

The Glenlyon Bride

Karen Ranney

One

Glenlyon Casde Scotland, 1772

"I'll not marry the witch," Lachlan said.

No one paid any attention to his words. Instead, his entire clan seemed entranced by Coinneach MacAuley. The old man considered himself a prophet, a seer, and every man, woman, and child in the hall obliged by being his willing audience.

"I see into the far future," the old man intoned. He stood in the middle of the room, both hands in the air as if his palms pressed against an invisible wall. His full white beard ended in a point at mid-chest. Beneath shaggy white brows were bright blue eyes, too young for the aged face. At the moment, they were fixed on the high ceiling of the hall as if he saw the future written there. "I read the doom of the Sinclairs. I see the chief, the last of his line. He will be no father." His voice rose, carried like an echo through the large room. People might have whispered among themselves, but no one thought to interrupt the prophet. "His sons, all the brave ones, are never born. All the honors they would have brought to the clan Sinclair—only dust in the wind. No future chief will ever rule again. Only barrenness and disaster will be the Sinclairs' future." He turned and pointed one long, wrinkled finger at Lachlan. "Because you ignored the Legend."

Lachlan eyed the old man. It was better to simply wait until the seer was finished with his pronouncements than to interrupt. That would only guarantee a longer harangue.

The finger dropped; the seer bowed his head. "No Sinclair will ever rule Glenlyon again," Coinneach continued. "The castle will lie like a crypt, devoid of life."

One eyebrow rose; then, by force of will, Lachlan smoothed his face of all expression. "Give it up, old man," he said now, his voice carrying as easily as the seer's. "I'll not marry the witch."

Coinneach's voice rose once more, its tone designed to lift the hair from the back of the neck of any Sinclair currently listening. The problem was, *all* of them were rapt with attention. They should have been drinking; it was a night of toasts and slow but certain drunkenness. His cousin, James, had wed, and the happy union was being celebrated. Instead, Coinneach was using this occasion to make mischief, and accomplishing his task well.

"And when it comes to pass that the Sinclair will lament over his fate, and the loss of all his unborn sons, only then will he be allowed to sink into his grave. The last of his possessions will be inherited by a Campbell." At this, there was a collective hiss of disbelief. The Campbells and the Sinclairs had been enemies for as long as any could remember. "I see the Bride standing before me," Coinneach interjected quickly. "She knows the secret of life. She'll be claw-footed and have a voice like a banshee, but she'll save the clan Sinclair."

Lachlan sat up straighten "Is that what's wrong with her, old man? She limps and screams? Is that why her father so willingly bargains her?"

Coinneach frowned at him. "He wants an end to the raiding, Lachlan. Your promise for his daughter."

The Sinclairs had been making mischief on the border for generations, but ever since the '45 it had been a sheer pleasure to tweak the nose of the English. In the last year, however, the raids had taken on a desperate turn. The cattle they'd stolen had been less for sport than to augment the dwindling Sinclair herds.

Lachlan settled back against the heavily carved chair that had been his father's and his father's father's.

He'd been raised with tales of Sinclair feats since he was a small boy, regaled with the history of his clan in this very room. He was laird, a position that seemed to mean less and less among the clans of late. But it had been a sacred duty to his father, and to all the Sinclairs who'd come before him. And it meant something to him. The responsibility he bore for his clan's survival was a constant burden.

His land was starkly beautiful, a succession of softly undulating hills and deeply shrouded valleys giving way to high, bleak peaks. A place of refuge that had always supported its people even in difficult political times. After the '45, it seemed as if the boot of England had continually been at Scotland's neck. No Scot was allowed to forget that his country had rebelled and lost. Roads were built and marched upon by red-coated English soldiers; forts were erected, and cannon stood ready; tariffs were extracted, and laws were made to banish or ban or expunge all that was a matter of pride to his countrymen.

In the last few years, it seemed as if the fate of the Sinclairs was as dismal as Scotland's. Their cattle had not flourished; their land yielded only barley. No wonder so many of his people were leaving.

All that Lachlan Sinclair saw when he looked out into the large hall of his home was what needed to be done, not what could be accomplished.

The Legend loomed larger and larger in his mind. Almost every day bore some additional reminder of his responsibilities. He was beginning to believe, like some daft seer himself, that this marriage might be the only way for the Sinclairs to prosper after all.

The Legend of the Glenlyon Bride had been whispered about from his birth. Old Mab, the midwife, had had a dream about his future, it was said, one closely tied to the clan's. The determination had been made that the old woman had dreamed of prophecy, and Coinneach had only exploited the tale. Over the years, however, the Legend had grown in importance. He was sure each member of his clan would admit to believing it. They trusted that a stranger's presence would signal an end to the hardship that had plagued them. It would not be his cunning that lifted his clan away from desperation, or his knowledge, or even his daring. *She* would be the answer, this shadowy figure of a woman who dared to stand on the periphery of his vision as if she mocked him even now. He'd rather raid her land and steal her cattle than wed the witch.

Her father had made the offer but a week before. Already, rumor had furnished him details her father had not. Harriet. Even her name was ugly. Coinneach's words only made fast his fears. A stern harridan of a bride, but with a dowry fat enough to feed his people.

He reached for his cup and drained it. There was no more whiskey; the last of the barrels in the castle cellar had been tapped for this occasion. A Scot without whiskey was like a river without water. One merely enhanced the other. Things were never so bad that a taste of the spirit couldn't make it better. He was very much afraid that the lack of whiskey would be one more sign to his people that the last days of the Sinclairs were here.

Angus had been in charge of the distilling, but Angus had died unexpectedly a month earlier. A tragedy in more ways than one, that. Not only had Lachlan lost a clansman, but he'd lost all the knowledge Angus had possessed, and, therefore, the only thing Lachlan might have been able to smuggle and turn into a tidy profit.

There were always those who would pay dearly for good Scots whiskey. Even Englishmen. But the fact of the matter was that the excise tax stripped even the smallest of profits from such a venture. It was commonplace, therefore, to simply avoid the tax. Some would label it smuggling. Lachlan preferred to call it smart commerce. The buyer was pleased with a superior product. The seller made a reasonable profit. The only people who weren't in favor of forestalling the punitive tax were the excise men.

But without the whiskey, he had nothing else to smuggle, trade, or barter. Glenlyon possessed only two things in abundance: barley and hope.

He stood and toasted his cousin, raising his empty cup high. Laughter followed his greeting to the happy couple. His own smile was more forced. He turned and left the room.

What he needed was a miracle. Or a Legend. He stopped, halted by a physical sensation so sharp it was

not unlike a dagger spearing his chest. Certainty, that's what it was. Or destiny. He was going to have to wed the Englishwoman to save his clan.

But he wasn't going to do so until he'd had a look at the witch.

Squire Hanson's **House** England

It would be a full moon tonight. A reviver's moon, her father had called it. *A moon for dreaming, lass. Close your eyes and feel it 'neath your lids. 'Tis magic, Janet.* She needed a touch of magic. Anything to dispel this awful feeling of being trapped within her skin. Screaming without a sound.

"Janet, may I fetch you a shawl? You are shivering."

She turned, and Jeremy Hanson was there again. As he was most times. So close she was grateful for the muslin fichu across her bodice. She pulled it up discreetly with two fingers. She shook her head.

"Are you ill?"

"No, just having an errant thought," she said, forcing a smile.

"Then you should not think such troubling things." His smile was sincere; the look in his eyes, one of deep devotion. He was a truly nice young man, tall and slender, with hazel eyes and light brown hair. Everything about Jeremy was agreeable, neither too glaring or out of place. But the truth of the matter was that he was too solicitous of her, a fact that would displease his family greatly if they were to realize. She was no more than a poor relation, a companion to the daughter of the house.

"Jeremy, come and see what I've done. I've quite captured the garden in spring, I think. What do you say?" Harriet called out, separating them.

Janet did not doubt that the other woman had intended it just so. Or perhaps she judged Harriet too sharply. She had spent seven years in service to her, enough time to get to know a person, but understanding still slipped through her fingers like water. There were times at which she thought Harriet genuinely kind, still other occasions when she suspected that Harriet waited until she was feeling her lowest to offer up criticism and censure.

Lately, Harriet's mood had been worse than usual. The reason for it had been hard to discern until she'd overheard a conversation. The manor house was cavernous, so much so that even whispers had a tendency to float from unexpected places. She'd learned, accidentally, that Squire Hanson had made peace with the Scot who had made a practice of coming over the border to bedevil him for the last few years. The squire had offered up his daughter and her dowry as an incentive for the Scot to cease stealing his cattle.

Harriet was to wed the laird of the Sinclairs. Now *that* was a surprise.

Janet could not help but wonder, however, if Harriet's father absented himself until the nuptials a month from now solely to avoid the unpleasantness of Harriet's mood. Her irritation about her upcoming nuptials seemed destined to last until the very day she was wed.

Janet turned back to the window, wishing that she had the power to ease herself through the glass and escape into the night like a shadow. She would hide among the trees, peer around a thick trunk, and run into the woods like a forest creature. Away. Where she could not be told that her accent was common or her coloring odd or her fingers clumsy. Where there was music, perhaps, and the sound of laughter. Happiness, wrapped into a parcel of night and bound together with a bow made of acceptance.

She was so lonely sometimes. But for the first time in seven years, she was promised an end to it. She had learned, the day she'd heard of Harriet's wedding, that she was to accompany Harriet to Scotland after she became a bride. To be home once more, to set her feet on Scottish soil. She anxiously counted the days.

"Come away from that window, Janet. I need you." Harriet's voice once again called her to duty.

Janet moved across the room and sat on the chair beside Harriet. She would be quite attractive, Janet thought, if she was not forever scowling at the world. Harriet had hair of a deep chestnut color that curled despite the weather, and was possessed of the softest blue eyes. She was short of stature and small of frame, giving the impression of weakness or fragility, something delicate to be protected. Harriet, however, possessed a will of iron. It was never overt, never demonstrated in screaming fits or tirades. It was simply *there*, like the sky or the earth.

"You've been pining all evening. What, some Scots holiday we've neglected to celebrate? Something altogether holy?"

Janet shook her head. It was better to never respond to one of Harriet's jibes—a lesson she'd learned in the last seven years. She had only been fifteen when she'd come to England. Her parents were dead, their village decimated by influenza. People had begun to leave prior, to the epidemic; afterward, it was as if only ghosts inhabited Tarlogie.

She had been given the choice of being a companion to Harriet or starving in the streets. There were some days when she knew she had made the wrong choice.

Still, it could be worse. Her duties were not onerous. She'd learned to ignore most of Harriet's complaints, even though the nasal whine of her voice made that almost impossible. She was allowed an hour here and there to spend among the flowers, to read a book borrowed surreptitiously from Squire Hanson's library. If she had no prospects or future, it was not Harriet's fault.

"You give yourself airs with my brother," Harriet said now. Her voice had softened to a grating whisper, inaudible to Jeremy, who sat on the other side of the room, reading. Periodically, he would look up and send a sweet smile in Janet's direction.

"I was but pleasant, I think He asked me a question; I answered it."

Was disposition passed from father to child? Was that why Harriet frowned so much and seemed so unhappy? If so, why was Jeremy not more like his father?

No, that was not quite fair, was it? Harriet's parents were quite nice people. Squire Hanson was a blustery sort of man who harrumphed a great deal and who was obviously more comfortable in the presence of animals than people. Harriet's mother, Louisa Hanson, was bedridden and removed from most of the activity in the house. She was a sweet lady, with a habit of sniffing into a lace handkerchief, and she had always been kind, in a slightly absentminded way. Janet would not have been surprised if the other inhabitants of the house forgot about her presence for long stretches at a time, just as Mrs. Hanson, no doubt, forgot about hers.

"I've seen the way you smile at him, Janet," Harriet said. "As if you would charm him."

"I was but being polite."

"Practice your wiles on the groom, Janet. Or the footmen. Else I will have no choice but to mention your wild behavior to my father."

Wild? A small smile was born secretly. She dipped her head in case it blossomed forth and betrayed her amusement. *Oh, Harriet, if you would know what wildness is, see inside my heart. That is wild.*

There, it was out, then. The truth, unadorned and without pretense. She did not want to be here, in this place, eternally a servant while her life drained away. She wanted to be home again, in Tarlogie. She wanted to hear her father's rich laughter and her mother's sweet voice. Her mother's mother had been English, and it was through her grandmother that she claimed kin to the Hansons and, because of that relation, had a home of any sort. But, oh, it was so difficult to pretend to *like* being English.

All her life, she'd been raised to prize her heritage, to find in herself those things that linked her to a proud people. She was her parents' only child, and one who was beset with curiosity, her father had said. Perhaps

that was why he'd let her tag along with him, learning his trade as well as any apprentice. She'd grown too accustomed to saying what she thought, to laughing immoderately, to seeing the best side of life.

To be so again, that's what she wished. To dance among the heather, to see a sunrise over the Highlands. To hear the sound of the Gaelic, to smell the acrid scent of peat smoke. That's what being wild felt like.

During the last seven years, she'd made herself into another person. The Janet who'd lived with her parents in the small village outside Tain had disappeared. She barely remembered her Gaelic, the tunes she'd hummed as a child. But then, there was no further cause for laughter, no reason to smile. Even her speech had changed. She sounded more English than Scots.

Oh, but inside, her heart beat with wildness.

"Are you pouting, Janet? It's very unbecoming in a servant. Hand me my case," Harriet said.

Janet bent to reach the embroidery basket. She offered it up mutely, said nothing as Harriet took her time selecting the next thread to use.

"Hold the basket steady, Janet. Your hands are trembling."

Janet braced the heavy basket on her knees.

"I detest this shade of blue thread you selected. Whatever were you thinking?" Harriet picked through the threads. It was one of Janet's duties to rearrange them every night, to wind them around the little spools arranged for just such a purpose. "Are you hoping to rid yourself of doing errands by showing such poor judgment?"

"It is exactly what you asked for, Harriet. A shade of blue for delphiniums."

Harriet looked over at her, her frown deepening.

"Are you telling me I'm wrong, Janet? I cannot believe you would be so foolish."

"If you do not like the shade I selected, Harriet," she said calmly, "perhaps it would be better if you went to the village the next time."

Janet looked down at the floor, horrified at her own words. A full moon, that's what it was. Had she forgotten her place? Yes, oh, yes, she had. Gloriously so. Enough that for once, she'd spoken the truth. Honesty bubbled up from her toes, capped only through will and prudence. Her words could get her dismissed despite any familial ties. Where would she be then? On the road with less future than she had now.

"Forgive me, Harriet," she said softly.

"You must be ill, Janet, to speak so foolishly. That is it, isn't it? Ring for Mrs. Thomas and have her bring you some Dover's Powder."

"It is nothing, Harriet," she said quickly. "Perhaps I am simply tired." Even if she had been feeling ill, she would have denied it to escape a dosing of Dover's. It made her stomach lurch and then induced the most bizarre dreams. The last time she'd been forced to take it, she'd awakened drenched from her own perspiration and vowing never to succumb to the medicine again.

"Why ever should you be tired? You've done nothing of consequence today." Harriet's smile had an edge of daring to it, one that made Janet choke back the retort that she'd walked to the village and back again, not once but twice, simply because Harriet had forgotten something she wished purchased.

"Perhaps you're correct," Janet said. "I could be sickening."

"How very inconsiderate of you to be ill while in my presence. Leave me, then."

Janet replaced the embroidery chest on the floor beside Harriet and nodded to her. Then, before Jeremy could wish her a soft good night, she escaped.

But not to bed. The night was young; the moon was just rising; the enchantment of an early spring breeze was too alluring to resist. The moment was too precious; the freedom too rare to waste.

She would be wild, if only for a moment.

A shallow stream ran through the Hansons' property to the east of the house. In the morning, it looked as if it glowed; the rays of the sun struck it just so. It reminded her of Tarlogie and the burn that flowed past their small cottage. It had winked in the morning light just like this one, before disappearing into the ground again.

Now the stream was black, lit only by a glimpse of moon. She turned and faced north, wishing that she might be like a bird and fly over the ground, finding a nest among the trees bordering a loch. She could almost feel Scotland call her from here, as if she knew that one of her children was missing. It was in her blood, this longing, so deep and so sharp that it made her wish to weep sometimes. *You can take a Scot from the land, but never the land from the Scot*—a saying she'd heard as a child, but whose actual meaning she'd never known until separated from the land of her birth.

She sat on the bank of the small stream, on the mossy ground cover. There were trees around her, shading the moonlit darkness still further. The night was welcoming, as if it approved of her escape into wildness. Just this once. A few moments out of seven years. Then she would return to being sober Janet.

She wiggled her toes, freed of shoes and stockings, lifted her serviceable servant's gown above her knees and waded into the stream. It was cold even though it was spring. Maybe it carried its chill from the high mountains of Scotland itself. *Whimsy, Janet*. More likely it was a staid little English stream. All proper and demure, never flooding, never straying from its bank. It would not tunnel through peat and carry a smoky taste. It would tumble over rocks and pebbles in only the most demure fashion.

"Is it hard to mind your manners, brook? Do you find it as difficult as I do? I wish I did not have to be so polite all the time," she said softly.

Suddenly a voice called out of the dark. "Are you a brownie, then, that you would speak to the water?"

Her head jerked up. All she saw was a shadow on the landscape, only a long, dark shape near a tree. Her heart thudded heavily in her chest. Her hands fisted her skirts, holding them above the rippling water. Had she not been in such a position, she might have fled at the sound of him.

Or perhaps not. Maybe she'd come to meet him, then, him with his voice all dark and thick like a summer night. With the sound of Scotland in it.

"A brownie?" She could not help it; she smiled. Doing so seemed to remove the cork from her feelings, held so tight and contained these last years. "If I were a brownie," she said, her voice as soft as his, "then I would be in the house performing the chores of the mistress—doing the supper dishes or plying my skill with a needle."

"Ah, but the candle still shines, so perhaps you wait until all are abed before you begin your chores."

He took a few steps forward, and she remained where she was, the sober Janet trapped by impropriety, a hoyden discovered just as she embarked upon her ill-bred ways. It did not seem quite fair to be caught just as she was about to be wild. She wiggled her toes. The rocks beneath her feet were kind and did not cut her skin, nor did the water seem as cold.

"I wish I had a bit of cheese or a drink of milk to give you," he said.

She followed his shadow, wondered who he was. Or was he even real? Had she conjured him up from loneliness? A dream, perhaps? A phantom, come to share her wicked moments?

"You've some skill in the tempting of brownies, I see," she said. "You must not pay them too much, else their pride is wounded."

"Nor ignore their contribution," he said agreeably, "lest they vanish and never appear again."

He was Scots, and it was a moonlit night, and this was England: three points upon which a conclusion could be drawn.

"You are a border raider, aren't you?"

His laughter surprised her—not the throaty sound of it, but the surprise and delight in the sound. He seemed charmed, and that was both idiotic and oddly vainglorious. Sober Janet, captivating a reviver.

"And I've come to steal you, is that it?"

"Have you?" she asked, shaking one foot before placing it on the gently sloping bank. She stepped out of the stream and dropped her skirt.

"While it's true a lass is a blessing, cattle are more prized. Lust is all well and good, but has never taken the place of a full stomach."

Her laughter came freely. Honesty was a commodity much lacking in her life of late. It was a refreshing thing to hear it, even if the truth was so baldly stated.

"Then I'm sorry I am not a cow, for your sake, sir."

"Oh, I've not come for cattle this time."

A faint skitter of alarm tripped through her. "And what *have* you come for?"

"To learn, perhaps. To seek answers to questions."

Silence, while she waited. When it was apparent he wasn't going to satisfy her curiosity, she tilted her head and frowned into the shadows.

"The moon lights your hair, lass. It looks silver in the light. What color does it appear in the sun?"

She blinked at him, startled by the question and the air of bemusement in his voice. "Brown."

"The brown of the earth after a spring rain?"

"Simply brown, I'm afraid. No better nor worse than that." Her smile was coaxed free again by his practiced charm.

"And your eyes?"

"Blue. And no, not the blue of the skies." "You lack poetry in your soul, lass." "And I think you've too much of it for a reviver." "Harriet!" The sound of Jeremy's voice cut through their banter like a sharpened sword. Janet turned her head in the direction of the house, alarmed. If Jeremy was looking for his sister, that meant Harriet was, no doubt, looking for her. And anger or irritation was the only impetus for Harriet to go abroad at night.

She bent down and grabbed her shoes, then crumpled her stockings into her pocket and crossed the stream with one bounding leap.

She stopped and turned, wishing to say good-bye, but he had already disappeared into the shadows. Indeed, she might have imagined him. Later, in her bed that night, she wondered if she had.

Two

It was raining, a very fine mist that ended almost as soon as it began. But Lachlan stood in it, he and his horse, waiting for her, wondering if a proper English miss would come to meet him in the rain. She should be warm and cozy next to a fire. Would she even sense him here? He sluiced the rain from his face and stared up at the windows of the manor house. Which room was hers?

Don't be daft, Lachlan. The very last thing you need to do is to steal your intended from her bed. But it was a tempting thought, nonetheless. Last night, he'd only a hint of her. A moonbeam had strayed beneath a branch and sent a portrait of her into his mind. Shadows obscured her features, but they seemed fine, indeed. Brown hair, she'd said. And plain blue eyes. He doubted it. With her teasing laugh, she'd rendered him curious indeed. She did not screech as Coinneach had promised, and her hurried return to the house had proven that she did not limp.

Harriet. He did not like that name. It did not seem to fit her somehow.

Why had he thought of her all day? Because she'd teased him about brownies and stood in the middle of a stream, barefooted. Because her laughter was free and easy and seemed tied to the center of him somehow, as if a string linked them.

Come to me, lass.

Would she hear his thoughts, then? Or was he simply a fool to stand here in the rain, waiting for a sight of a woman he'd be wed to, soon enough?

Janet coughed again, earning herself another fierce look from Harriet. Once more, and the other woman's lips pursed so tightly, they disappeared into her face.

"What possessed you, Janet? To rid yourself of your shoes and cavort in the garden like a common doxy? Is that what I should expect of you Scots?" She lowered her needlework and stared at Janet. "You deserve to be ill, you know. I should dismiss you out of hand, but Mama had a fondness for your mother and would be distressed."

Another cough; another frown.

"Oh, do remove yourself to your chamber, Janet. I cannot bear the sounds you make."

Janet stood, her hands hidden in the material of her skirt. Her fingers trembled, so she fisted them.

"Thank you, Harriet," she said, her voice barely audible. It sounded, to a casual listener, as if she were indeed sickening with a cold. But the night air had been warm, and she'd suffered more hardship in her life than standing in a cold burn.

You are a terrible person, Janet. To pretend an illness in order to escape Harriet. But, oh, the better to be able to race along the grass of the garden and return to the stream. Perhaps her revive would be there, the man she'd conjured up from loneliness and longing.

The rain that had misted the air earlier had stopped, but the dampness of the grass soaked into her slippers. She brushed against a low-hanging branch, and droplets beaded her cheek. She smiled. How many times had she stood in a Highland rain, her head tilted back, her face washed clean? *Too many times, but too long ago, Janet.*

The air was scented with the rain still, and the smell of growing things. She stopped and closed her eyes, wondering if she could tell all the various scents apart, one from the other.

You delay because you do not wish to know, Janet, she chided herself. *You do not wish to reach the stream and have him not be there. Why else do you stand in full view of the house and discovery? In order to summon him here with wishes, then?*

"Have you another name?" His voice came from behind a nearby tree. As she watched, a shadow disengaged itself and walked forward. Beside him walked a horse; it, too, only darkness upon darkness. She

might have conjured up the man, but had she summoned the horse, too?

"Another name?"

"Not your Christian name."

"Elizabeth," she said, giving him her middle name.

"A nice English name."

"I was named for my grandmother. She was a nice English lady."

"We'll call you the Gaelic, then. Ealasaid."

"Will we?" Should she have imagined a man with such an arrogant nature?

"Do not tell me you'd prefer something more English?" There was a decidedly pained tone in his voice.

"I haven't any objection to my current name," she said.

"It's too harsh for such a lovely lass as yourself."

"And how would you know it?"

"Perhaps I am part brownie."

He tied the reins of his horse to a tree, then walked slowly toward her. She clenched her fists in the material of her shawl. It was not fear she felt at that moment. Fear might have been more prudent. Instead, she felt excitement, perhaps. Daring, of a certainty. She was about to be more than wild. She was to have an adventure, of that she was sure. With a Scots revival.

"My name is not so unpleasant as yours, lass. Lachlan. Now, doesn't that have a fine ring to it? It flows from the tongue like the burn you waded in last night. Have you had no ill effects from such a daring thing?"

"You must think me puny indeed," she said, her smile enlivened by the gentle teasing in his voice.

"No, simply a lass who should be cosseted, I think. Or protected from her more wayward nature." Was it her imagination, or was there a smile in his voice? He was a vision crafted in mist and shadows. Even the moon had disappeared behind the clouds, as if shrouding him in secrecy.

He was really too close now, his voice curled around her like a dark, silken ribbon. It was almost heaven to hear the sound of it, the lilting tones of its teasing. He played with her, she knew. Daring he was, almost as much as she. But he knew the way of wildness, and she was new to it.

"So, you've not come to steal cattle tonight?"

"You accuse me without proof, Ealasaid. What have I stolen? Cannot I be a simple Scot wandering over the border for the sake of it? England's made it clear we belong to them. Is it only one-sided, then?"

"Then are you seeking answers, still?"

"No," he said, his voice closer than before. "I think I've found what I needed to know."

His fingers touched her cheek, and she jerked, startled. Instead of removing his hand, he continued his exploration, learning the texture of her skin, the shape of her face. She should have moved away or, barring that, asked him to refrain from such intimacies. But she did nothing, only stood, silent and enmeshed within a spell woven around them by the night and the mist. No, more than that. A longing for moments like this, with her breath coming in sharp little gasps and her heart racing. His fingers were rough; his touch, gentle.

His thumb rested upon her chin, dipped beneath her jaw and pushed her face up. She closed her eyes and

tilted her head back, waiting in terrified wonder for the touch of his lips on hers, the magical and forbidden taste of wickedness.

Instead, he spoke, his breath brushing against the tendrils of hair at her temple. "Why did you come, lass?"

Her eyes opened. He stood so close, she could feel his breath upon her cheek. Push him back, or be enfolded in his arms. That's how close they stood.

"I couldn't stay away." The simple truth of it frightened her. She'd done nothing but think of him all day, wondering if she'd dreamed their first encounter.

"Neither could I, lass. A good omen, I think." There was that hint of a smile in his voice again, as if he was amused by her. It should not have coaxed free her own smile. It might have been better if she'd feared him.

"Give me your hand, Ealasaid."

She reached out her arm, until her fingers brushed his chest. The hand that encompassed hers was large; his palm, roughened. He laughed then, an odd sound in the darkness, and pulled her with him.

Three

He had thought about her all day, this woman with the ill-fitting name. She wasn't timid. A timid miss might ask where he was taking her. But then, a timid miss would not be in the dark with him, or stand in a stream with her skirts to her knees.

Her voice was melodic, almost as if she had the sound of Scotland trapped within her speech. She was fleet of foot as she followed him, skipping every once in a while to keep her steps equal to his.

"Are you certain you've not come to steal?" she asked, her voice breathless.

"Are you feared I would ride with you across the border, lass? Hide you in my castle and demand a ransom for you?"

"Have you a castle?" She sounded fascinated.

Did she not know who he was? A thought without merit at this particular moment. But still, a thread of doubt crept through his mind. He'd never thought she wouldn't know him. Lachlan was a good Scots name, but not very common.

"I'm Sinclair," he said, wondering how she would receive

the news that the man who held her hand and pulled her through the forest was her future husband.

"Oh." A small sound, for all that. Still, she did not protest.

They traveled slower, winding through the thick woods. He waited for her to speak, wondered what her questions would be.

"Could you tell me about the castle?"

"Glenlyon?"

"Yes. It's to be my home, so I would like to know."

"It's a castle," he said. "It's old and grows cold in the winter, though passably cool in the summer. You don't expect me to tell you what color the curtains are or some such?"

Her laughter surprised him. So, too, the fact that it seemed tied to his own smile, as if she'd the power to summon it.

"Can you not wait until you see it, then?"

"You're right; I should wait. It is only a month."

Her hand still rested trustingly in his, and she'd said those words that had calmed his sudden jealousy without a clue that it had been there at all. *It's to be my home*. She'd known who he was, then, and had not simply come with him to have an adventure before marrying. He wanted to kiss her, some recompense, some reward for her hesitant honesty, for her gift of tremulous anticipation. There had been fear in her words, barely audible, but then he'd had some experience with learning that emotion in the past few years. He was occasionally afraid of the future, afraid he might not be able to save his clan. He turned his mind from such dour thoughts.

He brought her hand to his face, kissed the inside of her wrist. He did not wish to startle her; they were newly met, however destined their future together might be. She seemed silenced by his gesture, the pounding of her blood beneath her skin the only communication between them. Perhaps not a timid woman, but one of shyness still, of uncertainty. It was there in the way her breathing had escalated, in the small step she took away from him; almost, but not quite, pulling her hand from his stewardship.

He said nothing, simply walked on, his route one learned years ago when he had first begun to visit this place. The waterfall was the headwater for the small stream she'd bathed in last night.

The sound of the rushing water drowned out her words. She pulled free of his grasp and stood on the mossy bank overlooking the pool formed by the rapids. The moon chose that moment to peek out from behind the lowering clouds, and he was treated to the sight of her, bathed by silvered light.

She took his breath away.

She turned, her smile as radiant as the moon, the night no match for her beauty. Were all women as such when seen for the first time, or had it been his singular blessing to view her in the moonlight? Had Fate, who'd decreed the Sinclairs such a sorry lot these past years, felt only pity and sorrow for his condition, then? Had he been given this woman in order to right so many wrongs? A woman with a child in her heart, who gamboled in streams and raced like a fawn, whose laughter taunted him to smile and whose face made him thankful for Old Mab and the Legend. And perhaps even Coinneach.

Her lips were full, the lower lip more so than the upper. Her eyes were large; her cheeks, high. Her chin was neither squared nor pointed, but tapering in a way that chins do. And her nose was neither beaked nor sharp, but ended with a small upturn to it. Her hair curled over her shoulders in riotous disarray, and he wanted to know if the mist made it such, or if she was beset with curls every day. A question he'd have answered after their wedding.

He bent finally, and she cupped her hands around his ear so that he might hear her words over the roar of the water. "I've never known such a place existed," she said.

His own words were said in a similar manner. He hesitated as his hands brushed over her hair, feeling the thickness of it, wishing that it might be provident to thread his fingers through it. "You've led a sheltered life, then, lass. Did you never go exploring?"

She shook her head. He didn't need sunlight to see the sparkle of her eyes. He needed no urging for her to grip his hand. They followed the edge of the pool until they came to the waterfall. He turned and looked at her, as if to measure the extent of her daring, then calmly picked her up and walked into the gap between waterfall and stone.

He slowly lowered her to her feet and reluctantly stepped away. What he wanted to do was get so much closer. But they had all the time in the world to learn of the other. These moments hollowed from time and circumstance were sacred to themselves. He wanted to know things that a bridegroom might dismiss. Why she seemed so un-English for one, and why she'd never ventured far from her garden. Were her parents strict? Had she been mistreated, then? A surge of protectiveness for her thudded through him.

The cave was little more than a hollowed-out rock behind the waterfall, deep enough that they could stand with their back to it and watch the silvery curtain in front of them. He wished it were daylight, so he could see the expression on her face. She was little more than a shadow. A breath of substance.

"I shouldn't be here," she said, addressing the waterfall. Her voice was faint enough, but it was oddly less noisy here than in front of the cascade of water. Did she stand so still because she sensed him in the same way he did her? He wanted some connection of flesh to flesh, so he placed his hand on her shoulder. He felt her shiver, a strange sensation that was neither in response to cold nor aversion to his touch. Instead, it was as if every part of her body stilled in that instant, became aware of how close he stood to her, how near they were to each other, how their very breathing seemed in tandem.

"What better place, Ealasaid?"

"In my bed. Asleep."

"Dreaming?"

"Yes," she said. The word sounded sorrowful.

"And what do you dream about, lass?" He had not moved his hand, imagining he could feel the texture of her skin beneath her shawl, her dress.

"I dream of the past," she said. Her voice seemed as soft as a whisper; yet if it had been, he could not have heard it over the sound of the waterfall. "I dream of Scotland."

"Does it frighten you that much?"

"It does not frighten me at all."

"Yet we're an impressive bunch, for all that. I think you a brave lass, to be standing here in the dark with a Scot."

"Which is why I shouldn't be here."

"Do you question your courage, or my honor?"

"My own perversity, perhaps, that I would wish to be nowhere but here, even as I know it's not right or well done of me."

His smile broadened. "I'll not harm you."

She didn't answer him, just looked around the cave as if she could see into the nooks and crannies of it.

"Is this where you hide from the patrols?"

"I've put my wayward life behind me."

"Or encouraged me to join it."

"Is that what you've been dreaming of? The life of a border reviver?"

"It seems a bit more exciting than the life I've led," she admitted. "I've little liking for embroidery threads and sketching."

"Are you craving an adventure, lass?"

She glanced at him. "I think you are my grandest escapade of all."

She should not be here. *It* was one thing to be discovered barefooted and racing into the house; another to be missing when she'd convinced Harriet she was ill. She did not doubt that Harriet would send a servant to

check on her or go herself to render condemnation and compassion in one breath.

The rain had come as if to wash the sky clean and then disappeared, leaving it dazzling with stars and deep-black night. The moon had been a lantern, illuminating her foolishness, and then his face.

Lachlan Sinclair. One of the Sinclairs. His name alone had sent a thrill through her. She would see him again, then, after Harriet wed. They would live in the same place, know the same people. And perhaps they could meet again, as they did now, stretching the boundaries of the restrictions that held them in place.

An unmarried woman did not eagerly grasp the hand of a man she did not know. She did not race into the woods with her lips clenched tight as if to muffle the sounds of excitement. She certainly did not stand upon the edge of a pool grown black and silver with moonlight and gape at the face of a man she'd never met.

She'd known he was tall, and his breadth had been hinted at in the shape of his shadowed form. But she had not known that his face would be so strong, that the moonlight would dance upon his features and give shape and hollows to them. It was a face of extremes, softened by a mouth that seemed adrift in smiles. She had stared at him as if she'd lost her wits. And perhaps she had, for in that moment, when the moon had encapsulated him in radiance, she'd wanted to touch him. Her fingers ached to dance over the skin of his cheekbones, to see if they were as sharp as moonlight made them. Was his nose that strong, his lips that full? His hair that thick?

Last night she'd thought herself wild. Tonight she knew herself wanton.

She brushed by him. Without another word, she'd found her way from the cave and back to the bank of the pool.

"Ealasaid?"

She looked back, and he stood there, his arm outstretched, his hand palm up. She shook her head. He was too much a lure, and she had learned caution and survival in the past years. She should wait until they met again in Scotland. It would be more properly done. Less tempting than seeing him in the moonlight. Even as she told herself to leave, she did not wish to. A clue, then, to how wild she truly was.

"Meet me here, tomorrow."

Did she just imagine his words? *Wishful thinking, Janet, or a dream?* Or perhaps an echo of wildness?

Four

Janet slept heavily and woke late. She had crept to her room by the servants' stair, had felt only a giddy sense of relief not to have been discovered. But sleep had not come easily. Instead, she had remembered every moment of the hour she'd spent with Lachlan. She spoke his words over and over in her mind, as if to fix them there.

The day passed with aching slowness, a warm spring day that lured her and beckoned her outdoors. She had no errands to perform, no visits to the village, no lists of items to procure at the various shops. Instead, she sat in the large and sunny parlor and read to Harriet while she sewed. Every sentence or so she was halted and made to read another passage, to obscure any hint of accent from her voice. She longed to ask Harriet what she planned to do once she was in Scotland. Was she going to make every Scot repeat his words until his speech sounded more English?

"You are looking peaked, Janet," Harriet said now, her gaze sharp. "Are you still ailing?"

"No, Harriet. Shall I continue to read?"

"You don't like it when I correct you, do you?"

Janet kept her face carefully blank of expression. Honesty was not truly wanted at this moment. She had

learned, on too many previous occasions, that it was better to simply pretend to have no thoughts at all.

"I do it for your sake, you know. You'd sound like a barbarian otherwise. But sometimes you look at me as if you dislike my efforts to improve you. You mustn't do so, you know. Servants should always have their eyes downcast when they are being reprimanded."

"Yes, Harriet."

"You dislike me, don't you, Janet?"

She looked over at Harriet. The question surprised her, but it should not have. Harriet did not avoid confrontation; she embraced it. Indeed, there were times at which Janet had thought Harriet that spoiled for a fight, not unlike a young bully she'd known at Tarlogie. Robbie had had just that look about the eyes, that daring glitter.

Now there was a small smile on Harriet's lips, and her gaze was fixed on Janet as if relishing the discomfort she felt.

Did Harriet wish her to fawn? She could not. In truth, she did not know how to answer. She had never thought of Harriet in terms of friendship. Their relationship was built too strictly on servitude, a position Harriet had made clear the first day they'd met, seven years ago.

"You're to be my maid when she's taking her half day, and my footman if none is available. You'll do errands for me and fetch me tea if I require it. If your voice and your ability are agreeable, you will read to me. If not, you will be expected to sit quietly and not speak. Do you understand?"

She had only nodded in response.

"It is not important," Harriet said now. "You are my companion, after all. That is all that's needed."

Janet lowered the book to her lap. "Do you want us to be friends, Harriet?"

"Why ever would I want that? You're hardly my social equal despite our dubious relationship." Harriet's smile carried a brittle edge to it. "I am to be married Janet. Did you know?" Harriet seemed to study her. "But of course you do. Servants always know what is happening in a house. I had decided to take you to Scotland with me, but I believe now that another female will do just as well. In fact, more adequately, I'm sure."

Janet gripped the book so tightly, she thought her fingers might be embedded into the tooled leather. She clamped her lips over words that would plead. She would implore, and Harriet would only smile. Perhaps. Or maybe the price to go home to Scotland was her pride. Was she willing to sacrifice it? The gleam in Harriet's eyes seemed to ask the question.

"Please, Harriet," she said softly. "I very much want to go. Won't you reconsider?"

No words seemed capable of warming that icy smile. If anything, it seemed to soften into contempt. "Do not look so stricken, Janet. Mama will find you a position among the ladies she knows. Someone elderly, perhaps, who nods off during the day and will not mind your odd accent and your moodiness."

This, then, was the punishment for not toadying. For her silence, she was being penalized.

"Please, Harriet." She gave her another part of her pride, delivered in a voice that quivered, but only barely.

Her future, the one that seemed to be changing, now seemed bleak as ash. The cold and empty fireplace held more brightness. Lachlan. She'd never see Lachlan now, never spend time with him, never grow to know him. His home would be a mystery to her just as it was now, a castle that existed only in her imagination. And she would never see Scotland again. Sunsets so vivid they made the heart weep, skies the color of slate, a stark and solemn landscape rendered beautiful by touches of color. A shade of heather, a brown capercaillie and her yellowish chicks.

She didn't think she could bear it.

Did Harriet know how desperately she'd wanted to return to Scotland? If so, this was a wonderful punishment, delivered with a small smile. She felt something tear within her, a veil that hid her tears.

"Do not shame us both with your toadying, Janet." Harriet's voice seemed to come from far away. As far away as Scotland.

Janet began to read again, forcing the words past the constriction in her throat. The last remnants of her pride came to her rescue.

She would not cry in front of Harriet. Nor would she beg further. *O sgiala bronach!* The Gaelic seemed so perfect for this moment. Oh, sad news, sad news.

Where was Coinneach now? If the old man could read the future so well, why hadn't he been able to foretell this disaster?

"What happened, James?" Lachlan stood at the cavern entrance. A thick, milky substance clung to the rock walls and fell in rivulets to pool on the stone floor. It stunk of scorched barley, yet also smelled sickeningly sweet.

James was covered in a similar fashion, as were half the men who stood before him. It was not simply their appearance, he reasoned, that made them hold their heads averted or look at the ceiling or the floor. They looked like children who had been caught at some forbidden game. "What happened?" he said again, and this time, his voice ricocheted back to him. He did not sound pleased.

"We thought we might up the mixture a bit, Lachlan. We discharged the still, and it was a puny brew. Hardly worth tasting."

Twenty heads nodded.

"So you thought you might increase the fire a bit more, is that it?"

"Well, that, and the other," James said.

"What would the other be?"

"We drained off a little more of the water, Lachlan."

"You should have seen it, laird. The kettle looked to have the burps, it did." That was contributed by a small voice from the rear. As he watched, young Alex peeped around his father's legs. Barely six years old, and already learning the ways of a conspirator. Lachlan bit back a smile.

"I take it there's no more potent result. Except for this mess."

James shook his head.

"And no one injured?"

Another negative shake.

Lachlan surveyed the inside of the cavern again. The space was carved into a hill only a short distance from Glenlyon and had served as a hidey-hole for generations. In the last several years, they'd erected their pot still here, where it was sure to escape detection from the English excise officers. A series of pipes and vents ending in a crofter's cottage on the other side of the hill carried the steam from the still. The fact was that although the cottage was sparkling clean and dusted often, set up with furniture, a cook stove, and pots and dishes, it had never actually been inhabited. But the steam that billowed from its chimney would be seen as nothing more than a peat fire. If it smelled a bit too hearty and forever bore the scent of barley, it was in keeping with the Sinclair diet. As it was, they ate barley from morning until night—barley bannocks

and barley soup, barley stuffing, barley bread, barley stew.

This venture might very well save them. His bride's dowry would be a blessing, but his clan could not live on it for long. The only thing that would save them was the income from their distillery.

It seemed a good enough plan. The problem was the hundred-pound copper pot. It had been paid for with the last of their ready coin, but it had arrived after Angus' death. No one had been able to coax a palatable brew from it. His clansmen were dedicated, especially since they'd learned there was no more whiskey to be had, but their experience ran to small stills secreted in bed chambers and under piles of peat. They knew nothing about distilling in such a large and imposing vessel. Angus had been closemouthed and guarded his secrets well, so much so that none of their individual or collective efforts had resulted in anything approaching drinkable whiskey. And this afternoon, in an effort to make more powerful the mixture, they'd succeeded in dimpling the expensive pot and bending the tubes that fed into and out of it.

Lachlan stood in the middle of the cave and wondered if the actions of ancestral Sinclair lairds had been so heinous that he was still being punished for it. Surely it was not justice to starve innocents such as young Alex, or cause women to go about with a soft and worried look?

The only bright spot in the gloom of his horizon was Ealasaid. She had been on his mind all night, and she resided there even now as he strode through the cavern, mentally separating those pieces of pipe that could be saved.

"Lachlan?" He looked down, and it was Alex again, this time with his hands tucked manfully into his trousers, his posture not unlike that of his father. His dark brown eyes were the same as most of the Sinclairs; so, too, his dark hair. But it was the stubborn set to his jaw that marked him as a true member of the clan. That and a sweet smile. Lachlan's mother had told him that it was the downfall of many a shy Sinclair lass, that smile. But she'd laughed as she'd said it and looked over at his father fondly. He missed them both. Perhaps part of his sense of responsibility was the notion that his parents were somehow watching him, gauging his merits as laird. If so, they were no doubt disappointed.

"What will we do now, laird?" Lachlan found it disconcerting to be on the receiving end of an intent stare, especially since it was leveled by a six-year-old. But the question the boy asked was one that each man had in his eyes.

"We'll clean up this mess, Alex, and try again. That's what. And if that fails, we'll do it again."

It was an optimism he barely felt, but that must be voiced for the sake of the people standing in front of him. It was the only thing he could give them. That, and the gift of himself, freely given. A sacrifice of marriage. Only it did not feel as much of a loss as it had before he'd met Ealasaid.

Five

She could not wait for darkness; it could not come quickly enough. The sun hung upon the horizon like a recalcitrant child unwilling to find his bed. She urged it on with thoughts and words spoken only in her heart. But it did not pass any quicker.

Finally, it was night. The birds signaled dusk with their warbling. No rain marred the sky, but the moon was no longer full. Shadows graced the garden as the hour grew more advanced. She had learned her lesson during the daylight and did not bid time to hurry, only endured it as she could, her mind blocked to the sound of Harriet's criticism, her smile absent when she nodded to Jeremy.

Harriet had complained to her bedridden mother about her this afternoon. Janet could not help but wonder if it had been planned that she hear the exchange. She was, evidently, clumsy and aloof and rude. A barbarian who had been barely civilized. She had left the chamber rather than overhear any more.

She had worked beside her father for years, had watched as his hands had coaxed magic from the earth's bounty. He was a man who'd taught willingly, naturally, sharing his knowledge with any who asked. It was he who'd explained to her the virtue of patience, that it was possible to hasten a thing to its disaster. He was

the one, too, who'd shown her how to measure pressure, who taught her to gauge steam, the pattern it made as it floated toward the ceiling, how it gurgled in the pipes. Only then could one vat be combined with another, a mixture of agitation and one of reserve resulting in the perfect fermentation.

Janet felt the same right at this moment. She was outwardly calm, inwardly furious. But it did not show on her face, and her eyes were kept downcast in case their expression betrayed her rage.

Aloof—she was that and proud of it. She'd channeled her temper these past years. Grief and fury and worry and longing had no place in a fight for survival. She'd cooled them beneath a crust of ice lest they burn her.

Clumsy? She'd no words to fight that accusation. True, she'd tripped more than once on the small rugs scattered over the floor, and she was forever catching something that had fallen from a table or the mantle or a shelf. But the rooms were crowded with bric-a-brac, statuary, small pots, and dainty little doilies that collected dust and grabbed at sleeves.

Rude? Until yesterday, she'd restrained herself, held tight all those feelings she'd had for Harriet. Until yesterday, she'd said nothing when she'd walked the three miles to the village, because it had been an escape of sorts. Nor did she complain when Harriet had handed her mud-stained boots and demanded they be polished, or chastised her for the way she'd done her hair. She'd heard criticisms day and night, and if there was nothing to criticize, there was, at the last, her own being to condemn. She was Scots, a position and a heritage that, according to Harriet, was no more important than being a cur.

What Harriet called barbarism was no more than ignorance. While it was true she'd no knowledge of all the English table ceremony, she'd learned quickly. She wasn't a crude person. Her mother had been a parson's daughter, not schooled in the ways of gentry. But even if she had been it was doubtful that their three-room cottage would have boasted silver salvers and urns.

But that humble cottage had always looked more welcoming than this crowded house with its evidence of wealth.

Harriet said something, and she nodded, knowing an assent was necessary. In truth, she didn't hear the words, didn't care about them. All she was capable of was mastering her temper at this moment, holding it tight to her, so that it was not visible.

When finally the evening was done, she escaped to her room on the third floor and waited again. When she was certain the household was asleep, she tiptoed down the stairs and through the back parlor, into the hallway and to the garden walk beside the stables. Only then did she run. Toward the waterfall, toward Lachlan. And rebellion of the most daring sort.

He *was* daft; that's what he was. It was the only explanation for a man to stand outside a house waiting for a woman who might never appear. She hadn't, after all, said that she would come.

Was he going to make a practice of doing this for the next month?

He could go up those steps and demand to see her, but to do so would be to reveal his need for her. The squire was a canny man, and Lachlan had no doubt that he would savor the fact that the Scot who'd made his life miserable now pined for his daughter. He wouldn't put it past the man to extract his own revenge, possibly even delay the wedding, if only to balance the scales a bit.

He wished she would come to him now, before the night grew later. Every hour that passed was an hour wasted.

A few minutes later, she exited the house, slipping over the garden grass with the grace of an elf. He smiled even more broadly when he realized that she was going in the direction of the waterfall. She'd find a surprise there, his lass.

Six

The light of the full moon had made the path easier to navigate the night before. But the moon waned now, and it took her twice as long to find her way to the waterfall. In fact, she was nearly at the pool before she realized it lay before her. It was the light that alerted her; the faint hint of fire sparkling behind the sheet of water.

She walked around the rim of the pool, stepped carefully over the two stepping stones, and ducked behind the waterfall. She entered the cave, then smiled at the sight in front of her. A blanket had been laid upon the stone floor, and a candle placed at one edge of it, its glow protected from the fine mist by a glass shield.

A bower for a princess. All it lacked was a flower and a prince.

A rose was extended over her shoulder, held out by a large, tanned hand. A perfect pink rose, no doubt purloined from Harriet's garden. Her smile broadened as she turned. A prince, then, darkly enchanting in this place.

The moon had made of him a statue of gray and black. In truth, he was crafted of earth colors. His hair was the color

of oak, deeply brown and rich. His eyes were that of Scots whiskey, sparkling with depth and power. A strong face. No, the moon had not lied about that. But had she noticed before how strangely alluring his mouth was, or how squared his chin?

"Ealasaid," he softly said, and the sound of it seemed to flow over her skin.

"Lachlan." It was a simple greeting. Why, then, did it seem an entreaty?

He extended his hand. His grip was strong and warm and gentle. He led her to the blanket, and she sat upon it, silent in the face of her surprising sorrow. She did not know this man, had only spent a few hours over the course of two nights with him. But her waking hours had been filled with thoughts of him, and her dreams were rife with events that had never occurred and would never have a chance to happen now.

How silly she was. But was it so foolish to wish for something that made her heart leap and made her blood pulse? Even servant girls had dreams and wishes.

She folded up her knees, wrapped her arms around them, and looked outward toward the sheen of water. The air was damp, but not unpleasantly so. He did not speak, and she turned her head to find him studying her. He sat back against the stone, his arms crossed in front of him, one foot over the other. His boots were dusty; his trousers, the same. His shirt was dark, befitting a man engaged in illicit activities. His hair was worn long; his face appeared tanned even by the light of a lone candle.

He was a border raider, a reviver, and she sat alone with him in a secluded spot and felt no danger.

Oh, she was foolish, wasn't she? As he watched her, his face unsmiling, his gaze never leaving her, she felt the urge to smile. Her heart beat too loudly; her fingers trembled in the folds of her skirt. She should feel only shame for all her wicked thoughts. The first, that she should wish to be nowhere but here. The second, that she should wonder at the reason for his unerring study of her, or wish that she had a newer dress to wear, something edged with tatting or adorned with ribbons.

She brushed her hair away from her face. It was forever coming undone from its pins.

"What do you do during the day, lass? What occupations fill your hours?"

She tilted her head and looked at him. Women, not men, were supposed to be lovely in candlelight. But the flickering shadows seemed to make his breadth more solid and granted shading to the strong angles of his face. He looked like a man accustomed to the night, one who was familiar with the shape of it, the mystery of darkness. "Errands to the village, embroidery," she said. "I confess to having little patience for fine needlework. I read when I can, and I make myself useful. And you, Lachlan? What do you do?"

"I wait impatiently for night," he said, his voice soft. She looked away, her cheeks warming.

"You lied, lass," he said, a smile softening his words. "You've eyes the color of a loch. And hair that's almost red."

"Is that why you brought the candle? To see me more clearly?"

"A brownie did it," he teased. "Frowned at me quite bitterly when I said I much preferred the dark."

"Do you?"

"No. But until you come to my land, this will have to do."

Grief speared her so quickly, she had no warning of it. She wanted to tell him that she would not be coming, that there would be nothing further between them but these moments. She would never see Scotland again, never see the land of the Sinclairs. But she did not, unwilling to mar these moments with him. There would be time enough to long for what could not be. She would not waste these moments.

She looked around at the dimensions of the cave, made more clear by candlelight. It was deeper than she'd thought, a cozy nook for anyone escaping from the border patrols. When she said as much, he only smiled.

"Did you have no thought of this place, lass? Never?"

"I've never explored this far," she confessed.

One of his eyebrows arched upward. His smile seemed to follow it. "A man might think you timid, Ealasaid. But your presence here gives lie to that."

"A maiden and a reviver?"

"I've given up my past," he said, his smile growing in scope, his eyes seeming to spark in the candle's light. "I've been naught but proper for nearly a month now."

Of course, he would be, especially if his laird was due to marry Harriet. It would not be a proper thing to steal from the laird's future wife.

"Could you not be coaxed to being improper again?"

His laughter surprised her. "Those are words a man should say to a maid, Ealasaid. What matter of impropriety would you urge on me?"

"What is it like, being a reviver?"

His look was almost kind. "Occasionally terrifying, lass. If I sought excitement for the fact of it, it wouldn't be to steal a cow."

"Then it isn't exciting?"

"I didn't say that. It has its moments. Especially when the patrols are not far away." A small smile played on his lips as if he knew what she hinted at, the daring question she ached to ask him.

Finally, it slipped free. "Would you take me raiding?"

"And what would we raid?"

"Is there no fat cow you could take home as prize? If it's beef you're tired of, then I know where the henhouse is. Or the sty."

He did laugh then, the booming sound of it echoing through the cave and beyond, to the night-shrouded landscape.

"What a picture you would paint of me, lass, a few fine squawking hens tied to my saddle, or holding a pig

on my lap."

Her smile was rueful. In all honesty, she could see nothing of the sort. He seemed the type, instead, to carry a dirk between his teeth or be the vanguard of a raiding party, screaming a curse at the top of his lungs in warning to all who might doubt their murderous intent. Another reason she should not have felt so comfortable sitting here with him.

"I think what you want is not so much adventure, Ealasaid, as a touch of danger itself."

"Next you'll say that's why I'm here."

His eyes met hers. "Isn't it? Search your mind for the truth of it, lass."

"You make me sound too innocent."

He shrugged. "I've seen naught to lead me to think otherwise. In truth, I would not want you jaded."

"An innocent would not be here with you, Lachlan."

"Do you wish my word as a border raider that you are safe with me?"

She tilted her head and studied him. "That's a contradiction, isn't it?"

"Perhaps. Shall I pledge my clan's honor, instead?"

"Should I make you? Would an innocent take your word so easily?"

"Yes," he said, "but then, so would a woman well versed in adventure and danger."

"I'll never be that."

"Come," he said to her surprise. He stood and held out his hand. "If you would wish to be a woman experienced in excitement, we shall attempt to find some for you."

She stood and tucked her hand in his. "Truly?"

He looked down at her. She thought he was going to say something, but he clamped his lips over the words. Instead, he smiled. "Truly, lass."

Seven

She looked so happy standing there with a smile on her face, as if he'd given her the moon and all the stars. Did she know how little he was actually bringing to her? A rundown castle, worn-out land, a distillery that didn't distill, all countered by his intelligence and the strength of his limbs and an almost maniacal belief in the optimism of the future. But would that be enough?

Perhaps that was why he led her to his horse and helped her mount. To give her something that she wanted. Or maybe he'd simply breathed too many of the noxious fumes in the cavern this morning.

Either way, they were on their way deeper into England before he could recite the Sinclair motto. *Bi gleidhteach air do dheagh run.* Be guarded with your good intentions.

He found the herd in a pasture not far away. He wasn't sure if they belonged to her father or not. At this point, it didn't matter. One Englishman's cow was going to be sacrificed.

They stood on the edge of the field, looking at the night-darkened shapes. It was something out of an eerie nightmare. Occasionally, one of the cows would make a sound, a cross between a moo and a grunt. Another would echo it. Then one would slowly walk a few feet, disturbing the sleep of a group huddled beneath a tree. And through it all, Ealasaid sat silent behind him.

"Are you going to charge them?" she whispered.

"Hush, I'm thinking."

"Are you waiting for something?"

"Not courage, if that's what you imagine."

"I didn't, really. I just wondered what your next action might be."

"Wondering if I'm daft indeed," he said, looking about him. "I've normally a few men with me."

"Well, should I dismount and wake them up? You can't go about making off with something that's sound asleep."

"You lack the proper respect for these doings, lass," he said, forcing his voice to be stern.

"Then pretend that I'm a fellow raider, Lachlan. What would happen next?"

"It would be a full moon, for one. We would be able to see better. A few men would stand as lookouts, and a few would cull the cows from the herd."

"We've no moonlight; can we not simply pick out a cow?"

"I've no wish to break my horse's leg, Ealasaid," he explained, "by riding over a unknown field."

"Oh."

"Unless, of course," he offered, "you wish to examine it. I could stand here while you crisscross the field."

"And step in dung?"

"Lass, where is your daring?"

"Not in my slippers, Lachlan."

In truth, he felt more like laughing than reviving.

"Then what shall we do?"

He slid from the horse and held his arms out for her.

"We're more surefooted," he said, as she lowered herself into his embrace. Again, he was tempted to hold her against him. Instead, he regretfully stepped back. "And we'll walk carefully."

A few minutes later, he spoke again. "Which one?" he whispered, as they crept up on the herd of cows clustered beneath the tree.

"I'm to pick one?"

"This is your raid, lass. Which beast looks longing for travel?"

"An English cow with a yen for Scotland?"

"There, I knew you would learn the trick of it."

"The rather large one over by the fence."

"That one looks to be in the mother way, lass. The journey might be too rough on her."

"Oh." A moment later, she spoke again. "How can you tell?"

He could not quite stifle his laughter. "Look at her belly, lass. And her teats."

"Is that one acceptable?" She pointed stiffly to another cow. He turned and smiled at her even though it was probably too dark for her to see him. She was embarrassed, but weren't such things discussed among farmers? Not, evidently, between the squire and his daughter.

"That one does look restless. Bored, too, don't you think? Shall we go and invite her for the journey, then?"

"We're just going to walk up to one?"

"We are. Have you a handkerchief, lass?"

She pulled her handkerchief from her pocket and handed it over to him. It was the only thing to be seen in the darkness, a white flag. Lachlan used it to muffle the bell that hung around the cow's neck.

Once that was done, he gripped the bell rope firmly and led the unresisting cow to the edge of the pasture, opening the fence with one hand while Ealasaid followed him.

"It doesn't seem very adventurous, Lachlan."

"Oh, it's not the cows that mind being raided, lass. It's the people you have to watch for."

He was just congratulating himself on the success of their venture when a shout was heard from the side of the field. More than one man, by the sound of it.

He pulled her behind the trunk of the tree, looked at the looming shadows of his horse and their soon-to-be-stolen cow on the other side and cursed. Unless those men were blind, they would see them in only moments.

"Who is that?" Ealasaid whispered.

"Guards, no doubt."

"I'd not thought to look for one." Her voice sounded horrified.

"That's because you're new to this," he said. "It's a stupid thing we've done, lass, but I hold myself to blame. They use dogs a bit, and guns."

"Guns?"

"You sounded like a mouse then, Ealasaid. Is it that you're afraid?"

"I've no wish to be shot for a cow."

"Ah, then you'd be bored with being a reviver, lass."

"You don't like it either, do you, Lachlan?"

He thought about it for a moment, considered not answering her. But when he did, it was with the truth. "I've no liking for taking that which doesn't belong to me. I've tallied all that I've borrowed over the years and know to whom I owe it. My ancestors would, no doubt, be cursing me from their stones if they knew I was such a failure at thievery."

"And you really didn't want to steal this one, did you?"

"As I said, it's easier when my men are with me."

She gently pulled the bell rope from his hand.

"What are you about, lass?"

"If we leave her behind, then we won't have done anything wrong."

"Still, I doubt an Englishman truly shies at shooting a Scot, lass." She had the oddest ability to summon forth his humor.

She peeked out from behind the tree, led the cow to the opening in the fence, and then pulled the handkerchief from the belt and slapped the cow on the rump. She ambled back to her companions without much encouragement, her belt clanking loudly.

Ealasaid closed the fence behind her and raced back to the tree. Lachlan had mounted by that time, and he pulled her up behind him.

"Isn't this about the time you headed for safety?" she asked, her voice breathless.

The journey back to her home was filled with the sound of their laughter.

They rode to the side of the house, where the shadows loomed the darkest. He dismounted and held his hands out for her again. When her feet touched the ground, he stepped closer, reached out with his hands and framed her face. "It seems, lass, that I still owe you an adventure."

Silence, while she looked up at him and framed her question.

"Would you show me Glenlyon?" she finally asked, reaching out to touch his arm with a trembling hand. The request was rash, perhaps, but patience had been burned away by her earlier anger and her present grief. That, and a longing she should not have had, yet could not help but feel. She wanted to see his home, the land he called his. She wanted to see the place she'd dreamed of for two whole nights, and wished for even before that. She wanted, too, with a true feeling of wickedness, for him to kiss her.

"Show you?"

He slowly stepped back, dropped his hands. She missed their presence, their warmth, the feeling his touch gave her.

"The moon is no longer full, but it's light enough to see, is it not?"

He nodded.

"And your horse is strong enough to bear the burden of another rider."

He smiled. "As well you know. Do you wish to study the color of the curtains, then?"

"No," she said, smiling. "Only to see it. Is it far?"

"An hour, no more, of fast riding."

His fingers reached out and touched her face again, brushed back her hair, tucked it behind her ear. It was a gesture of intimacy, one of gentleness. She should have been shocked at it, if not offended. But she turned her head so that her cheek cradled his palm, held herself still in that moment when she heard his indrawn breath.

"I owe you a bit of excitement, don't I, lass? For the boredom of stealing cows. You want to see my home?"

She looked up at him, defenseless in that instant of truth. "With all my heart," she said. For a few hours, to be home in Scotland. To be someone she'd not been for seven years. "If we left when the night was young, could we not return before dawn?"

"There's naught to see at night, Ealasaid."

"Then you will have to describe the scenery to me," she said. "Or I can close my eyes and envision it

myself."

"We could do that now, could we not? If you close your eyes, I'll tell you about Glenlyon."

"Please take me there, Lachlan. You may sling me over your saddle if you wish, and I'll pretend to be booty from your raids."

He tapped his finger on the tip of her nose. "You'd soften a stone with such pleading, lass. I've but a warning for you: there's more hardship than beauty about my land."

"I know that well, Lachlan. I need to see it. Will you take me?" "Yes, lass, I will. Tomorrow."

A feeling he could not identify seemed lodged in his chest. He could not help but grin broadly all the way home. For the first time since he'd known Coinneach MacAuley, he blessed the seer.

His journey was interspersed by a chuckle from time to time. It was happiness; that's what it was. He felt as if all the hardships he'd undergone in the past few years were for a reason, the better to understand the fortune of his future.

She wanted to see his home. She yearned for a sight of Glenlyon. No typical English miss, this. Even her voice was different, acquiring a richness to it. Or maybe that was simply wishful thinking. He felt like a boy again, adrift in memories of the woman he'd left behind him.

Oh, lass, if you only knew. It's more than a sight of my home I've a longing to give you. He grinned again and leaned into the wind.

Eight

Not even Harriet could spoil her mood. Nor could Jeremy, although today he seemed even more attentive than usual. The day also seemed to cooperate, not passing with that aching slowness as it was wont to, but sliding from morning to night with gratifying speed. One thought seemed to accentuate its passage. lam going to Glenlyon. lam going to Glenlyon.

She sat through their evening meal with patience, her mind not on the lecture being delivered by Harriet nor on the long looks from Jeremy, but on the night ahead. She wished she had something daring to wear, something to echo her heart's wish. Something red, perhaps, or startling green. Something blue, to match the sky's tint, or even yellow to act as a harbinger of day. But she'd only her serviceable browns and blacks, and a shawl of ivory that had once been Harriet's. It would have to be enough for this grand adventure.

But she could wish, could she not? Or hope that her hair would behave just this once? An impossibility, it seemed, but even that fact could not destroy her happiness.

Time ticked by on slow, ponderous feet as she waited for the household to quiet. She stood at her door, her hand pressed against the wood of it, heard the ringing of Mrs. Hanson's bell as she summoned her maidservant to her. Harriet's voice came in response to some remark from Jeremy; a murmur from a servant answered someone's question. Then the night seemed to enfold them, pressing down to silence the entire world.

Everything but the beat of her heart.

She waited an hour more, then sped from the house, her leather slippers flying across the night-shaded grass. She did not realize she had passed him until Lachlan's hand reached out and caught her arm, propelling her into his embrace so forcefully that they both landed hard against the trunk of a tree.

"It's eager you are, lass?"

His chuckle warmed her heart, banished any errant thought cautioning her that such actions were improvident and risky. Instead, she looked up at his shadowed face, felt for the edge of his smile with her

fingers, and knew herself to be more welcomed here than in any place she'd been these last seven years.

"Aye, Lachlan," she teased. "I am."

"Then the night awaits, my border lass." He pulled her to where he'd tied his horse and helped her mount behind him.

Glenlyon Castle was a mammoth black shadow that guarded a series of valleys and a small loch. A torch here and there marked its boundaries, seemed to accentuate its size. Lachlan called out a greeting, and they rode through a narrow gate and into the courtyard. The sounds of fiddles and flutes colored the air, as did the laughter of those gathered there.

He reached up his hands to help Janet dismount. A faint smile played on her lips; her eyes held questions as she looked about her. The courtyard was crowded with people, and the rich smiles of his clan masked the poverty of his home. There were few things of beauty left at Glenlyon, but there was the castle itself, an old, imposing fortress that loomed gray on the horizon.

"They've been told you were coming," he explained. "And they play for your arrival."

Her face seemed to bloom at the idea of that. Her smile became one of true happiness; her cheeks turned pink. She was such a surprise, his Ealasaid. One moment daring, the next almost shy.

He bent his elbow, placed her hand on the bend of his arm, and escorted her into the Great Hall. While it was true that the castle had seen better days, there was none to say a Sinclair could not make a party when the occasion warranted it. At their entrance, the fiddles came to a stop, and a signal to the flute player called forth a trilling note that faded into the distance.

He turned to her, his words silenced by the sight of her. One candle had not done her justice. There was true red in her hair, and her eyes were the blue of Scotland's skies. Her skin was pale but enlivened by the blush that seemed to grow as he watched. She was not a tiny woman; her chin would rest upon his shoulder. Her lips were full and seemed to beckon a kiss. Would he shock or please his clan if he bestowed one upon them here and now?

Before he could question the propriety of doing so, he bent his head and kissed her. He heard the collective mutterings of his clan, the sound of approval, a masculine laugh— then nothing more as he seemed to spiral down into the kiss. He had wished for a taste of her and instead had become enchanted.

He pulled away, wondering if the ceiling tilted or if it was only him. Nor did Ealasaid seem immune to the power of that kiss. Her fingers pressed against her lips; her eyes were wide, but not shocked. Wondering, perhaps, but not horrified. He smiled, thinking that they were a pair, indeed. One of them too knowing, yet feeling acutely naive at this moment. The other, truly innocent, but with the aplomb of a born enchantress. Hardly fair, but decidedly interesting.

Instead of introducing her, which would have caused no end of interruptions that he did not want to tolerate at this moment, he walked with her to the middle of the room, then signaled to the fiddlers to begin a reel.

She shook her head vigorously and would not take his hand.

"What is it, Ealasaid?"

"It's been forever since I danced, Lachlan, and in truth, I've no skill at it." Her voice was a husky whisper that seemed tied to his loins somehow. Had she always sounded so alluring, or had her effect upon him tripled with their kiss? If that were the case, he doubted the ride back to her home would be as uneventful as the journey here. He would have to stop at least three or four times to kiss her again.

"I doubt that, lass. You seem light on your feet. Shall we not try it?"

"Must we?" She looked around at the crowd eagerly watching the two of them, then sent a helpless look in his direction.

"I'm afraid we must," he said.

Five minutes later, he wanted to laugh but refrained from doing so in case it hurt her feelings. Ealasaid had not lied, nor had she exaggerated in order to solicit a compliment. He held her hand and showed her where to turn, the reel being danced in a lively fashion with no regard to steps. But even so, she stepped on his feet twice and stumbled upon her own on one occasion at least. With each aching moment, her flush seemed to accentuate, and her discomfort become even more unbearable.

Finally, the dance was over. He pulled her into his arms and without regard to those who crowded around them, kissed her again. It was neither to make her feel better or to take her mind from the disaster of her dancing. It was that he could not bear another few moments to pass without tasting her again. Strange, how the thought of a month had seemed too quick, and now seemed eons away.

"You cannot sing, either, can you, Ealasaid?" he asked with a smile. The words of the prophecy came back to him. *She'll be claw-footed and have a voice like a banshee, but she'll save the clan Sinclair.*

She shook her head.

He leaned his forehead against hers and smiled. "Still and all, there are other things to wish for in a woman."

Her face bloomed with color again, a fact that made his smile grow larger. It was a strange thing, but he felt like laughing at this moment, or holding her in the air and twirling with her.

He nodded to Coinneach MacAuley, who looked pleased with himself. As well he might, Lachlan thought. So far, every one of his prophecies had come true. But there were things Coinneach had never mentioned. He had never said, for example, that the Glenlyon Bride would be a lovely woman with a laugh that made Lachlan smile, that she would have a voice that was as soft as raindrops, and that her form and her walk would give him dreams.

He twirled her into another reel, uncaring that his feet were at her mercy or that she cringed each time she took a wrong step. Some things were important. Others were not.

He could always teach Ealasaid to dance, but no one could incite a woman to be charming or to lure him to her through miles of darkness. He estimated that he'd had less than three hours of sleep in each of the past few nights, yet he felt more enlivened than at any other time in his life. Why was that? The very same reason the ceiling tilted, he suspected.

Nine

Lachlan whirled her in such a tight circle that the room spun, but she didn't care. Even if she had been standing still, the world would be rocking. Her heart was beating almost too loud to hear her thoughts; her stomach rolled in glorious wonder.

He had kissed her, and that alone was shocking enough. But to do so in full view of the clan was a momentous thing. At least, she thought it was. There were so many rituals and customs of her country that she'd never learned; the last seven years felt as if they had been stolen from her. But discounting the significance of it, the kiss had been momentous enough. Her first, and with such a man as Lachlan Sinclair. But then, to say such a thing to her. Was she awake? Or was this just one of her Dover's Powder dreams? *Please don't let it be a dream. Please.*

The dance was finally and blessedly ended. Lachlan led her to the corner, deliberately faced away from the center of the room—a repudiation or a warning to others to keep clear. It seemed a strange thing to do, until he slowly walked her back against the wall, grinning at her the whole time. He might not wish to indulge in thievery, but in all other ways he was a rogue. She knew it by the sparkle in his brown eyes, by the way his lips turned up at the corner. The last thought she had for several moments was that he should not look so self-assured.

When he raised his head, she sighed, and kept her eyes closed. Surely something so wickedly fine should be outlawed. Lachlan kissed very well. Even in her innocence, she could recognize talent. A kiss from Lachlan Sinclair was almost as strong as the spirits her father had made in Tarlogie.

The man who stepped between them smelled of peat smoke. His hair was long and white, and he carried a staff nearly the equal of his height, gripped in one hand. A long cloak covered his trousers and frayed shirt, and his boots were no more than flapping pieces of leather, laced together.

His bright blue eyes stared at her; his mouth quirked beneath his beard. Janet had the oddest feeling that he was laughing at some hidden jest that had her at its center. She frowned in response, which seemed to only amuse him further.

He turned to Lachlan. "So, lad, you've softened, then."

It was a question that demanded an honest answer.

"Aye," Lachlan said, smiling.

"You'll promise, then?"

Lachlan studied the old man in the silence. The room seemed to have stilled, as if waiting for something. He knew only too well what the clan anticipated: his acceptance of a marriage, but not just an English union. That would take place in its time. They wanted to see a Scots wedding, one here and now, amidst the music and the laughter.

He looked down at Ealasaid. There were many sacrifices he'd make for his clan, but he was truly blessed in the knowledge that this was not one of them. She was his own true love.

He smiled broadly. "You're a schemer, old man, but I'll concede to you this victory."

"It is not mine, lad," Coinneach said. "It's ordained by Fate."

Lachlan stepped aside, reached for Janet's hand and held it solemnly between the two of his. He smiled down into her eyes. "I'll be yours, lass, if you'll have me. This I promise."

Janet stared up at him, bemused, then over at the old man who seemed as happy as a proud father at this occasion. She nodded, and the room erupted in cheering and laughter.

One moment, she was standing there holding Lachlan's hand; the next, she was being pushed from person to person, her cheeks being kissed heartily. Once she was pinched; another time, enfolded in the arms of an old woman who was nearly toothless. She was like a leaf in a stream, incapable of doing more than being carried along. Words that she caught only pieces of seemed to float above her. *A bheil thu toilichte*—something about happiness. *Mi sgith*. Tired? It had been years since she'd spoken Gaelic. She was rusty with it, remembering only a few phrases, but she thought she could understand that much.

As quickly as they had entered the hall, they were out of it again. Instead of mounting Lachlan's tired horse, they slipped into the courtyard and down a path, barely illuminated by the torch mounted on the wall above them.

"Lachlan?" She stopped in the middle of the path and waited until he turned. "Where are we going?" "Someplace where we can be alone, lass." "You're going to kiss me again, aren't you?" "Well, I've thought of it. Have you any objections?" She turned away, frowned down into the darkness. "What is it, lass?" He returned to her. His finger traced a path from shoulder to bared elbow. She pulled her shawl down to cover her skin. He was so close that she could feel him breathe, his dark shirt moving against her back, his breath warm upon her neck. "I can't think when you kiss me, you know," she said softly, the words a confession. One that pleased him, if his soft chuckle was any indication.

"It would be a pity if you could. It would mean I wasn't doing it right."

"I think you do it very well indeed, Lachlan." Her voice sounded cross.

His laughter should not have been so charming. He turned her in his arms.

She stared up into his face, darkened by shadows, lit by the faint sliver of moon. "Did you ask me to marry you, Lachlan?"

"Not exactly, lass."

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed. Are you?" He bent down and kissed the spot in front of her ear. It made her skin shiver. She leaned into him.

"I've only known you for ten hours, Lachlan," she mumbled.

"You've counted it, have you?"

She nodded.

"Too soon for declarations and kisses, is that it, Ealasaid?"

Again she nodded.

"Have you always been so proper, lass? So English?" The question preceded another kiss. This one was even more potent than the ones they'd shared in the Great Hall. The top of her head felt as if it was lifting. She could almost see steam behind her eyelids. It drifted up toward the stars, taking all her bones with it. She blinked, slumped against Lachlan, and blinked again.

The oddest sound penetrated the cloud that enveloped her. Plaintive and stirring, it seemed as if the earth itself had been given voice. She tilted her head and listened. It was a rough growl of unearthly beauty, raw and oddly sweet.

" 'Tis the pipes, Ealasaid."

She'd never heard the sound of bagpipes—they had been outlawed since before she was born—but sometimes she thought she might be able to imagine them, so pure and so true that the ache of them could be felt to her bones.

"Are they not forbidden?"

She felt, rather than saw, the shrug of his shoulders. "That's an English law, and an old one. Who is to know what we do here?"

"What are they playing?"

"The Sinclairs' lament. Would you like to know the words?"

She nodded.

"Here is my heart a-calling, now when the night is falling; all the proud Sinclairs greet you here in this glen. Home is the smile to meet you; home is this land to hold you; home is Glenlyon and the spirit of her men." His hands pressed against her back, bringing her closer to him. "It's a catchy tune, lass, but there are some who say it's played a bit much. Still and all, it's our pipes, and we've a right to them."

She was struck by a sense of loss so profound that it nearly defeated her. She reached up, blindly, and curved her hand around his neck. She laid her forehead against his chest; her other hand rested upon his shoulder. She would never be here again. And circumstance would send her far from Glenlyon, far from the border, perhaps even to London.

But she had tonight. It would have to be enough.

Ten

His fingers threaded through the hair at her temples; his palms flattened on her cheeks. He bent until only an inch separated their lips. Her flesh beneath his hands seemed to warm as he waited, patient. Her breath caught, such a small sound to mark the moment. It was one of complicity more than surrender.

How long had he wanted her? Since he'd first seen her, or even before that? From the beginning of his life? It seemed that long.

"Ealasaid," he murmured against her lips. Their kiss was a welcoming, to more than passion. To belonging. To love.

He pulled back, finally, and laid his forehead against hers. Her breathing was fast, her hands gripped his arms tightly, and her cheek was hot where he touched it with gentle fingers. Anticipation was part of loving, and he wanted her to feel every measure of the pleasure and pain of it.

As he did. His blood was as heated, his breath as harsh, and his flesh was hard and straining against his trousers.

He pulled away and knelt before her, his hands reaching for her shoes.

"Lachlan?" The question was there in her voice, but she didn't step back.

He placed his hand on the back of her ankle. A soft tug, and she raised her foot. He quickly removed her shoe.

"You've lovely feet, Ealasaid."

"Thank you," she said.

So polite, his Ealasaid. Would she thank him, later, in her proper English voice? He grinned. If he did it right, she would.

Another movement, and the other shoe was removed. He burrowed beneath her skirt, trailed his hands up one leg to the top of her stockings. He looked up at her. She was staring down at him, but she did not step away. A slight tremor raced under her skin, as if she were awakening to his touch one slow inch at a time.

"I've wanted my hands on you since the night I first saw you, Ealasaid." His hands met at her knee. He was prevented from touching her skin by the coarse weave of her stockings. Why didn't she wear silk and fine ribbons? And why were her clothes of less fine quality than those of a rich English miss? This observation amused him, since the only real concern he had for clothing right at this moment was to remove hers as soon as possible. Other questions would be asked and answered at a later time.

He began rolling the hem of her skirt up slowly. He was a man with a notion of seduction on his mind. And she seemed in tune with it, her arms fallen to her sides, her gaze not moving from his hands. He reached up and gently folded her hand around the edge of her skirt. Complicity was so much more heady than dominance. He wanted her to be his partner in this act.

Once her legs were visible, he trailed his fingers to the top of one stocking and hooked his thumb inside it, feeling her skin for the first time. Soft and warm. A sound like a growl emerged from between his lips, some male noise that was both appreciation and warning to her if she but knew it. He rolled the stocking down her leg, taking his time with it.

When her leg was bared, he bent forward and kissed her naked knee. Her hand fluttered out—whether in protest or from sensation, he didn't know. But her only words were a soft gasp of sound, a tiny whimper.

"Ealasaid," he said, tracing her name in a soft kiss against her skin.

He reached for her other stocking and rolled it down. Instead of kissing her, he reared back and looked at her. One of her hands was on her mouth, knuckles pressed against her full lips. The other was clasped to her waist, holding her skirt from falling.

"You look just as you did the night I first saw you, wading in the burn and pretending to be a brownie," he said, the sound of his voice harsher than he intended. She had no comment for that, but then, he didn't expect one.

He bent forward and kissed the knee recently bared, trailed his fingers up the back of her leg from ankle to knee. She trembled beneath his touch.

"Your skin is almost hot, as if a fever burns you."

They were well matched in that. He was consumed in fire, hiding it only by the greatest of wills. Had he not, he would be inside her now, with her legs wrapped around him, easing this damnable ache of too many days' duration. But she was innocent and she was his, and he would have her pleased and sighing in his arms by daybreak.

By such vows were Sinclairs known.

His hands made the slow progression from her knees to her thighs, burrowing under fabric, pushing it aside. His fingers skimmed over the smoothness of her skin, sweeping over curves and then repeating the gesture in appreciation for her sweetly rounded flesh. Again, a small gasp from her. It seemed to measure both her innocence and his daring.

His hands slid beneath fabric, traced even farther upward until they reached her hips. His thumbs met and brushed against the curls at the juncture of her thighs. Not intrusive, only teasing.

He looked up. Her eyes were closed.

"You feel warm here, too, Ealasaid," he said softly.

Her knees trembled. Her fist pressed tight against her lips as if to restrain a sound.

He reached up and pulled her down to him, and she sank like a feather into his arms. Kissing her was like falling into a void where the only constants were her hands gripping him and the surge of blood in his veins. His body thrummed, shouting messages of *hurry!* and *now!* His mind seemed to have similarly lost its sanity and sided with his flesh. Both feverishly urged him to ease himself into her.

Patience, Lachlan.

He laid her down on the grass of Glenlyon, bent over her and unlaced her dress.

"I'm of a mind to make you mine this moment, Ealasaid," he said, his voice having lost its teasing edge. "Tell me you're not afraid." *Please.*

She only shook her head from side to side. Her hands were clenched in the material of her skirt, and he gently pried it from her grip. His fingers fumbled with her clothing, his experience forgotten, his haste and hunger only too apparent in the trembling of his fingers and his rapid breath.

Somehow in the last few minutes, even silent, even still, she'd transformed him into a ravening beast. When his hands found her breasts and cupped around them, he uttered a gusty, relieved sigh. Appeasement was close.

He pushed her dress up until it was wadded around her torso. Half in desperation, half with humor, he swore venomously. He was rescued by Ealasaid sitting up and sliding the material over her head.

Another moment, and she did the same with her undergarments. She was finally, gloriously, naked. In another minute, so was he.

A proper woman would have stayed his hands, or moved away, or told him no when he announced his intent. But she had lost those careful markers that showed the way to a circumspect life. Censure simply did not matter. Pride was buried beneath future loneliness. Consequences did not hold as much power as curiosity. She was desperately lonely, an expatriate offered a night of freedom with those of her kind. To hear the Gaelic and the pipes, to be a Scottish lass for these moments, seemed a blessed gift. She wanted all that was hers to want, all those things she'd been told to put aside, emotions too volatile for polite company, passions too strong for her position. She wanted, for a few hours, to be the woman she could have been, had not circumstance altered her life.

And most of all, she wanted him.

She wished she could have been perfumed in roses for him, with her hair brushed until it shined, and her gown one of silk. But she would not have changed the hour or the time or the setting of this joining. Let it be here, at Glenlyon, with the sound of the pipes a soft and wistful backdrop. She would remember it always.

His hands cupped her breasts; his finger traced from a full curve to the length of her nipple, measuring it. Her back arched in surprise at the touch of his lips there, and her body seemed to heat even further.

A low keening sigh slipped from her as he suckled her. Her hands reached up to bracket his head, fingers spearing into the thickness of his hair. With suddenly demanding hands, she brought his mouth to hers, instantly changing his soft chuckle to a guttural moan.

No woman had ever embraced her ruination with such hunger.

His teeth grazed the underside of her breast, and his fingers smoothed over her belly. She made a sound, a pairing of groan and entreaty, and gripped his arms with trembling hands.

Her body felt as if it was weeping. She ached in places rarely felt, and she needed something she'd only dreamed about in the last few days. Him. Lachlan.

His fingers stroked her intimately, urging her to whimper in his arms. When she did, he bent down and whispered into her ear, some harsh and lovely words in Gaelic. The sound of it was right for this place, for this moment, beneath the skies with only the earth and the stars as witness.

He was heavy against her, his flesh hard and hot and insistent. She widened her legs in wordless invitation. He accepted it instantly, lowered himself over her, and entered her with a sudden, sharp thrust.

Her soft moan of pain stopped him. He braced his hands on either side of her arms and lowered his head, his breath coming in great, shuddering gasps.

"There's a time and a place to be grateful for your innocence, Ealasaid, but I cannot tell you that now is one of them."

It was an odd time to feel a spike of humor.

She surged up beneath him, clamping her hands upon his hips and driving him into her. His low and fevered curse accompanied the pain of his full entry. She ached with it, but it was not unbearable, even with him settled in her, hard as iron and almost as heavy.

"My innocence is no longer an encumbrance," she murmured, trying to hide her smile. But he began to kiss her then, only to rear back and look at her. In the dark, his expression was hidden. Was he angry?

"It could be that we've wasted a few days," he said, his voice amused.

"And precious moments now," she said, her fingers trailing over his arms.

He surged more fully within her. His fingers clamped on either side of her head, kept her steady for his kiss. Amusement abruptly faded beneath the hunger again. He gripped her hands and entwined their fingers, their elbows grinding into the grass.

"Come with me, my Ealasaid, because I cannot wait." He began thrusting into her, a long, slow, measured invasion that counted off a cadence as old as time.

Her gaze was on his face, even though he was draped in shadow. She knew he watched her, as well.

Each time he thrust against her, an answering spark seemed to glow. Flickers of sensation began to mask the ache and grow within it, rendering it unimportant. A small wildfire began to race along her spine; a cord within her was lit, and the flames traveled up and over and through her. They were colored orange and red and blue and a fiery orchid, and all the hues and tints she could imagine.

She closed her eyes, helpless in the face of it. Lachlan leaned forward, kissed her, and whispered words into her ear. *Tha gaol agam art*. She knew the words well, had heard them from her parents often: / *love you*. His skin was slick with sweat, and his hands clamped on her hips as he drove deep.

She cried out, and he swallowed her cry, his kiss urging her on to touch all the colors of this magical rainbow, to become part of him as he was even now part of her.

He took her, this reviver, to a place she'd never been before, one in which there was no silence and no loneliness, only weeping joy and a belonging of the flesh and mind and heart.

When it was over, and after the night had reluctantly given way to the first creeping rays of dawn, she held him in her arms and loved him again, feeling neither shyness nor regret for her actions.

He was, after all, her beloved.

Eleven

He dismounted before he reached the house, then reached up and scooped her into his arms.

"You're tired, lass," he said gently, smiling down into her sleepy face. She'd nodded off during their trip home. He'd wanted to keep her at Glenlyon but had not wanted to cause dissention in his new family by doing so. Her parents would not understand, being English, that her Scots wedding was as legal as any obtained in England. Perhaps he could talk with her father and see if their wedding could be advanced. He disliked the idea of leaving her. Too, he realized that he didn't particularly want to wait many more days until they were wed in the English fashion.

He could imagine Coinneach's response to that admission.

She wound her arms around his neck and nuzzled her face into his neck. She murmured something, the feel of her lips against his skin too enticing. He had a long ride ahead of him, and she needed to be in her bed before the sun crept any higher in the sky.

"Lass," he said. " 'Tis true I've worn you out, but you'll have to wake up now." His grin was quick as she mumbled something but made no move to open her eyes.

He set her on her feet and steadied her. For a long moment, she leaned against him. Then she sighed and stood upright, weaving only slightly.

"I should feel like a sinner, Lachlan. If nothing else, wicked. But I don't. Isn't that daft of me?"

He smiled. "We did nothing wrong," he said, his hands rubbing from her shoulders to her wrists. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. This moment of parting was becoming more and more difficult. "We've done nothing the Kirk would punish us for." He leaned down and brushed a kiss against her forehead. "I can't properly call you lass from now on, can I? But I've grown accustomed to calling you Ealasaid. Do you

mind it to your first name? It's an ugly one, I'm thinking, and it bears no resemblance to you."

"Janet is not such a terrible name," she said and leaned against him, half asleep still.

"Janet?" He pulled back and looked into her face. Her eyes opened reluctantly. "Have you a bevy of names, then? I'm talking about Harriet; I've no liking for that one. You've not the look of a Harriet, you know."

She opened her eyes wider and shook her head slowly. "My name isn't Harriet."

He speared his hand through his hair, with the oddest feeling that he had not heard her words correctly. Or perhaps he was still asleep on the grass of Glenlyon, sated and pleased and more hopeful for his future than he'd been in a long time.

"My name isn't Harriet," she repeated. Her voice was soft, but he heard the words right enough.

He shook his head. "Aye, it is. Squire Hanson's daughter. My English bride."

It was as if the words he'd spoken had been carried on tiny bullets that embedded themselves in her heart. His English bride. Which meant, of course, that he could only be one person. Not simply a Scots reviver. Not a man from Glenlyon, but their laird.

She could see his face in the dawn light. His eyes seemed to scream at her.

"I am not Harriet," she whispered. She took one small step back from him. The distance might have been measured in miles for all the endless time it took. "My name is Janet."

She took one more step back from him. Then another.

"And you're the laird of the Sinclairs, aren't you?" Her voice trembled.

He nodded. Once. A short, sharp nod. "Didn't you know it, lass? That was my clan about me all night. They greeted you well enough as my future wife."

She shook her head over and over. But negating it didn't make this moment go away or wipe out the past few days. She'd fallen in love with him, with his smile and his laughter and his rueful admission of disliking reviving. He had loved her, and she'd held him when he'd shuddered against her, and he'd kissed her when she'd moaned. And now he stood looking at her as if she was a ghost.

"I'm not Harriet," she said once more.

"Then who are you?" The words sounded no louder than a whisper for all their harshness. Did he find this moment to be as odd and strange? As if nothing were right about it, as if it was a dream induced by too many comfits or too many spirits.

"I am Harriet's companion," she said dully. "I read to her when she's bored and straighten her threads and massage her forehead. That's all. I do not offer peace on the border nor a dowry for you."

Silence lay between them, a valley in which nothing grew. Not explanations nor apologies or regrets. What she thought was incapable of being translated into speech, and whatever he felt was trapped behind his silence.

The dawn sky lightened. The odd stillness between them was marred by the sound of a bird calling from a nearby tree. An alarm of nature. "You'd better go inside, then, before you're discovered."

She only nodded.

There were too many words they might say, and none they could. She lowered her gaze, turned, and walked away.

He told himself to stop watching her, to turn away as easily as she did. Both warnings were ignored as he stared after her. The hope that had so joyfully come to him the moment he'd met her and had only grown in her presence was gone. All his belief in the future was gone, too.

How many hours had it been? She'd tallied them so carefully. Ten hours—and then one magical night. That's all it had taken.

Twelve

"Who is he, Janet?"

The voice came from the yellow parlor. She stopped and turned her head. Jeremy stood facing her.

She looked at the chair that had been moved to the window. So, he had seen. *He is your sister's future husband. And my love.* Words she would never say. Should she not have felt more shame? Instead, she felt empty inside, as if part of her was missing. The most vital organ, A heart? Or perhaps only that place where such things mattered. It was not important if Jeremy labeled her a whore at this moment.

"You've been watching me all along, haven't you?" From the look on his face it was evident he had not expected the question. How unfair of her. But it made perfect sense. How else had she escaped detection? He had always been kind. Too solicitous, perhaps, even to abetting her wickedness. How had he turned Harriet's attention from her? By listening to his sister's complaints? By playing whist during those hours when Harriet would have checked on her?

"If you slip upstairs now, no one will know."

She stared at him. He was two years older than she, but she'd always thought of him as younger. A man barely out of youth, but there was something about him as he stood in the dawn light, something that had matured in the hours since she'd seen him last. Or perhaps it was only because she'd changed so drastically herself.

"Why not sound the alarm, Jeremy? Tell Harriet what you know."

"Would it make you feel better to be punished, Janet?" His voice was too kind, and she blinked back the tears that came too easily to her eyes.

"I suppose not," she said. "Thank you, Jeremy."

He followed her to the stairs, stood at their base, and looked up at her as she mounted them. It seemed as ponderous as scaling the highest mountain. When she stopped and looked back, he returned her look. His face was somber.

"If I can do anything for you, Janet, I will."

"Thank you, Jeremy."

"Will you let me know if I can aid you?"

"Yes, Jeremy, I will."

He was talking of scandal, of course. If anyone would discover her actions this night, or if she was with child, she'd be sent away in disgrace.

She opened the door to her room softly, closed it behind her, and sat on the edge of the bed, her arms wrapped around her waist. She rocked back and forth on the bed, the motion oddly soothing.

He was to be Harriet's husband.

She knew she would die of this.

"You'd be wise to stay away from me, old man." Lachlan glared at Coinneach, then turned away and handed the newly repaired pipe to James, who screwed it in place. Lachlan had been working feverishly since he'd returned to Glenlyon, but the occupations of his hands had done nothing to quiet his mind. "Or if you must be a prophet, tell me if this thing will ever work right."

Silence met his anger. Just as well, for he wasn't in the mood for a discussion. He was more likely to strangle the seer. Damn the Legend. Damn the penurious state of his clan.

He turned and faced Coinneach. The old man was smiling, if the twitch of his beard was any indication. He'd long thought the old man kept his facial hair in order to look more like a wizard. All he needed was a pointed hat to appear the part. That, and a genuine ability to see into the future.

"It doesn't matter, you know. You and your damn Legend. We'll find a way to survive without it."

The old man kept smiling.

"You never did believe in it. But your people do." Was there censure in Coinneach's eyes? Lachlan turned away again and bent to retrieve another piece of pipe.

"I'll talk them out of it. They'll never feel the lack."

"Aye, but you will."

"Don't be getting cryptic on me now, old man."

"Why are you here, and your wife in England? Ask yourself that, Lachlan. It is your own foolishness that makes you miserable and will continue to do so. Not any of my doings."

Lachlan narrowed his eyes and wondered exactly how old Coinneach was. Too old to fight, certainly. Too old to imprison in the castle cellar.

But the old man's words were true. He'd watched her walk away and had done nothing. Instead, he'd felt rooted to the spot, relegated to a private hell of his own making. He'd felt suddenly and oddly angry—at her, for not being who she was supposed to be; at himself, for endangering his clan. Or had he simply failed Janet? That thought had kept him awake during the long morning, and had made his perusal of his home one of stark and terrifying honesty.

The east wall needed to be shored up. The dark brick was shining white where the mortar crumbled. Glenlyon's letter furnishings had long since been sacrificed to a greater cause—that of the '45—or simply survival since then. Their cattle were scrawny things; even their chickens had a gaunt look. Their only hope for prosperity had been for their laird to wed it, and he'd failed at that, hadn't he?

Because he'd gone and fallen in love with the wrong woman.

The prophecy didn't matter. He'd made his choice and made it for all the best reasons. She'd charmed and enchanted him and made him laugh. He wanted to know what she thought and the dreams she had. He wanted to touch her again, lie with her in a bed and spend hours loving her.

What power did a Legend have when measured against this feeling?

He threw the pipe down and strode from the cavern. To blazes with the Legend; he was going to get Janet.

The second explosion, however, delayed his plans.

She didn't bother to answer the knock on the door, merely curled up in the middle of the bed and kept her eyes closed.

"Janet?"

"Yes, Harriet." She wished there was a lock on the door. The very last person in the world she wished to see now was Harriet. Especially since Harriet had a way of discerning misery quickly and would easily see that she'd been crying. She'd made no sound, really; the tears had simply leaked from her eyes. A broken heart had not required any effort on her part.

There were some mornings when she'd stood at her window, watched the sun light the earth, turned north toward Scotland, and ached with longing. She would never be able to look homeward again, would never be able to bear the loss. Lachlan. Of course he was laird. She should have realized it. His speech marked his origin; the twinkle in his eyes, his daring. He had humor and wisdom, the body of a warrior and the face of an angel. ...-..When she was a little girl, she'd dreamed of being so many things. She'd wanted first to be a princess, then to be a mother, then to work with her father in the distillery. When she was older, she'd wanted to fall in love, had imagined that she'd felt that way once or twice. When she was twelve, it had been Cameron Drummond. A year later, his brother Gordon. But none of the longing looks the two boys had exchanged with her had prepared her for this moment, or for Lachlan Sinclair.

Harriet's husband.

She clenched her eyes shut.

"Are you sickening again?" Harriet spoke from beside the bed, but she still did not open her eyes.

"I believe so, Harriet." *Please, go away and leave me alone.* It was a prayer said in the depths of her mind, but it had no effect on Harriet. She only drew closer.

"Have you slept in your clothes, then, Janet? How slovenly of you."

"Yes, Harriet." Perhaps agreeing with her would speed her from the room. But it was not to be.

"Or do you hide a greater sin, Janet?" A hand reached down and flicked at her skirt. "You're nothing but a whore, aren't you, Janet?" The words were said in such a pleasant tone that their meaning did not make sense at first. "All this time? Have you been a whore all this time?" The coldness of her contempt sliced through skin and nudged against bone. The horrible fact was that she had no defense for such words, nothing that would mitigate Harriet's scorn. There was, after all, nothing to say. She was guilty of all that Harriet thought. Worse, yet, she had sinned with the man soon to be Harriet's husband. She had ruined herself. A glorious night, true, but the voice of her long-dead mother echoed in her ear, all caution and propriety. Had it been her Scots nature after all? Or unbridled curiosity, or simple recklessness?

"Leave her alone, Harriet."

The sound of Jeremy's voice was an odd comfort. It was surprisingly firm, even angry. Janet opened her eyes and sat up. Her gaze turned to Jeremy, who stood in the open doorway, sentinel against his sister's condemnation.

"It's all right, Jeremy." She swung her legs over the side of the bed and brushed her hair back from her cheek.

She had no time for mourning. Instead, she must be about the business of putting her future together. For the first time since Harriet had delivered the news to her, she was grateful she was not going to Scotland. It would be unbearable to see Lachlan day in and day out, all the while knowing that he belonged to someone else.

This moment, however, must be gotten through. Somehow.

Harriet looked from one to the other, like a terrier scenting a wounded rat. "What goes on here, brother?"

"Janet was with me, Harriet; more than that, you need not know."

At another time, perhaps, the look on Harriet's face might have been amusing. But not at this moment. Janet only wished herself far away from this place, from echoes of Lachlan, from the sight of his intended

bride.

She stood and walked past Harriet until she came to Jeremy's side. She rose on tiptoe to brush a kiss against his cheek.

"Thank you," she murmured, "for your kindness. But it doesn't matter now."

"It does to me," he said, his eyes not veering from hers. "You need someone to protect you."

"What she needs, Jeremy, is to be banished from this house like the whore she is."

"No," Jeremy said, moving to stand between his sister and Janet. He looked at his sister, and his expression was cold. "You do not understand, Harriet." He turned to Janet and smiled. "I've asked Janet to be my wife, and she has agreed."

Thirteen

"What do you mean, she's not here?" Lachlan said. "And where might she be?"

The man who answered the door was young and dressed in a uniform that evidently made him feel important. Perhaps that was the reason he looked down his nose at Lachlan. Or maybe it had something to do with the fact that Lachlan had a bit of the barley odor about him again. And a few scorch marks, too. The explosion had been all stuff and fury, yet the effluence from it had been as cloying as before. But rather than taking the time for a dip in the loch, he'd mounted a fresh horse and set out on his way to Janet.

Of all the miles he'd ridden, of all the times he'd come to England, all the border raids and nights he'd come to Janet, he dreaded this journey the most. It had nothing to do with the fact that he was tired, infused with a bone-deep weariness. It was that he felt like a blathering idiot. The minute she'd told him who she was, he should have swept Janet up in his arms and run with her for the border. But he had not, and that stupidity was going to cost him a bit of explanation. He had already thought of the words he might use, decided that it was time his pride bent a little. He'd thought that she might not make it easy on him, or might not understand that he'd only been flummoxed by her identity and the sudden thought that he would not be able to protect his clan. He'd imagined all manner of ways he might coax her to forgive him, but he'd never thought she might not be here.

The servant backed away, preparatory to shutting the door in his face, Lachlan was sure. Instead, the young man found himself being hauled up by the collar, his feet dangling a few inches from the ground. It was not so much the sudden blanched color of his face that pleased Lachlan, but the quick spark of absolute terror in eyes that had just a minute ago been filled with contempt.

Lachlan grinned broadly, showing all of his bright white teeth. "I know that your memory serves you better, now, doesn't it, lad? Now would you like to tell me where she's gone?"

The man sputtered, but a voice behind him spoke up readily enough.

"She left—that's all you need to know."

He turned his head. A woman stood there, dressed in blue, her hair braided and arranged at the top of her head like a crown. Not one tendril was out of place. Her hands were folded at her waist, and she watched him without expression as he lowered the footman to the ground. She dismissed the servant with a hand gesture.

Lachlan had seen pretty women all his life. This one was attractive, he supposed, but he thought first that she was too controlled. Not one emotion could be read in her soft blue eyes. Her smile was only a thin slash of full lips. He wondered if she disliked her prettiness, if she saw it as a curse where other women might have seen it as a blessing.

"She's left," she said again. "Isn't that enough?" Her voice was high-pitched and sounded as if she spoke

through her nose. It grated on him.

"Where is she?"

She smiled again. He had no doubt who she was, any more than he doubted his very great good fortune at having avoided a union with her. Harriet. The name seemed to fit her.

"Where did she go? I've a thought you know perfectly well."

"She eloped. With my brother. Who is shortly to be disinherited. If you find them, you might tell him that. And tell him that I've sent word to my father as to his actions. She may change her mind about marrying a pauper."

His laughter seemed to surprise her, but no more than his parting words. "It's too late for that. She's already married to me."

Even as Janet left the house where she'd spent the last seven years of her life, she knew she was making a mistake.

What she had done the night before had not felt wrong, however the world might see it. Because of it, she could not quite see herself as ruined. Nor could she negate her feelings for Lachlan by entering into a marriage with another man, however much it might provide a future for her.

True, her prospects looked dim. She could never return to Harriet's employ, and she had few talents. Her schooling had been sporadic; her greatest skill had been that learned at her father's knee. She could, she supposed, get a job as a shop girl or a tavern maid. But where would she live, and how until she earned her first coins? No, not just dim. The future looked bleak.

"I cannot do it, you know." She looked across the carriage at Jeremy. He turned from his survey of the countryside and looked directly at her. "I'd ruin your life pining for another man."

"I'd thought to get halfway to Scotland before you'd object." His smile was rueful. "I'd even thought to get the marriage ceremony out of the way before you came to your senses."

When he leaned forward and clasped one of her gloved hands in his, she was even more bemused. "I'm a good sort, Janet. I would be a good husband to you."

She nodded.

"But it's not enough, is it?"

She shook her head. "No, Jeremy."

"Well, I had a stroke of luck. You were so miserable, you would have agreed to anything."

She nodded. She could feel the tears well up again. "You mustn't be nice, Jeremy. I'll drown us both if you are."

He dropped her hand and leaned back against the upholstery. "What shall you do, then, Janet? How will you live?"

"I don't know," she said, sighing. "Have you any friends who might need companions?"

"Your future would be solved if you would marry me. Are you very sure you won't?"

"I'm very sure. But I thank you very much for the offer, Jeremy."

"It was my first, you know. Perhaps I shall become adept at it, become quite a man-about-town, flitting from lady to lady, asking from each her hand."

"Someone wonderful will no doubt accept," she said, smiling wanly at him.

"Someone wonderful already has." His smile was soft and tender. "Unfortunately, her feelings are already engaged. Who is he, this idiotic man who hasn't the slightest idea of what he's missed?"

"Does it matter?"

"Do you think I'll challenge him?"

"You mustn't." Her feeling of horror was genuine.

"Thank you for that," Jeremy said, smiling. "I'll think myself a protector of a lady's honor, then. If not her husband."

"I do thank you, Jeremy. It was very sweet."

"Ladies, I have found, Janet, do not like *sweet*. They prefer dashing or exciting, but certainly not sweet."

At that moment, a shot rang out. The carriage lurched as the horses reared and then raced forward a few feet before they abruptly stopped. Janet was thrown forward and braced herself on the opposite seat.

A few shouts were heard, and then the carriage door opened. Lachlan, looking tired and dirty and extraordinarily surly, greeted her with a scowl.

"I hate to disturb you, Janet, but there's something that belongs to me in this carriage." She'd never heard his accent so thick, the deep rumble of his voice carrying not only the flavor of Scotland but the hint of danger.

"Another cow, Lachlan?"

If she hadn't been watching him so closely, she would have missed that twitch of his lips that measured his amusement. As it was, it was gone just as quickly.

"No, Janet," he said, and this time his voice was softer, overlaid with a hint of something she'd never heard from him. Tenderness?

He looked over at Jeremy and spent a scant moment seeming to take his measure. "She's my wife, lad. I'm sorry, but she's already taken."

"You said you'd not asked me to marry you, Lachlan."

"Silly woman, of course I hadn't. I had already wed you by that time." He reached in and pulled her easily to the ground. She sent one last look in the direction of the carriage. Jeremy leaned out the door.

"Is he the one, Janet?"

She nodded.

"He doesn't look at all sweet," Jeremy said, before pulling the door shut.

"Did the lad just insult me?" Lachlan scowled at the closed door.

She ignored his question. "What do you mean, we're married?"

She'd spent the last few hours grieving for him. That she could have been spared the misery with a few words from him made her wonder what she wished to do first—hit him or kiss him. When he swung up into the saddle and pulled her up to sit in front of him, she decided that it might be foolish to argue with a man so obviously determined. Therefore, she settled on kissing him. Long moments later, when she surfaced, he smiled down at her.

"You'll need to know a little about my country, lass. There's many a way to get married there. I made a

promise to you, and then you lay with me. It's one of the time-honored traditions. But you'll learn to be a Scot in time."

"I am a Scot, Lachlan, although it's been many years since I've lived in Scotland. My name, which you've never bothered to ask, is MacPherson."

He stopped his horse and looked down into her face. His smile, when it came, was broad. "Truly, Janet? Well, that's a relief. Almost as much as not having to apologize. I'll not do it after I found you eloping with another man."

He leaned down and kissed her once more.

A few minutes later, she spoke again. "You didn't mean it."

"What?"

"You didn't mean it. You would never have married me if you hadn't thought I was Harriet."

He turned his horse and trotted back in the direction of the carriage. He didn't need another shot to stop the driver; the beleaguered man only turned and looked behind him, then held up both hands as if in surrender.

Lachlan dismounted and rapped on the carriage door.

Jeremy opened it and looked out at the sight of Janet still mounted and an irritated Scot standing before him.

"I've a favor to ask, Englishman."

Jeremy's eyebrows wagged upwards.

"All you have to do is witness this." Lachlan turned to Janet and gripped her hand tightly. "I'll have you for my wife, Janet. Will you have me for your husband?"

She blinked at him, bemused. There was a shadow of beard on his face, and he looked irritated and tired. There were several strange stains on his shirt and trousers, and he smelled like malted barely. But his eyes seemed to sparkle, and his grin was daring.

"Are you sure, Lachlan?"

"With all my heart, Janet. I'll welcome you to my heart and home as if you were the Bride of the Legend."

"What Legend?"

He frowned. "A bit of nonsense that has no place here and now. Are you not going to answer me, then?"

"Yes, Lachlan, I'll have you for my husband."

He turned to Jeremy. "Did you hear all that?"

"Indeed."

"Then, Janet, we're wed again. Is that enough for you?"

He only laughed when she punched him on the arm.

Fourteen

He had plans, wonderful plans that would somehow come to pass. He couldn't help but think that things had a way of working out, if you put your nose to the ground and kept believing in it.

His clan didn't have to know that Janet wasn't exactly the Glenlyon Bride. The fact that he'd been spared

Harriet's presence in his life could be construed as a deep and heartfelt blessing. He wondered if she limped and added it to the list of questions he would ask Janet when she awoke.

He looked down at her. She'd collapsed against him again, her cheek resting against his shoulder. It was the very first time he'd seen her in the sunlight. Her hair was the auburn of a good Scots lass. He wished she was awake so that he could see her eyes, but he didn't jostle her. Perhaps now they'd be able to get a good night's sleep from time to time, since there was no need to stay awake at all hours of the night. But then, there were advantages to knowing that he could go for two or three nights without sleep. He grinned.

He had returned from a border raid with a true prize this time.

The sight of Glenlyon ahead filled him with pride and that ever-present feeling of homecoming. Mixed with it was the burden of its responsibility. Somehow, he'd find a way to keep the clan intact and his world together. Those who wanted could emigrate, but he'd provide a living for those who wanted to stay in their ancestral home.

"The beastie's going to blow again!" called a nearby voice.

Lachlan only sighed at the sound of another failure. As a greeting, it could have been better timed.

Janet roused, coming awake as easily as he did whenever he had a chance to sleep. She rubbed her eyes with the fingers of one hand and gripped his shirt with the other.

The cavern was being emptied of men as they raced for cover.

"What's the matter, Lachlan?"

They dismounted, and he pushed her back among the standing men. "It's a wee problem, Janet. Stay here where you'll be safer."

He walked into the cavern, expecting to see yet another oozing mess. Instead, the fire beneath the copper kettle was blazing brightly. But the hissing and bubbling that was coming from all the pipes did not augur well for the next few moments.

"The wort can't pass into the wash container, Lachlan."

He turned, and Janet was there at his side. But before he could ask her what she meant, she passed him, going unerringly to a series of pipes and curling vents. She turned one handle left and another right, and a pale-brown liquid flowed uneventfully into the huge copper kettle.

She turned and looked at the first of the men who peered cautiously into the cavern. "Is the yeast in the kettle?"

He nodded and came closer.

She looked over at Lachlan. "Sometimes the wort is too thick to flow freely, but when that happens, you have to dilute it with water. If you don't, you have a blockage, and the fermentation begins in the pipes instead of the kettle."

"Then it blows."

She nodded.

"And how would you know such things, Janet?"

She tapped the side of a smaller copper kettle gently, much like a proud mother would pat the cheek of a healthy babe. "You're wasting these mash tun solids. They're perfect for cattle feed."

Lachlan could only stare at her. It was as if she was speaking some odd language, and he could understand

only every third word.

"Where's your germinating floor, Lachlan?" He turned to James, who looked at another of the men. He led her to the far side of the cavern where the barley had been spread out. "It's too damp here," she announced, and before Lachlan could blink, half a dozen or more men were moving the grain to another, sunnier, area.

"How do you know of such things?" he asked again.

She smiled over at him. "I learned from my father. I helped him from the time I was old enough to walk." She looked around her, the expression on her face one of deep pleasure. "Isn't it odd, Lachlan? I have forgotten most of my Gaelic, and my speech is too English, but I'll never forget a pot still and good malted whiskey. A legacy from Ronald MacPherson."

"Of Tarlogie?" James came forward, his face wreathed in a smile as bright as the morning sun.

She nodded.

James turned to Lachlan. "'Tis said the excise men wanted him badly enough to put a price on his head. I've heard he could discharge a still sixty times in twenty-four hours."

"Ninety," Janet corrected, smiling. "He was a great one for production. Nor did he have any great love for the malt tax. He always said that the demand from potential customers made the threat of fines worthwhile. But the excise men were a bit of a problem."

James continued to shake his head, his expression one of rapt joy.

"You've not installed the vent pipe," she said, bending and retrieving one extra bit of pipe they had left after the second explosion. She pointed to where it should be inserted at the top of the kettle.

Lachlan watched her in amazement. His Ealasaid had been replaced by a woman named Janet who was familiar with her surroundings, who tapped the copper pot occasionally as if to judge its contents. She twisted a pipe loose and replaced it right side up, then popped her head into a barrel and pronounced it too briny to use for aging the newly distilled whiskey. She wanted to see the container of yeast and tasted a bit of it; she seemed to study the steam that wafted to the ceiling of the cavern.

He thought his mouth was open, but he didn't bother to shut it. He turned, and the seer was there, his beard twitching over his lips. The old prophet was laughing; he was sure of it.

"She's the Glenlyon Bride, Lachlan. She knows the secret of *uisge beatha*, the water of life. You know yourself that she's claw-footed, and she'll scare all the dogs in the castle if she ever sings."

"But she'll save us."

"Aye, and you."

He slitted his eyes at the old man. "Are you sure there's no other clan that can benefit from your wisdom, Coinneach? Someone else you might bedevil? You could have made this a lot easier by simply telling me."

"But to truly fulfill the Legend, you first had to fall in love with her." His beard twitched again.

Coinneach turned, held out his hands, and raised them above his head. In a voice born to carry, he made his latest pronouncement.

"I see into the future," he declared, when he was certain he had attracted the attention of everyone in the cavern.

Lachlan shut his eyes and waited. Only a touch on his arm bid him open them, and he did, to see Janet smiling up at him. He enclosed her in his embrace and held her tight, steeling himself for what the old seer

had to say next. But it didn't matter; he already knew the future. It stretched out before him hi a long road. A dynasty perhaps, and happiness. Hardship balanced by laughter. Friendship and love. Perhaps even success. Maybe a name for themselves. Glenlyon Whiskey. He could almost see it now.

He bent down and placed a soft kiss upon Janet's forehead. Her hand reached to the back of his head and pulled him down for a true kiss—one that enticed him to think of trysting places in the daylight. After all, he was newly married.

Thus, the Sinclair laird and the Glenlyon Bride missed the words of the seer entirely. But it didn't matter, for the Legend had already been fulfilled.