and willed her heart to cease its erratic pace. Again, she wondered how a man his size moved without being heard.

"Do you fancy standing in a cold stream?"

The amused tone of his voice annoyed her. She frowned and stepped toward the shore, ignoring the sharp rocks beneath her feet and the icy water absorbed in her robe.

"Do you fancy creeping up on me and scaring me half to death?"

"You look hale enough to me," he said and moved to the edge of the stream. "Give me your hand."

Sharyn's breath caught in her throat. She glanced from his offered palm to his dark eyes. The shiver that licked her spine had naught to do with the water.

"Come now," he said and wiggled his fingers. "I promise not to bite."

She was powerless to resist him. Her fingers slid against his warm palm and he pulled her from the calf deep water with ease. The moment her feet touched the grass, he released her.

Irritation stirred in her veins. Did he no longer enjoy her company? Had she offended him in some way?

"If the men do not return on the morrow, we will leave this place in search of them."

His voice captured her thoughts. Had he been plagued with worries of his men and those who searched for him?

"Do you believe they have fallen into peril?" she asked and seated herself once more on the stone.

Gideon moved before her and stood less than a touch away. "I am not sure. 'Tis uncommon for them to be absent so long."

Sharyn looked up at him and wished he would pull her into his strong arms, stroke her hair and assure her all would be well. She hungered for his touch, his kiss, his smile.

"I can rectify this situation, Gideon," she whispered. "If you would consent to a missive -- "

"Nay," he snapped, his voice laced with anger. "I canna allow you to place such trust in an English king."

Her temper flickered to life in her belly. She scrambled to her knees atop the rock and looked him in the eye. "Do you forget I am English?"

His nostrils flared with irritation. "I am reminded of that each time you open your mouth."

Sharyn counted to ten before she replied. "As I recall, my fine barbarian, my homeland did not disturb you when you were in a mood to kiss me."

A mirthless chuckle escaped his lips. "I have gone overlong without the company of a woman. A hunchbacked whore with a peg leg would look good to me about now."

A hurt growl emerged from her throat and melded with the tears that stung her eyes. She curled her hand into a fist and swung at his pompous face.

He caught her wrist with ease. Fury raced through her veins. She groaned and tried to hit him with her other hand.

Gideon captured that one as well and stood still as stone as she struggled against him.

"Release me," she cried and tugged upon her wrists. "I despise you to the depths of my soul."

"Pity I do not believe you," he said, his tone clipped.

Sharyn lifted her face to the sky and cried. Her struggles did naught to ease his hold or cool her temper. "I said unhand me, you barbarian. Go find yourself a peg legged whore to boss around."

With one swift jerk, Sharyn tumbled from the rock and into Gideon's arms. With very little effort he held her firmly against his hard body. Her hands held captive behind her, she was forced to look into his haunting eyes.

"I do not want a peg legged whore," he said, his voice harsh. "God help me, lass, I want you."

The next thing Sharyn knew, Gideon kissed her. The stubble on his face scratched her delicate skin and heightened her awareness of him. He plundered her mouth in a way she had never known before. 'Twas as if he loved her and hated her all in the same breath.

Slowly, Sharyn ceased her struggles and returned his grueling kiss. Love and hate, she knew the emotions well for she felt them each time she quarreled with Gideon. One moment she wanted to kiss him and the next she longed to see him in his grave.

Through the raw hunger between them, Sharyn felt herself being lowered to the ground and the press of cool grass beneath her. Gideon's hard body covered hers, drew her into his heat. When her fingers tangled in his hair, she realized he no longer restricted her movements.

"God help me," he whispered against her swollen lips. "I want you."

Pleasure slid through her soul and coiled around her heart as his lips followed the curve of her neck. His body adjusted over hers and his deft fingers released the tie of her robe. A moment later his lips loved the swell of her thinly clad breast.

A shudder passed through her soul. She tugged upon his hair and drew his mouth to hers. His tongue delved into her mouth and his hands explored her hungry body. Sharyn groaned and pressed herself against him, trying to get as close to him as possible. Her nails raked his broad shoulders. Again his lips left hers. They blazed a hot trail to her breast.

His fingers tugged at the top of her sleeping gown. A moment later the warmth of his mouth covered her and the tip of his tongue teased her tender nipple.

Sharyn sucked in her breath and whispered his name. Never in her life had she felt anything so seductive. And she wanted more.

"Milady!"

The cry tore through the haze of Sharyn's mind. Gideon paused and Sharyn opened her eyes. Bridget stood a few feet away, a look of horror on her face.

"Milady," she cried again. "Do you forget yourself?"

Gideon swore and rolled away. Reality crashed around Sharyn's ears. Above her sparse breathing, she noticed the disarray of her clothing.

She ignored her maid and looked at Gideon. His profile told her naught. Did he think no more of her now than the hunchbacked whore he mentioned earlier?

"Gideon," she said and struggled to sit up. She adjusted her clothes and tried to see his face more clearly.

"Milady, return to your chamber at once."

Sharyn shot her maid what she prayed was a murderous look. "Hush!" she snapped and turned her attention on Gideon once more. "Gideon, I -- "

"Go with her, Sharyn," he said, yet refused to look her way.

Angry tears stung her eyes and she fought to control her rampant emotions. "I am not ashamed of what transpired here, Gideon."

He turned a lonely glance on her. "Nor am I, lass." His voice cracked and he looked away. "Now, go with your maid."

Sharyn struggled to her feet and approached Bridget. "I have a good mind to strangle you."

The woman's mouth gaped open. "You chastise me for stopping you from giving yourself to a man who is not your husband?"

A sad chuckle escaped her lips as she moved toward the croft. "Bridget, the way that man makes me feel, I already belong to him."

Chapter Eleven

From his position atop a grassy knoll, Gideon looked down on the estate that he once called home. He watched the sun crest the horizon over his beloved Skibo.

The warm hues of dawn kissed the rose colored masonry of the tower keep and shimmered on the stained glass. Vines of highland green clung to the stone and stretched toward heaven above.

If he closed his eyes he could feel the warmth of his bed and smell the bountiful food being carried to the master on a tray hammered from fine silver. He could taste the exquisite ale he often shared with guests, and the whisky he sipped before he sought his bed.

And it was no longer his.

Sadness gripped his heart and twisted it within his chest. The estate had been his less than a decade, and lost to him these three years past. Yet, from the moment he had walked through the ancient doors of the castle, Gideon felt at home. The keep and the land called to him, welcomed him, embraced him, loved him.

Sharyn. He wanted to bring her here and show her his jewel. He longed to take her hand in his and guide her up the marble stairs to his chamber. To see her dark hair spread across crisp linen, to hear her cry his name as he tasted her passion. That would be a slice of heaven.

A shudder passed through his soul and he closed his eyes.

He had come so close to having her just a few short hours ago. Her fire fueled his lust and he knew when they finally came together as one, the earth would move.

The cry of a falcon drew his gaze and pulled him from his thoughts. The beautiful bird spread its graceful wings across the awakening sky and glided toward the trees. The bird reminded him of the freedom he lost, the liberation he would regain one day. When that happened, he would take great pleasure in ousting the current occupants from his home.

With regret, Gideon turned his mount and started the journey back to the croft.

Sharyn. God's blood, what was he to do with the lass? She roused his hunger to a level he had never known before. He wanted her so badly he could taste her upon his tongue.

The memory of her willing body pressed against his stirred the blood in his loins. The feel of her lips parting for him, responding to him, inviting him, was more than he could tolerate. The memory would haunt his nights for years to come.

At the top of a hill overlooking the vale that hid the croft, Gideon paused. Once again Sharyn was at the stream, washing the sleep from her lovely eyes. The ends of her hair trailed in the frigid water, yet she did not seem to notice. She wore a simple gown of midnight blue, and even from this distance, he could see each tempting curve of her beautiful body.

He realized then that God had sent him an angel. Sharyn was his reward for all he had sacrificed for his country and his king. Gideon could think of no grander gift.

A gentle nudge to the flank of his horse prompted the animal down the path. Each step increased the rhythm of Gideon's heart as he drank in the innocent beauty of Sharyn.

As he neared, the focus of his desire dried her face on a towel and turned. Lord she was lovely, even with the dark circles beneath her eyes. Their gazes locked and the distance that separated them seemed to vanish. His horse slowed to a stop.

"Good morrow, Gideon," she whispered and twisted the cloth still clutched in her hands.

"Good morrow, lass," he managed to reply. His gaze held hers as he dismounted and released the reins of his horse. "Did you manage any sleep last eve?"

She averted her gaze and shook her head. "I could not sleep after I spied your departure."

Inexplicable pleasure slid through his veins. She knew he was gone and had worried about him. With care he reached out a hand and lifted her chin. The depths of her violet eyes drew him closer.

"I watched the sun rise over Skibo," he whispered and slid his fingers along her velvety cheek. "All I could think of was how much I wanted to share it with you."

Tears dusted her eyes. "Truly?"

He smiled and pulled her into his arms. "Truly."

Sharyn sniffed and stared at his chest. "Bridget preached at me without mercy after you departed. She said I acted the strumpet and should fall to my knees and beg forgiveness."

Her soft, troubled voice tore through his soul. Without trying, he had caused her grief. "Lass -- "

"Nay," she said quickly and lifted her gaze to his. A tear shimmered on the brim of her eye, then slowly slid down her cheek. "I could not bring myself to ask pardon for something that did not feel wrong."

"Och, lass," he whispered and pulled her into his arms. His lips brushed the top of her head as her tears soaked his skin. Her body shuddered against his and the warmth of her arms circled his waist.

"Hush now. It breaks my heart to see you cry."

Sharyn sniffed and lifted her tear-stained face to him. Gideon eased his hold on her slightly and brushed the moisture from her skin.

"I feel -- I want -- you have stolen my heart, Gideon of Ross." Fresh tears tumbled over her cheeks.

He closed his eyes and drew her close to keep her from seeing the tears that stung his own eyes.

What was he going to do now? He could not ask for her, not when his life was in such turmoil. Nor could he let her go. He was trapped as keenly as a fox in a hound's den.

"God help me," he whispered and savored the feel of her in his arms. "I should have returned you to England when I had the chance."

Sharyn sobbed and pushed herself free of his embrace. "I tell you my heart is yours and all you can say is I should not be here?" she cried before turning her back to him. "Mayhap Bridget was right after all?"

Gideon felt as if his heart had been torn from his chest. "Nay, lass, you do not understand," he said and moved to place his hands on her shoulders. She shrugged him off and approached the stream. A weary sigh escaped his lips. He made a mental note to thrash Bridget.

"Lass, what would you have me say?" He approached her with care and paused less than a touch away. "My feelings for you are verra strong, mayhap as strong as yours for me, yet I am powerless to act upon them."

She turned to him, frowned and wiped a shaky hand over her cheeks. "Why?"

A sad smile touched his lips and he lifted a hand toward her lovely face. "I am a brigand. 'Twould be unfair of me to ask you into a life such as that."

Her lower lip quivered as he pulled her into his arms once more. "Gideon, will you wed me?"

Her question caught him unaware. His fingers paused against her cheek and his heart tumbled against his ribs. "What?"

"Wed me," she repeated with a sniff and a nod.

"Lass, I just explained to you -- "

"I am the one asking, Gideon, not you. The choice is mine." She rested her hands upon his arms and kissed his chin. "Wed me."

Her teeth grazed his flesh and desire spiraled through his soul. How simple it would be to say aye, to live a dream, if only for a short time. The tip of her moist tongue moved over the stubble on his face as she strained to reach his lips.

"Wed me," she whispered.

The rush of her breath against his skin caused his knees to tremble. He captured her lips with his and tightened his arms around her. She was his, had been his since the moment she tumbled from her saddle. And he wanted her to a depth he had never known before. 'Tis with her he belonged.

"Och, canna leave the Chief alone for a moment. We turn our backs and he has the lassies crawling all over him."

The chirp of Alpin's voice broke through the insanity running through Gideon's brain. He lifted his head and met the amused gaze of his men. Both were mounted and looked hale enough. Clearly the news they bore was good and could wait.

"Bugger off," he mumbled and kissed Sharyn again. At this moment, pleasing her was all that mattered.

Sharyn sat upon the steps of the lodge and watched Gideon pace as he spoke to his men. Each movement of his muscular body reminded her of how it felt to be in his arms.

How could she have been so bold? Gideon must think her the grandest of fools. By speaking so freely, she opened herself to hurt and misery. Yet, somehow, looking into his eyes, she felt that would not happen, not by his hand anyway.

As if sensing her gaze upon him, Gideon turned toward her. Sensuality emitted from every fiber of his being. A promise of passion soon to be fulfilled radiated from his body.

Her heart skidded across her ribs and her breath lodged in her throat.

Merciful heaven, she was doomed.

Although he had given no reply to her proposal, 'twas clear he had every intention of sating his craving, quenching her ravenous thirst and satisfying their undeniable yearning.

"That man looks upon you with hunger in his eyes." Bridget's tone of disapproval did little to dissuade Sharyn from her thoughts as the maid seated herself on the step beside her. "Your virtue is not safe with him, milady."

"I know." Sharyn smiled and cast the woman a sidelong look. "'Tis why I asked him to wed me."

Shock widened Bridget's eyes. "Milady! Have you taken leave of your senses? Edward will never consent to you joining with a brigand."

A mirthless chuckle escaped her lips and her gaze sought Gideon once more. "I find that pleasing Edward holds little appeal." Again she smiled. "I wish only to please Gideon."

Bridget gasped and pressed her hands against her cheeks. "Have you no shame, milady?"

"When it comes to Gideon, I fear the answer is nay." She glanced at her friend. "Do not despair, he gave no reply to my offer."

"Thank the Lord, one of you is sensible." The relieved tone of Bridget's voice stirred displeasure in Sharyn's breast.

"Controlling myself in his presence is near impossible," Sharyn frowned. "He stirs things in me no other has dared."

Bridget sniffed and lifted her nose an inch. "I was witness to your appalling weakness just this morn."

Irritation climbed up Sharyn's spine. "Do you profess chastity with Alpin?"

"I do," Bridget bristled. "He has been a perfect gentleman in my presence."

"Pity," Sharyn whispered and watched Gideon nod to his men then walk toward her. Raw, masculine energy spread across the distance that separated them. She felt his strength grow, draw her deeper into his trap with each haunting

step. "Mayhap, if you submitted to a kiss or two, you would not frown down your nose at me so much."

"'Tis spiteful you are since reaching this land," Bridget mumbled and climbed to her feet. "Subject yourself to ruin if you must. I will not interfere."

"Thank you," she whispered.

Mesmerized by the approach of Gideon, Sharyn barely noticed Bridget's departure. Captured in his aura, she had to force herself to breathe.

"Do we depart soon?" she asked.

He eased himself beside her on the step and braced his arms on his thighs. "The morrow will be soon enough."

Sharyn looked up at him. Despite his light tone she knew something troubled him. "Gideon, what is amiss?"

His periwinkle eyes moved to hers and he gently shook his head. "Naught. Brodic rode far and found no evidence of Mackenzie or Balliol searching for me."

"And this displeases you?" Men were a puzzle she would never understand. They worried when their life was filled with strife, and worried when there was peace.

A frown creased his brow and stole his gaze. "'Tis strange, yet I know not why. I feel -- something smells foul."

A soft laugh escaped her lips as she leaned close to his ear. "If you stood downwind of Alpin, that could be the source."

Gideon chuckled. "Aye, that well may be, lass." He turned toward her and the merriment slowly left his eyes. "I worry for you. If peril should befall you --"

"Hush," she whispered and placed a finger over his seductive lips. "Naught can harm me while in your presence."

He lowered his gaze and turned away. "You place a lot of faith in the likes of a brigand."

"Nay," she said and cupped his cheek in her hand. The stubble on his face scratched her sensitive skin. "I place my faith in you, Gideon. I trust you with my life."

The alluring sheen in his eyes turned her thoughts to mush. He covered her hand with his own then pressed his lips against her palm. Such a simple act spiraled desire straight through her soul.

"You deserve someone much better than me," he whispered. "The life of a brigand is not for you. Yet I canna contemplate letting you go. Should you wed another, I would surely die of madness."

"I could never allow you to succumb to such a fate," she said. "I want none but you, my fine barbarian."

Sadness touched his eyes. "You know not what you say." He pulled free of her grasp. "Years may pass before I am worthy of taking a wife."

Sharyn's heart tumbled to her toes. She watched him look away, as if he could no longer stand the sight of her.

"I am quite aware of what I asked, and the consequences that will follow." She paused to swallow the hurt that rose in her throat. "If you would allow a missive -- "

“Nay!” His gaze snapped to hers. “Dare not mention soliciting my plight before an English king again.”

“Why are you so stubborn?”

“Why are you such a shrew?”

Sharyn rose to her feet and, hands planted on her hips, stared down at him. “I have you to thank for my vile traits. Until the day our paths crossed, I was most pleasant.”

Gideon rose to his full height. “Indeed? Did your gracious demeanor help your beloved king choose your mate?”

Before she knew what she was doing, Sharyn slapped him. Her palm stung from the blow and the red mark upon his cheek blurred beneath her tears.

“I -- I -- ” A sob stole her breath. “Go to the devil, Gideon of Ross. The two of you deserve each other.”

Sharyn turned on her heel and fled.

Chapter Twelve

Christ Almighty! How had such a peaceful, pleasant day turned ugly so damned fast? Pricking Sharyn's temper was the last thing he wanted to do, yet he had done just that. If the lass would just refrain from mentioning that abominable English king, he would not lose his temper.

Gideon descended the steps and followed the path she had taken. Once he found her he would try to make her see reason, if that were possible.

"Do you need me help, Chief?"

Alpin's question did naught to pause Gideon in his quest. "Nay. This matter is between the lass and myself. Stay here."

"Now Chief," the little man chimed as he fell into step beside Gideon. "You canna keep your hands off the wee lass. I best come along to keep you straight."

Gideon whirled around on his friend, his temper high. "I said stay here!"

"Who put a thistle up your arse this morn?" he asked. "I only wish to help."

"When I need your help, I will ask." Gideon turned away and resumed his search for Sharyn. "Go share your company with Brodic and Bridget."

Alpin snorted. "At least they willna bite me head off."

Gideon ignored him and followed the path that sliced through the trees behind the croft. A gentle breeze stirred the spring leaves on branches overhead as he climbed the slope that led to the falls. The sad tune the leaves sang reminded him of the disappointment he had placed in Sharyn's eyes.

The path rounded an outcrop of moss-covered boulders. Above the song of the wind he heard the rush of water cascading over stones. He had not been to this spot in ages, yet he knew it well. Once it had been his favorite place to retreat.

He stepped around the ancient stones and found Sharyn standing near the edge of a steep crag, arms wrapped around her belly, her head bowed.

Alarm slid through his veins. Did she think to jump to her death? The palms of his hands grew damp and his heart lodged in his ribs.

"Sharyn," he whispered and moved toward her. "Lass, move away from the cliff."

Her body tensed. Clearly the deafening rush of the falls had masked his approach. The vivid green of spring grass and tender leaves on the opposite side of the ridge framed her like a painting. To her right the stark whiteness of water tumbling over the rim of the earth lent a poignant contrast to the raven beauty of her hair.

"Sharyn," he repeated and eased toward her. "Come away from the edge."

Long, slow seconds passed before she turned tear-filled eyes his way.

"Fear not, my cocksure fool. I have no intention of tossing myself off the cliff. You are not worth the bother." She turned away. "Leave me now before I shove you to your death."

The anger in her voice stirred his to life once more. "Such harsh words for the man you wish to wed."

She snorted and cast him a lethal look from over her shoulder. "'Tis daft I was to suggest such a thing." With a lift of her pert little nose, she turned away. "The offer is withdrawn."

"That pleases me fine, you pampered little miss." Lord, she was aggravating. "Heaven kens you could never keep pace with the likes of me."

She spun around to face him. Hands planted on her shapely hips, nostrils flared, she looked ready to rip him limb from limb with naught but her bare hands.

"Pampered! What luxuries have I enjoyed since we met, you overgrown savage?"

"You took over my croft at the loch," he said and moved so close to her he could see the fire in her stormy eyes and smell the lavender that clung to her skin. "Because of you I have half the troops in Scotland after my head."

"Far be it for me to deprive them their spoil." She took a step away from him. "Methinks Edward would love your black, miserable heart given to him on a platter."

Gideon grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward him.

"Unhand me at once, you -- you, Scot!"

Temptation to do just that swirled through his veins. "You daft wench," he growled and jerked her against his chest. "One more retreating step and you'd have tumbled to your death."

"Och, that would have pleased you." She clenched her jaw and struggled against him. "And dare not call me wench!"

"I will call you anything I please." He tightened his hold and moved her fighting body away from the cliff. "At the moment, methinks shrew is appropriate."

Once they were safely away, he released her. Sharyn stumbled from his grasp yet maintained her balance. Irritation etched upon her face, she gasped for breath and scooped up a handful of pebbles at her feet.

"If I am such a shrew, then leave." She threw a stone at him. It missed by a good yard.

Gideon tightened his jaw and advanced toward her. For the love of Scotland, all he intended to do was make the lass see reason. He never knew the task would be so difficult.

She backed away from him and continued tossing her misplaced stones. "I said leave. Go back to your men and return to what you do best. Hide!"

Another pebble sailed through the air. This one grazed his ear. He ignored the slight sting and settled his gaze on her.

Sharyn's back hit a moss-covered boulder. Gideon paused less than a step away.

What the devil was he to do with her? She stirred things in him that none other dared. Lust and annoyance; desire and despair.

The remaining pebbles slipped from her grasp as she struggled for breath. "Seek out your hunchbacked whore and hide from life, Gideon of Ross."

Christ, did the lass forget nothing that passed his lips? He frowned. "I told you I did not want a hunchbacked whore."

"'Tis clear you do not know what you want." The tone of her voice and the dust of tears in her eyes revealed her temper was about spent. "The power to obtain your freedom rests here." She held out her hands, palms lifted toward the sky. "Through me you could regain everything that has been lost. You could have peace." She lowered her hands and bowed her head. "You could have me."

Anger churned in his gut. "At what cost, woman? I will not beg -- "

"Nay, you would not, my proud barbarian." A ragged breath filled her lungs moments before her defeated gaze met his. "Heaven would shudder should you place an ounce of trust in the hands of an English shrew."

"I did not say that."

"You did not have to, Gideon. Your wishes are clear through your actions." Her lower lip quivered moments before she looked away. "I want to go home now, to England. For as much as I long to share my life with you, I cannot give myself to a man with no soul."

Misery welled in Gideon's chest. She thought to leave him, to rid herself of his presence. He had to say something, anything to let her know how truly bewitched by her he was.

"I have a soul, Sharyn," he managed to say. "You haunt me every moment of every day. I want you so badly I ache."

A sad chuckle escaped her lips. She bowed her head and sighed. "You do not want me badly enough, my noble brigand." Her gaze met his. The violet sea of her eyes held him captive. "If you did, you would do something to gain your wish."

There was naught he could say in his defense. Sharyn was right and he knew it. He heard of men who sacrificed much to gain the heart of a woman. Until now, Gideon always thought those men were simpletons with mush for brains.

"I will be ready to ride with the dawn."

Her voice pulled him from his thoughts. With a final look of defeat, Sharyn walked away. He turned and watched her disappear around the boulder.

What the devil was he to do now? Returning her to England was unthinkable. Delivering her to Mackenzie was no longer an option. The woman was his. He would kill any man who dared take her away.

The solution entered his head as quickly as a lightning bolt across a stormy sky. His heart stroked his ribs and spiraled triumph through his veins. This was one battle he longed to win. He planned to do just that, now that the answer appeared.

Gideon ran toward the path, his decision made. The lass wanted him to do something. He would be damned if he would disappoint her again.

The seclusion of the outbuilding where the horses were kept offered Sharyn the solace her wounded heart craved. She retreated here, to a darkened corner, after spying Gideon leaving shortly after her return. 'Twas plain he could no longer tolerate the sight of her. Tears stung her eyes at the memory of their encounter.

The truth of his actions this day could not be denied. He was like all men. All he longed for was a lift of her skirts. Clearly, the years of seclusion were taking its toll upon him, for he looked upon her as he would any woman placed in the presence of a lonely man.

Reality sliced through her heart with the accuracy of a blade. She closed her eyes and rested her brow upon her raised knees.

Gideon. She had nearly succumbed to him. If not for Bridget, Sharyn would already be soiled. What a wanton soul she had. She was no better than the jaded queen who led Mortimer to his death.

"Och now, lassie, 'tis safe we are."

Alpin's thick whisper severed the quiet of the building. She lifted her head and dried her eyes. At the far end of the structure, the little man led Bridget toward a soft pile of hay. Sharyn frowned and wondered what they were about.

"Gideon departed hellbent for leather and Brodic searches the stream for salmon."

Bridget stood in the glow of the afternoon sun that wavered through a door just wide enough for a horse to pass. She bit her lower lip and cast a worried gaze over her shoulder.

"I really should search for milady," she said as Alpin coaxed her onto the hay. "After the confrontation she had --"

"The lass is most likely just licking her wounds. Gideon can be harsh when he has a thistle up his arse." Alpin settled himself beside Bridget. His nimble fingers moved to the closure of her gown. "Did the miss not bark at you to leave her be?"

Again Bridget bit her lip and nodded. "Aye, she did."

Alpin nodded. "Then heed her wish. Besides, the Chief wouldna have left if his lass had been in peril." He took her hand in his and laid back against the hay. "Right now, me rooster struts for another entrance to your henhouse."

Stunned, Sharyn watched the maid slip her hand beneath Alpin's kilt.

Bridget cooed with delight. "Och, 'tis the rooster you wish to be this time." Her other hand disappeared beneath the plaid. "From the size of you, methinks we should do the stallion again."

Sharyn felt the color drain from her face. Bridget swore chastity just a few hours ago. Yet, from the barnyard banter they exchanged, this was not the first time the two had tussled.

"Next time, lass, next time." Alpin lifted Bridget's skirts to her knees. "Come now, the cock of the henhouse wants to crow."

Trepidation gripped her heart. What should she do? There was but one entrance to the building and there was no way Sharyn could slip out without drawing attention to herself.

Bridget straddled the small man's hips. Sharyn shut her eyes and covered her ears. There had to be a way out of here.

The cry of an incapacitated rooster echoed off the walls. Sharyn shivered and opened her eyes. She had to find a means of escape. A quick glance to her right revealed a shutter cut into the wall. Being as quiet as possible, she crawled over the hay-strewn floor and prayed she would not be noticed.

"Och, Alpin --" Bridget's shuddered voice echoed through the room. "The Lord was indeed kind to you."

Sharyn paused beneath the shutter and glanced toward the door. Thankfully, stacks of hay obscured the view. She could safely exit the building undetected.

"That he was, lass. Turn just so -- och, aye, aye."

Pleasure filled groans thundered in her ears. If the man crowed again Sharyn knew she would scream. She climbed to her feet and eased open the shutters. Dry hinges screamed their thirst through the building. Sharyn paused, her heart in her throat. Surely the groping fools had heard.

"Ruffle me feathers, woman -- aye, that's the way."

Sharyn hoisted herself on the edge of the sill. Rough wood bit her fingers as she maneuvered her way through the opening.

"Cock-a-doodle-doooo!"

The mangled cry of a rooster in heat made Sharyn jump. She tumbled from her position and landed with a thud on the ground.

"Miserable Scot," she grumbled as she climbed to her feet and rubbed her sore bottom.

Now that she was outside, she breathed a heavy sigh and glanced toward the heavens. Dark clouds emerged on the horizon. No doubt more rain was on the way.

Gideon. How long would he be gone? Why had he departed in such haste?

Would he return before the rain? There were no answers here. All she could do was adjourn to her rooms and wait. Then, no doubt, he would return her to England as she asked.

With a final glance to the shutter, Sharyn gathered her skirts and made her way toward the lodge. After the display she just witnessed, she doubted if she could ever eat chicken again.

Chapter Thirteen

Sharyn stood at the windows of the main room of the lodge and stared at the darkness beyond. Rain pelted the earth and distant thunder rumbled through the heavens.

Where the devil was Gideon? He could have fallen into peril, or been captured by Balliol. Her stomach tightened into knots at the thought of him in danger. Yet, from the actions of the others, it seemed she was the only one concerned.

She frowned and cast a look over her shoulder. Alpin and Bridget sat at the table and spoke softly to each other while sharing a tankard of ale. Brodic rested before the hearth and stared aimlessly into the flames.

Sharyn turned her attention out the window once more. Perhaps she was being foolish, worrying about an overgrown Scot. Yet she could not help herself. She would not rest easy until Gideon returned.

Lightning illuminated the area before the lodge. In the brief flash of light, Sharyn glimpsed two men on horseback. Fear coiled through her belly. Had Balliol and Mackenzie discovered their haven?

"Brodic," she called, her gaze still on the darkness beyond. "Someone is out there."

"I wouldna worry so, lass," he replied. "'Tis most likely the Chief."

Another flash of lightning kissed the sky. The men were closer now, almost to the steps from the brief glimpse she had.

"Gideon left alone," she said and backed away from the window. "There are two men approaching."

The thud of boots echoed across the room. Brodic passed before her and gazed out the window. "Get yourself and your maid to your rooms, lass," he said without so much as a glance. "Alpin, douse the light."

Alarm slid through her veins and melded with the noise the other occupants of the lodge made in doing Brodic's bidding.

"Come, milady, do as the men say." Bridget grasped Sharyn's arm and coaxed her toward the room they shared. "'Tis most likely naught but weary travelers lost in the storm."

Somehow, Sharyn doubted that. Memories of the paths they rode flashed across her brain. None but Gideon and his men could find them, so well hidden were they.

Darkness blanketed the room. Beyond the door the thud of boots rose above the thunder.

Sharyn allowed herself to be led to her chamber. Once they were safely inside, Bridget closed the door then guided her to the bed.

"Sit yourself down here, milady," Bridget urged and seated herself beside Sharyn. "The men know what they are about."

Behind their closed door, the thump of boots striking a wood floor echoed through the chamber. Outside, thunderclaps splintered the air followed by a flash of lightning.

Sharyn's heart skidded across her ribs and lodged in her throat. She clutched Bridget's hand tightly and stared at the closed door.

Naught but silence greeted her. More thunder rattled the windows. What transpired in the other room? Had the invaders killed Alpin and Brodic?

A weak light wavered beneath the short space at the bottom of her door. Muffled male voices sent shivers through her soul. Sharyn trembled and Bridget gripped her arm so tightly, she thought it would snap.

"Milady, I'm frightened." Bridget's worried whisper did naught to ease Sharyn's nerves.

"Stay here," she said and pried the woman's fingers from her arm.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" Bridget clutched at her arm and tried to pull her back onto the bed.

"Would you rather sit here and await our fate?" Sharyn asked.

She freed herself from the maid's grasp and, being as quiet as possible, retrieved her bundled chalice from the pile awaiting transport on the morrow. Her gaze darted to the bottom of the door once more as she hastily withdrew the chalice from its protective cloth.

The light grew stronger and a moment later, the handle rattled. Terror gripped Sharyn's heart as she positioned herself beside the door, chalice raised. A loud clap of thunder twisted her nerves tighter than the strings on a troubadour's lute.

The handle rattled once more then the door slammed open. Bridget screamed. Sharyn closed her eyes and swung her weapon. The impact reverberated up her arms, followed by a masculine grunt.

Sharyn hugged the wall and dared a look at the intruder. The candle still in his grasp, the man held his head and staggered into the room.

Bridget screamed again. The man shook his head and maintained his balance. Sharyn raised her weapon and vowed this time to bring him down.

A strong hand grasped her wrist from behind. "Are you daft!"

The sound of Brodic's voice kept Sharyn from shrieking like a fishwife. She turned to look up at the big man and willed her heart to cease its frantic pace. "I thought -- who --"

Brodic eased his hold. "You just tried to crush the skull of the Chief."

Trepidation spiraled through her belly. Sharyn shook her head and cautiously cast a look over her shoulder.

The invader shook his head once more and turned. Blood from a gash near the brow mingled with the rain that lingered on Gideon's face.

Sharyn's heart tumbled to her toes. She dropped the chalice and ran to him. "I'm so sorry, Gideon." She guided him to the bed. "Sit yourself down and I

will tend your wound." She took the candle from his hand and placed it on the table by the bed.

Bridget scrambled off the mattress and bolted through the open door. Sharyn ignored her and hastened to gather water and a cloth.

"Why did you try to kill me, lass?"

Sharyn dampened a cloth and frowned. "I thought you were a marauder." She stood before him and lifted his face toward her. Lord, he was handsome, even if he was soaked. A shadow of whiskers covered his jaw and light shone in his eyes. Her hand trembled as she dabbed at the wound. "If you had announced yourself, I would not have attacked."

He winced and leaned away from her ministrations. "What the devil did you hit me with?"

"This."

Brodic's reply stilled Sharyn's heart. Her chalice. Slowly she turned to find the big man crouched on the floor, her precious goblet in his large hands.

He met her gaze and stood. "It looks valuable."

Sharyn swallowed the lump in her throat. "It has been in my family a long time." She moved away from Gideon and stood before the big man. "Pray, return it to me."

"Nay." Gideon's voice stole her breath. Surely the man would not steal her heirloom. "Hand it to me."

Fear circled her heart as Brodic stepped around her and surrendered the item to Gideon. The goblet was hers. Sharyn watched him examine the burnished gold. Molded for the grasp of a man, the chalice fit his hand perfectly.

"Leave us," Gideon said as he examined the goblet.

Sharyn's fingers clutched the cloth she held tightly. She would not weep before him, nor would she beg for what was rightfully hers. She may beat him with it again if he tried to take it, but she would not weep.

The door clicked shut and Gideon rested his haunting gaze on her.

"Where did you get this?"

She swallowed hard and averted her gaze. "As I said, it has been in my family a long time." She approached the bed once more and continued working on his wound. Mayhap, if she pretended indifference, he would think it worthless.

"'Tis naught but hammered metal and cold stones."

"This craftsmanship is a lost art, lass." His warm fingers curled around her wrist and halted her movement. "Where did it come from?"

She had no choice but to look into his eyes. All was lost now. Whether she told him the truth or not, she would most likely never pass the heirloom on to her children.

"It came to me upon the death of my sire," she whispered and averted her gaze to the chalice. "'Tis rumored to have once belonged to Charlemagne."

"Charlemagne?" Gideon frowned. "That would make it hundreds of years old."

Sharyn nodded. "Five hundred and twenty, to be exact." She freed herself from his grasp and gathered the goblet into her hands. Four large jewels circled the vessel just below the rim.

"'Tis called, the Clever Chalice. The stones represent emotions that dwell in the hearts of all men. Those who wish to drink from the rim must have the strength to look into their souls and the wisdom to acknowledge what resides there."

She held the goblet level with her eyes and turned it. Each gem winked at her in the dim light of the candle.

"The ruby portrays desire that fires the soul." She turned the chalice again. "The diamond symbolizes strength and the ability to love."

Her fingers stroked the jewel and traced the chiseled cut. A deep breath filled her lungs and, composed, she turned the goblet to the next stone.

"The sapphire signifies passion and amber represents devotion." She lowered the chalice and met his gaze. "Only those who recognize these emotions as true, and have them nestled in their hearts, can drink from the chalice without choking."

Without a word, Gideon eased the vessel from her hands. He turned the chalice in his palms, as if assessing its value.

"Gideon," she said, her heart lodged in her throat. "Let me return it to my things."

His brow creased and he lifted his gaze to hers. "This is the bundle you have carried with you since we met, the parcel I assumed was ribbons and mirrors?"

Her voice deserted her. She nodded and forced herself not to snatch the goblet from his grasp.

"Who kens you possess this?" he asked and slowly stood.

Confusion swirled through her brain. Did he plan to keep it for himself or return it to her? By his words, it seemed he would not try to take her treasure.

"Sharyn, who kens of the chalice?"

She trembled and retreated a step. "Very few. Bridget, Edward --"

The curse that flew from Gideon's lips stole her words. Anger lined his face as he carried the chalice to the table and placed it on the surface.

"What is amiss, Gideon?" she asked and took a tentative step toward him. "Why are you cross?"

A laugh void of mirth escaped his lips and he gently shook his head. "Do you not see, lass? This is the reason you were set upon by Mackenzie. An object as valuable as this would be coveted by many, including an English king."

Dread washed through Sharyn's veins. This could not be true. "Edward would never betray me," she managed to say.

Gideon fixed a glare on her and scowled. Whatever curses he longed to toss her way died on his lips when a knock sounded on the door. "Enter," he barked and returned his gaze to her.

Brodic entered the room, a teary-eyed Bridget close behind. "Beg pardon, Chief, but are you near ready?"

Gideon's chest expanded with his breath. Clearly, he fought to destroy his temper. "Aye."

"Ready for what?" Sharyn asked. Surely the man did not think to leave in the midst of a storm.

"You have not told her?" Brodic asked, his eyebrow raised.

"Other matters claimed priority," Gideon replied.

"Told me what?" she asked and backed away from the men.

"Och, milady," Bridget cried and ran to embrace Sharyn. "He fetched a vicar. 'Tis why you saw two men approach."

"A vicar?" Sharyn whispered and pried at Bridget's arms. "For what purpose?"

"I thought to wed you," Gideon said. He touched his wound and grimaced. "After the greeting I received, I am tempted to change my mind."

Sharyn stared at him in amazement. "You thought to--" She paused, drew in a breath and finally removed Bridget's arms from her neck. "Did you never think to ask if I would have you?"

A slow, sensuous smile curled his mouth. "There was no need, lass. You will have me."

Annoyance climbed up her spine. She crossed her arms over her belly and lifted her chin. "You sound sure of yourself, my fine barbarian."

"I am. After all, you asked me first."

What she would not give to wipe that victorious grin off his handsome face. "The offer was withdrawn before you gave a reply."

Gideon merely shrugged. "It matters not to me. You will be my bride before dawn colors the sky." He grabbed the chalice off the table and ushered Brodic out the door. He paused in the threshold and said, "This will be waiting for you on the mantel. Wed me and you get it back. Decline, and it becomes mine."

Anger churned through her soul as the door closed, leaving her alone with Bridget. The man was pompous, arrogant and --

"This will do nicely for your nuptials." Bridget's voice drew Sharyn from her rage. The maid fluttered about the room, a lavender gown of embroidered silk in her arms.

Sharyn lowered her gaze to her hands, surprised to see them tremble. She had told him to do something about his emotions. Clearly, for once, he listened.

Marrying Gideon would also fulfill Edward's wishes. He wanted her wed to a titled Scottish lord. Gideon was titled and he was definitely a Scot.

"Come now, lady," Bridget chided and tugged at the laces of Sharyn's gown. "Change yourself before that man comes in here and drags you out by the hair."

A slow smile touched Sharyn's lips as Bridget pulled and fussed with her clothes. Finally, she could give Gideon what he craved most in life. She could give him Skibo.

Chapter Fourteen

Gideon's gut was wound tighter than the arse of an Englishman in winter. He paced before the hearth and continued to glance toward Sharyn's door.

What the devil was taking her so long? In the time that elapsed since departing her room, he had managed to eat, change into dry clothes and shave.

If she thought to deny him --

"Here, my friend, you look as if you could use this." Brodic's voice snatched Gideon from his thoughts. The man stood before him with two tankards in his hands.

"My thanks," Gideon said and accepted the welcomed offering. He lifted it to his lips and swallowed the tranquil brew. The taste was one he knew well, yet had not sampled in ages. He lowered the vessel. "Where did you get this?"

A wide grin spread across Brodic's lips. "The cellars of Skibo. Think the monks will miss a keg of your finest ale?"

"Monks my arse," he said and took another drink. "Balliol will pay for --"

The vision of Sharyn standing in the threshold of her room stole all coherent thoughts and words from his soul. She was a vision of loveliness, an angel dropped to earth.

Lavender silk hugged each curve of her haunting body. Birds and vines embroidered on the bodice enhanced her breasts and drew the eye to the swell of tempting flesh above. The vines and creatures cascaded down the skirt and framed inserted panels of pristine silk. Rolled braids kept her hair out of her face and disappeared behind her back. Sprigs of lavender were woven through her tresses and complimented her eyes.

"Let me take that before you drop it."

Gideon was vaguely aware of Brodic withdrawing the tankard from his hands. He was afraid to move, afraid to blink, lest the vision before him disappeared.

Alpin materialized at Sharyn's side and proudly offered her his arm. The beauty of a blush stained her cheeks moments before she nodded and accepted his gesture of grandeur.

The little man strutted with pride as he escorted Sharyn across the room. Gideon could do naught but stare at the beautiful creature who would soon be his. God had indeed blessed him well the day their paths crossed.

Sharyn paused before him and murmured her thanks to Alpin. Her gaze transfixed on Gideon, she gifted him with a smile that could warm the heavens.

A prod to the ribs pulled him from his stupor. He frowned and turned to the offender. "What?"

Brodic cleared his throat and nodded. "The vicar asked if you are ready to proceed."

Without a word he turned to Sharyn. The light in her eyes swelled his heart. He gathered her hand in his and brought it to his lips. The tempting aroma of lavender swirled through his brain.

"Are you ready, lass?" he managed to ask.

Her hand trembled slightly. "Aye."

His gaze settled on hers, he nodded. "Vicar, you may begin."

The words the holy man spoke swirled through his brain. If not for a prod to the ribs from Brodic, he would have failed to repeat the vows that bound him to his English lass.

All he could do was stare at Sharyn as she blushed and responded to the sacred words of marriage. Such elegance and grace were things he thought would never be his. Now that he found Sharyn, and was fortunate enough to gain her for his bride, he vowed to spend the remainder of his life thanking God for his endowment.

The vicar closed his book and nodded. "You may kiss your bride."

A slow smile touched his lips. "With pleasure," he said and pulled her into his arms.

The moment he touched her, the world ceased to exist. The only occupants were him and his Sharyn. He longed to spend eternity making love to her, caring for her, protecting her.

A firm hand on his shoulder penetrated the oblivious world he had retreated to with Sharyn. Reluctantly, he lifted his lips from hers and turned a glance over his shoulder.

"The vicar needs you to sign his book, then you can be alone with your bride," Brodic said.

Alone with his bride. That was one reward he looked forward too. Time to themselves, in seclusion, with no interruptions.

He eased her from his arms and slipped her hand in his. "Come, love. I wish to send the vicar on his way."

Gideon approached the table and accepted a quill from the man. He scrawled his name on the line indicated, then handed it to Sharyn.

While she signed her name, Gideon dug in his sporran and withdrew a small pouch of coins. "Remember, not a word to Balliol's troops."

The man nodded and pocketed the gold. "Have no fear, milord. None will learn of your location from me."

"Good," he said and turned to his bride. "Now, if you all will excuse us, I wish to be alone with my wife."

Bridget blew her nose on a cloth then tucked it into her pocket. "Not at all." She took Sharyn's hand and pulled her toward the door. "Give me a moment to prepare her to greet you."

Gideon frowned and refused to yield. "I said leave."

"But -- you do not understand --"

"'Tis you who does not understand, woman," he said and swept Sharyn into his arms. He leveled his gaze on the maid and dared her to protest again. "We are wed now and you no longer have cause to complain."

"Gideon, put me down this instant."

His gaze settled on hers. **"I will the moment we are alone."** He turned on his heel and approached his door.

Sharyn's nails dug into his shoulder. **"Please put me down."**

Her words made him pause in his quest. Uncertainty shone in her eyes. Did she fear him and the night ahead?

"I beg you for a few moments to prepare." She moistened her lips and leaned close to his ear. **"Use the time to send the vicar on his way. It will give me the chance to calm my nerves."**

Hell. What was the matter with him? He should know better than to carry a virgin to his bed and ravish her. Most likely he would scare the hell out of her. Damn it all. He had been without a woman far too long. This night was very different from any before. It must be done properly, with tenderness, understanding, affection. He prayed restraint was within his power to achieve.

Slowly, he lowered her to her feet. **"I beg your pardon, lass."** He brushed his knuckles across her soft lips. **"Gather what you need and bring it to my room."**

A blush stained her cheeks moments before she bowed her head and nodded. **"I thank you."**

A groan lodged in his throat and he turned away. If she gave him one more coy look, he would follow his baser needs and all control would be lost.

"Brodic, bring the ale," he said as he left the lodge. He had the feeling he would need a few tankards to cool his blood, along with a dip in the stream. Either way he vowed to take his time with his bride.

"Lady, cease your fidgets. You will survive this night."

Bridget's words of assurance did little to ease the knot of worry nestled in Sharyn's belly. She knew what transpired between men and women beneath the sheets, yet this was different. Tales were one thing, reality quite another.

To ease her distress she tried to concentrate on the room. 'Twas futile indeed for it bore the very essence of Gideon. His discarded clothes lay draped over a chair in the far corner. The wardrobe gaped open to reveal the few items he had carried from the croft.

She drew in a breath for courage and let her gaze settle on the bed. Brushed burgundy velvet drapes hung from the ceiling and were held back at each corner post with a matching tassel. Steps of polished oak stood at the ready near the foot of the massive bed. Somehow, she doubted if Gideon needed their aid.

This night she would share that bed with Gideon. He would do things to her none other had dared.

Memories of what she overheard in the outbuilding drifted through her brain. Bridget had preened over the size of Alpin. If a man that scrawny was

enough to make a woman quiver, then good Lord, what rested beneath Gideon's kilt?

Sharp pain sped through her head. "Ouch!" Sharyn groaned and turned a glare on her maid. "Are you trying to snatch me bald?"

The woman sighed wearily and lifted her gaze toward the ceiling. "If you would but sit still, 'twould make my task much easier."

Sharyn frowned and turned her back to the maid. Her reflection in the small mirror caught her eye. She lifted the polished glass and stared at herself.

A white gossamer nightgown was all that separated her from nudity. The translucent fabric clung to the swell of her breasts and tumbled like a cloud to her toes. Tiny bows of crimson hid her modesty.

'Twas the gown she was to have worn to greet Mackenzie in their marriage bed. The queen consort had it made especially for her. The white symbolized her purity and the red the blood he would spill when he made her a woman.

Disgust roiled through her belly. "Find something else for me to wear," she said and climbed to her feet. Her hasty movements caused Bridget to drop the comb.

"Lady, 'tis the finest garment you own."

"I do not care," she said and ripped the bows apart. "I will not go to Gideon wearing something created with another in mind."

She tore the garment off her body and cursed when it tangled around her arm.

"Milady . . ."

Bridget's whispered alarm halted her movements. The garment clasped before her, Sharyn turned.

Gideon stood spellbound in the doorway. The carnal gleam emitting from his eyes washed warmth through her veins. His sensual gaze swept over her with notorious leisure before slowly returning to her face.

"We need a few more minutes, milord." Bridget hastened across the room and tried to shove Gideon back through the door.

The man did not budge.

Sharyn lowered her gaze and tightened her fingers in the filmy fabric clutched to her breast.

"Leave," he said, his tone one she would not challenge. "Now."

Bridget murmured a goodbye to Sharyn. The door closed. She shut her eyes and tightened her hold on the fabric. The sound of a key turning in the lock grated down her spine.

A boot tumbled to the floor. Sharyn flinched, yet refused to retreat or open her eyes. The other boot fell. She drew a ragged breath.

What would he do to her? Would he want to play the stallion and her the mare? Heaven forbid if he preferred the rooster.

The jangle of a buckle being released sent shivers through her soul. Think, she commanded her terrified brain. There had to be a way to stop --

His sword fell at her feet. Her eyes sprang open and a gasp lodged in her throat. She lifted her head. The man looked ravenous, ready to devour her with

little prompting. Unnerved, she stumbled back from the giant Scot who could move with such stealth through a room.

His hand gripped her arm and kept her from falling. Sharyn froze, afraid to speak or breathe.

"Are you hale, lass?" The concern in his voice touched her heart. He may be a Scot, but he was a Scot with feelings.

Unable to reply, she nodded.

"Are you sure? I can fetch some ale to calm your nerves, if you would like."

Sharyn shook her head and prayed he did not feel her tremble.

Long moments passed before he withdrew his touch. Sharyn watched each movement of his long, lean fingers.

He freed the clasp of the badge pinned at his shoulder and tossed it onto the table now littered with her things. His eyes held hers as he pulled the length of tartan from his shoulder, then eased the edge of his tunic from the waist of his kilt.

Inch by slow inch his body became exposed to her. The taut muscles of his belly, the rigid expanse of his chest and the breadth of his powerful shoulders. The tunic tumbled forgotten to the floor.

He looked like a god standing before her, half dressed. She could gaze upon him all night and never grow weary of the sight.

His fingers released the sporran from his hips. He tossed the bag onto the table, then reached for the buckle that held his kilt in place. Sharyn swallowed hard and spun around. She could not watch him discard the final barrier.

"Och, lass, I thank you for the view."

Horrified, Sharyn realized she stood before him bare as the day of her birth. She choked on a gasp and whirled around to face him. The pleased smile that graced his lips did little to dispel her apprehension. At least he still wore his kilt.

With the grace of a raven spreading its wings, Gideon reached for the fabric clutched to her breast. Sharyn shook her head and retreated a step.

His fingers paused mere inches from hers. "Lass, I swear on my life I willna hurt you."

Sharyn swallowed the lump of fear lodged in her throat and stared at his chest. "I know."

He stepped closer and gently gathered the fabric into his strong hands. "Then, I beg you," he whispered and eased the cloth away. "Let me see if the vision of my dreams matches reality."

Releasing her hold on the gossamer shield took every ounce of courage Sharyn could muster. Never in her life had she stood unclothed before a man.

The rough breath that filled his lungs spread doubt through her heart. Evidently, the sight of her displeased him. She reached for the cloth still clutched in his hands.

"Nay," he said and shoved the garment behind his back. "Dare not cover perfection." The fabric fluttered to the floor.

Her gaze snapped to his. The glow of desire in his eyes spiraled a tremor clear through her heart. His passion filled gaze moved over her with unrestricted

captivation. The urge to conceal herself inched through her veins. This is how the prey of a wolf must feel moments before it is consumed.

Hesitantly, his hand moved toward her face. Petrified, Sharyn closed her eyes and waited to be despoiled.

The pads of his fingers brushed her cheek with the grace of butterfly wings. The delicate caress sent a wave of hope through her body. Through his touch, she felt his tenderness, his compassion, his understanding. He would be as tender with their consummation as he could.

"You are so verra beautiful." The hush of his voice quelled her inner strife. Her eyes fluttered open. "I canna believe this is real -- that you are truly mine."

With care, he slid his hands through her hair and loosened the braid that held it in place. Sharyn closed her eyes and enjoyed the feel of his strong hands against her scalp. Such gentleness in a man his size filled her heart with respect for the woman who raised him.

"I dreamt of your hair like this, unbound and tangled around my limbs."

The image that flashed through her mind caused heat to rush to her cheeks. She bowed her head and stared at his belly.

The tips of his fingers brushed her chin and raised her gaze to his.

"Do not fear me, lass. I will not hurt you." He cupped her face in his powerful hands and whispered light kisses across her cheek. "I would die first."

She wanted to believe his words. Yet, from what she knew, the first time with a man was always unpleasant. Then again, Bridget did not seem to mind the act with Alpin. In fact, from the barnyard banter they shared, the pair obviously enjoyed copulation.

Gideon slid his hands lightly across her shoulders and down her arms until their fingers twined. Her gaze met his and, in that fleeting moment, she knew that he would keep his word. There was naught to fear nor would he require barnyard preening.

"I need you," he whispered and led her toward the bed. "I have wanted you for what seems an eternity."

Her heart hammered a wild beat against her ribs. The dusk of his eyes and the kiss of candlelight on his muscular body chased away her apprehension and swirled desire in its place.

He paused beside the bed and pulled her so close, her taut nipples brushed his hard chest. Sharyn closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The tip of one of his fingers slid between the valley of her breasts and skimmed her flesh.

His lips brushed her bare shoulder and followed the curve of her throat. Euphoria engulfed her senses and caused her to sway against him. Strong arms kept her from crumpling at his feet.

"I have you," he whispered and eased her onto the bed.

She sank into the downy comfort and welcomed the heat of his skin against hers. The tip of his moist tongue teased the lobe of her ear, followed by the gentle graze of his teeth. Anticipation stirred in the pit of her belly and reeled through her veins. Her eyes fluttered closed and she slid her nails lightly over his broad shoulders.

A primitive growl lodged in his throat. "I want you so badly, Sharyn."

Her hands roamed over the corded muscles of his back. The echo of his breath lodged in his throat as his lips met hers. His merest touch sped urgency through her body. She wanted him in every way a woman could have a man.

His skin was so hot against her sensitive breasts, she thought she would scream from need. She fumbled with his kilt, trying in vain to loosen the wretched thing. She wanted no barriers between them at all.

His mouth left hers and forged a path of yearning to her breast. He drew her into his warmth and cupped her in his strong hand.

Sharyn cried his name and tried to get even closer to him. Fingers tangled in his hair, she held him against her and prayed he never ceased his exploration.

Gideon mumbled against her skin. His hands shook as he tore away the remnants of his clothes and rolled between her legs. His lips returned to hers and his palm slid down her belly to the juncture of her thighs.

The moment he touched her, an eruption of the sweetest kind consumed her body. She sucked in her breath and clung to him.

"God's blood, woman. You are impossible to deny," he growled and pushed his erect manhood into her.

The movement was so swift it took a moment for her brain to realize what had happened. A sharp pain spread from where they were joined and traveled through every fiber of her being.

"Gideon," she cried. Her body tensed around him and she closed her eyes against the pain.

"Hush, my pet" he whispered and gently kissed her cheek. "It will pass."

His hips remained still, for which Sharyn was most grateful. The gentle caress of his lips eased some of the tension from her stiff limbs. He kissed her as if he worshiped her, adored her, cherished her.

Sharyn's head spun in a flurry of emotions. The pain began to ebb, although a slight ache remained. She shivered and knew all they had shared before was dull and lifeless compared to this.

Slowly, Gideon raised his head. Sharyn's eyes fluttered open. Restraint was etched upon his face. 'Twas then she knew he was doing his best to honor his vow not to hurt her. She stroked his dampened cheek and sighed.

"'Tis safe to continue, my fine barbarian." She raised herself and lightly bit his chin. "You have kept your promise."

He closed his eyes and adjusted his hips. The feel of him moving inside her was more pleasurable than she ever imagined. She was now one with him, something she felt was destined to be from the moment they met.

Her eyes closed and her nails slid down the taut muscles of his back. He moved again. The stimulating feel of her body drawing him deep inside was nearly more than she could bear.

"Gideon," she whispered and pressed herself against him. If she had known what should happen next, she'd have begged him to hasten her there.

His hand skimmed down her leg and cupped her knee. Gently, he guided it to rest beside his ribs. This time, when he moved, ecstasy swallowed her soul.

She welcomed each of his slow, commanding thrusts with a need she never dreamed possible.

A tremble started in the pit of her belly. With each stroke she felt herself being pushed further toward heaven's abyss.

"Dear Lord," she murmured. The tremble burst into sweet, heated honey. It surged from where they were joined and flowed through her veins like fire over dry heather. Her legs tensed around his ribs.

"Och, lass," he groaned and plunged deep inside her. The eruption of his release speared her womb and melded with the rapture that poured through her body.

The echo of their labored breaths filled the room. Sweat-slicked limbs tangled together, Gideon rested his head in the hollow of her throat.

"God's blood, Sharyn," he whispered and lightly brushed his lips against her heated flesh. "I have never known such heaven before."

Tears stung her eyes and there was naught she could do to stop them. Sharyn had never felt anything so beautiful, tender or satisfying in her life. She stroked his damp hair and kissed his temple. Her heart swelled against her ribs and threatened to burst.

Now she was his, truly his, forever and always. No one could ever take her away from her fine barbarian.

Chapter Fifteen

Gideon rolled to his side and slid an arm around Sharyn. She snuggled against him in her sleep and breathed a contented sigh.

He closed his eyes and pressed his lips against her temple. This was heaven, what he craved and yearned for all his life.

And heaven came packaged in the guise of an Englishwoman.

The memory of their union was forever emblazoned upon his mind. Never, in his wildest dreams, could he have foreseen what transpired between them. He had been right. When they were allowed to unite as one, the earth moved.

His eyes drifted open and a satisfied smile curled his lips. When they first met, he dubbed her Trouble. Had he known the unrest she would cause his heart, and the fiery passion that flowed through her veins, he would have named her Obsession.

The hunger in her blood matched his with a force that shook him to the core. In one night he experienced sensual pleasure to a depth he had never known before. A complete surrender of heart and soul.

His.

"Sharyn," he murmured and nuzzled her neck. "'Tis time to arise, lass."

Her groan of protest echoed through the chamber. She stirred against him and enticed his dormant manhood to life.

He closed his eyes and willed his blood to cool. 'Twas too soon to have her again. Her body would be tender from their night together.

"Good morrow, husband."

The delicate whisper of her voice fanned his cheek and lured his gaze. The sated, sleepy smile she bestowed upon him filled his belly with a hunger only she could satisfy.

Gideon groaned. He rolled to his back and pulled her into his arms. His fingers slid through her hair and guided her lips to his.

One taste was all he craved, he told himself, as he parted her lips with his tongue. Yet, the moment she responded, all thoughts of restraint fled his brain. She was fire in his veins and lust in his soul. With her in his arms, he was complete.

The tender brush of her palms against his chest penetrated his mind. Her lips brushed his mouth then ventured to his chin. With the delicate grace of a butterfly, she lightly bit his flesh and the tip of her hot tongue slid along his throat.

A shudder passed through his soul. Her touch was intoxicating and he could gladly stay here forever and let her explore him to her hearts content.

"I want to make love to you, husband," she whispered against his skin. "Teach me how to please you."

Her tongue stroked his nipple.

Gideon sucked in his breath. "Och, lass," he groaned and wrapped his hands around her arms. "You please me more than you ken."

He pulled her up and captured her lips in a hungry kiss. In one smooth motion he rolled her to her back and cradled himself between her velvet thighs. Sharyn was ambrosia, nectar of the Gods, and he, a mere mortal, had been blessed with her.

With a groan he lifted his head. Gazing down into her passion filled eyes saturated his heart with an emotion that could only be love. The lure of her lips, swollen from his kiss, increased the intense adoration that flooded his soul.

"You have stolen my heart, lass," he whispered and smoothed a hand over her hair. "Guard it well."

His lips drank her sweetness as his body entered hers. The seductive groan of her passion lingered on his tongue and fueled his ravenous craving. Her body wrapped around his as he strove to quench the thirst she induced in him. The bite of her nails in his arms and the feel of her legs around his waist pushed him into oblivion.

In the back of his mind he heard her cry his name moments before her honeyed release lured his seed into the safety of her womb.

"Jesu!" he shuddered and pressed his body against hers. Tremors of satisfaction raced through his veins. She was heaven, pure and simple.

He rested his brow against her shoulder and thanked the Lord that she was his.

Happiness unfurled its wings through Sharyn's soul as she watched her husband dress. Being with Gideon was more wonderful than she dared imagine.

Memories of her apprehension the night before inched into her brain. How foolish she had been to allow herself to be frightened of him, of what they shared.

"What coaxes a smile to your lips, wife?" Gideon's voice pulled her from her thoughts.

"You do," she whispered.

The covers tangled around her, she rolled to her side and watched him finish dressing. Dark hair tumbled across his brow as he belted his tartan into place. A pristine tunic covered a chest she knew was molded of muscle.

He retrieved his sword and glanced at her. "After the night we shared, they will bury me with a smile on my face."

"Not too soon, I hope," she said.

His lips curled into a sensuous smile as he approached the bed. "Not for a verra long while, lass. My yearning for you is far from sated."

The periwinkle depths of his eyes still held the look of an animal seeking its prey. How she longed to surrender to him again.

"I will send Bridget in to help you dress." He leaned over the bed and brushed her brow with his lips. "We have a long ride ahead of us this day."

The thought of leaving this cozy lodge held little appeal. So much had transpired here. Behind these walls, her life had changed.

"Can we not linger another day?" she asked.

"Nay, lass. We must return to the loch." He brushed another kiss across her brow then lifted himself away from her. "The men and I will prepare the horses."

Sharyn merely nodded and watched him leave the room, closing the door behind him. Their departure, no doubt, was linked to the unease Gideon mentioned after his men returned. He had said something felt wrong, yet he did not know what.

She took a deep breath and forced the unpleasant thoughts from her mind. This day would bring naught but joy, now that she was wed. It did not matter where she was as long as she was with Gideon. She sat up, removed herself from the tangled mess of the covers, and climbed to her feet.

Dull pain throbbed through her groin. She winced and looked down at her body. Faint red smeared her thighs. A glance at the sheets gave proof of what transpired the night before.

She now belonged to Gideon.

A smile curled her lips and brightened her soul as she cleaned herself and recalled their night together. Gideon made her feel powerful, loved, cherished. The only thoughts she had after the first time was learning how to please him.

A light knock on the door, followed by Bridget's voice, drew Sharyn from her thoughts. She bade the woman enter. Bridget stepped into the room with naught but a robe in her arms.

Sharyn frowned. "Gideon plans to depart this day," she said as the maid closed the door. "I dare say I cannot travel in that."

"Nor will you." Bridget approached and held the garment for Sharyn. "It will be easier to dress you in your former room."

Without a word Sharyn slid her arms into the lush warmth of green velvet.

"How was your night, milady?"

A smile touched Sharyn's lips as she tied the sash of her robe. "'Twas truly wonderful." She turned to her maid and her smile grew. "Now I know why you spend so much time with Alpin."

The color seeped from Bridget's face. "Milady, I assure you I never --"

"Och, aye you did, and more than once, from what I heard." She tapped her maid's mouth closed and headed from the room. "I was in the outbuilding yesterday."

Sharyn was in such a happy mood, she hummed to herself as she crossed the common area that separated her chamber from Gideon's.

"Milady, words fail me." Bridget halted her near the center of the room. "'Tis ashamed of myself, I am. Until I met my little rooster, I was quite chaste."

Remorse filled the woman's eyes and tugged at Sharyn's heart. "If you had not felt 'twas the right thing to do, you would not have shared yourself with him." She pulled the woman into a sincere hug. "Have no fear, Bridget. Alpin is an honorable man. He will do the right thing by you."

The distant ring of metal against metal slid through the lodge. Sharyn's heart stilled as she freed herself from Bridget's embrace and strained to hear the noise again.

"I pray 'tis so --"

"Hush!" Sharyn snapped and moved with care toward the door. The noise sounded again, this time closer than the one before.

"Is something amiss, milady?"

Trepidation inched its way up her spine. The whine of horses melded with the thunder of her heart.

"Get me a weapon," she said and silently opened the door.

"Milady!" Bridget cried.

Irritated, Sharyn turned a scowl on the woman. "Now is not the time for tears. Fetch me a blade."

While Bridget did her bidding, Sharyn peeked out a crack in the door. Naught seemed amiss, yet the noise grew closer. Several male voices echoed from the rear of the lodge and rose above the metallic clang of swords.

"Milady."

Bridget's voice drew Sharyn's gaze. Light shimmered off the edge of a dirk held in the maid's grasp. She took the weapon and eased open the door. Another glimpse around the area brought her naught but a view she admired since their arrival.

She stepped across the threshold, Bridget close behind. Smooth wood chilled from the morning dew caressed her bare feet with each step she took down the length of the porch. The fighting grew louder and tugged her fear to life.

The scene before her stole her heart. A few dozen men clad in green plaid and English attire fought with Gideon and Brodic. Alpin was nowhere to be seen.

Mackenzie. Sharyn would never forget the plaid of the men who had attacked her escort. The English were most likely vassals of Edward sent to aid in the search for her and Bridget. Her fingers tightened around the hilt of her meager blade. Helpless, she watched the men fight.

Sweat dampened Gideon's skin as he fought with his back against Brodic. Swords clashed and each strike stabbed through Sharyn's heart.

A blade sliced through the air and struck Gideon's arm. He staggered beneath the blow and was set upon by the swarming foe.

"Gideon!" Sharyn screamed and ran for him. Dirk raised, jaw clenched, she would kill any who dared cause him harm.

Blinded with rage, she fought through the men who kept her from her husband. A powerful arm wrapped around her waist and jerked her back. Pressure applied to her wrist released her hold on the blade. A gloved hand moved to her chin. Sharyn knew the unseen foe meant to snap her neck.

"Dare not harm her!"

The roared command echoed through the morning mist and stilled the bedlam around her. Sharyn strained to see Gideon and quiet the mad beat of her heart. Englishmen and kilted warriors blocked her view.

The men parted like the sea and allowed their leader to approach. Her gaze rested on the man and revulsion settled in the pit of her belly.

Balliol.

The dull red of his hair gleamed copper in the morning light. Small eyes that resembled a serpent slithered over her body. 'Twas then she realized how she must look to him. Her hair a tangled mess from her time with Gideon, her robe twisted with naught but the sash covering her modesty. This cretin no doubt took great pleasure seeing her like this.

A frown puckered his circlet encased brow. "I heard you were set upon by brigands before you could arrive to your betrothed."

Sharyn clenched her jaw and pried at the arm wrapped firmly around her waist. "Aye, I was. Mackenzie is the one responsible."

A look of boredom crossed his face. "'Tis not the tale I hear." He glanced to the men. "Get the brigands to their feet."

Men did his bidding. Fear surged through her veins as she watched them drag Gideon and Brodic toward the trees. "Dare not harm them."

"I am the king of Scotland. I do anything I please." Balliol took a step toward her, his beady eyes narrowed. "These men are traitors."

Her belly kissed her spine. Traitors were granted no leniency. "Gideon and his men saved me. They are not the ones who attacked my party."

"Mackenzie swears they are."

"Mackenzie lies." Anger flared through her veins and her struggles resumed. "You will release me and these men immediately or so help me I will kill you myself."

"My, such harsh words for a friend you have not seen in four long years."

A mirthless chuckle escaped her lips. "We were never friends." She stomped on the foot of the man who held her. "Release me!"

"This is the lass intended for me?"

The question paused her once again. She turned a glare on the one who spoke. Hair the color of soiled linen tumbled across the pox marked brow of a man she assumed was Murdoch Mackenzie. The green of his sullied kilt stirred dormant memories of the lives that were lost on a highland road not more than a fortnight past.

Balliol grimaced. "Aye. Yet, from the looks of her, I would say her flower has already been plucked."

"You filthy bastard," Sharyn hissed and squirmed in the arms of her captor. "Edward will make you rue this day."

His viperous gaze drifted over her with an ease that slithered loathing clear through her soul. From the chill on her legs she knew they were exposed to his nauseating view.

"Speaking of your brother, what would he say if he heard you defending the likes of a brigand?"

"What would he say if he knew you attempted to violate me four years past?"

Anger darkened his eyes and his lips narrowed into a thin line. "If not for that blasted maid of yours, you would now be my mistress."

Sharyn snorted and fought her captor's hold once more. "Not while breath fills my lungs."

One copper eyebrow rose. "Indeed?" He turned to his men. "Hang them."

"Nay!" Her shriek echoed through the vale. Her patience gone, she reached behind her, grabbed her captor's groin and twisted. The man howled with pain and released her.

Sharyn ran for Gideon. Mackenzie lunged for her. She tightened her hand into a fist and hit him in the jaw. It felt as if she broke three fingers, but she did not care. All that mattered was saving Gideon.

"Cease acting the fool over the likes of him," Balliol growled and grabbed her wayward hair. A sharp twist and a tug pulled her against his side. "The man hangs."

Tiny needles of pain speared her scalp. She clutched her head and tried not to move. "You cannot hang him."

"Why?"

She took a deep breath and tried to ignore the pain he caused. "He is my husband."

His fingers eased their hold. Relief inched through her veins and she tried to gain her freedom. Balliol tightened his hold and jerked her against him once more.

"You lie."

"'Tis the truth." She clawed at the hand coiled in her hair. "If you do not believe me, have your men fetch the vicar."

Precious seconds ticked by while he considered her words. Sharyn kept her gaze on Gideon. The loose end of a rope sailed over the branch of a tree. Through the gaps in the men she saw them shove Gideon toward the waiting noose.

Hysteria clawed through her veins. "I tell you true. I am his wife." She closed her eyes a moment and tried to calm herself. "Hang him and the fragile peace you share with England will cease. Edward will see to that."

An angry curse lodged in his throat. Without a word he flung her from his grasp.

She stumbled and turned to face him. "Halt the hanging, Balliol."

He stared at her with eyes as cold as stone and maintained his silence.

She glanced over her shoulder. The noose was slipped over Gideon's head. Panic seared her heart. She grabbed Balliol by the front of his tunic and shook him. "Halt them!"

Her shriek startled birds from their nests. Deathly silence lingered over the vale.

Balliol bowed his head a moment then nodded. "I will concede this time. The prisoners will be transported to Inverness for trial. After all, traitors merit a public execution."

Relief mixed with fear tumbled through Sharyn's veins and tears stung her eyes. She crumpled to the earth and said a prayer of thanks that she had been able to save Gideon. For now.

Her future, Gideon's future, now rested with Edward. Once he learned what transpired on her journey, and of her union, Gideon would be set free.

Chapter Sixteen

Where the hell was Alpin? The question echoed through Gideon's head each mile they had traveled. The man was so small and agile; none of the marauders could catch him. The last glimpse Gideon had of the man, he was running like a rabbit through the hills with Balliol's men in hot pursuit.

Gideon struggled with the rope that bit into his flesh. His hands tied behind him, he could do naught but torture himself with worry. When Balliol's men returned alone, he knew Alpin had escaped. While that offered him relief, there were a hundred other things to be concerned with.

The sun had set an hour past and the group had paused for the night. Tied to a large oak on a knoll overlooking the camp, Gideon stared at the spot where Brodic was tied on the opposite side. He had expected to see Alpin long before now.

"Try to stop me and I will kill you!" Sharyn's angered voice captured his attention. She stood bravely before Balliol, a basket draped over her arm. "Gideon is my husband and he is hurt. I will tend him."

As if on queue the gash in his arm began to throb. He closed his eyes against the pain and prayed the lass had the good sense to stay away from him.

"You either go under guard, or you return to camp."

Balliol's hated voice stabbed his gut. Gideon frowned and rested his gaze on the loathsome pretender to Scotland's throne. While he hated the man to the depths of his soul, he knew the bastard would never hurt Sharyn.

"'Tis fear in your eyes, Balliol. You have four men standing over him now. What harm can I do?" She lifted her nose into the air and continued her journey up the knoll.

Gideon watched her approach. The urge to kiss her senseless melded with the need to wring her lovely neck.

She paused beside him. How he despised having her see him this way. Darkness hid her eyes from his view. He longed to gaze into those violet depths once more.

Sharyn placed her basket on the ground then knelt at his side. One of the guards stepped closer. She spared him no more than a glance, then focused on her task.

"Has the bleeding stopped?" She withdrew a pair of sharp scissors from the basket and moved close to his arm.

The very scent of her launched his mind into a spin. The musk of their union lingered with the faint remains of lavender.

"Do not fear, Gideon. All will be well once we reach Inverness." Her whispered words brushed his ear as she snipped at the cloth stuck to his wound.

"For you, perhaps." He looked at her and was thankful he could not see her eyes. It gave him the courage to do what he must. "Public disembowelment holds verra little appeal to me."

Her hand trembled as she eased the fabric away from his wound. "It will not come to that. I promise."

Nay, it would not, not if he could help it. Again he searched the darkness and wondered what was keeping Alpin.

"Balliol has done a fair amount of boasting since leaving the vale," she whispered and continued her ministrations to his wound. "Edward left their little hunting party to return to Inverness. He is less than pleased at the arrival of his mother."

Gideon did not give a damn about Edward or his relationship with his mother. At present, more urgent concerns occupied his thoughts.

Sharyn tied a cloth around his wound. "This will do until a physician can have a look. It does not appear to be as bad as I envisioned."

She gathered her things into the basket. Gideon could do naught but watch her. The guards stood too close for him to explain the plan he formed three years ago with his men, to be enacted in the event of capture.

A plan that did not include her.

"I will see to Brodic now. Bridget will bring food and water soon." She leaned forward and touched her lips to his.

Anger at himself for being in such a vulnerable situation slid through his soul. He should have followed his instincts from the start and hauled her shapely bottom back to England.

Despite the longing in his heart, he knew he should have never married her. With a great deal of effort, he forced himself not to respond.

Her body tensed and she moved away. "Are you cross with me, husband?"

He knew what he had to do. It would cause him great pain, but he faced no choice. Having her near him could be dangerous.

"I have been happier, lass."

The silhouette of her shoulders lowered an inch and he felt like a royal arse for his actions.

"Edward will set things right," she said, her voice a crushed whisper. "I will not let them hang you."

God forgive him for what he was about to do.

A harsh chuckle escaped his lips. "Aye, that I ken. You already deprived me a quick, merciful death." Her head snapped up and, although he could not see her gaze, he knew hurt and confusion surely graced her eyes. "Thanks to you, my bonnie Englishwoman, I face a demise more brutal than a noose."

Tense silence drifted between them. He had to bite his tongue to keep from recanting his words.

"Gideon, I --"

"Save your words." He adjusted himself against the ground and grimaced. "I will remember all you have done when they rip open my stomach with a hook."

"Cease this." She sniffed and swiped a hand over her face. "'Edward will spare you once he hears my plea."

"Och, aye, you fail to see that your king is a heartless bastard who strives to fill his grandsire's shoes and be taller by an inch." Gideon gently shook his head. "It seems you are gaining your wish after all."

"What wish?"

"To reunite yourself with your king. You have mentioned his name often enough since we met."

Her crestfallen sob tore through his soul. "Why are you being so cruel to me?"

"You think I am being cruel? Lass, what do you call what you have done to me?"

"I saved you from hanging!"

"Aye, you did. The English do not ken the meaning of mercy." He rested his head against the tree. "This morn I placed my heart in your hands and bade you to guard it well. Mayhap, if you ask nicely, Balliol will give it to you on a platter when the executioner removes it from my chest."

Sharyn gathered her basket, stumbled to her feet, and ran down the knoll. Each step she took twisted a blade in Gideon's heart.

Anguish tore through his soul. He wanted to call her back, to hold her in his arms and kiss the tears from her cheeks. She was his life, his love, his wife. Without her he was incomplete.

Tears stung his eyes. He tightly closed them and bowed his head. When this was over, if all went well, he could spend the remainder of his life making this up to her.

The pale hues of dawn streaked through a bleak, cloudy sky. Sharyn sat on a fallen log near the smoky remains of the fire. The camp slowly came to life around her. She barely noticed. Dressed and ready to continue the journey, she stared aimlessly at the whiffs of smoke that coiled through the air.

Sleep had eluded her. During the silence of the night, every harsh word Gideon said sped through her brain. They increased in intensity until she thought she would scream.

Bridget tried to convince her that he meant not a word, and Sharyn desperately wanted to believe her. Yet, the image of his grim face, coupled with his insensitive tone, made her think otherwise.

Her eyes drifted closed and memories of their time together flashed across her mind. Their first kiss, the brush of his strong hands against her flesh, the feel of his arms around her.

And he never wanted her.

Solemnly, she opened her eyes and stared at her feet. Gideon only took her with him that fateful day on the lane because his men badgered him to do so. He

carried her as far as the edge of Mackenzie land, intent on depositing her and Bridget there without so much as a backwards glance.

"Milady?"

Bridget's voice pulled her from her weary thoughts. She looked up at the maid and frowned. The woman held a mug and a plate.

"Will you try to eat something?"

Sharyn turned away and shook her head. "I cannot. If food should pass my lips, I would surely retch."

The maid sighed and seated herself beside Sharyn. "Then, would you like to take Gideon his food? He has had the torture of night to curse his hasty words."

Hurt rose in her breast and coiled around her heart. This quarrel was different from the others they shared. Gideon had never been so harsh with her before. She needed more time before confronting him again.

"I take your silence for a nay." Bridget scowled and climbed to her feet. "The man can be gruff, yet, I cannot believe he meant his words."

"He meant them," Sharyn whispered and pulled her cloak closer around her body.

A wild, uncivilized shriek stabbed the hush of morn. Sharyn leapt to her feet and scanned the trees.

"'Tis Alpin," Bridget whispered and promptly dropped the vessels she carried.

Chaos erupted so quickly, Sharyn did not have the chance to ask how Bridget knew the shriek belonged to Alpin. A sea of red plaids mushroomed from the knolls and flowed toward the camp. The deadly clash of swords splintered the air. Bridget clutched Sharyn's arm so tightly, she feared her bones would snap.

The men of Mackenzie, together with the English soldiers, drew their blades and hastened toward the red clad foe. The plaid. Where had she seen it before? Gideon's was red, yet the pattern of these were different.

Another wild shriek pierced the air. She glimpsed Alpin slash through the ropes that held Gideon captive before fighting men blocked her view. Balliol troops hastened toward Gideon.

Deep in her heart she knew that his bitter words the night before were a ruse, a way to keep her away from him and out of danger when trouble erupted.

"We must hide ourselves." Sharyn said and tried to loosen her maid's painful grip.

She turned and spied Agnes freeing Brodic. Munro. The plaid belonged to Munro. Somehow, it did not surprise her to see Agnes among the men. She was one woman Sharyn would never wish to cross.

"Run for the trees," she said and shoved the maid away. "I will join you as soon as I collect my chalice."

"Milady, nay --"

"Go!" Sharyn snapped and ran the short distance to where her things waited.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she hastily scattered her sparse possessions. She found the bundled chalice and clutched it to her breast.

Her neck jerked back and a thousand needles of pain spread across her head. The chalice tumbled from her grasp as she clawed at the hand twined in her hair.

"You knew this would happen!" Balliol's heated voice brushed her cheek as he yanked her to her feet. "I will not spare him again."

"You will not capture him again."

His hand tightened in her tresses and he pulled her with him across the clearing. "Aye, I will for I possess something he wants. I have you!"

Balliol's painful grip brought tears to her eyes. Frantic, she searched for Gideon. Naught but a sea of green melded with red greeted her. She stumbled over the hem of her gown and tried to think above the pain in her head and the noise of the battle.

Horses snorted and pawed the earth. Balliol shoved her against one and released his masterful hold. Sharyn fell against the animal, yet maintained her balance. She faced Balliol with hatred in her soul.

"Mount," he commanded.

"Go to the devil," she spat. She lifted the hem of her skirt and darted toward the trees.

A powerful arm circled her waist and snatched her back against his chest.

Panic seized her heart as she kicked and clawed his body. Balliol cursed and pinned her against the saddle. His grip shifted to her hair once more and he pulled himself into the saddle. His free hand grasped her arm and yanked.

"Gideon!" she cried moments before her stomach hit the saddle. The air rushed from her lungs and relief tumbled through her veins as he released his harmful hold.

"Aye, scream for him," he spat and kicked his mount in the flanks. "Hasten him to his death."

Sharyn jostled against the saddle. The pommel dug into her side. She ignored it and concentrated on his leg. It took three attempts before she got her hands around him. The moment she did, she bit him as hard as she could.

The man sucked in his breath then tangled his hand in her hair once more.

"You little bitch!" His grip returned to her scalp and jerked her head back. Sharyn gasped for precious air. "I should break your neck for daring to harm your king."

"You -- are -- not -- my -- king," she choked.

The world smeared before her eyes and slowly faded to black.

Chapter Seventeen

Above the bedlam of fighting men, Gideon heard his name. He slashed through the foe before him and leapt upon a nearby boulder. His heart thundered against his ribs as he scanned the melee spread before him. Where the devil was Sharyn?

Warriors from Munro slaughtered the foe. Across the littered clearing he spied Balliol astride a mount, Sharyn's listless body draped across the saddle before him. Rage seethed through his veins as he watched the man flee. The bastard would regret harming her.

"Gideon, behind you!"

Alpin's bellow captured his thoughts. Gideon turned and crouched at the same time he swung his blade upward. The wound in his arm throbbed as his sword sliced through the ribs of a Mackenzie vassal.

A pained cry melded with the din of a battle nearing an end. Gideon yanked his blade upward through the man's chest then jerked it free. The vassal fell in silence from the boulder.

Those loyal to Balliol and Mackenzie fled toward the trees, followed by howling Munro warriors.

Gideon leapt to the ground and forged a headlong path around lifeless bodies. His hand tightened on the hilt of his sword as he approached the path Balliol had taken. The man would die for harming Sharyn.

Breathless, he slowed his step and rested a bloodstained hand against a tree. An obscure image danced against the horizon with a trail of fading riders behind. Balliol and his followers were too far away to be caught.

An invisible steel band tightened around his heart. He closed his eyes and suppressed the urge to roar his rage to the sky.

Sharyn. His last words to her had been harsh and unfeeling. Would he ever see her again? Would he hold her in his arms and recant every bitter moment?

"Alpin!" Bridget's wail sliced through the silence that settled over the clearing. Gideon turned in time to see her knock the little man to the ground, her body covering his. "I was so worried about you," she cried and covered the man's face with kisses. "I would have killed you had you died."

Gideon drew in a breath and ignored the couple. His Sharyn was gone. Despite her impetuous temper he knew it would be difficult to gain access to her now.

He sheathed his weapon and approached the men who drifted in from the trees. Blood soaked earth squished beneath his feet. Eyes downcast, he thought of nothing save how to regain his bride.

A ribbon fluttered in the breeze from the gnarled twig of a fallen log. His heart stilled in his chest. It belonged to Sharyn. Without a thought he approached the dead wood and plucked the decoration into his grasp.

The lavender scrap of cloth was one she had worn in her hair the night she approached him at the loch. The night the fire chased them from the croft.

He coiled his hand into a fist, closed his eyes and pressed the ribbon against his lips. Memories of Sharyn drifted through his battered mind. He saw her bathed in the glow of the moon and felt the fiery passion that flowed in her veins. The sparkle of her sated eyes melded with the hush of his name falling from her lips.

"Chief?"

Brodic's voice pulled Gideon from his thoughts. He opened his eyes, tucked the ribbon into his sporran and turned. The big man stood with an arm draped around the shoulders of his stout wife. Behind them, Alpin comforted a teary-eyed Bridget.

"Munro gathers his men as we speak," Brodic said and glanced down at his woman. "Me lass understands the battle is far from over." His gaze returned to Gideon. "We will think of a way to return your lady to us."

"Aye, and Munro will pledge his men to you." Agnes wrapped her arms around Brodic and squeezed. "I will help as well."

Pain licked through Gideon's veins. He had hurt Sharyn deeply last eve. Would she know he did so for her own good?

"I thank you," he said and shoved a hand through his hair. More of Sharyn's things caught his eye.

Without a word he stepped over the log and crouched beside her scattered belongings. Her gowns had been trampled into the earth by fighting men and fleeing horses. They were damaged beyond repair.

"My lady was given sparse time to gather her things and change before leaving the vale," Bridget whispered.

Gideon ignored her and lifted a bundle into his hands. Bloodstained fingers quickly released the tie and eased away the cloth.

The burnished gold of the chalice came into view and the glimmer of a diamond winked at him. He recalled she said the stone stood for strength and the ability to love. 'Twas an omen that this particular stone caught his eye. Sharyn called this the Clever Chalice. Whether he believed the tale surrounding it did not matter. The heirloom would serve him well.

"Gather the horses," he said and slipped the cloth back over the chalice. "I ken how to regain my bride."

Cold drops of rain pelted Sharyn as she rode through the gates of Inverness castle. The late afternoon weather matched her mood. Forced to share a saddle with Balliol, she spent her time thinking of ways to end his life.

Above the dull ache in her head she heard the echo of hooves striking the cobbled stones of the courtyard. Serfs ran forward and grabbed the bridles of those seeking refuge from the imminent storm.

Balliol dismounted and reached for her. Sharyn did not protest his assistance and slid from the saddle. Behind these walls Edward waited. She would take grand pleasure seeing Balliol face her monarch's rage.

"I will have a chamber prepared for you," he said as he guided her up the rain-slicked steps. "Use the time to refresh yourself and wash the stench of that brigand from your body."

Sharyn jerked her arm free of his grasp. "The only foulness I wish to rid myself of is the offensive reek of you!"

His lip curled into a snarl and he gripped her chin with his strong fingers. "One day soon I will take great pleasure removing the venom from your tongue."

Sharyn tried to withdraw from his grasp. He tightened his hold and perverse gratification shone in his eyes. Anger mingled with disgust in the pit of her stomach. If he thought she would allow him to touch her, he was sadly mistaken.

"When a real man has parted your thighs, you will be as submissive as a London whore."

His mouth covered hers in a cruel kiss. Revulsion slid through her veins. She clenched her teeth together and plunged her knee into his groin.

An animal growl escaped him as he flung her from his grasp. Sharyn fell against the cold stone wall of the keep. The breath rushed from her lungs. She turned and settled her gaze on him.

"Dare soil me again with your vile touch and I will make you a eunuch."

His face contorted with pain, he clutched his groin and leveled deadly eyes on her. "Get yourself inside before I drag you to the stables and take a whip to you."

"Violate me again and Edward will have your head on a pike."

"Aye, I will." The sound of Edward's voice sped relief through her veins. He stood in the threshold of the keep, a sour look upon his otherwise handsome face. His gaze slid from her to Balliol. "You dare inflict pain on her?"

Balliol closed his eyes and removed his hand from between his legs. "The lass crushed my balls." His dark gaze slithered to her. "If I sire no bairns, 'twill be on her head."

"If you sire no bairns, 'twill be benevolence to mankind." Sharyn lifted her nose, turned to Edward and bowed. "Milord."

"Rise," he said and grasped her arms in his hands. His gaze moved over her and tugged a frown to his brow. "You look a fright." He turned and beckoned a servant. "Show milady to a chamber and arrange a bath and food."

"Edward, I must speak with you."

"Later," he said, his gaze moving from her to Balliol. "For now I need to hear this man's reason for daring to harm one so close to my heart."

Sharyn knew further protest would gain her naught but Edward's displeasure. That, she could do without. In the hours ahead she would ask much of him. She needed his approval, his understanding and compassion.

"Very well," she whispered and curtsied. "Pray, do not delay our discussion overlong. Much has happened since last we met."

Fatigue spread through her limbs as she followed a servant through the lofty halls of the castle. Soon she would place her case before Edward. Then he would reunite her with Gideon and her life would be complete.

Rain slid over Gideon's skin as he stumbled toward the gates of Inverness castle. Clothed in his bloodied plaid, his hands tied securely behind him, he followed the cobbled path and prayed the ruse worked.

Draped in heavy wool, their features hidden by hoods, Brodic and Alpin flanked him, each man with a grip on his arm. Behind them walked Agnes and a handful of Munro men covered in similar attire.

"Bridget could have helped us, Chief," Alpin whispered as they continued their walk. "She kens your lady better than most."

Gideon frowned. "She also shrieks and weeps at the most inopportune time." He shook his head. "'Tis safer we are having her stay with the remaining warriors of Munro."

"Who approaches?"

The yelled challenge echoed down from the castle walls and paused the group a few feet before the gate.

Apprehension slid through Gideon's veins. Again he prayed his plan would work. "Proceed," he whispered.

A weary sigh escaped Brodic. He released his hold on Gideon and stepped forward. "We are peasants from the hamlet of Fife. One of our women recognized this man as the brigand ken as Gideon of Ross."

Head slightly bowed, Gideon watched the activity beyond the gates. Guards hastened across slick stones and entered the keep while others scrambled to open the barrier.

Brodic returned to his side, grasped his arm once more, and led the way to the iron that groaned inward. "I pray you ken your mind, Chief," he whispered as they neared the royal guards. "They could opt to hang you the moment you enter the courtyard."

"Aye, they could," he replied, his voice low. "Yet Balliol will thirst for vengeance. He willna grant a quick death."

The moment the group entered the courtyard, the gates closed behind them. Guards approached and jerked Gideon from the grasp of his men. He stumbled and drove a shoulder into the chest of one of the guards.

"Watch yourself," the guard grunted and gained a hold on his injured arm. Gideon clenched his jaw to mask the pain. "Otherwise, you willna live to hang."

The echo of boots tapping against stone reverberated through the yard. The guards jerked him around to face the man who had hunted him for three long years.

Balliol stopped near Gideon. Beside him stood a man with the complexion of a woman. If not for the narrow beard on his chin, he could probably pass for one. The man, he assumed, was Sharyn's coveted Edward.

"Well, now," Balliol chuckled, his fists planted firmly on his hips. "I never thought to see you again so soon."

"These peasants captured him near Fife," a guard said and tightened his hold on Gideon. "One of the maids recognized him."

A bitter chuckle rumbled in Gideon's chest. He rested his gaze on Balliol and mocked, "'Tis a bitter blow to realize peasants accomplished what you could not."

Edward chuckled. "Aye, and it did not take them three years."

Laughter erupted among the guards. Anger stole the smile from Balliol's lips. He stepped forward and thrust his fist into Gideon's gut. Gideon doubled over in pain. If not for the grip of the guards beside him, his knees would have scraped the stones. Fingers slid through his hair and wrenched his head back. Balliol stood so close, Gideon could smell what he consumed during his last meal.

"Now that I have you, here behind these walls, you will not escape." He yanked Gideon's hair once more. "After a hasty trial you will walk to a traitor's death."

Hatred for this bastard swirled in Gideon's belly. He stared the man in the eye, took a deep breath, then spat in his face.

Balliol released his hold and recoiled. More laughter erupted from Edward and the guards which only fueled Balliol's rage. The metallic ring of a sword being drawn quieted the mirth.

"By all that is holy I will strike you down myself." Balliol raised his blade.

Edward grabbed the man and shoved him away. "Have you completely lost your senses?" he asked. "Kill him and you lose your throne. No one will tolerate a murderer, crown or not."

Gideon silently thanked Edward for interfering. He glanced at Brodic and saw the big man adjust his cloak. His men could thank him too. His actions saved them from drawing their blades.

Sharp breaths expelled through flared nostrils, Balliol slowly sheathed his weapon and rested his gaze on Gideon's men. "You have served your country well. You may now return to your homes."

"Och, milord, if you please," Brodic said, his voice humble. "Me woman is heavy with child, and the others old. I would beg you for the favor of a night in your stables."

"Grant the plea, Balliol." Edward stepped forward and nodded. "'Tis the least you can do to repay them."

Damn. If the man continued to play into his hands, Gideon would begin to believe some of Sharyn's praise.

“Very well,” Balliol said. “You have until morn to rest.” He turned to his guards and grimaced. “Take the prisoner to the cellars.”

Gideon trailed his heels as much as he anticipated was expected of him. The rough treatment of the guards aggravated his injured arm, yet it was a small price to pay to gain entrance to this damnable keep. For now he would thank God that his plan had worked thus far. He had too much at stake to lose now. His life and Sharyn. Gideon had no intention of parting with either.

Chapter Eighteen

"Lass."

The irritating voice wove through the haze of Sharyn's weary brain.

"Lass, awaken now." This time the voice was followed by a firm shake of her shoulder.

Sharyn groaned her displeasure and opened her eyes. The shrouded image that wavered before her lodged a gasp in her throat. She opened her mouth to scream. A palm with the lingering scent of damp hay clamped over her mouth.

"Lass, 'tis I."

Above the panic that pounded through her heart Sharyn tried to recognize the voice. The figure reached up and shoved back its hood. Relief tumbled through her veins and she removed his grimy hand.

"Alpin. Are you trying to frighten me to death?" Her brain registered her words. She sat up with a start and grabbed the scrawny man by the front of his cloak. "Gideon! Where is he?"

"Och, lass, you are snatching the hair from me body." He loosened her hold and rubbed his offended chest. "Leave something for Bridget to appreciate."

Sharyn scrambled off the bed. "Where is Gideon?" she asked and studied the small man. Drab wool tumbled from his shoulders and brushed his calves. His hair stood up on end and lines of worry creased his brow.

He took a deep breath and said, "Gideon is once again Balliol's prisoner."

"What?" she cried and leapt toward him. "When -- how --?"

Alpin jumped away from her tense claws. "Dare not snatch at me again."

"If you do not answer me, I vow to do more than snatch!"

"Now, no need to get your innards in a knot. I imagine the Chief is in the dungeons."

Despair coiled through her soul. Gideon. She could envision her beloved barbarian locked in chains and at the mercy of Balliol.

"You look a mite peaked," Alpin said and eased her into a soft chair beside the bed. "Trust me and Brodic, lass. We will die before we allow harm to befall the Chief." As quickly as possible he explained how they gained access to the castle. "The guards will spare no more than a glance to a lowly peasant. 'Tis how I was able to enter the keep and discover your chamber."

Some of the anxiety that coiled through her belly dissipated. For the first time, she noticed that soft candles illuminated the darkness of her chamber and a low fire chased the chill from the room. She remembered bathing and sating her hunger. After she dressed, she waited for Edward to arrive. She must have fallen asleep.

"What is the hour?"

Alpin shrugged. "'Tis late, I ken. We have been here near an hour. The day had already surrendered to night when we entered the gates."

Sharyn glanced at a ringed candle nestled in a sconce by the bed. "Nine," she whispered and turned away from the flame. "Why has Edward not come for me?"

"I couldna say, lass." Alpin's voice drew her from her thoughts. "He seemed nauseatingly pleasant in the courtyard, for an Englishman, that is."

"The courtyard?" Sharyn shook her head and tried to escape the lingering webs of sleep. "You speak in riddles."

"Nay, I am quite lucid." He shoved a hand through his mangled hair and frowned. "Listen to me well lass. The Chief will be fine until the morrow. What he needs from you right now is to gain audience with your king."

Sharyn closed her eyes and released her pent up breath. "Aye, 'tis a wise plan. Edward will --"

"Attend the trial."

His words drew her gaze. "Trial?" She shook her head and climbed to her feet. "If you think I will sit here and allow Gideon to face a room full of heretics, you are sadly mistaken."

Hands planted on narrow hips, Alpin frowned at her. "Do you wish to help Gideon or hamper him?"

Confusion tumbled through her brain. "Again with the riddles." She sighed and matched his stance. "I wish to help him, of course."

Alpin nodded. "As do we all." He slid a hand into the confines of his cloak and withdrew her bundled chalice. "This is your power, lass." He grabbed her wrist and wrapped her fingers around the vessel. "Use it to learn the truth."

Sharyn clenched her jaw and narrowed her gaze on the man. "If you speak in riddles to me again, I will hit you with this."

"Och, and the English call us daft," he mumbled with a stray glance to the ceiling. "Here is the picture, lass. Go to Edward and explain what transpired on your journey through our land."

The urge to strike the man coiled through her belly. "'Tis what I intend --"

"Now, bite your tongue, wee one, and let me finish me description."

Bite her tongue, indeed. Her fingers tightened on the chalice.

"As I was saying," he continued. "Edward will question Mackenzie. Demand to be present."

"But --"

"Och," he said and held up a finger of warning. "'Tis me picture I'm drawing, woman. Only I ken what should be on the canvas."

"Alpin --" Sharyn warned. Now she knew how Gideon must have felt when dealing with the small man.

"Lass, I do not mean to frustrate you." He took her hand in his. The look in his dusky eyes stirred unease in her belly. "Gideon believes the true devil hides behind the skin of another."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Heaven help her, she really did want to thrash him.

His gaze lowered to the floor a moment, then returned to hers. "It means that mayhap, just this once, Mackenzie, cranky and ill-tempered as he can be, is innocent."

The man was daft as a horse! "Surely you jest? Gideon identified the plaid himself."

"Aye, aye, that he did," Alpin said and released her hand. He shoved his fingers through his hair and turned toward the hearth. "Lass, think on this a moment, if you will." He paused before the fire and turned his gaze on her. "That mug you hold -- has anyone ever tried to take it from you?"

Her fingers tightened on the chalice. "Nay."

One scruffy eyebrow rose toward the disarray of his hair. "Nay? Are you sure?"

Trepidation inched down her spine. She lowered her gaze. "Well -- that is, Edward did borrow it from me once, without permission."

"Did the man borrow or steal?"

Sharyn cast him a frown. "Borrowed. Edward would never steal from me."

Alpin nodded. "Aye, then. What reason did he give for borrowing the mug?"

A lump lodged in her throat. "He said 'twas a valuable relic and he merely placed it in the royal coffers for safe keeping."

The little man snorted and cast a gaze to the ceiling. "And you believed him?"

Anger licked through her veins. "Aye, I believed him. Edward has never given me reason to doubt him or his motives."

"Not even when he sent you to Scotland, against your wishes, to wed a man you never laid eyes upon?"

Agitation seeped into her belly. "What is it you are trying to say to me, Alpin?"

His shoulders sagged beneath the weight of his cloak. He approached her and guided her back to the chair. "Lass, Edward and Balliol are in a scheme together. Gideon believes, and Brodic and I agree, that your union to Mackenzie was a ploy. We all ken you were never to reach your destination."

"Aye," she said, trying to remain tolerant. "That was clear when I was set upon by vassals of Mackenzie."

"Were they truly Mackenzie vassals?"

"By Christ's blue eyes, Alpin," Sharyn snapped. "Gideon is the one that made such a grand display over the color of cloth they wore."

"I am not denying the attackers cloaked themselves in Mackenzie plaid."

"Then, for the love of England, what the devil are you trying to say?"

"That mayhap your precious Edward isna so precious after all." The anger in the little man's eyes stole her heartbeat. "God's teeth, woman. Any fool can snatch a plaid and pose themselves as another. Many a foul deed has been done in this land, and yours, by such a guise."

Disbelief tumbled through Sharyn's soul. None of this was true. Edward was like a brother to her. Aye, he was harsh and unyielding at times, yet he would never harm her.

"It wouldna surprise me to learn Edward arranged your union with Mackenzie once he realized how far into the Highlands you would have to travel." His voice, soft with remorse, drew her from her thoughts. "It also wouldna surprise me to learn that Balliol agreed to the attack. Edward would gain the chalice. Since Balliol is wed, you would have likely been taken as his mistress."

Revulsion surged bile to her throat. Sharyn closed her eyes. It could not be true. Please, God, this could not be true.

"Edward ken of this mug. No doubt he passed that knowledge on to Balliol. Methinks you were naught but a pawn in a greedy game of royal chess."

Tears stung Sharyn's eyes. The part about Balliol she could comprehend. The difficulty came in believing the words about Edward.

"Hide this well." Alpin's hand on hers drew her gaze. "Remember to demand to be present during all questioning. I do mean demand. Hop a fit if you must, but make your wishes clear. Do not surrender your demands. And whatever you do, keep the chalice hidden."

Numb with grief and confusion, Sharyn watched the little man tug his hood into place and move to the wide window of her chamber.

"If your suspicions are true," she said, her voice a crushed whisper, an echo of her soul. "If they are true, how will the chalice help?"

Alpin chuckled softly. "Och, lass, what a daft wee thing you are." He shook his head and swung a leg over the sill. "Unless the mug means more to you than Gideon, use it to bargain the Chief his freedom."

Sharyn blinked and Alpin was gone.

"You have been a thorn in my side for three long years."

Through a haze of incredible pain, Balliol's hated voice filled the air. A fist to the ribs pushed the breath from Gideon's lungs. His arms suspended by chains embedded in the wall, he could do naught to protect himself.

The injury in his arm screamed agony through his weary brain. It melded with the punishment from Balliol, and Gideon silently prayed for unconsciousness to claim him.

Fingers tightened in his hair and jerked his head back. Balliol's distorted face wavered before eyes near swollen from abuse. Behind the despised man, the weak light of a lone torch flickered against the cold stones of Gideon's prison.

"After you are dead, Sharyn comes to me. 'Tis for me she will live. My name will be all that falls from her lips. The pleasure we share will erase all memories of her brief time with you."

Gideon struggled to stand upright. If he could only hit the bastard once, it would make him a very happy man.

Laughter echoed through the small chamber. A moment later, another blow landed to his abdomen and the fist clutched in his hair released its hold.

"It takes a very small man to violate one who is defenseless."

The soft whisper of a woman's voice echoed through Gideon's brain. With extreme effort, he raised his head.

Naught but a tall, murky shadow drifted before him. Balliol paused his flailing and faced the image.

"Then again, violating the helpless is what you do best."

The gentle caress of her words gave Gideon comfort. With determination, he managed to gain his footing and drew in a placid breath.

"I authorized no visitors," Balliol hissed and took a step toward her.

"I do not seek permission from the likes of you."

Gideon strained to see the woman in the poor light. Whoever she was, he admired her for facing Balliol alone.

"Get yourself away from here," Balliol whispered, his tone harsh. "This matter is between the brigand and myself."

"Methinks you forget yourself," she said and stepped closer to Gideon. Soft hands cupped his face and supported his pounding head. "I am the queen consort whose son erroneously placed you on the Scottish throne." Her distorted features swam before Gideon's swollen eyes, yet her compassion emitted from her touch. "If you wish to keep your lofty station, I suggest you remove this man's shackles before you depart."

She withdrew her caress. Above the thunder in his ears, Gideon heard Balliol curse.

"He can rot from his arms for all I care." Balliol returned to Gideon and snatched his head back once more. "Thank Queen Isabella for her mercy."

Balliol tossed Gideon away. His head snapped back and lolled to one side. A moment later, hard leather hit his ankles and his feet refused to support his weight. His arms pulled violently against the chains in an effort to hold him upright. Misery speared his body and a distressed cry lodged in his throat.

One day he would repay this bastard for his maltreatment.

"Dare you return and I will have you locked in irons!" Isabella's angry voice echoed off the narrow walls of the cell.

Gideon closed his mind to the pain and forced deep breaths into his lungs.

"The worm is gone." Again her soft hands cradled his face. "He should be the one chained here." She slid a shoulder beneath Gideon's arm. "Guards!"

Voices thundered through his head and his body swayed from the chains with each movement of the frail woman called Isabella. Clearly Edward had one commendable quality on his side; his lady mother.

The chains on one arm grew slack and Gideon collapsed to his knees, pulling Isabella down with him. The wound in his arm throbbed with the tingle of blood rushing through limbs no longer restrained.

"Here now," she whispered and did her best to help him rise.

The other chain went limp and somewhere in his mind he heard the length scrape against the stone surface. Strong hands pulled him to his feet, guided him across the floor, and onto a slab bench.

Relief sped through Gideon's veins. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall. Never would he have guessed that sitting could bring such comfort. The shackles around his wrists fell free and the echo of men departing the cell rang through the night.

Moist fingers touched his lips. Tiny drops penetrated his mouth and slid down his parched throat. More cooling wetness was offered and the drops increased to a trickle.

"The guard is fetching the things I need to tend your wounds," she said and a blessed cool cloth comforted his eyes. "I need you coherent." More wetness trickled down his throat. "Nod when you think you can speak."

Under her ministrations, the pain in his body began to ebb slightly. With care Gideon lifted a hand to the cloth over his eyes and pulled it away. It took all his energy to perform the task, but the sight of Isabella was worth the effort.

Seated beside him, the top of her head barely reached his shoulder. Dark hair sprinkled with the color of ash framed a smooth face and enhanced her pale eyes.

Her touch, although gentle, caused him pain. He winced and tried to pull his battered body away.

"My heart aches for you," she said and used more gentleness than before. "I did not mean to harm you."

Gideon moistened his lips and did his best to nod. Why was this woman, mother to Sharyn's scheming king, showing him kindness? It made no sense to his addled brain, yet he could not form the words to pass his barren lips.

"My son tells me you and Sharyn are wed." Her gaze lifted to his for the space of a heartbeat, then returned to the bandage she applied to his arm. "Is this true?"

Again he opened his mouth to reply, yet no sound emerged. He closed his eyes a moment, swallowed, and managed to croak a weak, "Aye."

Her mouth set in a firm line, she finished the bandage then met his gaze. "Do you love her?"

Love. Gideon was not sure he truly understood the meaning of the word. If it meant mental unrest when parted, an overwhelming desire to protect and defend, and complete peace when together, then the answer was aye. He slowly nodded.

The lines on her face softened. "You have no idea how much joy that gives my heart." Her gaze lowered to her hands and a deep breath filled her lungs. "Has she shown you the chalice?"

Gideon moistened his lips. "Aye."

"Did she explain what it means?"

He nodded. "Aye."

Her gaze lifted to his. "Do you believe the tale?"

His eyes closed. Did he believe that a drink from a cup could determine if love lingered in a man's heart? Memories of his time with Sharyn flashed across his mind. Her standing in his croft the morning after they met, the fire in her eyes when they shared their first kiss in the stables at Munro. Her softness, her beauty, her grace.

Her love.

"Milord, do you believe --"

"Aye," he whispered and forced his sore eyes open. He looked at Isabella and knew in his heart that every word Sharyn said to him was true. "I believe."

The whisper of a pleased sigh filled the air. "Sharyn is very special to me."

Through the dim light, Gideon saw a touch of sadness grace her eyes. "To me also."

Her gaze met his and a soft smile touched her lips. "I am elated that you were there when she needed you." She paused and used the cool cloth to bathe his chaffed wrists. "When I heard she was set upon by brigands, and that she disappeared -- well, my heart felt as if it was torn from my breast. I gathered my things and started the trek for Inverness."

Tales of this woman he heard throughout the years drifted through his brain. Given in an arranged marriage to a homosexual king, once Longshanks died, she took control of the country and had her husband imprisoned. With the help of Mortimer, the king was deposed and forced to abdicate in favor of his one and only son. Somehow, the image of the stories did not match the vision of the woman beside him now.

"I have done much in my life that warrants no pride," she whispered and moved to his other wrist. "Sharyn is my chance to make what amends I can."

He thought he understood her stance, yet he could not be certain. "You feel guilty about Mortimer?"

Sorrow filled eyes met his. "I do. If I had been stronger -- I never did the right thing by Sharyn."

A strange sensation circled Gideon's heart. "The right thing, lady? You took her in as ward when Mortimer died."

"When he was murdered, you mean," she said, her voice filled with anger. She climbed to her feet and moved to the far side of the cell. "I owe her more than I can ever hope to repay."

"How?" He drew a deep breath and tried to clear his eyes. "Why is Sharyn, and her happiness, so important to you?"

Isabella turned and a sad smile touched her lips. "'Tis simple, milord." She paused and lowered her gaze a moment. "Although the secret has been well kept, 'tis time for you and Sharyn to know the truth." Another deep breath filled her lungs and she returned to stand before him. "You see, milord, Sharyn is my daughter."

Chapter Nineteen

Sharyn was hopelessly lost. Unfamiliar with the keep of Inverness, she crept through the darkened, quiet halls, down eerie, winding stairwells, and still had no luck finding Gideon.

Refusing to give up her search, she pushed upon an iron-studded door. Hinges thirsty for a drop of oil screamed through the sleeping hall. Heart in her throat, she glanced around the empty corridor for any sign of discovery. Precious seconds ticked by with no alarm being raised.

A quiet thanks to God passed her lips before she braved a peek inside. The staggering glow of a torch rippled through the darkness. Phantom suits of armor stood as silent sentinels and dared her to enter. Broadwords and shields of various origins mocked her from their home on the wall.

With a frown Sharyn lowered her gaze and tugged at the door. A thought flitted across her mind and she paused for another look. Why would a torch be kept burning in the armory at this hour?

With care she slipped into the chamber and quietly shut the door. Back pressed against the aged wood, she took deep breaths to gather her courage.

"'Tis naught but empty armor and idle weapons," she whispered and glanced around the eerie room.

The mysterious grate of stone slithering against stone reverberated through the chamber. Terror surged through her veins as she scanned the room for the source. At the far end of the chamber, the dying torch revealed a hole emerging in the wall.

Frantic, Sharyn glanced around for a place to hide. A suit of armor all but hidden in shadow beckoned her to safety. The murmur of a male voice propelled her across the stones. The size of the armor dwarfed her, safely hiding her from view.

"I tell you once more that my men returned to the area." The nettlesome tone of Balliol's voice spiraled revulsion down her spine. "Despite a thorough search, no chalice was found."

A muttered curse drifted through the chamber. Sharyn's heart stilled in her breast. Nay, it could not be --

"I want that grail found!"

She closed her eyes a moment and prayed with all her might that the voice did not belong to Edward. Steeling herself, she knelt upon the cold stone floor and crept toward the thigh of the armor. The position warranted her an unobstructed view of the men. Dismay kissed her spine. The voice indeed belonged to Edward.

"And I do not?" Balliol asked, his voice laced with impatience. "Relics mean naught to me. Gaining Sharyn does. I have waited overlong to bend her to my will and tame her insolent behavior."

"You should not have mishandled the opportunity placed before you four years past."

Disbelief tumbled through Sharyn's veins. He knew. Worse than that, he arranged it so Balliol could violate her.

The echo of grinding stones pulled her from her musings. Across the room the gape in the wall slowly closed.

"That damnable maid was the reason for my failure." Balliol scowled and shoved a hand through his hair.

A mirthless chuckle escaped Edward's lips. "If you had wanted Sharyn as badly as you claim, you would have prepared your end of our bargain better. I did all I could by placing her in an unfrequented part of the castle. The rest was for you to handle."

Tears stung her eyes and she bit her lip to keep from sobbing. The event he described was the day her chalice was returned to her. To make amends for his secluding the vessel without her knowledge, he arranged for her chamber to be refurbished. So much did she trust him that she did not question his motives for placing her in a seldom used wing while the work was accomplished.

"'Tis a bold one you are to preach sternness." Balliol's harsh voice pulled her from her thoughts. "Your mother occupies the dungeons as we speak and coddles that damned brigand!"

Gideon was being tended by Queen Isabella? Why? Sharyn grimaced. She never cared overmuch for the queen. Aside from the illicit affair the queen had with her sire, something about the woman's manner struck odd for as long as Sharyn could remember.

"Dare not invite my temper. You could not even abduct Sharyn properly." Edward's bitter voice sliced through her soul. The men walked softly toward the door. "How difficult is it to destroy a handful of hired guards and carry away one simple woman?"

Balliol grabbed Edward by the arm and halted him near the center of the room. "I had no idea Ross would be in the area."

"Excuses are all I hear from you." Edward jerked his arm free.

"Next time, there will be no interference." In the faint light Sharyn saw Balliol swallow hard. "Once Ross is dead, and Sharyn is mine, you will have your precious chalice."

Edward took a step toward the man, a heartless sneer on his lips. "You have to find the damned thing first!"

Hide it well. Sharyn closed her eyes as Alpin's words echoed through her brain. Despite her instincts at the time, she did as he asked. Now the proof was before her. Men she had known less than a month saw through Edward and his disguise of caring. No wonder Gideon flew into a rage whenever she mentioned his name.

"I will find it." Balliol's voice held a tone of apprehension.

Edward scowled and started for the door. "I am weary of being tolerant with you. I will find the chalice myself."

Sharyn nearly snorted but managed to stop herself in time. Let Edward search for the chalice. Should he order the keep disassemble brick by brick, it would not be found.

"How? I told you my men found naught at the site."

Hand poised on the door, Edward paused. "I know Sharyn better than any person on earth. She goes nowhere without her precious grail." The door inched open. "I will have it in my possession before another sun sets in the sky."

The men left the chamber, closing the door behind them. Sharyn bowed her head and closed her eyes against the pain in her heart. Her entire life, it seemed, had been naught but a ruse. A man she thought she could turn to in a time of need revealed himself to be a Judas. The only reason he tolerated her at all was for the priceless relic she possessed.

Use the chalice to buy the Chief his freedom. She lifted her head and wiped a hand over her face. Alpin was right. She had the means to gain Gideon his freedom, and anything else she wanted.

She climbed to her feet and quietly left the room. On the morrow, Gideon would stand before the mockery of a king's trial and face the charges against him.

Nothing on heaven or earth would keep her from attending.

A touch as gentle as the wings of an angel lured Gideon from his fitful dream. "Sharyn?" he groaned and forced his eyes open. His haggard gaze rested on Isabella who stood before him. In a cell designed to offer no comfort, Gideon had slept leaning against the wall.

"I wish I could tell you aye." A sad smile graced her lips as the comfort of her touch withdrew. "Alas, the dungeons of Inverness are well hidden. If I had left long enough to show her the way, you would have fallen into peril. I knew Balliol would not stay away."

Through the pages of his mind Gideon recalled the intrusion last eve. Once Isabella had tended his wounds, he drifted in and out of consciousness. Heated words between Isabella and her son tumbled through his brain, although he could not decipher the vague memory.

"They will come for you soon."

Her gentle voice drew him from his thoughts. Without her interference, he was not certain he would have survived the night. Her ministrations definitely preserved his health. While every inch of his body was sore, and no doubted bruised, he did not feel as if any bones were broken.

"I thank you for your kindness, milady." He cupped her hand in his and brought them to his chaffed lips. "Someday, I hope to repay you."

Her free hand rested atop his head. "Once this day is over, spend your life making Sharyn happy, and you owe me naught but an occasional fond memory."

"Granted," he whispered and withdrew from her touch. "When will you tell Sharyn you are her mother?"

Sadness touched her eyes. Arms wrapped around her belly, she turned away. "I fear the time will never be right to reveal that secret. Although I have tried to do right by her, she has always resented me."

"Only because she thought you were nothing more than her father's lover."

Her gaze returned to his. "And that I am the reason for his death." She bowed her head. "Mayhap I did cause his demise."

"'Tis in the past, lady."

"And in the past it must remain," she whispered and raised her head. "All of it."

Gideon refused to argue with her. She had done much for him through the night, and for that, he would respect her always. Yet, if he made it through this day alive, and he could once again hold his Sharyn in his arms, he would tell her all he learned, all he could remember.

"I must go prepare myself for the trial." Again she approached him and placed a gentle palm against his cheek. "You are the type of man I dreamed about when I was Sharyn's age. While I was bargained for like property between kingdoms, it elates me to know you were there to save Sharyn from a similar fate." Her fingers slipped from his skin. "She is very fortunate to have a husband who loves her."

He watched her leave with the natural grace and dignity of a princess groomed from birth to fulfill the role of queen.

At that moment Gideon knew he was the fortunate one.

The cool kiss of dawn caressed Sharyn's cheek as she stepped from the confines of the keep. Mist clung to the stones and drifted between the open area between the castle and the outbuildings. Although Alpin had not said where they were offered refuge, she assumed their disguise earned them a night in the stables. She lifted the hem of her velvet gown and descended the steps.

After her restless night, she should have been fatigued beyond reason. However, the opposite was true. Once she found her way back to her chamber, she methodically laid out her plans for this day. Already a note had been sent to Isabella begging use of a fine gown and any trimmings she could spare. Once she saw Alpin and Brodic, she would return and prepare for her appearance in court.

Near the stables the angry voice of a guard could be heard. "You were granted quarters for one night. 'Tis dawn and time for you to begone!"

Trepidation slid up Sharyn's spine. She had to think of a way to keep the men behind the palace walls. With a hasty step, she ran into the stables and followed a shriek of painful cries until she found the source. The sight before her made her pause.

Brodic knelt upon a bed made of straw, a distraught look upon his face. A handful of others, cloaked as Alpin had been the night before, stood around

Agnes. The woman clutched her belly and writhed against the hay. The simple walls of the stable echoed her cries of pain.

Sharyn shoved through the spectators and fell to her knees across from Brodic. "What is amiss?" she asked and reached for the woman's hand.

"Me woman -- our babe -- her pains -- 'tis a long journey home."

The concern on Brodic's face tore at Sharyn's heart. She had not realized Agnes was with child. Pity flooded her veins and she placed a hand on the woman's taut abdomen. Agnes felt ready to burst.

"The king granted you lowly peasants lodging for one night. That time has come to an end."

The hateful tone of the guard rankled Sharyn's temper. She turned a glare on him and prayed her anger was clear.

"Does your king have no compassion in his heart for his subjects? I assure you my displeasure will not bode well with the two monarchs sharing this roof." The guard visibly recoiled.

Agnes growled with pain. She crushed Sharyn's hand so tightly, she winced.

"I grant these travelers all the time they need behind these walls." Sharyn looked into Agnes' distorted face and tried to pry away her grasp. "I take full responsibility for them. Now, vacate this building at once. She may be a lowly peasant, but I insist she be allowed to give birth in privacy."

The guard grumbled beneath his breath and departed. One of the men in their company followed his exit.

Sharyn lifted her gaze to Brodic. His head bowed, his broad shoulders shook with grief. "'Tis ashamed of yourself you should be," she chided. "To bring Agnes with you on such a trek when her time is so near."

The big man raised his head and laughter rumbled from his throat. "Och, lass," he chuckled and rocked back on his heels. "'Tis priceless you were. I couldna have planned this better if I tried."

Confusion touched Sharyn's brain. She looked from the chuckling man to those standing around. They looked as idiotic as Brodic. Her gaze lowered to Agnes who also smiled like a cat who ate the cream.

"You are not with child?"

Again the group erupted into suppressed laughter. "Och, lady," Agnes said and slid a hand beneath her apron. "Munro has a new baker who makes bread so hard, no amount of soaking can soften it." She withdrew a large rounded loaf and cradled it in her arms like a babe. "Och, there now, me wee bairn. I willna let the men use you for a whetting stone."

Amid the stifled laughter, Sharyn's temper flared through her veins. "I fail to see the humor in playing me for a fool when Gideon's life is in danger." She climbed to her feet and turned to leave.

"Now, there is no need to get your innards in a knot." Alpin grasped her arm and halted her exit. "We planned to remain behind these walls from the moment we entered with the Chief. Hell would freeze before we would allow harm to come to him. You merely expedited our cause."

Her emotions raw, Sharyn looked the man in the eye and did her best not to let her lower lip tremble. Until this moment, she did not realize how apprehensive she was.

"Come, now, and we can tell you what our plan entails." Alpin tugged her toward the group of cloaked, foul smelling, peasants.

Brodic helped Agnes to her feet, a mighty frown upon his face. "When the Chief is found guilty, as we ken he will be, Balliol will no doubt demand immediate execution. While Gideon is led to the dais, we will be there to interfere."

Sharyn's heart tumbled to her belly. "How calmly you speak of his demise." Her gaze moved from Brodic to each person present. "I assure you things will not get that far."

Alpin shifted his head and gave her a quizzical look. "You plan to do something with the chalice then?"

"Aye," she said and proceeded to tell them of her adventure the night before and all she had learned. "I was raised a lady and cannot tell you where I would like to shove the relic."

"There now, wee one," Alpin said and patted her roughly on the shoulder. "'Tis discouraging to learn the truth about one you thought you ken so well."

Tears stung her eyes. She blinked them away and lifted her head. "I survived and have a way to repay Edward for his betrayal."

"Did you do as I said, lass?" Alpin asked. "Did you hide the chalice?"

Satisfaction touched her heart. "Aye, I hid it very well. It will remain hidden until the outcome of the trial is known. If things go as you predict, keeping the chalice from sight will give me the advantage to gain Gideon his freedom. By the time I finish with Edward, he will promise me the moon, in writing, and will restore Gideon to his proper station."

Alpin yelped and grabbed her in a fierce hug. "I ken from the moment I laid eyes upon you that you would do right by the Chief. Giving up a trinket that you hold so dear warms me heart."

"I cannot breathe." Sharyn winced beneath his crushing grip and wiggled against him. "I did not say I would surrender the chalice."

Quiet descended over the stalls and Alpin released his hold. "You just said --"

"I said I will use it to gain what I wish and to have Gideon's freedom restored. I never said I would surrender it to another."

Brodic gave her a curious look and stepped closer. "What ticks through that shrewd brain of yours, lass?"

Sharyn smiled. "I thought you would never ask."

Chapter Twenty

Sharyn stood back and studied her reflection in the mirror. Isabella had been more than generous.

A gown of virgin white velvet hugged her bodice then flared into heavenly folds to the floor. 'Twas fortunate she was to be near the same size as the queen.

A girdle studded with diamonds and pearls draped her narrow hips and dangled to her knees. Tucked at her side was a small, deadly dirk. A Celtic knot formed the handle and a sheath of hammered gold bordered in pearls held the blade in place.

The modest neckline of the gown, and the edge of the snug sleeves, were trimmed in soft ermine. Around her throat rested a single strand of pea-sized pearls.

Isabella also sent her maid to arrange Sharyn's hair. A circlet of smaller pearls encased her head and was masterfully woven into a braid that was then coiled and pinned at her nape.

Standing here, in the solace of her chamber, Sharyn felt like the Princess Royal.

A knock on the door drew her from her thoughts. She opened the barrier and found a guard.

"Queen Isabella sent me to show you the way."

Again Sharyn wondered at Isabella's motives. Aye the woman had always been kind to her, yet something was different.

"I thank you." She stepped into the hall, closed the door and followed the guard.

Each step thundered in rhythm with her heart. The palms of her hands grew damp and she prayed she had the power to fulfill her plan. For Gideon, she would walk through fire and face the devil himself.

After what she overheard last eve, and Edward's failure to appear at her chamber, convinced her she was doing just that.

The guard paused at a pair of ornately carved doors. Without a word he opened one and stepped aside so she could pass.

Sharyn stood in the threshold. Before her, at a long, polished table, sat Edward and Balliol, their heads together in quiet conversation. Other men Sharyn did not know occupied the remaining four chairs. She assumed they were members of the king's council.

With a swallow for courage, followed by a deep breath, Sharyn stepped into the room. Her entrance drew the gaze of the men. Edward looked annoyed while Balliol smiled with greedy lust in his eyes.

Head held high, Sharyn took her first step toward the men. 'Twas then she noticed other spectators in the room. From the corner of her eye she saw at least

half a dozen men draped in rich cloth gape at her as she passed. Near the front of the room she beheld Isabella for the first time. Tears shone in the woman's eyes and a look of pride softened her face.

She forced her attention on the men at the table and paused before them.

"What is the meaning of this?" Edward asked, his voice laced with aggravation. "You were not summoned."

"If I waited for audience to be granted with you, I fear I would be old and gray."

His eyes narrowed and a vein in his neck twitched. She knew she struck a nerve. Good.

"Take yourself back to your chamber," Edward grimaced and dismissed her with a wave of his hand. "I will deal with you once the matter concerning this brigand is over."

Annoyance raised her chin an inch. "The man you so freely call a brigand is my husband."

"Not for long," Balliol snickered.

Sharyn shot him a quick glance that instantly removed the smile from his repulsive lips. "I am in no mood to play lady to the likes of you. At the moment, I am deliberating how best to turn you into a gelding."

Balliol slowly rose to his feet. "Methinks you forget yourself, lady. Bow before your monarch then beg forgiveness for your sharp tongue."

She demurely folded her hands before her. "I will, as soon as you leap upon the table and kiss your own arse."

"Sharyn!"

Isabella's shocked whisper, followed by bridled laughter of the onlookers, did naught to dispel the anger in her veins.

Balliol's face turned a brilliant shade of red. He made a move, as if to leap across the table at her. Sharyn refused to retreat. Edward intervened with a firm hand to the man's arm.

"Sit yourself down and cool your temper." He pulled Balliol into the chair so hard, it nearly toppled. His angry gaze met hers. "As for you, 'tis clear your time in the company of vermin has robbed you of your senses."

"Nay, I am quite lucid." Her chin rose a smidgen. "Not long ago Gideon told me that, despite my praise and constant defense, you were naught but a heartless bastard who strives to fill your grandsire's shoes and be taller by an inch. I now see he was right."

Deadly silence echoed through the chamber. The hate in his eyes was foreign to Sharyn. Until last eve, she had remained on his pleasant side, for the most part.

Edward stood and rested his palms on the sleek surface of the table. "Beg my pardon at once."

His soft voice sent shivers down her spine. When his utterance lowered to a mere whisper, 'twas an omen that he was about to lose his temper.

Despite this knowledge, she refused to yield. "Will you beg mine for deceiving me my entire life?"

Bewilderment flashed across his eyes. "Beg my pardon or face my wrath."

"You beg mine." She drew in a breath and forbid her gaze to lower. "Bring forth my husband immediately, or you will never possess the chalice."

Comprehension flared his nostrils and tightened the lines around his mouth. "Clear this room."

"But, your Majesty, our business is not concluded."

Edward turned to the man seated to his left and whispered, "Clear this room at once or I will have your head on a pike." His gaze slid back to her. "Displease me further, and I may have yours as well."

With feigned boredom she shrugged. "If that is what you wish, then so be it. I shall die happy, knowing you will never get your wretched hands on my property."

The rage in his eyes would be enough to scare the wits out of any person with an ounce of common sense. If she did not have the power of the chalice behind her, she would be terrified. Instead, she was seething with anger.

"Dare not touch an anointed queen." Isabella's oath drew Sharyn's gaze. A guard tried to coax her from the room. "I do as I please, and I please to stay."

The guard looked to Edward. He must have received silent consent for the man turned on his heel and left the near vacant chamber.

Something in Isabella's soft eyes held Sharyn captive. Compassion? Pity? Nay, most likely 'twas support for a cause she knew was right.

"Where is the chalice?"

Edward's heated whisper drew her gaze. Aside from herself, Isabella and Edward, the only other occupant of the chamber was Balliol.

Sharyn stood bravely before Edward and asked, "Where is Gideon?"

Tense silence drifted between them. Silently, Sharyn was thankful for the table that separated them. Edward turned to Balliol. "Dispatch a guard for him."

Without a word of protest, the man did as he was told. Again, Edward's gaze slid to hers. "Where is the chalice?"

A mirthless chuckle escaped her lips. "'Tis something you will not discover until my demands are met."

One eyebrow lifted toward his scalp. "Indeed?" He said and slowly sank into his chair. "We shall see who has the stronger will."

Sharyn did not like the sound of that, yet she kept her face impassive. The moment Edward saw fear, all was lost. That was one error she could not afford to make.

Seconds ticked by like hours while they awaited the arrival of Gideon. Each beat of her heart reminded her of the time they had together, brief as it was. His tenderness and compassion, his anger and frustration.

The faint rattle of chains lodged her heart in her ribs. All she wanted was to see her husband. A door opened and Gideon stumbled into the room followed by a guard. The moment Sharyn saw him, her heart plummeted to her toes.

Both eyes were bruised and discoloration outlined his nose. More lesions covered his cheeks and one lip was split. Shackles circled his bandaged wrists

and rattled as he was propelled toward the table. She wanted to run to him, hold him, see for herself how badly he was injured.

"It looks worse than it is."

Isabella's soft voice in her ear startled Sharyn. She glanced at the woman before returning her gaze to Gideon.

"I stayed with him through the night to keep him from being mistreated." A forlorn sigh escaped her lips. "My only regret is that I did not arrive in time to prevent this."

With caution, Sharyn moved toward Gideon. Her heart twisted in her chest at the image of how he must have suffered. She paused before him and tears stung her eyes. She lifted her hand and lightly touched his face.

"Bruises heal, wench."

The use of the unfavorable name nearly made her sob. 'Twas a sign that he was not badly injured.

"I love you," she whispered and wrapped her arms around his waist. Her cheek pressed against the firm beat of his heart, she knew all would be well. The stench of clothing worn for too many days filled her nostrils, yet she did not care. She was here with her Gideon and, by the grace of God, they would never be parted again.

Chains rattled as he held her against him. His lips brushed the top of her head. "And I you, my velvet angel."

Sharyn forced aside her emotions and stepped from his embrace. 'Twas time to get this over with. She nodded at the guard. "Remove the shackles."

"Nay." Edward's voice echoed through the hall. "Leave the key before me then depart. You will be summoned when you are needed again."

When the guard left the room, Sharyn turned to Edward. "Hear me well, for I plan only to say this once." She took a deep breath and continued. "My demands are simple. Gideon will be cleared of all charges of treason. His title and estate will be restored with no further threat from Balliol."

"Never!" Balliol roared and leapt to his feet. "An English king cannot pardon a Scottish traitor."

Edward turned a gaze on the man. "An English king was good enough to place you on Scotland's throne. The same English king can remove you."

Seething anger emitted from Balliol's eyes, yet he sank into his chair. Edward then turned his attention on Sharyn.

"Now 'tis your turn to listen, for I will say this only once." His gaze flashed to Gideon. "The brigand has a choice. If he will admit his guilt, I will grant him a quick, merciful death. Let him maintain his arrogance, and he faces public disembowelment."

Dread washed through her soul. "I have the chalice. Carry through the sentence of death and you will never possess it."

A mirthless chuckle escaped his lips. "I have ways of making people talk."

"Slay my husband and I will claim my own life moments after." She took a step toward the table. "Let me assure you, my arrogant king, that the chalice you covet to the point of deceit will never be found."

Each second that passed in silence thundered in Sharyn's heart. The impassive look on Edward's face revealed naught.

Edward placed a finger on the key and slid it toward him. The metal grated across the surface before falling into his hand.

"Remove the shackles," he said and tossed the key to Sharyn.

She caught it with ease and, with a final look at Edward, turned to Gideon. Her fingers trembled as she cradled one strong arm in her hand and tried to release the lock.

"'Tis all right now." Gideon's whisper drew her gaze. "Release me, my bonny velvet angel."

Solace slid through her veins. Gazing into the periwinkle depths of his eyes, she knew all would be well. The key turned in the lock and the shackle tumbled to the marble floor. As quickly as she could she released the other manacle and let the key tumble to the earth with the cumbersome chains.

"Fetch the chalice." Edward commanded.

Captivated by the love in her husband's eyes, courage surged through Sharyn's soul. "On one condition," she said and turned her gaze on him. "You know the legend behind the goblet?"

"Aye. What relevance does that serve?" His lips curled into a smirk. "'Tis naught but a fable."

"A fable?" Sharyn asked, her brow raised. "Then, agreeing to the rest of my words will be effortless for you."

A furrow formed between his brow. "What words?"

"If you can drink from the chalice without suffering, it is yours."

Disbelief graced his face. "And if I choke?"

"The charges against Gideon are dropped and his estate returned."

Edward snorted and shook his head. "Only a fool would agree to that."

Again Sharyn raised her brow. "If you believe the legend of the Clever Chalice is naught but a tale, you have nothing to fear."

All signs of mirth fled his features. "Fetch it."

"Then you agree to my terms?" she asked.

"I said fetch it."

"Agree to my terms."

Edward slowly stood. "I agree." His clipped tone revealed his anger. "Now, summon a guard and fetch the damned thing."

Sharyn slowly shook her head. "Gideon goes with me. I no longer trust you with anything I cherish."

Fury darkened the color of Edward's face. Isabella hastened from her chair. "Go fetch the chalice," she said, with a glance and a smile to Gideon. "I will stay and assure no harm will come to your love."

Uncertainty quivered through her belly. Again Isabella was rushing to her defense. Why? The weight of Gideon's hand on her shoulder drew her gaze to him.

"Depart with peace in your heart, love." His fingers lightly touched her cheek. "Naught but love lingers on this side of the table."

Adoration surged through her heart. She turned into his embrace and lightly kissed his wounded lips. "I will not be long."

Gideon nodded and Sharyn turned away. Her gaze flashed to Isabella. "I thank you for all you have done this day."

A smile borne of sensitivity graced the woman's lips. "You deserve so much more," she whispered and motioned toward the doors. "Go now and fetch this goblet. The sooner you return, the faster you can leave with your young man."

With a final glance at Gideon, Sharyn walked toward the door. She stepped through the opening and closed the barrier behind her. Two confused guards and the men banished from the chamber hovered in the hall, their gazes on her.

She looked one guard in the eye and smiled. "I need you to escort me to the privy."

Chapter Twenty One

Seated beside Isabella, Gideon stared at the two deviants who masqueraded as men and mentally envisioned their deaths. If he were in possession of a sword, both men would be dead at his feet.

"Your wounds need tended."

Isabella's soft voice drew him from his thoughts. He glanced down at his bandaged wrists and noticed fresh blood had seeped through the wrapping.

A mirthless chuckle filled the air. "I would not fret over a minor wound," Edward said as he leaned back in his chair. "By the time dusk touches the earth, his innards will be scattered from Loch Ness to Orkney."

"You promised Sharyn to free him." Isabella laid a hand on Gideon.

Again he chuckled. "I do not plan to choke."

Only those who recognize desire, love, passion and devotion, and carry them in their hearts, can drink from the chalice without choking.

Sharyn's words the night they wed echoed through Gideon's brain. His gaze rested on Edward and anger simmered in his veins. Without a doubt the man had no intention of honoring his word to Sharyn. King or not, the man should die. His gaze flicked to Balliol. Naught but a coward hiding behind the skirt of England. His only power came in dominating helpless women and restrained men. It would give him great pleasure to slowly gut the man.

A silent smile spread through his soul. It mattered not what this man chose to do. Gideon knew something Edward and Balliol did not. He had loyal men behind these walls, men who would do all in their power to save him from a wrongful death.

The rattle of the door pulled him from his thoughts. He turned and watched Sharyn enter the chamber, followed by a guard, his arms covered in mire. His gaze rested on his wife. She carried the chalice in one hand, a decanter in the other. How beautiful she looked this day. The vision of her nearly stole his breath.

She approached the table and placed the items upon the surface. With the grace of a princess, she lifted the decanter and poured some wine into the chalice.

A foul odor crept through the room. Gideon glanced around. Isabella pressed a linen cloth against her nose. Edward and Balliol grimaced and Sharyn seemed unperturbed by the offensive smell.

Edward wrinkled his nose and leaned back in his chair. "What is that atrocious stench?"

Calmly, Sharyn placed the decanter on the table and met his gaze. "I had the guard retrieve the chalice."

"Where the devil was it hidden?" Edward asked and pressed a cloth to his nose.

Sharyn demurely folded her hands before her and said, "The privy."

A slow smile touched Gideon's sore lips. He was so proud of his woman he could hardly contain himself. Leave it to his Sharyn to hide the relic in the last place anyone would think, or want, to look.

"If you please, your Majesty, I had to plunge my arms in the hole until I found it," the guard said. "I would favor a dip in the loch and a change of clothes."

"Aye, aye, granted," Edward said and waved the man from the room.

Sharyn slid the chalice toward Edward. "Drink."

Revulsion touched his lips. "After knowing where it has been?"

Hands planted on her hips, she gave him a wearied glance. "First of all, I wrapped it in cloth soaked in oil. Second, I had it scrubbed while I fetched the wine." She nodded toward the mug. "Drink."

Silence lingered between them. Slowly, Edward lifted the cup and peered into the vessel. "How do I know you did not lace the wine with pepper?"

"If I had the opportunity to add anything 'twould be poison." Again she nodded. "Drink."

Edward shook his head and placed the chalice on the table. "Give it to your man first," he said and slid the vessel across the table.

Coward, Gideon thought. So much deceit lingered in Edward's heart, he could not trust anyone, not even a lass as virtuous as Sharyn.

"Milksop," Sharyn uttered and lifted the chalice into her hands.

Gideon watched her approach. She looked like an angel to him and he knew he was blessed to have her in his life and in his heart.

She paused before him and offered him the chalice. He covered her hands with his own. His gaze held hers as he guided the mug to his lips.

Sweet wine flowed over his tongue and down his throat. After three swallows, she withdrew the mug and stepped away from his grasp. Tears dusted her eyes and a pleased smile touched her lips.

"I love you, lass." God it felt good to tell her the truth, to confess his heart to her.

"I realized that long before you drank from the chalice," she said.

A heartbeat later, she turned and approached the table. With a calm hand she refilled the mug and slid it before Edward once more.

The man scoffed, grabbed the goblet and drank deeply of the contents. He slammed the vessel onto the table and glared at her.

"Fables --"

A gurgling sound emitted from his throat and stole his words. His eyes rolled back in his head and his face turned a peculiar shade of red. He clutched his throat and stared at Sharyn through glazed eyes.

"Poison," he gasped and fell to his knees. His chair overturned and clattered to the floor. "Bitch!" He toppled to the ground and struggled for air.

Balliol hastened to the door and yelled for the guards. Gideon moved beside his wife and placed an arm around her shoulders. Isabella ran to Edward and loosened the cloth around his throat.

"Sharyn," she cried with a glance over her shoulder. "He is turning purple!"

"Pity, yet he will not die," she said and took a deep breath. "The seizure does not last long."

Gideon moved behind Sharyn as guards and other nobles raced into the chamber. He had no sword, yet he would rip each man limb from limb with his bare hands should any think to harm his wife.

A harsh gasp rattled through the room. Around Edward, those loyal to him knelt. Color slowly returned to his face and he allowed himself to be helped to his feet.

Sharyn stepped forward and retrieved her chalice. "This matter is now settled. Pen the notice of freedom and surrender the deed to Skibo."

Edward's heated gaze settled on her. "You hang alongside your man!"

"Nay!" Isabella screeched and lunged for her son.

Gideon's heart scraped his ribs as chaos erupted around them. He shoved Sharyn behind his back and tried to think. Guards surged toward them while nobles attempted to pry the queen off Edward.

One man grabbed Gideon's injured arm and twisted. Pain speared his body and a growl lodged in his throat. A moment later, a metallic thunk sounded near his ear and the guard released his hold. He turned to see Sharyn lower the goblet moments before the man crumpled to the floor.

"Thank you, lass."

"My pleasure," she replied and nodded. "More approach."

Gideon grabbed a chair. Legs protruding, he used the item to keep the men at bay as he backed himself and Sharyn toward what he prayed was a door.

"Will this help?"

He glanced down to see a sharp dirk clutched in Sharyn's hand. "Not unless it can grow a few inches in a matter of seconds."

A wild, uncivilized cry drifted above the din. Gideon glanced toward the door in time to see Alpin dive into the midst of English guards. Balliol ran for the door. Agnes hit the man over the head with what looked like a loaf of bread. The man fell to the floor and crawled for the door.

"Gideon!"

The shout drew his gaze.

"Catch," Brodic called and tossed him a sword.

He caught the weapon by the hilt and flung aside the chair. Now the playing field was level and he was more than ready to defend his wife.

"Murderer!"

The shrill word screeched through the chamber and echoed above the din. His sword still at the ready, Gideon watched the activity slowly cease.

Edward stood before the table. Blood seeped from gashes torn through his cheek by Isabella's nails, no doubt. The queen was now restrained by two guards. Amid the shambles of the once elegant chamber, men disguised as peasants held nobles to the ground. Balliol was nowhere in sight.

Isabella clenched her jaw and tugged at her arms. "Release me or I swear to send you to the gallows!"

The guards exchanged glances, then did as she ordered. Once free, she jerked her disheveled vest into place and approached Edward.

"You may be king but you are still my son. For your actions this day I should take a cane to you!"

"Stay out of this, mother. This does not concern you."

"You are sadly mistaken and you know it." She wiped a shaky hand over her brow, shoving back a wayward strand of hair. "I will not allow you to destroy Sharyn as you once destroyed me."

"Mother," Concern touched his eyes as he glanced around the room. "This is not the place --"

Isabella slapped the words from his mouth. The blow reverberated through the room.

Gideon slowly lowered his blade. For one to possess such gentleness with him, seeing her temper fly was astonishing. Now he knew where Sharyn inherited it from.

"Honor your word. Remove the price from Gideon's head and restore his keep to him," Isabella snapped.

From the tone of her voice, Gideon would not have argued with the woman. Sharyn inched around his arm, her little dirk in hand. He glanced down at her then pulled her against his side.

"Nay!" Edward spat and took a step toward her. "I have not taken orders from you since I took charge of my kingdom and had your lover hanged."

Sharyn tensed against Gideon's side. He wrapped his arm around her and gently kissed the top of her head.

"He told me 'twas the Scots," she whispered and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Why would he do such a vile thing?"

How Gideon wished he could disappear right now and take Sharyn with him. He had the distinct feeling things would get worse before they got better. His fingers tightened on his sword.

A mirthless chuckle escaped Isabella's lips. "Aye, you repaid me very well for daring to find an ounce of happiness in my life." In the blink of an eye she grabbed Edward by the ear and twisted.

His cry of pain echoed through the chamber. Gideon winced. Size did not matter when grabbed like that. As if to prove his thoughts, the distraught queen brought Edward to his knees.

"Despise me all you wish for failing to warm to a homosexual king." Edward struggled and she tightened her hold. "Did you know, on my wedding night, I had an audience?"

"Mother," Edward groaned.

Isabella jerked his ear. "You will hear this. All present will hear the truth."

"Nay!" Edward yelled and tried to claw her arm.

Her other hand clutched his windpipe and all struggles ceased. "One of your sire's lovers suckled him until his seed was about to burst. Even then his lover had to encourage him so he could do his duty to me. Do you know how degrading and embarrassing that is to a twenty year old virgin?"

Gideon had never been so repulsed by a story before in his life. Now the tales he heard of this woman made sense to him.

"'Tis a miracle you were conceived at all." She released his throat and pulled him up by the ear. "Mortimer was the only good thing that happened to me. He gave me love, he gave me respect, and most of all, he gave me Sharyn."

Christ, this was not how Gideon envisioned Sharyn learning the truth. She trembled beneath his touch. The goblet and dirk tumbled from her hands.

"Cease the lies," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

None appeared to hear her words as they all watched the queen drag her son by the ear to his chair and shove him into it. Her order for paper and quill was met with a scramble by guards to do her bidding lest she turn her rage on them.

Sharyn eased herself from Gideon's grasp and slowly approached the table. "My mother died giving me life," she said, her voice touched with tears. "How could you claim me when all at court would know you carried a babe?"

Gideon joined his bride and stood within reaching distance behind her. Looking into Isabella's face, he clearly saw the resemblance to his Sharyn.

The guard returned and the items were placed on the table. "Write," she commanded her son before resting her gaze on Sharyn.

"I met your sire when Edward was four. A year later, I discovered I was with child. I retreated in secret to my homeland of France. My husband did not object. It gave him the freedom he craved to cavort with his lovers. The English court was given false updates from my attendants as to my health and well being, and of the joy I spread at each appearance I made."

Edward shoved aside the paper. Isabella paused, read the words, then slid it back before him. "His estate is returned as well. Should attacks occur from Balliol, the worm will be removed from his throne and a guardian appointed."

He muttered beneath his breath and she twisted his ear again.

"Why did you hide?" Sharyn asked, her voice just above a whisper.

A soft smile touched Isabella's lips. "A king can sire as many bastards as he wishes. Let a queen do the same, and she loses her head for treason. I was rather fond of my head."

Sharyn sank toward the floor. Gideon dropped his sword, caught her in his arms and Alpin hastened forward to right a chair. With care Gideon placed her on the seat, knelt beside her and cupped her cheek in his hand.

"Are you all right?"

"I felt odd," she said and gazed into his eyes. "You knew?"

He slowly nodded. "She told me last eve."

Confusion touched her incredible eyes moments before her gaze lifted to Isabella. "How did you explain me when you returned?"

"One of my attendants perished from a mysterious affliction in the time I was gone. When I returned, all were told she was Mortimer's lover and died giving birth to his child. The tale was believed, for my affair with your sire did not become clear for several more years."

Edward slid the paper away from him and tossed aside the quill. Isabella lifted the parchment, read the words, then released her hold.

Across the distance that separated Sharyn from Edward, their gazes met. The resentment emitting from the man's eyes spiraled distrust through Gideon's soul. He leaned forward and retrieved his blade.

"I celebrated the night I had Mortimer hung and his head placed on a pike." His voice held such abhorrence, Gideon wanted to strike him down. "It ended the life of the man who turned my mother into a whore."

Isabella grasped Edward's hair and jerked his head back. "I was considered his whore only because I could not legally be his wife." She tossed him away and folded the parchment. "Announce your decision."

Reluctance clear upon his brow, Edward did as he was told.

It was over now, Gideon realized, as he slowly climbed to his feet. No longer did he or his men have to hide in leaky crofts or the bowels of cold keeps. He was free to do as he pleased, to reclaim Skibo, to share his dream with Sharyn.

"My goblet." Her timid whisper drew his gaze. Alpin retrieved the relic and placed it in her hands. She murmured her thanks and climbed to her feet.

"Lass, what is it you do?" Gideon asked. She looked ashen and meek. Clearly she needed a rest.

Without a word she turned on her heel and walked through a path in the littered room. Concerned, Gideon followed. The footfalls of others echoed through his brain, yet his focus remained on Sharyn.

She walked with the grace of a queen down the hall and into the great hall. A fire blazed in the hearth as servants saw to their tasks. Curious glances were exchanged as the group entered the room. When Sharyn reached the fireplace, she paused and retrieved a poker.

Unease slithered through Gideon's soul. "Sharyn, love, what is it you do?"

Her gaze settled on him. "Why, assuring myself I will never see Edward again."

In one fluid motion she turned and tossed the chalice into the fire. The stem lodged between two logs and the flames licked over the ancient metal.

"Nay!" Edward roared and ran for the hearth.

Jaw tense, Sharyn lifted the poker. "Stand away or I swear I will shove this through your head."

Disbelief lined Edward's face. "'Tis a priceless artifact you destroy."

"'Tis your greed that has brought me to this. A chalice created to symbolize love and devotion has turned into an icon coveted by you to the point of murder and abduction." Tears shimmered in her eyes and tumbled down her cheeks. She sniffed and adjusted her hold. "Brodic, add logs to the fire, if you please. I want to make sure it gets hot enough to melt the thing."

"Be my pleasure, lass." The big man hastened to do her bidding.

Edward growled and his hands curled into fists. "You daft bitch!"

Gideon hit him. Pain shot up his arm and his wrist throbbed, but it was worth the discomfort to see the arrogant bastard stagger across the floor.

"Hit him again, Chief," Alpin prodded. "Break his jaw so he canna speak."

Gideon ignored him and advanced on Edward who clutched his jaw in pain. "Speak ill of my wife again, and I will break your neck."

Desperation brought grief to the man's eyes. "She is ruining a valuable piece of history."

"'Tis hers to do with as she sees fit." Gideon turned and approached the hearth.

He took the poker from Sharyn and pulled her into his arms. His gaze moved to the chalice that had helped gain him his freedom. The warped metal did not resemble the relic he knew. It had survived five hundred years and was destroyed in less than an hour.

Sharyn sniffed and raised her head. "Take me away from here, Gideon."

"'Tis a long trek to Skibo," he said and gently wiped the tears from her eyes. "We both need rest before departing."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I care not where we go, as long as it is away from these walls. An Inn, a croft, a stable. With you by my side anywhere is heaven."

"Milord?" Isabella's voice drew his gaze. She lowered her head a moment then offered him the parchment. "This is your freedom."

How would he have survived without her interference? "I thank you," he said and took the document from her grasp.

"There is an Inn not far from here, one that will offer all the comfort you need. Retire there and tell the proprietor you are my guests." She gave him directions then rested her gaze on Sharyn. "I truly loved Mortimer. With him, I had the same happiness you have found with Gideon." A soft smile touched her lips. "I was his glory. You were his pride."

A sob tore from Sharyn's lips and she buried her face in his chest. "Gideon, please take me away."

Her tears stung his heart. "Aye, lass, aye," he whispered and met Isabella's sad gaze. "She needs time to comprehend --"

"Say no more," Isabella said and stepped aside. "Take her away. Hold her, comfort her, love her. That, my fine lord, will heal more than you know."

Gideon nodded and guided Sharyn from the room. Alpin rushed ahead. "I'll arrange for horses, Chief," he said and ran down the hall and out the door.

"I will take your sword," Brodic said and plucked the item from his hand. "Once you are settled, I will send word to Munro, thanking him for his services."

Gideon nodded and stepped into the mist of morn. His first breath as a free man filled his lungs and expanded the love he felt for Sharyn. He lifted her face and stared into her tear kissed eyes.

"Thank you for loving me, lass." His fingers brushed her soft cheek. "You are my pride."

"'Tis my pleasure, my fine barbarian," she whispered and snuggled into his touch. "My pleasure indeed."

Epilogue

Skibo Castle, 1338

Gideon spurred his mount down the barren lane with the haste of Hades on his heels. Sharyn. He had to reach Sharyn. Anxiety skittered through his soul and tightened his gut into a firm knot.

Damn it all to hell, this was not supposed to have happened for another fortnight, at the very least.

The evening sun had yet to disappear behind the crest of mountains that surrounded his home. The estate of Skibo was so spacious, by the time the message from the castle arrived, half the day was gone.

At Sharyn's insistence, he had left at dawn to help prepare one of the crofts for Alpin and Bridget on the eastern part of Skibo land.

The couple had wed shortly after they left Inverness and, less than nine months later, Bridget had given birth to a strapping lad that, God help him, was the very image of Alpin. Now the couple prepared for the arrival of their second child.

At the entrance to his vast home, Gideon tugged the animal to a halt and bolted from the saddle. Apprehension hastened his movements. He spared no more than a glance at the lad who came to tend his horse, or of the maid who managed to open the carved doors before he burst through them.

The clatter of his boots echoed against marble steps as he raced up them two at a time. Heart wedged between his ribs, he thought of only one thing.

Sharyn. Dear Lord, she had to be fine. He would die without her. His palms grew damp and fear climbed up his spine.

At the door to their chamber he came face to face with a stern looking Agnes. Arms crossed beneath her ample bosom, the woman frowned at him.

"Did you kill your horse?"

What the hell was the woman babbling about? "Did I what?"

"Kill your horse," she repeated with an impatient glance to the ceiling. "Word was sent to you just this morn. In the haste you arrived, surely you killed at least one beast in your swiftness."

By Christ's blue eyes, he would kill something all right and it had naught to do with horses. His fingers itched to wrap around her throat and move her from her position.

The very angry, muffled, wail of a babe drifted through the door to him. His heart ceased to beat and his breath escaped his lungs.

He had a child. Sharyn had given him a healthy child, if the shrill cries he heard were any indication. He reached for the door.

Agnes blocked his path. "Not until the midwife gives the nod that she is through."

"This is my keep and I say step aside!" He moved the woman and flung open his chamber door.

Isabella was the first to greet him. When Sharyn learned she carried a babe, she sent for her mother. Resistance from Edward delayed the journey and Isabella arrived just two months past.

Gideon started for the bed and the curtain of women that obscured his view.

"Let them finish," Isabella said and placed a hand on his arm. "It will not be long."

"It happened so quickly," he said and shoved his fingers through his hair. "Her pains must have started soon after I departed."

"'Tis fortunate she was to deliver with little trouble. 'Tis a sign she will gift you with several healthy bairns."

Several bairns. His heart swelled at the mere thought. Skibo was a large estate and he could gladly fill each room with children.

"They are finished now." Isabella nodded. "We will leave the three of you alone."

Gideon could do naught but stare at the bed. Sharyn lay propped against plush pillows. Her face flushed with happiness. The joy that emitted from her eyes filled his heart with such fulfillment, he knew he could now die a happy man.

"Do you not wish to greet your daughter, my fine barbarian?"

She sounded weary. No doubt she was. Her fingers eased aside a fleece covering and gave him his first glimpse of his child. A red wrinkled face pouted at him and the tiniest fingers he ever saw in his life moved toward a small head covered with black hair.

Somehow, he managed to make his feet move toward the bed and lower himself to the edge. The babe made noises he assumed were normal, as if her lungs were adjusting to the air.

"Hold her."

Sharyn's tender voice drew his gaze. Hold her? Place something that tiny in his large hands? Surely he would crush it.

A contented smile curled her lips. "You will not break her. She is strong, Gideon."

He swallowed hard and gathered the squirming bundle into his big hands. The moment he touched her, he lost his heart in a different way. Gently he stroked her miniature fist. Tiny, translucent fingers curled around his and pulled a lump to his throat.

Lord, she was so small, she barely filled one of his palms. Her grip was firm for one so new to the world. No doubt, one day, his daughter would take Scotland by storm.

"It would please me to name her Isabella."

Her weak voice drew his gaze. Sharyn smiled.

"All my life I resented Isabella, punished her for things I did not understand." She glanced at the babe and gently placed a hand atop the child's

head. "This would help me honor both my parents who sacrificed so very much for the glory of love."

Tears stung Gideon's eyes and the lump in his throat grew to the size of a choking mass.

Love. Before Sharyn tumbled from her mount and into his life, he doubted such emotions existed, much less would ever be his. Now, he knew he possessed the kind of love sung by troubadours in years past. The complete adoration for one person was nestled firmly in his heart and soul. To know his feelings were returned was enough to bring tears to his eyes. He vowed to do all in his power to honor love, and its meaning, each and every day of his life.

He blinked several times to force away the moisture gathered there. Numerous hard swallows passed before he could collect himself enough to gently kiss his daughter's brow. With care he placed their child back in Sharyn's arms.

"It will give me great pleasure to announce to our clan that Isabella of Ross has been born this day." His voice faltered and his heart filled with glory. He leaned over and brushed his lips against Sharyn's. "I love you so, lass. You are my pride."

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Celia Collier

Rural Oklahoma is where Celia calls home. Single, with two grown children, her “babies” are now her two dogs; Lady (part Australian Shepard and Chow) and Seamour (a miniature Schnauzer). A Naval veteran originally from Phoenix Arizona, Celia first moved to Oklahoma during her high school years. She began writing in 1990 after reading “a really BAD book.” She focuses her writing on Scotland, the true love in her life.