



## PAPER ROSES

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*PAPER ROSES is dedicated with respect and admiration to Diana, Princess of Wales. Through these pages, I contribute to her memory the happily ever after she so richly deserved and was so horribly denied.*

*Celia Collier*

## Chapter One

*The North West Highlands, November 1524*

*I beg you to come. You are the only one who can help me now.*

Ciara Mackintosh clutched the missive in her hand and seated herself on the worn leather top of her inherited trunk.

The message, written nearly four months ago, reached her just a fortnight past. Rough seas and unusual weather hampered her efforts to return to her homeland. Now, she waited on the pier of this quaint coastal village and prayed the driver she hired would soon arrive.

The cry of a fishmonger drew her gaze. Peasant women roamed the planks, hawking salmon and herring to the passengers arriving at the port. Ciara realized she was naught but a speck amidst a multitude of crates and boxes that lined the docks of Loch Broom.

Beyond the stench of the wharf and the noise of the busy port lay purple-tinted mountains. The beloved hills and glens of Scotland embraced her like a mother welcoming home a long lost child. She closed her eyes and breathed in the crisp Highland air.

When Ciara had departed her home at Glengarry, she had looked forward to experiencing a different culture. In her heart she carried the hope that returning her mother to her homeland in France would cure her failing health.

The journey did not turn out as planned. Ciara soon discovered the so-called refined men of Paris were little more than pompous fops when compared to practical Highlanders.

Now, as she gazed down at the letter, a sense of foreboding nestled in her heart. During the three years of her absence, Ciara kept in contact with her close childhood friend, Valerie. While she was away, Valerie married into the clan MacDonell and established a household near the village of Coygach.

Ciara grimaced. MacDonell. What had Valerie done to deserve such a fate?

Even though her friend had wed the laird, the MacDonells were naught but a brood of ruffians itching for a fight. She found the praise Valerie wrote of her husband difficult to believe. Surely, the MacDonell had bewitched her friend. 'Twas the only explanation that made sense.

"Are ye ready tae go now, lass?"

She looked up into the weathered face of an ancient man who swore no fear or fealty to the MacDonell, and was willing to escort her to Valerie.

Ciara nodded and climbed to her feet. The old man hoisted the trunk onto his back, then promptly dropped it.

"What have ye got in here, lass? Stones?"

Ciara smiled. The trunk was indeed heavy, although it contained naught but her meager possessions. "Aye, 'tis filled with jewels I have gathered from many admirers during my travels."

He stared at her through wise eyes, then scoffed, "Och, aye, ye poke fun at me."

His words tugged the smile from her lips and she stared at the hem of her worn gown.

Beauty was not hers to enjoy, she knew that. Nor was wealth among her attributes. She was not a pauper, but gowns had to be made of sensible fabric and worn for as long as the thread held. With the handful of coins her mother left for her, Ciara had hoped to have a couple of new gowns made.

Then the missive from Valerie arrived, and with it went the hopes of a new gown. Eneas, Ciara's brother, agreed to pay her passage back to Scotland, but his offer came with a price.

He wanted her to wed the chieftain of MacLean. While Ciara was no beauty, she hoped she could find a better match than the repulsive, aging laird of a withering clan. She had no choice but to decline Eneas' offer.

She remembered her mother's dying words. She had pulled a promise from Ciara to guard her inheritance, and never surrender this old trunk to her brother. It seemed an odd request, for her brother would never want such a worthless item.

The thud of her trunk landing against weathered planks of a makeshift wagon drew her gaze. The old man wiped sweat from his brow and climbed onto the only seat.

"Jump on, lass, unless ye prefer tae walk."

Foregoing dignity for practicality, Ciara lifted her skirts and crawled in beside her trunk.

The old man clucked his tongue and the tired horse began a slow pace away from the docks.

The fingers of her hand curved over the crude side of the wagon. Once she felt she would not fall, Ciara withdrew the parchment once more.

What had the rotten MacDonell done to Valerie? What kind of peril did her alliance create? It had to be dire indeed for Valerie to beg Ciara's presence, especially when her best friend knew how she felt about the MacDonells.

With firm resolve, Ciara shoved the parchment into her pocket and looked across the busy port that slowly disappeared behind her.

Clouds filled with snow drifted over the sky and blocked the sun. Birds circled the air over two ships docked at the port, searching for food.

If the MacDonell had harmed her friend, Ciara vowed to kill the man and haul his rotten carcass down to the pier for the rats and birds to feast upon.

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"Visitors approach."

Alastair MacDonell looked up from the papers spread before him. Torquil, his most loyal clansman, stood in the doorway. Dark hair tumbled across his furrowed brow. Beneath the whiskers that hid his chin, Alastair saw a frown, a most common expression for his dedicated friend.

"Can you identify them?"

With a mighty shrug, Torquil approached a window that offered a commanding view over the loch. "An old man drives a cart that looks ready tae crumble. In the back sits a lass, naught special tae the eye." He turned to his friend and scowled. "She has a trunk."

A trunk? With a sigh, Alastair rose from his chair. "How long before they arrive?"

"Half an hour at most."

Joining his friend at the window, Alastair peered through the open shutter. Hills covered with dormant brown heather sloped to the shore of the loch five miles below. In the distance he glimpsed the wagon.

"Do I turn them away?" Torquil asked.

Alastair frowned. No one came onto his mountain without permission. The locals knew that.

"Nay, allow them to approach." He withdrew from the view and returned to his desk. "I will hear their reason for trespassing before tossing them out."

With a grunt of disapproval, Torquil departed. Alastair ignored him and cleared the papers from his desk. Clan business could wait.

He approached the hearth and reached for the sword displayed above the mantel. A small portrait of his wife caught his eye. Without a thought, he lifted the gilded frame and cradled it in his palm.

Valerie was a fine woman indeed. She embraced their marriage with a thirst he longed to share. He was very fond of her, yet could not return the love she proclaimed for him so freely.

With a heavy heart, he replaced the portrait, then lifted the sword into his grasp. 'Twas a fine sword, one that had belonged to his sire and now served him. Alastair strapped the leather belt around his waist, then left the room with the comforting tap of the scabbard against his calf.

In the quiet of his home, the echo of his boots striking against polished stone floors drifted through the hall. At the foot of the spiral staircase, he paused.

Valerie. Could she have knowledge of these most unwelcome visitors?

He shook his head and grabbed his cloak from a peg as he left the manor. Nay, his wife had been bedridden for nigh on three months. Any missive she sent would have gone through him.

Alastair paused on the steps. Brisk highland air embraced him. Winter would be upon them soon. In the past, the season brought him great pleasure. Now, the thought of snow and the climate ahead filled his heart with grief.

Valerie would not last the winter. Alastair knew this. Deep down, he thought Valerie knew it, too. The way she spoke about the future, of things he would do in his life, Valerie painted a vivid life for her husband. A life without her.

The rattle of iron-braced wheels moving over rocky earth drew him from his thoughts. He peered through his men who milled around the yard.

Their presence did not fool him. All visitors, welcomed or otherwise, drew them from their tasks. Their curiosity would soon be sated, for less than a hundred yards from where he stood, the wagon continued its slow, lumbering approach.

Alastair recognized the antiquated man who held the reins, although his name escaped him. His gaze shifted to the back where a woman clung for dear life to the side of the wagon.

He almost smiled. The ride up the mountain was rough enough on horseback. He could only imagine the bumps and bruises a ride such as this would cause.

Amid a tousel of flame-kissed hair, eyes as blue as the loch in June met his. Unfortunately, that was all he could see of the lass. Alastair frowned and rested his hands on his hips.

The creature looked frightened out of her wits, yet did not look away.

"Whoa, ye auld nag," the driver grumbled and tugged upon the reins. The wagon creaked and groaned under the load, then jolted to a harsh halt.

From the back of the cart, the lass tumbled to the ground. The patched fabric of her skirts flew to her waist. All that saved her modesty was an underskirt of white that looked to have as many patches on it as her gown.

As Alastair watched, the creature shoved her skirts down and crawled to her knees. She fixed the driver with a deadly glare.

"*Merde!* When I hired you, I never dreamed you would attempt to kill me along the way."

The driver frowned and climbed down from his perch. "Women. All they ken how tae do is complain." He stopped at the back of the cart and pulled her trunk off his vehicle. It landed with a mighty thud in the dirt beside her. "I promised tae deliver ye tae laird MacDonell. I ne'er vowed the journey would be smooth."

"Who gave you permission to approach my domain, old man?" Alastair asked, his voice echoing through the glen.

"Och, I'm rid o' her, laird," the driver said as he climbed back on his wagon and gathered the reins in his gnarled hands. "If ye want her off the mountain, remove her yerself."

The woman scowled and stumbled to her feet. As if noticing Alastair for the first time, she stopped and stared at him with eyes that resembled precious jewels. Rare sapphires and cherished diamonds flickered in her gaze.

With an inward groan, he scoffed at such a flowery display of thoughts. He was married and had no business finding beauty in any lass, much less a lass who dared to trespass upon his land.

He didn't know what this woman wanted, or what gave her the impression she would be welcome here, but he was about to make her see things his way.

The wagon jostled into movement and disappeared down the path. The noise drew him from his thoughts.

"Who are you, woman, and why did you dare climb my mountain?"

"Your mountain?" the woman said as she dusted off her clothes. "Who died and named you God Almighty?"

Alastair frowned. "I am Alastair MacDonell, laird of this region. Who are you and why the devil did you approach?"

She shoved her long hair out of her face, giving him his first clear view of her.

Beautiful she was not, yet ugly did not describe her either. Freckles tinted her otherwise ivory skin. Full lips puckered into a frown. Arms crossed beneath an average bosom and an even more average waist, as she surveyed him.

"Valerie Macleod sent for me." With a superior lift of her nose she added, "As proclaimed laird, you must be her husband?"

Unease and pain stabbed his heart. How dare the lying witch bring his wife into her scheme.

"Aye, Valerie is my bride. I also know for a fact she did not send for you or anyone else. I see to her needs."

The witch snorted and bestowed him with an evil glare. "Aye, I can just imagine how you tend her needs."

Anger stirred in the pit of his belly. His hands curled into fists. "Begone from my sight, heathen. You have wasted enough of my breath." He turned to enter the keep. "Leave my mountain at once, or I will take the driver's advice and toss you off on your patched behind."

"I am Ciara Mackintosh."

Her lie, although more elaborate than he ever imagined, was enough to pause him. He turned and examined her more closely.

The delicate curve of her mouth curled in distaste as she moved her gaze

over him. "I can assure you, you arrogant — lord, that I was asked here by your wife." She shoved her wayward hair across her shoulder and added, "I will depart only after I see Valerie, and then, only if she asks."

Damnation, but the name was one he had heard his wife use often during the year of their marriage. He remembered only because Valerie had mentioned a strange hobby the lass had. What was it again? Flowers. Something to do with flowers.

"Prove to me you do not lie," he said, still considering the possibility of tossing her into the loch. Perhaps that would cool her hot temper.

The flame-haired witch who called herself Ciara grimaced and approached the steps. From the folds of her pocket she withdrew a crumpled piece of paper.

With a feeling of impending doom, Alastair descended the steps and took the parchment from her grasp. On one side, written in his wife's hand, was the name Ciara Mackintosh with an address in France. On the other were the simple words begging her to come.

He held the paper before him and lifted his gaze to her. Behind her, his men crowded around, waiting to see what would transpire.

"This message is dated four months past. Why the delay arriving?"

Ciara reached for the paper in his grasp. When he refused to yield, she sighed. "I came as soon as I could."

Still, Alastair maintained his hold. He didn't want to believe her. This witch was the last person he wanted on his mountain.

Through her unwavering gaze, the briefest flash of sorrow touched her incredible eyes. She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "I had to bury my mother first."

Alastair released his hold on the parchment and watched her tuck it back into her pocket. What the hell was he supposed to do? Having strangers around, especially ones with venomous tongues, did not appeal to him.

However, his wife was dying. If the tales she told about this woman were true, they were near sisters in heart. How could he deny his wife's wishes?

"Well, what is your decision, MacDonell? Do you allow me entrance, or do I put the training my brothers forced upon me to good use?"

Damn the woman! She reminded him of a wildcat caught in a trap. He wondered what had happened to make her so bitter.

"'Tis plain your brothers neglected to teach you that a lady holds her tongue and shows respect to her laird."

"Alas, *you* are not my laird."

The witch was begging to be thrashed. With extreme control over his urges, he nodded. "You may enter as long as you agree to my terms."

Ciara looked up at him and frowned. "Terms?"

"Aye. Keep your tongue civil and try to avoid my presence." He turned and



mounted the steps. "When I find a viper, I kill it. Out of respect for my wife, I will spare you -- for the moment."

"I will do the same, MacDonell." He paused at the doors and met her amused gaze. "Spare you, that is."

Despite his strong desire to toss the woman off his mountain, Alastair resisted. He hoped she would stay no more than a day or two; then, he would be rid of her forever.

\* \* \*

"Ciara! At last you have arrived."

Frozen in the doorway, Ciara could do naught but stare at the frail woman propped up in a sumptuous bed.

Gone was the lass with rose-kissed cheeks and hearty laugh that Ciara knew so well. Hair once the color of honey had lost its sheen. This woman before her was thin as a rail, and looked as weak as a kitten.

What had that no-good MacDonell done to her?

The smile that lit Valerie's face faded. Her dark blue eyes lowered and thin fingers stroked an embroidered quilt.

"I know I look a fright."

With a heavy heart, Ciara entered the room. "Not at all, Val. I just -- that is -- I had no idea you were ill."

Valerie raised her head, a weak smile on her lips. "I am dying, Ciara. The healer has done all he can, but naught helps this horrid plague that haunts me."

Grief grasped her heart in a cold grip. Death. Must she face losing someone she cared about so soon after burying her mother?

With a great effort, she forced back the tears that stung her eyes. She would not show weakness in the presence of others. 'Twas a lesson not wasted on her.

"Come, tell me how your mother fares."

Ciara eased herself onto the edge of the bed. She gathered Valerie's hand in hers. So small and frail. "Mother now rests in the arms of Christ, Val. 'Tis what delayed my arrival."

Sorrow filled Valerie's eyes and choked her voice. "I am so sorry. Your mother was a fine woman."

"Aye, she was," Ciara whispered.

Sadness settled over her heart. Slowly dying of a mysterious affliction and a broken heart, her mother's last request was to die in the land of her birth. Quarrels with Eneas weakened her mother and affirmed her decision to return to France. As the sole daughter amid a brood of twelve, Ciara had accompanied her mother on her final voyage.

With determination, Ciara forced aside her memories and met Valerie's worried gaze. "When did this strike you?"

Valerie shrugged. "Shortly after I wed Alastair." At the mention of her husband, her eyes sparkled and a genuine smile curved her lips. "Have you met him yet? Oh, Ciara, he is so good to me."

"Aye, I met him."

"Is he not wonderful?" Valerie gushed. "I could not have asked for a kinder, gentler man to be my husband than Alastair."

A disbelieving snort escaped Ciara's lips before she could stop it. Instantly, she regretted her lack of control. The smile and color drained from Valerie's face.

"'Tis the truth, Ciara. Although our union was arranged, he has been most kind."

"I ask your pardon for being rude, Val." Ciara rubbed the back of her friend's hand and lowered her gaze. "MacDonells do not rate high with my clan."

"My Alastair was not among those who ambushed your sire and his men."

The sadness that touched Valerie's voice did naught to ease the guilt in Ciara's heart. No one knew which MacDonells were responsible. No one. A stranded horse and a scrap of MacDonell tartan were all that was found among the bodies.

For the sake of her friend, she would not condemn Alastair. At least, not within Valerie's hearing.

Ciara forced aside the grief that rose in her throat. This was not why she was here, she reminded herself as she met her friend's worried gaze. She forced a smile to her lips and patted her hand.

"Do not fret about it, Val. I dare say I can handle one MacDonell, should our paths happen to cross."

"Oh, they will cross; 'tis why I sent for you."

Unease settled in the pit of Ciara's belly. Her fingers stilled against the translucent skin of Val's hand. "What do you mean by that?"

Valerie suddenly looked very tired. She rested against her pillows, a tender smile on her lips.

"My motives for wanting you here will seem like trickery, I fear. And, mayhap, it is." Tears filled her eyes and rolled silently down her cheeks. "You see, Ciara, although my husband does not love me as I love him, he is a very good man with a wounded soul."

Ciara didn't like the way this conversation was heading. "What has that to do with me?"

With a shaky hand, Valerie wiped her cheeks. "'Tis simple, my friend." She met Ciara's gaze and did her best to smile. "You see, I want you to take my place in Alastair's life when I am gone." A ragged breath filled her lungs. "I plan for you to wed Alastair."

## Chapter Two

Disbelief coiled through Ciara's belly. Surely, she had not heard Valerie properly. What wife, dying or not, would arrange a marriage for her husband?

Valerie smiled. "I knew you would think me daft; 'tis why I did not mention my plan in the missive."

Ciara took a calming breath and shook her head. "'Tis utter madness."

"Nay, 'tis the rational request of a woman who will soon meet death." Valerie's soft voice held the sadness of her fate. "Consider this, Ciara. In all the years we have been friends, have I ever misled you?"

"Aye. You convinced me that if I kissed Bryan McDermott, he would turn into a prince and love me forever."

A chuckle escaped her friend's lips. "Och, aye, I forgot about that."

Ciara frowned. "'Twas a revolting thing to do, Val. Bryan was a deplorable lad who picked his nose, then ate what he found. A prince, indeed!"

Laughter bubbled in Valerie's chest until tears glistened in her eyes. "I can assure you that Alastair does not have that disgusting habit, yet he does bear princely qualities."

"Then there was James Cameron," Ciara continued, not wanting to consider the good traits of a MacDonell.

Val sobered a bit and wiped away the moisture that clung to her lashes. "What about him?"

"You know what." Ciara wasn't amused in the least. "He peed his kilt nightly and did not bathe. Half the flies in the Highlands called him home. Yet, for some reason, I allowed you to convince me that if I rolled with him in a thistle patch, it would cure him of his affliction."

Again Valerie laughed.

"I am pleased you find merriment in my misfortune." Arms crossed over her belly, Ciara scowled. "My mother picked thorns from my bum for a week."

"Och, I am sorry, my friend." Val dabbed her eyes with the edge of her nightdress and tried not to smile. "But these things you mention happened when we were wee bairns. Since we swore ourselves sisters, have I done anything to deceive you?"

Ciara hated to admit it, but the truth could not be denied. Mirrored in her friend's eyes, she saw times long past when they had been happy and full of promise for the future. Sorrow touched her heart. Valerie had no future. She was dying.

Unwilling to disgrace herself by succumbing to her feelings, Ciara turned her gaze toward the windows. Pristine curtains that matched the spread over Valerie were pulled back to reveal the gray skies beyond. To Ciara, it felt as if the heavens reflected her soul.

"Well, have I?"

The tenderness of Valerie's voice drew her gaze. Ciara sighed and shook her head. "Nay."

"Since reaching the age of ten and two, have I not protected you?"

This was most unfair of Valerie -- to draw on her emotions like this to gain her way. "You have been a true friend to me."

A delicate smile touched Valerie's lips. "Then, why do you not trust me now?"

"'Tis not you I mistrust, Val, but surely you must see the folly in your plan. He is a MacDonell!"

It was obvious to Ciara that a match between herself and MacDonell could never be. Why couldn't Valerie see this? The women had been together the night her clansmen carried her father into the keep, blood seeping from his body. 'Twas Valerie who tended Ciara through anger and grief over the loss of the only man she had ever loved.

"Ciara, please, listen to what I have to say before you call me irrational."

The pleading tone of her friend's voice drew on the love Ciara bore for Valerie in her heart. In defeat, she nodded. "Speak your peace."

A somber look entered Valerie's eyes. She stared at the quilt and idly ran a finger over a tiny rose. "I know you better than any person on earth, Ciara. I know what is in your heart." She looked up and placed a thin hand over Ciara's. "Alastair has a very troubled soul. I hoped I could reach into the recesses and help him, but the depth of his hurt is beyond my grasp."

Ciara's heart ached. Valerie's voice held such despair. "What makes you think I can succeed where you have failed?"

A gentle smile touched Valerie's lips. "Because, my dear sister, only one who has shared a similar hurt can understand his pain."

Hurt? What kind of hurt had the MacDonell suffered, and why should she care? He and his kin could have been among the men who slew her father in his saddle.

"You have hardened your heart to all things soft for fear of being belittled. In a way, Alastair has done the same."

Her friend's voice drew Ciara's gaze. In the glistening depths of her blue eyes, Ciara saw the love Valerie bore for her husband -- a love that, according to her friend, was not returned.

"Please, Ciara, consider my wish. Do not force me to make it a dying request."

Ciara bit the inside of her cheeks to keep from sobbing. A dying wish would condemn her, for no matter what was asked, Ciara would be obligated to fulfill it.

A thought occurred to her; a way out of this dilemma. "You have failed to think of one aspect of this plan of yours, Valerie."

A furrow creased her brow. "What would that be?"

Relief tumbled through her veins. It was the only solution to this problem. Ciara cleared her throat. "You have not considered MacDonell's reaction."

"But I have."

"Have you? Truly?" she asked, not allowing Valerie to continue. "Look upon me, my friend. Not as a sister of the heart, but as a person. I have no qualities at all that would lure a handsome man to ask for my hand. I have no wealth to fill his coffers, nor beauty to soothe his eyes."

A long silence passed while Valerie studied Ciara. 'Twas an awkward moment and Ciara regretted her inability to gracefully accept her friend's wish, yet she had to make her see things in a rational light. This was one request Ciara could never honor.

"You called him handsome."

The assured tone puzzled Ciara. "What?"

"Alastair," Valerie said with confidence. "You said he was handsome."

Dear Lord, Valerie's mind was more than half gone. "I did no such thing."

"Aye, you did, so do not dare deny it." Valerie sat up a little straighter in bed and took Ciara's hands in her own. "You are a beautiful person *inside*, Ciara, where it counts. Your heart is pure and good." She lifted their hands and gently rubbed them together. "And what talent you hold in your palm! I have always envied your creations."

"Creating beauty is one thing. Pretending to possess it is quite another."

"You will trust me in this and agree to my ploy before I die." Valerie leaned against her pillows, her exhaustion clear. "Now, leave me for a spell so that I may rest."

A torrent of emotions spiraled through Ciara's belly. She carefully removed her hands from Valerie's and rose from the bed.

"If I must, I will beg you not to make this fantasy a dying request. Please do not do this to me, my friend."

"'Tis for your good, as well as Alastair's. The two of you share the same soul."

Ciara could argue with her friend no more. The short time they were together had taken a visible toll on Valerie. Darkness colored the skin beneath her eyes, and her voice betrayed her weariness. The matter would have to rest for now.

"I will return with the evening meal and sup with you, dear." She leaned over and placed a sisterly kiss on her friend's cool brow. "Sweet dreams."

With a heavy heart, she moved toward the door.

"Ciara?"

She turned. Valerie lay sleepily against her pillows, a pleased smile on her lips.

"Thank you for coming."

Ciara returned the smile. Although Valerie had spent her strength relaying her wishes, it could not hide the genuine caring that lay in her heart. "Naught could have kept me away, my friend."

Silently, she closed the door behind her. In the dim light of the stone hall, Ciara leaned heavily against the door and closed her eyes.

Valerie was not long for this earth. The stench of death permeated the air. 'Twas a odor Ciara knew all too well. It had lingered around her mother during her final days, and was something Ciara would never forget.

Grief constricted her heart. It threaded its way up her spine and lodged in a choking lump in her throat. The burn of tears again tried to make its way to the surface. Ciara bit her lip and shook her head. She would not succumb to weakness. Not again.

"Does she sleep?"

The quiet male voice startled Ciara. She spun in the direction and found the proud laird MacDonell watching her.

A frown furrowed his brow. He stepped closer. "Did you upset her?"

Och, the cocksure fool. If only he knew what his wife had planned. Ciara mustered her dislike for all things MacDonell and moved away from the door.

"She grew weary and begged for a rest." Avoiding his dark eyes, she attempted to move around him. His breadth made it impossible. Given no choice, she lifted her gaze to his. "If you have no objections, I would like to refresh myself."

Seconds that passed as slowly as an eternity lingered between them. He hid his feelings well, providing he had any. Yet something in his eyes held her captive. Sorrow, perhaps. Did he know his wife would soon breathe her last?

'Twas foolish, indeed, but her heart reacted to what she imagined she saw. It fluttered against her breast and attempted to capture the very air she breathed.

Could MacDonell actually care about something or someone other than himself?

Finally, much to her relief, he stepped aside and nodded to a nearby door.

"I assigned you this room for the duration of your stay, and had your trunk placed inside."

Somehow Ciara managed to whisper, "Thank you," before disappearing into her room.

Valerie's foolish idea had Ciara as nervous as a pheasant in a fox den. If only the fox were as appalling as Bryan, or stank like James. Then it would be much simpler to convince her friend that she would sooner wed one of those unfortunates than the laird McDonnell.

\* \* \*

Alastair sat in a chair worn to fit his body from many hours of use. In the dark of the witching hour, he listened to the rattled breath that filled his wife's lungs.

How much time would pass before she was released from her tortured life?

Regret stabbed his heart. Despite the assurance of the healer that the illness was caused by a fragile constitution and could not possibly be his fault, Alastair could not escape the feeling that he had somehow failed his bride.

After their marriage, when they journeyed deeper into the Highlands, rain descended upon them. Although she complained not at all, Alastair chastised himself for not seeking shelter.

He shivered at the memory. Valerie had been near frozen when they arrived on his mountain. Soon after, lung fever set in. For a fortnight Alastair paced the floors, certain he had sent his wife to an early grave.

If only he had taken more care -- if only he had delayed their journey until the weather had cleared -- if only he had never met her. Perhaps she would never have become ill.

Yet, she recovered. In the months that passed, although she grew weary quite easily, he thought she would survive.

With the first kiss of autumn, Valerie once again succumbed to illness. Even now, as he sat in their room and watched her sleep, the lingering odor of death hung in the air.

Valerie sighed in her sleep. The gentle rush of her breath reminded him of the first glimpse he'd had of her. 'Twas in a meadow near her home. From afar, he watched her run barefoot through the glen, her laughter embracing the air. Skirts hiked to her knees, she played with the children of her village and attempted to avoid their grasp.

It seemed impossible that a mere year had passed since then.

Alastair eased himself forward and gently stroked his wife's cheek, hollow from her illness.

He had brought her here to his paradise, the land, the sea, the beauty as far as the eye cared to see. This place had made him strong, and many MacDonells before him. Yet none of his strength could he give to his wife.

Anything within his grasp could be hers. All she had to do was ask. But his love -- that he could not give. Why? What did he know of love? 'Twas a silly

emotion that transformed men into fools.

Valerie turned to her side. From her fingers, a small item tumbled to the floor. He frowned and retrieved the object.

Held in his powerful hand was a rose. A perfect creation, from what he could tell. In silence, he stood and approached the window. Beyond the protective walls of his manor, snow fell in quiet beauty to blanket the earth. It offered light to an otherwise dark night.

He lifted the blossom before him and studied the delicate petals. The tip of one finger touched the bloom. 'Twas then he realized the meaning of the flower.

The rose was made of paper. Delicate folds formed a bud in the center. Around that, careful petals fanned out, like a dove spreading its wings.

Paper roses. That was the odd hobby the witch across the hall possessed. She created beauty from scraps one would normally discard. Beauty that, once painted, looked as real as any bloom cut from the vine.

He turned his attention out the window and stared at the falling snow. Roses made of paper and a witch with the tongue of an asp. Somehow the two combined to form delicate beauty that could never be duplicated.

With a sigh, he returned to his wife's bed. He settled the flower on the table beside her, then leaned over to place a tender kiss on her upturned cheek.

Quietly, he left the room and made his way down the hall to the bed he occupied since his wife took ill. Much had happened in the short space of a day.

Alastair slid between the cool sheets of his narrow bed and folded an arm beneath his head. He stared out at the falling snow and wondered how his wife had formed such a strong bond with a red-haired witch.

Ciara. He would tolerate her in his home for a time, for Valerie's sake. Only for Valerie.



### Chapter Three

**"I want Valerie moved."**

Alastair turned from his stance before the hearth and stared at Ciara, framed in the doorway. Dressed in a simple patched, clean frock, her wild hair pulled away from her face, she looked as if she had slept very little.

He understood that feeling. Sleep was a luxury he himself had done without for what seemed a lifetime.

With a sigh that belied his weariness, he looked away. "I do not need you to tell me how to tend my wife."

The witch snorted. "I beg to differ."

Irritation pricked his veins. "Woman, I am in no mood to discuss my wife with you."

"Well, MacDonell, that is a pity. I want Valerie moved, and I want it done now."

Anger flickered to life in his belly. Who the hell did this witch think she was, coming into his home, against his wishes, and spouting orders? He turned a gaze on her and once again considered tossing her out on her mended behind.

"Hear me well, woman, for I am not in the habit of repeating myself." He took a deep breath to cool his rising temper. "The only reason you are here is because my wife requested it. That does not mean I have to listen to your words or suffer your presence. Valerie is my wife. Any decisions concerning her health are mine to make, not yours."

There. He'd said it. His wishes were so clear, even the village idiot could understand.

She stood unwavering before him. The only indication that she heard him at all was the tensing of her jaw. In the depths of her incredible eyes, he saw a flood of emotions flicker to life.

"MacDonell, what I do here is for Valerie, not you. Her symptoms are very similar to those my mother suffered." She paused, as if to regain control over her emotions. "In your desire to reign supreme over all things in your house, have you not perceived that Valerie is dying?"

Anguish filled his heart. How unfeeling the woman must think him! To stand boldly in his home and gouge the truth nestled in his soul was foolish beyond belief.

With care to keep his temper in check, Alastair closed the distance between them. Staring into her luminous eyes, he longed to wrap his hands around her ivory throat and squeeze.

"I know quite well the fate of my wife, woman," he managed to say. The bite of his voice was not lost on her, for she retreated a step. "I have done everything in my power to heal her. Dare not imply I am ignorant again, or so help me, I will take a whip to you."

Her chin rose a fraction of an inch. He did not miss the tremble in her hands as she folded her arms across her belly.

"Try it and I will turn you into a eunuch, MacDonell."

His threatened manhood recoiled. For one brief moment, Alastair believed her.

"Have you noticed the stench that fills Valerie's room?"

He grimaced and turned away, lest he give into his urges and strike her down. "Aye. 'Tis hard to ignore."

"I just came from her chamber. Mold covers the walls."

The woman was daft as a horse. He paused before the hearth and once again turned to her. "So? This keep is old and the climate damp. Mold cannot be avoided."

One fine eyebrow rose. "Aye, it can, MacDonell." With courage, the woman dared approach him. "Mold breeds a fungus that attacks the lungs of the weak."

What was she talking about? Mold was everywhere in this land, especially during autumn. "How do you know so much? My own healer has said naught of this."

Pain touched her eyes. He caught just a glimpse of it before she lowered her gaze. "While I was in France, I enlisted the talents of the healer who served the court. The first order he gave was to have our quarters scrubbed from floor to rafters to remove the mold."

Something stirred in Alastair's heart. But what?

"'Twas his theory that the mold was the malefactor of my mother's bane."

Lord, she sounded sad, lost and alone. Before he realized what he was doing, Alastair tucked a finger beneath her chin and lifted her gaze to his. In the starry depths of her eyes he saw pain.

Her lip quivered and he briefly thought she would weep. "Alas, I was unable to save my mother."

Drawn into the recesses of her forlorn tone, Alastair felt sympathy for all she endured. For some unexplainable reason, he wanted to pull her into his arms and —

"I will beg you if I must. Please, give me the chance to help Valerie."

Her sad whisper spiraled through his soul. The woman was indeed a witch, an enchantress skilled in the art of her craft. At that moment, she had him completely beguiled.

The echo of a door closing rang through the gallery and effectively broke the spell. Alastair dropped his hand and stepped away from the captivating

shrew.

Footsteps echoed across the stones. For some reason, Alastair felt like a lad caught stealing biscuits from the kitchen. He turned away from Ciara.

Control. 'Tis what he needed when dealing with this woman. Yet, he found himself unable to accomplish this. One look into her alluring eyes and he was reduced to a quivering mass of infatuation.

"The room two doors down from Valerie can be easily prepared," he said, clearing his throat to dislodge the uncomfortable lump wedged there. "I will move her by midday."

"Thank you."

Her soft murmur coiled around his heart. What was happening to him? The viper knew her mission well, knew how to use him to gain her wishes. He closed his eyes and nodded.

The hush of her steps faded from the room. Alastair rested an arm on the mantel and took a deep breath. Guilt gnawed at his belly. Valerie deserved his unwavering attention; yet, somehow, Ciara forced her way into his mind.

He stared into the hearth. Flames licked over dry logs and sparks drifted up the chimney. The cherry glow of the fire reminded him of Ciara; both her hair and her temper.

By all that is holy, he was a married man. His wife lay dying in a room they once shared. A chamber where pleasure and peace once dwelled.

Disgusted with himself, he left the room in search of Torquil. If it took his final breath, Alastair had to find a way to remove Ciara from behind his walls.

\* \* \*

MacDonell was a very dangerous man.

Annoyed with herself for her conduct, Ciara plunged her brush in a bucket of soapy water and scrubbed the floor with a vengeance. Bubbles skittered across the stones and carried with it the haunting eyes of her best friend's husband.

Why had she allowed the man to touch her? Somehow he managed to stir her emotions and lower her defenses. Even now, hours after the confrontation in the hall, she felt the touch of his fingers against her skin.

'Twas something she vowed would never happen again.

"I have women arriving to help with this task."

Ciara's heart jumped to her throat. She turned a glance toward the door. MacDonell stood there, surveying the empty room.

Soft boots covered his feet and hugged his legs to the knee. A few inches above, the edge of his plaid brushed against his thighs. A pristine shirt with a leather tie at the throat encased his broad shoulders. Hair as dark as a raven's

wing caressed that breadth and drew her gaze to his unforgettable eyes.

"Am I disfigured, or do you like what you see?"

Dear Lord. He had caught her staring at him. That misdeed was horrid enough. Yet the cocksure attitude of the man was enough to rile her temper.

With a scowl, she turned her attention back on her task. "You are disfigured."

His amused chuckle did little to dispel her discomfort. She felt his gaze upon her as she shoved the bucket across the floor. Damn the man to hell and back. Why couldn't he keep his distance?

"Do you think this will help my wife?"

Sorrow filled her heart and her brush slowed against the stones. From his tone, Ciara knew MacDonell cared for Valerie. Still, she could not bring herself to look at him.

"Aye. I only pray it is not too late." A painful lump lodged in her throat at the thought of losing her friend. She shook her head and forced it away.

"I share your prayer."

The melancholy that laced his voice drew her gaze. In the lines etched upon his brow, she glimpsed the despair he felt. 'Twas a feeling she knew well. No one, MacDonell or not, liked to believe themselves helpless when dealing with death.

"Her fate rests in the hands of the Almighty, MacDonell," Ciara whispered. She lowered her gaze to the brush held in her damp hand and sighed. "This we do is naught but a request for merciful time."

With an enthusiasm she did not feel, Ciara returned to her chore. The scrape of the brush against the stones was the only noise in the room. She dared a glance at the doorway.

MacDonell gazed upon her, yet she felt he did not see her. The hollowness of his eyes made him appear to be a hundred miles away.

What should she do? The desire to offer him comfort welled in her breast. Yet she resisted. He was, after all, a MacDonell. Did that mean he had no feelings?

With her gaze still on him, Ciara reached her brush in the direction of the bucket. It hit the rim and, before she could stop it, the pail tipped and spilled the contents over the floor.

The noise drew MacDonell from his trance. He sighed and shoved his fingers through his hair. "If you need anything else to help Valerie, let me know."

A moment later, he was gone. Ciara sat back on her bent legs and stared at the doorway. Despite the water that seeped through her worn gown, she was reluctant to move.

The man was a puzzle, without a doubt. He appeared hard and calloused on the outside, yet when it came to Valerie, he was tender and caring.

Ciara lowered her gaze to her lap. He knew Valerie was dying. What more did he know, yet kept to himself? Her heart tickled her ribs and fluttered to her throat.

Could he possibly be aware of the plan Valerie had for them? And if so, what were his thoughts on the matter?

Trepidation settled in the pit of her belly. She shook her head and continued her chore. It did not matter if he was aware of the plan or not. She hoped this scrubbing would restore Valerie's health. She would regain her strength, and resume her life with her husband.

That would leave Ciara free to remove herself from this keep and the disturbing presence of its laird.

\* \* \*

"What troubles you, Alastair?"

The sleepy whisper drew his gaze away from the snow that continued to blanket the land. Valerie lay against an unfamiliar mattress. Fresh linen embraced her and soft pillows offered her comfort. The faint light of a lone candle danced across her delicate face. She looked so damned weak.

"Naught for you to fret over, wife." He moved away from the window and eased himself on the edge of her bed. "You should sleep."

She shook her head and stifled a yawn. "What is the hour?"

Alastair glanced at the ringed candle nestled in a stand beside her bed. "'Tis near midnight." He lifted his hand and stroked her soft cheek. "Drift back to sleep now."

"Nay," she sighed and closed her eyes. "Soon I will have an eternity to slumber."

His hand stilled against her flesh. The truth stabbed his heart. He did not want her to die. 'Twas unfair of God to deal her such a cruel hand.

Her eyes fluttered open. A tender smile curved her lips and she raised a hand to his cheek. "Do not look so forlorn, love. The only regret I have is that I will not be here to share a life with you."

Alastair closed his eyes against her words. He wished he had as much courage as she did. The palm of his hand covered hers against his cheek. With a sad heart, he gently kissed her wrist.

"I will listen to no more talk of death," he said and braved a look into her eyes. "Ciara has worked hard this day purifying our chamber for you."

A gentle sigh escaped her lips. "If God wills me to join him soon, naught will delay his wish." Her hand withdrew from his and rested across her belly. "I need to speak with you about Ciara."

Just the mention of the witch's name lulled his sleeping guilt to life. He would perish before telling this sweet creature of the shame he carried in his heart. Yet, mayhap, Valerie would offer a reprieve.

"Do you wish her to leave?"

Breath held, he waited for a positive reply.

She smiled and briefly closed her eyes. "Nay, dear husband. Having Ciara here is a great comfort to me."

All hopes Alastair had of removing the woman from his house fled. He took a deep breath and nodded. "Then, what thoughts concern you?"

A frown furrowed her brow. "The future. Ciara is a very special woman."

Alastair had no idea where this conversation was going, but he prayed she would soon make her point. Discussing the red-haired viper was not high on his list of favorite topics.

"Do you know why she hates the MacDonells?"

The question, simply stated, took him by surprise. Hostility was clear in his dealings with Ciara, yet he assumed it was her nature.

He cupped Valerie's hand in his and whispered, "Nay."

A rattled breath filled her lungs. "Five years past, her sire and a group of his men were slain in a glen near Loch Garry."

Dread stilled his heart. Through the pages of his mind, his memory flashed to a summer's eve when he rode beside his father on a mission he knew little about.

"When the Mackintosh fell, and their blood stained the ground, all that was found among the bodies was a scrap of MacDonell plaid."

The shriek of horses falling beneath their masters melded with the clang of swords that echoed through his brain. Hands stained with blood clawed at his clothes.

"None know who was involved. The plaid could have been a clever device meant to entrap the MacDonells."

Reluctant shivers danced along his spine. He heard the roar of his father and felt his rage. Beneath his father's blood-stained hands, Alastair's plaid was stripped away, a mark of shame among the clan.

"I assured Ciara that you were not involved."

*Take up yer sword and strike the foe, or ye are nae kin o' mine!* The words reverberated through his mind until Alastair thought he would scream.

The tender brush of Valerie's hand against his cheek jerked him from the past. He stared down into her worried eyes and willed his heart to calm.

"Mercy, Alastair, your skin is damp and chilled."

The horror he endured that night would haunt him the rest of his days.

Her fingers traced his jaw, then slowly drifted back to her lap. "Did I tell Ciara true, husband?"

The worried look reflected in her eyes tore at his soul. He would not let her last remembrance of him be the discovery that her husband, the man she so freely loved, was a killer.

With firm resolve he forced the tortured memory from his mind and did his best to smile. "Nay, I did not kill her sire."

The smile gifted upon him was worth the lie. "I knew it." She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and continued. "I have a request to make of you, husband."

After the lie he just told, he would promise her the moon, should she ask. "What would that be?"

She hesitated just a moment. "Promise me that, once I am gone, you will care for Ciara as you have cared for me."

Disbelief tumbled through his veins. He could not have heard her properly. Surely, she had not asked him to take a viper into his home. "What?"

A weak smile touched her lips. "You heard me, Alastair. I want you to protect Ciara."

He scoffed. "That is one lass, I dare say, who can protect herself."

Her smile faded. "Ciara is not as she seems. She is more fragile than you know."

Fragile? She could not possibly be referring to the same woman who threatened to rob him of his manhood this morn.

"Will you do as I ask?"

He stared into her beautiful face and his heart twisted in his chest. How could he deny her? Yet, how could he not? Being dubbed the protector of Ciara Mackintosh was not what he longed to do.

"Please, Alastair. Do not make me beg."

He felt lower than the king beneath a whore. Valerie never asked him for favors. Now, when she made a request of him, he found it difficult to consent.

"I would never make you beg." He swallowed hard and nodded. "I will honor your wish."

Valerie smiled.

## Chapter Four

Ciara slipped from the keep as the dawn sun struggled to rise in the eastern sky. Every muscle in her body ached from her activities of the day before. None of that mattered, though. Today the room would be open to the fresh highland air and tomorrow Valerie would return to her chambers. By the grace of God, Ciara's efforts would be rewarded with the restoration of her friend's health.

Across the glen and the slope to the valley below, a thick blanket of snow covered the land. The wind kissed her cheek and lured a smile to her lips.

Nothing on earth could compare to a Highland dawn.

With care, Ciara pulled the warmth of a cloak around her shoulders and descended the steps. Snow crunched beneath her feet as she made her way toward the clearing that offered such a heavenly view of the loch.

In a matter of minutes the chill dampness of the snow seeped through the holes in her worn leather shoes, soaking her stockings and the hem of her gown. Despite the discomfort and the cold, Ciara continued on her journey.

So many thoughts filled her head, keeping her from peaceful slumber. Valerie's condition and her odd request, coupled with the disturbing presence of the laird, unsettled Ciara. Valerie's approval did not ease the guilt Ciara felt when caught alone with MacDonell.

This reprieve with the solace of dawn was what she needed to clear her mind of unwanted thoughts.

Ciara reached an outcrop of trees that bordered the glen and rested her back against the trunk of a mighty oak. The contentment of a sigh murmured through the air as she lifted her face toward the sky.

God knew what he was about when he created the Highlands.

A faint noise drew her gaze. Not thirty feet from where she stood, an exquisite red deer picked its way through the pristine blanket. It paused and nibbled at the bark of a tree.

Ciara smiled. Such a beautiful animal. The grace of its legs and curve of its neck drew her respect. Not everything God created was lovely. Ciara was proof of that.

A fawn wobbled from the protection of the trees. It made its way to its mother and joined her in their morning meal.

Natural beauty and serene grace. Two qualities Ciara longed to possess but knew would never be hers.

The doe suddenly lifted her head, ears pushed forward, every line of her lithe body alert. Ciara followed the deer's gaze, yet saw nothing amiss. Without



warning, a harsh whisper robbed the serenity of the morn. An arrow struck the doe in the neck.

Horror lodged a scream in Ciara's throat. Stunned, she watched the beautiful creature stagger from the blow. Blood spurted from the wound and stained the virgin snow. The immature deer cried as another arrow hit its mother, successfully bringing her to the ground.

Shocked, Ciara turned sharply in the direction from whence the arrows had come. MacDonell and the lout named Torquil emerged from the trees. Hatred raced through her veins. How dare he destroy such a creation as this?

MacDonell paused and notched another arrow in his bow. Ciara's heart leapt to her throat. He meant to kill the baby as well.

"Dare not!" She shrieked and pushed herself away from the tree. Without a thought for her safety, she ran through the thick snow toward the men, cursing the weight of her gown that hampered her movements.

Darkness clouded MacDonell's face, followed by a momentary look of surprise. An unfeminine growl wound through her throat as she lunged for the hated MacDonell. She hit the man square in the chest. He lost his footing and tumbled to the snow-covered earth, taking Ciara with him.

"You merciless bastard!" she hissed and trained her nails for his face.

A grip akin to iron circled her wrist. Beneath her, MacDonell's legs became entangled with her own. He grunted, then rolled, successfully pinning Ciara underneath him in the cold snow. The hard wood of his bow dug into her back.

Fury licked through her veins as she squirmed beneath his crushing weight. "Remove yourself from me, MacDonell."

Anger flashed across his dark eyes. His face mere inches from hers, MacDonell held her wrists in a crushing grip. "Never interfere with a hunt again, or so help me, I will sink an arrow into your black heart."

"My black heart?" She groaned and tried to remove his cumbersome weight. "You are the one who killed that beautiful deer."

He adjusted his body and pressed her firmly against the ground. Her heart thudded in rhythm with his. The feel of his lean, muscular form shoved intimately against hers curbed her breath and threatened to steal her fury.

His harsh breath brushed her cheek. "Aye, I killed the deer. If you had not come shrieking through the glen, I would have had the fawn as well."

"You bastard." Ciara clenched her jaw and tried desperately to move. Given half a chance, she'd sink a blade in the broad expanse of his back. "How could you kill such beauty?"

Some of the tension eased from his body. "'Tis simple, woman -- I like to eat. That deer will feed this clan for near a week." He loosened his hold on her wrists. "As laird, 'tis my duty to see to the needs of all who reside under my roof."

With a grunt, he lifted himself away from the ground. Brisk air flooded Ciara's lungs. She lay against the cold, wet earth and stared up at him.

MacDonell towered over her, his irritation clear in the depths of his dark eyes. An image of a tiger on the prowl sprang to her mind. He looked as if he were ready to pounce on her again.

"Do they not dine on meat where you come from?" he asked as he brushed snow from his clothes.

Ciara grimaced and rolled off the painful bow. She struggled to her feet and noticed their fall had broken the weapon. Satisfaction touched her breast. At least she had saved the fawn, and this churl would kill no more deer this day.

"Of course my clan feeds on meat." She fixed him with a glare she prayed would send him into the bowels of hell. "However, I prefer not to look my meal in the eye before eating it."

MacDonell scowled and retrieved the broken pieces of his bow. "'Tis not as if I intended to slice a chunk from the carcass and slap it down before you, woman."

He grimaced at the severed weapon. Ciara refused to feel any guilt over what transpired. MacDonell flashed a glance to her, then turned his attention on the fallen deer. Ciara followed his gaze.

Her stomach churned at the sight of Torquil lifting the lifeless doe onto his broad shoulders before moving toward the keep. Unable to bear the view, she closed her eyes and turned away.

The echo of MacDonell's sigh drifted through the air. "I did not know you were about to witness the kill."

A sad chuckle escaped her lips. She raised her face and stared at the orange-streaked sky visible through the bare branches of the trees. "Would it have mattered?"

A moment of silence passed before he replied. "Nay."

Ciara turned and stared into his haunting eyes. Why did he have to be so callous? Then again, he was a MacDonell. Killing came naturally to him and his clan.

"Why am I not surprised?" She lowered her head and started for the keep.

MacDonell grasped her arm. Ciara refused to look at him. In her present state of mind, she doubted if she could ever eat venison again.

"Women should not witness death, if it can be helped."

Something in his voice drew her gaze to his. She wasn't sure why she looked, but she knew she had no choice. If she didn't know better, she would think the tiny lines around his mouth and eyes were formed by regret.

"Alas, MacDonell, I witnessed the deaths of both my parents. 'Tis a part of life, and cannot be avoided."

His fingers eased from around her arm. Ciara pulled her cloak tightly around her shoulders and walked away.

\* \* \*

"You upset Ciara, husband."

Alastair grimaced and shoved his fingers through his hair. "Then we are even, wife, for I am not overly pleased with her, either."

He tugged the soiled shirt from the waist of his kilt and pulled the fabric off his body. If the witch had stayed where she belonged, he would not have lost a weapon -- nor the fawn.

The shirt crumpled beneath his fingers. Twined in the fabric lingered the intoxicating fragrance of Ciara. He lifted the linen to his nose and breathed deeply of her scent. Lavender.

"You should seek her out and ask her pardon."

Alastair paused. Valerie would think him daft for smelling his clothes. He grimaced, tossed the soiled item aside and snatched a clean one from a drawer.

Guilt set aside for the moment, he turned a gaze on his wife. She sat propped up in bed, her vivid eyes brimmed with tears.

Now, what the hell had he done? 'Twas not his fault the daft wench went screeching through the glen and foiled his hunt.

"I have done naught to feel remorse, nor do I wish forgiveness." He tugged the clean linen over his head and shoved his arms through the openings. "'Tis that viper who should beg my pardon for her actions."

Tears spilled over Valerie's lashes as he tucked his shirt into his kilt. The sight of her sorrow shoved a dagger through his heart.

"You lied to me, Alastair."

Her weak, choked voice twisted the blade already embedded in his chest. Had she somehow discovered the fib he told her last eve? With a sigh, he approached the bed and sat beside her.

"I did not mean to displease you," he whispered and lifted a strong hand to her hollow cheek. "I would never harm you."

"Yet you have done just that." She looked away from him and drew a ragged breath into her lungs. "You promised me last eve that you would care for Ciara as you have for me."

Relief tumbled through his veins. So that was the oath she thought he broke. Gently he moved his fingers to her chin and turned her to face him.

"'Twas no lie, wife. I made you a vow and I will do my best to keep it. Yet, when I am on a hunt to provide food for you and my clan, I will not allow a shrew to interfere."

Anger touched Valerie's blue eyes and mingled with her tears. "Cease calling Ciara names. She is not a shrew, nor is she the viper you dared call her a moment ago."

How did a woman's mind work? He was the injured party here, not Ciara. Alastair rubbed a hand over his weary eyes. No matter how much he was provoked by the enchanting witch, he must restrain himself from speaking his thoughts in the presence of his bride.

"I let my anger rule my head, wife," he said and dared another look into her luminous eyes. "I will slander Ciara no more."

Ciara. The woman was like none he had ever met. One moment he wanted to choke the life out of her, and the next -- well, if he were to be honest with his soul, he would admit to the desire she stirred in his veins.

She dared him to test the waters of her wrath and discover first-hand if her passion was as fiery as her temper. He almost challenged that dare this morn while the witch was trapped beneath him in the snow.

"My friend has been hurt so much by life, Alastair. You have no idea the depth of her wounds."

The tender embrace of her voice drew his thoughts from a place they should never have ventured. Guilt gnawed in his belly and clawed its way up his spine.

"Ciara needs you so very much, Alastair." Valerie raised a gentle hand to his cheek. Her lip quivered and he feared she would weep.

"The lass needs naught but to return to her clan, Valerie."

Silent tears slid over her cheeks. "She needs a man, Alastair, someone who will love her and show her kindness."

Alastair's breath lodged in his throat. "What has that to do with me? I am already wed."

Valerie lowered her gaze. "Not for long, husband." Her voice betrayed her sadness. "My time is limited, as well you know."

He wiped away the tears that stained her cheeks and sighed. "I have not lost hope that you will recover." Valerie raised her gaze to his. "You are my wife, and the only woman I wish to think upon right now."

Mirrored in the watery blue depths of her eyes, Alastair saw the truth. Despite Ciara's efforts, and his, Valerie would soon die. Resignation tightened his chest. He was naught but a helpless spectator in this battle with an unseen foe.

"I love you so very much, Alastair. I only want you and Ciara, the two people I care for most in this world, to find happiness." Her voice wavered and tugged at his heart.

God, he was such a blackguard. With Valerie he found a woman who loved him to the depths of her soul, yet he could not return the sentiment.

He felt lower than an adder under a rock.

"I beg you to be a fair judge with Ciara. With her, I believe you will both find love."

Exasperation mixed with guilt in his chest. Torn between respect for his wife and an unexplainable infatuation for a beautiful witch, Alastair longed to run from the keep before madness overwhelmed him.

"I will listen to no more of this talk," he managed to say. Heaven knows he had done enough this day to harm Valerie. "'Tis with you I pledged my troth. I will not sully our marriage or allow you to plan my next wife."

Silence filled the air. Alastair wished she would say something, anything to let him know what thoughts occupied her mind.

"'Tis not a sin if I give my blessing, which I do."

The hush of her voice filled the air between them. 'Twas then Alastair knew she meant every word. Stunned, he tried to make reason from folly.

What was Valerie's motive here? Surely she did not think that he could ever wed a shrew like Ciara. His head throbbed. Not only did he not wish to think about burying his wife, he would not consider following a plan that would place him in a viper's den, either.

Valerie sighed. "I will not force the issue yet. You need time to think this matter through." She placed a gentle hand on his arm. "Just remember how well I know you, husband, and how well I know Ciara. The two of you share the same soul."

Madness crept further into his brain. This had to be a very peculiar dream. "All Ciara and I share is animosity."

"Liar," Valerie whispered, her voice soft. "The two of you share a bond in your fondness for me."

"To that I will agree," he said, remembering how hard Ciara had worked in Valerie's chamber.

"Alastair, hear my plea. 'Tis my desire and fond wish for you to show Ciara some tenderness." She held up a hand to silence him when he started to protest. "If you would only put forth a small amount of effort, you would earn her trust and be amazed at the woman you find lurking beneath the facade of an impartial heart."

'Twas the trouble. He longed to explore Ciara, all right, and not in a brotherly way. The woman had haunted his nights from the moment she tumbled out of the wagon that brought her to his mountain. Aye, he knew what Ciara needed, and it had naught to do with friendship.

And it was all so very wrong.

Alastair sighed and cupped Valerie's hand in his own. He could never consent to arranging a second wife while the first still lived. And given a choice, he could never consider Ciara.

He gazed into Valerie's eyes and his heart ached. She truly thought she

knew what was best for him. All he could do for the moment was appease her.

"I will do all in my power to make peace with Ciara. Yet I fear what you call a facade is true nature."

A weak smile touched Valerie's lips. "You are wrong, husband. If you keep your word, you will soon realize how mistaken your thoughts are."

An invisible band tightened around his heart. If he could muster no love for a woman such a Valerie -- a lass who deserved the emotion -- how could he possibly have such feelings for Ciara?

He shook his head to clear his mind of such foolish thoughts. "I fail to see why we even speak of such things."

"Because it is my will."

Alastair leaned over and kissed his wife tenderly on the mouth. The salt that lingered from her tears swirled around his tongue. He was the reason for her unease.

He rested his brow against hers and sighed. "You are my wife, Valerie. I will have no other."

"Aye, you will. All men need sons."

The truth of those words could not be denied. Despite his will, a heir would have to be produced before he breathed his last.

Yet the mother of his children could never be a red-haired enchantress named Ciara. Even if he should entertain his wife's suggestion, he knew something she did not.

He, Alastair MacDonell, had ridden with the men who slew Ciara's father. That, he felt certain, was one sin she could never forgive.

## Chapter Five

Ciara leaned over an aged ceramic basin in her room and splashed cool water over her face. Her dreams had been haunted, first by the doe, then by MacDonell. In the hours before dawn, Ciara tossed against her mattress and tried in vain to wipe away the memory of how it felt to have his body pressed against hers.

A gentle knock upon her door drew Ciara from her troublesome thoughts. Dressed in naught but her chemise and underskirt, she pulled on a robe, then eased open the door an inch.

MacDonell stood in the hall. In the wavering glow of a torch, Ciara saw tired lines around his dark eyes, his mouth turned down at the corners. 'Twas clear she was not the only one in this keep who could not sleep.

"I need a word with you." He sounded as tired as he looked.

"I am in no mood to enter a duel of words with you, MacDonell." She lowered her gaze and pushed the door. His hand against the wood prevented it from closing. Her gaze returned to his.

"'Tis a pity, for speak to me you shall."

Arrogant cuss. Ciara frowned. "Very well, I will meet you below stairs shortly."

MacDonell shook his head. "Nay. What I need to discuss I do not wish others to hear."

A shiver licked her spine. She forced herself to remain calm. "Speak, then."

Again he shook his head and stepped into the room. Ciara's heart leapt to her throat. She backed away from the door and his masterful form. Being alone with him was not a wise idea.

"Are you aware of this intolerable plan my wife has concocted?"

Ciara closed her eyes and willed her pulse to cease its erratic beat. He knew. She opened her eyes and swallowed hard. He gazed upon her as if he could gladly choke the life from her body.

"Aye, I know of the foolhardy plan that wanders through Valerie's brain." Another swallow edged its way around the painful lump lodged in her throat. "'Tis clear her illness has dulled her senses. Now, remove yourself from my chamber."

He didn't move. The rasp of his breath echoed off the walls and sent chills down her spine. Reluctantly, Ciara turned away from his unnerving glare and approached the lone window that overlooked the loch.

She felt something must be said. Calling forth her courage, she stared across the pristine scenery and cleared her throat.

"I tried in vain to make Valerie see reason."

"Did you?"

Anger quickly replaced the unease from a moment ago. She glared at him. The egotism of this man was not to be believed. He probably thought an ugly lass like her would grovel at his feet and kiss his toes for the chance to wed him.

He was about to be proven wrong.

"Aye, I did. I would rather die a spinster than to consider a life in purgatory with the likes of you!"

MacDonell closed the distance between them, yet Ciara did not back away. If MacDonell itched for a fight, that is what she would give him.

"Methinks I am the one who would suffer." His rough voice sent shivers along her spine.

Ciara swallowed hard and met his cold glare. "Do not fear, my mighty laird. I have no intention of entertaining such a foolish notion."

The darkness of his haunting eyes settled on hers. "Nor would I be fool enough to wed a woman with the tongue of a viper and the temper of a shrew."

"Good, then we have no problem." Ciara crossed her arms over her belly and glared at him. She hated him from the top of his dark, arrogant head to the tips of his toes. "Now, remove yourself from this room."

One dark eyebrow disappeared beneath the hair that tumbled recklessly across his brow. "'Tis my house you occupy, woman. I do as I wish."

Ciara swallowed hard. 'Twas difficult indeed not to retreat from his imposing presence. "And what, pray tell, do you wish to do with me?"

A vein twitched in his neck and the dusk of his eyes swept over her. Ciara trembled. She tightened her hold around her body and prayed he did not notice her discomfort.

"That, woman, is one question you do not wish me to answer."

Jaw tense, she lifted her chin. She knew only too well that, given the chance, he would bounce her down his mountain and drown her in the loch.

"I refuse to leave until Valerie bids me so."

Something flashed across his eyes, yet Ciara could not identify it, and she wasn't certain she wanted to. Perhaps she had read the thoughts that tumbled through his pompous head?

MacDonell lowered his gaze and turned away. Ciara glanced toward the ceiling and released her pent breath, relieved she no longer endured his scrutiny.

"I will do all in my power to make my wife see reason. I expect the same from you."

Och, the cocksure fool was begging to be attacked. "What, pray tell, do you think I have been doing?" Her question drew his gaze once more. She shivered, yet refused to look away. "Valerie knows better than most my lack of fondness for all things MacDonell. In her heart, I believe she knows I could never honor her



request."

An array of emotions crossed his face. Furrows formed on his brow and pulled his lips into a thin scowl. A moment later, his troubled gaze rested on hers. Damnation, but the man looked lost and, for just a moment, afraid.

Her heart thumped against her breast. Never had a man stirred such emotions in her before. In one encounter MacDonell lured fear, anger and compassion from the depths of her buried soul.

Ciara moistened her lips. "My only prayer is that she will not make it a dying request."

Mirrored in his eyes, she thought she saw a similar hope. Unable to bear his gaze a moment longer, Ciara turned away.

"If Valerie does place me in such an unfavorable position, I will be hard pressed to consent." She lifted her gaze to the awakening sky and drew in a breath. "It will be just as difficult to deny. A last plea cannot be refused."

"I know." His hushed whisper tickled her spine.

Ciara closed her eyes and prayed to God that Valerie would soon see reason.

"Valerie knows this as well." The echo of his sigh revealed the turmoil harbored in his soul.

Still, Ciara refused to look at him.

"She wants a willing agreement between us, but will make it a dying wish if she must."

A sad chuckle escaped her lips moments before she turned to face him. The torment etched upon his brow tugged at her heart.

Ciara averted her gaze. "Then we are doomed."

Silence lingered between them until, unable to stand the solace a moment longer, Ciara looked his way.

MacDonell shoved lean fingers through his hair and sighed. "There is one way to avoid this."

Breath held, Ciara waited for him to continue. "How?" she prompted when he seemed determined to keep his thoughts to himself.

His dark gaze settled on hers. "'Tis simple, woman." The width of his chest expanded with his breath. "You must leave. By removing yourself from this keep, Valerie cannot place a dying wish upon your shoulders."

Ciara blinked. Leave? Abandon her friend in her time of need? "Never. I refuse to take the coward's way out."

Anger clouded his eyes. "Now you call me a coward?" He took a menacing step toward her.

She shrugged and moved away. The cool stones of the wall halted her progression. MacDonell was scaring the life out of her, but she would perish before showing her fear.

"'Tis how I see it. You want me to turn tail and run." He stopped before her, mere inches separating their bodies. Ciara shivered and told herself it was from the cold in the walls. "I have never turned my back on a challenge before. I will not start now."

His jaw tensed and, briefly, Ciara thought she may have pushed him too far.

"I am *not* a coward!" The biting tone of his voice pressed her further against the wall.

Above the thunder of her heart, Ciara heard herself apologize. 'Twas clearly the words he needed to hear, for the tension eased from his face.

MacDonell stepped away and stared at her. Ciara felt the condemnation of his gaze clear to her toes.

"If you stay, and Valerie makes this a dying wish, I will not be responsible for my actions." He turned on his heel and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

Ciara slumped against the wall and slid to the floor. Tears seeped through her lashes and trickled down her cheeks. Years had passed since she last felt this amount of fear in the presence of a man.

A few deep breaths later, Ciara managed to regain control over her emotions. She knew what had to be done. There was no way on earth she could remain here and place herself at the mercy of MacDonell.

Despite her friend's wishes, Ciara knew in the depths of her heart that the moment Valerie breathed her last, the murderous MacDonell would choke the life out of her.

\* \* \*

"You cannot leave!"

The forlorn tone of Valerie's voice sliced through Ciara's heart. It could not be helped. Her decision was made.

"I am sorry, my friend, truly I am. A message from Eneas arrived this morn." She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and avoided Valerie's gaze. "He has entered into a betrothal agreement with laird MacLean. I shall be wed before a fortnight passes."

"That vile, decrepit old man?"

Still Ciara could not face her friend. The sooner this matter was settled, the better for all involved. She nodded and kept her gaze on the floor.

Valerie sighed. "I always knew Eneas resented you, but I never knew how much until now."

Ciara bit her lower lip in an effort to regain her lost courage. "He is my brother and, as laird, has the right to betroth me to whomever he wishes. Eneas

has longed for an alliance with that clan since assuming the role of laird."

The thunderous roar of silence echoed through the room. Finally Valerie spoke, her voice frail and weak. "Ciara, look at me."

She closed her eyes and willed her emotions to remain hidden. The story was not a complete lie. Eneas did wish to wed her to MacLean. Alas, she never cared for her brother's wishes, nor was she pleased with them now. Yet, this situation with Valerie left her no choice. With a swallow for courage, she raised her gaze.

Tears glistened in the depths of Valerie's eyes. The sight twisted Ciara's heart. "Do you truly think yourself better with MacLean than my Alastair?"

Somehow, Ciara found her voice and the strength to lie. "Aye."

Tears dampened Valerie's cheeks. With grace, she extended a hand to Ciara. "Show me the missive."

Ciara's heart stilled in her chest. "Why?"

"Just show it to me."

The determination in Valerie's eyes overcame the fragility of her voice. Ciara longed to run deep into the woods and hide.

"I cannot. 'Tis packed away, and my trunk is already at the pier."

Condemnation lined Valerie's face as she lowered her hand to the bed. "You never have been able to lie to me, my friend. I wish to know why you do so now?"

In her chest, Ciara felt her heart being ripped in two. "I do not lie. Eneas does wish to wed me to MacLean."

Valerie slowly nodded. "Aye, that I can believe. Your brother is consumed by greed. The ill health of MacLean, along with the power the man would bring to your clan, no doubt prompted Eneas to agree to an alliance."

A momentary spurt of relief touched Ciara's heart.

"However," Valerie continued, "If I know you -- and I do -- you told Eneas to stuff it up his kilt."

Guilt gnawed in the pit of Ciara's belly. That is precisely what she had done. She lowered her gaze to the floor.

A sad chuckle escaped Valerie's lips. "Your silence condemns you, my friend."

Desperation filled Ciara's soul. She had to leave this mountain, and she had to do so now.

"'Tis true I cannot wed MacLean." She raised her gaze and the smile on Valerie's lips tore at her soul. "However, I cannot wed MacDonell, either." The smile slowly left Valerie's lips. "I am sorry to disappoint you, but I have no choice. I pray you understand my motives."

Ciara turned on her heel and left the room. In the loneliness of the hall, Valerie's voice calling for her to return echoed off the stones. Ciara paused and

leaned against the wall for support.

She had to leave. There was no other choice. With false courage, Ciara continued along the hall and down the winding stairs. Still, Valerie's voice called for her.

At the bottom of the stairs, MacDonell and a few of his men gathered, puzzled looks upon their faces at the sobs emerging from above. MacDonell blocked her path.

"What have you done to upset my wife?"

"Stand away from me, MacDonell," Ciara said through her teeth. She could not take much more of her friend's haunting pleas that seemed to grow closer. "I have done as you requested. Although it broke my friend's heart, I am leaving."

His gaze flashed from her to a spot over her shoulder. The color drained from his face. He shoved her aside and ran up the stairs. Ciara fell against the stones and dared a glance to where he ran.

Valerie clung to the rail for support and struggled down the steps. Tears stung Ciara's eyes. Only through determination did she keep them from falling.

MacDonell placed an arm around Valerie's frail shoulders. She shrugged him off, her gaze fixed on Ciara. A harsh breath filled her lungs.

"Hear me now, all of you," she panted and shoved off her husband's arms once more. "'Tis my dying wish that Ciara Mackintosh -- "

"Nay," Ciara whispered on a sob, begging her friend not to finish her sentence.

"Ciara must wed Alastair and give him heirs." She sank toward the stone steps, her gaze still fixed on Ciara. "This, my last wish, must be obeyed."

MacDonell swept his wife into his arms and fixed a deadly glare on Ciara. No words were needed. The anger and hatred in his eyes bespoke his opinion of her. And he had no right. 'Twas his own request that prompted her decision to leave. He turned and carried his wife up the stairs.

Stunned and terrified, Ciara could do naught but stare at the empty space where her friend had condemned her. By stating her wish before witnesses, it could not be denied.

Her heart ached and thumped so hard against her ribs, she thought it would burst.

"I ken from the moment I saw ye that naught but grief would follow."

Ciara turned to the men who stared at her with a mixture of hatred and confusion. Torquil had spoken the words she could not deny.

His lip curled in disgust. "If the laird chooses tae kill ye, as I would if I were him, I will dispose of yer corpse myself." He turned on his heel and left the keep.

Ciara sank to the cold stone steps and tried to still the fear that stirred in her belly. Bile rose to her throat as the impact of the situation sank into her brain.

She lowered her head to her trembling hands and fought the terror that tried to circle her heart.

How could Valerie do this to her? Ciara felt as if she had just been sentenced to death.

## Chapter Six

Contained rage coursed through Alastair's veins. He paced before the hearth in Valerie's room. Unable to sit still, he found it even more difficult to leave. With each step his gaze strayed to the bed.

The aged healer leaned over Valerie. With care, he removed leeches that all prayed would draw the illness from Valerie's body.

Alastair's gaze moved to her face and his heart twisted in his chest. The pallor of death clung to her skin. It hollowed her cheeks and pushed the breath from her lungs.

And it was all Ciara's fault.

His anger churned at the thought of the witch and how she harmed his wife. Aye, he wanted Ciara gone. Yet the woman should have had the sense to leave quietly. Surely she knew that bidding Valerie farewell would only add to his wife's anxiety and weakness.

"Alastair."

He paused in his pacing and fixed his gaze on the healer. Beneath a shield of whiskers, the man frowned, lowered his eyes and shook his head.

"Death is near."

Grief rose in his throat. He knew this moment would come, yet in his heart he held to the belief that it would not be this soon.

"Make peace with your wife," the healer said as he gathered his belongings. "She will be with God by the time dawn colors the sky."

Disbelief tumbled through his veins. So quickly life passed. In one breath, it robbed the world of the grace of a beautiful woman.

The healer left the room. How long Alastair stood and stared at his wife, he had no idea. What seemed hours later, he managed to propel his lead-filled feet across the floor.

By her bed, he fell to his knees. In the depths of his calloused hands, he held her fragile one. Tears stung his eyes. He closed them against the pain in his heart and said a prayer for her soul.

"Husband?"

The call was so weak that for a moment he thought he imagined it. He lifted his head and found his wife looking at him through sleepy eyes. Beneath his palm, her hand moved.

"You weep."

The tender brush of her fingers closed his eyes. Through the choking mass lodged in his throat, he managed to whisper, "Aye. I do not wish to lose you."

Silently, he caressed her hand and willed his courage back to life. Now was not the time to show weakness. Valerie needed his strength, not his shame.

"Please forget me never, husband."

Her weak plea lured the lump higher in his throat. He pressed her hand against his heart and stared into her eyes. "You will live in here forever."

A troubled breath touched her lungs. "I am not afraid."

"Of course you are." Alastair blinked away the pain in his eyes and looked at her. Lord, she was beautiful. "We all fear the unknown."

Her eyes fluttered closed and silence embraced the room. His heart froze in his chest.

"Valerie?"

A tired smile touched her lips. "I am still here, love." Another breath filled her lungs. "And I tell you true. I have no fear."

That was good, because he had enough fear in his body for both of them. He kissed her palm and sighed. "You are a wonderful woman, Valerie."

"I was never a proper match for you." Her gentle whisper opened her eyes. "Ciara is the one you need."

Again, anger churned in his belly. "Pray, do not mention her name. 'Tis because of her you are —"

"Nay!" Her voice sounded stronger than he would have thought possible. "I prayed God would let me live long enough for her to arrive, so I could make my wishes known."

Beneath his fingers he felt the rapid beat of her pulse, and the labor of her breath echoed through his brain. "Calm yourself."

Valerie shook her head. "Not until you tell me you will not blame her for this."

How could he make such an oath? 'Twas clear that after the confrontation in their room, Valerie spent what energy she had left to stop the witch from leaving.

"Promise me you will not blame Ciara for my misfortune."

God, she was killing him. "I promise."

The tension eased from her body and a contented sigh filled the air. "Good. Now, promise to honor the request I made in the hall."

Alastair bit his lip and shook his head. "I cannot."

Her weary eyes settled on him. Mirrored in those depths he saw her pain. It tortured his soul and threatened to rip his heart from his chest.

"'Tis my last wish of you, Alastair."

The harsh burn of tears threatened his eyes. "I would beg you to reconsider this wish."

Valerie shook her head. "Trust me to know what is best for you. I give you my vow that you will not regret my decision."

She was weakening fast. He saw it plain upon her ashen face and the shallowness of her breath. There was nothing left to do.

"Much as it grieves me, you leave me no choice but to honor your last request." The words lodged in his throat and left a bitter taste.

A smile curled her lips. "Thank you. 'Tis one of the reasons why I love you so."

Alastair closed his eyes and bowed his head. He did not deserve her love. She would despise him and withdraw her affection if she knew that he was behind Ciara's attempt at departure.

A soft knock pulled him from his sorrow. He glanced toward the door. Ciara stood there and, from the look of her, she was as grief-stricken as he.

"Who is it?"

Valerie's hushed query turned his gaze to her. He stroked her brow tenderly. "Ciara is here."

"Call her forth."

He'd much rather call her a witch in the village square and toss the first stone. Instead, he leaned over, kissed Valerie's clammy brow and rose to his feet. He turned to Ciara and reigned in his urge to choke her.

"Her time is short. Dare not upset her again."

The witch merely nodded and moved with care across the floor. In an effort to hide her fear, Ciara twined her fingers tightly before her. Resentment curled through his chest. If the woman felt fear now, just wait until this ordeal was over. Alastair would teach her the meaning of the word.

He stepped aside and allowed Ciara to take his place beside his wife. Alastair remained nearby, hand on his dirk. One wrong word and he would take care of Ciara himself.

"I am so sorry I hurt you before, Val," Ciara whispered, her voice choked with unshed tears. "I never dreamed you would try to stop me."

Valerie lifted a hand. Where she found the strength, God only knew. Ciara held it in hers and pressed it against her cheek.

"There is naught to forgive, Ciara. All is well now between you and Alastair."

Ciara's gaze met his. Despite his will to keep his anger close to the surface, the look of utter grief in the woman's eyes dispelled a bit of his rage.

"Do you know how hard your wish will be for us to carry out?" Ciara whispered.

Alastair tightened his hold on his dirk.

Valerie smiled. "Aye, yet I ask you the same as I did my beloved. Trust me."

The witch was trying very hard not to weep. Was it a ploy, or were the torturous emotions real?



"I do trust you." Ciara stroked Valerie's hand before pressing it to her lips. "You are my sister."

Valerie's body tensed and a ragged breath filled her lungs. "Alastair?"

In the flash of a thought, he moved Ciara aside and eased himself onto the edge of the bed beside his wife. He took her hand in his and paid little attention to Ciara, now kneeling upon the floor.

"I am here."

Another shallow breath filled her lungs. Although her eyes were open, she did not seem to see. "Hold my hand, love. Please."

Anguish twisted in his heart as keenly as a blade. He glanced briefly at Ciara. Her chin trembled and tears hovered in her eyes.

Without a thought, Alastair positioned himself on the mattress beside his wife and drew her into his arms. "I will hold you close and keep you safe," he whispered and kissed her brow. "Stay with me."

A broken breath drifted in the air between them. Her thin fingers wound in the fabric of his shirt. "I smell bread."

Alastair frowned and looked down at her. "What?"

The fingers twined in his shirt eased their hold. Her eyes drifted closed as her final breath expelled from her lungs.

Torment tore at his soul. She couldn't be dead, not when he had held her so tight. There was no evidence that her spirit had passed from her body. She looked as if she had simply fallen asleep.

"My mother smelled roses."

Ciara's broken voice drew his gaze. She wiped at the tears that hovered in her eyes.

"They say when one sees the face of God, life's fondest memory is their last remembrance." Her face contorted in grief and she bowed her head. "When we were bairns, Valerie's mother made the bread for the village."

The tortured hush of her voice tore at his heart. When she raised her eyes, he felt the pain she bore.

"'Twas a special honor for us to be allowed to help." She blew her nose then met his gaze. "Valerie loved the smell of fresh baked bread."

She choked on a sob, then fled from the room, leaving Alastair alone with his wife. He looked down at her peaceful face and knew too late that, in his own way, he had loved her.

He held her close and buried his face against her throat. Grief tore through his body and cleaved his soul. His tears dampened her still-warm flesh. He would give anything for another of her smiles, or to stare into her beautiful eyes.

Slowly, he regained control over himself. This is not what Valerie wanted. She would frown at him for displaying such weakness over a lifeless body.

With care, he eased her against her pillows and climbed off the bed. He

adjusted the covers over her and smoothed her hair.

On the bedside table, he noticed the rose Valerie often clutched in her sleep. He retrieved the small bloom and placed it in her palm. His hand closed her fingers around the paper rose. Alastair kissed her hand, then laid it to rest across her belly.

Reluctantly, he turned away and approached the windows. Darkness greeted him. Through the night sky, stars shone like jewels.

"God," he whispered, his voice raw. "Take good care of Valerie. Her soul is so pure. Your angels will weep from her virtue."

Alastair MacDonell, laird of his clan, bowed his head and cried.

## Chapter Seven

With a heart numbed by grief, Ciara walked through the snow, oblivious to the large flakes that clung to her hair or the chill that permeated her body. Clutched in her hand, she held a bouquet of tiny white roses she had made during the tenure of her visit. These were Valerie's favorites of all Ciara's creations.

Ahead of her, MacDonell clansmen ferried a litter that held Valerie's shroud-encased body and rested atop the softest of fur pelts. The path they followed wound along the side of the mountain, between crofts Ciara never knew were there.

MacDonell followed the men, his head bent in grief. The lonely cry of bagpipes echoed through the trees and bemoaned the sadness nestled in Ciara's heart. Through the branches, the wind stirred and wept along with the mourners.

At the crest of the mountain, a clearing came into view. The spot overlooked the loch and distant peaks of the isles barely visible through the falling snow.

The men paused beside a gap in the earth. 'Twas then Ciara noticed the dirt-strewn snow. Someone had toiled many hours to dig a grave in the frozen earth.

With care, the men settled the litter on the ground and stepped aside. Ciara stood beside the grave that beckoned her one true friend. A lump lodged in her throat and tears stung her eyes.

Across the void that waited for Valerie, MacDonell knelt beside his wife. A shroud embraced her lifeless body, with naught but her sleeping face exposed. The clan gathered round in the silent morn to bid farewell to the laird's wife.

The frosted air echoed the chill nestled deep in Ciara's soul. Would Valerie continue to live if Ciara had not acted out of fear and attempted to leave?

With care, MacDonell tucked a folded piece of his tartan and his clan badge inside the shroud. Then he raised his head. Across the expanse of a grave, his grief-filled gaze locked on hers. A shiver licked her spine. 'Twas plain he wished her to take Valerie's place.

Ciara bowed her head. If only that were possible! Tears filled her eyes. She closed them tightly and forced away the sting. When Valerie had passed, Ciara came very close to showing her weakness to MacDonell. That, she knew, would be a mistake.

A deep breath of frigid air filled her lungs and gave her the courage to raise her head. MacDonell leaned over Valerie and placed a tender kiss upon her brow.

The sorrow etched upon his face tugged at her breast.

His hands trembled as he folded the shroud over his wife's sleeping face. Still he knelt in the dirt-strewn snow, reluctant to rise, the signal for his men to lower his wife into the ground.

Ciara bit her lip and blinked away the fat flakes of snow that clung to her lashes.

Without a word, Torquil stepped forward and placed a large hand on MacDonell's shoulder. Melancholy twisted Ciara's heart as she watched MacDonell nod and rise to his feet.

Two clansmen approached Valerie and, with care, lifted her shrouded body and placed her in the shallow grave. MacDonell bent and gathered soil in his hand. At the edge of the grave, he allowed the dirt to sift between his fingers and dust the body of his wife.

Ciara's legs felt as weak as a newborn colt, yet somehow she managed to move forward. She knelt upon the cold ground and placed her bouquet on top of the dirt-dusted shroud.

Again, tears stung her eyes. Life was so unfair. Valerie deserved a longer existence than this. Ciara's ragged breath made frosty clouds in the air. She did her best to regain her composure, then dared a look at MacDonell. The condemning darkness of his eyes made her shiver.

He blamed her for this.

With a heavy heart, Ciara climbed to her feet. She turned from the gathering and walked away. Hollowness nestled in the area where her heart used to reside. The death of her friend so soon after her mother's was a great burden. The two people Ciara cared for most in her life were no more than memories.

The snowfall intensified as Ciara approached the keep. She paused and stared at the house of stone that loomed on the horizon. 'Twas such a bleak, cold and foreboding sight. Yet, behind those walls her friend had found happiness.

Ciara knew that no joy would be found behind those walls as long as she was present. MacDonell would kill her, or her him, before a month passed.

Valerie was wrong to place such a heavy burden on them. On her. But, if she chose to flee and ignore a dying wish, Ciara would be condemned to the bowels of hell.

She glanced over her shoulder at those who drifted back to their homes. Through the flakes that tumbled from the heavens, she found MacDonell watching her. Ciara shivered and turned away.

No matter what Ciara chose to do, she would find herself in hell -- be it in the present with MacDonell, or in the hereafter.

Any way she looked at it, Ciara knew she was doomed.

\* \* \*

Alastair sat alone in the darkness of the chamber where Valerie had died, the same space they had shared in their brief time as man and wife. He still felt her in his arms. The echo of her dying breath thundered through his brain.

He had not deserved her, and now she was dead.

In the stillness of the night, a thud disturbed the peace. He frowned and glanced toward the door. A scrape reverberated through the air, followed by another thud and a groan. Alastair pushed himself out of the chair and eased open the door.

Through the wavering light of torches that sputtered in rings embedded in the wall, a cloaked figure, bent at the waist, labored over an unseen object. Curiosity lured him into the hall.

The figure struggled for breath, cursed in French, then stood.

Alastair knew then that the creature was Ciara. She sighed and stepped around the object before her. The sight of her trunk caused his heart to sink. Did the witch plan to leave and ignore Valerie's wish?

Ciara grasped the handle at the opposite end of the trunk and pulled. As if sensing his presence, she lifted her head and paused. Fear flashed across her face as she slowly stood away from the trunk.

Irritation seeped into Alastair's veins. He stepped to the opposite end of the trunk and met her worried gaze.

She bit her lower lip and averted her gaze. "I did not mean to disturb you."

The whisper heightened his anger. "'Tis clear you meant to sneak away." Her gaze flashed to his. "Does the dying wish of your best friend mean so little to you?"

Ciara sighed and rubbed her brow. "MacDonell, surely you see the folly in Valerie's request." Her hand drifted back to her side. "Do you wish to fulfill the plea?"

He shook his head. "Nay." The relief that eased the lines of worry from her face irritated him even more. "Yet fulfill it I shall. Valerie asked little of me in our time together. I will not turn my back on her now."

Her hands trembled and she stepped away from the trunk. "'Tis madness. Much as I loved Valerie, I cannot carry through her demand."

Alastair stepped around the trunk. "Would you care to place a wager on that?"

The witch trembled and backed away from him. "MacDonell, you cannot mean to see this through. We despise one another."

He shrugged and continued his progression. "It matters not to me. Many marriages are arranged. Valerie beseeched us to wed, with half the clan as witness to her plea. I will not disgrace her memory to save myself from the clutches of a shrew."

Her back hit the wall. Through the dim light, Alastair saw the rapid rise and fall of her chest. The witch was frightened out of her mind. Good.

Ciara moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue, yet did not avert her gaze. "I will not give my consent."

Alastair rested an arm against the wall and leaned close to her ear. "Aye, you will." The fingers of his free hand stroked the pulse that beat in her throat. Beneath his touch, she flinched and closed her eyes. "I will share with you a bit of wisdom, woman. Do all in your power to please me." His hand fit perfectly around her throat. Her eyes snapped open and stared into his. "I have buried one wife. It will not distress me to bury another."

He eased his hold on her and pushed himself away from the wall. Respite flooded Ciara's face and he felt certain if he had not been present, she would have slid to the floor.

"I would prefer not to force the issue, and give myself time to grieve for Valerie. Yet, if you attempt departure again, I will drag you by the hair through the village until we find the nearest priest. Do I make myself clear, woman?"

A nod was her only reply. Alastair felt certain he had won that match. He turned and his gaze fell upon her trunk.

"Och, aye, I nearly forgot," he said, turning a glance on her from over his shoulder. "Torquil will be placed in charge of you. I can assure you that his tolerance of you will be far less than mine. Do not test him."

Alastair turned and walked away. He was no fool. The match may have gone to him, but the battle was far from over.

\* \* \*

Ciara felt each nerve in her body scream in protest over what transpired in the hall. She should have fled the keep when she had the chance, her trunk be damned. But, she could not leave behind her mother's gift. It seemed dying wishes were doomed to condemn Ciara, no matter which way she turned.

She paused before the window and stared out at the snow-covered earth. What the devil was she to do? MacDonell would kill her if she dared to deny Valerie's request. And, should she honor her friend's wish, he would kill her soon after.

Her gaze drifted to the ground below and her heart sank. Should she try that means of escape, the distance of the fall would break her neck.

Anger mixed with trepidation in her belly. Her only hope was to get a message to her clan. If any could stop MacDonell in his quest, 'twould be her brothers.

Ciara approached the table and lifted the missive she composed. The words contained spoke of Valerie's death and of her friend's dying request. Her

brothers would come for her once they read this.

Her ploy would work if she could convince MacDonell to dispatch a messenger. Her decision made, she folded the parchment and applied her seal. Surely he would not deny her request.

Her hands trembled as she approached the door. Now was not the time for her courage to take flight and abandon her. She took a deep breath and opened the door.

The grizzled face of Torquil met her gaze. Ciara swallowed hard at the menacing glare fixed on her. With a determination she did not feel, she held out the missive.

"I wish this to be dispatched to my clan."

Torquil grunted and gave her a look she was certain had slew many small children.

"I simply inform them of Valerie's passing."

Dark, narrow eyes slithered over her. She wondered if it would make him feel more at ease to know she disliked him, too.

A disgruntled sigh escaped his whiskered lips. He snatched the missive from her hand and frowned. "I make nae promises."

"I asked for none," Ciara said and pushed the door closed. She fell against the barrier and willed her pulse to calm. MacDonell would dispatch the missive. He had to.

With certainty, she pushed herself away from the door and approached her trunk. From the confines she withdrew strips of paper, smooth twigs of various sizes, and her precious paint. If she set her mind to creating more roses, 'twould ease the burden of her wait.

Ciara assembled her items on the table, then gathered water to mix the paint. She poured a small amount into wooden bowls and set the pitcher aside.

Her door crashed open. Terror sped through her heart. She spun around and stared into the enraged face of MacDonell.

"I warned you not to test my patience, woman!"

The bark of his voice made her jump. She scrambled away from the table and put as much distance as possible between herself and this deadly laird.

"Did you think I would blindly believe your excuse and not read the words?" He lifted the parchment she had given to Torquil. It crumpled beneath his fingers.

Ciara's heart thumped hard against her ribs. In all her life, she had never been more frightened than she was now.

He tossed the missive across the room, his gaze fixed on her. "You leave me no choice, woman. I will have your consent now."

She wished she could meld into the cool stones pressed against her back. Her hands scraped the wall to hide her fear.

MacDonell slowly approached, like a panther moving in for the kill. Ciara slid along the wall until the corner trapped her.

"Consent to be my bride."

His whispered command did naught to conceal the fury in his heart. Unable to reply, Ciara shook her head.

MacDonell paused, as if he did not trust himself. "Verra well, have it your way." He called for Torquil who lurked in the doorway. "Remove her trunk and all things that could possibly give her pleasure."

"Dare not!" she cried and ran for the table.

MacDonell caught her easily around the waist and held her captive in his grasp. "Give your consent and your things will be returned."

Ciara struggled against him. "Go to the devil, MacDonell."

"I feel as if I already have."

Helpless, Ciara watched the giant gather her things from the table and toss them with little care into her trunk. He picked up the flasks that held her dry paint and started to toss them as well.

"Take care," she said, swallowing hard when MacDonell tightened his hold. "The paint is dear to purchase."

Torquil gazed upon them and MacDonell slowly nodded. The silent signal was heeded, for the giant did not spill her things. When the last of her precious items were inside, Torquil closed the lid and, with little effort, hoisted it onto his back and left the room.

MacDonell released her. Ciara stumbled from his grasp and turned her anger on him.

"How dare you treat me like a prisoner? You have no right."

"I have every right. The condition you find yourself in is your doing, not mine." He moved toward the door and withdrew a key. "I will return each day and ask for your consent."

Ciara crossed her arms over her chest. "You will waste your breath."

A brief, tense silence filled the air. Finally, MacDonell sighed. "We shall see whose will is the strongest. You will remain locked in this room with naught but your thoughts for comfort. During the long hours ahead, think of Valerie and all you promised her."

The door closed and the echo of a key turning in the lock rang through the room. Stunned, Ciara lowered herself to a chair and rested her head in her hands.

What was she to do now? Her brothers knew she was here from the message she sent them from France. Yet, as far as they were concerned, she spent the time tending to Valerie.

Tears stung her eyes when she realized no one would come to help her. Beyond the barrier lurked a man determined to carry through his wife's last wish.

To make matters worse, he now wanted her consent. Could the MacDonell



possess honor?

    Ciara closed her eyes and pushed aside her thoughts. Honor among ruffians was laughable. Yet, naught about her present situation deserved merriment.

    Her hell had begun.

## Chapter Eight

Ciara fought the madness that threatened to seep into her brain. A fortnight passed with her pacing the floor, debating her chances of surviving a leap from the windows.

Each day, MacDonell appeared long enough to ask for her consent. Each day, he left without it.

Torquil, her gruff and uncommunicative watchman, brought her meals and stood as silent sentry while she ate. Aside from his moody presence, Ciara remained alone.

In the lonely hours between dusk and dawn, Ciara's thoughts were consumed with Valerie. Loyalty to her friend placed her in this condemnable position. Now, there appeared to be no way out. MacDonell would not admit defeat. Through isolation and the threat of madness, he would gain what he wished.

Ciara lay on her bed and stared into nothingness. Guilt gnawed at her breast until she felt raw. She had made a promise, yet if she honored the vow, the result would be the opposite of what Valerie intended. Ciara would destroy herself and MacDonell.

She closed her eyes and pushed all thoughts from her mind. While the ruse of carrying through Valerie's wish was horrendous, what more could she do? Ciara had no more resistance to offer.

The grate of a key in the lock echoed through the room, yet she did not turn her gaze. 'Twould be MacDonell again.

"Will you give your consent this day?"

His voice filled the room with the question he asked each day of her confinement. Tears stung Ciara's eyes. She no longer had the will to fight him, or Valerie's memory.

MacDonell sighed. "I take your silence as a nay."

"Please," she whispered, her voice weak from lack of use. Her gaze turned to him. He paused at the threshold, his hand poised on the latch. "I can stand no more."

A furrow creased his brow and he stepped into the room. "Do you give your consent?"

Anger at herself for being weak surged through her veins. Despite her efforts, a tear seeped from the corner of her eye.

"Aye," she whispered and turned away from him. She would perish before allowing him to see her weep.

A moment of silence passed. Ciara wished he would depart so she could grieve in seclusion.

"I will send for the priest. We can fulfill our promise to Valerie by dusk."

Ciara nodded. What more could be said? She had tried in vain to make him see reason. Despite her dislike for MacDonell, the damnation of Valerie's dying wish could not be ignored. There was naught left to do but get the matter over with.

"I will return your trunk. Do you need assistance to prepare for this eve?"

His false consideration mocked her and wore her nerves thin. She bit her lip to keep from turning on him. Instead, she shook her head.

He sighed, and through the stillness of the room she heard his steps take him to the door. The click of the latch rang in her ears. Deep in her heart, she felt as if her life had just drawn to a close. She was as good as dead.

Ciara buried her face in her pillows and cried.

\* \* \*

The clan assembled at the given time. Despite the reason for the gathering, the atmosphere of a funeral prevailed.

Alastair couldn't blame them. He held no emotions toward the forthcoming union. Across the room, Ciara stood in a patched gown of worn peach silk. He frowned. Was this the best the woman had to wear on the day of her wedding? An image of her on that first fateful day flashed through his mind. Were rags all she owned? From the weight of her trunk, he presumed her possessions were many, yet she continued to appear in one of three mended gowns.

His gaze moved to her face. She looked bereaved, as if the ceremony she was about to endure was a sentence of death.

Alastair grimaced. 'Twas his fault she looked upon this as such. In an effort to gain his way, he used intimidation to his advantage. After what transpired in the hall a fortnight past, followed by seclusion, 'twas no wonder Ciara gazed upon him with doom in her eyes.

Through the pages of his mind, the unwanted image of a battle in a glen sprang forth. Dread coiled through his veins. Her opinion of him would plummet even more if she ever found out the truth. Perhaps he should tell her.

One look into her troubled eyes and he shoved the thought aside. Time will show what should be said and what truths are best left to their fitful slumber.

"I still say ye should forget the irrational wish of a dying woman and simply toss the viper from the keep."

Pulled from his troublesome thoughts, Alastair looked up at Torquil who now stood beside him. He frowned and shook his head. "I cannot do that. Valerie had her reasons for making the request."

Torquil snorted and scowled across the room to where Ciara stood staring out the window. "Yer love for yer wife must have been deep tae face a future with that lass."

Love? The words shook Alastair to the very core of his soul. Had his clansmen known what he did not until the final breath had passed from Valerie's lungs?

"Love has naught to do with what is about to transpire. A dying wish, as well you know, cannot be denied."

The priest entered the room and took his position before the hearth. 'Twas time to see this through. With a sigh, Alastair approached Ciara and placed a hand on her shoulder. Her gaze met his. In the depths of her eyes he saw surrender.

"'Tis time," he said and moved his fingers to her elbow.

Ciara resisted. Her gaze scanned the room. She moved closer and whispered, "I beg you to reconsider. This is wrong."

Alastair tightened his hold and forced aside the irritation her words evoked. "The priest awaits."

With as much joy as a person facing the gallows, Ciara turned and approached the hearth. Alastair was at a loss how to handle the situation with her. He had never forced himself upon a woman in his life, and he disliked the thought of having to do so now.

Yet Valerie had left him no choice. She knew he would honor her wish, no matter what his feelings. Through aggression, he had gained Ciara's consent.

That, he resolved, was as far as he would carry his threats. When he took Ciara to their bed for the first time, it would be because she wished it.

The ceremony concluded amid silence. How different this service was, compared to his union with Valerie. Then the clan had gathered with wishes of health and happiness falling from their lips. Music had played, and merriment filled the air.

Naught but dread hovered over them now. Alastair turned to the room. Anger climbed up his spine at the forlorn faces that greeted him.

"Do none wish to welcome my bride?"

His question met with a mixture of clearing throats and gazes locked to the floor. A few women murmured a welcome.

Alastair slipped an arm around Ciara's waist and guided her through the room. He paused at each clansman and introduced them to his wife. The looks bestowed upon him told him they would rather stone Ciara than greet her. Yet his position as laird prevented them from acting on their urges.

As the last couple was introduced, the voices of those gathered began to blend. The icy reception had been dispelled and Alastair felt relief that the ordeal was over.

Ciara did not wish to be part of this clan, yet she saw the oath through. Perhaps now she would feel more at ease with him and his clan. Surely she knew that by presenting her at his side, he ensured her safety.

None would dare harm the laird's lady.

\* \* \*

Ciara was going to vomit. Bile rose in her throat and a chilled sweat dampened her brow.

Dear Lord, she had fulfilled Valerie's wish and married a MacDonell. A *MacDonell!* God forgive her.

She closed her eyes and leaned over the basin tucked before the windows of her room. Deep breaths filled her lungs as she fought the urge to spew.

Clearly MacDonell possessed a bit of decorum, for after the nightmare of the ceremony, he escorted her here and left her alone. For that, at least, she could thank him.

She held little memory of what transpired below, save the brush of his hand against her back as he moved her through a clan who would just as soon rejoice at her wake than her wedding. At one point the room began to spin and, despite her intentions, she clutched MacDonell's arm to keep from falling into a swoon.

A sad chuckle escaped her lips at the memory. The concern he pretended almost convinced her he truly cared for her well-being. 'Twas then he brought her above stairs and begged her to rest.

Rest, indeed. Most likely he would return and demand his rights over her body.

Another wave of nausea consumed her. It rose no further than her throat before it subsided, yet it left a bitter taste in her mouth.

She could not think of the night to come. Aside from the kiss she shared with Bryan McDermott so long ago, Ciara had been quite chaste. This was no surprise for, based upon her looks, none would wish to steal a kiss from her.

"'Tis foolishness," she muttered and dared open her eyes. MacDonell was her husband now, and there was naught she could do to prevent him from taking what was rightfully his.

With trembling hands, she poured water into the basin and splashed it over her clammy face. She rinsed her mouth, then buried her face in the softness of a towel.

"Are you feeling better now?"

Ciara froze. Dear Lord, he had come already. If she did not know better, she would think him eager to bed his new wife. Her stomach churned at the thought.

With a swallow for courage, she removed the linen from her face. "Aye," she whispered and twisted the fabric held tightly in her hands.

"Good. Would you care for something to eat?"

Suspicion edged into her brain. He was being nice to her. Why? She turned and immediately wished she hadn't.

One look into his sensuous eyes and Ciara knew she would vomit all over him if he so much as touched her.

He raised his eyebrows. "Well, would you?"

What the devil was he talking about? It took a fair amount of effort on her part to remember he had asked about food.

Ciara avoided his gaze and moved to the table. "Nay. I fear I will disgrace myself should I dare let food pass my lips."

The door closed and her gaze snapped to his. Her heart lodged in her throat as she watched him approach the table.

God, he was handsome. 'Twas a sin for one man to hold so much appeal. Comely or not, it did not ease the tension from her body. Any man who thought to do to her what she imagined a husband does to a wife scared the life out of her.

"Does my presence cause you grief?"

Nervous laughter tumbled from her throat. "That is an understatement, MacDonell." She looked away from his haunting gaze and tried to still the rapid beat of her heart. "This entire situation causes me grief."

His weary sigh drew her gaze. Strong fingers shoved through his tousled hair before his gaze met hers.

"I believe I can dispel some of your unease," he said, and moved around the table toward her.

Ciara's heart increased its rhythm as she backed away from his imposing form.

MacDonell paused and frowned. "Cease backing away from me, woman. I give you my word I will not toss you upon the table and ravish you."

His words halted her steps. They also stirred her anger. 'Twas clear she was too nightmarish for any man to lose his senses over and devour. If he dared speak her thoughts, she would kill him where he stood.

Again he sighed and rubbed his brow. "Listen to me, Ciara, and hear me well." He lowered his hand and stared at her. "I have no intention of bedding you this night."

Ciara's anger hardened her heart. His response should be no surprise. She raised her chin and crossed her arms over her belly.

"'Tis difficult to see yourself wed to a crone, is it not, MacDonell? It must be quite repulsive to envision me in your bed."

A vein in his neck twitched. "Woman, I am trying to be noble. You make the effort difficult."

"Noble?" She nodded. "Aye, I suppose it took a bit of plotting to find a way to tell your bride that she stirs no desire in your veins."

MacDonell shook his head and muttered a curse. "Och, I will have you in my bed. However, addlebrained as I am, I thought it best if we spend time together first to acquaint ourselves with one another before taking that step."

Ciara felt as if she had been punched in the stomach. Did he truly wish to be noble? This had to be a ploy. Without consummation, the union could be challenged.

"Yet, if you prefer a ravishment, I assure you I can comply."

He jerked off the brooch that held his tartan over his shoulder. The metal clattered over the stones and lured Ciara's heart to her throat. He pulled the hem of his shirt from the waist of his kilt and her nerves coiled in her belly.

"Nay!" she said, instantly halting his disrobement. His eyes met hers. Ciara swallowed hard. "That is, I prefer to avoid the issue as long as possible."

Lord, it was difficult to speak with him looking at her like he actually desired her. She averted her gaze and clasped her hands before her.

"I mean to say. . . that is, I have not so much as kissed a man before." She moistened her lips and swallowed hard. "I would favor the wait."

The scuff of his boots moving toward her heightened her fear. She took a step back before forcing herself to stop. If he wanted her dead, he would have carried it through long before now. Something about him assured her he would cause her no harm.

He stopped before her. Ciara stared at his shoes and willed her pulse to cease its erratic beat. His hands moved with care toward her face. Despite her urge to retreat, Ciara stood her ground.

The gentle brush of his fingers against her cheeks sent shivers down her spine. He lifted her head until her eyes met his.

The pads of his thumbs caressed the corners of her mouth, then followed the curve of her lips. Ciara closed her eyes against the sensations such a simple act caused.

His breath brushed her skin moments before his lips met hers. Such tenderness in a man his size and strength surprised her.

The softness of his lips moved over hers. In her breast, her heart beat so fiercely, she was certain he could feel it.

"I will not hurt you," he murmured and eased a hand to the nape of her neck. "I promise."

The next thing Ciara knew, she was pressed against his chest. As if they had a mind of their own, her lips parted.

In the back of her mind, she heard MacDonell groan. The intoxicating sweetness of his mouth invaded her. He tasted like ambrosia and she wanted more. The tip of his tongue touched hers. The jolt of unexpected pleasure it caused made her tremble in his arms.

Her knees threatened to give way and she clutched his shirt for support.

Dear Lord. If she had known this was what it was like to kiss a man, she'd have dared it long before now.

His tongue lured hers to respond. The moment she did, she felt a shudder stab his body. He deepened the kiss and Ciara knew she would swoon.

Through the seductive fog that surrounded her brain, she felt something hard press against her belly. MacDonell must have felt it, too, for he withdrew his lips from hers.

Ciara's eyes drifted open. Why was it so hard to breathe? 'Twas as if MacDonell sucked all the air from her lungs.

His hands rested on her shoulders. They were so very warm, for she felt the heat through the thickness of her clothes. MacDonell expelled a breath through his teeth and raised his gaze to the ceiling. Had she done something wrong?

Doubt pierced her heart and she lowered her eyes. 'Twas then she saw the source of her earlier discomfort. MacDonell was clearly ready to move to the next stage.

"Now, wife, you have been properly kissed by a man."

Her gaze moved to his. A teasing smile curled his lips. Heat rushed to her cheeks. The man knew what she had stared at.

He chuckled, placed a chaste kiss upon her cheek and moved toward the door. "I bid you goodnight, Ciara MacDonell."

The moment the door closed, Ciara staggered and sat upon the bed. She closed her eyes and pressed her cool palms against her heated cheeks.

He had left his mark upon her. She still felt the touch of his lips and the caress of his arms. More alarming than that, the press of his. . . um, manhood against her womb did very strange things to her body. It stirred something in her she had never felt before, or dreamed possible.

Whatever the feeling was, it had to remain unexplored. Now that she was his wife, she could get word to her brothers.

Once they arrived, the marriage could be annulled and both she and MacDonell would be free of Valerie's curse.

The solution seemed simple enough. All Ciara had to do was keep the union chaste. Her eyes drifted open and she glanced toward the door.

She could not allow MacDonell to touch her again. If she failed, she would soon find herself in his bed.

Ciara lay back on her mattress and tried to summon memories of her father. Yet, despite her efforts, the only image that came forth was of MacDonell pulling her into his arms. MacDonell showing her what it was liked to be kissed.

She closed her eyes and tried to push away the feelings the memory of his kiss evoked. Ciara knew then that keeping him at bay would be harder than she ever imagined.



## Chapter Nine

Alastair sat before the hearth in the dining hall. Beyond the windows of the keep, snow descended upon the earth and blocked out the kiss of dawn.

His gaze flicked over the clan gathered for their morning repast, and focused on the doorway. What was keeping Ciara?

The mere thought of his bride sent shivers through his soul. He had a difficult time last eve restraining himself. The simple kiss he bestowed upon her was meant to do no more than gain an ounce of her trust and prove his honor.

His departure haunted him the remainder of the night.

Ciara had unknowingly given him a taste of her passion. Her response to his gentle encouragement was more seductive than he ever dreamed.

Alastair briefly closed his eyes and willed his blood to cool. Walking the keep with an erection stabbing his kilt was one thing he could do without.

He had been celibate for nearly half a year. Now that he had a healthy wife, he longed to ease the discomfort in his loins. But, not until she was ready.

Ciara chose that moment to enter the hall. His gaze slid over her and his tempered passion stirred. A mended gown covered the body he longed to explore. She wore the length of her flame-kissed hair swept up off her shoulders, leaving her neck exposed. The smudges beneath her eyes bespoke the sleep that had eluded her.

Alastair smiled. At least he was not the only one who lay awake all night. Again his gaze moved over her. Without question, once he unleashed her desire, the fire of their union would consume them both.

The murmurs of the clan died away and all eyes turned to Ciara. No doubt she felt the iciness of their welcome. He would put a stop to that.

The scrape of his chair against the floor as he stood drew not only Ciara's gaze, but those of his clan. No words were needed to relay his displeasure. The clansmen avoided his gaze and resumed their meals.

"Come sate your appetite, wife."

The blush that crept into her cheeks tugged a smile to his lips. She avoided his gaze and slowly approached the table.

Each step aroused his imagination. The tips of his fingers ached with the memory of touching her. His arms felt hollow without her in their embrace. Alastair suppressed a shudder and tried to force away his troublesome thoughts.

He failed miserably.

Perhaps the seduction of Ciara wouldn't be as complicated as he assumed. Done properly, he could gain her consent to share his bed before a week lapsed.

Nervous excitement wound through his veins as she drew closer. He felt as impatient as a green lad whenever he looked at her. Yet he was no untried lad, nor a bridegroom for the first time. He was a seasoned warrior, well versed in the ways of pleasuring a woman.

And he longed to pleasure Ciara.

God, she was lovely. The curve of her cheek, the shape of her jaw, the demure glance of her eyes. She was innocence just begging to be probed, and he was the man for the task.

His blood stirred in the pit of his belly. If he allowed his thoughts to stray overmuch, he would be hard-pressed to keep his yearnings at bay.

"I wish you would not call me that," she said as she slid into the chair he held for her.

Alastair had no idea to what she referred. "Call you what?" he asked and seated himself beside her.

His gaze transfixed on her. The tiny lines at the corner of her eyes and the tension in her jaw defined how ill at ease she was. A smile tugged at his lips and he eased an arm across the back of her chair. This was going to be enjoyable.

Ciara glanced at him and frowned. "Wife. It unsettles me to hear the word."

Alastair couldn't help himself. His fingers strayed to the nape of her exposed neck. The moment he touched her, a quiet gasp fell from her lips.

He leaned close to her ear and whispered, "I only speak the truth."

She visibly trembled, yet refused to look his way.

"Cease this at once, MacDonell. Your clan watches."

He turned a brief glance on the room. A few people looked their way, but the moment his gaze met theirs, they turned away.

"Let them. I am not ashamed of my bride." His fingers teased an errant curl. "My only prayer is that you do not resist me overlong."

Ciara shivered and stared across the sea of people before them. "You promised to give me time."

"Och, aye, and I intend to keep my vow." He placed a tender kiss on the sensitive area below her ear and lowered his voice a notch. "*Virtutis gloria merces.*"

She said nothing, but he did not miss the gooseflesh that slid over her skin. Alastair smiled and pressed a kiss against her ear. "'Tis Gaelic. The words mean, glory is the reward of valor."

Ciara scrambled to her feet. Alastair grabbed her arm to keep her still.

"Where are you going, wife? You look quite ravenous to me."

A fidgety scowl turned down the corners of her tempting mouth. She tugged at her arm. "You have succeeded in spoiling my appetite, MacDonell, with this shameful public display."

He released her with a chuckle. "Sit yourself down, woman. I promise not to tease you for the duration of this meal."

"I do not believe you." She gathered her patched skirt in her hands and turned away. Not more than two steps from the chair, she paused and turned a scowl on him. "Do you offer me a challenge with your words, MacDonell?"

His gaze swept over her and he nodded. "Aye. 'Tis a dare I long to win."

Ciara approached his chair and leaned toward his ear. The rush of her breath against his skin sent Alastair's pulse twisting straight through his loins.

"Since you are fluent in Gaelic, MacDonell, you will understand this. *Disce pati.*" She gifted him with a tender smile, then turned on her heel and walked away.

Alastair leaned back in his chair. A slow grin curled his lips.

Ciara told him to learn to suffer.

\* \* \*

The man was an incorrigible lout!

Ciara slammed the door to her room and paced the floor in an effort to dispel her aggravation. For all his noble talk the night before, 'twas plain by his actions in the hall that he meant to lure her with a contest of words.

He had no intention of playing fair.

Her gaze fell to her trunk. She must get word to her brothers, and soon. Not that she felt she would fall for MacDonell's ploy; nay, that was not it at all. 'Twas the man himself she did not trust.

Deftly, she removed the items she needed from her trunk and placed them on the table. Within minutes, she began composing the missive to her brothers.

If MacDonell longed for a battle, then she would not disappoint him. Now that she knew his intent, 'twould be simple to foil his plan.

Ciara finished her message, dusted the ink with sand, then applied her seal. Now all she had to do was convince MacDonell to dispatch it.

Memories of the last missive she attempted to send drifted through her mind. Did she truly wish to test his temper again? She bit her lip and climbed to her feet.

This time would be different, she told herself as she walked toward the door. She had something MacDonell wanted, something he could never have. That, she determined, made all the difference in the world.

Her courage attempted to flee as she descended the stairs. Clansmen occupied the foyer, talking amongst themselves as they donned their cloaks in preparation to face the weather. Among them stood the giant named Torquil. The moment he saw her, his displeasure became clear.

Ciara decided she would rather face MacDonell alone in his chambers than attempt to cross this beast. She ignored his scowl and went in search of her husband. The mental acknowledgment of MacDonell as her mate made her heart trip in her chest. She chastised herself for the errant thought and continued her quest.

In the small room that held his desk, she found her prey seated and staring out at the storm.

Her heart sank. The storm. He would never send a man into such weather simply to deliver a missive. She tucked the parchment in her pocket and turned to leave before he noticed her.

"Did you wish a word with me, wife?"

Irritation pricked her spine. She stopped in the threshold and turned a frown on him. "I asked you not to call me that, MacDonell."

The dusk of his eyes swept over her and a smile tugged at his lips. Damn the man to hell and back. He had no right to look at her like that, no right at all.

"I will make a deal with you, wife. I will cease calling you by that endearing term the moment you call me by my Christian name."

Ciara's jaw fell open. His smile grew and she snapped her mouth closed. She'd rot first.

His laughter stirred the frustration he planted in her veins. "Why did I know you would sooner kiss the devil than speak my name?"

"'Tis plain you are not a dull-witted man, MacDonell," she said and crossed her arms beneath her bosom. "You should rejoice that I do not call you scoundrel."

Again, a nettlesome smile touched his seductive lips. Ciara longed to knock it off his face.

"I dare say I have been called worse." He pushed himself out of his chair and moved toward her.

Despite her irritation, Ciara trembled, powerless to move away from his lethal approach. The tumble of hair over his brow, the enchantment of his eyes, the alluring sway of his body -- he was a difficult man to resist.

Somehow, Ciara found her voice. "I dare say I could think of worse names for you."

Too late she realized the small confines of the room. No one else occupied the space, and she suddenly wished to be in the midst of the entire clan.

MacDonell paused before her, a mere touch away. "Why do you fear me?"

Ciara swallowed hard and, despite her resolve to stand firm, retreated a step. "The sun has yet to rise on the day when I would fear a MacDonell."

One dark eyebrow rose. "Indeed? You truly do not fear me?"

Again, Ciara swallowed and met his bold gaze. "I do not fear you."

"I do not believe you." He lifted a hand to her cheek. The moment his

fingers touched her, Ciara shivered. "I require proof."

The icy feel of terror tickled her spine. She had to think, and fast. "My very presence in this keep is all the proof I plan to give."

His hand slid with forethought along her jaw and eased her toward him. "You challenge me to validate your claim."

Dear Lord, how had she placed herself in such a position? His lips lowered toward hers and, desperate, she turned away.

"MacDonell, release me." Her whisper sounded weak even to her own ears.

"Och, nay," he murmured and turned her face back to his.

Nestled in the dark recesses of his eyes was a force so powerful, it frightened her. What that energy was, she had no idea, but knew that once unleashed, it would destroy her.

The delicate brush of his lips stroked her cheek. Ciara's breath lodged in her throat and her eyes fluttered closed. Her hands covered his wrists.

"MacDonell, please --"

His teeth nibbled her lower lip. The highly seductive gesture stole Ciara's thoughts as well as her words.

The moist tip of his tongue teased her lips. A bolt akin to lightening jolted through her belly. Ciara's knees weakened and she sagged against his hard chest. His arms slipped around her at the same moment he swept into the depths of her mouth.

Stars spun through her brain and the warmth of the moon spiraled through her soul. Heaven spread before her and coaxed her toward its gates.

MacDonell's arms tightened and cradled her firmly against the length of his body. The warmth of his lips strayed to her ear.

"I want you, Ciara," MacDonell groaned.

His words sliced through the fog that surrounded her brain. In the recesses of her mind, she felt his hands move over her body. Her breast filled his palm and the slightest pressure pulled a moan from her heart.

"Methinks ye should move this shameless display upstairs."

MacDonell tensed and lifted his head. "Get the hell out of here, Torquil, before I toss you out!"

Pulled from a place she should never have ventured, Ciara slowly returned to her senses. Mortified, she realized her fingers were tangled in MacDonell's hair.

The disgusted snort of MacDonell's guard nestled shame and embarrassment deep into her heart. She tried to push away from MacDonell, yet he refused to yield.

"If I were ye I would get good and drunk, toss up her skirts tae hide her homely face, take my fill and leave."

Tension of another kind filled MacDonell's limbs. He shoved her aside and lunged for Torquil.

Ciara stumbled and turned in time to see MacDonell plunge a fist into his clansman's face. The giant staggered back, yet did nothing to defend himself.

"Remove yourself from my presence until my temper has had time to cool," MacDonell hissed. "Once that is accomplished, you will beg pardon from me and my lady."

Torquil shot her a loathing glance. Ciara began to tremble. At that moment, she longed for the stones to open and swallow her whole.

The giant rubbed a knuckle over his split lip, turned on his heel and left.

MacDonell expelled a breath through his teeth, shoved his fingers through his hair, and glanced at her. She must have looked a fright, for the transformation that touched his face resembled remorse.

"Ciara, I apologize --"

"There is no need, MacDonell." Ciara lowered her gaze. "I have been called everything from frightful to repulsive. The words no longer offend me."

"They do offend me."

His words drew her gaze. Mirrored in his eyes she saw concern.

"Why? Your man only spoke the truth."

"Nay, he did not."

Again she lowered her gaze. "There is naught wrong with my eyes, MacDonell. Now, stand aside and let me pass."

"Look at me, wife."

Ciara trembled and twined her fingers before her. "I prefer the view of the floor at the moment."

His sigh filled the room. With a gentle nudge, he raised her chin with his fingers.

"Beauty comes in many forms, Ciara. Some possess it where all can admire the creation."

Tears stung her eyes and she turned her head. What was the use of him telling her what she already knew? The stroke of his fingers against her cheek returned her gaze to his.

"Others hide their beauty behind a shield. Only those with the intelligence to explore the hidden are gifted with the prize."

A sad chuckle escaped her lips. "Now you tell me I am a prize? You truly are a master at deception, MacDonell."

She tried to move away. MacDonell refused.

"Honesty is what I speak, Ciara. There is more to you than you care to admit."

Ciara shook her head. "I know I am unsightly, MacDonell, yet I never considered myself a strumpet. I had no intention of kissing you, much less letting things go as far as they did. I am ashamed of myself and my shortcomings."

"Naught that transpired between us in this room was wrong." He sighed and stroked her cheek. "We are married. 'Tis not a sin to be intimate with your spouse."

Aye, it was, yet she could never tell him that. A few moments ago, she had nearly ruined her chance for an annulment.

"I am a mean-spirited woman with the face of a crone. How you managed to kiss me without spewing is beyond my grasp."

"God's blood, Ciara. Cease this torture you inflict upon yourself."

"I am weary, MacDonell. Let me pass."

"Not until you vow never to speak ill of yourself again."

She looked into his eyes and nearly wept. He looked so forthright, she almost believed he cared. "'Twould be a false promise."

MacDonell shook his head. "What sort of people raised you? To place a seed such as this in a young mind, then allow it to fester seems beyond cruel."

Ciara bit her lip to keep her tears at bay. "I was raised in a loving home, MacDonell. My father adored me and I would have died to save my mother." Damn the man. How he must enjoy seeing her so weak! "Never speak ill of them again."

She pushed him aside and fled the room. His call for her to halt went unheeded as she escaped to the sanctuary of her room. Then, and only then, could she vent the grief, fury and shame that raced through her soul.

Ciara ran up the stairs two at a time, not bothering to apologize to clansmen she bumped into along the way. Once she reached her door, Ciara closed the barrier against the world and turned the key in the lock.

The moment the task was complete, she crumpled to the floor. Her tears fell and she did not try to stop them.

She deserved the torment raging through her heart. The spell MacDonell wove was a feeble excuse for her wanton behavior. Husband or not, the man belonged to an enemy clan. Yet, placed alone with him, she fell into his arms and all but begged him to ravage her.

Ciara lay upon the cold stones. Eneas was right; she was a worthless woman who would follow any man who did not look upon her in disgust.

She reached into her pocket for a linen to blow her nose. Her fingers brushed against the missive. Ciara sniffed, pushed herself upright and withdrew the stiff paper. She gazed at the parchment and dread coiled through her heart.

Should she return to her clan, she knew what fate awaited her. Eneas would wed her to MacLean, or the first dilapidated man blind enough to ask. Revulsion rose in her throat. Despite her looks and lack of grace, that was one future she could not abide.

The paper crumpled in her grasp. A fresh wave of misery overwhelmed her. What other choice did she have? To stay here and fulfill Valerie's wish was not feasible.

Ciara tossed the parchment across the room and raised her face to the ceiling.

"Mother, I am so confused." A sob tore from her throat. She lowered her head and wiped a hand over her eyes. "I am at a loss, and I don't know what to do. Please help me."



## Chapter Ten

Alastair tossed against his mattress and tried once more to find a position of comfort. 'Twas a useless task as long as Ciara occupied his mind.

The memory of her passion haunted him. For a brief moment, she had set aside her inhibitions and let herself enjoy his touch.

Then, Torquil shattered the moment and stole the ground Alastair worked so hard to acquire.

The hurt planted in Ciara's eyes by his clansman's thoughtless words stirred his anger.

If Torquil or any other of his clan disapproved of his choice, then so be it. They would have to learn to keep their opinions to themselves. Alastair would be damned if he would allow them to cause his bride harm.

His bride.

The familiar tingle of desire skittered along his spine. Wed he was, and to a lass he longed to teach the art of carnal knowledge. Yet, aside from the spot he occupied, his bed remained cold.

He had to gain Ciara's trust. Nothing short of a complete surrender would suffice. But how? After what transpired earlier, Alastair doubted she would place herself alone with him again.

A frustrated sigh escaped his lips. Again, he tossed within the confines of his bed.

Her taste lingered on his lips. The palm of his hand still felt the weight of her breast. How he had longed to free her bosom and suckle her with the warmth of his mouth. The echo of her passionate cry throbbed through his brain and nestled in his loins.

God's blood! He wanted his wife, and he wanted her now.

Alastair tossed back the covers and pulled on his robe. The cold stones beneath his feet did little to dispel the urgency of his lust.

In the dying glow of a banked fire, the door beckoned him. Across the hall, nestled in a lonely bed, lay his wife.

And he yearned for her to a depth he never knew existed in his soul.

Two paces from the barrier, he paused. Time. He had given a vow to Ciara. Alastair always honored his vows, no matter how bitter they grew.

He closed his eyes and cursed. If this marriage had not followed so closely after Valerie's death, he would have never uttered such a foolish oath.

Alastair turned and approached the windows. The storm had subsided, yet snow continued to fall from the heavens.

*Do you know why she hates MacDonells?*

The echo of Valerie's voice in his mind chilled his soul. Dread tumbled through his gut. Once Ciara discovered he was among the men who slew her father, she would despise him forever.

Did he have to reveal that sin to her? Could he live with himself if he kept silent?

He closed his eyes and rubbed his brow. Why had his father forced him to kill?

*Ye are a MacDonell warrior. Lift yer sword, or I will strike ye down.*

Bitterness rose in Alastair's throat. He fought that day, as he had done before. Yet the difference rested in the foe. In all battles he engaged in prior to then, Alastair had known and agreed with the cause.

Yet, he never found a reason for the massacre of the Mackintosh. 'Twas a secret his father carried with him to his grave.

*My friend has been hurt so much by life, Alastair. You have no idea the depth of her wounds.*

Humility settled in his soul. Aye, he had an idea of all Ciara suffered, and the cause of her grief. The loss of her parents and the torture of her self-image were the roots that needed to be slain. He had been blind to this at first, but now he clearly saw the source of her bane.

*The two of you share the same soul.*

Alastair sighed and lifted his gaze. How very wrong Valerie had been. That was his fault, too. If she had known the truth, she would have seen the error in her judgment.

Movement below captured his gaze. Through the fat flakes of snow that continued to fall, a dark image stumbled through the trees. A pristine blanket silhouetted the vision that moved closer to his keep.

Alarm stirred in his belly. In the midst of the storm, no guards were posted. Any intruder brave enough to face the elements could wander onto his mountain.

Alastair turned away from the opening long enough to grab his boots. With his back pressed against the wall, he tugged on his shoes and continued to watch the progress of the invader.

The cloaked bastard would be at his door in a matter of minutes. Alastair ran from the room and hastened down the stairs. He grabbed his sword from over the mantel and freed it from its sheath.

The echo of the latch chilled his blood. Silently, he crept toward the barrier. Hinges thirsty for a drop of oil groaned through the night. The cloaked figure entered the keep and eased the barrier closed.

Fury licked through Alastair's veins. He shoved the intruder hard against the door. The edge of his sword rested at a lethal angle against the back of the trespasser's neck while his free arm pinned the man's shoulders.

"Identify yourself, or die where you stand."

The figure trembled beneath his grasp and a ragged breath reverberated off the walls.

"I lost my way."

Ciara?

The blind fury of a warrior melted from his veins. Alastair removed his sword and grabbed a handful of wet cloak. He spun the intruder around and ripped away the hood. Blue eyes filled with terror stared up at him.

Shivers consumed her body. 'Twas then he noticed the blue tinge around her lips.

"What the devil were you doing out there, woman?" he snapped. Anger mixed with fear and stirred fury through his veins. "You could have frozen to death."

"I realize that," she whispered, her limbs quaking from the cold. "Now."

Alastair scowled. He propped his sword against the wall, then lifted her into his arms. Christ Almighty. She felt light as a feather, not to mention half frozen. The drenched weight of her cloak penetrated the warmth of his robe and chilled his skin.

"What were you doing out there?" he asked again as he carried her up the stairs.

Ciara trembled and closed her eyes. "I sought Valerie's grave."

Her words chilled his heart. He glanced down at her pale face and frowned. "Why?"

"Guidance," she whispered and opened her eyes.

Alastair didn't pretend to understand. Most likely the walk in a blizzard had made her delirious. For now, he needed to get her warm. He carried her into his chamber.

Ciara's fingers curled in the lush fabric of his robe. "Nay."

At the side of his bed, he paused. "I have no plans to break my vow, but you need to be tended."

She shook her head and her trembling body tensed in his arms. "I cannot rest in Valerie's marriage bed."

Christ. A bed was a bed.

She adjusted her hold on the throat of his robe. Her cold fingers brushed his skin. "Please, take me to my room."

He was in no mood to argue. "I yield this time, woman, only because your escapade has made you senseless."

Some of the tension eased from her body as he carried her across the hall to her room. She continued to shiver, which did nothing at all to ease his mind.

Valerie had trembled like this shortly after they wed. Now she was dead. Alastair would perish before allowing the same fate to befall Ciara.

\* \* \*

Ciara slowly opened her eyes. Comforting warmth seeped into her heart. Her gaze focused on the stones of her chamber. The glow of candles and a low fire in the hearth cast shadows over the walls. The euphoria of peace and safety settled in her veins.

She closed her eyes and snuggled deeper into the mattress. What an odd dream she had! MacDonell scolding her as he stripped away her clothes -- the cold that turned her bones to ice. Then the searing warmth of MacDonell's body pressed against hers. The heat from his muscular legs, strong arms and broad chest melted the chill from her body.

If the vision had not been a dream, Ciara would be mortified.

The click of a latch drifted to her ears. Her eyes inched open. MacDonell entered the chamber, a tray in his hands. Secretly, she watched him push the barrier closed with his foot before placing the tray on the table.

Her gaze slid over him. Dressed in a shirt and kilt, Ciara couldn't help but admire the beauty of the man. He glanced her way, then approached the hearth.

Still she remained silent and observed his every move. His legs drew her gaze as he knelt before the fire. The hem of his kilt slid up his thigh as he adjusted the logs.

Ciara felt heat rise to her cheeks. She should be ashamed of herself, watching him like this. But there was something very appealing about Alastair MacDonell.

He used a poker to slide a brick from the fire. When he climbed to his feet and turned her way, Ciara closed her eyes.

The quiet fall of his steps made her heart thunder against her ribs. At her feet, she felt the covers being moved. She peeked and saw him remove a folded blanket from her bed and return to the hearth.

Ciara frowned. What the devil was he doing? She watched him remove a brick from the blanket and replace it with the one he withdrew from the fire. He returned to the bed and slid the blanket-wrapped stone beneath the covers.

Glorious warmth spread through her. 'Twas then she remembered her walk through the snow. The cold, the wind, the press of a sword against her back.

Ciara trembled. How much of her dream was real?

MacDonell lifted his gaze as he tucked the covers back around her feet. A relieved smile touched his lips.

"'Tis glad I am to see you back among the living." He stepped around the end of the bed and seated himself beside her. One strong hand covered her brow. "The fever is gone." He climbed off the bed and approached the tray.

Ciara's heart dipped to her belly. Nay, the images that flitted across her

mind had to be a dream. Her nudity, his, the bed. Dear Lord, it had to be an illusion.

With dread, Ciara lifted the covers. The erect tips of her breasts stood tall for her inspection. Embarrassment lodged her breath in her throat. "I-I'm naked!"

"As the day you were born."

The covers slid from her grasp. "How -- why -- who --" God, she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answers to the questions that tumbled through her mind.

MacDonell sighed and returned to his seat on the edge of her bed, a bowl cupped in his hands. "I am the one who disrobed you and tucked you in bed, wife." He guided the bowl to her lips. "Now, drink."

Ciara stared at him over the rim and sipped the warm broth. What else had transpired between them while she slept? Her body was sore yet that could be from her trek through hampering snow.

"For some reason, you decided to brave the storm and seek Valerie's grave."

The timbre of his voice twined its way through her soul and coiled around her heart.

Ciara turned away from the bowl and groaned when he tried to lure her into drinking more. She felt as weak as a newborn kitten. MacDonell placed the vessel on the table, then braced his hands on each side of her ribs.

"You scared me, Ciara. Promise that you will never do such a foolish thing again."

"I promise," she whispered, and stared into his eyes. "MacDonell, did you -- did we -- sleep together?"

A slow, teasing smile curled his lips. "Aye, I shared this bed with you."

Ciara tightly shut her eyes. She must have been out of her mind with fever to have allowed such a thing.

The tender brush of his fingers against her cheek lured her gaze. "Sleep is all that transpired. I may be a lowly MacDonell to you, but I do have my pride. I would never dishonor an incoherent woman."

Confusion touched her brain. She was almost afraid to look at him. Would he mock her for her faults?

"Why did you sleep with me? That is, 'tis embarrassing enough to know you saw me unclothed, but why did you share my bed?"

A weary sigh escaped his lips. He withdrew his hand and climbed from the bed.

"Naught I did eased your shivers. Blankets, warmed bricks, they all failed." He shoved a hand through his hair and approached the window. "I was terrified you would catch lung fever and perish as Valerie did." He shook his head. "I could not allow that to happen."

Guilt tore through Ciara's heart. While the thought of lying naked with MacDonell was disturbing, it paled in comparison to the fear he must have suffered during her sleep.

"I am sorry I frightened you. 'Twas not my intent."

Her whisper drew his gaze. Across the distance that separated them, the pain in his eyes was clear.

"Why did you do it, lass? Do you detest me that much, to inflict danger upon yourself?"

Ciara shook her head and tore her gaze from his. "I meant only to pray over Valerie's grave. I needed guidance."

"You sought advice from the dead?"

Tears stung her eyes. "Loved ones live on as long as they are remembered." Her voice cracked and she turned away from his gaze. She would not let him see her cry.

The echo of his sigh tugged at her misery. What had she done to deserve such a fate? She had watched both her parents die, then was condemned to the family enemy by her closest friend. Now, to make matters worse, she found herself concerned over his feelings.

"Ciara, I did not mean to snap or belittle your beliefs."

Tears seeped through her lashes. She adjusted her hand and wiped her eyes. "Nor did I mean to frighten you or harm myself."

"I know."

The hush of his voice lured more grief from her already wounded heart.

The bed sank beneath his weight. Ciara said a silent prayer that he would not touch her. If he did, she would burst into sobs and never stop.

"I am a warrior, Ciara. I have fought in battles where blood flowed around my feet like a river. I stared into countless faces of some of the most feared men in the land."

Ciara dried her eyes and took a deep breath. "Do you boast, MacDonell?"

"Nay."

The palm of his hand curled around her shoulder. Ciara closed her eyes and shuddered.

"I tell you this so you will understand me a little better."

Unable to keep her back to him, Ciara turned and stared up into his handsome face. "What do you wish me to understand?"

A sad smile touched his lips. His fingers stroked her cheek. "All the wars and battles I have faced pale in comparison to the anxiety you placed in my heart these two days past. I have never met a woman like you."

"I see once again I have caused someone pain." Ciara lowered her gaze to his chest. "I am sorry I hurt you."

MacDonell swore and lifted his gaze. "You have missed the issue here,

Ciara. I want you, woman. Do you comprehend that? I want you so badly, I can think of little else. Sleep eludes me, my body screams for you. Christ Almighty, I want to make you my bride in every sense of the word." He leaned over and stared into her eyes. "You want me, too. I dare you to deny it."

A tremor scraped her belly. "I deny nothing, MacDonell. Yet, the thought of sharing myself with you scares me beyond belief. The woman in me longs to surrender. The daughter in me struggles to resist the enemy."

He slowly shook his head. "I am not your enemy, Ciara. I am your husband."

"Under duress --"

"We spoke our vows under pressure to fulfill a dying wish. But now, the feelings you stir in a soul I thought died long ago have naught to do with duress."

He was confusing the hell out of her. Was that his plan, or had he shown her a piece of his heart? Desire from him would be too much to hope for.

MacDonell sighed and placed a chaste kiss upon her brow. "Just consider my words, and think of our future."

He stroked her cheek. The expectation in his eyes made her heart flutter in her breast. What she wouldn't give to believe him! MacDonell or not, if what he said was true, it would be worth the risk to her heart.

"I want to honor the vows we spoke, Ciara. All I ask for is the chance to be a proper husband to you."

He climbed from the bed, gathered the tray, and left. Ciara stared at the closed door, her heart in her throat.

Was this the guidance she had prayed for? Did Valerie and her mother use MacDonell to relay their wishes? Should she dare the risk of falling in love with her husband?

She closed her eyes and prayed whatever decision she reached would be the right one. For as God was her witness, if she surrendered to the enemy and he betrayed her, she would kill him in his bed.

## Chapter Eleven

**"MacDonell!"**

Alastair paused beyond the barrier to Ciara's room. Her mighty roar echoed through the hall and tugged a smile from his soul.

Her door slammed open and he found himself face to face with his wife. Nostrils flared, irritation clear in her marvelous eyes, she planted her hands on her robe-clad hips and scowled.

She was feeling better.

"Where are my clothes?"

"I gave them to the women to use as rags, which is all they were good for."

A vein throbbed in her throat. Fury colored her cheeks and matched the tempting flames of her hair.

"How dare you!" she hissed and shoved him hard in the chest. Alastair didn't budge, which only fueled her temper. "For your information, *husband*, those items you so freely disposed of were all I owned."

Alastair loved seeing her like this, all thistle and thorns. It made his conquest of her so much sweeter.

"You are now my wife, Ciara. I dare say I can afford to clothe you properly."

Hostility flashed across her eyes. "I never asked you for clothes. Nor do I approve of you going through my chest without my permission."

His gaze swept her bosom and again he smiled. Evidently she understood his silent glance, for she turned her back on him. God, she was beautiful when she was angry. And he savored being able to use her words for a completely different meaning.

"You have a lewd mind, MacDonell."

Och, he was truly enjoying this. "I said not a word --"

"There was no need," she spat and turned a glare on him. "Your thoughts were quite clear."

"Apparently not." He stepped into the room. Ciara backed away from him, yet the rage in her eyes told him the dispute was far from over. He looked forward to another victory.

"I've had days to think about what I would like to do with you, ways to create our bairns." With purpose, he let his gaze travel the length of her desirable body before returning to her eyes. "Alas, you are still chaste, so clearly you cannot read all my thoughts."

Color stained her cheeks. "You are incorrigible."

She turned away from him and shoved slender fingers through her wild



tresses. "Can I dare to hope a seamstress is on her way?"

Alastair watched her move to the windows. The sway of her hips and the tilt of her head stirred the lust he found more and more difficult to keep at bay. When she turned heated blue eyes on him, he suddenly remembered her question.

"Nay," he said and averted his gaze. The woman was a temptress, and the wonderful part about it was, she didn't know it. "The snow is too deep for travel."

"What am I to wear, then? I cannot roam the halls dressed in naught but a robe."

If he had his way, she wouldn't need clothes for the remainder of the winter. His gaze slid over her once more. He wondered if she could read his thoughts now? If so, she showed no sign.

Alastair sighed. "There is a storage room on the top floor of the keep. Surely, we can find something for you to wear until the snow melts and passage can be gained to the village."

Ciara's jaw dropped open. "Do you mean to say that I am stranded here until spring?"

Irritation stirred in his belly. "Did you plan to travel somewhere soon, wife?"

Ciara averted her gaze. She stared out the window, her back tense. "Am I your prisoner, MacDonell?"

His aggravation increased a hair. "Do not tempt me, wife."

"As if that were possible," she snorted and glanced at him from over her shoulder. "And I asked you not to call me by that name."

"I gave you my terms on that issue already."

A deflated sigh escaped her lips and she shook her head. "You are one stubborn male."

A frustrated chuckle escaped his lips. "Och, and I suppose you are the most agreeable female who ever drew breath?"

Ciara turned to face him, hands resting on her hips. "I did not say that. Cease putting words in my mouth."

"Cease acting the witch with me, then." Lord, she would try the patience of a saint. "I have done naught to deserve the venomous side of your tongue."

"Nay?" she asked, one delicate eyebrow raised. "You pilfered through my things without my consent --"

"Christ Almighty!" he snapped, his tolerance gone. "The next time I hear the word consent, I want it to be in my chamber!"

The echo of his voice rang in his ears. Across the space that separated them, he saw trepidation touch her eyes. He was sorry he yelled, but Christ's blood, he had been indulgent longer than most husbands would.

"That cannot happen, MacDonell," she whispered and avoided his gaze.

His heart sank in his chest. He had shared a piece of his heart with her the other night, yet still she refused to yield. With all that had passed between them since her arrival, he thought her defenses were weakening.

'Twas a bitter blow to realize he was wrong.

"That chamber is where you laid with Valerie after your marriage."

The forlorn tone of her voice dispelled his anger and allowed promise to seep into his veins once more.

"'Tis also where she died." Ciara shook her head. "As long as you occupy that room, you will do so alone."

A shiver licked his spine and the seed of hope began to grow. "It matters not where I sleep, Ciara. What does matter is that you soon come to me as my wife."

"I do not know if I can, MacDonell. That prospect is not within my power to bestow right now."

But she was thinking about it. That knowledge alone sent his spirits soaring through the roof.

"Fair enough."

She lifted her gaze. "You are not angry again?"

He managed to smile. The woman had no idea how deeply infatuated with her he was. Her mere presence kept him aroused to the point of discomfort most of the time. Alastair was eager to fulfill his vows, yet he intended to honor his word.

"I am not angry."

An oppressed sigh escaped her lips. "'Tis glad I am to hear." She walked toward the door, paused, and looked at him from over her shoulder. "Do you plan to stand there all day, or will you help find me some clothes?"

Ciara gave him more pleasure in that moment than she would ever know.

Unbeknownst to her, she had just surrendered a piece of herself to him.

\* \* \*

"*Merde!*" Ciara swore and tossed aside yet another gown. "Were all the previous owners strumpets?"

Through the dusty silence of the storage room, MacDonell retrieved the discarded gown. "This one belonged to my mother."

Ciara closed her eyes and silently wished the floor would open and swallow her. Yet what was she to think? All the clothes she looked at so far appeared to be cut clear to the navel.

She rubbed her brow and sighed. "MacDonell, I did not mean to insult your mother."

"I know. Here, what is wrong with this one?"

Ciara opened her eyes. Bathed in the glow of a winter sun, MacDonell held a gown of sapphire blue velvet. She had to admit it was a lovely creation, except for one thing.

"Naught is wrong with it if I want to show my bosom to the clan."

He frowned at her and moved across the littered room. "The neckline is modest," he said and pressed the fabric against her body. "And before you tell me it is more suited for a mistress, this was also my mother's."

Ciara sighed and held the gown against her belly. She gazed down at the lush fabric and had to admit it covered more than she first thought.

"Very well, MacDonell, this one will do." She compared the waist of the gown against her own. "I think it will fit."

"Aye, now that you mention it, you are about the same size as my mother." He released his hold on the material and searched through the other gowns discarded on the floor. "Ah, this is the one I had in mind."

MacDonell held before her a beautiful gown of forest-green silk adorned with tiny white stripes.

Ciara remembered tossing it aside, although it did suit her tastes. She folded the blue gown and avoided his gaze. "'Tis fine silk."

"Aye, and it would look wonderful on you."

She shook her head. "That should be worn on special occasions." Ciara held the folded gown before her and stared at the floor. "I would ruin it."

His sigh stirred the stale air. "Ciara, I asked you not to degrade yourself."

The authority of his voice drew her gaze. Why did he care? It made no sense to her.

"You will take this gown and wear it." He held it out to her.

Ciara hesitated. Such finery did not belong on her. The dusk of his eyes swept over her and she knew that he would not yield on this issue. Her fingers took the gown from his grasp.

With a satisfied nod, he turned to survey the room. "In fact, all of these should fit you. I will have them sent to your chamber."

Ciara's heart dipped to her belly. "Och, MacDonell, I could not allow such an extravagance. Two or three are all I need --"

"All of them," he said with a lift of one dark eyebrow. "'Twould be a pity to leave these things up here to collect dust when you could use them."

For the first time in her life, Ciara was speechless. In the past, she felt fortunate to own three serviceable gowns and one presentable enough for unique events. Now MacDonell spread the wealth of a garment kingdom at her feet and ordered her to indulge.

"Words fail me," she whispered. "I have never owned such finery before."

The smile that curled his lips melted into her heart. "It gives me great pleasure to delight you, Ciara."

She had the distinct feeling his words held a double meaning. At this moment, she didn't care. "Then I accept your generosity, Alastair."

The gleam of the devil entered his eyes. "My name sounds sensual when it passes your lips."

Ciara's breath lodged in her throat. Too late, she realized she had called him something other than MacDonell.

"'Twas naught but a slip of the tongue, I assure you."

Clearly, he did not believe her. A wicked grin touched his lips and he moved toward her with the grace of a panther.

"Do not deny me the pleasure of the moment, Ciara."

She backed away from him. "MacDonell, behave yourself." His grin wedged her heart between her ribs.

"I have been a perfect gentleman thus far."

Ciara swallowed hard. "I am not certain about the perfect part, especially now."

If he touched her, Ciara knew there would be no diversion. Worse than that, she wasn't sure she would want to escape.

"Cease eluding me, woman."

His husky whisper just confirmed her thoughts. Ciara shook her head, turned on her heel and ran from the room. At the bottom of the steps that led to her floor, his laughter bounced off the stones.

Ciara paused and struggled to regain her breath. The man enjoyed baiting her. She frowned and hurried down the hall to her room. Once inside, she realized she still held the two gowns.

So MacDonell wished to toy with her, did he? She approached the table and lay the green one over the back of a chair. The blue one would serve her needs. She shook out the gown and held it before her. The cut of the bodice was indecent, yet MacDonell needed to be surpassed at his own game.

A delicious shiver slid down her spine. This time, Ciara would be the victor.

\* \* \*

Alastair stood at the windows of the room he once shared with Valerie and stared out at the black smoke that billowed into the air. It curled through the bare branches of trees and disappeared into the snowy heavens.

His order to have his bed burned met with resistance among the clan. Torquil, recently forgiven for his slander of Ciara, was the strongest opponent. Although the words were never spoken, Alastair knew his friend thought he was bewitched.

Maybe he was. Alastair didn't know for certain. The only thing clear in his mind was removing the past so he could create a future with Ciara. Deep down,

he felt it wasn't the master's space that caused her hesitation, but the furnishings.

With that in mind, he had the room stripped and the mattress burned. Ciara could wander the rooms of the keep and choose what furniture she wished for their chamber. With her touch, the room would be transformed into a place she would feel content to enter.

"I smell smoke."

The sound of Ciara's voice pulled him from his thoughts. His gaze still on the blaze below, he sighed. "Aye."

The hush of her feet moving over the stone floor echoed through the barren room. "MacDonell, what have you done?"

"Naught," he whispered, his gaze still transfixed on the flames.

With his decision, he had buried Valerie once and for all. Aye, she would always occupy a place in his heart. He would always cherish Valerie for gifting him with Ciara.

"Where is the furniture?"

Again he sighed. "I had it removed." He nodded toward the fire. "Methinks you would like to furnish this chamber to suit your taste."

Silence lingered between them. At his back, he felt the brush of her breath against his neck. He closed his eyes. The woman had no idea the power her presence had on him.

"You are burning the bed?"

He swallowed hard, opened his eyes and nodded. "Aye. I will have a new one made for . . ." His voice trailed away. He promised her time. A weary sigh escaped his lips. "'Tis something I felt had to be done."

Again, silence lingered between them. The gentle rush of her breath filled the air.

"I ask your pardon for placing such a burden on you, MacDonell."

The quiet turmoil of her voice tugged at something buried deep in his chest. He frowned and turned. Whatever words he had formed in his mind vanished the moment he saw her.

Sapphire-blue velvet hugged her waist. The velvet bodice circled her ribs and enhanced her silk-encased breasts. The tempting fabric molded to her ripeness and lured his gaze to the swell left exposed.

"I told you the bodice was indecent."

Her timid whisper drew his gaze from her bosom. He stared into her luminous eyes and had a difficult time catching his breath.

The spiraled mass of her flame-kissed hair lay in a disorderly pile atop her head. A simple ribbon of blue that matched the gown was woven through her tresses. Wisps of errant curls framed her face and brushed the ivory of her neck.

The pads of his fingers ached to loosen the ribbon and fill his hands with her wondrous hair. He could almost feel it tangling around his fingers.

Ciara lowered her gaze. "I will go change."

"Dare not," he whispered, halting the steps that would carry her away from him. The tempting blue of her uncertain eyes met his. "You are a vision I fear will vanish if touched."

One trembling hand rose toward her cheek and hovered near her flesh. He wasn't sure he trusted himself enough to stroke her cheek. She looked so damned lovely, he knew one touch would never suffice.

A coy smile traced her lips and a blush crept into her cheeks. She bowed her head and drew in a breath. "'Tis the most pleasant thing anyone has ever said to me."

"'Tis the truth I spoke." His fingers brushed her cheek and his heart dipped to the pit of his belly. With care, he slid his fingers along her flesh and raised her chin. "You are beautiful, Ciara."

Darkness clouded her eyes and she stepped away from his touch. "I almost believed you, MacDonell." Her lip trembled and moisture gathered in her eyes. "I should have known better."

She turned and fled the room before he could blink. What the hell happened? He spoke only the truth. Why did it upset her?

Understanding slowly seeped into his muddled brain.

He dared call her beautiful. 'Twas the fateful word that broke the spell she cast over him. A frustrated sigh escaped his lips. He shoved his fingers through his hair and headed from the room.

Things had gone as far as he planned to allow. Tonight, Ciara would be his.

## Chapter Twelve

Ciara stood at her window and stared into nothingness. 'Twas a foolish notion indeed, to try to best MacDonell. Her feeble attempt to goad his dander turned on her.

Beautiful. MacDonell had called her beautiful. Ciara snorted and shook her head. How could a person tell such a bold-faced lie?

Still, when he first looked away from the window, something in his gaze had made her feel pretty for the first time in her life. 'Twas those damned eyes of his that had the ability to turn her thoughts to mush.

She had played right into his hands. Ciara closed her eyes and tried to blot the memory from her mind. Never again would she place herself in a position to be hurt.

A weary sigh escaped her lips. She turned away from the window and the blanket of darkness beyond, and approached her small table. It felt like midnight instead of the dinner hour. Facing him below in the dining hall was at the bottom of her list of favorite things to do.

The leather hinges on her door groaned. Ciara paused and glanced at the barrier. MacDonell entered the room, a covered tray in his hands. She frowned and avoided his gaze.

"I see your mother failed to teach you how to knock on a closed door." She took a candle and lit another with its flame.

"My mother taught me many things; mainly, how to get my way."

Ciara watched him approach and place the tray on the table. She replaced the taper and frowned. "What is this?"

"A tray," he said before returning to the door.

"I can see that, MacDonell. What is it for?"

The clasp of the door rattled. Ciara's heart lodged in her ribs. Did he lock them in? MacDonell turned back and her breath snagged in her throat.

"'Tis a meal, nothing more." He moved toward her.

Ciara retreated a step. "I am not hungry."

"You will be."

Worry rushed through her veins. The look in his eye, the grace of his body. She didn't like the way the air crackled from his presence. "MacDonell, unlock that door."

A look of indifference touched his face. He moved past her to the window. The latch gave under the pressure of his fingers and the barrier swung open. Cold air rushed into the room.

Suspicion unfurled in her belly like the petals of one of her paper roses. "MacDonell, I said --"

"I heard you." He tossed the key through the opening, then closed the window against the chill. With ease, he turned to face her. "I chose to ignore you."

Dear Lord, this could not be happening. Being trapped in a bed chamber with MacDonell was not what she wanted.

"Pray tell me you have another key," she whispered, her throat dry.

His gaze swept over her and he gently shook his head.

Ciara trembled. What was she going to do? What did he plan to do? She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and turned away from his intense gaze.

"I fail to see why you did that." She averted her gaze and toyed with a bead of wax that clung to the side of the taper.

"'Tis simple."

The hush of his voice sent chills down her spine. She closed her eyes and prayed he would not speak her worst fear.

"I plan to make sweet, passionate love to my wife this night."

Ciara's breath rushed from her lungs. She swayed and clutched the table to keep her balance. This was a very bad dream, one she could not wake from soon enough.

"Dare not presume --"

"I will not force you. There will be no need," he said, his tone low. "By the time dawn colors the sky, you will be mine in every way possible."

Ciara's heart raked her ribs. Her fingers tightened on the table until her knuckles ached. She took a deep breath and slowly opened her eyes.

"You sound sure of yourself, MacDonell," she whispered. Her gaze rested on the tray.

"I am."

The whisper of his steps moving closer increased the rhythm of her heart. In one fluid movement, she moved around the table and jerked back the cover of the tray.

Her belly kissed her spine. Spread before her was an array of sliced cheese, dried fruit, wine and roasted pheasant. Not a blade in sight.

His amused chuckle filled the air. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I took the liberty of removing all sharp objects from the tray."

Ciara's gaze snapped to his. The lethal desire in his eyes scared the life out of her.

"You see, I have not forgotten your earlier threat to turn me into a eunuch." He paused a breath away from her and let his gaze travel the length of her velvet-clad body. "That, my dear, would be a horrible tragedy for both of us."



She bit her lower lip and retreated a step. He did not advance. "I cannot --"

"You forget I have seen you naked, Ciara," he said, not allowing her to finish. He filled a goblet with wine and offered it to her. "Rest assured that you can indeed fulfill your wifely duties."

Ciara sank into a chair. MacDonell placed the goblet on the table and slid it toward her.

"Duty," she whispered, unable to meet his gaze. "Is that truly how you want me?"

"Nay."

His whisper drew her gaze. The emotions mirrored in his eyes were too numerous to identify. Yet the despondence of his voice tugged at her racing heart.

"I grow weary of the chase, Ciara. This event should have occurred the night we wed. If not for my honor, it would have. Our bedding cannot be avoided forever. Without consummation, our marriage is not valid."

Ciara lowered her gaze to the goblet. She thought he had not realized that the marriage could be challenged. 'Twas foolish indeed to believe him so ignorant.

"Ciara, look at me."

She would rather not. Right now, she felt like the village idiot. How keenly she had fallen into his trap! While she thought herself cunning, he was secretly countering her every move.

The brush of his fingers beneath her chin raised her gaze to his. Tolerance shone in the depths of his dark eyes.

"I have made it quite clear how much I want you. The night of our marriage, I tasted your passion. You awoke things in me I have not felt in a very long time."

Tears stung her eyes. He was not being fair to her. Did he forget he was the enemy?

He sighed and removed his touch. "I have been honest about the desire you stir in my blood, yet you refuse to believe me. I must admit I enjoyed baiting you, tempting you into accepting me as your husband. Yet you continue to resist."

Ciara lowered her gaze and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "You promised me time."

"I kept my vow."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Not long enough."

Silence filled the air. Seconds that seemed like hours passed before he spoke. "Again, you underestimate me. I am not so shallow that I do not understand your turmoil." He sighed. "Eternity would not be enough time for you to admit you desire an enemy of your clan."

The truth left a bitter taste in Ciara's mouth. The memory of his kiss flooded

her mind; the feel of his lips, his hands, his body. Yet she would sooner kiss the devil than admit her desire aloud.

Why? For the sake of a clan who would wed her to the first available man they could find. The only difference between that arrangement and her current situation was the choice of groom. Her brothers would pick one from a clan they wished an alliance with, instead of one they believed killed her sire.

And, truly, what proof was there that this branch of the MacDonell clan was even involved? Scottish clans were widespread. Each one had a troublesome section that mirrored those who sought peace.

Ciara lifted her gaze. MacDonell poured himself a goblet of wine and approached the windows.

"I refuse to try to convince you my words are true. Clearly, you will believe ill of me until you draw your final breath. So be it." He lifted the goblet to his lips, drank deeply, then sighed. "We are stranded here until dawn when Torquil brings the key. I suggest you get some sleep."

Ciara fingered the fine goblet before her. The victory was hers. He entered this room determined to have his way, yet she defeated him. While joy should fill her heart, naught but disappointment lingered.

She lifted the goblet to her lips. The sweet flavor slid over her tongue and down her throat. Despite this, bitterness remained in her mouth.

She was a shrew to treat him so badly. If she were honest with herself, she would admit that he had been good to her.

And, she wanted him.

It mattered not if his words of passion, desire and beauty were false. For the first time in her life, she wanted to be with a man.

"MacDonell," she whispered, and turned her gaze on him. He stood rigid before the windows like a lone sentinel on a craggy moor. "I give my consent."

He said not a word, nor gave any indication he heard her words at all. Ciara frowned and climbed to her feet.

"MacDonell, did you hear me?"

She crossed the room, her irritation beginning to grow. Surely he had heard her. This room wasn't that large.

Still, he said not a word nor acknowledged her presence. Ciara poked him in the ribs. "Have you gone suddenly deaf?"

"Have you forgotten my name?"

Aggravation pricked her temper. "You are, without a doubt, the most irrational man I have ever met. I give consent to something I thought we both wanted, and you draw hairs?" She shook her head and turned away. "Forget my words."

Before she could take a step, his hand grasped her arm. She scowled and glanced from his hold to his eyes. "Release me."

With deliberate ease, he shook his head. "You gave your permission."

Ciara tugged on her arm. "I withdraw --"

"You cannot," he said and turned her to face him. "'Tis not allowed."

One look into his dusky eyes and all thoughts of denouncement fled her mind. The wavering light of the candles kissed his cheeks and danced over his lips.

He placed his goblet on the sill of the window, then eased her toward him. She could not look away from him, nor did she want to. He was so very handsome, from the tip of his tousled hair to the bottom of his boots.

With care, he lifted his hands to her hair and loosened the ribbon that held it in place. Ciara closed her eyes. His fingers caressed her scalp, then smoothed through the length of her tresses, spreading the unruly mass around her like a cloak.

Somehow, she managed to find her voice. "'Twas a ridiculous creation."

"Och, nay," he whispered and moved his fingers down her throat. "You looked so lovely before, I thought my heart would burst."

Yearning filled her soul. She opened her eyes and gazed into his. He certainly knew how to make her feel bonny.

The brush of his fingers against her ribs made her tremble. He paused.

"Are you afraid?"

The caress of his whisper speared her heart. Ciara shook her head. "I am terrified."

"There is no need to be. I will not hurt you."

He was lying and she knew it. She heard enough tales from barmaids and ladies alike to know the first time with a man was unpleasant. Still, she did not resist him as he led her toward the bed.

"Toss your inhibitions aside and let yourself feel everything that transpires."

A nervous chuckle escaped her lips. "'Tis what terrifies me."

"'Tis natural to fear the unknown, Ciara, but trust me. Hold onto me. I will not let you stumble on this path we follow."

They paused beside the bed. His deft fingers loosened the ties of her bodice. The brush of his knuckles along the underside of her breasts sent a shiver through her soul. Her nipples hardened and pressed against their silk prison.

Ciara closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The tip of one of his fingers slid between the valley of her breasts and skimmed along her flesh until it reached her shoulder.

The fabric eased away from her heated skin. He moved to the other shoulder and, inch by inch, eased the delicate material down her arms until the cool kiss of dusk touched her bosom.

"Christ Almighty, Ciara. You are exquisite."

His hoarse whisper drew her gaze. The look bestowed upon her melted her previous doubts. He gazed upon her as if she were the most beautiful woman in the world. And, just for tonight, here in this candle-lit room, and with this man, she wanted to believe the lie.

He stepped closer. His lips brushed her bare shoulder as he eased the gown over her hips.

The sensations these simple movements caused were foreign to Ciara, but welcomed. She clutched his powerful arms as the gown slithered to the floor.

MacDonell pulled her into his arms and guided his lips along the curve of her throat. Ciara swayed against him and her heart thudded in rhythm to his. Never in her life had she wanted anything as badly as she wanted her husband.

The warmth of his tongue teased the lobe of her ear. Heat stirred in the pit of her belly and spiraled through her body. Her eyes fluttered closed and she tugged at his shirt. She wanted to feel the press of his naked chest against hers. She wanted to touch him, to please him.

A primitive growl lodged in his throat. She felt the muscles of his back and shoulders constrict as he rid himself of his shirt. His naked flesh smoothed against hers. She had no idea something so simple could bring so much pleasure.

Her hands roamed over the corded muscles of his back. The echo of his breath lodged in his throat as he moved his lips over her cheek. To know that she could tempt a man such as him boosted her courage to continue.

Alastair swept her into his arms and laid with her upon the bed. The touch of his lips against hers increased the urgency that sped through her veins. She parted for his tongue and matched his demanding kiss with one of her own.

His skin was so hot against her sensitive breasts, she thought she would scream from need. She fumbled with his kilt, trying to loosen the damned thing so she could fling it off his body. She wanted no barriers between them at all. Flesh against flesh, heart against heart.

His mouth left hers and forged a path of desire to her bosom. He drew her into his warmth and cupped the weight of her breast in his strong hand.

Ciara 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.

Alastair ripped away the remnants of his clothes and rolled between her legs. His lips returned to hers and his hand moved down her belly to the juncture of her thighs.

The moment he touched her, an eruption of the sweetest kind consumed her body. She shivered beneath him and sucked in her breath.

"God, woman, you are on fire," he growled and pushed his erect manhood into her.

The movement was so swift, her brain barely registered the surrender of her virginity.

Alastair trembled above her, yet his hips remained perfectly still. His lips devoured hers in a hungry kiss.

Ciara's head spun in a flurry of emotions. The kisses they shared before paled in comparison to this mind-numbing burst of pleasure.

Slowly, Alastair raised his head. Ciara'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.

"Make love to me, Alastair." She raised herself and lightly bit his chin. "You kept your promise."

He closed his eyes and adjusted his hips. The feel of him sliding inside her body was more pleasurable than Ciara ever dreamed a joining could be.

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 inside of her was nearly more than she could bear.

Alastair's hand slid down her leg and cupped her knee. He squeezed her thigh, then raised it to rest beside his ribs. When he moved this time, ecstasy swallowed her soul. Her body met his demanding thrusts with a need she never dreamed possible.

Ciara tensed and flowed with the torrent of molten honey that spewed through her veins. A moment later, Alastair groaned and plunged deep inside of her. The eruption of his release speared her womb and melded with the euphoria that surged through her body.

The echo of their labored breaths filled the room. Sweat-slicked limbs tangled together, Alastair rested his head in the hollow of her throat.

Tears stung her eyes and there was naught she could do to stop them. Ciara had never felt so loved, or so special, before in her life. She stroked his damp hair and kissed his temple. Tremors controlled her body and emotions ruled her head. She drew in a ragged breath and kissed him again.

Alastair raised his head. He stared into her eyes and a frown creased his brow. "Did I hurt you?"

An irrational laugh blended with a sob. She shook her head and cradled his face in her hands. "Nay. I just never knew anything so incredible could happen between a man and a woman."

He smiled and lowered his lips to hers. The tenderness of his embrace melted her heart. All too soon, he lifted his head and eased onto his side. He sighed and pulled her into his arms.

"Give me a moment to catch my breath. Then I will take off these damned boots and fetch our food."

Ciara snuggled against his chest and smiled. She realized she still wore her shoes and stockings.

Her lips pressed against the fine silk hair that covered his chest. At this moment, her life was good and she would not trade what transpired here this night for all the beauty in the world.

### Chapter Thirteen

Alastair couldn't take his eyes off Ciara. She slept on her belly, a tangled sheet her only shield. It cradled her bottom and pooled at her waist.

The swaying light of a dozen candles turned her hair russet. Those glorious tresses caressed the curve of her back and spilled to the sheets. Dark lashes rested against the freckled ivory of her cheeks.

She was beautiful.

The memory of their union enticed a smile to his lips. Not in his wildest dreams had he envisioned such a reception. He had told her to toss aside her inhibitions. Clearly, for once, she had listened.

He lifted a strand of her hair and rubbed it between his fingers. The finest silk in the world could not compare to this. He closed his eyes. The tease of such finery moving against his flesh was more seductive than anything he had experienced before.

Ciara murmured in her sleep and lured his gaze. A secret smile touched her lips and Alastair longed to share the mystery that gave her such pleasure.

With care, he trailed the tips of his fingers along the arm curled beneath her pillow. Her sigh encouraged him and stirred his sated passion.

He continued a path along the curve of her delectable neck and tormented the lobe of her ear.

A tender moan escaped her and she moved against her pillow.

Alastair smiled and brushed her cheek with his knuckle. Her slightly parted lips beckoned him. He leaned over and placed a gentle kiss upon them.

The scent of their lovemaking lingered on her flesh and stimulated his banked passion. His lips moved to her upturned cheek, then to the sensitive area below her ear.

The softness of her shoulder brushed his chest. She turned into his waiting arms. The delicate caress of her hands against his cheek sent a shiver through his soul.

"You wish to love me again?" Her sleepy whisper roused his blood.

"Aye," he sighed.

Her eyes fluttered open and a demure smile curled her lips. "I just dreamt you did."

The faint whisper of her hands slid from his face and across his chest. Excitement speared his loins. She seemed in a mood to explore. He was in the mood to oblige.

"Tell me your dream," he whispered, his body heated from her touch.

Her fingers paused against his shoulders and a blush stained her cheeks.

"I cannot."

"Aye, you can." He stroked her velvet ribs. A quick breath filled her lungs. He smiled and trailed a path over her breast and around her stiff nipple. "Did I do this in your dream?"

Her eyes fluttered closed and the rhythm of her heart pulsed through his fingers. The supple brush of her hands lingered on his chest, then stroked his nipples.

"And this?" he queried and held her in his palm. He watched her face, then moved his thumb over her firm peak.

Her seductive moan of pleasure embraced his soul. His arousal grew and pressed against her heated thigh. Through discipline, he forced himself to refrain from a quick sating. He wanted her to enjoy herself, enjoy him.

"Or did I do this?" His lips covered her throbbing crown and enticed it into his mouth. Ciara's fingers slid along his shoulders and her nails curled into his flesh.

Alastair eased his hand along her back and cupped her tantalizing bottom. Ciara curved her spine off the mattress and drew in a breath. He shuddered and rolled to his back, taking her with him.

His wife was more tempting than Cleopatra had been to Marc Antony.

The touch of her lacy curls against his erection fueled his desire. Her lips grazed his brow and the warmth of her hands cupped his face, drawing him to her mouth.

The need she awakened in him shook his heart. He slid his hands up her back, beneath her shield of hair, and cradled her head. Her legs straddled his hips while his tongue plundered her mouth.

God, she tasted so good, felt so good. He could love her forever.

Ciara's palms pressed against his chest. Reluctantly, Alastair loosened his hold. Lust churned in his gut as he watched her ease herself away from him. He couldn't stop touching her. His hands teased her breasts and pulled a groan from her throat.

The moist heat of her desire moved against the length of his erection. Alastair tensed and sucked in a breath. "Dear Lord, Ciara."

Her body stilled and a concerned look creased her brow. "Did I hurt you?"

Och, if she only knew. "You are driving me mad, woman." He guided his hands to her hips and lifted her slightly. "Have pity on me and take me into your sheath."

Their labored breath was the only sound to break the silence. Her eyes met his. "It can be done that way?"



He would have laughed if he hadn't been about to spill. "Aye, and many other positions as well."

Ciara bit her lower lip and dropped her gaze to his erect manhood.

"You can touch it, you know. It will not bite."

Her gaze flashed to his. One hand cupped his shoulder and the other skimmed his belly. The moment her timid fingers touched him, Alastair groaned. He lifted her hips a little higher. The warmth of her gentle fingers navigating him to her core pushed him closer to insanity.

The tip of his arousal contacted the heated velvet of her entrance. Alastair clenched his jaw and lowered her over him. Her sultry passage stretched around him and drew his length completely into her depth.

Her bottom brushed his raised thighs. Christ Almighty, she was torturing him. Despite his urge to toss her onto her back and plunge into her, Alastair squeezed her hips and eased her away. Before he withdrew, he lowered her again.

Ciara trembled above him. Her hands circled his wrists and her thighs constricted against his hips. She repeated the movement and closed her eyes. The sway of her breasts fascinated him and the look of pure ecstasy on her face propelled him closer to the edge.

He would not last long under this exquisite torment. Alastair slid a hand to the juncture of her thighs. His fingers drifted through her soft curls until he found her swollen bud. Ciara gasped and her body tensed.

"More, Ciara. Give me more."

She leaned over him and kissed him with a passion that branded his soul. Alastair could stand no more. He grasped her hips and plunged into her with blinding need. A groan tore her lips from his. Hands braced on his shoulders, she moved in rhythm to his body.

Mindless passion filled the air. Blood surged through his groin. Above him, Ciara cried his name. The rush of her climax lured his seed.

"Jesu," he growled and, with a final thrust, spilled into her. He held her tightly against him, his body a mass of soul-shattering tremors.

Slowly, the room ceased to spin. Ciara fell across his chest, the rasp of her breath melded with his. Alastair cradled her in his arms and kissed the top of her head.

They fit together perfectly, like they had been made for one another. Ciara pressed her lips against his chest and raised her head.

In the depths of her incredible eyes, he saw how much she enjoyed their passion. "That was my dream, Alastair."

He smiled and stroked an errant curl from her cheek. His fingers traced her swollen lips. "Tell me all your dreams and I will make them come true."

Color stained her cheeks and she lowered her lips to his chest. "One dream at a time, husband."

Again he smiled and folded his arms around her. Contentment settled into his bones. Somewhere along the way, he had fallen in love with a red-haired viper named Ciara.

\* \* \*

Dawn colored the sky a glorious shade of pink. The hue spread across the heavens and pierced through the lingering clouds like the fingers of a familiar lover.

Ciara watched the sky through the lone window of her room -- the window Alastair had tossed the key from the night before.

Alastair. He lay beside her in peaceful slumber, his arm draped protectively around her waist. A smile touched her lips at the memory of the night they shared. Although she had slept very little, she felt refreshed. Reborn.

She was now a wife. Alastair's wife.

"Good morrow."

His husky whisper, followed by a tender kiss upon her cheek, pulled Ciara from her thoughts. She turned in his arms. "It is now."

The kiss bestowed upon her released the adoration he planted in her soul last night. In the recesses of her mind, she chastised herself for avoiding him so long.

Alastair raised his head, glanced toward the window and sighed. "I find I desire darkness once more." He looked down at her and smiled. "Your passion has yet to be fully explored."

The seductive tone of his voice stirred in her belly. If what they shared thus far was merely a beginning -- she shivered.

"Are you cold?" he asked and lowered his lips to her throat. "Pray tell me aye, so I can warm you."

Ciara closed her eyes and stroked his back. "Much as I would like to oblige you, I fear my sensitive body would protest."

Alastair raised his head. "I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "Nay, but I am not used to such -- attention."

Longing touched his dark eyes. "I should not have had you twice." He kissed her chin and sighed. "I could not help myself." His lips brushed hers. "If I do not remove myself from this bed, I will be unable to stop myself again."

Pleasure coiled through Ciara's soul. To know that he craved her, desired her, was difficult to comprehend. No one had ever wanted her in this way, nor had she been interested in sharing her body with another.

Until now.

With a groan, Alastair rolled away from her and climbed from the cocoon of their bed. He shivered and rubbed his arms. "'Tis cold as a tomb in here."

His words stilled her heart and images of Valerie flashed through her mind. Had they experienced a similar glimpse of heaven, the same paradise Ciara shared with Alastair last night?

"I need to join the men. Do you wish a tray, or will you accompany me?"

His voice drew her gaze. Kilt draped around his lean hips, he pulled on his crumpled shirt and hid his broad chest from her view.

"A tray will be fine," she whispered and tried to force mental images of him and Valerie from her brain.

He paused before the hearth and glanced at her. "Is something amiss?"

Ciara did her best to smile. "Nay. I am just weary."

Alastair grinned and tossed a log on the dying embers. "With good reason." He shoved his fingers through his hair and gathered his discarded boots. He approached the bed and seated himself beside her. "Stay abed and rest. You will need your strength."

A shiver licked her spine. Those words held promise.

He pulled on his boots, then leaned over and placed a chaste kiss upon her brow. "I will return as soon as I can."

Ciara nodded and watched him approach the door. She frowned. "Has Torquil unlocked it yet?"

He paused, his hand poised on the latch. "It was never locked."

Nay, that could not be. Ciara pushed herself up in the bed, the sheet clutched to her breast. "I saw you lock it."

Alastair shook his head, then looked her way. "You were free to leave any time you wished, Ciara. All you had to do was tell me nay."

Annoyance stirred in her veins. She shoved her hair out of her face and frowned. "You tricked me?"

Again, he shook his head. "I merely made my wishes known. I created an illusion. Departure was always within your grasp."

Ciara grabbed her pillow. "You are an immoral rogue, MacDonell." She flung the pillow toward the door.

Alastair caught it and tossed it back. "Mayhap my tactics were illogical, yet one thing you cannot deny, Ciara." His gaze slid over her and a smile curled his lips. "You said aye."

A growl lodged in her throat. She hurled the pillow at him again. He chuckled and left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Ciara fell onto the mattress and stared at the ceiling. The man was pretentious beyond belief. Anger at herself rose in her breast.

He was right, she had given her consent. She had also failed to attempt to flee. That was not the point, though. Once again, she had played into his hands. His mind must be crafty indeed to constantly turn things to his favor.

That was before he tangled with her.

Somehow, Ciara vowed to find a way to even the score with Alastair MacDonell.

## Chapter Fourteen

"Have ye gone completely daft? How could ye take her maidenhead?"

Alastair glanced up from the papers spread across his desk and frowned at Torquil.

'Twas bad enough tradition demanded the laird's sheets be hung for all to view after a marriage was consummated. However, discretion usually followed. To hear the gossip that surely spread through the clan like fire, and from his most trusted man, irritated Alastair.

He sighed and gathered the documents he examined. "I am quite sane and I took naught from my bride. She gave herself to me of her own accord."

The big man smirked. "I imagine she did."

His words chilled Alastair's blood. The papers slipped from his fingers. "What do you mean by that remark?"

Torquil stepped into the room. "As homely as she is, I imagined she would have given away her chastity long before now." He snorted. "Did ye cut yerself and stain the sheets with yer own blood?"

Dark fury raced through Alastair's veins. Jaw clenched, he climbed to his feet and glared at the man before him. "Retract that insult at once, or die where you stand!"

"I merely repeat what is being whispered through the clan."

Alastair drew his dirk and stepped around the corner of his desk. "Ask my pardon."

Tense silence stilled the air. The beat of Alastair's heart thundered in his ears. Staring into his friend's eyes, Alastair wasn't convinced the man would yield.

Finally, Torquil bowed his head and asked for forgiveness.

A deep breath filled Alastair's lungs. He sheathed his dirk and attempted to shove his anger aside.

"Granted." He moved to the fireplace and, arm resting on the mantel, stared at the smoke-stained stones. "Gather the clan."

A moment of silence passed before Torquil replied. "For what purpose?"

Ire stirred in the pit of Alastair's belly. With care, he turned to face his guard. "Because I command it."

Torquil grimaced. "When do ye order their presence?"

"Vespers."

The big man nodded, then left the room. Anger, hurt and betrayal stabbed Alastair's soul. In the four years he ruled this clan, never had he known them to

turn against his wishes. The men and women always showed him respect and honored his decisions.

His gaze fell to the portrait of Valerie still in its revered place on the mantel. 'Twas her dying wish that flung him and Ciara together. He would be forever grateful for her wisdom. Yet to have his people disgrace his new bride with slander and hearsay twisted his heart.

Ciara's courage could not be ignored. To honor a request that bound her for life to an enemy of her clan was beyond his comprehension. If he'd had a personal quarrel with Mackintosh, if they had truly been enemies, Alastair wasn't certain he would have been as fearless.

For the life of him, he could not understand why everyone around him thought Ciara unattractive. Aye, when he first met her he thought her plain, average, but never unbecoming.

The memory of how she looked last night was emblazoned upon his mind. Her hair, her blush, her complete surrender. Alastair shivered and closed his eyes.

Ciara was, without a doubt, the most beautiful woman he had ever known. The difference was, Ciara hid her loveliness beneath a mass of flame-kissed hair and a sharp tongue. She concealed it deep within her damaged heart, between the cracks of her fractured soul.

Dejection lodged in his chest. His clan was the source of most of her hurt, himself included. A reckless ride through a secluded glen branded the MacDonells enemies to her people.

Alastair opened his eyes and stared into the crackling fire of the hearth. Shame wound through his heart.

Before he claimed her body as his, he should have told her of the occurrences that transpired that day -- events he was forced to participate in or face expulsion from his home.

*I sired nae coward!*

Bitterness rose in Alastair's throat. His father shouted those words for all the clansmen to hear. Bodies littered the glen and blood stained the earth. Alastair still felt the fabric of his tartan being ripped away by his father's gnarled hands. Disgust had shone in the man's eyes.

*Walk among the bodies. Find one that lives.*

Alastair shut his eyes against the memory. His father was a heartless bastard who did not understand how compassion could reside in the heart of a warrior. Forced to walk through blood-soaked heather, the faces of the dead were forever etched upon his soul. His clansmen kicked and jabbed the bodies until they found one who had yet to succumb to death's embrace.

*Kill him!*

Hatred coiled through his veins. Taunted by his father, his gaze blinded

with tears, Alastair drew his blade. Yet he faltered, unable to slay a wounded man.

*Lift yer sword and strike him dead or ye are nae son o' mine!*

Alastair would never forget the man's face. The agony that contorted his features, the plea for mercy in his eyes. Spurred by the mockeries of his father and clansmen, Alastair relented and plunged his sword through the man's heart.

'Twas the only thing that saved Alastair from being driven from the clan tied to a yoke.

And he never learned why the deaths occurred, or the reason for his father's hatred.

A touch brushed his arm. Startled, he turned and stared down into the enchanting eyes of his wife.

"Is something amiss?" she asked, concern in her voice. "You heard not a word I spoke."

He pulled Ciara into his arms and kissed her. How could he tell her of the torture that spun through his soul? She would despise him, abandon him for something over which he had no control. That was one fate Alastair could not face.

"Never leave me," he whispered against her lips. He closed his eyes and held her tightly in his embrace. "Promise to stand by me always."

Desperation pumped through his veins and tangled with his heart. Only Ciara could dispel the anxiety that ruled his brain.

"I promise," she whispered and struggled in his grasp. "You rob me of my breath, husband."

Alastair loosened his hold and eased himself away from her. She drew in a breath and he realized he had crushed her.

Her eyes met his and the worry mirrored in the blue depths tugged at his valor. "What was that about, MacDonell?"

He shoved his fingers through his hair and turned away. How could he tell her the truth about his clan? "I just wanted to kiss my wife. Is that a sin?"

"Nay," she whispered and placed a hand on his arm. "But why did you have me promise never to leave you?" She stepped around him and lured his gaze with a hand on his cheek. "What is amiss?"

Alastair drew a deep breath. "Rumors are spreading through the clan. I have called a meeting."

Ciara stared at him, her body perfectly still. 'Twas then he noticed she wore the emerald gown and had taken care with her appearance. She looked almost as desirable as she had last eve.

"This drivels," she said, her voice soft. "It concerns me?"

All he could do was nod. Hurt flashed across her eyes moments before she turned away.

"Ciara, I will cease the wagging tongues once and for all." He placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her back against his chest. "The clan will accept you this night, or face my wrath."

Head bowed, she remained silent a moment. "What do they say about me, husband?"

The hush of her voice tugged at his heart. He could not tell her all she wished to know, for it would harm her.

Ciara lifted her head and turned to face him. "Do they call me witch and believe I used sorcery to seduce you? Does bile choke them every time I enter their midst?"

"Ciara —"

She shrugged out of his grasp. Tears shone in her eyes like the crown jewels. "Do they think you are condemned, facing life with a woman so repulsive in looks that a seafarer would pass her by?"

His anger tried to surface again. Hearing her words, truth or not, displeased him. "You are not ugly. Do not refer to yourself like that again."

Astonishment touched her face. "I am painfully aware of my looks, MacDonell. Clearly, so is your clan. None speak to me or meet my gaze. The women avoid my presence and tug their bairns inside when I pass for fear my glance will harm them."

"This night I will dispel this treatment. 'Tis unacceptable for my lady." Christ's blood, Ciara was beautiful. Why did others treat her so badly?"

A ragged breath entered her lips and she wiped a hand over her eyes. She shook her head. "I know their opinion of me. 'Tis nothing new to these ears. Over the years I have heard it all." Her gaze sought his. Through a haze of unshed tears, her lip quivered. "Why did you have to make me feel attractive? Such deception only makes the truth hurt all the more."

"I have not deceived you, woman." If he lived to be a hundred, Alastair knew he would never understand women. "In my eyes, you are the most ravishing creature God ever created."

Ciara closed her eyes. "If only that were true."

Anger gripped his heart. He grasped her by the arms and pulled her against him. "Christ's blood, Ciara! Why do you resist me and my words?"

She pressed her hands against his chest. "Why do you tell half-truths?"

"I did not --"

"Aye, you did!" She shoved against him hard and gained her release. Two steps away from him, she paused and glared at him. "Look upon me, husband. My mouth is too big, my nose is too small and my eyes are slanted. If I stay in the sun overlong my skin blotches, then I am called the spawn of the devil." She jerked the ribbons from her hair and pulled the glowing mass over her shoulder. "Then there is this. Hair the color of fire, another mark of Lucifer. My flaws are



many, my attributes few. Valerie was insane to force me upon you."

Alastair clenched his jaw to keep from howling with rage. Starting a fight with Ciara was the last thing he anticipated. Yet now that it began, he would be damned if he would let her win.

"Listen to me well, woman." He took a deep breath and expelled it through his teeth. "Your mouth was made solely for my kisses. Your eyes shimmer with the brilliance of jewels intended to gaze only upon me." He reached out and filled his hand with her glorious hair. "And this," he said, his anger abating, "is more enticing to me than anything that has ever tempted me before. I can assure you that Satan, or the wish of a dying woman, has naught to do with my feelings for you."

Ciara frowned and snatched her hair out of his grasp. "Do not lie to me, MacDonell."

"I am not lying! Christ Almighty, you would try the patience of a saint."

"Then I will not make you suffer a moment longer."

Alastair grabbed her arm to keep her from leaving. "Why do you believe I lie?"

"Because I am not ignorant. Never has a man paid me such praise and meant the words." She tugged at her arm. "What makes things different with you?"

"I am your husband."

She snorted and again tugged on her arm. "Under duress."

"Damnation, Ciara, I love you!"

Beneath his fingers, Ciara went perfectly still. Her eyes met his and silent tears slid over her cheeks. Alastair released her arm.

What had he said?

"That lie hurts me most of all."

She ran from the room in tears. The echo of her sobs sliced through his heart. How many people had lied to her in the past to give her such a great amount of mistrust?

Her tears bespoke her feelings of betrayal. She had not cried when Valerie died, nor during the storms that followed. He had the feeling that she showed her emotions to no one, and would resent him pushing her to such a point.

Alastair shoved his hand through his hair and left the room. Somehow, he would find a way to get through to his clan and his wife. He refused to let anyone hurt Ciara ever again.

## Chapter Fifteen

"Release me, MacDonell!" Ciara grimaced and struggled to free her arm from her husband's firm grasp.

With her emotions still raw from their previous encounter, being in his presence was the last thing she wished.

"I said, release me!" She tried to dig her heels into the slick stones as he pulled her down the stairs.

"Nay," he replied, ignoring her feeble attempts at freedom. "I called a clan meeting. You are now part of this clan."

They reached the bottom and Ciara tripped over the hem of the green gown. She continued to struggle with him all the way down the corridor. He shoved open the doors to the dining chamber and hauled her down the aisle behind him. Embarrassment slid through Ciara's veins. Oh, but MacDonell would pay for this. She would run him through the first opportunity she found.

Their entrance silenced the murmurs of three hundred clansmen crowded into the hall. Animosity splintered the air coupled with looks of utter loathing. Despite the bold Mackintosh blood that flowed through her veins, Ciara trembled. 'Twas clear the entire clan wished her dead.

"MacDonell," she hissed and tried to gain her freedom.

He disregarded her and did not halt his long strides until he reached the front of the room. At the laird's table, Alastair stopped and, Ciara still held in his grasp, turned to face his clan.

"My anger goes beyond words."

The deep timbre of his voice reverberated off the walls. A few clansmen lowered their gazes. Ciara didn't blame them. She felt like running far from this keep and its angry laird.

"Never in my life have I been more ashamed of this clan than I am right now."

The fingers coiled around her wrist eased their pressure slightly. Ciara glanced from the disheartened faces of the clan to her husband.

"I took a wife, yet my own people refuse to accept her. They doubt her purity, shun her for her name, and whisper about her looks."

Ciara's heart spiraled to her feet. He planned to publicly humiliate her.

"I stand here now to tell you all that I am happy with my bride. She has more courage to face this clan than any of you would have if placed in a similar situation."

He was happy with her? And he thought her courageous? This could not be true.

"She was chaste until last night. The rumor that has me placing a wound on myself to stain the sheets is false. I dare any of you to doubt my words, for if you do, I will strip for a complete inspection. If I am challenged, and once the curious are sated, you will be banished from this clan as a traitor."

Heat rushed to Ciara's cheeks. Images of what he looked like nude flashed across her brain. Would he truly be so bold as to disrobe before his entire clan merely to prove her virtue?

Deadly silence filled the room. Glances were exchanged, yet none were courageous enough to challenge him.

Alastair nodded. "Verra well, now I will address my wife's looks."

"MacDonell, nay," Ciara whispered and tugged upon her arm. These were words she preferred not to hear again.

He ignored her. "I find no fault with Ciara's appearance and my opinion is all that should matter. In my eyes, she is beautiful." He shook his head. "I fail to see what you, my clan, finds so offensive."

Ciara ceased her struggles and turned a stunned gaze on him. Beautiful? To speak such words in private could be disputed as a lie. But before the entire clan?

"She has bewitched you, laird. You burned your bed for her." The proclamation came from the back of the hall. Others nodded their agreement.

"I admit to being under her spell. Which man among my clan has not made a fool of himself over a comely lass with star-dusted eyes and berry-red lips?" Silence settled over the room. "I am no different from you. Ciara pleases me. Unlike you, I took the time to know her. If you would bother to speak to her, look upon her with kindness, you would discover the same caring, wonderful woman I found."

Grumbles drifted through the room. Ciara couldn't tell if they believed him or if they longed to stone her.

"What of the bed?" The shouted question raised more voices in the hall.

"Destroying the bed was my decision. Ciara made no mention of this to me at all."

A flurry of murmurs sped through the room. Ciara trembled beneath the harsh glances cast her way. Alastair slipped his hand from her wrist and twined his fingers with hers.

"Remember this." His voice brought an end to the whispers that filled the room. "If you insult my lady, 'tis the same as insulting me."

His words settled over the chamber. Ciara was unsure about the clan, but she was convinced he meant every word. Alastair looked down at her. Her heart fluttered against her ribs and she had the horrible urge to weep with joy.

He told the truth, not only now, but earlier as well. She saw it reflected in his eyes, as clear as a spring day.

"Come, wife," he whispered and turned to leave the chamber.

"She must be a mighty forgiving lass tae give herself tae a clan responsible for the downfall of her sire."

Disbelief washed through Ciara and stilled her heart for one painful moment. Her step faltered and she stood rooted to the floor as firmly as the trees in the forest. Beneath her fingers, she felt Alastair's pulse miss a beat.

Slowly, she turned to face the room. The first person she saw was Torquil. He stood amidst a sea of men, his scowl instilled upon her soul.

"'Twas *this* branch responsible for the deaths in the glen?" Where her voice came from, she had no idea. It sounded weak and distant to her ears.

Torquil lifted one bushy eyebrow. His gaze slid from her to Alastair. "Ye dinna tell her ye rode with the men that day?"

Ciara closed her eyes. Betrayal wedged in her soul. So eager was she for attention, she convinced herself that Alastair could not possibly be involved. A chill settled over her heart. She had been such a fool.

"I had yet to explain that aspect to my wife."

His admission tore through the remnants of her trust. She pulled her fingers from his cold grasp and looked up at him.

He had not lied to her, for she had never asked if he was involved. Yet he knew the truth all along and chose to keep silent.

"How could you, Alastair?"

Misery lined his face. "Ciara, there is much about that night you do not know."

"Aye, like what a thieving bastard her sire was. He brought death upon his own head."

Torquil's words penetrated her brain. She turned to face him. "My father a thief?" She shook her head. "Never."

Disgust curled the man's lips. "Aye, Mackintosh stole hard and heavy from all the neighboring clans. Sheep, cattle, horses. The final insult came when he captured our laird's mistress tae have as his own."

Shock tore through her breast. He was lying. Her father adored her mother. Ciara shook her head and took a step away.

"I see ye doubt my words. Ask any present. Laird Mackintosh abducted Rachel. He subjected her tae unholy sins, sodomy among them, before she died."

"Cease your lies," she whispered and retreated another step. "My sire was incapable of such things."

Torquil moved through the crowd toward her. "Rachel escaped a fortnight later and lived long enough tae name Mackintosh as her tormenter. Yer sire got exactly what he deserved. My only prayer is that he is roasting in the depths of

hell for his actions."

She could no longer hold the tears at bay. They tumbled down her cheeks like the blood of her father. The blood these men had spilled. With a sob, she turned and fled the room.

Lies. They were all lies.

She raced up the stairs, refusing to heed her husband's plea to stop.

Her husband!

Dear God. Was marrying her Alastair's way of seeking revenge on her clan?

She ran into her room and bolted the door. The horror of Torquil's words echoed through her head and shattered her soul.

What was she supposed to do now? God Almighty, she was married to the laird. How could life be so cruel?

\* \* \*

"You bastard!" Alastair struck Torquil hard across the face. "Why was I never told this?"

Torquil staggered, yet did not fall. His stormy gaze settled on Alastair. "Ye ken. 'Twas common knowledge yer sire bedded Rachel."

Alastair's fingers curled into his palm. "Aye, that I knew. But I was unaware of what led to Rachel's death." He took a deep breath. "On his deathbed, father said 'twas sin that killed her. I thought he referred to his affair with her."

"Yer sire went mad the night Rachel vanished. And when she returned and died in his arms, it pushed him over the edge."

Anger and disbelief battled in Alastair's veins. Things made sense to him now. His father's rage and demented demands. The blood thirst that dominated the glen.

His gaze rested on Torquil. "You were my friend. You should have told me."

"I thought ye ken. 'Tis why this clan could not understand yer infatuation with that Mackintosh bitch."

"Silence!" Alastair snapped, his rage still high. He turned to cast a gaze over the clansmen who occupied the room. "Dare not speak ill of my wife again. Ciara is no more responsible for the sins of her sire than I am for mine."

Disbelief lined Torquil's face. "After all this, ye plan tae honor yer marriage?"

"Aye," he said, without hesitation. "Naught has changed. I expect loyalty from each and every one of you. Do anything to harm my lady, and I will kill the offender and display his head on a pike. Dare not test me, for I assure you I mean every word."

Alastair turned on his heel and left the room. He had to speak to Ciara. Fear stirred in the pit of his belly. Somehow, he had to convince her that all he said was true.

He admitted love for the first time in his life. Alastair would be damned if he would lose it now.

\* \* \*

"Open this door, woman!"

Ciara adjusted the ties along the bodice of her gown and ignored her husband's request. His blatant betrayal before his entire clan was one thing she could not forgive.

Fighting the emotions that threatened to overcome her, she smoothed the skirt of the plain gray wool gown she found among the things Alastair had sent to her chamber from the upper room. This was more suited for her than the finery MacDonell had offered. Ciara moved to the small mirror on the mantel and stared at herself.

Ribbons no longer adorned her hair, nor did the blush of happiness stain her cheeks. Her heart was numb, unfeeling. To hear such blasphemy about her sire, coupled with Alastair's lies, slaughtered the hope and happiness she foolishly allowed to rise to the surface.

Her door vibrated from blows, followed by the muffled curses of her husband. Still, she ignored him.

Mindlessly, she gathered her hideous hair and worked it into a knot at the nape of her neck. When she finished, the image that stared back at her was one she was accustomed to seeing.

A drab spinster with nothing at all to look forward to in life.

Ciara lowered her gaze and moved toward her trunk. She placed the last of her belongings inside, then silently closed the lid.

The crack of wood giving way echoed through the room. She turned, hands clasped before her, and waited for her husband's entrance.

Alastair stumbled into the room the moment the barrier gave way. The shattered wood groaned and fell to the floor.

"At least I know you breathe." Hair tousled, face flushed with annoyance, his gaze locked on hers and he rubbed his shoulder. "Why did you disregard me?"

A tiny shiver danced along her spine. She forced it aside and cleared her throat. "I was not ready to face you, MacDonell."

Concern touched his dark eyes and he slowly advanced. "Ciara, I swear to you I had no knowledge of what you learned this eve."

Hurt stabbed her heart. She refused to acknowledge it or look away from

her husband's gaze.

"You knew." A deep breath filled her lungs. "I wish to leave."

His gaze darted to the trunk behind her. "Do you promise things freely with no intention of honoring them?"

Ciara shook her head. "Nay."

Confusion touched his brow and clouded his eyes. "Then, why --"

"I cannot stay where I am detested and misled." She lowered her gaze. "I want to go home."

"You are home." The shuffle of his feet moving over the stones made her tremble. "You are mine now, Ciara."

She shook her head in denial. Emotion attempted to stir in her breast. She tried valiantly to bury it.

"You did your duty, MacDonell; we both did. Our union was a grievous error, yet it can be corrected."

"What transpired between us last night was not a mistake!" His anger drew her gaze. "I will not let you leave."

"You have no choice."

The emotions that crossed his face frightened her. She retreated a step, only to bump into her trunk.

"You are the one with no choice, woman!" He pulled her against his chest. Ciara did not resist. She stared into his troubled eyes and tried to remain impassive. "You are my wife. I refuse to let you go."

Ciara's heart thudded against her breast. "Your clan will stone me for the lies they believe about my sire."

Alastair shook his head. "They will not harm you."

"I would if I were in their place."

The rage that funneled through his veins showed in his eyes and his embrace. "I vow to look into this matter and discover the truth. Will you help me?"

Her voice deserted her. Compliance was the last thing she expected, or wanted, from him. She shook her head.

"If you are convinced Torquil's words are false, why deny me?"

"Lies or not, one thing remains true, MacDonell, and always will." She took a deep breath and disengaged herself from his grasp. "You rode with them. From the moment I arrived, you knew that you participated in the slaughter of my sire and his men, yet you said not a word."

Torment consumed his features. "I cannot deny that."

Her hands trembled and she turned away from his sorrowful gaze.

"So much makes sense to me now. Our consummation was a form of retaliation. However, the crown jewel in your revenge was making me believe you desired a crone."

"Ciara, you are so terribly wrong."

She closed her eyes against the feigned pain in his voice. He placed his hands upon her shoulders. Ciara recoiled and turned a gaze on him.

"Do not touch me. I cannot tolerate that now."

A disgruntled sigh escaped his lips and he shoved his fingers through his hair. "Everything that transpired in this room last night was the truth."

Ciara shook her head. "You deceived me."

"Aye, I did, yet I want to tell you the rest of the story. Will you listen?"

She turned her back on him. "Do I have a choice?"

Silence lingered between them. Finally, MacDonell spoke. "Ciara, I was absent most of the year your sire perished. I returned the day my sire rode out. He ordered me to accompany him in battle, although I was unaware of the cause. My queries went unanswered. When I refused to kill, my father labeled me a coward."

*I am not a coward!*

The memory of Alastair's declaration shortly before Valerie died spiraled through Ciara's soul.

"After the brunt of the battle was over, he stripped me of my tartan and a search among the bodies revealed a man who had yet to perish." He turned her and raised her chin with his fingers. "Look at me, Ciara. I want you to know I speak the truth."

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. Etched upon his face were the horrors he endured five years past. Empathy tried to coil around her heart.

"I was ordered to kill the man, or be banished from my clan and my home. Naught I did could sway my father from his decision." He lowered his gaze a moment, then whispered, "The clan backed my father and forced me into a quandary. I am ashamed to say I killed a wounded man."

Tears filled Ciara's eyes. How was she to know he did not continue with his lies? Had every moment that passed since they met been filled with deception?

"I cannot expect you to forgive me for hiding this from you. My only excuse is, I was so captivated by you that I did not want to risk hurting you."

"Yet you have done just that, MacDonell." So many thoughts tumbled through her head, Ciara had a difficult time thinking. "You have shattered the fragile bonds of trust so newly-formed between us."

His fingers brushed her cheek. "I refuse to let you leave me, Ciara. Should you dare try such a thing, I will come for you."

"Why?" she whispered, her heart filled with uncertainty. "The wishes of your clan are clear. They will never accept me."

"I want you here because I love you."

"Dare not lie --"

"'Tis the truth," he said, not allowing her to finish. "Accept it or not, the



choice is yours. Help me learn the truth about what happened to Rachel. 'Tis the only way for both of us to survive."

She wanted to believe him. If she persisted with her plan to leave and he followed, bloodshed would occur the moment her brothers spotted a MacDonell on their land.

Could she live with his death upon her hands?

She turned away from him and approached the window. The reflection that stared back at her was of a woman who was slain last night, a lonely spinster who no longer had a right to exist.

Her gaze moved to Alastair's image. The memory of their night together played across her mind. His tenderness, his whisper, his touch.

'Twas then she knew she could not leave. She saw the truth behind his words etched upon his face. He would indeed follow should she depart. That was one bloody battle she could thwart.

A shaky breath filled her lungs and she lowered her gaze from the reflection in the glass. "I will stay."

Alastair moved behind her. The moment he touched her, she spun away from him.

"Dare not presume to touch me, MacDonell," she said, her voice choked with emotion.

Confusion touched his eyes. "I do not understand. You consented to stay-"

"To avoid having your death on my soul." She stepped away from him and tried to still her trembling hands. "My brothers would butcher you the moment you appeared on our land."

Hurt flashed across his eyes. "Ciara -- "

"I will stay, yet we will occupy this keep as husband and wife in name only. We will not share a room, or a bed -- "

"Like hell!"

He reached for her. Ciara eluded his grasp. "'Tis my terms, MacDonell. Accept them now, or arrange to have my trunk taken to the dock."

His strong jaw tensed with unleashed rage and the fingers she eluded curled into the palms of his calloused hands.

"I will not lose this war with you, wife."

The hush of his voice slid through her soul and tugged at the memories buried deep in her heart.

"Nor will I, husband."

Tense silence filled the air between them. Finally, MacDonell lowered his gaze and approached the broken door. He paused and glanced at her from over his shoulder.

"I give you fair warning, Ciara. I do not intend to play fair in this game of yours. Once I prove to you my words are true, I will claim you again."

He stepped across the shattered wood and left her alone.

Ciara managed to make it to a chair before she collapsed. This would be the most difficult battle of her life.

She closed her eyes, bowed her head and prayed for guidance. The ugly truth, countered by his words of explanation, battled with each other in her heart. She had suffered enough heartache to last a lifetime. Was it too much to ask for one act of kindness?

If, in the end, she could not forgive Alastair, Ciara prayed for a quick and merciful death.

## Chapter Sixteen

Alastair rolled over in bed and reached for Ciara. Cold sheets were all that greeted him. Alarm shook his heart and opened his eyes.

She was gone, no longer at his side. Through betrayal, he had lost the one woman remarkable enough to heal his soul and show him the true meaning of love. And he was powerless to do anything about it. Her trust could not be regained overnight.

With a sigh, he tossed back the covers and climbed out of bed. He tugged on his robe and moved to stare out the lone window of his small room.

Ciara had yet to furnish the chamber Valerie died in, a room he had hoped to share with his bride during their lifetime.

*Do you know why she hates MacDonells?*

Valerie's ghostly voice echoed through his brain. Alastair closed his eyes and prayed the pain in his heart would ease. He had unwittingly hurt Ciara. If he had known that one day their paths would cross, that she would be his bride and fill him with joy, perhaps he could have dissuaded his sire in the glen.

He opened his eyes and stared into the inky darkness beyond his room.

The battle, the horses, the blood. 'Twas part of his past, and no amount of regret could change the events that occurred that fateful eve. Mayhap it would have been better had he disobeyed his sire and been banished from the clan. Then he would not have killed Valerie. He would not have met Ciara.

Alastair turned away from the window and approached the door. Sleep would not return with ease this night. He stepped into the hall and headed for the stairs.

As he neared the broken timber that was once Ciara's door, Alastair paused. The faint light of candles flickered through the shattered wood and beckoned him forth.

At the threshold to a room where just an evening past he had found exquisite pleasure, Alastair stood and watched his bride.

Ciara sat at the table, her back toward him. A collection of candles flickered through the darkness. The uneven glow of the flames kissed the russet length of her unbound hair that cascaded down her back and brushed her velvet-clad hips.

Lord, she was lovely. Should he dare speak to her? He glanced to the floor and summoned the courage to face his wife. He told her he did not plan to play fair. The lass could not say she had not been warned.

"Could you not sleep?"

Ciara paused, yet kept her back to him. "What are you doing here, MacDonell?"

"An empty bed woke me." Alastair tossed caution to the wind and approached the table.

Spread across the polished wood lay an array of paper strips, painted a variety of colors. Smooth twigs rested near her slender fingers and awaited use. Nestled on the table before her was a perfect white rose.

Alastair paused behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. She tensed but did not pull away. "This seems an odd time to indulge in your craft."

Ciara shrugged. "When my thoughts are troubled, this soothes me."

Tormented thoughts. Shivers slid over his skin. He was the cause of her sleeplessness.

"What is it you do?" he asked and leaned over so his cheek brushed hers.

Her hands trembled as she removed a tightly wound piece of paper from around a twig the size of his little finger. "This will be the center of a rose."

With fascination he watched her shape the paper into a bud. She curled the edge of another strip around a slightly larger twig, then affixed it to the end of the bud to form a perfect petal.

"Where did you learn this?" he whispered and moved his hands gently down her arms.

Ciara stiffened for a moment, then continued with the next petal. "My mother was French, and had a fondness for roses. They were displayed in her family silver and her embroidery. I experimented with different things until I could duplicate the beauty of nature. That way, my mother could have her roses all year."

His fingers curled around her wrists, yet did not hamper her movements. 'Twas strange, but he felt as if he were helping her create these magnificent blooms.

Another strip of painted paper slid between her fingers. She wound it around a twig and glanced at him. "'Tis tiresome to watch. Pray, leave my chamber and return to your bed."

Infatuation coiled in his belly. "Och, nay," he murmured and pressed his lips against her cheek. "'Tis seductive to watch you like this."

Ciara quivered and the paper tore. "Your tactics will not work this night, MacDonell."

He smiled and moved his arms around her. "I wish nothing more than to watch my wife perform an art."

The twig fell against the polished table. Ciara cursed and reached for it again.

Alastair kissed the curve of her neck.

"*Merde!* Will you cease this?" Ciara shoved away from his embrace and

stood so abruptly she overturned her chair. Nestled in her eyes he saw the torment that struggled for dominance in her heart. "You are violating my terms."

He nodded. "I made myself quite clear, wife. I do not plan to play fair."

Ciara fixed him with a narrow look and took a step away. "You betrayed me, MacDonell. I will not be seduced by you again."

Lord, perhaps he could find some enjoyment from this damnable situation. Memories of the bantering that followed their marriage flitted across his mind.

Alastair smiled. "I accept your challenge."

"MacDonell," she whispered and retreated another step. "Pray leave this room."

He studied her a moment, fighting the urge to drag her into his arms and kiss her breathless. At this point, that would gain him resistance and that was the last thing he wanted from his beautiful Ciara.

"Verra well," he whispered and gave her a short bow. "I wish you peaceful slumber, wife." He turned on his heel and walked away.

In the dim light of the corridor, he paused and smiled back at the shattered door. He would win this match, and soon.

No more secrets remained between them. Now that she knew the truth about him, about his clan, nothing else in the world could come between them.

Once he regained her trust and her love, he would cherish it, and her, for the remainder of his days. Never again would he do something so dire that Ciara would be tempted to leave him.

He returned to his room and climbed into bed. Ciara. They belonged together. He would kill anyone who dared come between them.

\* \* \*

"Invaders approach."

Ciara's heart dipped to her belly. She raised her head and looked at Alastair seated at his desk. His gaze remained on Torquil, who blocked the threshold.

"How many?"

The giant scowled and approached the windows. "Fifty, maybe more. My numbers are poor."

Alastair frowned and turned to her. "Go to your room and remain there until I come for you."

"Who would arrive in such deep snow?" she asked and set aside her sewing.

Torquil grunted. "I may be slow at numbers, but plaids I ken." His dark, narrow eyes flashed to her. "'Tis a mixture of Mackintosh and MacLean tartans that contaminate our soil."

"MacLean? Why would that slimy bastard be in their company?"

Ciara's hands trembled as she stood. She knew why. Clearly, Eneas intended to force her into compliance.

Torquil shrugged. "Who kens the likes of him?"

Alastair removed his blade from its resting place over the hearth. "Ciara, do as I say. I will handle this."

Anger stirred in her veins. "What makes you think there is something to handle?"

Her words halted his movements and drew his gaze. Ciara swallowed hard, yet refused to allow him to intimidate her.

"Woman, get yourself above stairs now, or so help me I will drag you there by the hair."

"Nay. I refuse to allow you or anyone else in this clan to harm my family." She held his gaze while inside, her stomach cringed. Clearly, her husband was not used to being defied. "Three years have passed since I last saw my siblings. Naught is wrong with them paying me a visit."

Alastair frowned and glanced at Torquil. "Prepare the men," he said, not continuing until the giant left the room. Once they were alone, he slowly approached.

"Dare not defy me in the presence of others. I bade you to your chamber for your protection. This could be a ploy from mine enemies."

"It could also be a simple wish for brothers to see their sister."

Aggravation darkened his eyes. "No one climbs my mountain without permission."

"Och, off we go again on the idealism that you own this mountain."

"I do!"

"Nevertheless," Ciara said, trying hard to keep her temper at bay. "Those are my brothers out there. As your wife, I expect them to be made welcome."

Alastair stopped before her. Flecks of gold melded with the dark brown of his eyes. He did indeed look like a panther ready to strike.

"I anxiously await the day when you are truly my wife once more."

Ciara's belly kissed her spine. She swallowed hard and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Do not attempt to change the topic to your favor, MacDonell."

The seductive curve of his lips made her insides quiver. "Verra well. Were you not taught that wives are to be submissive to their husbands?"

God help her, but she wanted to hit him right in the middle of his arrogant face. Her fingers curled against her palm to suppress the urge.

"If you think I will blindly obey your every wish, you are sadly mistaken. If this is what you seek, find yourself a dog."

One dark eyebrow rose and disappeared beneath the tumble of his hair. "At least a dog would know its place."

Fury licked through Ciara's veins. She clenched her jaw and moved to strike him. He caught her wrist with ease, his eyes deadly.

"Do not defy me on this, Ciara." He released her and nodded toward the doorway. "Go."

The words Ciara longed to call him tumbled unspoken through her brain. She would rather kiss the devil than admit defeat.

Images of MacLean flashed through her mind. The man was lewd, to say the least. How Eneas managed to forge a friendship with the man was unknown to her. If eternity passed before she laid eyes on MacLean again, 'twould be too soon.

Perhaps it was best to let Alastair have his way, just this once.

"Verra well," she said with a lift of her chin. "I will go this time. However, expect defiance in the future."

"I welcome your fire when we are alone."

The smug smile of victory that crossed his lips fueled her temper. She turned on her heel and walked away, lest she give into her urges and strike him down.

The arrogant cuss. She may have conceded this battle, yet in the end, she would win the war.

\* \* \*

Alastair sat astride his mount, his gaze locked on the line of men forging a path up his mountain. Through the thick frost of his breath, his attention focused on just one man.

Fergus MacLean.

Disgust tightened Alastair's fingers around his reins. There were very few men Alastair truly despised. MacLean was one of them. The stories told about the decrepit laird made his skin crawl.

The bastard best have a damned good reason for trespassing on his mountain.

The warriors of MacDonell stood at the ready. Four dozen rode mounts. The remaining men stood in knee-deep snow, their bodies layered in fur. Leather shields, broadswords and bows weighted them down. Yet, despite the elements, Alastair knew any one of them could out run a deer.

"How close tae the keep do ye plan tae let them get?"

Torquil's words drew Alastair from his thoughts. "We are a safe distance. Let them wear out their horses and save ours."

"I dislike this, my friend." Torquil grimaced and rubbed a hand over his bearded face. "Mackintosh, I can understand. But what the devil is MacLean doing here?"

Alastair nodded toward the gap in the trees. "We are about to find out."

Twenty feet before him, the men drew in their reins. Alastair slid his gaze over the leader of the group. The man wore the plaid of Mackintosh. From his badge, Alastair knew this was the laird. Neatly-groomed burnished hair lay against his shoulder. Eyes as blue as the heavens surveyed him.

"I come in search of Ciara Mackintosh," the man said, his hand resting on his pommel.

Disdain coiled through Alastair's belly. Something about the man, the way he carried himself, the superior lift of his nose, irritated Alastair to no end. "Identify yourself."

A smirk curled the man's thin lips. "Eneas Mackintosh." With a docile nod toward his shoulder, he continued. "My brother attends me as well."

Alastair's gaze flashed to MacLean. "What is this one doing in your company?"

Eneas frowned. "That concerns you not." He adjusted himself in his saddle. "Now, do you take me to my sister or do we draw swords?"

This man was begging to be killed. Alastair nudged his mount forward a few paces.

"All who trespass upon my land concern me, Mackintosh." Again his gaze slid over MacLean. "If you desire entrance, explain his presence."

MacLean's lips parted to reveal a mouth filled with rotten teeth. Beneath a shield of greasy hair, eyes as narrow as a snake's assessed Alastair. "Ciara is my betrothed."

Revulsion stirred in Alastair's heart. Clearly, her brothers thought very little of her to even entertain the idea of matching Ciara to MacLean. 'Twas difficult indeed to hide his disgust.

"I find that impossible to believe," Alastair said, barely noticing when Torquil drew alongside.

Eneas sighed. "It matters not what you care to believe, MacDonell. I came to remove my sister from this keep so she can honor her betrothal."

Alastair cupped his hand over the hilt of his sword. The touch of cool metal did little to dispel his anger.

"'Tis a shame you wasted a journey. Ciara is already wed, to me."

"You lying bastard!" Eneas hissed, his eyes dark with rage. "Ciara would never defy me. Nor would she wed into a clan who murdered our sire."

"Your opinion means naught to me, Mackintosh. I have the papers to prove my words." Alastair tightened his hold around his sword. "Ciara is mine."

Fury etched deep lines across the other man's face. "I demand to see my sister at once!"

What a fool this man was. 'Twas cocky, indeed, to ride onto MacDonell mountain uninvited, much less in the company of a man rumored to favor sheep



in his bed. 'Twas bolder still to make demands on him.

"If you wish to live to see the sunset, I suggest you adjust your tone and consider your words with care." Alastair kept a keen eye on Mackintosh. If he thought Ciara would not hate him, he would kill the bastard now and do the world a favor.

From behind Eneas, another man wrapped in Mackintosh plaid moved his mount forward. 'Twas clear they were brothers. Yet where Eneas irritated Alastair, this one did not.

"I am Ninian, another of Ciara's brothers. Our journey has been long and I would appreciate a chance to speak with my sister and rest my mount."

At least this one had more style and sense than his elder sibling. Still, Alastair longed to banish them from his mountain. Despite his wishes, he knew he could not do such a thing. Ciara would never forgive him.

"Do you swear to keep that lecher and your laird under control?" Alastair asked.

Ninian nodded. "I do."

Despite his instincts, Alastair believed him. Eneas may be the laird, but 'twas plain he was not the wisest choice for the position.

Alastair sighed. "Verra well. My men will escort you to our keep. They will relieve you of your weapons for the short duration of your stay."

He turned his mount away and, with Torquil by his side, rode toward the keep.

"I will not pretend tae care for yer bride," Torquil said with a backward glance at the intruders. "Yet nae lass deserves tae have MacLean forced upon her."

Alastair grimaced. "The old bastard is part devil to have lived so long. He has buried more wives than the king has bedded whores."

"Aye, and yer lady was almost one of them."

Chills danced along Alastair's spine. Just the thought of Ciara at the mercy of a debaucher froze his blood.

If MacLean so much as dared a look at his bride, or any other lass in his realm, Alastair would kill him.

## Chapter Seventeen

Ciara paced the corridor outside her room. Her gaze continued to stray to the glow of torches near the stairs.

How long would MacDonell leave her here? From the voices that drifted up the staircase, she imagined several more hours would pass before she was allowed to see her brothers.

Curiosity melded with impatience. To allow him to order her to her chamber was one thing. To be forgotten was quite another.

With resolve, Ciara approached the stairs. She would show MacDonell that he could not boss her about.

Each step grew slower and, mid-way down the spiral she stopped, her back pressed against the wall. From the sounds of it, the men were about to exchange blows.

"The betrothal papers promising Ciara to MacLean were signed over a year ago!"

Eneas' heated voice sent chills down her spine. Had he entered into an agreement with MacLean despite her wishes? Aye, 'twould be just like him.

"I could care less if the papers were signed the day of her birth. Ciara is mine, and I will kill anyone who tries to take her from me."

Ciara's breath caught in her throat. He meant his words. And by the tone of his voice, she knew he was very angry. A tense silence filled the air. She dared to descend another step.

"The king will see things differently."

Dread coiled through Ciara's belly and froze her to the stones beneath her feet.

MacLean.

The man enticed both hatred and fear in her veins. She didn't understand why her brother would agree to an alliance with such a deplorable lecher.

"I need little encouragement to mount your head on a pike."

Ciara wound her fingers in her skirt and edged her way up a step. Now was not the time to defy her husband. He was furious enough without being tested further.

"To begin with, Ciara and I wed to honor the last wish of my late wife."

"Aye, we heard of Valerie's passing."

At least Eneas could muster an ounce of sympathy for the loss of her friend.

"Dying wishes are —"

"Secondly," Alastair snapped, not allowing MacLean to finish. "My heir grows in her womb as we speak. Those two reasons alone, you contemptible bastard, will hold more merit with the king than your broken betrothal."

Shock speared Ciara's heart. Her pulse thundered in her ears. What if his boast was true? Dear Lord, she would have to find the courage to forgive him if she discovered herself with child.

"You bedded her?"

Ciara lifted her gaze toward the heavens and shook her head. Leave it to Eneas to disbelieve anyone could desire her.

Alastair's chuckle reached her ears, yet she knew by the tone he was not amused. "Get the hell out of my keep before I toss you out."

"MacDonell, please, I for one am elated Ciara is not doomed to MacLean. I would like to see her before I depart."

A smile touched her lips. Ninian. Always her champion.

"You approve of her being with MacDonell? Must I remind you, he is our enemy?"

Ciara retreated another step. Eneas would not admit defeat with ease.

"Must I remind you Ciara is now part of this clan? Offend the laird, and you ruin all possibilities of seeing her again."

Ninian was irritated also. 'Twas clear by the hush of his voice and the clip of his words. The journey must have tired him, for Ninian was difficult to provoke.

Again, Ninian spoke. "The hour grows late, MacDonell. Allow us to share your roof this night."

Awkward silence filled the air. Ciara held her breath. Did her husband trust Ninian enough to allow them to stay the night?

Finally, Alastair's sigh reached her ears. "I grant you quarters for one night only, and under heavy guard. On the morrow, you may share the morning repast with your sister and see for yourself she is hale. Then you will depart."

"Guards?"

MacLean's wretched voice made Ciara shrink against the stones. Perhaps it was best if Alastair tossed them out.

"You insult me by offering such an indignity to a man of my position."

Another step separated Ciara from MacLean. She could feel his filth creep up the stairs toward her.

"That reminds me. The livestock will be guarded as well."

"You bastard!"

The hiss of MacLean's voice in response to Alastair's slight drifted through the hall. Feet shuffled and the thud of bodies being tossed around echoed up the stairs.

Ciara's heart leapt to her throat, yet she could not force herself down the steps. Alastair would not kill her brothers, and it would be difficult for Eneas or

MacLean to gain an advantage over her husband.

Another thud permeated the air, followed by the wrathful timbre of Alastair's voice.

"Torquil, get this cretin who calls himself a laird the hell out of here before I kill him."

Ciara stayed for no more. She turned and bolted up the remaining stairs, then entered her lonely room.

Her hands shook from the confrontation. She could only imagine the thoughts and fury that raced through not only her brothers' heads, but her husband's as well.

Tension tightened the muscles across her shoulders and wound through her veins. She would not rest again until MacLean was far from this keep.

Unable to remain still, Ciara began to pace. Each step twisted the knot lodged in her belly.

As much as she wished to see her brothers, she did not think she could tolerate MacLean. The man's voice made her squirm and the thought of seeing him again sent revulsion straight to her soul.

Gooseflesh slid over her skin. She paused before the hearth, closed her eyes and rubbed a hand over her arms.

Alastair would protect her. She may be mad as the devil with him at the moment, yet if MacLean so much as brushed her skirt, MacDonell would kill him. Of that, she had no doubt.

The leather hinges of the door creaked. Ciara opened her eyes and turned toward the barrier. Alastair stood framed in the threshold, his face clouded with indecision.

'Twas then she knew the depth of his feelings for her.

Despite his deception, and her tender feelings, Alastair loved her. He clearly suppressed his urges and instincts, and allowed people he could not otherwise abide to occupy his home.

She began to tremble. Now she was safe. As long as she remained in his presence, no harm would come to her.

"Alastair," she whispered, her voice choked.

He moved into the room and pushed the door closed with his foot. The emotions that filled his eyes wrenched her breast.

He loved her. He truly loved her.

She longed to run to him, to feel the warmth of his strong arms around her. Yet, she hesitated. Her emotions licked through her veins as quickly as a fire took to dry wood. They battled with the betrayal wedged in her heart.

"You heard what transpired?"

The timbre of his voice vibrated through her soul and pulled her from her troubled thoughts. Unable to form words, Ciara nodded.

He sighed and approached the table. "Have no fear, wife. Although I was tempted, I did not harm your brothers."

She approached the table and paused by his side. One touch would not hurt. "Alastair," she whispered and placed a hand on his arm. The dusk of his eyes rested on hers. Ciara swallowed hard. "The presence of MacLean is the source of my unease. He is immoral."

A frown tugged the corners of his mouth. The gentle brush of his fingers caressed her cheek. "Among other things."

Ciara shivered against his touch and closed her eyes. She needed him so very much, needed his touch and reassurance.

"I will protect you with my life," he whispered and pressed his lips to her brow.

The depth of his worry, as well as his convictions, was apparent in his touch. 'Twas as if he needed her as much as she needed him.

His hands cupped her face and his lips strayed to her cheek. "None will harm you, love," he whispered and cradled her head against his chest. "I will kill any who dares to try."

Ciara felt like weeping. Nestled against the comforting beat of his heart, feeling the tenderness of his touch, her emotions threatened to consume the deception lodged in her soul. He made it very difficult to maintain her war with him.

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes. For the first time in her life, someone other than a kinsman loved her. Her heart trembled. How could she continue to punish him when the proof of his love was so clear?

"Stay with me until they leave. I do not feel safe alone."

Tenderness softened the worry from his eyes. "Mayhap, if MacLean's presence returns you to my arms, I should thank the man."

Her tummy fluttered against her spine. "We will share a room, husband, nothing more."

He pressed his lips together and nodded. "'Tis a start, wife; 'tis a start."

\* \* \*

Alastair sat before the hearth and stared into the low fire. His feet propped upon a stool, he occupied a stuffed chair in his wife's chamber.

His wife.

Guilt tugged at his bruised heart. He had betrayed her, that could not be denied. Somehow, he needed to find a way to earn her forgiveness and regain her trust.

He glanced toward the bed where Ciara lay sleeping. The tender glow of the fire caressed her face and lured to life the longing hidden in his soul.

*Do you know why she hates MacDonells?*

Valerie's ghostly voice drifted through his mind. Bitterness rose in his throat. Alastair lowered his gaze and stared at the blanket that covered his body.

Ciara hated him and his clan. He closed his eyes against the pain that knowledge placed in his heart. How could he expect her to forgive him, when he could not forgive himself? Once again, he found himself wed to a woman he did not deserve.

"Alastair?"

Her tender voice pulled him from his sorrow and he rested his gaze on her. She sat up amid her rumpled covers, worry upon her brow. A pristine nightgown concealed the body he had explored one night, and longed to sample again. Blood stirred in his loins. He turned his attention back on the hearth.

"Could you not sleep?" he managed to whisper.

"Nay. My thoughts are troubled."

And he was the cause, no doubt.

"What keeps you from slumber, husband?"

Alastair closed his eyes. Should he tell her that guilt kept him from sleep? Or that the knowledge she slept less than ten feet away kept him awake?

The groan of the bed lured his gaze. Ciara climbed from the confines and approached his chair. Her tousled tresses glimmered in the light and dared his fingers not to touch. A familiar ache wound through his soul.

He loved her with every fiber of his being. The knowledge that she resented him stabbed his heart. 'Twas then he knew how Valerie must have felt. She had loved him to the very depths of her soul, yet he could not return her feelings. Perhaps this was God's way of punishing him for his sins.

Ciara lowered herself to the floor beside his stool and rested her head upon his thigh. His body tensed at the contact and drew her gaze.

"Does this disturb you?"

Lord, if she only knew. He swallowed hard and shook his head. "Nay, wife. I would prefer you did not sit upon the cold stones, though."

Her gaze lowered for the space of a heartbeat before returning to him. "I want to be near you, husband."

Alastair's breath caught in his throat. 'Twas another step in the right direction as far as he was concerned. Little things such as this would regain her trust.

"Come, wife," he whispered and held his hand to her.

Indecision clouded her eyes. She glanced from his hand to his face, then slowly slid her fingers against his palm.

Joy spiraled through Alastair's heart. With care, he helped her to her feet, then pulled her into his lap. He covered her with the blanket and held her in his arms.

This felt so right to him. How he had missed holding her, touching her, loving her.

Ciara snuggled against him and rested her head on his shoulder. "My weight does not bother you?"

Alastair smiled and placed a chaste kiss upon her brow. "There are many things about you that bother me," he whispered. "Your weight is not one of them."

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes. Longing stirred in his veins once more. God Almighty, she was beautiful. He wanted to kiss her so badly, he could taste her upon his tongue.

As if she read his thoughts, Ciara lowered her gaze. "I search my heart for a way to forgive you, Alastair." Again she looked into his eyes. "Each day, each act of kindness from you, weakens my resolve."

He lifted his hand and lightly touched her cheek. "Once I gain your forgiveness, I vow never to hurt you again."

Ciara said nothing. She looked away from him and once again settled in the cocoon of his arms.

The subtle scent of lavender teased his nostrils and tempted his dormant passion. He closed his eyes, held her close, and willed his body to remain impassive.

Time. Through the passage of time, he would gain the return of his wife. He stroked her hair and stared into the hearth once more.

He could hold her like this forever. In all his life, he had never felt anything so natural.

*You and Ciara share the same soul.*

The haunting whisper of Valerie's words drifted through his brain. How daft he thought her at the time for making such a comparison.

Now he knew that her words were true. Ciara nestling in his lap only strengthened Valerie's words. They did indeed belong together.

"I love you, lass," he whispered and pressed his lips against her brow. He closed his eyes and prayed with all his might that soon Ciara would forgive him.

## Chapter Eighteen

Alastair paused in the doorway of the dining chamber, Ciara at his side. Although she would never admit it, he knew she was apprehensive about the confrontation to come. The sleepless night they shared was proof of her unease.

"Shall we?" he asked.

The depths of her blue eyes searched his. She nodded and, with a gentle hand at the curve of her back, Alastair guided her into the room. Unease churned in his gut, and against his arm he felt his bride tremble.

Maids moved among the tables, settling trays upon the wood. A few clansmen occupied benches, engrossed in quiet conversation, and spared them no more than a glance.

At the head table, Alastair helped Ciara into her chair, then seated himself beside her. This meal could not end soon enough for him.

People filtered into the room and found their seats. Alastair leaned back in his chair and surveyed the area.

His men wore weapons into the hall, a custom Alastair usually forbade. Yet in light of their visitors, he encouraged it, felt it was best his clan be prepared. None would rest easy until their unwelcome guests departed.

At that moment, the men of Mackintosh and MacLean entered, Torquil and a handful of others close behind. Animosity clouded Eneas' face the moment he saw Ciara. Likewise, contempt curled the thin lips of MacLean. Alastair's fingers coiled against his palm.

Ninian glanced at his sister and smiled. At least she had one brother who appeared to give a damn.

The men moved toward them. Each step twisted Alastair's gut. With care to keep his dislike in check, he stood and glared at the men.

"MacLean is not welcome at my table." He nodded to Torquil. "Move him far from my sight."

Anger churned in MacLean's eyes. "The king shall hear of the insults you offer."

Alastair shrugged. "It matters not to me whose shoulder you weep upon. Consider yourself fortunate you did not sleep in the snow last eve."

The group dispersed. Ninian moved around the table and placed a kiss on his sister's cheek.

"'Tis hale you look, Ciara." He seated himself beside her, ignoring Eneas and his pompous glare.

"'Tis good to see you again, brother."



"Mackintosh," Alastair said, drawing Eneas' gaze. "This is reserved for you." He nodded to a stool beside him and lowered himself into his own chair.

Pleasure filled him at the insult he offered Eneas. Lairds were unaccustomed to eating from a stool. Alastair wanted this worm within easy reach.

Haughtiness touched Mackintosh's eyes. Alastair silently dared the vermin to challenge him in his own hall.

"I will not allow you to provoke me, MacDonell," Eneas hissed as he settled onto the offered seat.

"Pity. I so looked forward to gaining a valid reason to kill you."

Eneas rested his arms on the table and leaned forward to look at Ciara.

"Sister, dear, do not become accustomed to this clan or its laird." His gaze flashed to Alastair and a thin smile curled his lips. "'Tis clear Valerie was out of her mind when she made her last wish."

Alastair grabbed the man by the nape of the neck and shoved his face into a bowl of porridge.

Eneas sputtered and scrambled to his feet, overturning the stool in the process. Instantly his hand went to his waist.

Alastair knew he had been right to remove the visitors' weapons.

"Beg my pardon at once, MacDonell!"

Calmly, Alastair used a linen cloth to clean the sticky mess off his fingers. "Ciara and I are wed, and naught will change that. I thought I made that clear last eve."

"She is betrothed --"

Alastair stood and glared down at the arrogant cuss before him. Aggravation edged its way to the surface. One wrong word and he would toss the man into the hearth.

His tactic worked, for Mackintosh retreated a step and wiped a hand over his soiled face. "I will forgive you this time."

"I do not wish forgiveness. You deserved that." Behind him, Alastair felt Ciara's hand against his back. He scowled and returned to his seat. "The issue of our marriage is now closed."

"Thank you, husband," she whispered, her head bowed. "Eneas can be difficult at times."

"'Tis for you I did not toss him out on his behind." He took a deep breath and ignored Eneas, who returned to his seat.

Ninian leaned forward and frowned. "Why was Valerie's wish not mentioned in your missive informing us of her loss, MacDonell?"

A chill settled over Alastair's heart. "I sent no missive announcing her death."

"Aye, you did. Word reached us within days of the event."

Alastair focused on his wife. "Did you inform them?"

Ciara shook her head. "I had planned to, but the storm approached and halted my request to you for a messenger."

What the devil was happening here? His gaze scanned the clan assembled before him. Had one of them turned traitor?

"I do not understand this." Ninian's voice drew Alastair's gaze. "Eneas read the missive to the clan, then informed Valerie's people as well." His frown turned to Alastair. "We could not understand why Ciara did not come home once the death occurred. 'Tis what prompted this visit."

Alastair tried hard to remember the days that followed his wife's death. None of his trusted men had departed for the time required to deliver such news. But someone had made the journey.

Unease settled in his belly. He turned to Eneas. "Did you retain the missive that bespoke Valerie's passing?"

A smirk touched his lips. "Nay. It bore the MacDonell seal. Once the information was read, I used it to wipe my ass."

Ire licked through Alastair's veins. "You beg for another taste of porridge, I see."

Eneas leaned away from him and scowled. "Touch me, and I will make Ciara a widow."

A chuckle escaped Alastair's lips. "'Twould require a man greater than you to see to the task. Yet, if you insist, I am certain my people would not mind the entertainment of watching you wither in death's embrace."

"Please cease this arguing."

Ciara's voice drew Alastair away from his thoughts of strangling Mackintosh. Instead he sighed and asked, "Whose name graced the missive?"

"Yours." For once, Eneas looked disturbed. "You truly did not send the message?"

Alastair said nothing. He would prefer not to let his enemies know that a possible traitor lurked in his midst. "Finish your meal so you may leave my sight."

Silence settled over the table, and again Alastair surveyed the room. His gaze paused on Torquil. His hatred for Ciara was clear, yet the man could not read, much less write. In fact, he knew of none in his clan, aside from himself, who could master such a task.

Perhaps the disloyal one sought out the services of another. The village priest would know his letters, yet Alastair was not convinced a man of the cloth would forge his signature.

He turned his gaze to Ninian. "Before you depart, I would appreciate a word alone with you."

Ninian nodded, and continued his meal and quiet conversation with Ciara.

"I need a word with my sister as well."

The tone of Eneas' voice grated on Alastair's nerves. "Whatever you wish to speak to my bride about, you will do so here or leave in silence."

"The devil you say, MacDonell. 'Tis private family business and does not concern you."

What Alastair wouldn't give to take a whip to this man! "I deny your request."

Anger distorted Eneas' face. "You are overbold, MacDonell."

"You are a -- "

"Husband."

Ciara's gentle hand upon his arm halted the crude words from tumbling from his lips.

Her gaze flashed from him to Eneas. "What do you wish to say to me, brother?"

Eneas scowled and shoved the bowl of porridge to the far side of the table. "Mother's possessions," he said and slid a glance to his sister. "What did she bequeath you?"

Ciara frowned. "Enough coin to gain my passage here and her traveling case. Why?"

Alastair grimaced. "What concern is this to you, Mackintosh? Anything possessed by Ciara became mine the moment we wed."

"MacDonell -- "

"Not the family silver," Eneas said, not allowing Ciara to finish. "If my sister surrenders those items now, I will dissuade MacLean from pursuing his plea with the king."

"I cannot surrender what I do not possess," Ciara said as she climbed to her feet. One look at her and Alastair knew she was tempted to silence her brother herself. "Even if I did hold those items you covet, I would not relinquish them into your greedy hands."

"Nor would I let you." Alastair grasped her hand in his and tried to urge her into her chair.

"Do not lie about this, Ciara. The silver vanished the night before you left for France."

"Silence!"

The command came from Ninian. The man stood and glared at his brother. "Mother hid the items to keep you from selling them. 'Twas her intent all along to pass them on to Ciara, since she is the only daughter."

"As laird -- "

"Close your mouth now or I swear to do it for you, brother."

Alastair glanced from one man to the other. Perhaps he should have seated Eneas beside Ninian. 'Twas clear the elder Mackintosh was barely tolerated by

members of his own family.

"Mother and I had no luxuries while we were in France. I have not seen the silver since the day I left Glengarry." Ciara seated herself and stared at the table. "Methinks your disagreements with her prior to our departure would place enough guilt in your heart to cease causing trouble now that she is gone."

"I want that silver."

Ciara turned heated blue eyes his way. "As I said, all I inherited was a worn leather trunk. If you misplaced a heirloom, 'tis on your head, not mine."

Tense silence descended over the table. Ninian returned to his seat and Alastair surveyed the room.

Heirloom silver and a missive. Something was out of place here, yet he could not identify the source.

He turned his gaze down to the table. Once he was alone with Ninian, he hoped to gain some much-needed answers.

\* \* \*

"I refuse to be sequestered in my chamber again, husband."

Ciara stood in the midst of the small room Alastair used as an office. Light streamed through the windows and reflected off his sword positioned above the hearth.

Alastair, seated at his desk, turned to her and frowned. "I have my reasons for making a request of you."

"'Twas not a request, but a command." Her hands rested on her hips and she met her husband's irritated glare with one of her own. "This matter concerns me as well."

A vein twitched in Alastair's neck. "Woman, you test my patience."

She nodded, satisfied she irritated him. "Splendid. We are even then, for you have tested mine repeatedly the last few days."

"Ciara, I am warning you."

Her chin lifted a smidgen. His tone did not frighten her. "I am not leaving."

He cursed and shook his head. "I should thrash you for defying me."

"Yet you would not lay a harmful hand on the mother of your heir." His gaze flashed to hers and Ciara almost smiled. "You are the one who made the declaration, not I."

Alastair scowled. "Ciara, what I have to discuss with your brother may not be appropriate for your ears."

"I am not leaving, MacDonell." She crossed her arms over her belly and frowned. "You asked me to help learn the truth about what led to the massacre in the glen. This mysterious missive could be related to that most grievous event."

Voices from the passage beyond halted any response he may have offered. With confidence, Ciara moved to the couch and seated herself. 'Twas unfair of her to use his own words to gain her wish, but he left her no choice.

Stubborn Scot.

"Nay, brother, I will do this alone." Ninian paused just beyond the doorway, his face set in anger.

"I am laird of our clan, not you, and I am not finished with Ciara." Eneas grimaced and glanced into the room. "If the bastard wants information so badly, he will gain it from me."

"I will not." Alastair moved to the threshold, his back to Ciara. "You may be laird, but I know which man is more worthy. Torquil?" A moment passed before the giant appeared. "Escort this guest and his companions to their mounts. My conversation with Ninian will not take long."

"My pleasure," the giant replied and laid a hand on Eneas' shoulder. "Come, laird, I will show ye the way."

"Unhand me, you oaf!" Eneas struggled in Torquil's grasp.

The giant actually smiled. "It gives me enjoyment tae force ye tae my laird's wishes." He lifted Eneas by the scruff of the neck and propelled him out of Ciara's view.

Alastair stepped aside, one large hand poised on the door. "Enter."

Ninian strode into the room. His step faltered when he noticed Ciara. "You should not be here, sister."

"I tried to tell her the same, yet she refuses to listen." Alastair closed the door and sighed. "My wife can be quite stubborn at times."

Ninian smiled.

Ciara frowned at him and lifted her gaze toward the ceiling. She had a good mind to smack them both.

"This missive that relayed Valerie's death," Alastair said, drawing Ciara's gaze. "Did you see the words yourself?"

Ninian approached the hearth and shook his head. "Nay. I had no reason to examine the paper. The content was simple."

Alastair frowned and seated himself beside his wife. The warmth of his hand covered hers. "Did you perchance see the messenger?"

Ciara slipped from his grasp. Just because she allowed him into her room last night, and awoke this morn cradled in his arms, did not mean all was well between them.

A grimace creased Ninian's brow. He rubbed his jaw. "I was present when he arrived, though I must admit I paid little attention to him."

"Do you remember anything at all about him? The color of his cloak, a facial expression, his voice? Anything that seemed amiss?"

Ninian lowered his hand and narrowed his gaze. "Well, now that you mention it, there was something that caught my eye, though I thought little of it at the time."

Despite her courage, Ciara trembled. Was there a traitor among her husband's men? Again Alastair's hand covered hers. When she tried to pull away, he gave her a light squeeze. He looked not at her, but at her brother.

"What did you find odd?"

A sigh escaped her brother's lips. "'Twas his plaid." He moved to stand before Alastair. "It had more red in it than the one you wear."

Dread coiled around Ciara's heart. Different branches of the same clans wore independent plaids. Some clans even had alternate patterns for various events, including hunting.

"My uncle rules a rowdy branch of this clan." Alastair scowled and tightened his hold on Ciara. "The plaid he chose is much as you described."

"That does not explain how he knew of Valerie's death, or what his motive would be for dispatching such a message." Ciara studied her husband's face. The lines that creased his brow worried her.

"His incentive was to stir trouble, wife." He sighed and removed his hand from hers. "John has longed for possession of my lands since the day my sire died."

Alastair climbed to his feet and moved to stare out the windows. Ciara met her brother's concerned gaze and shrugged.

Ninian cleared his throat. "I give you my word not to make mention of this to Eneas. He would find a way to cause trouble for you and my sister."

"I thank you," Alastair said, his voice low. "I do have another matter to discuss as well." He bowed his head a moment, then turned to face Ninian. "What do you know of your sire in the days before his death?"

Darkness clouded Ninian's eyes. "'Tis a topic I would prefer not to speak with you about, especially in the presence of my sister."

"Ninian," Ciara said, and rose to her feet. "I know this clan was the one who brought down father and his men."

Intense emotions crossed her brother's face. He exchanged glances with Alastair. "At least he had the wisdom to tell you the truth."

A lump lodged in Ciara's throat. She preferred not to think of how she came to learn the facts or the torment that followed. "Brother, this clan believes that father -- that he abducted the mistress of my husband's sire and subjected her to deplorable acts."

"Deplorable acts?" He turned a questioning glance on Alastair. "Our sire adored our mother, MacDonell. He strayed not once from his vows."

Alastair's jaw tensed. "Are you certain?"

"Husband --"

"Aye, I am certain," Ninian interrupted, not allowing her to finish. "I resent what you imply about a man filled with devotion and impeccable virtue."

"All I do is attempt to learn the truth." Briefly, Alastair explained what he knew of the day in question.

Ciara felt a bit queasy hearing the accounts of what led to Rachel's death. Perhaps Alastair had been right and she should have avoided hearing this discussion.

Ninian scowled and turned toward the hearth. From his stance, Ciara knew he was annoyed.

"These events sound more like something MacLean would do, not my sire." He glanced toward Alastair. "'Tis why I do not object to Ciara's union with you. An enemy you may be, but no promiscuous acts haunt your name."

"'Tis my thoughts as well, where MacLean is concerned." Alastair sighed and shook his head. "I cannot understand this. If your sire was not involved, why did Rachel name him her tormenter?"

So many questions and so few answers. Ciara lowered herself to the couch once more and tried to make sense from disorder.

"Did this Rachel have kin?" Ninian's question drew Ciara's gaze.

Alastair nodded. "Aye, her sire passed long ago, but her mother remains. She took a croft deep in the forest and keeps to herself since Rachel died."

Ninian shook his head. "I suggest you speak to her, and any others who were witness to either the abduction or the return. Through them, I believe you can gain the answers you seek."

"Brother?" Ciara whispered, drawing his gaze to her. "Will you help?"

His adoration for her eased the worry from his face. He knelt before her and gathered her hands in his. "I fail to see how I could assist in this matter, Ciara."

"Ask questions. Use that clever brain of yours to probe MacLean." She squeezed his hands and dared a glance at her husband. "We will learn what we can as well. Both Alastair and I long to glean the truth and clear father's name."

Ninian lowered his gaze and rubbed his thumbs over her knuckles. "I will do what I can."

"Your help is appreciated." Alastair sighed. "Do you have knowledge of this silver Eneas is howling about?"

Ninian shook his head and met his sister's gaze. "It vanished. My personal theory is that one of the vermin my brother has befriended stole the wares. Eneas, with his pride, would not admit such a mistake in his judgment."

Ciara squeezed her brother's hand. "His mistakes as laird have been many."

Memories of the heated arguments between her eldest brother and her mother returned. The quarrels were over the silver. Eneas longed to possess the heirlooms for the wealth he would gain, and the status he felt he deserved among

his peers.

"I bid you a safe journey home."

The sound of her husband's voice drew her from her thoughts. Melancholy tugged at Ciara's heart. Three years had passed since she saw her brother. Now, all too soon, their time was over. "Return in the spring for a visit, yet leave MacLean behind."

"And Eneas," Alastair added.

A smile tugged at Ninian's mouth. "Aye, my brother can be trying on his best day." He leaned over, kissed Ciara on the cheek, then climbed to his feet. "Take care, sister, and send word when your bairn arrives."

Ciara's belly licked her spine. She could not confirm or deny Alastair's boast, so she decided to let the matter rest. "I will."

Ninian turned to Alastair. "I know our clans have known differences in the past. Yet, after meeting you, I hope through your union with Ciara, peace will be known."

"I thank you for your honesty and share your hope." Alastair accompanied him to the door. "If you discover anything, no matter how insignificant it may seem, I would appreciate being informed."

"I make the same request of you." Ninian paused and gifted Ciara with a final glance. "Take good care of my sister, and you and I will have no quarrel."

"'Twill be my pleasure."

The door closed and Ciara was alone with her husband. Across the room, her gaze met his. The emotions in his eyes mirrored the ones that tumbled through her belly.

"Thank you for trusting Ninian," she said and lowered her gaze to her lap. "Of all my brothers, he is my favorite."

Alastair seated himself beside her. "Do the others take after Eneas in temperament?"

His fingers brushed her cheek. Ciara shivered. How could she tell him of the cruel jests that haunted her childhood? The taunts and mockery that magnified her inferiority and weaknesses?

"Ciara? Did I say something to offend you?"

She swallowed and shook her head. "Nay, husband. None of my brothers favored me much, save for Ninian."

"He seems an honorable man."

She nodded. "He is. To the best of my knowledge, he has never spoken a dishonest word in his life."

Alastair sighed and pressed his lips against her ear. "If I did not have that impression, I would not have confided in him." He stroked her cheek. "I must now assist Torquil in the removal of our guests." He placed a gentle kiss upon her cheek, then climbed to his feet. "Go gain a nap, wife. You look weary."



Ciara said nothing as he left the room. She was tired. Sleep had eluded her since the night she learned of Alastair's involvement with the death of her sire.

While she believed him, she wondered if remaining with him betrayed her sire's memory. No doubt Eneas saw her marriage as such. With ease, he could convince the others as well.

Hurt rose in her breast. She forced it aside and, with a sigh, climbed to her feet and mounted the stairs.

She had forsaken no one, least of all her father. If she were to be true to herself, Alastair was honorable as well. 'Twas his suggestion that they delve into the circumstances that led to the deaths in the glen.

She entered her chamber, slipped off her shoes and lay against the mattress. Ciara was now wed to Alastair, no matter what information they discovered. Be it good or bad, she would always be his wife.

The mattress shifted beneath her as she rolled to her side. Ciara nestled into the downy softness and closed her eyes.

She prayed that through the mystery surrounding her sire, they found proof of his innocence. While it would not return her father to the world of the living, it would make the acceptance of her into this clan more tolerable. Perhaps, it would help her to grant forgiveness to her husband as well.

Slowly, her eyes drifted open. At that moment she realized what lay in her heart.

Ciara loved her husband.

In Alastair, she found a champion greater than Ninian and a heart more devoted to her than her mother or father had been.

Given half a chance, she felt true happiness could be hers, a joy she never knew before. Somehow, through the battles they shared, the cracks in her soul had mended.

If Alastair behaved himself and ceased his attempts at bossing her about, maybe, just maybe, she would tell him her true feelings.

Ciara snuggled against the pillows and smiled. Finally, she had an advantage over her husband, knew something he did not.

She planned to enjoy herself.

## Chapter Nineteen

"Are you sure you are up to this, Ciara?" Alastair asked as he maneuvered his horse across the snow-covered mountain. "Johann welcomes few into her croft. She may toss stones at you."

Behind him, Ciara's arms circled his waist. Her breath brushed his neck. Lord, how he missed her. Since her brothers' departure, they once again resumed separate quarters.

"You seem a large enough shield, MacDonell. I dare say any stones tossed my way will strike you first."

Amusement touched his lips. Her defenses toward him were weakening. Her teasing words were proof of that.

"'Tis a comfort to know I am of some use to you, woman."

"I find it best not to pay tribute to your qualities, MacDonell." Her arms tightened around him. "Such praise tends to swell your head."

Wicked thoughts consumed his brain. "You should choose your words with care, wife. Some have double meanings."

Her exasperated sigh brushed his ear. "You are incorrigible, husband."

He chuckled and placed a gloved hand over hers to keep her from withdrawing her arms. "You made me that way, my enchanting witch."

"I dare say you were hopeless long before making my acquaintance." She squirmed against his back and rested her chin on his shoulder. "It seems we have ridden for hours now. How far is this croft?"

"The snow hampers our progress. We are almost there."

Overhead, snow-laden boughs swayed in the breeze. Through the desolate branches, a sky sprinkled with gray clouds peeked at them. Ciara shivered and snuggled into him.

Alastair frowned. Despite the pleasure of her company, he knew Ciara should have remained behind. Although the weather was pleasant when they departed, in the Highlands, that could change with the beat of a heart.

A shiver kissed his spine. Valerie had been out in poor weather and taken ill. The only difference is, Valerie's bane was rain, Ciara's was snow.

"Are you warm enough, wife?" He would never forgive himself if Ciara took ill.

"Aye, husband." She rested her cheek on his shoulder and sighed. "I will be glad to get off the back of this horse, though."

Her words removed some of the doubt from his soul. Still, he would hold her before him on the ride home, her protests be damned. The warmth of his

cloak, combined with hers, should keep her safe from illness.

The journey to Johann's croft, a trek that usually took an hour in spring, had now stretched into nearly three. The snow was deeper on this part of the mountain. He should have trusted his instincts and made Ciara bide his command.

A smile tugged at his heart. Ciara disliked commands, which made giving them all the more pleasurable. Naught could compare to the fire in her eyes or the blush of her cheeks when her dander was riled.

He wouldn't trade it, or her, for all the wealth in the Highlands.

A clearing came into view. Nestled in the midst, a thatched croft beckoned them. Smoke curled from a stone chimney and carried with it the scent of roasted pheasant.

'Twas a simple dwelling for a simple life. The woman who occupied this residence found comfort in solace. Visitors were rarely welcomed.

Alastair tugged on his reins before the crude door of the abode. The shutters were drawn and, aside from the smoke, the place looked abandoned.

He held onto the pommel and grasped Ciara's arm. Silently, she slid to the ground. Alastair released her, then dismounted. He led the horse to a post and secured the reins.

"No stones greet us," Ciara said and adjusted her cloak around her beautiful hair. "Perhaps she has mellowed?"

"Perhaps," he said and, touching her elbow, guided Ciara to the door. "She could be waiting for us to open the door so her aim is true."

Ciara frowned. "You make her sound as agreeable as a fishwife."

"You have yet to meet her." He lifted his hand and knocked on the weathered wood. "Johann, 'tis I, Alastair." The silence of the forest was their only reply. He knocked again. "I have brought my bride to meet you. Pray open the door."

The barrier flung open. Ciara jumped and retreated a step. The putrid air of a croft used to house livestock in the winter assaulted his nostrils.

Alastair was thankful he had not dined before departing. Chickens darted between his legs and scurried into the snow.

He stared down into the tormented face of a mother who lost her only child. Raven hair streaked with gray covered a head that barely reached his chest. Her size meant naught to him. This little woman came in a powerful package.

Alastair smiled. "You look hale, Johann."

Sorrowful brown eyes moved from him to Ciara. "Why did you bring this Mackintosh bitch to me?" She moved forward and examined Ciara with a scowl. "An unsightly lass at that. She is a credible argument for chastity."

Despite his good intentions, Alastair began to get angry. "That is quite enough, Johann. Ciara has done naught to harm you."

"Ciara?" A mirthless chuckle escaped her lips. "'Tis ironic such an ogre was given the name of an angel."

Beneath his hand, he felt Ciara tremble. He scowled and started to speak. His wife stopped him.

"You know the myth?"

Johann sneered and drew her moth-eaten cloak around her. "Aye."

Alastair creased his brow. "I know of no fable surrounding your name."

Ciara looked up at him and nodded. "Aye. 'Tis said during the Yule one year a lonely man fell asleep along the western seashore. During his slumber, he dreamt of an angel named Ciara. At Brigid's Well they shared a kiss. He fell hopelessly in love with her, and longed for the end of each day so he could be with his angel again."

He knew exactly how the man in the story felt. One kiss from his Ciara and he, too, had fallen hopelessly in love.

"This is all quite charming, but does naught to make your presence welcome." Johann stepped into her croft and pushed against the door.

Alastair placed his hand on the barrier. "We came to talk to you about Rachel."

Hurt flashed across the woman's eyes. "Laird or not, I should take a dirk to you." Her gaze moved to Ciara. "The sire of this heathen bitch killed my daughter. By all rights I should be given free reign to bind and torture her, make her suffer the same indignities forced upon my Rachel."

Tolerance for her only went so far. "Enough!" His roar was effective for the woman ceased her verbal assault. Alastair sighed and willed his annoyance to abate. "Johann, I have learned information that sheds new light on the death of your daughter."

Some of the anger that creased her face eased. "What kind of information?"

Alastair looked down at Ciara and pulled her close. "I believe the Mackintosh was innocent."

Rage clouded the woman's face. "You grunt between her legs a few times and decide the condemning words of my dying daughter are false?"

"You, dear woman, have the vilest mouth of anyone I have ever met in my life."

Dear Lord, Ciara was angry. Not that he blamed her, but the tone she used was one he had never heard before. Alastair looked down at her and found himself at a loss.

Johann stepped to within an inch of Ciara and scowled. "The opinion of an ugly slut means naught to me."

A vein twitched in Ciara's jaw. "'Tis bold you are to call me ugly. When was the last time you looked into a mirror? I dare say you would frighten Nessie right

out of the loch."

A baleful growl lodged in Johann's throat. She shoved his wife so hard, Ciara stumbled and fell into the snow.

Alastair had all he could stand. He stepped forward when Johann advanced. He would throttle the woman himself.

"Husband, nay!" Ciara said, her gaze locked on Johann. "'Tis my battle."

Wicked laughter echoed off the trees. "Och, 'twill give me great pleasure to beat you to death." Johann dove for Ciara.

In a blind flurry of movement, Ciara rolled away and Johann landed face first in the snow. A blink of his eye brought an image to Alastair's mind he would never forget as long as he lived.

Ciara held Johann against the cold ground with a knee pressed against her back. One hand clasped the older woman's wrists while the other twisted her face into the snow. Fingers twined in streaked hair, Ciara lifted the woman's head.

"From one crone to another, death will not greet me this day." Increased pressure from Ciara stilled the squirming Johann. "Ask my pardon."

"Go to the devil, you witch."

"After you." Ciara clenched her jaw and shoved the woman's face into the snow once more.

Alastair leaned against the post where his horse was tied and watched. Never in his life had he seen anything as amusing as this.

After five more denials from Johann, followed by a face shoved in snow, Alastair decided it best to interfere.

He moved behind his wife and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Let her up, Ciara."

She shook her head and shrugged away from his grasp. "Not until she begs pardon."

Alastair smiled at the muffled curses that drifted to him from Johann. "I dare say hell would freeze first."

"Pull her off of me, laird. She is crushing my backbone."

"Consider yourself fortunate that is all I have done. Now, beg pardon for your insults or I will sever your spine."

"Ciara —"

"Stand away from me, MacDonell, or you will be next."

Damned if he didn't believe her.

"I yield," Johann gasped, her face contorted with pain.

"Do you beg pardon from myself and my husband?"

Johann hesitated, so Ciara tightened her hold. "Aye, aye, now let me up."

Ciara released her hold and climbed to her feet. She brushed at the snow that clung to her cloak and gown and grimaced at Johann. The woman rolled to her back and choked on the brisk Highland air.

"Where did you learn such tactics?" Alastair asked.

She shot him a heated glance. "One does not grow up in the midst of eleven brothers and not learn a thing or two." Her gaze returned to Johann, who managed to sit up in the snow. "We have wasted a trip. This woman has no desire to learn the truth. She would rather wallow in self-pity and seclusion."

Alastair hated to admit it, but he feared Ciara was right. He watched his wife make her way to their waiting mount. A weary sigh escaped him. He stepped forward and offered Johann his hand.

The woman's eyes met his for the space of a heartbeat, then her weathered palm slid against his. Once on her feet, she brushed at the snow that covered her clothes.

"I am sorry we disturbed you, Johann. It will not happen again." He approached his mount and reached for the reins.

"What information do you have?"

Her words made him pause. He glanced at Ciara before he answered.

"Are you truly interested, or are you gaining your second wind to have another go at my lady?"

A moment of silence passed. "I am truly interested."

Alastair turned to face her. This was the most docile he had seen Johann in years.

Her gaze flashed to Ciara. "If her sire was not responsible, I want to know who is." She looked down at her clothes and scowled. "Give me a moment to change into something dry, then come in and sit a spell."

Ciara stood unmoving by the horse. Once the door closed behind Johann, Alastair dared approach.

"Is your temper cooled now, wife?"

"I had no idea one woman could be so mean." She closed her eyes and rubbed a gloved hand over her brow. "At first, I thought kindness would reach her. Yet once her mouth opened, I knew the only thing she would understand was a thrashing."

Despite himself, Alastair chuckled. This drew Ciara's gaze and he tried to sober.

"I beg your pardon, wife. I am elated to see you can take care of yourself, should the need arise."

"I never thought I would have a husband to defend me, Alastair, so I learned to do it myself." She crossed her arms over her belly and turned away. "As scrawny as Johann is, 'twas an unfair match."

He smiled and moved behind her. "From where I stood, I would say the match was even." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. She squirmed and he tightened his hold. "You gave me yet another reason to love you, Ciara."

The door creaked open. "Do you plan to stand out there all day and freeze off your behinds?"

Alastair sighed. "Come, wife, we are being beckoned."

"I heard."

Now that the territory had been drawn, and Johann knew where she stood with Ciara, it wouldn't surprise him if the two women became friends.

\* \* \*

Ciara sat on a stone ledge before the hearth and grimaced at the ewe that nudged her hand. In all her life, she never seen a place as filthy as this.

A milk cow occupied one corner of the cramped room. Chickens and sheep dominated the rest. Dung covered the floor, yet did not seem to bother Johann as she moved about, fetching mugs for her guests.

Alastair occupied the only chair in the place. 'Twas a crude contraption that looked as if it would not support his weight. An equally rustic table and a lone cot completed the furnishings.

"So, you want me to tell you all that transpired the fateful day my Rachel returned?" Johann asked and handed Alastair a mug.

He peered into the vessel and scowled. "Aye, I do."

Johann grunted, then hobbled over the floor to hand Ciara a mug. Guilt touched her heart. Was she the cause of the woman's limp? She accepted the mug with a whispered thanks. Johann grimaced and turned away.

Ciara looked into the cup and frowned. Something floated atop the drink. She used the tip of her finger to remove the item.

'Twas dung, most likely from the chickens.

The ewe, momentarily distracted, returned. Ciara placed the mug on the ledge and scooted away from the animal. The sheep didn't seem to mind the filth and dipped its nose into the vessel.

"The laird knew I never approved of him using my daughter like he did. Yet, Rachel was in love with the man, so what was I to do?"

Alastair placed his mug on the table and sighed. "What of the day she returned?"

Sorrow touched Johann's eyes. Ciara almost felt sorry for her. The woman eased herself onto the edge of her cot and absently stroked the ears of a lamb.

"She was bruised from head to toe with nary a stitch to cover herself." Grief fractured her voice. She paused a moment, then continued.

"Rope had rubbed the skin from her wrists. Cloth hid her eyes from light the entire time of her captivity. She was near blind by the time she escaped. 'Tis a miracle she found her way home."

The hush of her voice drew Ciara's gaze. Despite their rocky start, empathy rose in her breast.

"She told what acts were performed on her, and what she was forced to do to gain rest or food. When she refused, her flesh was cut, then hot wax dripped into the wounds until she complied."

A shudder sped through Ciara. She stared at the floor, unable to witness the pain in the woman's eyes. Bile churned in her belly. She swallowed hard and forced it away.

"She did not see her tormenter?"

Alastair's voice drew Ciara's gaze. Hope seeped into her veins.

Johann shook her head. "Nay. 'Twas during the night when she was taken from us. The bold bastard stole her from your father's keep."

"Then, how did she know to accuse my sire?" Ciara asked.

When Johann looked her way, she wished she had remained silent.

"He told her his name, repeatedly, during the long hours they shared. Even if he had not, we would have known who to accuse."

Alastair creased his brow. "How?"

Johann climbed to her feet and moved to a shutter. She eased open the barrier and closed her eyes against the breeze. "He branded his crest into her buttocks."

The stench of the room, coupled with the story, forced the restrained bile to Ciara's throat. Without a word, she ran from the croft. Her legs refused to support her weight. She sank to her knees and vomited in the snow.

It could not be true. Her sire was incapable of such things. Another wave of nausea overwhelmed her. She closed her eyes and prayed the sickness would pass.

The weight of a cloak covered her shoulders. Ciara opened her eyes and found her husband kneeling beside her.

"Are you all right?"

Tears stung her eyes. She looked away from him and wiped a shaky hand over her mouth. "I -- spewed."

His hand touched her brow. "So I see. I asked Johann to fetch some water from a nearby stream."

Ciara trembled and pulled the cloak around her shoulders. "'Twill be frozen."

He shook his head. "She keeps a hole chipped through the ice."

Despite her wishes, tears seeped from her eyes. "It cannot be true, Alastair. The things she stated." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "My sire could not have done that."

"He was innocent, Ciara."



His words drew her gaze. She wiped her eyes and stared at him. "How do you know?"

"Only a fool would abduct a woman for such illicit acts and tell her his name. Nor would he imprint his badge on her flesh." He lifted his fingers and stroked her damp cheek. "A badge as well as a plaid identifies you. From what I know of your sire, he was no fool."

Ciara's lower lip quivered. She averted her gaze and nodded. "He was a good man."

"Hush, now," Alastair whispered and pulled her into his arms. "I promised to learn the truth."

Johann returned with a pail. Water spilled over the sides as she sat it beside Ciara. Alastair eased her from his embrace and filled a gourd dipper.

"Here, this will help."

Ciara didn't resist. The cool water slid down her throat and soothed her rampant tummy.

"Are you breeding, lass?" Johann's rough voice drew Ciara's gaze. The woman frowned. "Do you have a bairn in the barn?"

Despite herself, Ciara smiled and accepted Alastair's hand. "'Tis possible."

Johann grimaced. "If I had known, I would not have been so rough on you."

Somehow, Ciara doubted that. "No harm was done. Do not fret over the confrontation."

"Och, the day has yet to come when I would worry over a Mackintosh."

"Johann --" Alastair warned.

The woman scowled and glanced toward the sky. "You best be on your way, lest you be caught in the storm."

Alastair sighed and looked at Ciara. "Are you settled enough to ride?"

She nodded and walked with him to their mount.

"Place her in the saddle before you, laird," Johann instructed.

Ciara trembled at the thought of the long ride home with her bottom nestled in Alastair's lap. "That will not be necessary. I --"

"The rump of a horse is no place for a woman in your condition." Johann scowled.

Alastair lifted his gaze toward the heavens and gently shook his head. "Methinks it 'twas a mistake coming here," he whispered and lifted Ciara into the saddle. "Somewhere in the midst of her black heart, she thinks herself my mother."

"There are worse things in life to suffer, husband," she said as he mounted behind her.

The warmth of his arms embraced her and pulled her against his chest. She hated to admit it, but it felt good.

"Will you keep me informed about my Rachel, laird?"

Alastair nodded. "I give you my word." He gathered the reins and turned their horse toward home.

"And the babe," Johann called as they neared the edge of the forest. "Send word when it is born."

"Aye, Johann," Alastair replied and guided their mount from view.

Nestled in his arms, Ciara stared up at her husband. So much talk about babes had occurred the last few days, she was beginning to wish it were true.

"Alastair, do you think I carry a babe?"

One dark eyebrow disappeared beneath the tousled hair that covered his brow. "'Tis entirely possible."

Ciara lowered her gaze. "I never thought I would be a wife, much less a mother." She shook her head. "It worries me."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "What if I fail miserably at the task?"

"Impossible."

Her gaze sought his. "How do you know?"

The dusk of his eyes swept over her. "Because I know your heart, Ciara. You would adore a child to the depths of your soul."

He was right, and she knew it. All her life, she favored children. She helped kinsmen care for theirs, and played with them to keep them occupied. Her tummy fluttered at the thought of having a child of her own. She had only one fear.

"What if our babe resembles me, husband?"

A slow smile touched his lips. "Then I would consider myself blessed."

Ciara's heart melted under his gaze. She prayed she soon found the courage to forgive him.

## Chapter Twenty

Alastair sat at his desk and stared through the glass at the storm that deposited more snow over his mountain. Elbows braced on the arms of his chair, his fists pressed against his lips, he mulled over all he learned the last few days.

Endless interviews with clansmen present when Rachel stumbled through the trees so many years ago only confirmed what Johann had related. The wounds that covered her body and the words that condemned a clan to death.

He closed his eyes.

Mackintosh was innocent.

Deep in his heart, Alastair knew this to be true. Yet, none of his trusted men shared his view.

They argued that the brand of a crest established Mackintosh's imagined superiority, not just over the lass, but the MacDonells as well. The argument was also raised that Mackintosh would be so bold in his actions because he never planned for Rachel to escape.

Alastair didn't believe this.

He opened his eyes.

The situation was too audacious. For Mackintosh to steal into this very keep and nab Rachel from her bed was the snag in their theory. The abduction occurred in spring. Guards would have alerted the keep to the presence of an enemy clan.

Trepidation gnawed at his gut.

The guards would think naught of the approach of an allied clan. Only an ally, someone trusted within the realm of the clan, would know the layout of the keep, which rooms to enter and which to avoid. Only an ally, or a clansman, would know their way through the forest at night.

"Ye sent for me, laird?"

Torquil's voice drew Alastair from his thoughts. He glanced toward the door and nodded. "Aye."

The giant entered the room and closed the door behind him. Alastair sighed and pushed himself out of his chair.

"Do you know which guards were on watch the night Rachel disappeared?"

The big man frowned and scratched his beard. "'Twas long ago." He nodded. "Aye, I seem tae recall who was on duty that night."

Alastair approached the hearth. "I need to speak with them."

"Only two still live." Torquil joined his friend before the warm fire. "One died of lung fever last winter. The others fell during the battle in the glen."

A frown tugged at Alastair's heart. "The survivors will have to suffice."

Silence lingered between the men. Absently, Alastair stared at the portrait of Valerie. She had been his salvation after the death of his sire. Through her, he had hoped to revive the clan from their bloody past.

"Ye still believe the Mackintosh innocent?"

Torquil's query pulled Alastair from his reflections.

With a sigh, he nodded. "Aye, I do." A thought came to him and he frowned. "Tell me, did my sire have visitors in the days before Rachel disappeared?"

Again, Torquil grimaced and stroked the wiry hair that covered his chin. "Aye. John and his men arrived a few days prior."

The mention of his uncle stirred abhorrence in the pit of Alastair's belly. He never liked the man, nor understood how his sire tolerated his presence.

Through his brother, John gained the grant of newly-acquired lands near Glengarry and the clansmen to protect it. Yet, Alastair knew the grant was not enough to sate his uncle's thirst for power. Shortly after his sire died, Alastair found himself in battle against his uncle, defending his birthright to rule his mountain.

"John helped hunt for Rachel," Torquil continued. "When he had tae depart on business a couple days after, he offered his men tae aid in the search."

Dread spread its fingers through Alastair's soul. His uncle could have easily managed the capture of Rachel. By being present in this keep, the entire event could have been planned. His men may have taken the lass while John, by merely being present, would appear uninvolved.

"I want the bastard brought to me," Alastair said, his anger beginning to rise.

Torquil frowned. "Yer uncle?"

Disgust wound around Alastair's heart. "Aye, my uncle, and I want you to head the plan."

Worry formed ridges on Torquil's brow. "What concerns ye, my friend?"

Alastair boldly met his friend's gaze. "That my uncle was the one who instigated the abduction of Rachel. He knew my sire's fondness for the lass. In his quest to gain our lands, it is conceivable that he would conspire to drive my sire into the depths of madness."

Torquil lowered his gaze. "If yer notion is correct, then yer lady's sire —"

"Died an innocent man," Alastair said, not allowing his friend to finish. "I want John's throat between my hands so I can dare him to lie."

Torquil nodded. "Ye have my fealty. What is yer plan?"

"I would love to grab him from his bed in the dead of night, just as Rachel was taken." Alastair grimaced. "Yet, with my uncle, methinks another tactic would work better." He looked his friend in the eye. "I will invite him here, as my guest."

Torquil's mouth fell open. "Surely ye jest? The man kens the hatred ye carry for him."

"The man is also vain." Alastair approached his desk and, once seated, began penning a missive. "I will inform him of my marriage and express my desire to mend the rift between us for the sake of my bairns. Whilst they will never know my sire, John will serve as protector to my offspring."

A moment of silence passed, then deep laughter filled the air. Alastair looked up from his work, surprised to see a smile as broad as a Highland sky on Torquil's face.

"He will devour every word as truth."

Alastair nodded. "'Tis the plan." He finished the missive and applied his seal. "He is crafty, yet he has never matched wits with me." He withdrew another parchment and took up his quill.

"I would like Ninian here as well. Somehow, through this web of deceit, John and MacLean are linked." He dusted the missive and applied two seals against the folded paper. "Once I discover the truth, God himself will be unable to save them."

A knock sounded on the door. Alastair stood and handed the missives to his friend. "Take a few men with you. The parchment with two seals is for Ninian."

Torquil nodded and tucked them into the plaid draped across his chest.

Again, the rap on the door sounded. Alastair sighed and opened the barrier. One of the women who served the keep as maid stood before him.

"My pardon, laird, but I just passed your chamber." The maid paused and averted her gaze. "Your lady weeps."

Fear sank Alastair's heart. Without a word, he ran for the stairs. If harm had come to Ciara, he would kill the person responsible.

He paused beyond the barrier of the room Ciara occupied alone. Quiet sobs drifted through the wood. He took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

Ciara sat on her bottom in the middle of the room, her back to him. Her head bowed, his gaze followed the trail of her burnished copper braid that brushed her spine and coiled against the cold stone floor. Scattered around her were painted scraps of paper.

Uncertainty creased his brow. He eased the door shut and carefully approached his bride.

"Ciara?"

She sniffed and, from her movements, he knew she wiped at her tears.

"What is amiss?"

She shook her head and sniffed again. "Naught."

"Then, why do you weep?" He knelt beside her. The sight of her grief-stricken face tugged at his heart. "Ciara?" He lifted a hand to her cheek.

Ciara recoiled and flashed him a watery gaze. "Do not coddle the weak, Alastair."

What the hell was she talking about?

"Ciara, you are not weak. Now, tell me what brings tears to your beautiful eyes."

She averted her gaze and drew in a ragged breath. "I ruined it." Through her trembling fingers, the petals of a paper rose fluttered into her lap. "I defile everything I touch these days."

Why on earth was she so upset about scraps of paper falling apart?

"Ciara, 'tis unusual for you to get so emotional over something so meaningless."

"Dare not mock me, MacDonell," she choked and shoved the petals from her lap. "My roses may seem meaningless to you, but they have brought me great joy in times when naught but sorrow ruled my life."

Alastair was at a loss for words. He watched her scramble to her feet and move to stare out the window.

Her arms circled her belly and a ragged breath filled her lungs. "Pray leave me in peace."

Understanding spiraled through his soul. Ciara carried his babe. He had been in the company of enough women in this state to recognize the signs. Bouts of temperament and unfounded emotions were indications that a child had been conceived.

A slow grin touched his lips. He stood and approached his wife.

"Ciara, do you realize you breed?"

Her gaze remained transfixed on the storm. Fresh tears spilled over her cheeks. "Aye."

The smile slowly left his face. "Why, then, do you seem so miserable?"

Her lower lip quivered and she wiped away her tears.

"Women die in childbirth, MacDonell." She shook her head. "I do not wish to be out there with Valerie, buried in the cold earth with naught but a blanket of snow for warmth."

Alastair lowered his gaze. Her words were true. His own mother died attempting to present his sire with a second son. Both mother and child perished.

"I have never been so frightened before in my life."

Her quiet voice drew his gaze. She tried hard not to cry. He could see it in the set of her jaw and the poise of her body.

"Ciara, your own mother brought twelve healthy bairns into the world. 'Tis quite likely you will do the same."

Her gaze flashed to him and she took a step away. "If you dare give me a dozen babes, so help me --"

"You will love each and every one of them." He smiled and advanced toward her. She retreated. "Come here, Ciara. I wish to kiss my wife."

She shook her head. "That was the prelude to my present situation."

"I know," he said and continued his prowl. "Yet you have failed to recognize one thing."

Ciara paused and frowned at him. "What?"

Alastair couldn't help himself. He drew her into his arms and grinned. "You cannot conceive another while this one resides in your womb."

"'Tis a difficult feat to accomplish with us residing in separate rooms." She grimaced and pushed against his chest. "Unhand me, MacDonell."

He shook his head. "Not until the day I die."

His lips touched hers and his arms held her firmly in his grasp.

Alastair MacDonell loved his wife. He vowed to spend the rest of his life showing her how much.

\* \* \*

Ciara paused in the doorway and watched her husband. Head bowed over papers strewn across his desk, he seemed engrossed in his work. The glow of a dozen candles danced over his tousled hair. A fire burned in the hearth and cast warmth over the inviting room.

"Alastair?"

He raised his head. The dusk of his eyes swept over her. Ciara shivered. Would he always possess the power to disarm her with just a glance?

"Aye, wife," he whispered and gathered the papers into a stack before him.

Ciara drew in a breath and approached his desk. "I wish to beg pardon from you."

Lean fingers paused against stiff paper. Dark eyes looked into hers and a frown marred an otherwise smooth brow. "For what?"

"My conduct earlier." She paused and lowered her gaze from his. "I usually have better control over my emotions. 'Tis my prayer you can forgive my weakness."

Silence lingered between them. In the hearth, the fire crackled and hissed, which only added to Ciara's distress. She wished he would say something.

The echo of his sigh reached her ears. His chair scraped against the stone floor as he stood. Ciara tightened her fingers before her and steeled herself for the explosion sure to come.

A touch borne of tenderness brushed her cheek and moved to her chin. The slightest pressure of his fingers raised her gaze to his.

"Who made you believe emotions are wrong?"

A lump rose in her throat. The gentleness of his eyes, the soft caress of his voice, his compassion caught her unaware.

"Who convinced you that tears are a sign of weakness?"

"They are --"

"Am I weak?" he asked and moved his thumb over her lips.

Ciara could not answer him. Her heart raked her ribs and vibrated through her soul. She managed to shake her head. Grace touched his face and lured tears to her eyes.

"I wept the night Valerie died."

"As did I," she managed to say.

"Yet I felt no shame, nor thought myself weak." He cupped her face in his strong hands. "I display emotions too, Ciara. Anger when someone speaks against you, love when I look into your incredible eyes, lust when I have you naked in my arms. You are the one who awoke these feelings in me, feelings I had buried long ago."

"Alastair, I --"

"I love you, Ciara. I have never said those words to another living being. Not my sire. Not Valerie. No one but you."

Tears slipped from her eyes. She raised her trembling hands to his wrists. "Please cease this torment."

"Torment?" he whispered and eased her toward him. "I am the one being crucified, love. You keep me from your bed and avoid my touch. When will you forgive me?"

Ciara closed her eyes and turned away. Her husband's touch kept her in place.

"Who wounded you, Ciara? Who made you ashamed to love me?"

"'Tis colder than the heart of an Englishman out there."

The harsh, unexpected voice broke the mood between them. Alastair raised his head and Ciara turned.

Framed in the doorway, holding a satchel, stood Johann. Damp wool covered the woman and fingerless gloves embraced her weathered hands.

"Johann, did you walk here through the storm?"

The woman scowled at Alastair and entered the chamber. She paused before the hearth, dropped her satchel, and stretched her fingers towards the welcoming warmth.

"I own no horse and I canna ride my cow." She turned her back to the fire and nodded. "I walked."

Ciara could only imagine how long the journey took on foot. "I will fetch some warmed mead to chase the chill from your bones."

"Do not trouble yourself," Johann said, halting Ciara before she could leave. "I had a nip or two on my walk. This fire is all I need." She narrowed her



gaze on them. "What did you do to make your lass weep, laird?"

Embarrassment slid through Ciara's veins. 'Twas horrid enough Alastair saw her in such a state, but for a stranger to witness it as well was mortifying.

"I merely told her I loved her."

Johann raised a gray brow. "Did you now?"

"Aye," he replied and leaned against his desk. "What brings you out of seclusion?"

She grimaced and moved her glance to Ciara. "Your wife there. Scrawny as she is, I figured if she is to deliver a healthy bairn, she'd be needing my help."

Images of the filth that covered the woman's abode sprang to Ciara's mind. "That is not necessary, Johann. My husband --"

"Wore diapers himself once upon a time. Who do you think changed most of them?" She snorted and shook her head. "He dinna come out full grown, you know."

Despite herself, Ciara smiled. "Nay, I suppose not."

"Johann served as midwife to the keep for many a year, Ciara." His voice drew her gaze. Arms crossed over his chest, he nodded. "She delivered everyone from Torquil to the youngest lass that serves the hall."

This did naught to bolster Ciara's confidence in the woman. After all, Alastair's mother perished in childbirth.

Johann sighed and rubbed a hand over her rump. "Aye, lost a few by the will of God. The laird's mum for example." She shook her head. "Her body refused to open up and expel the bairn."

And the same fate could await Ciara. She lowered her gaze and tried to shove aside the disturbing images.

"Och, lass, I dinna mean to scare you." Johann said. "'Tis nothing at all to bring a babe into the world. 'Tis as natural as drawing a breath."

Ciara nodded and lifted her gaze to the bedraggled woman. "Why would you want to help me?"

Johann scowled. "'Tis not for you I am here, 'tis for the laird. He needs a healthy heir."

"And your presence will assure that?" Ciara asked.

"It will help more than it will harm." Johann retrieved her satchel and headed for the door. "Is my old chamber fine with you, laird?"

"Aye, Johann."

"As if it would matter had you said nay," Ciara said the moment the woman left the room. She turned to her husband. The smile on his face stirred her irritation. "You find this amusing?"

"Aye, I do." He pulled her into his arms and chuckled. "Johann would die before admitting she walked all day in a storm just to tend you."

"She probably longs to smother me in my sleep."

"Nay, wife, she likes you well enough or she would have stayed away."

That may be true, but trust was one thing Johann would have to earn from Ciara.

She wiggled in his arms and sighed. "Release me, husband. I need to go make sure that witch is not poisoning my food."

"If I thought her a threat, I would not allow her anywhere near you."

Ciara stilled and braved a look into his eyes. "I will arrange a bath and clean clothes for her, then. If she truly wants to tend me as midwife, she will keep herself scrubbed or I will find another."

Seconds that seemed like hours passed before he spoke.

"Point taken," he whispered and slid his hand to her cheek. "Be warned, the talk Johann interrupted is far from finished, Ciara. We will continue it again tonight."

Not if she could help it. She had come too close to surrendering to him just now. Ciara nodded and left his presence. She hoped Alastair would forget the words they exchanged and never broach the subject again.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Alastair stood before the window in Ciara's room and stared into nothingness. Every thought in his head centered around his wife.

Damn Johann and her ill timing. Before her intrusion, Ciara had been very close to opening her heart to him, not to mention accepting him back into her life. Now, he would have to work to capture that moment again.

"Alastair?"

The hush of Ciara's voice drew him from his thoughts. He turned and, through the tender glow of candles, Alastair watched her step into the room and close the door.

"I thought you would be abed by now."

He sighed and shook his head. "I could not sleep."

Her gaze held his for the space of a heartbeat, then lowered to the floor. "I am happy to say, Johann has bathed and sworn to remain cleansed for the duration of her stay."

Alastair raised an eyebrow. "How did you manage that?"

Her gaze flashed to his and a small smile touched her lips.

"I threatened to haul her foul carcass out into the snow and scrub her down myself." She averted her gaze and approached the table. "My threat alone did not convince her, though."

Something was bothering her. He could tell by the way she chewed on her lower lip, and the slight tremble of her hand as she filled a mug with ale.

"What did convince her?" he asked and moved to stand beside her.

Eyes downcast, Ciara lowered the mug. "I fear I have overstepped my position, and need to beg your pardon again."

Her words tugged at his heart. She had so little confidence in herself when dealing with his clan -- not that he blamed her. Yet, unless she committed murder, she should know he would support her actions.

"Ciara, tell me what you have done."

Her gaze moved to his. Uncertainty clouded the serene beauty of her eyes.

"I told her you upheld my decision and, unless she complied, she would be turned out of this keep and forbidden to tend me or anyone else under your realm."

Alastair stared down at her and prayed one day soon she would love him as much as he loved her.

"You told her true, wife."

Reservation creased her brow. "You are not angry?"

He shook his head and pulled her into his arms. "What is there to be angry about? You are my wife, and your worries concern me also." His fingers strayed to her cheek and eased away an errant lock of hair. "Clearly, Johann believed you or she would not have complied."

"I am free to make decisions? You will not belittle me for my boldness?"

Anger churned in the pit of his belly. 'Twas not aimed at his wife, but at the sadist who placed such fear and doubt in her heart.

With restraint, he kept his temper in check. "I would never belittle you, Ciara. I love you, lass."

Tears dusted her eyes and she lowered her gaze to his chest. "You continue to amaze me, husband. A lesser man would have chastised me before the clan for daring to imply he honored a decision he knew naught about."

His fingers slid to her chin and raised her gaze to his. "Have I not done my best to honor all your requests?"

She nodded and tried to withdraw from his grasp. He resisted.

"Who in your past condemned you, Ciara?" He held her close and refused to yield. "Who did you love so much that their ill-placed logic wounded your soul?"

Ciara closed her eyes and shook her head. "Some things are best left alone, husband."

"More often than not, only by speaking about such offenses can they be resolved."

She squirmed in his embrace. "Alastair, please. I do not wish to speak of the past."

"I do." One hand cupped her cheek. "Look at me, Ciara."

Her eyes drifted open. Nestled in their depths he saw the pain she bore. He wanted to banish it from her mind, her body, her soul.

"You can trust me, wife." She shivered in his arms and lowered her gaze. "I need to know how you were harmed. 'Tis the only way to mend your shattered faith."

Again, she shook her head. "I cannot open wounds long healed, husband." She raised her head and stared at him through eyes filled with tears. "Let it rest."

"I cannot do that. Somewhere along the journey of your life, you experienced a terrible event. Whatever it was, it damaged your soul."

Hurt flashed across her eyes and spilled a tear over her cheek. "Release me."

Her choked whisper stabbed his heart as keenly as a blade. Perhaps he was wrong to force her to discuss a subject that bore her pain. With regret, he withdrew his touch.

A ragged breath filled her lungs. She turned away from him and bowed her head.

"Ciara, I only try to help." He longed to touch her again, to place his hands on her shoulders and draw her against his chest. "Who wounded you, lass?"

Silence drifted between them. Each second echoed through Alastair's heart until he could stand no more. He followed his instincts and pulled her against him.

Her body trembled. 'Twas then he noticed she wept. The sight of her tears burned his soul.

Wrapped in his arms, he pressed his cheek against hers and whispered, "It breaks my heart to see you suffer, Ciara. Please, tell me who made you ashamed to love me."

One hand rose to her cheek. Her fingers quivered as she wiped away the tears that stained her freckled skin.

"Brothers can be very cruel," she whispered on a choked breath. "The lessons they taught — I learned much from their countless, if not honest, tactics."

Alastair could barely breathe. Brothers. He should have known that growing up under the fist of Eneas had harmed his wife. And Ninian. Had he misjudged the man? Had he been in on the pranks that wounded his bride?

Ciara moved from his embrace. "The spring Valerie and I turned four and ten, lads captured our fascination." She paused before the hearth and sighed. "Val was so fair. The lads buzzed around her like bees to honey."

Memories of Valerie flitted across his mind. Her smile and charm, her love of life. Remorse touched his soul. He had not deserved her and, in the end, he was the cause of her death.

"Their lack of attention toward me was no bother. Despite Valerie's reassurance, I knew I was unattractive. I had enough people around to tell me, so that I knew the truth." She shrugged. "'Twas a fact."

Alastair had a very difficult time keeping his distance. He wanted to go to her, hold her, love her. But he couldn't. Not until she was ready.

"That spring, a young man from a neighboring clan arrived. A friend of Eneas', he gained permission to stay with our clan for the duration of the summer. Handsome is not a strong enough word to describe his appearance. When he passed by, grown women would pause their chores and admire him."

Bitterness wound through Alastair's belly. He didn't like the way this conversation was going.

"I was no different from the others. I dreamt of winning his heart, although I was never bold enough to try. With my looks, he barely knew I existed."

Alastair moved toward her, unable to stay rooted to the spot by the table. He paused before her and drew her gaze. He was almost sorry he persisted with this issue.

"Unbeknownst to me, Eneas overheard Valerie and I discussing our childhood fantasies of love toward his friend. Eneas enlisted him and some of my siblings in a jest." Her lower lip quivered.

She bowed her head. "For a fortnight this lad entertained me. He accompanied me during my chores, sat with me during meals and convinced me that he truly cared. All the while, my brothers snickered behind my back and enjoyed their ruse."

Anger churned in Alastair's gut, at her brothers and himself. From this tale, he knew that in his wife's eyes, he was no different than this cruel lad.

"One evening, in response to a message, I went to meet him by the bank of the loch near our home." A tender smile touched her lips.

"'Twas the most beautiful night ever. The moon was full, the breeze warm. A perfect setting for —" Her voice faltered and her smile disappeared. "I am ashamed to say, I fell right into their scheme. Feelings I shared with no one except Valerie tumbled from my foolish lips. Hope filled my heart as I waited for him to repeat my words of devotion."

Shivers slid down Alastair's spine. With care, he reached out and touched her cheek. Her eyes met his. Mirrored there he saw the extent of the damage done to her by a thoughtless prank.

"I can still hear their laughter, Alastair," she whispered as silent tears fell from her eyes. "My brothers emerged from the shrubs and mocked my words. All the while, the lot of them rolled around the sweet grass and roared themselves silly. I had never been so humiliated in my life."

She was right, her brothers were cruel. At this moment, Alastair had half a mind to hunt them down and beat them into the ground. Worse still, she thought the same of him.

Ciara turned away and approached the window. "To hear such ridicule from this lad, not to mention my brothers, spiraled me deep into disgrace." She paused and drew a ragged breath into her lungs.

"Eneas was the worst of the lot. My mortification alone was not enough for him. He belittled me with taunts of my emotions. He called me weak and desperate, and said I would toss myself at any man who showed me kindness."

Alastair's hands curled into fists. Wait until he saw Eneas again!

"When I gained my freedom from the cruel realm by the loch, I fled for my rooms. Along the way, I literally ran into Ninian. I was hysterical, yet he gained enough information to know what happened. He beat the stuffing out of Eneas for instigating the ruse."

Good, Alastair thought and crossed the room to stand beside her.

"When father discovered what transpired, he banished the lad back to his people and my brothers were reprimanded." She shook her head. "No amount of punishment could erase the ugly truth I learned that night."

Alastair brushed her cheek with his fingers and drew her gaze. "The only truth displayed is that your brothers are cruel creatures with no respect for others."

"You are wrong, husband," she whispered. "I learned through countless escapades not to show sentiment. To admit love is the same as placing your heart on a table for cannibals to feast upon. To show emotion or display tears is a sign of weakness. One should remain impassive, and keep all feelings buried deep inside where no one can ever reach."

Her words twisted his heart. He shook his head and eased her toward him. "You are mistaken, Ciara."

"Nay, I am not." She moved out of his grasp and stared at him through sorrowful eyes. "Their jests were numerous, their repentance stark. The night my sire died is yet another confirmation of my words. I wept without restraint over his corpse, and expressed my wishes over his burial. This so enraged Eneas that he beat me before the clan, shouting at me all the while to cease the tears. He was now the laird. 'Twas his place to make all decisions concerning the clan."

Alastair reached for her. She slapped his hands away. Anger mixed with determination set her jaw.

"I vowed that day never to display emotions in the presence of another, to never trust another. Until I met you, I kept that promise. Now, look at me. I am an emotional wretch, and it is all your fault!"

"Ciara --"

"Stand away from me, MacDonell." Again, she slapped away his touch. "You forced me to wed you, then tricked me into your bed."

"You tempt my anger, woman," he said and pulled her into his grasp. He reminded himself that because she carried his babe, her emotions were raw.

"You are the one who would not let the matter rest, husband. Do not blame me if you do not care for the truth." She struggled against him, her anger high. "I never wanted to feel again. You made me break the promise I made to myself."

"Ciara, it is normal to feel, to love, to weep."

She shook her head. "'Tis weakness that opens yourself for wounds."

"Sheep shit!" he said and tightened his hold on her arms. "Eneas is a imbecile. Wait until my path crosses his again! If you thought Ninian beat the stuffing out of him, 'tis naught compared to what I long to do to him for hurting you so."

"He opened my eyes --"

"He blinded you!" God, she was frustrating. "Damn it all, Ciara. I love you."

He crushed her against his chest and kissed her. Alastair longed to wipe away the memories of a cruel childhood from her brain. He wanted her forever in his arms, his heart, his soul. Through trust, she would see that her brothers were wrong, that she could openly love him without fear of ridicule.

The kiss lasted until her struggles ceased and her arms circled his neck. With reluctance, he lifted his head and stared down into her flushed face.

"You muddle my brain, husband," she whispered, then lowered her gaze. "You make me forget your betrayal."

"Place your trust in me, Ciara, and I will open a whole new world for you." He cupped her cheek and lifted her face. "I swear on Valerie's grave never to hurt you again."

"I want to believe you."

Hope speared his heart. "You can believe me, love. Have I not done all in my power to learn the truth thus far?"

Ciara lowered her gaze and nodded.

"Have I not tried to regain your trust?"

Again, she nodded. Alastair raised her chin and stared into her beautiful eyes. "Are you through punishing me, wife? Can we resume our life?"

"I am frightened -- afraid of being hurt again, Alastair. Life has been very cruel to me thus far. Why should I believe you, or believe that happiness can be mine?"

His heart shivered against his ribs. How he loved her! "I will do my best each and every day to make you happy. Our time apart has been torture to me. I love you, Ciara. Please forgive me."

Tears shimmered in her eyes. "Should I forgive you, and you hurt me again, I would be tempted to kill you in your bed."

"I would deserve that." He stroked her cheek and captured an errant tear with his fingers. "Am I forgiven?"

Another tear spilled over her lashes and Ciara nodded.

Joy such as Alastair never knew before filled his soul. He crushed her against him and kissed her deeply. "You will not regret your decision, love," he whispered and cradled her in his arms. "I promise to love you forever."

Ciara sniffed and pushed away from his embrace. "What if I cannot return the love you give?"

"Then, I suppose I will know how Valerie must have felt. She loved me to the depths of her soul, yet I was unable to return the words." He stroked her cheek again. "If you bear feelings of love for me, then do not fear saying the words. I assure you, naught but good will come from such an admission."

Ciara gently shook her head. "Alastair, I --"

"Hush," he whispered and placed a finger over her full lips. "When you trust me, when you are ready to take a risk, the words will come. Until then, try to forget Eneas and his pranks."

She closed her eyes and nodded. "I will try."

Alastair folded her into his arms and held her close. "'Tis all I ask, lass," he said and placed a tender kiss upon her brow. "'Tis all I ask."



## Chapter Twenty-Two

"Ninian!" Ciara smiled and hastened down the snow-covered steps that separated her from her brother and Torquil. She flung herself into Ninian's waiting arms and hugged him tight.

"Och, sister, 'tis frigid out." He eased his hold and grasped her shoulders. "You should have remained indoors. 'Tis unwise for a lass in your condition to be running through the snow."

"I agree."

Ciara disentangled herself from her brother's grasp and turned toward the keep. Alastair stood on the steps, her cloak clutched in his powerful hand.

"Do not be cross with me, husband, or you will find yourself alone once more," she said and made her way toward him through the hampering snow. "If you had told me of his impending arrival, I would not have forgotten my cloak."

"I was unsure how long the journey would take." Alastair frowned and settled the garment on her shoulders. He glanced over her head and nodded. "I am glad to see you were able to come so soon, Ninian."

Her brother moved beside her and rubbed his gloved hands together. "I knew by the missive that it would be best not to tarry."

Ciara creased her brow and looked up at her husband. "Mmissive? You sent for him?"

Alastair nodded and, her elbow in his grasp, turned toward the keep. "I have laid a trap and I need your brother's assistance to carry off the ploy."

Dread coiled through her belly. She paused at the entrance and drew her husband's frown. "Whom do you plan to snare?"

"We can discuss this inside, wife," he said and pushed open the door.

A muffled groan echoed from behind the door and the barrier began to close. Alastair grimaced and wedged his body through the opening.

Ciara tried to peer over his shoulder. All she saw was the broad expanse of her husband's back.

"Johann, are you hale? I had no idea you were so close."

Mistrust sped through Ciara's veins. In the fortnight that had passed since Johann's arrival, Ciara grew more ill at ease. Something was amiss with the woman's presence, yet Ciara could not identify what precisely caused her suspicion. Johann was polite and attentive to Ciara's needs. There was no basis for her feelings, save for her intuition.

"Och, laird, 'tis I who beg pardon of you. 'Tis clumsy I am in my old age."

The door opened and Ciara stepped into the warmth of the hall, Ninian and Torquil close behind.

Johann, her cheeks flushed, smoothed a hand over her groomed hair and brushed her fingers against the skirt of her gown. At least the woman had maintained her appearance during her stay.

"Arrange refreshments for my guest and have Ninian's things placed in a room," Alastair said to Johann as he swept the cloak from Ciara's shoulders. "The men in their company will be weary, not to mention hungry." He handed Johann the cloak and, hand pressed against the small of his wife's back, ushered her toward the room he used for an office.

Ciara seated herself on the couch. Ninian and Torquil vied for a position before the hearth while Alastair closed the door.

He turned to face the room and sighed. "How were you received at Glengarry?"

Torquil grumbled and fixed Alastair with a frown. "With arrows, at first. Once we gained the advantage and John read the missive, all was well."

Alastair seated himself beside Ciara. "He will come?"

Torquil nodded. "Aye."

Unease settled in Ciara's belly. She turned to her husband. "Your uncle will visit? I thought you detested him?"

"I do." He then explained all he learned about Rachel, and his suspicions of his uncle's involvement.

Gooseflesh slid over Ciara's skin. The evil that possessed some men, she would never understand. Deep in her heart, she prayed Alastair was correct and her father's name would be cleared.

"John is very devious. 'Tis one of the reasons why I wanted Ninian here. I need several trusted eyes upon the man for the duration of his stay."

Ciara lowered her gaze from her husband. How had she been so fortunate to find him? Another man would have let the matter rest as truth. Not Alastair. He made her a promise and, clearly, intended to honor his word.

"What role do you plan for me?"

Ninian's voice drew her gaze. He moved away from the hearth a bit, yet remained close to its warmth.

"Friendship," Alastair said. A knock at the door halted his words.

Johann entered the room and placed a tray on the polished table before the couch. Her gaze rested on Ciara for the space of a heartbeat, then moved to Alastair. "Will you be needing anything else, laird?"

Alastair shook his head and leaned forward to fill mugs with ale. "Nay, Johann, thank you. Close the door on your way out."

Again the woman's gaze swept Ciara. The look nestled in Johann's eyes sent chills through Ciara's soul. Something about this woman did not ring true.

"Johann, you have been dismissed."

The deep timbre of her husband's voice comforted Ciara. Without a thought, she moved her hand to cover his. Johann lowered her gaze and left the room. The moment the door latched behind her, some of the tension left Ciara's heart.

The men helped themselves to tankards then resumed their discussion.

"Friendship?" Ninian said, a frown on his brow. "With whom?"

"My uncle." Alastair squeezed Ciara's fingers then lifted his goblet. "I suspect he is linked to MacLean somehow."

"And you need me to discover how?"

"Aye." Alastair drank from his mug, then placed it on the tray. "The task should be simple. John is quite vain and loves to boast about himself."

"Aye," Ciara whispered. "He paid visits to my sire before -- I glimpsed him only once, and recall he strutted about the great hall, preening over his newly-acquired lands."

"I had no knowledge that my uncle knew your sire." The hush of Alastair's voice drew her gaze. Nestled in the depths of his haunting eyes, something disturbed him.

"'Twas after he gained the area of Glengarry," Ninian said. "He approached our keep, and those of his neighbors, bringing with him a claim of peace and unity." He snorted and shook his head. "'Twas difficult to maintain peace with a man who lifted your cattle and chased every maid on the land."

"Livestock were stolen from ye?" Torquil frowned and placed his mug on the mantel.

Ninian nodded. "Aye, although the thieves were never caught, nor could we prove our new neighbor was the culprit. 'Twas naught but a gut instinct that severed relations with him and the band of ruffians he dubbed a clan."

"What happened after communication with John ceased?" Alastair asked.

Ninian's gaze flashed to Ciara before returning to her husband. "Others were blamed for the crimes. Evidence was left behind that incriminated innocent clans."

Ciara closed her eyes. She never knew this. The accusation from Torquil in the dining hall, which now seemed a lifetime ago, fluttered through her mind.

"Were other clans in ill favor with yours?"

Alastair's voice drew Ciara from her thoughts. The set of her husband's jaw worried her. She turned her attention to her brother.

"Aye. Some were barely tolerated, others not at all, until my sire died." Ninian scowled and placed his mug on the mantel. "Eneas is more forgiving than I would be."

Images of MacLean flashed through her brain. Her sire had naught to do with the man. After his death, and Eneas advanced as laird, MacLean was again

welcomed into their home. The memories stirred bile in her belly. Her brother had tried to force the decrepit fool upon her. Ciara, with the help of her mother, refused. Her defiance, coupled with his lust for the family silver, propelled her mother to return to her homeland in the company of her only daughter.

Alastair sighed and shook his head. "All this makes my head spin. It seems there is quite an intricate web that surrounds, not only your sire, but my uncle and MacLean as well."

Ninian stretched his arms. "If there is nothing else, I would appreciate being shown to my room. Torquil and I made haste traveling here. I could use a meal and a rest."

Ciara climbed to her feet. "I will arrange a tray and discover which chamber Johann assigned you." She turned a gaze on Torquil. Despite his earlier resentment of her, something in his eyes had changed. If she did not know better, Ciara would think he was beginning to like her. "I would be pleased to arrange a tray for you as well, Torquil."

The part of the giant's face not covered with hair colored slightly, followed by a scowl. "I can fend fer myself, milady."

"As you wish," she said and approached the doors. A feeling of accomplishment touched her heart. Torquil, her most adamant enemy, had called her by a favorable name. 'Twas progress, and Ciara welcomed the change.

\* \* \*

"Did you ever discover who sent word of Valerie's death to Glengarry?"

Alastair rolled to his side in the bed he shared with Ciara. Through the faint light of the moon that spilled into their chamber, he studied her.

"I thought you were asleep," he whispered and moved his hand to her belly. Beneath his heated palm, the slight swell of his child filled his hand.

Ciara rested her palm across his and sighed. "My thoughts keep me from slumber." She stroked his fingers. "The missive, husband. Did you ever discover who dispatched the news?"

"Nay." He frowned and moved closer to his wife. "'Tis a riddle. None were absent from the keep in the days that followed Valerie's death." He shook his head. "I pray once John arrives, I can glean the truth from him and know who to condemn."

Her fingers stilled against his and she turned her head against the pillow. In the semi-darkness of their chamber, her eyes glistened. "I believe I know who is responsible."

She had his attention. His heart stilled and his breath lodged in his throat. "Who?"

A moment of silence passed, followed by her sigh. "You will think me daft," she whispered, then turned her gaze away. "I suspect Johann."

Alastair's heart fluttered to his belly. He expected her to name Torquil or one of the other men in his realm. But Johann? She lived a life of seclusion, sequestered amid the trees. 'Twas her daughter who had been tortured to death.

"Can you tell me why you suspect her?"

Ciara slowly nodded. "Aye. Do you recall the day I first met the woman?"

Through the pages of his mind, Alastair drew forth that frosty morn when he had ridden with his bride deep into the woods. "Aye."

Again Ciara turned his way. "Do you not think it odd that she knew my identity?"

He shook his head. "I introduced you."

"Nay, you did not, husband." She paused and twined her fingers with his over her womb. "You knocked upon her door and told her you had brought your bride to meet her."

*Why did you bring this Mackintosh bitch to me?* Johann's words echoed through Alastair's mind. His gut churned with disbelief.

"If she remained secluded in her croft, how did she know from which clan I hailed?"

How, indeed? Dread closed Alastair's eyes. *The sire of this heathen bitch killed my daughter.* Could Ciara be right? But why would Johann send word to John?

*By all rights, I should be given free reign to bind and torture her, make her suffer the same indignities forced upon my Rachel.*

Revenge. Retaliation upon a clan he believed innocent, yet Johann believed guilty as sin.

Dear Lord, he had unwittingly invited more than one deadly viper into his home?

"Alastair?"

The brush of her hand against his cheek drew his gaze. His heart raked his ribs. Empathy had clouded his judgement, and he had placed danger within striking distance of his wife.

"I am ashamed to say, I had no idea," he whispered and covered her hand with his own. "I will confront her on the morrow."

"Nay, husband, you will hold your tongue."

Her plea chilled his blood. Through the darkness he tried to see her eyes, read her thoughts. "I will not allow anyone near you who may cause you harm."

"I can handle Johann -- or have you forgotten the tussle in her yard?"

The memory of Ciara holding Johann captive in the snow flitted across his mind. "I remember, yet--"

"Keep silent until your uncle arrives," Ciara said, not allowing him to finish. "Inform Torquil and Ninian of our suspicion, but do not act differently around Johann."

Understanding edged its way into his brain. He kissed her palm and cradled her hand in his. "I see your ploy. If Johann is the one responsible for conspiring with John, it will become evident when he arrives."

The warmth of her sigh caressed his soul. "As I have told you before, husband, you are not a dim-witted man."

Alastair pulled her into his arms and held her close. "Nor are you a dim-witted lass." He kissed her brow and tightened his hold. "Sleep now, love. You need your rest."

He held her long after her breathing evened and her body grew lax against him. If their suspicions were proven true, Alastair did not know what he would do.

Treason could not be tolerated at all, and the punishment would be severe. He had a couple of options before him. Banishment would be in order. Death was also an alternative. Yet, could Alastair dole such a sentence to a woman?

As dawn streaked the sky pink, Alastair made up his mind. He knew exactly how to gain the truth from Johann and his uncle. Now, all he needed was for his trap to be sprung.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Ciara cleared a circle in the frost-covered pane in Alastair's den that overlooked the clearing. Through the smear, blurred images moved. Despite the obstacle, she recognized her husband at once. He alone sat astride a horse.

Again, she wiped away the fog from the window. Alastair's mount moved, carrying her husband away from their home. His men waded through snow and moved further from her view.

Unease nestled in her womb. John of Glengarry approached. Her husband rode out to meet him and his men.

"Are you truly happy here, sister?"

Startled, Ciara turned her attention from the windows. Framed in the doorway stood Ninian. Ciara smiled and went to greet her brother.

"Aye, I am content." She paused before her champion and looked into his worried eyes. "Why do you ask?"

He gently shook his head. "'Tis merely a question I longed to ask when we found time alone." He sighed and placed a tender kiss upon her brow. "It pleases me to know you have found love."

Love? The word stilled Ciara's heart. In silence, she watched her brother enter the room and lower himself into a chair. How did he know what rested in her heart? How could he know of something she had admitted to none but herself?

A crooked grin curled his lips. "'Tis in your eyes, Ciara. Your fondness for MacDonell cannot be missed."

Heat flushed her cheeks. How easily he read her thoughts! "I never imagined being in this position, Ninian." She shook her head and seated herself on the couch across from him. "A husband and a babe of my own. I truly thought I would die a spinster."

"If you had not gone to France . . ." His voice trailed away and he avoided her gaze.

Melancholy touched her heart. "Ninian, she did not suffer." His gaze met hers. Tears glistened in his eyes and drew moisture to her own. "Mother died in her sleep."

Grief contorted his features, and once again he looked away. "Eneas was such a bastard to her after father died." A ragged breath filled his lungs and one hand moved over his eyes. "I will never forgive him for driving her away."

A tear slipped from Ciara's eye. She wiped it away, then approached her brother. "Mother knew that, in their own way, her sons loved her." She rested a hand upon his shoulder.

"I'm sorry you bore her death alone," he whispered and covered her hand with his.

Ciara swallowed the lump wedged in her throat and nodded. "I managed." She turned away from him and approached the hearth. Her gaze rested on the portrait of Valerie. "'Twas harder to cope with losing Val. Where mother was concerned, I knew she was dying. I had three years to accept it. But Val," she paused and shook her head. "I was given less than a fortnight to prepare."

"I am amazed you maintained your sanity."

"It has not been easy, brother." Ciara closed her eyes.

The voyage across turbulent seas, her arrival here, the funeral of her friend and subsequent marriage to Alastair. 'Twas enough to make her mind spin.

The weight of Ninian's hands on her shoulders drew her from her thoughts. "You are a very strong person, Ciara. To grow up the way -- well, you either had to be strong or perish."

A weary sigh escaped her lips. She turned into her brother's arms and held him close. "You made things bearable."

His chest rumbled with a chuckle. "Beating the stuffing out of Eneas has always given me pleasure."

Ciara leaned away from him and smiled. "'Tis something Alastair longs to do as well."

The front door groaned open and halted their talk. Ciara disentangled herself from her brother and moved so she could see into the foyer.

Alastair entered first, followed by Torquil and John of Glengarry. Although she only saw him once many years ago, Ciara recognized the man.

The top of his head barely reached Alastair's shoulder. Hair as dark as the wings of a raven tumbled over his brow. 'Twas the only resemblance she saw to her husband. Her gaze slid to John's face. A long scar marred his flesh from brow to chin. He looked solid, strong and mean.

Johann appeared from the shadows, so it seemed, and relieved the men of their cloaks. John turned and dark, narrow eyes settled on Ciara.

She shivered, yet refused to look away.

"Och, I see you have noticed my bride," Alastair said and placed himself between Ciara and his uncle.

Her gaze flashed to his. Despite his uplifted tone, his eyes could not hide the abhorrence for their guest. She took a deep breath and said not a word as Alastair approached and placed a protective arm around her shoulders.

John entered the room, Torquil close behind. He paused when he saw Ninian standing before the hearth. "Mackintosh?"

"Aye, glad to see you again, John," Ninian replied and moved to welcome the man.



The glimmer in John's eye as he looked from Ninian, then to her sent shivers down Ciara's spine. "I was not aware you knew my nephew."

"Aye," Ninian said and nodded toward her. "Ciara is my sister."

Again, eyes as narrow as an adder's slid over her. So repulsive was the gesture, Ciara cringed.

Recognition cleared the man's hard features. "'Tis a small part of the world we occupy, is it not?"

The gentle press of Alastair's fingers against her shoulder prompted her reply. "Aye, milord, it truly is. Please, make yourself comfortable."

"Ninian, would ye accompany me tae settle in John's men?" Torquil asked.

"Aye," her brother replied and turned to John. "Now that we are more than neighbors, perhaps we could use this time to become friends?"

"Perhaps," John whispered, his gaze on Ciara. "There is a satchel attached to my saddle that contains a peace offering for my nephew. I would be most grateful if you could bring it back with you."

"'Twould be my pleasure," Ninian said before following Torquil from the room.

"Did your trek pass without incident?" Alastair asked as he seated himself on the couch, pulling Ciara with him.

John glanced from his nephew to Ciara and back again before lowering himself into a chair. "Aye. Winter, as you know, is a time of solace in the Highlands." Again, his gaze sought Ciara. "How did you come to wed my nephew?"

Alastair cleared his throat and drew his uncle's gaze. For that, Ciara was grateful.

"I explained that in the missive, uncle. Ciara and Valerie were friends. 'Twas Valerie's dying wish that united Ciara and me."

John's cold eyes assessed her. "You are a bigger man than I, Alastair. I could never honor a dying wish I did not agree with."

Icy dread washed over Ciara. She disliked this man, and decided not to pretend otherwise. "Then, are you not fortunate to remain friendless, milord?"

Alastair's hand covered hers and squeezed. Ciara ignored the silent meaning and stared at his uncle. If the man wanted to exchange veiled barbs, she would comply.

"I am very pleased with my bride, uncle." Alastair's voice drew John's gaze, but not Ciara's. "While it grieved me to lose Valerie, I soon saw the wisdom in her plea."

One of John's eyebrows lifted toward his scalp. "Wisdom?"

Alastair nodded. "Och, aye. Not only have I gained a lovely wife, but I will be a father before the year is done."

He tucked a finger beneath Ciara's chin and turned her gaze to him. Nestled in his dark eyes, she recognized his silent plea to behave and follow his plan.

"I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth," he whispered.

A lump formed in Ciara's throat and she averted her gaze to his chin. He spoke the truth and she knew it. When, if ever, would she be able to tell him the words he so freely spoke?

"Then I wish you a long, prosperous life together." John's words broke the spell.

"Thank you, uncle. That means a lot to me."

How Alastair stomached being in the same room with this man, Ciara never knew. Yet, despite her instincts, she decided to curb her dislike and attempt to comply to her husband's wishes.

'Twould be a difficult task to accomplish, but somehow Ciara would survive.

\* \* \*

Alastair poured a few swallows of whisky into three mugs. He studied his uncle, and again an uneasy feeling settled in his bones. Despite the aged whisky presented as a gift, Alastair had the distinct impression his uncle was up to no good. He was also convinced the man was deeply involved in the disappearance of Rachel. Alastair knew this as surely as he knew the sun would rise tomorrow.

The man sat near the hearth in quiet conversation with Ninian. Alastair prayed this puzzle came together soon, for having his uncle under his roof was a dangerous ploy. He gathered the tankards in his hands and approached the men.

"I am pleased my nephew invited me here, and accepted my peace offering. 'Tis a clear indication he is willing to forget the past." John paused and took the tankard Alastair offered.

The urge to toss the contents of the remaining mugs in his uncle's face was strong. Yet he restrained himself and handed a vessel to Ninian. "Naught can be accomplished by dwelling on past slights, uncle."

"'Tis true," Ninian said as Alastair lowered himself into a chair. "Eneas feels the same way. Since my sire passed, he has resumed relations with neighboring clans."

Images of MacLean flashed across Alastair's brain. He still didn't understand the alliance Eneas forged with that laird.

"When is the bairn due?"

John's question pulled Alastair from his thoughts. "Early fall, most likely."

"I hope the child resembles you instead of its mother."

Anger stirred in Alastair's veins and tightened his hold on his tankard. Again, Alastair fought the urge to cram the vessel down his throat.

"There is more to life than beauty," he managed to say.

"Aye, Ciara has many fine qualities," Ninian added. He emptied his mug, then set it aside. "Her children will not lack love or attention."

His anger subsided a bit. Alastair turned to his uncle and decided it was time to put his plan into motion.

"Tell me, uncle," he said, pausing until the man looked his way. "I understand you were in residence five years ago when Rachel was abducted from this keep."

Suspicion clouded his uncle's feature for the space of a heartbeat. "Aye. I spent many hours in the saddle searching for her."

Alastair nodded. "'Tis what I heard. I was also told you offered your men to aid in the search when you had to depart."

John narrowed his gaze. "Aye, 'tis the truth you were told." He set aside his mug and leaned forward. "Why do you explore this topic?"

With a shrug, Alastair finished his drink and placed the vessel on the floor between his feet. "Since I am now wed to Ciara, I just wish to confirm what transpired that fateful day that Rachel vanished. Hearing the same tale repeated assures me that her sire deserved the death he met."

Some of the tension vanished from his uncle's face, only to appear on Ninian's.

"I heard about her unfortunate end." John shook his head and climbed to his feet. "That topic also resides in the past. Since we are approaching a new relationship, I believe it best to leave such discussions alone."

The man was guilty as sin. Alastair knew it, felt it to the very center of his soul.

"The hour grows late. If you will excuse me, I will find my bed."

Alastair nodded and watched John leave the room. The moment he departed, he turned his gaze on Ninian. "I am surprised you were able to restrain yourself."

"'Twas trying, indeed," Ninian whispered and glanced toward the door. "The bastard is fortunate I did not draw my blade on him."

A weary sigh slid through Alastair's lips. "I hope we will soon gain the information we need. Then, I will gladly give you permission to kill him, provided I do not beat you to the task." He climbed to his feet and looked down at the other man. "I bid you goodnight."

Alastair left the room and slowly climbed the stairs. Each step tugged at the unease nestled in his gut. The light of torches cast eerie images across the ancient stones. He stepped onto the landing and paused.

Tense silence filled the air. A look along the corridor revealed nothing amiss. Everything appeared to be as it should.

Quietly, Alastair approached the chamber he shared with Ciara. At the door, he stopped. Muffled voices edged their way to his ears from the direction of his uncle's chamber. He moved along the worn stones until he reached his uncle's door.

Alastair paused and strained to hear the whispered words beyond. 'Twas no use. Only snippets and an occasional word made it to his ears. He did hear enough to know the occupants were his uncle and Johann.

Displeasure stirred in his gut once more. It appeared Ciara was right about the woman. He was tempted to burst into the chamber and catch the pair in their deceit.

Tomorrow, he told himself as he returned to his chamber. His trap should be set by then and, if all went well, he would snare a traitor or two by the end of the day.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

"Make a sound, and you die in your bed."

Ciara's eyes snapped open. Against her throat, the cold edge of a dagger pressed into her skin. Through the semi-darkness, she stared into the scarred face of John MacDonell.

Disdain curled his lips and a hand grasped her arm. "Rise."

Terror mixed with dread in her heart. It beat so strong against her ribs, she thought it would burst. John tugged upon her arm and Ciara rose to her feet. Her gaze sought Alastair. He continued his sleep, unaware his uncle was in their chamber.

John pulled her across the room. Cold stones caressed her feet and sent a chill straight into her soul. She tugged upon her arm when he reached the door.

"Release me at once," she hissed, and tried once more to free herself from his grasp.

John ignored her and pulled her into the hall. Once the door closed behind them, he shoved her toward the stairs.

Fear edged its way into her heart. She called for her husband, a plea that lured a mirthless chuckle from John.

"My nephew canna hear you," he said and pulled her with him down the circular stairs. "He drank from the whisky I offered as gift, never knowing I had added sleeping powders to the brew. I dare say he will not stir before dawn."

At the bottom of the stairs, Johann waited. Clutched in her gnarled hands were a pair of Ciara's slippers and a cloak.

"Put these on," John hissed and tossed the items toward her.

Her hands shook so badly she could barely manage the task. In the shadows of the foyer, Ciara met Johann's gaze. "Why are you helping him?"

Hate distorted the woman's features. "I lost a child," she said as Ciara donned her cloak. "So shall you."

The icy hand of dread gripped Ciara's belly. She needed to escape, to find a weapon to use to her advantage. Alastair could not help. Where were Ninian and Torquil? Her gaze flicked to the den and the door that stood ajar.

Alastair's sword was there.

John reached for the door. The moment his back was turned, Ciara made her move. She shoved Johann against the wall and ran for the study. Once inside, she slammed the barrier and turned the key in the lock.

Curses drifted to her through the thickness of the door. Ciara's heart raked her ribs and she fought to remain calm. The handle rattled and Ciara backed away.

The blade! She had to get the sword. Ciara turned, and stopped dead in her tracks. Ninian lay sprawled in a chair before the hearth. The door rattled again. Ciara ran to her brother and shook him.

"Ninian," she cried amid the thunder of a key turning in the lock. She glanced at the door and terror sped through her veins. Clearly, Johann had stolen the spare keys. "Brother, I beg you to awaken."

'Twas no use. Ninian was held in the same sleep that captured Alastair. And Torquil? Where was the mighty giant?

Frantic, Ciara looked for a way to escape, a place to hide. The handle rattled again, followed by the groan of hinges. Ciara grabbed Alastair's sword, freed it from its sheath and turned to face the door.

John entered the room, Johann close behind. Anger darkened his features.

Ciara swallowed hard and, sword held before her, backed away from the man. "Stand away from me, or I swear I will run you through."

Dark eyes glimmered in the faint light of the room. He moved with purpose toward her. Ciara tightened her hold on the hilt. One more step, and she would strike.

John stopped beside the chair where Ninian slept. Light glimmered on the edge of his dirk moments before he pressed it against her brother's throat.

The sword Ciara held became quite heavy in her grasp. Alarm stilled her heart and lowered her blade toward the ground.

A cruel smile twisted John's lips. "I see you understand my intention." He nodded toward the sword. "Drop the blade now, or I cut his throat."

Tears stung the back of her eyes. The sword slipped from her fingers and clattered against the floor.

John nodded. "That's a good lass." He adjusted his hold on the dirk. "Now, come to me."

An uncomfortable lump wedged in her throat. She barely noticed Johann retrieving Alastair's blade.

"I said, come here," John hissed and moved the blade against Ninian's throat.

Blood trickled down his neck. Ciara choked back a sob and did his bidding.

John stared into her eyes and eased the dirk from Ninian's throat. Without warning, he lashed out with his palm and struck her hard across the face.

Ciara stumbled from the blow and landed with a thud on the couch. Pain throbbed through her cheek, and silent tears slid from her eyes. She would kill the bastard for this.

"Disobey me, and you will get more of the same." John gripped her arm and yanked her to her feet. Held in his cruel grasp, Ciara had no choice but to follow him from the room.

At the door that opened to the outside, they paused. Johann appeared and handed the man a ball of cloth. Through the dim light of the foyer, his eyes met hers. "Open your mouth," he commanded.

Ciara shook her head and tugged upon her arm for freedom.

John sneered and twisted her arm. Pain shot through her body. "Open your mouth!"

Through her tears, Ciara stared at the crazed man. No one was around to help her. Once again, she was alone.

"Do it now, or I swear I will return to that room and slit your brother's throat."

Pain held her heart in its grasp. She opened her mouth. The instant she did, John shoved the fabric inside. His fingers twined in her hair and forced her to her knees.

Still held in his powerful grasp, Ciara was helpless to stop Johann from tying the gag in place. Once that was accomplished, John pulled her to her feet. Johann stepped around them and opened the front door.

Frigid air sliced through the warmth of the hall. John tugged on his cloak, then pulled Ciara outside behind him. The moment they crossed the threshold, Johann, who remained inside, closed the door.

Two men sat astride horses, and another awaited use. Ciara did not recognize these men, and assumed they belonged to John.

She stumbled down the steps behind him and collided with his back when he stopped. One of the men tossed him a rope.

Without a word, John jerked her hands before him and wound the coarse fiber around her wrists. "My nephew erred when he invited me here. If he wishes to see you again, he will forfeit his holdings to me."

Trepidation coiled around her heart. 'Twas then she knew that John had a hand in the abduction of Rachel so many years ago. What did puzzle her was Johann -- 'twas her daughter who was taken.

John secured the free end of the rope to the pommel, then faced Ciara. "Mount."

She was in no position to argue. Ciara slid her foot into the stirrup and straddled the back of the horse.

The two men moved their horses closer, one before and one behind. John took the reins and handed them to the lead man.

"You know what to do," he said and stepped away from the animals.

The horse jostled and Ciara clutched the pommel to keep from falling off. Tears slid over her cheeks as she was led into the night, away from her husband, her love.

Ciara hung her head and prayed she would not die before telling Alastair how much she loved him.

\* \* \*

Thunder throbbed through Alastair's head. With a groan, he raised his hand and rested it upon his brow. What the devil had happened to him?

The thunder sounded again. Alastair inched his eyes open. Through the window, the bold rays of morn spilled across the room and increased the pounding in his head. 'Twas then he realized the insufferable noise came from the door. He scowled and glanced toward Ciara.

Naught but an empty bed greeted him. Foreboding settled in his heart. With determination, he climbed to his feet, tugged on his robe and approached the barrier.

Torquil stood on the other side. One look into his trusted man's eye and Alastair knew something dire had occurred.

"What is amiss?" he asked, and willed his pulse to cease its erratic beat.

"Ninian needs tae speak with ye at once."

Alastair scowled. "And for this you woke me?"

"Aye," the big man said. "He fears his sister has fallen into peril."

Alarm inched its way up Alastair's spine. "I will be down right away."

He closed the door, shed his robe and dressed with the haste of a man caught in the wrong bedchamber. Once that was accomplished, he raced down the stairs and entered the study.

Ninian sat before the hearth, his head in his hands. Alastair stepped into the room and exchanged glances with Torquil before he spoke.

"What makes you believe Ciara is in danger?"

The man raised his head. A stream of dried blood stained his throat. Shadows hung beneath his eyes, and he generally looked as bad as Alastair felt.

"John fed us tainted whisky," he said, his voice rough.

Disbelief slid through Alastair's heart. "That canna be. He drank from the same flask we did."

Ninian shook his head. He winced and pointed toward the mug still resting on the hearth. "The man touched not a drop."

Trepidation wound along Alastair's spine. His gaze moved to Torquil. "Where is my uncle now?"

The big man averted his gaze and shrugged. "Gone. I bunked with John's men last eve tae keep an eye on them. I was not aware of his departure."

Anger mixed with fear in the pit of his belly. "And Johann?"

Torquil scowled. "She alerted me to John's disappearance." He withdrew a folded parchment and crossed the room to stand before his laird. "She claims to have found this in his chamber."



Alastair took the paper from the other man's grasp. His hand trembled slightly as he broke the seal and unfolded the stiff paper.

The words before him fed his anger until he thought he would explode.

"What does it say, MacDonell?"

He lowered the paper and met Ninian's worried gaze.

"John holds Ciara. He demands the surrender of my holdings for her safe return." The paper crumpled in his fist. "I will kill the bastard for this!"

"I will gather the clansmen," Torquil said and headed from the room.

"Bring Johann to me first," Alastair called after the man. He approached the hearth and removed his sword.

"MacDonell, I will alert my clan as well."

Alastair turned and faced Ninian. "Nay."

Confusion touched the man's eyes. "She is our sister. We should -- "

"I said nay!" Alastair snapped and silently dared to be challenged again.

"You are the only one who cares about her." He took a deep breath and tried to remove the bite from his voice as he tightened the leather strap around his waist.

"She is part of this clan now. We take care of our own."

He started from the room. Halfway to the door, he stopped. Johann stood in the threshold. From the look on her face, he knew she had participated in the events of the night before.

Rage built in his chest. He closed the distance that separated them. "Where is my wife?"

The woman swallowed hard and averted her gaze. "I do not know, laird."

Alastair's hand shook. He curled his fingers into his palms to keep from striking her. "Lie to me again, and I will remove your traitorous tongue."

Her gaze snapped to his. She retreated a step and wound her fingers in her skirt. "I refuse to disclose that information."

Anger clenched his jaw. "I have never struck a woman in my life, yet I swear to do so now if you do not tell me where that bastard took my wife."

"To hell with coddling the old bitch," Ninian snapped. He shouldered his way past Alastair.

Johann's eyes widened in fright and she attempted to flee the room. Ninian grabbed her by the hair and shoved her into the nearest wall.

"Where is my sister?" he asked and pressed his knee against the small of her back. "Tell me now, or I will sever your spine."

Johann gasped for air against the stone. "I canna breathe."

"Continue to deny me, and breathing will be the least of your worries." Ninian tightened his hold on her hair and applied pressure to her back. "This is your last warning."

"The croft," Johann cried, her eyes closed in pain. "He took her to my croft."

"Do not release her yet," Alastair said. He approached the woman and stared at her face, half of which was pressed against the stones. "Did you send a missive to my uncle when Valerie passed?"

The woman closed her eyes and winced. "Nay, laird."

He didn't believe her. Alastair met Ninian's gaze and nodded. The pressure the man applied to her spine drew a cry from her lips.

"Let me put it this way, woman," he said. "Did you inform John of the activities on my mountain?"

The half of her mouth he could see curled into a snarl. "Aye, I did. I knew the moment that Mackintosh bitch set foot on our soil that trouble would follow."

Alastair placed a hand on Ninian's shoulder. The man eased his hold on the woman. She slumped against the wall and sucked air into her lungs.

"Why did you betray me to John?"

Johann looked at him and struggled to regain her breath. "He was kind to me, laird. In the days that followed my Rachel's disappearance, he was most attentive and concerned over all who lived upon this mountain."

Alastair's fingers curled into his palms.

"I heard of the request your late wife placed upon your head." Johann shook her head. "I could not allow a Mackintosh to join this clan or have their blood mingle with ours."

Anger churned through Alastair's belly. "You will gather your belongings from this keep and depart this mountain before the sun sets on this day. If you fail, so help me, I will have you stoned." He turned away from her and started for the door.

"You canna mean that, laird. I've always held you dear in my heart," she said, her voice halting him. "Your uncle would do naught against you."

He took a deep breath and expelled it slowly through his teeth. "Johann, I believe John is the one who arranged for Rachel to be taken. He is the only person with the knowledge and power to accomplish such a feat." He donned his cloak and met her gaze once more. "You have just assisted the man responsible for Rachel's demise."

Johann ran to him and gripped his arm. "'Tis a lie! John did not torture my Rachel."

Alastair paused while Ninian gathered his cloak. He looked down into Johann's weathered face and frowned. "How do you know?"

Johann averted her gaze. "I have naught but his word."

"John merely thirsts for land," Alastair said as he pulled open the door. "Someone else was behind Rachel's death."

He started from the keep, yet paused and glanced at the woman from over his shoulder. "If harm has befallen my Ciara, banishment alone will not save you. I suggest you use the day to your advantage and place as much distance as you

can between us."

Alastair left the keep, Ninian on his heels. The brisk air of dawn kissed his skin and urged him onward.

Ten minutes later, the men of MacDonell were mounted and riding hard toward a croft nestled in the woods.

In the depths of his heart, Alastair prayed Ciara would not be harmed. It mattered little what John's scheme entailed. By the end of this day, John of Glengarry would breathe his last.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Ciara struggled with the rope that held her captive in Johann's cold, filthy croft. Bound to the rickety chair Alastair occupied not long ago, with chickens pecking around her feet, she tried to loosen the blasted ties that cut into her flesh.

Upon her arrival, the silent beasts who escorted her pulled her from the saddle and shoved her inside. Forced into the chair, her bound wrists in her lap, Ciara tried to kick the men as they wound the length of rope tightly around her legs and secured her to the seat of the chair. Once that was accomplished, they removed the gag. Her request for water and a fire went unanswered and the men departed the shack without so much as a backward glance.

Frustration lured a curse from her lips. If only she could break the wood! Should she topple the chair, surely the weak timber would splinter.

A quick glance at the drawn shutter gave her courage to continue. She said a quick prayer that the fall would not harm her bairn; then she braced her feet against the dirt-packed floor and rocked her body from side to side. The wood groaned beneath her weight. Finally, Ciara toppled to the floor. The dilapidated timber groaned a loud death.

Breath held, Ciara waited for signs of discovery. Chickens clucked around her and one proud rooster strutted before her face. Several long minutes passed with naught but the fowl aware of her efforts.

Relief tumbled through her soul. Ciara pushed herself upright and used her teeth on the tight knots the men had made.

Anger churned in her breast while she worked. Her husband would make these men rue the day they laid a hand on her.

Alastair. Her heart ached when she thought of him. Did he know she was gone? Would he know where to begin a search?

One knot broke free. She said a prayer of thanks and worked on the next.

Hours had passed since her arrival. She glanced toward the shutter. Judging from the light that peeked through the cracks, it was now mid-morn.

Her tummy rumbled with hunger. Ciara ignored it and continued her task. Why did they have to bind her so tightly?

Finally, the rope fell away from her tender wrists. Ciara spared no more than a moment to rub them before she freed her legs. Once she was rid of the cumbersome ties, she climbed to her feet.

Blood rushed into her limbs and she had to lean against the table for support. Once the circulation returned, her gaze moved to the shattered chair.

One leg remained intact with a piece of the broken seat attached. Ciara retrieved it. 'Twould make a fine weapon, if needed.

She crept to the closed shutter and peered through the cracks. In the clearing before the croft, a dozen men stood at the ready. Ciara frowned and glanced at her meager weapon. 'Twould take more than the broken leg of a chair to get past those men.

Two horses emerged through the trees, the blanket of snow silencing their steps. John and MacLean approached the croft and dismounted. One guard stepped forward and spoke in a low voice to John.

Disgust wound through her belly. Now she understood why John remained behind. No doubt, he had conspired with MacLean before arriving on Alastair's mountain.

Ciara moved toward the door and held her weapon like a club. Her heart thundered in her ears while she waited for the men to enter.

The door swung open and clattered against the opposite wall. Light spilled into the room along with crisp, clean air. The moment John entered the dwelling, Ciara clenched her jaw and swung her weapon at his head.

The force of the blow made John stagger back into MacLean. Both men stumbled and fell in the snow.

The stunned faces of the guards turned her way. Ciara quickly closed the barrier and reached for the lock. Trepidation coiled through her when she realized there was no bolt.

"*Merde!*" she swore, then hastened toward the table. She laid her weapon upon the rustic surface and shoved the obstacle against the door. Thank goodness the table, while sturdy, was light enough for her to move.

The angry voices beyond the thatch caused her hands to tremble. They would try to enter again. As quickly as she could, Ciara toppled the table and wedged it at an angle she prayed it would keep the foe at bay. Once that was accomplished, she took up her club and backed away from the barrier.

A strong thud shook the door. Heart in her throat, Ciara stared at the table. The wood shivered from the blows, yet maintained its hold.

The shutter slammed forward. Ciara spun her attention there. A masculine leg straddled the opening. She ran toward the intruder and used her club on the leg that invaded her space. A cry of pain echoed in her ears before the intruder withdrew.

Ciara reached for the shutter. A strong hand reached through the open space, grabbed her hair and pulled her up against the wall. She winced and dropped her club. Her nails clawed at the hand that held her captive. Skin tore and the warmth of blood covered her fingers. The one who held her yelped in pain and released his hold.

She spun around and attempted to close the shutter. Another unfamiliar arm invaded her space and prevented it from closing.

Fury licked through her veins like fire over dry wood. Ciara sank her teeth into the offending arm. The tactic worked, for the owner withdrew amid a howl of pain.

The shutter banged against its frame and Ciara slid the peg bolt into place. She retrieved her weapon and backed through the startled chickens so she had a clear view of both portals.

The door shook, yet by some miracle the table held. Two more blows followed, then naught but silence filled her ears.

Unease spread its fingers through her belly. With care, she approached the shutter and peered through the cracks.

John stood not more than five feet from the croft. One side of his head was covered in blood. A touch of satisfaction filled Ciara. He deserved a lot worse.

Beside him stood MacLean. Gooseflesh slid over her skin at the mere sight of the detested man. He stared at the croft, then spoke in a low voice to John. Whatever he said held some appeal, for John nodded his consent.

A hen pecked at the soiled hem of her nightgown. Ciara frowned and nudged the animal away with her foot. "Be off with you, before I wring your neck and place you in a stew."

Activity in the clearing drew her gaze once more. Dread snaked its way through her soul. The men gathered wood and piled it in the middle of the void. Damn it all! Johann would have a stock of dry wood to last the winter.

One man crouched before the aged timber and struck a flint against stone. In a matter of minutes, flames licked over the dry fare and sputtered black smoke toward the heavens.

The man moved away and the group stared at the croft. John stepped forward. "Exit the croft at once, or I will burn it over your head."

His voice echoed through the glen and pierced her heart. What the devil was she supposed to do now? Was Alastair on his way, or were false clues left for him to follow?

Her hands shook and she clutched her club before her like a shield.

"I see you are as stubborn as your sire," John said before turning to one of his men. At John's signal, the man retrieved a chunk of wood partially engulfed in flames and flung it toward the croft.

Ciara looked up at the thatched roof. Flames spread over the far corner of the croft and spat fiery sparks over the sparse furnishings.

The club slipped from her fingers as she backed away from the spreading flames. Her heart raked her ribs and terror wound its way through her belly.

Alastair! Dear God, where was Alastair?

\* \* \*

Thick black smoke curled through leafless branches and coiled toward the sky. Alastair paused his mount near the clearing before Johann's croft. He dismounted, followed by his men, and walked his horse into the protection of trees and shrubs. Once the beast was tethered, he slipped through the dormant foliage and peered into the glen.

Near two dozen men stood in the snow and watched the croft burn. In the midst, he spotted John and the hated Fergus MacLean.

"Where is Ciara?"

Ninian's whisper drew Alastair's gaze for the space of a heartbeat. Again he stared at the croft, halfway engulfed in flames.

"God's blood," he whispered and fought the dread that attempted to wedge its way into his soul. "Ciara is in the croft."

He drew his sword and sprang forward through the brush, a cry of rage falling from his lips. The warriors in his company followed suit.

Surprised, the men who served his uncle turned in the direction of the noise. Rage churned through Alastair's veins. He cut down one man after another in his quest to reach his uncle and MacLean.

His prey ran for their horses. "Torquil and Ninian, to me!" he said, and ran toward the frightened animals.

One strong hand grabbed John by the nape and flung him into the bloodied snow. Alastair planted a boot-clad foot in the center of John's chest and stared down into his uncle's tormented face.

Fear drew moisture on John's brow. Alastair gripped his sword firmly by the hilt and poised it over John's throat.

The frantic beat of John's pulse vibrated through Alastair's foot. "Lad, you canna kill -- "

Alastair clenched his jaw and plunged his blade through the man's throat with such force, he embedded the metal into the ground. He released his hold and the hilt swayed back and forth in rhythm to the convulsions that trapped John's body.

The sound of falling timber drew his gaze. Most of the croft was now engulfed in flames. Fear pumped adrenaline into his veins. A quick look at Ninian satisfied Alastair that he could handle MacLean.

"Ciara!" Alastair called and ran for the fire-embraced wood. The heat scorched his flesh. "Ciara!"

Amid the crackling wood, he swore he heard her call. The door was in flames and fiery wings spread toward the shutter. Alastair beat at the wooden barrier with his shoulder. Pain shot through his body with each blow. Heat from the fire grew closer and smoke filled his lungs. He coughed and continued his

attack on the timber.

The barrier gave way and Alastair stumbled. He peered into the abode and tried to see Ciara through the sea of black.

"Ciara!" He choked on the smoke and dove through the opening. Hard dirt-packed earth greeted him. He raised himself to his hands and knees. Another cough racked his body. When it subsided, he called for her again.

"Alastair."

The call was weak, yet he heard it. He crawled toward the sound of her voice. His hand brushed against her. "Here, love, come to me."

She scrambled through the smoke and growing flames and clung to his neck. Alastair lifted her into his arms and ran for the only exit available.

Flames leapt around him and fiery clumps fell around his shoulders. He did not halt his progress. The moment he reached the shutter, he hoisted Ciara through the opening. His men pulled her to safety, then strong hands reached for him. They grabbed him by the waist of his kilt and pulled him from the flames.

Cold snow embraced his face and cooled his singed flesh. His throat constricted on the brisk air. Rough hands rolled him in the snow.

'Twas then Alastair smelt the stench of burning wool. He lay upon his back and choked on the clean air that filled his lungs. Smoke curled into the air, and the dying crackle of burned timber echoed in his ears.

Faces loomed above him, yet all he saw was Torquil's frown. "I canna believe ye dove through the shutter like that with flames licking yer skin."

Alastair groaned. "I would crawl through Hades naked to save my wife." He rolled to his side and searched for her.

Ciara lay in soiled snow. Her ragged coughs permeated the air and drowned out the sound of the fire that destroyed the croft. Smoke blackened her nightgown and blotted her skin.

Emotions surged through his body and robbed him of his voice. He had nearly lost her. Alastair struggled to his knees and scrambled to his wife.

Soot-covered eyelids lay closed against singed flesh. His heart twisted in his chest. With care, he reached out a hand and touched her cheek. "Ciara?" he whispered, his voice choked.

Her eyes slowly opened. Mirrored in those starry depths Alastair saw pain. A lump formed in his throat. He forced his gaze from her eyes and gave her body a quick examination.

"Are you harmed?" he asked and rested his gaze on her once more.

Tears slid from her eyes and formed a clean path through her soot-covered cheeks. "I thought -- " A vicious cough stole her words.

Alastair turned to the men who gathered round. "Fetch water."

The light touch of his wife's hand upon his arm drew his gaze. He gathered her into his lap and cradled her in his embrace.



Beneath his palm, he gathered bits of snow and held them against her dry lips. "Eat this," he said.

Her eyes fluttered shut as she drew the moisture into her mouth. When she finished, he gathered more. One of his men offered a skein of water. Alastair held it for her. Each swallow assured him she would survive.

Ciara lay against his arm and shook her head when more water was offered. "I thought I would die in there, Alastair."

The harsh tone of her whisper twisted through him as keenly as a blade. If he had arrived even moments later . . . he shuddered at the thought. He had gotten here on time and had pulled her from the flames.

Someone produced a cloth. Alastair dampened it with the water and gently cleaned her face. "All is well now, love," he whispered and continued to bathe her face.

Ciara's hand circled his wrist and drew his gaze to hers. "I was frightened I would die without telling you how I feel about you."

He didn't want to hear this. Deep in his heart, he knew the love he felt for her was not returned.

A soft hand on his cheek pulled him from his thoughts. He stared into her luminous eyes and braced himself to hear the truth.

A tender smile curled her lips. "I love you, Alastair MacDonell."

"Och, 'tis naught but mush talk they exchange."

Alastair barely heard Torquil's proclamation. His mind was filled with Ciara's tender words. Joy speared his heart and leaked into his soul. She loved him! Ciara truly loved him.

The smile slowly left her face and she frowned. "Do you have naught to say, husband?"

He shook his head. "Not a word, wife," he said and covered her lips with his own. Through his kiss, his touch, he prayed she would understand the depths of his emotions.

"Much as I hate to disrupt such a tender display, I would like to know what you want done with him."

Ninian's voice penetrated Alastair's thoughts. Reluctantly, he lifted his head from his wife's tempting lips and turned his attention to Ninian.

Held in the man's firm grasp was Fergus MacLean. Bloodied features and swollen eyes stared back at him.

"Drown him in the loch, for all I care," Alastair said. He helped Ciara off his lap and to her feet. Torquil offered Alastair a hand. Once pulled to his feet, Alastair brushed off his clothes and settled his gaze on MacLean. "You conspired with my uncle all those years ago, didn't you?"

Amid a mixture of dried and fresh blood, MacLean curled his lip in disgust. "You can prove naught."

Alastair took a step forward, his temper rising to meld with the destruction of the croft. "I know what happened. John abducted Rachel, then turned her over to you." Another step lessened the gap between them. "'Twas at your hands she suffered and died."

MacLean snickered. Ninian grimaced and shoved an elbow into the man's ribs.

"My uncle's motive I understand," Alastair said and took yet another step. "Explain yours. Why did you brand Rachel with the badge of an innocent clan?"

A sharp tug from Ninian lured a response from MacLean. "Mackintosh sealed his fate the moment he made threats against me."

Ninian frowned. "What sort of threats?"

MacLean grimaced. "The king disapproves of certain activities that bring joy to those who choose to participate."

Without a doubt, Alastair knew it was lecherous deeds he cited.

"Your sire discovered how I seek my pleasure," MacLean said to Ninian. "He gained sworn statements from a couple of lasses involved, and threatened to place them in the hands of the king if I did not repent."

"'Tis clear my sire's threat went unheeded."

The hush of Ciara's voice drew Alastair's brief gaze. He draped an arm around her and pulled her against his body.

MacLean sighed. "Somehow, your sire learned about my presence at Glengarry. He signed his own death warrant the moment he nudged his mount toward Edinburgh."

Beneath his grasp, Alastair felt Ciara tremble. He gave her a reassuring squeeze, yet kept his gaze trained on the deplorable man before him.

"Why does Eneas tolerate you?" Ninian asked. He tightened his hold when MacLean hesitated.

"Eneas is a greedy bastard with a taste for a lifestyle he can ill afford. Since becoming laird, he has created a sizeable debt. I was the only one willing to help him. In exchange, I was to receive two things." His gaze flashed to Ciara. "Fabled priceless silver, and you."

Anger slid through Alastair's veins. He would love nothing more than to retrieve his sword and strike the man down. He took a deep breath to control the urge and asked, "And Rachel? The condition of the lass and the words she uttered before she died lead me to believe you were her tormenter."

MacLean looked away. "The lass served two purposes at once." His swollen gaze turned to Alastair. "When I finished with her, John returned her to these very woods and released her near the keep."

Ninian raised a bloody dirk and pressed it against the man's throat. "You bastard!"

From the protection of the trees, a high pitched cry shattered the air.

Alastair shoved Ciara behind him and turned in time to see Johann sprint across the clearing. The woman looked wild; as if madness consumed her soul. She held a dagger poised, ready to strike.

"Alastair, she has a blade."

Ciara's whisper sent chills down his spine. Johann leapt for MacLean at the same moment Ninian jumped back to avoid being crushed.

Johann hit MacLean square in the chest with the blade and her weight. The pair toppled into the littered snow. Johann sat up and, jaw clenched, she stabbed MacLean again. When she lifted the blade to strike once more, MacLean grasped her wrist.

Alastair pulled Ciara into his arms and cradled her face against his chest. She had witnessed enough death in her life; she need not witness more.

The couple in the snow struggled and a moment later, Johann's painful cry split the air. Her body tensed and shuddered for what seemed an eternity. Her cry died away and she fell atop of MacLean. The man's hand slid from her back and dropped lifelessly into the snow.

Ninian and Alastair exchanged glances. Finally, Ninian approached and rolled Johann to her back.

Her dagger protruded from her chest. He felt her wrist, then slowly looked up at Alastair and shook his head.

Despite her betrayal, Alastair felt a stab of remorse for the lost soul. There once was a time when Johann had known peace and joy; a time when she was a pleasure to be around, to confide in.

Ninian examined MacLean, then stood. He stared down at the bodies and sighed. "They are both dead."

Beneath his embrace, Ciara trembled. He swept her into his arms and carried her toward his horse. "Torquil, I leave you to see to the dead and return my blade."

"Aye, laird. Do take yer lassie home. She looks a mite worn."

Once mounted with Ciara nestled before him, Alastair turned toward home. He glanced down at his wife and the love he felt for her surged through his heart.

"Tell me again how you feel about me, wife."

She leaned her head against his arm. A lazy smile touched her lips and her soft palm cradled his cheek. "I love you."

Elation curled his lips into a smile so broad, his face hurt. For the first time in his life, Alastair knew love.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Ciara removed the last of her possessions from her mother's trunk. 'Twas due time to settle into her life with Alastair. She no longer had a need to live out of a worn leather case. Alastair's mountain was now her home.

With care, Ciara closed the lid. Her fingers lingered against the cool grooves of the ancient, well-worn leather overlay. 'Twas all she had left of her mother.

A sigh passed her lips. This belonged in her past now. Before her lay a future with a man she loved, and who loved her. Ciara had no idea what she had done to deserve a man like Alastair, but she would thank God and Valerie for him every day of her life.

Beyond the windows of the newly-furnished room that once reeked of death, Ciara gazed into an azure sky. The light reflected off the snow and the boughs of trees.

Melancholy touched her heart. She missed Ninian. A fortnight had passed since the nightmare at the croft. Ciara closed her eyes and rubbed away the gooseflesh that prickled her skin.

Everyone who wished her harm was now dead. Johann, John, MacLean. She opened her eyes and stared aimlessly toward the horizon.

Through the death and blood that surrounded this mountain, her father's name had been cleared. For that feat alone, Ciara would always love Alastair. 'Twas because of him and his oath that bitterness and hatred did not linger between the two clans.

Torquil surprised her as well. Each time their paths crossed, he inquired after her health and the health of the babe.

She smiled and placed a hand on her slightly swollen belly. It gladdened her heart to know she had won over her most adamant opponent. Although he would perish before admitting it, Torquil had a soft spot for her.

Warm hands and a tender kiss upon her ear pulled Ciara from her thoughts. She smiled and leaned against her husband's chest.

"Is the trunk ready to be moved?" Alastair asked as his arms circled her thickening waist.

"Aye," she whispered and covered his arms with her hands. She could stay this way forever.

He sighed and nuzzled her neck. "I suppose I should move it, then."

Ciara smiled. "Aye, husband." She turned in his arms and stared up into his beautiful eyes. Her fingers trembled as she smoothed away a lock of hair that

tumbled across his brow. "I love you."

A slow smile touched his lips. He covered her hand with his own and kissed her palm. "And I you, woman."

Her hand still held in his grasp, he lowered it between them and dipped his head towards her.

The feel of his lips on hers and the intoxicating scent of masculinity that belonged to him alone, made Ciara's knees tremble. Never again would she find herself alone and unloved in the world.

With a groan, Alastair raised his head and pressed his lips against her brow. "I fear if I do not move that trunk now, it will remain in that spot until the morrow."

Happiness filled Ciara's heart. "Then go, husband." She stepped away from him and her soul burst with love.

Alastair moved to the case and lifted it onto his back. He frowned and lowered it to the floor again. "I thought you said this was empty?"

Confusion skidded along her spine. "It is."

"Then why does it feel as if it is filled with stones?"

He knelt before the clasp and lifted the lid. Ciara stood behind him and peered over his shoulder into the barren vessel.

"I told you 'twas empty."

"Aye, so you did." He felt along the bottom, examined the exterior, then rapped his knuckles against the underside.

"What is it you do?" Ciara asked.

Alastair withdrew his dirk from the sheath at his waist and forced it between the bottom and side of the trunk. His muscles strained as he pried upon the wood.

Her heart dipped to her belly. "Husband, cease this at once." She laid a hand on his shoulder. "You are ruining it."

The wood creaked and groaned beneath his blade. Amid the noise, the bottom lifted away.

Alastair wedged his fingers into the opening, returned his dirk to his waist, then glanced at her. "'Tis a false bottom."

Ciara looked on in confusion. Why would her mother have need of such a trunk? The moment Alastair lifted away the partition, she knew.

Packed tightly amid straw was her mother's silver. Alastair removed the items with care and placed them on the floor.

Ciara retrieved a goblet from the pile and studied it in the light. Roses intertwined to form the stem and spanned upward around the base.

"This must be worth a fortune," Alastair said as he climbed to his feet.

"It is," she said and turned her gaze on him. "'Twas a gift to my mother's family from the King of France. My mother's grandsire served the crown with

valor. Since he would accept no compensation, the silver was crafted."

Alastair took the goblet from her hand and studied it closely. "No wonder Eneas wanted it so badly."

Ciara averted her gaze. Eneas. 'Twas his bothersome quarrels with their mother that forced her to return to France. Although her mother never revealed the subject of the arguments, staring down at this priceless collection confirmed the topic of their spats.

These candlesticks, goblets and platters, if bartered well, would keep Eneas in sumptuous comfort for the rest of his life.

"Ciara?"

Alastair's voice drew her from her thoughts. She turned to him and looked into his worried eyes.

"Is something amiss?"

She glanced away for the space of a heartbeat. "Nay, husband. Unfortunately, this all makes perfect sense to me now. Mother's wish to journey to France, her strange deathbed request for me to guard this trunk always and never surrender it to Eneas." She paused and shook her head. "I wish I had known this was here. It would have purchased the best healer in the land; someone who might have saved her."

He pulled her into his arms and rested his chin on the top of her head. "Your mother did not want it sold for any reason, Ciara. 'Tis why she hid it here and bequeathed it to you. She knew you would cherish it always."

A lump formed in her throat. She closed her eyes and nodded against his chest.

"I will build a special cabinet for this," Alastair said and eased her away. He tucked his fingers beneath her chin and raised her gaze to his. "We will place it where its beauty can be admired by all."

Ciara lowered her gaze. "Doing so will make me feel like my mother is here with me." She looked into his dark eyes and a flood of emotions rushed through her heart. "I will no longer have to rely on paper roses to feel her presence."

A soft smile curled his lips and he gently shook his head. "Ciara, my love, didn't you know that you carry a piece of her with you every day? 'Tis here, in your heart." He placed a hand over the pulse in her chest. "You never needed paper roses."

Tears stung her eyes. How did he know her so well? 'Twas as if they were created for each other.

*The two of you share the same soul.*

Valerie's haunting words echoed through her mind. 'Twas at that moment Ciara realized what Valerie knew all along.

Ciara needed Alastair as much as he needed her. Their common bond was Valerie, a spectacular woman who cherished paper roses.

Should she live to be a hundred, Ciara would offer a prayer of thanks each day that Valerie had uttered such a wish before she died.

Ciara had her memories, her roses and the love of a magnificent man. She vowed to cherish them always.

## ***ABOUT THE AUTHOR***



**CELIA COLLIER**

Stillwater Oklahoma is home to Celia Collier, her husband, two children, Lady (the dog) and Shadow (the ornery cat). A Naval veteran originally from Phoenix Arizona, Celia first moved to Oklahoma during her high school years. She began writing in 1990 while her husband was away on deployment.

Her love of history, with a fondness for Scotland, shines in her work. PAPER ROSES is Celia's second novel to be released in electronic format.

**Visit Celia's Home Page At**

**<http://www.cowboy.net/~celiac/index.html>**