

Reiver's Passion

Angus thought quietly about the answer to her question. That some women were as cold as the snowy peaks of Ben Novis and others were as hot as a sunny desert. That some women were built sleek for speed, while others were made supple for comfort.

Letitia--the cold English blood flowing through her veins; her cool aristocracy brought down from her family's origins. He thought of her in bed, where he had found release and nothing else, where she had always withheld any show of passion beneath that slender little girl's exterior.

Then... there was...

Candelinn--the hot-blooded Scottish lass, even now shooting fire through those beautiful green eyes at him across the distance of the room. With a body that left no doubt in a man's mind that indeed there was a woman next to him in the darkness.

What They Are Saying About

Reiver's Passion

"A sparkling debut... Reiver's Passion enchants from the first page. A tapestry of passion, history, and adventure... simply magnificent! Mariah LeGrand is a bright new talent sure to please the most discerning readers. The book truly is a real gem. Mariah LeGrand captured the atmosphere of medieval Scotland very, very well. And the characters are three-dimensional--quite real seeming. All in all, a superb book."

--Sue Ellen Welfonder, Warner Books
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Knight In My Bed
Bride Of The Beast
Master Of The Highlands
and Wedding For A Knight coming soon

Wings

Reiver's Passion

by

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Dedication

To Lucille, Louise and Lois,

who never wavered from their support and help.

To the three L's, that have gone before us.

And to Ed, my knight in shining armor

and my dragon slayer,

who never complains when I am up

in the middle of the night writing

and is always game to help do dinner.

I love you all.

One

Scottish Highlands 1305

The steep heather-covered brae was slowly losing its purple hue and velvety texture for that of the pale, dry color of ripe wheat. A grove of mountain ash in the nearby wood dropped their fiery colored leaves in continuous procession as the crisp breeze ruffled through their branches, layering the ground with those weakened with death, setting the forest aflame in this time of autumn.

A lone bird had tarried too long; his cry cleaved the morning stillness in his futile effort to find a companion for the long trip to the warmer climes.

The sun's rays held little warmth as they peeked through the clouds moving swiftly over the land. Like a great eye, its lid slowly closing in a capricious wink when the giant puffs of cotton moved before it, shutting out the semi-brightness of waning days.

The sharply rising slope of dried heather stood motionless until, breaking its summit, two kinsmen came into view, their helmets reflecting the sun. Bent close together, they appeared in deep conversation. The hammered metal of the harness clanked against the full armor of the horse of the larger rider, as they stepped casually along the path. The smaller rider's horse wore only the leather saddle and bridle, undressed for battle. The leather saddles sighed a steady rhythm in harmony with their peaceful surroundings.

The two riders traversed the hillside to a grass-filled glen, their mounts moving slowly, as they picked their own way around the boulders strung hither and yon in their path. The steeds moved, uncaring of the clear trail they left in the fine layer of shimmering frost, which still blanketed the land in the morning hour. All trace of their passing would soon flee when warmed from the rays of the day's sun.

Both kinsmen were dressed in leather jerkins and leggings. Their woolen plaids bearing the bright red and green of the Comyn clan were draped from their shoulders. Black leather boots covered their legs to the thigh. Their shields were carried slung across the saddle pommel in an attitude of peace, and the stiff gauntlets were tucked in their belts. They were not traveling in haste to battle but were moving at a more leisurely pace enjoying the morning briskness.

The larger of the two, green eyes shadowed beneath his helm looked on sullenly at the gaiety of his kinsman. A sword dangling at his side was revealed in the glint of the scabbard at his waist. The smaller rider wore only the short scabbard holding a *sgian-dubh*; a jewel encrusted dagger at the side of his leg.

The men of Scotland were never without a weapon unless in bed, and then it was always within arm's reach. If they had laid aside their dirk or heavier claymore they had only to bend to have the deadly *sgian-dubh* in their hand. It was commonly worn by the men in a scabbard on the calves of their legs. Though the sight of such a weapon on a female was indeed rare.

Two pair of green eyes shadowed beneath their helms looked to have been brothers. The older and much larger of the two riders, who had not yet seen his first score of years, scowled heavily, riding in silence, listening to his younger companion.

"Damn the black Laird of Badenock! I am sick of looking at four walls when my life's blood hungers for the open countryside of the Highlands! The joy of feeling the crisp air in my face. If I thought I would have to spend the rest of my life cloistered behind impenetrable walls as I have been these last few weeks, I would choose instead the gibbet."

Able to contain himself no longer, the silent partner interrupted vehemently.

"Why I let you talk me into this I'll never know. Sir John will surely have my head if he gets word of this escapade. He gave strict orders that you were to remain inside the castle gates, ye ken, and once again you've deliberately defied him." Slowly his gaze wandered the near horizon, his hands resting on the pommel, holding his reins loosely. The scowl transformed into a smile. "Still and all, it is a bonny morn." His easygoing nature once more rising to slough off the worry and doubt he had borne on this day.

"Come," spoke the smaller Comyn, seeing his good humor return. "Let's see if that great stallion of yours is all you claim him to be. I'll wager a silver bawbee that my horse can outrun yours to the MacBaron borders. Well? Must I throw down my gauntlet?"

With a slight nod Fergus kicked his mount up the hillock in pursuit of the silver coin. The two had played this same game often enough and it caused Fergus no small amount of frustration that at no time could he best the other rider. Openly he blamed his losses on the lesser weight of his competitor, but grudgingly conceded that the better horseman of the two was consistently the winner.

After cresting the rise, Fergus skillfully guided his steed down through the boulder-strewn brae. He bent low over the velvet brown ears, shouting words of encouragement. He rode well, astride the large-boned bay in full battle regalia, making an impressive sight. His quick start had given him a slight edge over the challenger and he pressed forward, trying to take advantage of it.

"If I reach yon glen first, I've got ye!" he shouted triumphantly over his shoulder.

"You know the danger of making idle threats, brother," came the rejoinder from far nearer than a minute earlier. And this race proved to be no exception. Stretched low over the stallion's neck, he felt his companion draw close, the other steed's hooves matching the pounding beat of his destrier. Then his opponent whipped past him with a loud guffaw. For while it was true that Fergus rode the larger animal, it was also a fact that the smaller horse possessed a keener agility that made quick, smooth work of the meadow maze. With matching strides they burst into the clearing, their mounts stretching for the finish. The smaller horse and rider seemed as one, flying unbridled across the field, outdistancing the bay. The heavy armor began to take its toll on the stallion's endurance, leaving a fine layer of glistening sweat upon his body. His breathing was more labored and white flecks of foam beaded the corners of his mouth. Mindful of the heavy load his mount carried, Fergus finally eased back on his reins, conceding the contest.

When he reached the stretch of the Reelig Glen Forest that marked the boundaries of MacBaron land, he reined his horse to a halt. His companion, who awaited his arrival, sat astride the saddle at a rakish slant, grinning victoriously up at him. Reluctantly Fergus reached under his leather jerkin for a small pouch, withdrawing the promised silver coin and held it out in his open palm.

"Drat it, Candelinn," he cursed his sister lightly. "How do you do it? I have more experience at being a horseman than you and yet you always sail by me as if I were a stripling lad."

With a flippant wave of her slender, well-shaped hand, she dismissed the look of consternation on her

brother's face and laughed away her victory.

"Mayhap, you're correct, Fergus, in saying it's the difference in our weight. Why you men have to ride in full regalia I shall never understand. Even without your arms and shield you would still burden you steed in chain mail beneath your jerkin. 'Tis no wonder your poor stallion can't keep up with my sprightly mare."

Fergus looked fondly upon his sister, her green eyes flashing mischievously. Her blazoned hair was slipping defiantly from beneath her helm and showing around the edge of her coif in wild abandon. *Less like a lad she could never look*, he thought, shaking his head in amusement.

"That unruly hair of yours is going to be our undoing, Candelinn. No one could possibly look at those tresses and think they belonged on the head of a lad. Mayhap we'd best turn back afore it's too late. We're going to have trouble aplenty getting through MacBaron lands without the stalkers of that wild band noticing a strange lass within their reach. 'Tis a dangerous thing we do. Rumor leaves little doubt of their gentleness with the fairer sex. And with the surname of Comyn, we would probably not be allowed to live." Even as he spoke, Fergus looked about suspiciously, his manly bravado giving way to youthful insecurity. He sucked in his lower lip nervously, emphasizing the finely chiseled jaw line still discernible through a sparsely thatched growth of beard. Quickly he looked at his sister, unconsciously acknowledging her as the stronger of the two, awaiting her decision. Her stronger personality had led them both the last few years, not only in childish mischief but also to outright disobedience of their cousin, the Comyn Laird.

Candelinn's skin prickled at the mention of the clan MacBaron. They had been enemies of the Comyn's for years; since Archibald Comyn, a cousin of her great-great-grandfather, had kidnapped one of the MacBaron maidens and kept her his captive, before finally marrying her after she gave him a son. Since that time, tales were told far and wide of the wicked things the clan MacBaron had done to any female wearing the familiar red and green colors of the Comyn clan. Stories that burned the ears of the MacBaron clan and added to the cold war that simmered between the two.

Often Candelinn had sat listening to the men gathered round the roaring fire in the hall on cold winter evenings as they told and retold of how seven years before, one of her clan had fought one of the Earl of Carrick's clan, a good friend of the MacBaron, at Peebles. Deep in the forest of Selkirk a council of the realm had been called, presiding over jointly by Sir John Comyn and Sir Robert Bruce. An argument had erupted between Malcolm Bruce, one of the Earl of Carrick's following and one of the Comyn clan. In the ensuing brawl, John Comyn leaped upon the earl, seizing him by the throat. The fight was broken up by the MacBaron Laird, but tempers continued to rage. Before the day was over Sir Robert Bruce had resigned in disgust and he and the MacBaron had stormed from the council. To make matters worse, Candelinn's cousin, Sir John Comyn, was fighting Robert the Bruce for the crown of Scotland. For Scotland was now being ruled by King Edward of England. No true Scotsman could yield under the yolk of foreign rule. It was widely known that the MacBaron was a close friend of Robert the Bruce and wanted him on the throne, which only served to intensify the hatred between the two clans.

Candelinn tucked her hair back into the coif under her helm and squared her shoulders, pushing the distressing thoughts from her mind as she did so.

"They'll never guess I'm a lass, brother, never fear."

Fergus chuckled. "I'm sure there will be no doubt, especially with the way you sit so straight in the saddle. I think it time you found a larger jerkin for yourself," he teased, glancing at the leather jerkin stretched tightly over her breast, unable to suppress her obvious womanhood. "Perhaps you should lean

a little forward against the pommel like a bent old man, if you are so intent on this journey." His brows twitched lecherously as he sat grinning broadly.

"Fergus! Heed your brashness!"

"Och, fair damsel," he mocked. "'Tis no doubt your tender ears have heard more lewd words than these while hiding behind the stairs listening to the warriors and huntsmen tell their tall tales. Aha!" he pursued the issue. "I see by your blush that you didn't think you were seen. But never fear, I am probably the only one that recognized that fiery head of yours." His countenance changed to that of solemn protector. "In all truth, Candelinn, I don't think we should cross MacBaron land."

"Still your doubts," she said. "We've gone through all this before and I must see Helena. You know she is to be married in a month's time and we won't be able to see each other. I've begged Sir John and he forbids me to have anything to do with her, simply because she is betrothed to the younger brother of The MacBaron! Furthermore, it was an honest wager you lost with the bow and yard-arrow. St. Columba! How was I to know that my aim would be so true? Say me aye or nae. Would you be less than a man and go back on your word to take me to see Helena as fair payment for your bet?"

"Aye, Candelinn, aye," he shrugged in surrender. "You win," he answered her shortly, unwilling to argue further. "Let's away afore darkness comes and we are but halfway there."

Fergus was the older by two years, and as they rode abreast he looked at his sister appraisingly. Though to the eye she appeared such a tender young lass, yet she was surer of arm and sharper of eye than many other lad near their age.

Since their parent's death of the fever, five years earlier, and their lands being confiscated by King Edward of England, they were forced to live with their cousin, Sir John Comyn. Since that time Fergus's feelings of protection had grown naturally stronger. Their parents had allowed their daughter full rein in her wild and boyish ways and now Sir John struggled in vain to dominate and control her irrepressible actions. But his heavy-handed ways were too restricting on her restless, growing spirit. Instead of becoming the more timid and dutiful maid, Candelinn was even more determined to hold onto her rebellious ways, thwarting her cousin's ideas of propriety at every turn.

Fergus chuckled to himself as he thought back to the day before, when bored of listening to the men, while drinking their ale, retelling of their courageous adventures, he had let Candelinn challenge his aim with the bow. There were times when he thought her more lad than lass. He laughed outright at the thought, perhaps if need be she could protect him instead of the other way around.

Fergus led the way, cautiously skirting the boundaries of the vast MacBaron lands but never quite trespassing upon them. Kenneth de Keith owned the lands bordering on the other side of the wild MacBaron clan and that was to be their destination. Since brother and sister had to move as stealthily as possible, both knew it would be almost nightfall before they reached their destination.

Silently they journeyed throughout the day, stopping only once by a small burn, shadowed by a copse of birch, to water the horses. They refreshed themselves and shared the dried venison and flat bannock cakes they had carried in a leather pouch.

Candelinn broke the silence. "Fergus, do you ever wonder what is going to happen to us?"

His eyes quickly glanced the perimeter, trying desperately to see through the trees for any unseen enemy. His hand nervously fondled the handle of his sword.

His quick movements were not lost to Candelinn so she hurriedly continued. "I don't mean right now, you dolt! I mean in years to come. Our chief wants to be the next King of Scotland and I suppose we owe him our loyalty. He'll probably want me to marry someone who has the men to help him attain his goal. And you? You'll have to bear his arms in the battle against the other clans. I tell you, I just don't like the man. Oh, I know we owe him a debt of gratitude for taking us in when our parents died but Fergus, there's no warmth in the chief of the Comyn's. He's hard and cruel to all his people. I sometimes think of our fate living under the rule of the Red Comyn. I vow to you before all the saints, that I will never marry a man unless he is of my own choosing, not someone picked out by our cousin to further his ambitions." She sighed wistfully, her eyes pinched in thought, her face solemn.

"Well, I guess we cross that moor when the time comes, Candelinn. It may be bottomless bogs in spots but we have each other, so we'll survive anything our chieftain hands us. We could always escape to live in the heather," Fergus answered bravely determined to show his manly strength. His sister smiled at his heroic outburst but didn't comment.

After their light repast they resumed their journey, but with much more caution, the farther they traveled from Comyn lands.

Occasionally they had seen other riders in the far distance, but were unable to discern clearly the color of their plaid. Always they appeared in groups of a half dozen or more, for traveling with less than that often proved a serious mistake. Not only rival clans, but also roving bands loyal to no tartan plaid scoured the countryside, eager to set upon easy prey, such as Fergus and Candelinn provided, traveling, as they were alone and with only his heavy claymore and her small *sgian-dubh*. They were a foolhardy twosome, something Fergus pointed out at every opportunity. More than once they were forced to take cover when a band of men passed their way. But fortunately none of the groups appeared to be seriously hunting for fresh tracks this day and they made their way stealthily to safer ground.

Candelinn's tired body had long since started to ache from so many hours in the saddle when they at last passed the village of Keithtown and a familiar sight loomed up ahead. The Keith Laird's castle, its rugged outline barely visible from the flickering torchlights reflecting about its tall, round turrets.

Fatigue was instantaneously replaced with renewed energy, as only the young are capable of doing. With an excited call to her brother, Candelinn pushed her mount forward and reached the gate first. She reined in and sat waiting, an impudent smile upon her face as Fergus slowly joined her at the portcullis.

"Who goes there?" shouted the watchman at the gate.

"'Tis Fergus Comyn and his sister Candelinn to visit Helena de Keith," he answered. "Open up, man! The hour grows late and we would like to pass some friendly words with her afore it is time to retire."

Cautiously the guard reached out, holding his torch aloft, verifying the presence of only two riders.

"From the clan Comyn, ye say." It was more a question than a statement. "Doff ye're helmet lad, so I may see ye in the light."

Obediently Fergus removed his helmet, placing it on the saddle pommel before him. He pushed his coif back onto his shoulders, showing the guard his telltale hair. Impatient as he was to rest his weary body beside a warming fire, he understood the necessity of the guard's caution. Few people traveled after dark, and it was not unheard of for a lone rider to appear at the gates of a castle under the guise of friendship while his men waited in ambush outside the circle of torchlight. But the Comyn red hair was

well known in the highlands so it was the immediate password for entry.

Satisfied at last, the guard retreated inside to open the gates.

"Good God, lad, what brings ye out at this time o' night?" The watchman hollered through the heavy planking of the gate.

"Who else, but my sister," Fergus answered disparagingly, his patience wearing thin as he grew chilled in the night air.

"Poor sport," his companion teased, her spirits clearly restored with their arrival.

"Hmmpfh!" came the answering voice in the dark.

The iron portcullis slowly raised like the opening jaws of a fabled monster to the accompanying sounds of heavy chains screeching their protest. The two horses stepped forward, passing beneath its jagged teeth, their hooves echoing on the cobblestones. Now that they had reached their destination, they moved unhurriedly across the courtyard and the pair dismounted before the stairs of the castle.

The door of the keep opened wide allowing the light from within to spill down the steps as the dogs leapt forward, their voices barking a warning as they hurtled out into the night air to meet the newcomers. Their tone changed to one of welcome as they recognized a familiar scent.

The two riders dressed in the easily discernible Comyn plaid waited silently, revealed in the splash of light on the cobbles.

Helena herself stood at the top of the stairs, her shadow reaching to the hooves of the horses standing in the courtyard below her. With a cry of surprised joy, she hurried to greet her guests. She lifted her skirt out of her way as she ran down the timeworn stone steps.

"Oh, Fergus!" she cried, "You're a welcome sight." Barely glancing at the other young visitor, she continued, scanning the darkness for a third rider. "But where is Candelinn? Did she not come with you? Or did Sir John forbid it?" Her voice was full of disappointment and not a little sarcasm.

Candelinn, understanding that her friend did not recognize her, could not resist the temptation to tease, and spoke up with a voice, several octaves lower than her own.

"What need ye with Candelinn when two braw lads have come so far, braving unimaginable perils to rest their weary eyes upon a maiden so fair?" With a great show of boldness, Candelinn sauntered up to Helena. She threw her arm familiarly across her shoulders and spoke boldly.

"What?" No friendly kiss for two lonesome highlanders who have traversed so far. Why, we were even brave enough to cross the wild MacBaron lands to see you on this fair eve."

Helena's reaction was one of indignant shock. "Why you... you!" She raised her hand to slap the face of the presumptuous lad who dared to be so forward. When she stepped back to take her swing, the light from within shone directly on the familiar green eyes, crinkling with barely restrained laughter. Helena hesitated as she recognized the face of her closest friend.

"Candelinn, you ribald piece of baggage!" She hugged her friend close. "What will you think of next? So you're back to wearing your men's breeks. I thought your cousin forbid it?" Though she knew her friend

enjoyed her escapades when dressed like a lad, Helena had never really understood it.

"To speak the truth, Helena, Fergus would not bring me unless I dressed as such. He feared I would be ravaged by a wild MacBaron if I came as myself. But I so wanted to see you before your wedding, there was naught else I could do."

Helena looked hesitantly from Candelinn to Fergus and back again. "Candelinn, before we go inside, I must forewarn you," she stammered, wringing her hands together. "Richard, my husband to be and... and the MacBaron chief are both here at the castle. They are discussing the final arrangements of the wedding with my father." When she saw the shocked looks on her friends' faces she rushed on. "But I promise you that no harm will come to either of you. You are my dearest friend, Candelinn, and I'm sure that is enough for Richard. Besides, my father will protect you." She said as an afterthought.

"But what of the MacBaron chief?" Fergus spoke up rather harshly, his words echoing hollowly about the courtyard as his hand slid unconsciously over the handle of the claymore he carried. Candelinn's hand also moved to her dirk. Both prepared to defend themselves.

"Helena shrugged helplessly. "I cannot say for certain. He does not speak overmuch and when he does everyone in the room hears his voice. I must admit he frightens me more than a little."

"I think we had best depart, Candelinn. No good can come from meeting a sworn enemy of the Comyn clan," spoke Fergus hastily, his hand never leaving his heavy sword. His head swiveled, trying to penetrate the darkness surrounding them. He was apprehensive just knowing any of the MacBaron clan was in the vicinity. A laird never traveled alone. His guard of eight or ten men always accompanied him. But the thought of the chief alone being this close made the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

"You are right, Fergus. Their treachery is well known among the Comyns so we will not tempt fate in their favor," agreed Candelinn, turning as if to leave.

"Please, don't go," begged Helena. "You've come all this way and you shouldn't travel further tonight. Your father and mine were dear friends, so rest assured my father would see you come to no harm. Please come in, Candelinn. It is time for our evening meal and I know you both must be starved."

Fergus stood watching Candelinn, awaiting her decision. At her nod, he relaxed his guard, the thought of an all night ride not inviting.

Candelinn, whose vibrant, alive beauty so contrasted with the delicate grace of the other, put her arm through Helena's and together they walked up the stone steps, talking over the forthcoming marriage.

They were oblivious of Fergus, handing their reins to the clansman, waiting nearby. He brought up the rear, scowling at the thought of sharing a meal with a MacBaron, and especially the chief of the clan.

When the two women reached the top of the stairs, Candelinn threw back her head to laugh at something Helena was saying, and nearly walked into a tall dark form frowning down at her. The sound of her laughter never left her mouth and she almost lost her balance. She stepped back at the large man blocking their path. He was of medium build and extremely handsome, his dark brows were pulled together dangerously, his deep brown eyes staring daggers through her. Helena moved quickly away from Candelinn, going to his side. His scowl was like a dark thundercloud as his arm circled her waist possessively.

She looked up at him beseechingly. "Richard, I want you to meet my very best friend, Candelinn de

Comyn and her brother, Fergus. Candelinn, this is Richard MacBaron, my betrothed."

Richard's scowl turned to puzzlement as he looked from Helena to the lad in the Comyn plaid. The darkness of the courtyard acted as a shield against close scrutiny, preventing him from noticing the obviously feminine form beneath the male clothing.

As she watched his skeptical appraisal of her, Candelinn suddenly realized that she was still wearing the helmet bearing the Comyn arms.

"Och... my helm, I forgot," she grimaced and quickly removed it. She loosened the coif and pushed it back letting her hair fall free. The long thick masses of fiery hair dropped to her waist. She put forth her hand, determined to be pleasant.

Richard finally smiled, trying to thwart the jealousy he had felt at first. He nodded down at her from his extreme height.

"I've heard much about you, Candelinn," he greeted her warmly, bowing from the waist.

Candelinn could not answer. She stood frozen, her feet rooted to the stone step. Her skin shivered as if a cold wintry breeze has just blown down from the snow-capped Grampians. Behind Richard was a giant. He was standing in the lighted doorway almost blocking the light from within the room. He was the most imposing man she had ever seen and his aura of strength reached out and engulfed her. He was as dark as Richard and attired as was his brother in the plaid of the clan MacBaron, but there the resemblance ceased.

His kilt was mostly black, with red stripes running though it crisscrossing into a chequered pattern, showing bronzed, extremely muscular legs beneath it. He had a heavy woolen plaid of the same material draped from his left shoulder, held in place by a large gold brooch bearing the clan crest. His leather belt, holding his lambskin sporran, encircled his narrow hips, emphasizing his broad chest and shoulders. He had evidently laid aside his sword, but the jeweled hilt of his dagger was prominent on his calf.

How she managed to notice his clothing, Candelinn wondered afterward, for it seemed as though her eyes had never left his. They were large and dark brown surrounded by thick black lashes. While his rugged good looks resembled his younger brother, his manner reflected the self-assured strength of the leader of the large clan MacBaron. She'd heard his age was almost one score and ten, though it was hard to tell, and his features were hard, masculine, with a touch of savage cruelty, gentled only by a slight curving of his lips as he returned her gaze. His shoulders were twice as wide as his brother's and iron-thewn muscles rippled beneath his velvet tunic as he approached them.

Angus's eyes never left the vision of the lass, as he made his way closer. He felt like he had been kicked in the stomach. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her thick masses of hair, in disarray around her face and shoulders, looked as if she had just crawled out of bed. His mind dwelled on that thought and he was disturbed at the fact that his body began to warm as his imagination started to get carried away.

Candelinn felt her body turning hot from the toes up, leaving her slightly flushed. She realized that while bowing low he had slowly looked her over, devouring her as he silently appraised, before his gaze came to rest on her jade green eyes. His expression still held hers with a hint of arrogance as he raised one eyebrow in silent mockery of her dust-stained male attire.

While Helena made introductions, Candelinn raised her chin, nobly determined to regain her composure.

So this was Angus MacBaron! Though her hands were shaking, outwardly, she tried to put on a front of controlled haughtiness against the chief of the MacBaron clan.

How she wished she hadn't listened to Fergus and worn these men's clothes, she thought, pulling at her jerkin in an unconscious effort to straighten it. The main reason for his caution was standing here before her now. She could have worn her new gunna, after all, even if it meant riding sidesaddle, which she hated. But why did it bother her? Why should she care what this man, her clan's enemy thought? Her mind made up, she tried to ignore the powerful feelings that were trying to control her body. She raised her chin higher, flinging her hair behind her shoulders. Her eyes only reached his chest and she had to look a long way up to stare defiantly into his eyes, silently challenging him. The man was way too handsome by far.

The MacBaron chief's look changed to one of humor as he watched the wee sprite before him, her expression mirroring her convictions. As if reading her mind, one side of his mouth slanted upward in cynical answer to the invisible gauntlet thrown at his feet. Good God, she was lovely! Before her arrival, he had felt bored with the proceedings leading to his brother's wedding. Now, of a sudden, he was looking forward to the rest of the evening.

Everyone was talking around her, while Fergus was calmly shaking hands with the two men, seeming actually pleased to meet them. *What by all that's holy*, she silently questioned, *could he be thinking of?* These men were their family's sworn enemies and yet here stood Fergus traitorously smiling at the two men like long lost friends. As always, Fergus got over his anger quickly. It was simply too much! She shook her head disgustedly, which did not go unnoticed by The MacBaron.

Before Candelinn could reach Fergus's side to give him a well placed kick on the ankle, Helena interrupted. She invited them all back into the hall where her father and mother and the rest of the Keith clan waited. Candelinn noticed Fergus capture Richard MacBaron in conversation as the two followed Helena through the wide arched doorway, leaving her behind to find her own way. Fergus would have much to answer for on the ride home.

Before Candelinn could make a move to follow them, the mountain blocked her path. Her body tensed and for the briefest instant, uncertainty showed in her face as she looked up once again into the eyes of The MacBaron.

Laughter flickered in the brown orbs as he offered her his arm.

"Mistress Comyn," he spoke for the first time, softly, continuing to hold out his arm for her to take. He sensed the anger and frustration she felt for being left alone in the cold passageway with him. For a second he thought she may faint, but quickly changed his mind. Nae, this lass would never faint for such a paltry reason. He could tell from these brief moments, she had courage and fire. And he found he was glad this was so. He stood waiting.

The gentle rolling brogue in his deep rich voice threw her off guard. Those two words spoken as a caress possessed her completely. The feeling of his power surrounded her and she stepped back involuntarily, losing her balance.

Strong arms caught her, and brought her up against his chest. He waited as she regained her footing. For the briefest moment longer, his hands lingered on her, his strong fingers spanning her waist.

Candelinn's blood raced through her veins as her heartbeats sped faster and faster. His touch bound her as if in chains and she held her breath lest her shallow breathing gave her away.

"You are safe lass." his warm breath ruffled the top of her head.

She wanted to yell no, she wasn't safe at all! Her traitorous body was acting ridiculously out of character. But instead she nodded at his chest, the top of her head touching beneath his chin.

Angus stepped back, giving the lass some room. However, he kept his hands around her waist, until he was sure she could make it up the last of the steps. He had fought the urge to kiss her, when her breasts touched his chest. "The way is dark," he gave her an excuse for her near fall. He offered her his arm once again. "Even a wee Comyn lass may have need of the MacBaron, in this darkened corridor." He teased her, trying to disguise the smoldering hunger fanned into flame by a single touch.

"I do not need the helping hand of a MacBaron," she said sarcastically, regaining her composure and a spark of anger at his teasing remark. "If you would just remove your body from in front of me, I could get through."

He chuckled and stepped back, giving her more room. *Aye, she had courage.* "You never know when the tides of fate will be against you, Mistress Comyn. Mayhap, someday you will be grateful for the hand of a MacBaron."

Cadelinn stumbled once again on the step in front of her. Quickly she regained her balance before he could grab her a second time. She flounced passed him as best she could, dressed in breeches and jerkin. As she moved in front of his giant frame she whispered. "I'm quite able to manage on my own, thank you." She heard a soft chuckle behind her and her back stiffened indignantly.

"I think not, lass," his words penetrated the darkness.

By the time Cadelinn had entered the castle, she was in such a rage as would do the reputation of the redheads proud. Flaying the night air with silent curses, she stomped across the hall and fairly flung the door wide as she stormed into the room. The sound of heavier footsteps echoed unhurriedly behind her.

Two

Boisterous conversation and a warm, welcoming room did much to quell her ill temper. Cadelinn crossed the floor with light sure steps and stopped by the huge stone fireplace to pat the two old hunting dogs that had returned to their haven and lay stretched before the hearth. The dogs, who had known her for years, thumped their tails on the floor in rhythmic welcome. They took turns licking the offered hand affectionately as she scratched behind their soft gray ears.

Totally unconscious of the mode of her dress, Cadelinn tossed her helmet onto the pile of armor, shields, and weapons already accumulated in the corner of the large chamber and went to join the others. She was immediately aware of the many MacBaron plaids scattered across the room. They all towered over the Keith clan and looked fierce and dangerous. *Was the whole clan huge?* she wondered.

The room became noisy with exclamation at her arrival, as most of the Keith family had known her for

years. They bid her a hearty welcome. The warmth, from the huge logs burning in the fireplace, enveloped her and the odor of fresh cooked meat and roasted pheasant met her nostrils. It reminded her she had eaten little since leaving Lochindorb early that morning. She noticed the freshly cut rushes on the stone floor and knew it was a special occasion to go to so much trouble just for visiting friends. The MacBaron's were indeed honored guests.

Candelinn went to the front table and kissed Helena's mother, an older version of her daughter. The kiss was received with the usual austerity that Lady de Keith always displayed toward Candelinn. She was very aware of the MacBaron as he sat down to the left of Helena's father.

The coolness from Lady de Keith, and the nearness of the Laird MacBaron was more than obliterated by a great welcoming bear hug from Helena's father.

"Candelinn? Why must you insist on wearing such disgusting clothes?" The Lady de Keith said sarcastically.

"I'm sorry for my appearance, Lady de Keith," Candelinn justified her attire, "I just thought it was safer to travel disguised as a lad."

"Och, hush woman," Kenneth de Keith quieted his wife as he released his hold on Candelinn with a smile and sat back down at the table.

Free from his crushing embrace, she was standing within inches of the broad shoulders sitting on his left. She nodded again to her host and moved away. Helena was motioning her to sit beside her but Candelinn shook her head. She was determined to sit as far away from Sir Angus MacBaron as possible. Candelinn slipped into a small space on the bench next to her brother, at the far end of a different table nearby. She casually threw her leg over the bench, then with manly form brought her other around in front of her. She settled into her place, carefully ignoring the dark brown eyes of her antagonist watching her every move.

Angus watched her stiff retreating back as she moved to the far end of the next table and recalled the first time he had seen her. It had been two years ago when crossing Comyn lands when he had spied this same lass out riding, racing over the greens with total abandon, her wild red hair waving as a banner behind her.

Ever since, he had carried that picture in his mind, dwelling on it, savoring its image as if it were flesh and blood; giving her full rein over his entire body, even his heart. So without actually meeting her, he had come to admire her and wanted her as no other ever. He found himself drawn to that same spot time and again in hopes of seeing her. His effort was rewarded but never had he made his presence known. Each time only served to sharpen his hunger for the spirited lass. Now he had met her and knew his thoughts as to her personality had been correct. He knew had Candelinn ever knew of his watching her, she would not only have ripped into him with her sharp tongue, she probably would have challenged him on the spot. He couldn't restrain the smile that slipped across his face at the thought of her wee erect body facing his enormous height with sword in hand. He was pleased. But for to her be so close, only feet away from him, made it almost unbearable not to touch her as he had often longed to do.

He frowned at the men around her and noticed his own clansmen started gathering near as well. She was too beautiful and they had never seen one such as she. Their eyes moved over her with way too much familiarity and he felt a growl began low in his throat.

The long table Candelinn had joined was filled with men, ranging from about her age to the elders of the

clan. A man with sandy colored hair spoke loudly from across the table.

"Cadelinn, lass, I'd be honored to have ye ride wi' me clan on any night's raid. One look at ye wi' ye're helm off and the English could do naught but fall out of their saddles in shock."

A loud roar of laughter followed from the other men at the long table with many ideas offered for consideration. Cadelinn noticed two of the MacBarons shoving at each other to gain an empty spot at the end of the table. Both had her fixed in their sights and were staring rudely. *Had they no manners?*

Cadelinn faced the other way. Her eyes met the burning glance of Angus MacBaron and quickly turned once again to face forward. She felt her face growing warm. She turned her mind to her friends and after taking all their ribbing with good-natured humor, she offered a few opinions of her own concerning their skills as raiders and huntsmen. She finally motioned them to silence.

Serving maids were busy rushing to refill the pitchers of ale and *usquebaugh* and strong lads carried the huge platters of roast meat to the awaiting appetites at the long tables set up in the overflowing hall. After all the goblets were filled, Laird de Keith stood to quiet the boisterous gathering, banging his cup loudly on the table, unmindful of the *usquebaugh* that sloshed out onto the surface. When silence finally descended he raised his voice for all to hear.

"Hail to all for sharing this night with us. I think this old castle hasn't been so blessed with guests since my own betrothal some twenty years ago," he smiled at his beaming wife before continuing. "In the olden days in the highlands it was custom to toast the King of Scotland at any gathering of the clans... But tonight I wish to drink to the health of the Laird MacBaron." He held his cup high as those old granite walls fairly shook with cheers before everyone had a drink from their goblets.

Angus stood up, waiting for the attention of his audience. "And I would ask you all to drink to the health and long life of Laird de Keith. May his daughter and my brother have a strong and lifelong union."

A welcoming roar went up from the cheerful crowd, with a few ribald remarks, before they again sampled their Scottish brew and banged their cups on the table enjoying the blush on the face of the future bride.

Sir Francis laughed. "Eat friends. Enjoy this repast from the lands of the clan de Keith." As he sat down, the platters of food were already rapidly emptying; the noise of conversation and banging cups becoming a steady humming sound.

Together they raised the goblets full of wine in salute with all present to Helena's father at the head of the table. Solemnly he stood once more to give his blessing to his only daughter and her betrothed. The entire room quieted to dead silence.

Sir Kenneth stood looking over the room, then affectionately stared into his daughter's eyes. "Lass, this is indeed a great day for the clan de Keith. And I as your father am proud to announce your betrothal to a man so deserving as Richard MacBaron. May your days always be happy ones, and may you furnish me with many strong grandsons." At this point the crowd laughed good-naturedly, before Sir Kenneth once again quieted the mass. "And most important, may the clans of Keith and MacBaron always remain strongly tied by this union and together keep the Highlands of Scotland forever at peace."

The cheers and yells were the most boisterous of the evening. Richard and Helena were both well liked among their respective clansmen.

Amidst the loud cheering following the toast, Candelinn's attention centered on the two subjects of the celebration. Helena was looking shyly and adoringly at her husband-to-be. Her soft hazel eyes reflected her emotions, as silently she watched Richard's every move while he raised his wine to toast his future bride. Their heads bent close together, whispering the words of lovers, oblivious of the rest of the room. The blush of innocence upon Helena's cheeks seemed enchanting to Richard, his adoration plain for all to see. Her gentle beauty was enhanced by the pale green of her gown and her girdle of gold filigree, which hung about her slender hips and blended with the green velvet of her gown. Her fine blonde hair was pulled away from her face and held off her neck with velvet ribbons of the same hue and material.

Candelinn watched as Helena's cheeks flushed crimson, her hazel eyes lowered modestly at the affectionate ribbing of one of the clansmen. Richard's dark countenance contrasted greatly with her fairness as he wrapped a strong arm protectively about her in reassurance, giving her his full attention.

Candelinn swallowed the toast in deep concentration. She suddenly felt melancholy for what lacked in her life. A love and security that Helena was going to have. A small quiver of yearning passed through her. To be treated as if she were the most important human being in the world and never know fear, to be protected and cherished for all time.

Appetites were satiated and everyone lingered over their goblets while the serving maids cleared the tables.

Wistfully she sipped once more from her goblet, the wine making her think of the coming celebration that she would have to miss. She longed to come to the wedding, to hear the skirl of the bagpipes, the gaiety, the dancing... how she loved to dance. But alas, Sir John's anger would know no bounds, of that she was sure. To attend the wedding of Helena and Richard had become for Candelinn an impossible goal.

She also knew the entire MacBaron clan would probably be there and she shivered at the thought. *The MacBaron!* His demeanor was as fierce as his reputation declared and no doubt the stories of him were true. Candelinn cast a covert glance in his direction and noted once again the rugged handsomeness and the strong sense of personal awareness which emanated from him, drawing her like a magnet.

Never had the mere touch of a man left her mind and body in such a state of contradiction. To be swept up with such effortless force, leaving her senses reeling despite the logic of her mind.

Candelinn was treading on virgin paths, well she knew; for never before had a single touch or look caused the slightest ripple in her emotions. But for her body to react so inflamed from the one person she should fear and hate, if she were true to the name of Comyn, was unthinkable!

Her thoughts were interrupted. She felt eyes staring at her. She lifted her head, meeting the dark brown eyes gazing deeply into hers from the face of the man in her thoughts, peering at her over the rim of his goblet.

From his position at the table, in the soft smoky torchlight of the room, he watched her at his leisure. Her way of talking and her actions were a subtle mixture of changes, from comrade to the Keith men to that of a beautiful lass, with definite womanly movements. Her habit when she was agitated of flicking that unruly mane away from her face was a movement so provocatively feminine. Yet she was totally unconscious of the picture she presented dressed in the leather jerkin and leggings snugly outlining her soft curves.

Candelinn was surprised at his expression. It was one of peaceful enjoyment. His sun-bronzed skin contrasted deeply with the whites of his eyes and their dark-brown centers sparkled with mischief. His

mouth curved around the cup in a smile, showing a small dimple in each cheek. As she studied him in return, she was shocked to see a slow deliberate wink in her direction. As if they shared a secret unknown to the rest of the people gathered there.

She looked away. *The damn man was a little too full of himself! He had an abundance of arrogance and was way too familiar!* Candelinn looked quickly about the table at the other guests hoping no one had noticed, especially her brother. But she had nothing to worry about, for Fergus, she saw, was laughing at the fellow next to him and happily draining his goblet.

Totally undone by Angus's bold display of implied intimacy, her appetite was suddenly gone and the tempting and aromatic platters of venison and game fowl could have been cold porridge for all the attention she paid them.

Her face felt flushed and although she never once looked to the head of the table again, she felt the MacBaron's eyes rest on her many times throughout the meal. Her nerves were stretched to breaking as she heard her voice raised higher and her laugh louder than was her normal nature. She found herself flirting outrageously with Simon de Keith, Helena's cousin, sitting next to her on her left. Ordinarily she would have ignored him as one person whom she really disliked.

"So does your uncle know you have come here this night?" Simon spoke softly leaning close next to her.

His breath was hot on her neck and she shivered with revolt. She leaned away and faced him. "I'm sure he knows by now. You know how the highlands are. News travels fast." She was ashamed for flirting with him earlier and now had to find a way to end their conversation.

He appeared overjoyed at his newfound luck and was lavishing her with compliments that flowed a little too easily from his tongue. He had tried numerous times before to gain her attention and never had Candelinn given him a moment of her time. Thrilled by what he thought was her sudden change of feeling, he was determined not to let her get away so easily this time.

"You are more beautiful every time I see you, Candelinn. It sets my heart to pounding just to rest my eyes on you. Perhaps we could take a walk on the battlements after we dine. I would like to talk to you alone."

Candelinn could have kicked herself. Now how was she going to get away from him? She was suddenly nudged by someone on the other side of her. She turned in that direction. It was a MacBaron warrior. She had not even realized Fergus had moved. But then she saw him on the other side of the clansman.

"Mistress Candelinn, I am Duncan, the MacBaron's first in command. He was wondering if you needed aid." he motioned with his head in the direction of Simon de Keith.

Her eyes flashed toward the front table. Angus was looking right through her, a dark scowl plainly visible on his face. Could the man read her mind?

"Just say the word and I will remove him from your presence."

Gads, these MacBaron were brash! "Thank you, Duncan for your offer. But please tell the Laird that I told him I could take care of myself." She glared back at the man in question. "Since I will be here only a short while, I must spend as much time as possible with Helena. I want to wish her well, and..." she looked in the direction of where Helena was sitting. "And I see her beckoning to me now. If you both will excuse me," she nodded to Simon and the MacBaron clansman. Duncan looked to the direction of

Helena and noticed her head bent close to her betrothed, not at all interested in what was going on at the other table. He swiveled his head to see Simon scowling at him. He smiled in return. But the smile never reached his eyes.

Cadelinn swung her boots to the outside of the bench, briskly stood up and walked hurriedly in the direction of her friend, leaving the two men watching the sway of her hips as she moved away.

Helena had just stood up and turned as she approached, and Cadelinn once again felt disheveled standing so near the young woman in the fresh new gown. Unconsciously she pulled at her jerkin and pushed at her hair, trying to smooth the flowing mass of copper waves into some sort of order.

"Oh, Cadelinn. I'm glad you're here. I was just coming to get you. Let's away to my chambers so we can visit and leave the men to their battle stories." She curtsied shyly to her betrothed, who took her hand and kissed it warmly, then to the MacBaron, before kissing her mother and father on the cheeks.

"Good eventide, lass," her father said affectionately, "and Cadelinn, I'll expect to see you in the morning when we break the fast, to hear about what mischief you've been up to since your last visit."

"Yes, sire," she answered respectfully. "I shall be here, though of late there is not much to tell." Cadelinn nodded to Lady de Keith by her husband's side and turned to Richard, refusing to acknowledge The MacBaron.

"It has been a pleasure to finally meet with you, Richard. I've heard so much about you from Helena, I feel I know you already. And after watching the two of you this evening, I can see your match is blessed indeed. I love her like a sister I never had, and I would wish her well. My deepest regret is that I will not be able to attend the wedding."

"But surely you will be able to attend our nuptials. I assure you I would be as happy with your presence there as Helena would be."

Cadelinn felt herself grow hot all over, as she stood speechless before him, trying to think of an acceptable reply. She had forgotten that Richard was a MacBaron too and had nearly blurted out that besides Sir John's imposed restrictions on her activities, it was also fear of his own clan that had kept her away from Castle de Keith for so long. She started to stammer an excuse when her brother threw his arm across her shoulders nearly knocking her to the floor beneath his inebriated weight.

"Ho, ho! Tell them the truth my rough and tumble sister. What doest keep us from Helena's side?" The smell of alcohol was thick on his breath and he staggered, leaning harder against his sister's side, forcing her to support most of his weight.

"Fergus!" Her voice remained firmly in control trying to head off the inevitable. "You've toasted the betrothed couple once too often, it seems. And probably with more Scottish *Usquebaugh* than wine!" She glared at him trying to overcome her embarrassment.

"Och... Away with ye lass. What harm is a nip or two of *usquebaugh*. These MacBarons are braw men and I like them well. I'm sure they would wish you no harm."

Cadelinn gasped, her eyes widening, wishing she could put her hand over his mouth before her brother added more fuel to the fire.

"Now I know you're fearful of their ways with women, but..." Fergus continued as he swung about,

facing the whole room. "'Tis Sir John who will have our hides, not the MacBarons." He grinned lopsidedly to one and all.

"Fergus!" she whispered frantically.

"Do ye know," he addressed the gathering, "what we went though to get here? Not that it hasn't been worth it," he hiccupped into his half-full goblet.

"Fergus, shut your rambling tongue!" she threatened her voice a low growl of anger as she tugged at his arm.

"She always gets nervous at a party... poor shy lass." He motioned toward her with his head, smiling at the loud guffaws of the crowd. With one hand to steady himself, he stared into murderous green eyes, the likes of which had never known a shy day in her life.

"You will stop this nonsense now, brother, if you value your worthless life," she threatened in earnest, bringing the room to a standstill as everyone awaited the outcome.

"Och, now lass." He cajoled, as laughter once more filled the room. "Ye know we are among friends here," he reached out to put his arm about her, only to find he'd misjudged the distance and lost his balance, wincing in pain as he barked his shins against the bench. Undaunted, he turned his attention once more to the gathering crowd.

"As ye know," he began again, determined to finish his story. "My sister, Candelinn, is a very determined lass once she sets her mind to it. Now... Sir John, tyrant that he is, forbid my dear, sweet sister to leave the castle for any reason whatsoever." He turned on his heel and spun about, facing the other side of the room and stood, swaying precariously waiting for his drink boggled vision to catch up with him. "Now, everyone who knows wee Candelinn, knows the set ways of her mind, and right then she decided to come for a visit."

"Oh!" Candelinn blushed furiously in embarrassment. "I shall never forgive you for this, Fergus!" She stomped her booted foot and turned her back on him, crossing her arms across her chest.

"Of course ye will, lass." He drawled through drunken lips too numb to respond correctly. "After all, I am your loving brother, who, I might add, in spite of my better judgement, helped ye to make good your escape. It was I who convinced them to look the other way." He leaned dangerously forward, trying unsuccessfully to whisper in her ear. "I had to promise them you would let them win the next archery contest."

The entire room burst into loud laughter as fists pounded the tables in enjoyment. Fergus was not the only one to have freely imbibed on the usquebaugh.

Candelinn spun about, facing her brother once again, her anger leaving her speechless. She was ready to do physical damage to him just to make him close his mouth.

Suddenly there was a loud sound of wood scraping on the floor as a chair at the table was shoved back. Sir Angus stood and walked to their side. With a barely perceptible nod of his head he motioned to one of his men and Fergus was immediately being helped back to the table, leaving Candelinn standing alone before the MacBaron chief.

She was too flabbergasted and angry to do anything but stand mesmerized that the MacBaron Laird

should be the one that came to her aid with her drunken brother. Her heart was pounding. Not knowing what harm he could do to her, here off his own lands, she still felt fear like a living thing surround her.

Quickly, she turned toward Helena hoping to make a fast exit, thereby avoiding a confrontation with the MacBaron, but her way was barred. His large frame blocked her friend from view. Indeed, the whole room was out of sight behind the flowing black and red plaid tartan draped over his broad shoulders as he placed himself purposefully before her, forcing her to stay or make more of a scene for the others.

Cadelinn's mind raced as she realized her predicament. Still staring straight ahead at the solid wall of muscled chest, she side-stepped quickly trying to out-manuever him but his reflexes were lightning fast and he held her gently in her place. She refused to look up, staring instead at her hands clasped tightly together, trying desperately to think of something frivolous to say to break the silence.

A large strong hand reached out and covered hers, withdrawing one from the other. While he held her left hand in a strong clasp, she stood staring at the tanned skin, feeling the power within and immediately knew the strength these hands would have in combat. A voice above her head, trying to cover its mirth, spoke softly to her alone, though to her small ears and taut nerves it was an echo through the now silent hall.

"Cadelinn, perhaps the MacBarons could be of some assistance. I feel I know your problem... do I not?"

She noticed the familiar use of her first name and raised her head proudly at his mocking tone, forgetting her fright. She was surrounded by MacBaron plaid. Angus stood in front of her and making a complete circle around the two were the tall fierce warriors wearing the black and red tartan. Though she felt somehow safe and thankful that they would be unobserved by the entire room this way, she was still angry. The look in her eyes as she stared back at him would have sent a lesser man scurrying for cover.

"Och, that's better. I hate to see a woman cowering and afraid. A little spirit is more to my liking and more to your nature, I think," he teased.

"I care not what is to your liking, Sir Knight. As you would already know were you half as nimble-minded as the lowest form of pond frog." She ground out forcefully through clenched teeth, her fear making her anger sound all the worse.

Mumbles from the MacBarons reached her ears. "Did she call our Laird a pond frog?"

"Aye, she did."

"Lass." Angus continued undaunted. "You do me great wrong if you think me so incapable of understanding." His smiling brown eyes belied his serious tone and saddened demeanor.

"Not only do I think you incapable of civilized behavior," she retorted, "but I consider you a blackguard, a profaner of innocent women and a common criminal, a... a reiver in the night." Cadelinn could have bitten out her tongue, she was so shocked at herself. What had she done?

"Does she know who she's talking to like that?" growled a MacBaron.

"Aye, I think she does," the voice sounded like Duncan and he seemed to find it funny.

Angus's smiling expression never changed, but the vein on the side of his neck throbbed and Cadelinn

winned in pain as his grip tightened upon her hand. With the swiftness of the falcon her small dirk was in her free right hand with the sharp tip pressing against his wrist.

"There is pain in your grip, MacBaron." She ground the words out, her eyes flashing fire. No man, not even the Laird of the MacBaron clan, was going to cause her physical pain as long as she was capable of defending herself.

Angus heard his men exclaim and looked at each of them, stilling their movements. He felt the sharp edge barely pressing into his wrist. His eyes widened in amazement, then sparkled in appreciation. She was cocooned by giant warriors and she stood undaunted at the frowning faces staring down at her. He knew not a man who could look so brave surrounded by his elite guard, the mightiest of the MacBaron warriors. He knew without a doubt that she wouldn't hesitate to plunge the dagger through his flesh and be damned to the consequences.

Angus looked down at the anger and hatred shining out of fiery green eyes. He didn't know which he would rather do at that moment; throw her over his lap and give her the spanking she so deserved and needed, or pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless. He did not relinquish his hold on her hand, though his grip softened.

When his grip ceased to cause her pain she lowered her dirk but did not return it to its sheath.

"I do not fear you, Laird."

"Aye, you do." He did not know why it made him happy to see her jut out her chin and raise her sparkling green eyes at him in false bravado, but it did. He could smell the feminine fragrance of her standing so close to him and it took no small restraint not to pull her against his chest and bury his face in the vibrant waterfall of her hair.

"The MacBarons will come to your assistance," he stated flatly.

"It is none of your concern."

"Candelinn, there you are wrong. If the problem that keeps you from my brother's wedding is what I surmise, then I'm afraid it is my concern."

She could feel his thumb moving slowly over the back of her hand in a very distracting fashion. It felt seductive, like he had just pulled her close and wrapped her in his arms. His manner was most disarming as the tingling sensation in her hand brought sparks of feeling rushing through her body at his touch. He was making her so nervous, she could barely remember what they were talking about. Her mind searched for something to say to break the silence and bring her body back under control.

"What is it you've heard that would make us such scoundrels, before you've even met us? Surely you do not believe the tales your kinsmen tell of the MacBaron clan? No man could be that black! Is it clan MacBaron you fear, lass, or just the chief of the MacBaron's?"

She looked into eyes that never wavered from her face. Why should she let him know the fear she had been raised to feel since she was a wee bairn? That his clan was her own's enemies, that much he knew, and that they made a game of dishonoring any female Comyn that came into their lands. She would not tell him. How he would love to hear her fear of him. *Damn the man!* He was making her speechless as a simpleton.

"I fear no man," she lied looking him straight in the eye. It took all her courage to do so.

"Good!" The lass had spirit, though he read the fear in her eyes. But he would have her no other way. "But because of the many brigands riding the heather, I will still make you a promise. I will vow to you safe passage through my land, so you can come to the wedding. I would even escort you and keep you safe. I will see to it that no MacBaron or anyone else will harm you. Even if you don't need our aid," he added to let her know he remembered what she had already stated twice this night.

His tone was gentle and mellow, her emotions responded and her body held rigid for so long before him was atremble. She looked into his dark brown eyes to see if he were mocking her, but found only sincerity there.

She replaced her dirk into its sheath, never losing contact with his eyes. The man had no idea what he was doing to her. His thumb, still rubbing against her hand, brought an innocent confusion, unable to understand her own feelings of womanhood threatening to burst forth in some sort of response. Her eyes went to his lips. She wondered what they would feel like against her own.

Angus saw the direction of her eyes, and had to hold his breath. Was she thinking of kissing him? Or wanting him to kiss her? He felt heat flow through him and lust for this fiery lass completely filled his thoughts. Luckily for her, she stepped back, pulling her hand from his.

"That will not be necessary, Laird." She said firmly, but without the cold biting tone of her previous remarks. "If you can grant me safe passage, I can certainly come alone with my brother."

Angus arched one brow and skeptically looked away from her to Fergus, slumped over the table, snoring loudly, his chin resting on his folded arms. Slowly he turned his eyes once more on Candelinn's face.

"Such a worthy knight you choose as your escort, lass," he said.

"You are unfair! Fergus isn't always as you see him now. Have you never been tipsy yourself, Laird?"

Angus smiled good-naturedly. "Aye, Candelinn, many times. But never did I leave a beautiful maiden to her own defense." He stepped aside then, allowing Candelinn a path of escape. The warriors stepped back out of her way. As she walked out of their circle they bowed their heads to her. Not one soul in the great hall knew the substance of their conversation

Helena, seeing that the discussion between her friend and the clan chief was apparently over, came quickly to Candelinn's side and looked with frank curiosity from one to the other.

"Everything is settled? You will come to the wedding? Candelinn?"

Candelinn looked at her dear friend, anxiety showing clearly on her pale face. She could not disappoint her by mentioning her cousin and the trouble she would now be in for sneaking away without permission. She would find a way to escape again, for Helena's sake. Still fully aware of the MacBarons behind her, and listening to every word, she wanted to make sure their Laird knew she was no coward.

"Aye, Helena. I shall be here to see you married to your braw Richard." With that the atmosphere relaxed and Helena exclaimed joyously as she put her arm through the other girl's and led her away.

Duncan moved up close to his chieftain. "She is most beautiful, my liege," he murmured.

"Aye, she is," Angus answered. He discreetly rubbed his wrist at the small prick in the flesh. He felt admiration once again for the petite, flame-haired beauty with sufficient fire to match his own.

Many eyes were on the two girls as they left the hall. Dark confident ones rested on long shimmering copper-colored hair that hung down the back of the one dressed in men's breeks. The hips and swing of the walk were far from masculine. Angus chuckled. Any man that mistook that bonnie lass for a lad would have to be blind. And the MacBaron's were noted for their ability to spot a delectable maiden as well as for their keen sight in spotting an enemy's plaid from afar. He finally noticed the number of other men in the room watching the same sway of hips and an angry growl came from deep in his throat. He turned back to his goblet of wine. He had never been possessive of a woman in his life and did not like the feel of it.

"Candelinn," Helena asked, breathless with excitement. "Isn't my Richard handsome? I'm so gloriously happy! He's the most wonderful man on all the isle of Britain." She prattled endlessly, sitting on the edge of her bed with her feet dangling over the side, waving her hands before her face, fanning her flushed cheeks.

Candelinn flopped ungraciously into a large chair in the corner of Helena's bedchamber; her legs sprawled straight before her. "I find myself growing more and more envious. Perhaps I should go back downstairs and become better acquainted." She taunted with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

"Och, Candelinn, you could have married long ago if you so wished," Helena returned flippantly, enjoying the carefree banter with her best friend. "You have only to make your choice. Many's the lad that would trip over themselves to receive favors from you. Why just the other day..."

That is just the problem, Candelinn thought, her delicate brows creased in a frown of perplexity at the revelation of her mind. They are only lads! Never before had Candelinn considered the young men of her clan as anything more than the friends she'd always known, who provided an easy mark for a friendly wager during weaponry practice. To suddenly find herself torn between the new found feelings of a woman with new stirrings of passion within her and the innocent youth of yesterday was unsettling to Candelinn.

She didn't want a lad. Was it a man she desired perchance? Aye, she answered herself with unwavering certainty. A man to send my senses reeling. A man who... who... A man like Angus MacBaron her mind fairly screamed. Nae. He is an enemy with a powerful ego, used to getting his own way. She felt like a timid mouse in a lion's den when she was around him. And he could surely eat her up with one bite. The tone of Helena's voice brought her back to reality just in time to hear the man's name of her thoughts said aloud.

"... and, Letitia says Sir Angus is the most handsome man in all of Scotland."

"Who is this Letitia?" She suddenly found herself angry of any other woman who would have a say about the MacBaron.

"She is from England and comes into the Highlands all the time. She seems to think she can have any man her heart desires. And the men do seem to hang around her in droves when she's here." She noticed the frown on her friend's face.

"Do you think Sir Angus handsome too, Candelinn? Frankly, he scares me to death. He is too foreboding. What do you think?"

"Aye, he is a handsome devil," she admitted.

"You really think so? Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could catch his roving eye? Although, I fear 'twould be no easy task. From what I hear, he has many a maiden after him and never gives his favors to any certain one for very long."

"Helena, for shame! You've been listening to gossip." She didn't want to hear about his loves, so thought to change the subject. "Tell me about your wedding dress." She was so confused by the feelings she did not yet understand and was irritated with herself for the way her pulse raced at the sound of the man's name. She stood and walked to the window, seeing nothing in the darkness but the face of Angus MacBaron staring back at her.

"Aye, it's finished. Come and see." Helena was so wrapped up in her own thoughts, she failed to notice Candelinn's agitation. She ran to her wardrobe, pulling out an armful of satin and lovingly held it before her, twirling gaily about the room. "Isn't it the most beautiful gown you ever saw?"

"Aye, 'tis truly beautiful." Candelinn replied absent-mindedly, barely turning to look at the magnificent creation of lace and pale yellow satin.

"... and you will be my bridesmaid, and Sir Angus will stand with Richard and... oh Candelinn, I think I'll die from the waiting before a month is up."

Unable to contain herself any longer she squealed excitedly and flung herself onto the bed, causing its furs and blankets to bounce in protest. Helena's mood was catching and before long Candelinn had shed off her melancholy and she too was sprawled on the bed beside her friend.

"I have only one problem, Candelinn and don't you laugh at me."

"What?"

"The wedding night. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Did your mother not talk to you about it?"

"Aye, a little. But it was still confusing. Do you know?"

"How would I know? Tell me what your mother told you. I have no one to inform me of these things."

Helena informed her on what happens in the marriage bed, and before long they were both giggling over the thought of it.

They talked and laughed into the wee hours, both knowing it would be the last time for such childhood confidences. The next time they met would be to see one of them wed. After that, Helena's thoughts would be to running a household and making her husband happy.

~ * ~

Downstairs the conversation was not nearly as lighthearted. Lady de Keith, as was her custom when Candelinn was visiting, was deeply involved in criticism of the girl's behavior. Her husband, as always, maintained a strong argument in Candelinn's favor and would not be persuaded to discourage her visits

to their home.

The MacBaron returned from seeing his men settled for the night, just in time to overhear Lady de Keith's bitter denunciation of Candelinn's manly ways. Casually he stood shaking the night's moisture from his great cloak, listening with an air of studied indifference.

"Someone should take her in hand afore it's too late. Why, it's disgusting the way she flaunts about the countryside dressed like a man. It's unnatural, I tell you."

"On the contrary, madam," Angus joined the discussion. "I find it a pleasant change from the mincing ways of most women her age."

"Oh, Sir Angus," Lady de Keith hesitated, flustered at his intrusion. "I was just trying to talk some sense into my Laird de Keith." she waved a disparaging hand toward her spouse. "To think that our only daughter is upstairs this very minute being influenced by that red-haired hellion. God knows what will ever become of her. No man in his right mind would ever want that undisciplined hellcat for a wife. I can only thank God that our Helena will soon be married and the MacBaron lands will be off limits to Mistress Comyn."

Angus gave no reply and made himself comfortable near the fire watching with some amusement. She flounced the length of the room, her skirts awash in her wake, shaking her head in despair when neither he nor Kenneth de Keith failed to show the proper distress at her words.

"Now, now, my dear," her husband chided gently. "You know Candelinn is a good and innocent lass just as our Helena is. Since her parent's death, her upbringing has been in the hands of Sir John, and as we all know, not much love is lost on Candelinn or Fergus where he is concerned."

Angus remained outwardly disinterested, while taking careful note of what was being said.

"But she's more lad than lass," Lady de Keith protested, her voice taking on the whining pitch of one who knows the argument is already lost. "And her brother! What revolting behavior he presented this eve," trying once more to make her feelings known of the pair of young Comyns.

"Fergus was just a little in his cups and the lass is an independent waif only because no one has ever appealed to her feminine side before," Sir Robert continued in her defense. "There's a woman inside that little hellion, as you call her, and the man with the strength to see it through will be forever thankful of his choice."

"You're daft, my Laird!" His wife stared at him incredulously. "No queen, princess or peeress, even in robes of state, has appeared as less than a lady and no Highland woman should! She'll never amount to..." She halted the tirade as her husband rose from his chair, marking the end of the discussion with an unyielding look in his eyes. Even she dared not press an issue with her husband of many years.

"Enough of this prattle, woman! Show a little charity in your heart." He stretched sleepily, his head thrown back in a great yawn. "Be assured of this," his furry brows joined into one as he frowned toward her. "Candelinn will always be welcome here and you will always treat her as a guest. Do I make myself clear?" One stocky finger rested pointedly on her chest. "Good," he nodded acknowledging the look of surrender in her eyes. "We'll say good eventide then," he raised an arm in farewell to Angus. "If you need anything call one of the servants. What is here is yours." He placed his hand in the small of his wife's back and urged her through the door.

"Aye, Sir Kenneth," The MacBaron raised his goblet in salute. "I believe I will stay up a wee bit longer," he added under his breath. He had listened while the other two had argued about Candelinn's propriety and innocence. *She may have dressed like a lad for convenience and safety sake*, he thought, *but her innocent eyes were proof she knew naught of the ways of men.* Aye, Angus had been thinking of her too, but his mind ran more to passion and lust.

After refilling his drinking cup with usquebaugh, he slowly wandered about the room studying the different tapestries adorning the walls. In spite of his deliberate attention to the exacting detail in each one, Candelinn again invaded his thoughts. His dreams of her had not left him disillusioned when at last they had met. In fact, he had found her more desirable than ever. Their brief encounter after dinner had left him with a growing sense of unrest, adding fuel to the smoldering hunger in his loins. He smiled in remembrance of the dirk in her small hand. Just to be the man that channeled all that temper into fires of passion caused him much unrest.

Why, he asked himself, could he not be pleased with the other lasses throwing themselves at his head. What did this impudent Comyn lass have that drew his every thought her way? Maybe the fact that she did not bow to his every wish kept her ever present in his mind. But, whatever the cause, the copper-haired beauty was the only one that turned his blood to fire... over and over again with each glance.

A rugged sigh escaped his lips, and with heavy steps he left the room. He placed his empty cup on the table and proceeded up the stairs to his chambers, giving the sleepy guard's salute a brusque reply as he passed him on the landing.

The bedchamber door had no sooner closed behind him when he dropped his clothes onto a chair and stretched out naked on the bed, unmindful of the chill in the air. Methodically, as was his way, he organized his thoughts of her and one by one put them away until at last his tortured soul found some ease, and he closed his eyes at last. He was nearly asleep when the musical notes of her laughter filtered through the coverings of his window, releasing all his pent up yearnings once more. With an agonizing groan he snuffed the candle between his moistened fingertips. In frustration, he grabbed a fur robe and pulled it over himself.

"Damn the lass!" he growled, slamming a clenched fist into his pillow. "Damn her innocent, unknowing ways!"

Three

Candelinn slipped cautiously down the stairs, wishing to avoid a repeat of her previous night's experience with Sir Angus. She peered around the corner into the open room, wary of encountering any of the MacBaron ilk. Seeing no sign of a black tartan, she relaxed considerably and strode into the hall to break her fast. There was no sign of Sir Kenneth and she was glad that she would not have to pass the time with him as she was in no mind for lighthearted conversation. At her leisure now, she glanced about at the men gathered in small groups, talking of the day's activity. Assuring herself that no MacBaron clansmen lingered in the outer hall, she took it for granted that they had left in the middle of the night. Though night it still seemed, with darkness covering the castle like a cloak.

Soon Fergus joined her, but at the look of the porridge and greasy pork he grunted at her from under his breath. "I'll wait for you in the courtyard. I'll have the horses ready." Then, without letting his eyes lower to the food at the table, he took himself out of the hall.

Wrapped in their heavy tartans for protection against the cold, Cadelinn and Fergus mounted their horses and headed south before the dawn had warmed the land, driving the mist from the heather. She had enjoyed her visit with Helena, but now she must face what lay ahead of her at Lochindorb. They rode in silence, thinking of the dour-faced reception they would receive upon their arrival. She wondered what punishment her cousin, Sir John Comyn, would demand of her this time. Whatever he chose, she mused, setting her finely shaped jaw at a determined angle, it had been well worth it. She could take any kind of punishment he would mete out, as it was only one month's time to the wedding. A small mischievous smile played at the corners of her mouth, growing to a full-fledged grin as a decision was reached. Next time she would sneak a new gown out with her. Perhaps the soft blue velvet she'd been saving for something special. Yes, that would be the one. She would have a dress to wear to the wedding. Suddenly, she felt exhilarated and spurred her mount forward.

"Come away, Fergus! Let's make speed and get the journey over with," she called over her shoulder.

With a groan, Fergus speeded up his mount, holding his head with one of his hands as if it were about to fall off. Simple justice no doubt for a slight over indulgence the night before.

Her meeting with The MacBaron had left Cadelinn with the instinctive knowledge that they would come to no harm, and she ignored his well-marked boundaries. In cutting straight across his lands, she would save hours of time. No doubt, word had already reached his castle that she and Fergus were close upon the MacBaron lands. The stalkers and gamekeepers would have notified the gillies who in turn would have carried the word to the chief himself, that two horsemen wearing the Comyn plaid were crossing his previously forbidden lines. Just knowing Angus might be about in the dark forest made her feel somewhat protected and safe. It was a strange impression that she could not explain.

When she noticed Fergus sitting alert in the saddle looking around him, she informed him of the events of the night before when he had been so inebriated that he knew not what had passed between her and Sir Angus.

"So have no fear, Fergus. The great MacBaron granted us safe passage through his lands," she said very sarcastically. "Now, we can return for the wedding. Well, what say you, Fergus?"

"I say my head is killing me so much I would no' care if he were to take me as of now and put me out of my misery. Och, Cadelinn, do ye need speak so loudly? I'm no deaf, ye ken!" He slipped into a deeper brogue in his misery; his eyes were bloodshot and pleading as he looked at her.

"My poor lad," Cadelinn taunted without the least bit of compassion. "I seem to remember a time last night when speaking loudly did not bother you in the least. Of course, it was you doing the talking as I recall."

"Me?" he answered innocently. "Talking loudly?"

"Only to the whole room, knave," she scolded, waving a clenched fist dangerously near his head.

"Even so, I fail to see the reason for your temper. It's not unheard of, ye ken, for a man to enjoy an extra cup or two and join in a little friendly revelry."

"Och, you dunderhead," she shook her head in disgust. "As I recall, you were the jester of the celebration." She turned in her saddle and faced him lopsidedly, imitating his drunken stance. "Le' me tell you 'bout my dear shister," she slurred her words for effect. "And why she's afraid to come to the wedding." She leaned closer, her green eyes glinting menacingly.

Slowly the light of recognition dawned in Fergus's befuddled brain. Beneath her withering glare his head retreated into the top of his cloak, much like a cowardly turtle withdrawing from harm's way.

"So!" The word pounced on him. "You do remember. Ha! I hope you feel as embarrassed as I was. I tell you Fergus, scrubbing cooking pots for a month would be too good for you." A look of unmistakable agony enveloped him, leaving a sickly pallor about his face.

"Oh, very well," she relented, punching him good-naturedly on his arm. "I will ride the rest of the way in silence. But do you think you can whip some speed into that nag? Let's away home."

Meekly he nodded, relief flooding his features.

The sun was slowly receding over the heather-blanketed braes when Candelinn reined in at the stables at the edge of a small clear loch. A large castle could be seen on a lush green isle some few hundred feet from shore.

An old man, bent with years of serfdom, came out of the room at the back of the stables, his aged legs moving with rheumatic slowness. He smiled affectionately at the young woman, displaying the gaps in his mouth where teeth had once been. His gnarled hands reached out to take the reins.

"Mistress Candelinn. 'Tis good to see you safe. The Laird is fair beside himsel' wi' worry and when he found I gave ye a horse, I tho' my days were o'er for sure. Ye'd think the Black MacBaron himsel' had taken ye for a ride, he was so angry. Best hurry to the boat and row to the castle afore he bursts a seam."

"Aye, we will, MacDougall, and thank you for not giving me away." She bent and kissed the crippled man on his weathered cheek, which immediately turned as red as his hair once had been.

"Och, away wi' ye, lass. I donna' have time for the likes a' ye. Gi' us that horse so I can rub him down 'fore he catches a chill. Ye too, Master Fergus. Better make it quick. Ye'll be over her tendin' the horses wi' me when the Laird gets through wi' ye."

Fergus relinquished his reins to the older man and jumped in the small boat to row Candelinn and himself to their awaiting doom.

The first person they saw on the island shore was the scowling Sir John Comyn, ready to mete out his wrathful punishment to the two disobedient kinsmen. Like the blade of a claymore, his harsh clipped tones rent the night air, calling their sentence down upon them.

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Candelinn needn't have worried about meeting the black MacBaron on leaving the Castle of the Laird de Keith. The dark dreary night surrounded the men as they raced, clamoring, well into the countryside. Their chief at their head rode in haste. His mighty destrier stretching out its hooves in a fast gallop, sending damp clods of mud flying through the air.

The clan call of "MacBaron!" echoed across the stillness.

"To Annandale!" The chief shouted, leading his clan straight southward, his black cloak flowing behind him. On and on they rode through the night and into the day, crossing moors, braes and burns. They bypassed Badenock territory but refused to veer from the direction intended.

The party's pace never slacked as the hooves of their horses shook the very ground. Animals scurried from their path and any poachers that happened to be out stalking made certain to be out of view when the clan MacBaron pounded across their path. So the day passed, the hours of hard riding never showing on the clan chief, his energy as fresh as it had been at early dawn.

Though some of his men grew weary in his wake, they never slacked their pace. There were times when their chief would slow them to a walk and allow the horses a much-needed rest, but the men remained seated on their mounts. The love and devotion they held for The MacBaron gave them the courage to follow him unfalteringly, even were he to lead them to the dark side of the world.

His men didn't realize he rode to escape the unbearable ache in his groin for the wee lass he had left behind him. He thought to distance himself from her and the hard ride through the beautiful Highlands was meant to clear his mind of her. When the sun began to lower and the moon came into view, the small army slowed at the foot of the Grampian Mountains to make their way more carefully along the dangerous ridges and craigs of Ben Novis. They had been riding hard throughout the day, stopping only once to rest the horses. When night enclosed them, their chief finally reined in and ordered camp to be made on the western shores of Loch Laggan.

The men were only too happy to eat their bannock cakes from their pouches and drink from the icy cold waters of the lake before wrapping themselves in their heavy woolen plaids to fall into an exhausted sleep. Their night of quaffing, taking its toll.

The following day, the ride was of a more leisurely pace. The fires burning in The MacBaron had cooled to embers to lay dormant awaiting another time and place. The archers had practiced throughout the day, killing hares to be roasted at nightfall.

They had passed with stealth by the Sterling Castle in the fog and mist and camped ten miles south of the Kilsyth hills. The inhabitants of the castle were known enemies to the riding clansmen.

In a matter of minutes, campfires spotted the glen. The thick woods served as a protection against any patrols that might be riding by them. The men sitting around the campfire wrapped in their woolen plaids were at ease. They filled their stomachs on fresh cooked hare spitted over the campfires and bannock cakes fried on the open fire and were soon relaxing beside their comrades. Only a highland clansman could survive on so little sustenance. They could travel for days eating only the oatmeal cakes and washing it down with ale. Only when they had time to spare did they kill a grouse or hare to top off their meal.

Angus, cupping his hand around a horn of *usquebaugh*, leaned back against a sturdy pine. His eyes stared into the fire blazing forth its warmth a few feet in front of him.

Richard could see that he was deep in thought, so he left his brother alone and made his pallet a few feet away to get what little bit of sleep he could.

Angus could hear his men, some settling down and going right to sleep after their night of debauchery

having taken its toll, others joking and jostling at each other and felt a kind of contentment seep into his thoughts. He loved the cool Scottish nights, out in the wilderness with his men. He was proud of his clansmen. There'd been times in the past when he'd had to settle a dispute between a couple of warriors raising fists and battering at each other. But on the whole they were good, honorable highlanders and this was the way of men in these troubled times.

For Scotland was adrift with no king of its own and slowly choking under the yoke of King Edward. An English king who ruled with an iron hand, and the Scots could tell only too well of his cruelty and unrelenting punishments.

Angus scowled as he thought of Sir William Wallace. A greater patriot Scotland had never known and he had given his life to keep his country from falling under English rule.

Robert Bruce himself, as Earl of Carrick, had knighted Angus and William Wallace on the same night for their bravery in battle, when they had defeated the English at Sterling Bridge.

Angus chuckled as he remembered the strategy of his leader in that particular fight. Sir Andrew of Moray had allowed half the English troops to cross the bridge before he and his men cut it off behind them and, though he was mortally wounded, the rest of the Scotsmen went on to win the day and score a victory for Scotland in his name.

Angus had fought by the right hand of Wallace through the entire battle and because of this he felt in him a kinship and hated to think of what befell him not two months past.

After having been lured into a pitched battle, Sir William Wallace was captured and taken to London, where King Edward showed his sadistic nature and hatred to Scottish eyes. There, among a crowd of onlookers, he had Sir William hung stark naked in public, then cut down choking but still alive. With cruel savagery, the king ordered his private parts cut off and had him disemboweled so Wallace could watch his own entrails burn before his very eyes. To further his butchery, Edward then ordered his arms and legs hacked off, and finally he put Wallace to death by beheading. His head, still dripping blood, was hung high above London Bridge and his quartered body, divided for exposure, was placed to rot at Newcastle upon Tyne, Berwick, Sterling and Perth to discourage any man in Scotland from thinking he could rule in Edward's stead.

Angus threw back his head and downed the remaining *usquebaugh* in his horn. A hatred he had never known for any other man filled him, forming a tight knot in his stomach as he remembered the fate of the man who had kept Scotland free of England's rule. Now the country waited for a new man to come and claim its throne.

Such a man was Sir Robert the Bruce. A man who would rule Scotland fairly, with an unfaltering spirit. He was a supreme soldier and had a kingliness that was inborn. Angus would gladly place his life and that of his men in the hands of Sir Robert of Bruce, the Earl of Carrick. And if he did nothing else in this lifetime, even it meant that he would suffer the same fate as Sir William Wallace, he would strive to place Robert Bruce on the throne of Scotland.

Angus stood up and walked among his men, most of which were now laying on their pallets to catch a well-earned rest before their chief roused the camp for the hard ride before them on the morrow.

This solitary walk cleared his mind and after leaving a few men to stand guard, he lay down himself, pulling a heavy fur robe around his shoulders to shut out the night air. Shortly before slumber overtook him, he thought of a comely lass with long fiery hair and a quick temper. He knew her passion, once

awakened, would burn just as much as he did for her now.

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Angus woke early and set about rousing the men. He walked to the burn nearby and washed the sleep from his face with the icy water that flowed down from the snow-capped Grampians.

By the time he got back to camp the men were up, getting the horses ready to ride, and were cooking small griddlecakes to eat on the way.

When all was in readiness, Angus took his reins from Duncan. He mounted his stallion, which stood snorting and stomping, anxious to be away. With a nod to his men he turned his steed and in the noise of the pounding hooves led them farther south into the Lowlands of Scotland, on to Galloway and Lochmaben castle.

Night had fallen on them once again as the clan of MacBaron clattered over cobblestones at the seat of Sir Robert de Bruce, Earl of Carrick.

Dogs barked and men emerged from every crevice of the castle, shouting their greeting. One of them was a sturdy, muscular man clad in hunting attire. He stood before Angus, his hand raised in greeting. Angus swung from his horse and knelt in homage at the other's feet.

"My liege. I'm happy to see you well."

Robert de Bruce brought his friend to his feet and pounded him on the back. "Aye, Angus. And how are things with you? It seems eons since we last shared a dram of mead. You too, young Richard," he motioned his head at the younger MacBaron. "Come inside, we will remedy that without delay."

Robert's pretty young wife, Elizabeth, and the four Bruce brothers, all happy to see him and hear the news of the Highlands, greeted Angus and Richard inside. They had just filled him a goblet to brimming and sat down in the private family chambers to catch up on the sought after news. Suddenly a wild scream came from the door and a small blonde whirlwind came running at full speed into the room to jump into Angus's out-stretched arms.

"Uncle Angus! I'm so happy you've come! What did you bring me? I've waited so long to see you!"

Angus looked to Robert's brothers, smiling widely. He gently stood his bundle at his feet and winked over her shoulder at her father. "Marjorie, my little minx, you mean to tell me that with four real uncles following your every command that you missed me?"

The young girl, her blonde curls bobbing in excitement was half a score in years and had known Angus since her birth. Her mother having passed away a few years back, she had adopted Angus for her foster uncle before her father had married the lovely Elizabeth. She reached out and touched his fingers, no longer encased in leather gauntlets.

"But they won't let me ride their stallion and you will. Papa says I'm not big enough to ride anything larger than my pony you sent from the Highlands. But I am, Uncle Angus! Tell them I am!"

Angus threw back his head with a snort of laughter.

"Oh, no, lassie. You'll not get me to go against your father's wishes. You can ride my mount only if

Duncan, my gillie, leads you. Never alone. Do you hear me? Now..." He reached into the leather pouch suspended from his belt and pulled out a dainty gold chain. A piece of yellow cairngorm enclosed in a gold leaf, its petals folding securely around the stone, dangled from the chain's length. He held it out of the little girl's reach, teasing her.

"I wonder what payment I could extract from such a lovely lassie for so great a gift?" Angus squatted down on his haunches so she could reach him. Little Marjorie Bruce squealed and threw her tiny arms around his broad neck and kissed his cheek with a loud smack.

"That is payment indeed," he smiled. He swatted her on the bottom as he stood up. "Now away with you, so I can speak with your father and uncles. We don't need wee ears around when we speak of battles gone by. If you hurry you might be able to catch Duncan afore he puts the stallion away in the stables."

Lady Elizabeth glided across the floor to her stepdaughter. Taking her hand, she curtsied to the gentlemen in the room before disappearing with the child. Her dark, perfectly coiffured hair contrasted remarkably with the blonde curls skipping along beside her.

Angus turned to the Earl, who leaned casually against the mantle of the fireplace. "She looks more like you every day, my liege. She has grown a foot taller since I last saw her."

"Aye, she does. And grows as obstinate, I fear." This brought a roar of laughter around the room, while Alexander, Robert's younger brother, passed around the goblets full of the clear dark liquid.

Soon they were all settled down, relaxed in chairs and cozy from the warm fire and hearty brew. Talk ranged from hunting stag and bear, to Scotland and the problems it was having with England and its demonic king.

Nigel Bruce, one of the brothers, spoke up heatedly. "For what he did to Willie Wallace, he should pay, and pay dearly! When Robert is king this cruelty will cease."

A scowl covered the face of the Earl. "It's doubtful that will ever happen, Nigel. Edward of England claims the right to choose who rules Scotland and I am not exactly in his favor after my association with Sir William. He has already seized some of my estates and given them to Sir Ingram of Umfraville. No telling what will be next."

"Well, the Keith chieftain has assured me, he is behind you, my liege. So that is one more clan on our side. The numbers behind you are steadily growing, sire. You still think that Edward would choose the Red Comyn?" Angus questioned, dreading the answer.

Robert de Bruce sat in deep concentration, staring into the huge fireplace, before replying.

"I fear it is so, my friend. Even though our numbers may be larger than those following The Comyn, it remains that he is still in favor with the king. It would be folly indeed for Scotland, if the Red Comyn were to rule. He holds no grace to the less advantaged. Our poor crofters would suffer as much from him as they do with Edward holding the scepter."

Alexander, jumped to his feet, with his usual brashness, his fists clenched. "He must be stopped, Robert! You can't just sit there drinking your ale and do nothing!"

"Sit down, Alex!" Robert's voice cut the air like a scythe. "Cool your temper at once! It is early days

yet. We shall just wait and see what occurs."

He looked over at Angus's younger brother. He changed the subject, breaking the tension in the room. "Let's talk of other things, easier on the mind. I hope you, Richard, are well prepared for your coming vows of fidelity."

"Aye, sire." He looked at The Bruce over his cup. "The final plans were made these three eves past. May we expect your presence there? 'Twould make Helena very happy."

"Nae, lad. I'm sorry I won't be able to attend. The date coincides with an important meeting I have with the regents of Scotland. It was enough that I could spare your brother to be there. But tell the bride, I wish her well." He glanced mischievously at Angus. "If I could just be around when the downfall of your brother occurs, I will be most pleased. "'Tis time some lovely maiden cooled his heels."

"Who knows, sire," he returned the smile and shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. "My day may come before you know it."

"Oh? Does that mean there is a certain maiden that has caught your eye? Perhaps the English miss I saw hanging on your arm at the last Edinburgh celebration? She was a comely lass. What was she called? Ah, I remember, she was Sir Alexander Seton's niece. Letitia... Wasn't that her name?"

Angus stared openly at the earl in surprise. "I'm shocked that you can recall every lass you have ever seen at my side, sire."

"Especially as there have been no small number," Robert interjected good-naturedly.

"And with Lady Elizabeth on your arm," he ignored the jibe. "I would think that you saw no other in the room"

"On the contrary, Angus." He chuckled at his friend's discomfort. "It was my lovely Elizabeth who brought it to my attention. From the look the lass was giving you at the time, she thought your bachelor days might soon be over."

"You know how I can't abide the English, sire. I think I will hold out for a Highland lass. But don't hold your breath, my liege. I'm not shackled yet. By the way, how is young Jamie Douglas? I have not heard how he fairs on these borders of late?"

Robert laughed at the quick change of subject. "He is having trouble with the English on his lands also, but so far he has kept them at bay."

The talk settled to times gone by and Angus enjoyed himself, spending the time with his liege. It was in the wee hours of the morning when the conversation waned and everyone sought out their assigned chambers and fell into a welcome bed to have a good night's rest.

For almost two weeks, the clan MacBaron enjoyed the hospitality of the Bruce's with hunting along the moors, and fishing in the nearby streams before they had to return to their own lands to ready for Richard's wedding. But before they left, all the MacBaron's knelt to vow their allegiance, once again, to Sir Robert the Bruce.

Fergus wasn't banished to the stables, but he did walk the battlements every night for a fortnight, while Candelinn was confined to her room. Sir John Comyn could not have picked a better punishment for the two of them. For Fergus loved to sit in the keep and talk to his cousins following for hours on end, and Candelinn would rather have taken a flogging than be restrained to her room. Even if she would not be free to go ashore, she could have walked the windswept battlements and felt the sun on her face and the wind in her hair. So to the two truants, this was punishment indeed.

Candelinn, sitting in her chambers with her two serving maids, was busy embroidering a bolt of material for a new gown. As she passed the needle through the cloth, it slipped and pricked her finger. She jumped up, disgustedly threw the material on the chair and sucked at the injured tip. She pulled it out of her mouth and glared at the small pinprick of blood.

"Damn!"

"Mistress, Candelinn!" One of the maids looked up, a shocked expression on her face.

"I care not, Wilhelmina! I despise this woman's work! I was just not meant to sit in this room for hours on end. It's driving me mad!" She looked disdainfully at the stitch work.

Candelinn stalked over to the window and yanked the animal fur aside. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and looked longingly toward the highland hills, letting the cold air from the loch below blow gently against her flushed face. The image of the dark, rugged MacBaron chief floated softly on her thoughts. More and more often she thought of him these days and each time his vision came to her easier than before, filling her with an emotion Candelinn could not understand. Always before he had appeared in her dreams at night, but now, in broad daylight and in the presence of others, it was too much for anyone to tolerate. She angrily shook her head and turned to Wilhelmina.

"For two weeks I've been stuck in this room and it's about to make me lose my mind!"

At that moment there was a tap on the door and upon recognition her cousin's steward entered.

"The Laird of Badenock wishes ye're presence at dinner, Mistress Candelinn. He says that ye will dine at the usual time."

At her nod, the steward bowed and stepped from the room, closing the door after him.

"Willy! Did you hear that? I finally get to leave this bloody chamber! Even Sir John's disapproving face is better than these four walls! I'm free at last!"

The rest of the day went speedily, as Candelinn's mood became once more one of merriment and good cheer.

Dressed in a flowing gown of green wool, the tight sash showing a slender waist and the full round curve of breast revealed at the lace trimmed bodice, Candelinn regained the courage to face her cousin and the evening ahead. She had not spoken to him this past fortnight, not since she had been ordered to remain in her chambers until further notice. He had stormed and railed at her disobedience, finally dismissing her from his sight. Her lack of humility had enraged him.

Her eyes sparkled back at her from the reflection in the small hand mirror as Wilhelmina brushed her hair until it shone and pulled it high off the nape of her neck, as was the style of the Queen of England.

The great Lord of Badenock had a stubborn opponent in this tiny figure of a woman. She would not admit to being wrong in slipping away from the castle to see Helena de Keith. If he was going to insist on treating her like a prisoner she would be doing it again in another fortnight's time. After all, Comyn blood ran in her veins as well and the clan had never been known for giving an inch if they thought they were right.

Her satin slippers were silent as she descended the stone steps. As she passed her cousin's private council chambers, she was stopped by raised voices coming from within the room. The heavy oak door was slightly ajar, letting the sound carry easily into the empty passageway. Normally Candelinn would not have hesitated so, but with the sound of Sir John's voice raised in anger with Sir Angus MacBaron's name on his lips, Candelinn found her feet frozen to the floor.

"What's more, that damn MacBaron and the rest of his clan are slowly drawing many of the highlanders to the side of Robert the Bruce. I'd rather see him dead than King of Scotland in my place."

"You know The MacBaron is marrying his brother off to Helena de Keith." A voice vaguely familiar to Candelinn's ears answered her cousin. "I fear if we are not careful we will have lost what little loyalty her father gave us--If we haven't already with the alliance. There must be a way to stop him!" If we could rid the land of The MacBaron, the numbers against us wouldn't be as great."

"Don't be ridiculous! That would accomplish nothing except open warfare between the clans. But you are right in one thing--either The Bruce or The MacBaron; one of them must be disposed of. But it must never look like I was involved. Damn their insolence!"

Then Candelinn heard a loud noise as if her cousin had pounded his fist on the table in front of him. When she heard his chair scrape the stone floor she hurried on into the banquet hall for fear of what her cousin might do were he to find her eavesdropping outside the door. She entered the room on trembling legs, wondering whom the person was that had been talking to Sir John. She was alarmed at the fear she felt for Sir Angus--the same man she had so bitterly denounced as a blackguard and a reiver.

"Well, lass, I see you faired well enough in your chambers this past fortnight." Her brother quickly approached her from across the room. He smiled, revealing a dimple similar to her own. "I wonder what our dear cousin has in store for us this night? How I'd love for this to be the end of it. Those battlements get damnably cold and I'd like an evening spent close to the fire with a mug of ale in my hand. You don't know how lucky you have been."

"Lucky! St. Columba, Fergus! Sometimes I think you are addled! I've loathed every second of it. How would you like to sit for hours on end, listening to the prattle of senseless women and stick your finger repeatedly with a needle while attempting to do needlework, something you have no interest in?"

Fergus threw his head back and laughed, but his humor was cut off short by the cold voice at his shoulder.

"If you find punishment so humorous, perhaps I could keep you on guard permanently, young Fergus."

Fergus sobered immediately and bowed respectfully to his cousin. "Sire," then, held Candelinn's shaking hand as she curtsied.

Sir John nodded at the young woman, then looked at them both severely, his brow wrinkling in distaste.

Candelinn noticed Simon de Keith standing a few feet behind her cousin and realized that the other voice

she had heard in her cousin's private chambers had been his. *Helena's cousin! Was he then a traitor to his clan?* Sir John brought her thoughts back to the moment at hand and her own troubled circumstances.

"First we will dine, then I will meet you both in my private chambers. I would talk to you then." He turned abruptly and strode away, followed by Simon, who gave her a lecherous glance. Sir John was greeted and hailed just as he thought his due and moved to his waiting guests at the long table in the center of the room.

Cadelinn noticed the hard lines upon her cousin's face that she had never before observed. His lips were thin and his chin was narrow and weak. Why was she finding these faults in him now? Although slightly in fear of what he was capable of, she had been nevertheless comfortable under his domain these past years. Though Sir John Comyn had never shown love to Fergus and herself, he had seen to their physical wants. They were clothed well and had never known hunger.

He was her father's cousin and he was a distant enough relative to have turned her and her brother away without consideration, but he had not. She recalled the way both her parents had openly demonstrated their love in so many ways and thought it strange that the chief of the Comyn clan showed no affection toward even his wife. Though the Lady Comyn was seldom seen out of her private chambers, when she was about, their conversation to each other was stilted and cool.

How Cadelinn wished she could turn back the clock and return to the times when she was so happy with both her parents alive. But all that was over now. Her life was here with the Black Laird of Badenock as he was often called behind his back. *I must cease these traitorous thoughts running wildly through her mind.* She admonished herself, blinking back the tears starting to form behind her eyes.

When the dining had finished she waited until her cousin's departure before leaving herself. Simon watched her retreat, his gaze taking her in from her feet to her flaming hair. The movement of her hips made his loins ache and he fantasized to the day she would belong to him.

Cadelinn immediately sought out Fergus to accompany her to the chief's hall. She didn't feel as brave as she had earlier in the evening. Not up to facing her cousin on her own, she was braced by her brother's presence at her side.

They stopped in front of the huge oak door. Fergus squeezed her fingers.

"Are ye ready, lass? He can't do much more than he's done already, so the worst should be over. Now we'll just have to listen to the lecture of not breaking the chief's command and paying closer attention to his words henceforth."

Cadelinn raised her head, a mischievous smile curving her lips.

"Do you think it will do any good, Fergus? I don't know what makes me so willful, but I'm afraid I can't promise to change." Her dimple deepened.

"Nay, lass, don't change. I like you just as you are. If I had to put up with a sister like most of the shy, sniveling females within these walls, I would volunteer for all the battles just to be away from you."

"Well, 'tis time," he said soberly, reaching to tap upon the door before them.

On Sir John's word, both crossed the threshold to stand in front of him. Fergus bowed. Candelinn curtsied. There was a huge log burning in the fireplace but still Candelinn shivered. It wasn't the temperature of the room that made her feel so cold, but the atmosphere within that was doing it. She raised her head to stare into the cold gray eyes facing her across the table. His red hair and beard looked alight with the fire reflecting on it, as if he were the devil himself sitting in judgement. The room was silent except for the crackling of the pine logs and Sir John's repeated tapping of his quill on the table in front of him. When Candelinn thought she could stand the silence no longer he finally cleared his throat and broke the silence.

"Have you two come to your senses long enough to apologize for breaking my order?" Not giving them time to answer, he continued. "I want you to know that I will stand for no disobedience in the clan and especially from the two of you. I knew you would bring me nothing but trouble when I took you in. I did so only on your father's memory. I tried to dissuade him from marrying that wild MacDonald serf, but he insisted, and I'm afraid you both have inherited some of her wicked traits. Especially you, Mistress Candelinn, with your rebellious ways. I think it is time for me to find you a husband. Perhaps with another's less tolerant nature you will learn to curb your riotous tendencies."

At this the girl in question stiffened. She didn't care how he berated her, but she hated to stand here and listen to him insulting her beloved mother. She had heard these same words repeated over and over in the years spent under his rule but they still wounded her as deeply as the first time she had heard them.

"But Sir John..." Fergus spoke up, retaliating against the cruel insinuating words, while Candelinn bit her tongue in silence, waiting.

"Silence!" Snapped Sir John. "You will both have the freedom of the castle, but you will remain on the island until the next full moon. Then, and only then, if you have proven to be humble enough to apologize and swear to me this incident won't be repeated, will we talk again." He looked down at the parchment in front of him and dipped his quill, to begin scratching across its surface, ignoring their presence.

The couple knew they were being summarily dismissed and walked slowly across the stone floor and through the door. The second it was closed, Candelinn broke forth.

"Damn! The next full moon is almost thirty days away. I will miss the wedding."

"I doubt he would let you go anyway, lass. You may as well put it from your mind."

"Don't be such a gomeril, Fergus! Of course, I am going. Could we let the MacBaron throw out such a challenge to us and we not take it up? He's offered safe passage across his lands and if we don't come to the wedding he will indeed think us cowards!"

Fergus watched with apprehension as he saw the beginning of an idea reflected in his sister's eyes.

"Come to my chambers and I will tell you how we can do it, Fergus."

"Och, lass. Think twice about this! What will happen if we go against his wishes again, I hate to think. He could banish us from the castle, then what would we do?"

"I don't think he would do that at the present time, Fergus. He wants as many with him against Robert the Bruce as possible. And you have proven yourself worthy in battle many times over. He would not lose you, never fear. And if he decided that he could stand my face around here no longer I could always live with our old maid, Luisadh. She only lives in the next shire and I'm sure she would take me in. So

don't fret, all will be well."

"What of the mention of marrying you off? I don't think it was an idle threat, lass," his words were serious.

"I would never marry without love, Fergus. He cannot force me." Even knowing that by the right of guardianship he could do just that, she pushed it from her mind.

After securing the door to her room once Fergus had entered, Cadelinn told him of her plan to escape to the wedding. After several hours of intense discussion, Fergus agreed to trust her ideas and reluctantly conceded his argument against another forbidden adventure. As usual his sister had once more convinced him that anything was possible and they would once more succeed.

After leaving her bedchamber, Fergus tiptoed down the hall, careful not to alert the guards. They would undoubtedly question his whereabouts at this late hour. An audible sigh of relief escaped his lips as he closed the door of his own chambers behind him.

"What have I let you talk me into now, dear sister?" he whispered into the darkness.

Cadelinn's thoughts raced ahead to the day of the wedding as she dressed quickly for bed. Barely had her eyes closed when the familiar dark face drifted back to her as once again, their first meeting was relived in her dreams.

Four

Angus sped eagerly over the last few leagues to Glencairn. He had enjoyed his visit with Robert the Bruce at Annandale, but was now anxious to be home. The sun glistened on the castle walls as he crested the last heather covered brae, his men dust-stained and weary behind him. He never ceased to admire the sight of Glencairn as it looked at this moment, with the evening sun reflecting from the open sea against its wind swept battlements. The MacBaron home. If only he could survive to pass it on to his heirs. There would be many skirmishes ahead with the challenge for the Scottish crown and who knew what his future would be.

As he drew near the portcullis, he saw a small number of Englishmen on horseback waiting outside the heavily barred gates. Among them was a woman in flowing skirts, riding sidesaddle. Drawing rein at her side he recognized Letitia Seton. He shook his head, *would the lass never give up?*

"Angus! Thank God you have come. Your stupid guardsman refused to let me enter without your permission. What in God's name has got into him? I have been here often enough for him to know who I am. Does he not know of the Seton's?" she asked, boastful of the rank her uncle now held for the King of England. "Pray tell him to stop this nonsense and bid me enter!" She demanded through tightly pursed lips.

"He was following orders, Letitia. But mayhap 'tis your bodyguard of English soldiers that worried him so. Do you always have to come fit for battle?" He teased her, trying to get her to stop her tirade. He

also knew her uncle would not allow her to go unattended in the Highlands. He raised his hand, signaling to his gatekeeper who immediately raised the creaking iron bars. Angus took stock of her guards, knowing most of them to be harmless and didn't bother to tell his men to keep a close eye on them, as normally he would have done with the English. They were her uncle's personal troops, garishly displayed in the family's colors of orange and green. Dandies all, they were good for nothing but attending the wants of the likes of Letitia. Certainly not enough for a MacBaron to worry over.

He slid effortlessly to the ground and walked around to the left side of her horse to help the visiting maiden from her saddle. She clung to him, her body leaning into his seductively, fluttering her eyelashes flirtatiously in his face. He dropped his hands and stepped away to help her maid from her mount. Letitia's brazen display irritated him. He preferred being the hunter.

"What brings you to Glencairn, Mistress Seton? Is there anything wrong at your uncle's?" He mocked, slapping his horse on the rump as it was led away.

"Angus, you don't have to sound so formal. It's so boring just sitting around that old castle," she complained. "There has been so much trouble between the Scots and us that the balls and celebrations have dropped off to nothing. When are they going to stop this infernal bickering? They know they could never find a better man than King Edward for the crown in this whole country." She never noticed the fierce scowls on the MacBaron guards in the courtyard. She prattled on, not once considering that the man she was talking to was Scottish through and through. "So why aren't they happy with what they have?"

"Maybe because they are Scots and Edward is English?" He raised an eyebrow at her. He led her into the main hall of Glencairn and seated her on one of the chairs, close to the warmth of the fireplace.

"Rest here a minute, Letitia and I'll see to refreshments." He walked through the door into the cooking area without a backward glance.

Letitia dismissed her maid who had followed shyly, with a curt command. "Go prepare my quarters and make sure I have hot water for a bath and a warm fire." The maid nodded and swiftly left her Lady's presence.

Letitia looked around the room and grimaced. How disgusting and stark it was. So cold and barren with those ancient shields and claymores adorning the walls. *What I couldn't do to this castle*, she thought. *With Angus's money and my excellent taste, it could be made to challenge any in England. If only I had the opportunity. Angus needs a wife to give him an heir. Now that his brother's wedding is planned, perhaps he will have the time and the inclination to look to himself. If that happens, I want to be sure of my position when he chooses a wife. With a little careful planning...* she smiled to herself. *But he is so stubborn! Not once have I gotten any kind of commitment out of him. Perhaps he can be persuaded to choose a mate in the near future and who better*, she reasoned, *than someone who holds his best interests so close to her heart, after all.*

Voices intruded on her thoughts, ceasing her scheming and planning. Angus entered with a serving maid in tow, carrying a heavily laden tray. He nodded toward a narrow doorway, showing Letitia into a small private chamber, avoiding the rest of the clan now clamoring into the main hall of the keep, after seeing to their horses. Starved and thirsty after the hard ride, they collapsed on the benches, slamming their fists on the table, yelling for food and drink.

Letitia looked about the room at the cozy surroundings. She ran her fingertips across the back of a chair, inspecting it for dust. *It's not to my taste*, she smirked, *but it is an improvement over the large hall*

full of the clan. And, it is more private. How thoughtful of Angus. Usually he keeps me in the crowded hall with all the warriors and servants in attendance. And he knows how their manners disgust me; I have told him often enough. Could it be he no longer intends holding me at arms' length? Letitia smiled coyly at the thought of a closer relationship. *Perhaps he was beginning to weaken under the onslaught of my considerable charms*, she mused, extremely pleased with herself. Her tactics appeared to be paying off sooner than expected. Her beauty was such that it had never been necessary for her to be the aggressor, striving for a man's attentions. But Angus was not just any man. A small frown creased her forehead. No, this was the only way she could have Angus MacBaron. There was no feeling of shame at the thought of chasing after him, for the final outcome was worthy of her pursuit.

That she was no virgin, he well knew, but what better recommendation could she offer than her already proven ability to pleasure him in bed. They had made love often since their first meeting several years ago, but always in the dead of night after she had made all the advances.

Curiously, Angus's attention seemed to have waned of late and the last few times she had visited Glencairn she had even slipped into his chambers, because he had not tried to approach her himself. He was not the type to chase a mere female, not Angus MacBaron. Any woman who would catch and hold him would have to be the pursuer... or so she thought.

"Why the frown?" Angus broke into her pondering, holding a heavy pewter goblet of wine in front of her face for her to take.

Letitia reached out, her slender fingers purposely brushing his hand as she accepted the drink. Her expression cleared instantly to be replaced by her most tantalizing smile.

"I was just thinking of how lonely you will be with your brother gone," she hinted.

"Lonely?" He asked incredulous. "How can I be lonely when I have a castle full of people, a large clan moving in and out my doors and such beautiful guests visiting Glencairn?" He countered skillfully.

"But Angus, I do not see you often enough. Uncle Alexander won't allow more frequent visits, not with the wild bands scouring the countryside." She looked over her goblet at him. "You are not among the clans that are unhappy with Edward, are you Angus?" He had never voiced his opinions to her before and at this moment she needed to know they were on the same side.

Instead of answering her question, he turned to the fireplace, resting his booted foot upon the stone hearth. He took a large draught of wine before his eyes met hers. Once more they contained his usual good humor.

"You came all this way to talk politics?"

His aloofness made her realize she had stepped over the boundaries of decorum and that the chief of the MacBaron clan would not relish her questioning his allegiance. Letitia stood and came to stand directly in front of him. She ran her hands up his chest, her long tapering fingernails spread out against the smoothness of his leather jack. She looked into his eyes, their darkness showing no emotion.

"No, Angus. I care not where your loyalties lie. I came to see you, as well you know." She hated groveling at the man's feet but with Angus there was no other way that she felt she could hold him.

"I'm surprised your thoughts have time to turn my way with the amount of men I hear are vying for your

favours." He stepped away from her nearness to go once more to the desk and refill his cup with wine.

"They mean nothing to me, Angus." She took his coolness for jealousy and, happy at the thought, tried to put his mind at ease. "They are mere simpletons! I only keep them around me because I have been so bored of late. What would you have me do while you're out riding over the country? Surely you would not want me pining away alone in my chambers?"

"Nae, Letitia. I have never asked anything of you. You know that."

Letitia watched his expression to see if his jealousy would show. But she read nothing on his face, as she watched him while sipping from her goblet. If she were not so sure of herself, she would have thought it was of no real interest to him whatsoever.

"Are you ready to retire? If so, I will have the maid prepare your usual chambers." He walked to the door opening it for her exit.

"It isn't necessary, Angus. I've already sent my own woman." Letitia took this as an open invitation for a more private interlude and her eyes sparkled. She sat her goblet on the desk and moved to his side once more, her heartbeats quickening with passion.

"Yes, Angus. I rode most of the day and the thought of a comfortable bed is enticing." Her lashes lowered coquettishly, thinking of the coming night in his arms.

As the door closed behind her, Angus took a last long draught from his cup and after a short interval left the room, calling for Duncan.

Once in her chambers, Letitia demanded hot water for her bath. Stripped of her clothing she stuck one foot gingerly into the brass tub only to jerk it back with a scream of pain.

"You incompetent imbecile!" She screeched at the elderly maid. "Are you trying to burn me alive? Get out of my sight! My father will hear of your carelessness, have no doubt. When I am Lady of Castle Glencairn I will leave you in England! Now leave me old woman! And send someone more capable of being a Lady's maid with some cold water!"

Louise fled from the room, cursing her mistress. She would never become accustomed to the verbal abuse. She hoped the mistress would leave her in England and request someone else to be her personal maid. She would rather be working in the kitchen scrubbing the huge black pots than catering to Miss Letitia Seton.

Later, bathed and perfumed, Letitia put on a filmy night rail of sheer red silk, leaving nothing to the imagination. She admired her perfectly formed body in the mirror, before donning her matching robe. She wanted this night to be perfect. With her feminine prowess she would try one last time to get Angus to propose. Surely no man could refuse her looking as she did.

If she could just persuade him. Of all the men she had known, Angus was the most handsome of them all. He was one that would not submit to her feminine ways, she knew, but one that would be virile and a challenge for years to come. He would never bend to any woman's demands, but with him it would all be worth it!

Full of self-confidence she tiptoed down the now silent hall to the chief's chambers. Quietly she inched open his door to step inside. A candle burned on the table by his bed and a roaring fire in the fireplace

took the chill from the room. But of Angus, she saw not a sign. The bed had not been touched and he was not in his chambers. She walked the floor waiting for his entrance. On her other visits he had been abed long before this. What could be keeping him? After what seemed like hours, Letitia tired of her long vigil, stepped into the hall. Her temper frayed, she approached a guard at the top of the stairs in a huff. Not thinking of her appearance, as she stood half-naked before him, she asked, her voice demanding.

"Where is your chief?"

As she stood in the hall in a state of undress, the guardsman, with crimson face at her boldness, stammered, "Sir Angus is gone, m'lady. He left with his gillie this hour past. Could I be of help, m'lady?"

Unbridled fury at her rebuff from this clan's chief inflamed her.

"Call my escort! Tell them to ready themselves. We ride at once!" With a flourish she turned on her heel. Nose in the air she flounced down the hall to her chambers, leaving the guard staring with mouth agape in wonderment at her unexpected tirade.

~ * ~

Angus reined his horse to a walk, nearing the edge of the loch. The moon burst upon the black waters like a myriad of silver splinters, outlining the stark presence of the island castle not far from its banks. Angus, smiling expectantly into the darkness, stepped from his saddle and handed Duncan, his only companion, his reins. His guards would be disappointed that he sneaked out without them, but this was one night he felt he wanted to be alone.

Duncan had been his first in command, since Angus became Laird, and knew everything about him. The two had been close friends since a score of years ago when Duncan had saved the life of young Angus from a wounded stag that had charged him. That same year Angus had returned the favor when he had rescued Duncan from roving thieves with his excellent marksmanship with bow and yard-arrow. From that day to present they had been together. Duncan willingly became the Laird's closest guard and rode unhesitatingly into battle beside him, knowing it was his duty to protect his Laird's back. He alone would be his company this eve.

"I will return within the hour. If I have not appeared on shore by that time, carry word to Glencairn."

"But Angus. Please reconsider this foolishness. 'Tis suicide to walk into Lochindorb at this hour, and wearing your black and red tartan is like announcing your coming," he pleaded hopelessly.

"Fear not, Duncan. 'Twill take more than a bloody Comyn to hinder me. Just the thought of another fortnight without a glimpse of the lass makes this all worthwhile." Angus patted his guard's shoulder, and without another word, approached the shore of the loch. Hidden beneath some overhanging ferns was a coble, laid safely concealed a few days ago by one of his clansmen. He climbed into the short, flat-bottomed boat and began silently rowing himself in the direction of the isle, careful to keep a low profile lest one of the lookouts be alerted to his dark form moving toward the castle walls. The closer he rowed the greater his spirits soared, anticipating how he would find her. Suppressing a chuckle, he shook his head. *If The Bruce could see this, he would never let me hear the end of it.* He shifted his oars, and let the small boat glide the last few feet on its own momentum till it nudged the shore, its bow resting easily against the soft sand.

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Duncan cursed under his breath at the stubbornly retreating back of his Laird. He was five years older than his chief, and though not as strong in battle as Angus, he was sinew tough and ready to perform any command of his Laird. But to attempt this folly for a mere lass, no matter how beautiful. His chief must be mad! And a Comyn! Why couldn't his Laird be happy with the number of other lasses plying their talents, trying to win his attention? Why even the English lass, Mistress Seton, was better than this. At least she came to Glencairn to see the Laird and they weren't out traipsing over the cold moors in the dead of night for the mere sight of the lass. Bah! He kicked a pebble into the loch and strode over beneath the shelter of the giant firs, wrapping his tartan around his shoulders for warmth, to await his return. A slow smile curved his lips in the darkness. But, the lass in yonder castle was like no other. She was by far the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and the way Angus was so obsessed with her truly pleased him. It was time the Laird thought of his future and stopped his rakish ways.

~ * ~

With sure, quick steps Angus covered the narrow strip of ground separating the water's edge and the castle. He felt his way in the dark and crept along the outer wall till his hands found a notch in the weathered stone near a little used castle gate. Carefully he counted four widths of his hand across, then slid it straight up a few inches above his head. His fingers disappeared into a small crevice, invisible from the ground, and felt for the cold touch of metal. With the key safely within his grasp he unlocked the gate, pocketing the key for his return. Patting it reassuringly he grinned, Duncan had done his groundwork well.

Angus entered the postern door of the castle with great stealth and waited for any sound from within the hall. Hearing nothing but the sound of his own steady breathing, he silently opened the door leading to the back way to the upper chambers. He stole down the hallway with the easy grace of a practiced thief. The narrow stone steps, worn smooth by many years of service, afforded him soundless footfalls and he gained the second level without mishap.

It was not difficult to find the room he wanted. From what he had learned in listening to the de Keith's, Candelinn and her brother were not held in great favor with their cousin and he had only to search a couple of the smaller chambers at the back of the castle before stepping into Candelinn's room. Noiselessly the well-oiled leather hinges swung closed and he stood, his hand still resting on the door latch. He looked about the room, taking in its simple furnishings, committing to memory her accumulation of things, bringing to light another facet of her being.

A small candle burned low on the table beside the bed, its flickering flame casting a golden glow on the clear complexion of her face. Angus walked toward her with the silence of a cat, having left his spurs at Glencairn. When he reached her side he stared at her for endless moments.

Her long lashes cast feathery shadows on her cheeks and her hair fanned seductively over her pillow. His glance moved down her entire length, her womanly form revealed beneath the heavy woolen blankets. He looked back to her beautiful face, and saw one slender hand curled beneath her cheek in slumber. This small gesture made her appear such a young lass. A tender bairn in the world of lewd men.

Without jarring the bed, he sat down, lightly resting his massive frame on its edge. A sigh escaped Candelinn's lips as she changed positions, turning to face him. The covers slid from her shoulders, exposing the cleavage between her well-formed breasts. She stretched out with sleepy grace reaching for something unknown, her fingers brushing against his leg before settling contentedly on the bed.

Angus released a ragged breath as he unclenched his fist, rigid in his lap, fighting the urge to pull her into his arms. He reached beneath his leather jack and took something from within it. The light caught and reflected off its shiny surface as he placed it next to her face on the pillow. He bent down and with his

hand against her cheek, gently placed a warm tender kiss upon her lips. Still she slept, nestling against his palm as he caressed her silky skin, causing a smile to crease the corners of her mouth.

Angus stood, making sure once more not to rouse her from her deep sleep. His loins were on fire for her. He knew if she were to suddenly awake she would scream the walls down at finding a man in her chambers, but God how he wanted to wake her. He knew if he kissed her again and she responded with any show of ardor, he would ravish her completely, taking her for his own. He wanted to kiss her again. A real kiss that would arouse her passion to meet his own. He took a ragged breath as he drank the vision of her in before noiselessly crossing the floor to the chamber door. He looked back over his shoulder at her feminine sleeping form for a final glance.

"'Tis only a fortnight, my bonny lass," he whispered, before opening the door and disappearing into the darkened passageway.

Candelinn sighed contentedly. Her eyelids fluttered and opened, the remnants of the most pleasant dream drifting beyond her mind's reach. Gray shadows danced upon the wall evading the dark corners of her room. She looked about seeing the candle still burning beside her bed, its flame sputtering at wick's end, threatening to go out. She was alone. It was just a dream. Yet the fragrance of fresh moorland air was still in her nostrils and she could swear that she had just been kissed, her lips tingled so.

She leaned over, blowing out the remaining stub of candle. Lying back on the bed she closed her eyes trying to recapture the feelings that had run through her body moments earlier. But the phantom of her dreams eluded her and before long she dozed off, sleeping the rest of the night away in peaceful bliss.

A single ray of sunlight found its way between the layers of skins covering the window, spreading its golden warmth across her face, awakening Candelinn to a new day. Drowsily she stretched and opened her eyes only inches away from a small object resting upon her pillow. Hastily she sat up and grasped it in her fingers. A small golden brooch of delicate filigree framed a porcelain oval, bearing the MacBaron crest.

She threw the blankets aside and crept barefoot across the cold stone floor to the window. There she held the brooch in the light of morn for a closer examination and discovered a ruby of the truest color embedded in the top and bottom of the gold filigree. The design, engraved deeply across its surface, was the thistle of Scotland. She held it preciously in one hand while her free hand unconsciously touched her lips as she recalled her dream the night before.

Her lips tingled. Then she smiled. The scoundrel had entered her bedchambers like a reiver in the night and stolen a kiss! Her brow wrinkled with a frown as her indignation started to rise.

"How dare he!" She declared out loud, grabbing her robe on her way to give the alarm that intruders might be inside the castle walls. Her hand reached for the handle but she was unable to open the door as her fingers froze against the latch in response to her female vanity. *Was it so harmful, this thing he had done? After all, how many maidens could claim to have been so favored with such a gift delivered in such a daring manner?*

She released her hold on the handle, turning back into the room to pace dreamily about, her footsteps marking a path at the side of her bed as she walked back and forth across the small space. "What arrogance! The audacity of the man! Who does he think he is to kiss me while I sleep? Does the MacBaron have no sense?" Her anger was brushed aside, replaced by a new concern. *What of the danger he had placed himself in to attempt such a feat? The castle is well guarded, what if he had been caught? The crazy gomeril! Had he no fear?*

She flung the brooch upon the bed and flounced to the window in disdain to stare at the hills. Slowly her Scot's temper cooled and she smirked knowingly at the picture in her mind's eye of the great MacBaron skulking about the castle looking for her room, before making a clean escape.

She retrieved her brooch from the coverlet and held it gently to her breast. *He was either crazy or ungodly brave! What a courageous man!* Her face alight with happiness, she dressed quickly. She pinned the brooch securely to her shift, lest someone in the castle see it. With a last look at the highland hills where even now the black rogue MacBaron could be riding, she went downstairs. Her skirts swished with a newfound lightness in her step, to join the rest of the household already busy preparing for the day.

Early afternoon, Candelinn was sewing in front of the fireplace in the main hall when her cousin's voice interrupted her.

"Candelinn, look who has come to see us."

Candelinn raised her head from her deep scrutiny of her embroidery to see Sir John with Simon de Keith in tow. Surprised, she set her stitchery aside and stood up.

"He was on his way to the Lowlands and thought he would stop and say hello," her cousin said in a condescending tone of voice. "Aren't you happy to see him?"

She was speechless. *What was Simon up to?* Surely he had not come to see her. Did he think because she had been friendly to him at Helena's that she was interested in him? She had not spoken to him the last time he had been here scheming with her cousin.

Simon crossed the room and bowed low over her hand, his moist lips crushing against its surface. Candelinn's willpower was stretched to the limit as she fought to keep a somewhat frozen smile upon her face in front of her cousin, instead of grimacing in distaste.

"I will leave you two alone. Simon, I expect you to spend the night and tell me all about Sir Robert de Keith and your family, later this eve."

Simon slowly took his eyes away from Candelinn, facing her cousin. "'Twill be an honor, sire."

Sir John nodded, leaving the room, closing the door behind him. Candelinn had noticed a well-satisfied smile covering his face.

Candelinn could see why he was so well pleased with himself. A de Keith paying homage made him feel more secure in his battle for the crown. But why did he deliberately leave her alone with Simon de Keith? Maidens were never left unattended with men and certainly not with the door closed!

"Ah, Candelinn, my lass. It has been eons since I last feasted my eyes upon you. I could not go to Galloway without stopping to pay my respects." His words were filled with an air of falseness.

Candelinn returned to her seat and picked up her stitchery once more. "It has not been that long ago, Simon. Not so long ago at all," she said coolly. *Not long enough!*

Simon came to her side and knelt by the edge of her chair, undaunted. "A few days can seem a hundred years when it keeps me from your side."

"Nonsense, Simon! You didn't come all this way to see me and you know it. Why are you at Lochindorb?" She asked suddenly curious for his answer.

"Ah, lass, you do me wrong." But the look on his face told her he lied. He had come to see her cousin and meant to leisure away his hours with her at the same time.

"Would I pass within a few leagues of your door without paying a visit to the most beautiful lass in Scotland? You know I've greatly admired you for years."

Candelinn could sit still no longer. She lay her material carefully aside, paying particular attention to its correct folding, her needles and thread neatly tucked within it. She stood up and walked across the room, away from him. His nearness repulsed her thoroughly.

"Bosh, Simon. Don't be an eldritch! You and I both know that my feelings for you have never been more than disgust. If you think because I was nice to you at the de Keith's, I'm sorry. I was angry with someone and you just happened to be sitting next to me. Whatever your reasons for coming here, courting me was not one of them." Candelinn looked pointedly at him, riveting him to the spot where he stood, shirking her unyielding gaze. "Tell me Simon, why are you here?"

Simon stood up, his spindly legs showing weak and skinny beneath his kilt. "I must say your cousin was more pleased to see me than you appear to be," he hedged unsuccessfully, his lips forming a pout.

"And what news did you bring him that so thrilled him to see you, Simon?" She knew she would get the truth from him. He had brought information that her cousin would be anxious to hear.

Simon fluffed his ruffled cuffs and wiped an imaginary fleck of dust from the sleeve of his impeccable coat.

"You'll be happy to know," he started, a hint of arrogance once more in his voice. "That I have decided to help your cousin become the next king of Scotland. I brought him news that Robert the Bruce and James Douglas are planning to drive out the English at the border. If John were to stop them, Edward would look in favor upon the man that ended this rebellion in his northern territories."

"And what does the de Keith Laird say to all this?"

"Bah! My uncle is blind! He sees no farther than The MacBaron lets him. All he can talk of is Robert the Bruce. Sir Angus has him believing that The Bruce is the most natural choice for king. But they are both crazy! If The Bruce were king he would give away the taxes to the peasants and where would the rest of us get our funds? With your cousin on the throne they would be kept in their place, and..." he strolled closer till he stood directly in front of her, his eyes narrowing in satisfaction. "... I might add, that I feel I would be a great addition to the new king's following. And what's more important, Sir John agrees. Especially if I were to wed his beautiful cousin." He waited, watching her face, looking for the positive reaction he was sure would come after hearing he had bestowed such a compliment on her. But the reaction he received was totally unexpected.

"So you and Sir John agree! St. Columba, you are mad! Why, I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man in all of Britain. I'd join the Kirk first and never marry!" She flounced to the door and opened it before she glanced back to see how her tirade had been met by Simon de Keith. He stood in the middle of the floor, mouth agape, not believing what he had just heard. That she would actually refuse him. His face turned to one consumed in fury at her rude rejection, but quickly erased. He knew Sir John would

have the final word on who she would marry. He would have her in the end no matter what the wench desired.

"Someday I hope Sir Kenneth de Keith finds out what a sneaking traitor he has living in his own castle." With that she walked through the door and slammed it in his still angry face.

Once out of the confines of the room, Candelinn was in dire need of some fresh air. She went through the kitchen and out the postern door. She leaned her back against the rough wood, taking deep breaths of air. Her eyes rested on a small rowboat pulled up against the bank. Before she could change her mind she approached it and quickly shoved it off the bank. She picked up her skirts to keep them from getting wet and hopped into the moving boat. She sat down and picked up the oars and looked at the castle to see if anyone was following her. She breathed a sigh of relief when she noticed no one watching her exit. She put all her strength into her rowing, causing the wee boat to move swiftly across the lake's smooth surface.

When she arrived at the opposite shore, it was to find McDougal spreading dry rushes in the horse's stalls. He felt Candelinn's presence and looked up, grinning toothlessly.

"Ah, Mistress Candelinn. 'Tis nice to see ye're finally allowed t' leave the isle. Did ye want the mare, lass?"

"I hadn't planned on it, MacDougall, but perhaps that is exactly what I need." She looked down at the gown she wore, sorry for her hasty departure from the castle.

The elderly man noticed her frown. "Did ye want the sidesaddle this day, Mistress Candelinn?"

"Nae. My ride will be short and no one will see me. I should have thought to put on my breeks."

"Och, lass. Ye should no' wear the breeches of a lad. 'Tis no' fittin' on a maiden."

Candelinn smiled to herself as she watched the stoop-shouldered man saddle her mare, shaking his head in disapproval.

Once in the saddle she did not hesitate any longer. She kicked her steed, causing the mare to jump into action beneath her. Candelinn didn't slow down until there were many leagues between her and her cousin and Simon de Keith.

Her ride never varied, having a favorite run that she always used to clear any depression from her mind. She was deep in thought, unmindful of dark brown eyes that watched her speedy approach, hidden from view in a copse of trees.

Angus waited until she was close to his cover and kicked his stallion in the flanks in quick pursuit. The long legs of the large destrier stretched out for an easy overtaking of the lass racing across the moors.

Candelinn heard an echo of hooves behind her and glanced quickly over her shoulder. The huge black carrying the chief of the MacBaron's was gaining on her rapidly. She bent low over her horse's neck, but to no avail. The stallion drew alongside her with practiced ease.

Angus rode beside her, admiring once more the way she sat her mare. Her gown showed an abundant amount of leg riding astride, making him almost lose his concentration. The determination as Candelinn tried so hard to pull her horse ahead brought a smile to his face. He easily leaned over and took hold of

her reins, slowing their horses until both animals stood still, snorting and covered with foam.

Cadelinn looked up into his face, her anger at his overtaking her so easily mirrored in her eyes. "Let go my reins!"

"I've missed you too, lass" he completely ignored her sarcasm. "It's been awhile since I've seen you exercise your mare. Maybe that is why I caught up with you so easily," he teased.

He was enjoying her discomfort, she decided. His nearness was making her rattled and he sat there as if he had not a care in the world. How did he know she had not been out of the castle? "What are you doing on Comyn lands? Do you want to die so young then? Or is the mighty MacBaron immune to danger?" She watched his dark brown eyes glide over her face as if he were touching every place his eyes roamed. She thought of him bravely coming into her chambers in the dead of night. "Only a dim-witted fool would enter the holding of an enemy for a flight of fancy!"

"Ah, so you found the brooch." His eyes dropped to the front of her gown, knowing full well that she could never wear it around her kinsmen.

"I would not be caught dead wearing the MacBaron crest!" Misunderstanding his gaze, her hand moved to the material under her gown where the brooch lay resting near her heart. She would not give him the satisfaction of letting him know how beautiful she thought the gift.

"One day, my bonny lass, you will try my patience too far and you will suffer the consequences." He bent closer, his face only inches from her own. "Would you like me to tell you the kind of punishment I shall enforce?"

"What kind?" She wanted to take back the words the minute they were spoken. His sweet breath had fanned her face and the heat inside her grew in intensity. He was making her so nervous she knew not what she was saying.

He looked down at the snapping green eyes. She was so lovely, he could barely breathe. He wanted to yank her off her horse and carry her to the nearest wood. Instead he grasped her head behind her neck and covered her mouth with his. He gave her the kiss he had so wanted to the previous night. He forced her lips open and his tongue entered her mouth to take total possession. Once he started he couldn't stop. Her mouth was so soft and sweet. The kiss lasted a long time as he moved his head back and forth fanning the hot fire he sent into her.

Cadelinn yearned to get closer to him, bending far over her mount to wrap her arms around his neck to keep him as near as possible. She almost fell from her horse when he finally released her. She had to grasp the pommel of her saddle to stay seated. Good Lord, if this was his idea of punishment she did not want to imagine how he would make love. Her breathing was rapid and the rise and fall of her chest was very telling at how much he had shaken her.

His hand rested on her exposed thigh, his thumb moving back and forth on her heated flesh. St. Columba! Whatever was the matter with her. She slapped his hand away and leaned back in her saddle to escape his nearness. She knew he could have taken her and she would have done nothing to fight him. She had returned his kiss with total abandon and was shocked that even now she wished he were kissing her again. She had to distance herself away from him as fast as possible. She wrenched her reins out of his hand and kicked the mare hard. She pulled away from him, not slowing her pace and turned in the direction of Lochindorb.

Angus watched her, holding his stallion in check, not trying to follow her. He smiled at her retreat and did not turn his horse around till the red-haired beauty had completely disappeared from view. He thought he had wanted her before, but now he burned for her. His body was on fire to feel her beneath him, her passions fully aroused. God, how would he survive, until he could see her again? He was in dire need of a drink and a cold swim in the sea near his home. He turned his mount and headed north.

~ * ~

Later that day, Candelinn descended the stairs for the evening meal. She had kept out of Simon's way and hated the thought of seeing him again. She pushed all thoughts of Angus out of her thoughts until tonight when she could relive his kiss in the privacy of her chambers. She had to keep a clear head around her cousin and Simon. They were plotting something and the thought worried her.

Luckily Fergus was beside her throughout the evening meal and she pointedly ignored Simon's presence directly across the table from her. He was a traitor to the Keith's and she despised him. He could find another way to get a foothold with the future king, than through her. She would have no part of him. She felt his eyes rest on her many times during the meal and she ignored him totally. She knew this did not go unnoticed by her cousin and she would probably have to answer to him for her deliberate rudeness to his guest, but she cared not.

She was happy to hear Sir John remind Simon about the promised discussion so she could slip away from their company. But when she passed the last corner on her way to her room a dark form stepped out in front of her, pulling her roughly against him.

"I would talk with you, Candelinn. We must settle this."

"We have nothing to say to each other, Simon." Outwardly she appeared calm, but all the while underneath she quaked with revulsion. "Remove your hands from me this instant!" She spat heatedly.

Instead of heeding her wish, he crushed her mouth with his. His wet lips sliding over hers to kiss her eyes, her cheeks and to rest passionately on her neck. She shoved at him with all her might. "Stop this at once, Simon, before I call the guards!"

"You will not call the guards," he leered. "Sir John will not do a thing to me. He wants this match as much as I do, and you will have little to say in the matter."

She jerked free from his hold and slapped him with all the strength she could muster forth. The sound echoed through the empty corridor and Simon jumped back in surprise, a reddened handprint appearing on his cheek.

At that moment Fergus appeared around the corner of the stair. "Oh there you are. I've been searching for you." He wondered what Simon was doing in the darkened corridor with his sister. And when he glanced at her face he could see he must have been up to no good. Fire spit from her eyes and hatred lingered there, too. Then he glanced to Simon and the red handprint was still quite visible for all to see. "What's going on here?" He felt the urge to kill.

Candelinn finally turned his way. "Nothing, Fergus. Will you walk me to my room?"

"Sure, lass," he offered her his arm. He wanted to get to the bottom of this.

"We are not done with this, Candelinn." Simon said to their retreating backs.

"Aye, we are," was her reply. After she heard his boots hitting the stairs as he went back down to the hall, she let her breath out with a sigh of relief. Her legs were shaking and her fingers trembled as she reached up and felt the brooch under the cover of her gown. She wished it could give her some of the bravery and strength of the man that gave it to her.

At her bedroom door her brother asked. "What was going on down there? You still look white as a sheet. If he did anything to you, I will kill him."

"Nothing happened, Fergus. And I don't want you to kill anyone. Simon de Keith is not worth your time. All is well. Really."

Five

Candelinn spent all her spare time embroidering on a long bolt of material with feigned patience. She had long since finished the gown she would take with her to the wedding and spent her time peacefully sewing so as not to alert her cousin to her plan. When the day of escape arrived, she made ready to steal away.

She thought nightfall would never come so her chambermaids would leave her.

"Are you sure you don't want me to put your material away, Mistress Candelinn?" Wilhelmina asked her from her doorway. "Twould be a shame to soil it after all your painstaking work."

"No, Willy. I plan on working on it some more this eve. But away with you and get a good night's rest. I will see you on the morrow."

Wilhelmina didn't like the way her mistress had been acting the last few days, but it was none of her concern. Finally she nodded and went through the door.

"At last!" Candelinn leaped to her feet and went to lock the door. She ran to her wardrobe. She pulled out the gown for the wedding and lay it on the bed. She picked up her satin shoes and lay them atop it, then busied herself by gathering appropriate jewelry, her new filigree girdle and long matching cape. She rolled them together as neatly as possible to lessen the wrinkles and slipped them into her leather case where she normally kept her embroidery thread. Candelinn then pulled the man's jerkin and breeks out of the chest at the foot of the bed and hastily donned them. In these clothes she could ride astride instead of sidesaddle. After grabbing her tartan and slipping on the leather boots she was ready. She removed the filigree brooch from her discarded shift and started to tuck it into the leather case for safekeeping, but hesitated before letting it go. She had worn it pinned next to her skin for the last fortnight and she hated to relinquish it from her person. She stared down at the shiny gold lying warm in her palm, her fingers opening and closing over its smooth surface. She shrugged.

"The devil take it! For luck!" She smiled, pinning the brooch boldly to the front of her tartan.

Candelinn went to the window and pulled back its covering, hooking it securely out of the way. Her heart beat with excitement as her eyes tried to penetrate the darkness to see if Fergus was at the foot of

the wall waiting for her as planned. But she could see nothing. There was a cold wind blowing over the loch and clouds hid all sign of the moon and stars. It was going to be cold traveling this night and she hoped the mists would not settle along the ground so they could see to find their way.

She grabbed up the material she had been working on these endless day past and tied it to the bedstead. Every few feet she looped the fabric, tying it into a knot. Hours of grueling work were ruined, though not once causing her an instant's regret. This was worth it.

Cadelinn hurried to the window, throwing the long piece of cloth out over the rough-hewn sill, trailing it along the wall. She leaned out as far as she dared and still could not tell if it reached the ground, its end stretching beyond the meager light of the room. She raised her eyes in prayer and mumbled into the night.

"St. Columba, if ever you were inclined to help a wayward Scottish lass, I pray it is now."

She picked up her leather case and tied it to her back. She quickly climbed through the narrow opening in the wall, before faintheartedness could overtake her.

The cold wind gusted against her as she swung freely from her improvised rope. Her teeth chattered from the icy currents penetrating her clothing, the chill driving into her bones. She worked her way from knot to knot slowly down the castle wall. Her arms ached from holding her weight plus her back pack and more than once she thought her hands would give way to let her crash to the rocks below her. Her tartan whipped at her legs entangling itself about her, making her descent nearly impossible. But her stubborn determination gave her the needed strength to hang on until finally she felt the last knot in her hands. Cadelinn stretched her full length, reaching for the solid feel of ground below her. Still her feet did not touch ground and she dangled precariously in the darkness. Steadying herself against the wall, she squinted downward but could see nothing except blackness beneath her.

"Oh, dear God! I can't hang on much longer. Fergus, where are you?" She whispered against the stone surface inches away from her face.

Her mind was exhausted trying to find a solution. Cadelinn was about to give up and let go when strong hands encircled her waist and gently lowered her to the ground.

"Fergus, thank God, you're here. But what took you so long?" His hands were still on her waist and she turned in the darkness to thank him with a hug, when she realized her hands still resting on his shoulders were much higher than they would have been for Fergus's height. She tried to step back in fear but the wall stopped her retreat. She covered her mouth with the back of her hand to stifle a scream, when a faintly familiar mocking voice came out of the darkness.

"Easy, lass." It was The MacBaron himself.

"Angus! But what...?" In her fright she didn't realize that she had called him by his given name, a right reserved for family and very close friends.

"I told you I would escort you to the wedding. But I never knew to what extent you would go to see me again. I am deeply honored," he teased.

As she got over her surprise, she gathered her wits and shoved at his chest in anger. Of course, it was like moving a stone wall and it didn't budge him. "I told you I didn't need your escort! What have you done with my brother?" she demanded.

"Quiet, lass. Do you want to bring the whole Comyn clan down upon our heads? Your brother is quite safe and holding the boat in readiness. He at least, seems more pleased at my appearance than his ungrateful sister. Let's away." He grabbed her hand and began taking long strides toward the edge of the isle, where Fergus waited. Candelinn could barely keep up with his long legs and stumbled, and almost fell. Before she hit the ground, she felt herself lifted like a wee bairn and strong arms were carrying her. She instinctively placed her arms around his neck to hold tight as he traipsed into the night.

"The whole Comyn clan, you say." She whispered to him. "What care you for the whole Comyn clan? You didn't seem to fear them when you stormed the castle and went sneaking about in the dead of night!"

Her breath, hot against his cheek, was almost more than he could stand. Finally holding her in his arms made him want to never let her go. She was where he wanted her.

"Och, but Candelinn, it was worth it for that one sweet kiss. No danger would have been too great." She was like a breath of fresh Highland air. No one had ever talked back to him the way she did. She truly was a spunky lass. "But the kiss you gave me the next day was much more to my liking. Aye, when you're awake you do know how to set me on fire, lass."

"You will not mention that to me."

"But it is foremost in my thoughts. And I like making you blush, though it is too dark for me to see at the moment."

"Hmmp!" was her only response. The man was too full of himself. Did he have no fear? Didn't he know what could have happened if he had been found not only in her chambers, but riding on Comyn land as well?

"Did you fear for me, lass?"

It was like he could read her mind. She should lie and tell him no, she didn't care what happened to him. But his strong arms holding her tight against his chest was doing strange things to her body and her mind was not working right. "Aye," she whispered.

He barely heard her answer, but it filled him with happiness all of the sudden.

"I'm glad you made it at last." Fergus voice brought her out of her trance. "I was nervous that the guards might detect us. Hurry, let's be off."

Candelinn found herself deposited soundly into the bow of the small rowboat.

"God's truth!" she spat quietly into the darkness at Angus. "If you don't quit battering and bruising me I'll be too crippled to attend the wedding. Do you have to be so unco' rough?"

A deep chuckle was the only reply as the small boat was pushed away from the shore and the two men quietly took their places and began to row.

"It's not funny," Candelinn couldn't resist saying.

"Yes, it is, lass."

With each powerful stroke of the MacBaron's oars the little boat made smooth lunging motions in rhythmic time as it moved swiftly away from the castle.

Cadelinn noticed that they weren't headed toward the side of the loch where the horses were stabled but rather to the opposite end. The landing closer to the MacBaron borders. Were they going to walk to the de Keith's?

The rain started falling and a mist rolled out over the water, saturating everything in its path, with the heavy drops of moisture. Cadelinn huddled down lower into the bottom of the boat, wrapping her tartan around herself, covering her head to keep as dry and warm as possible.

Soundlessly the two rowed the boat. The silence was unnerving. Especially now when they were so far away from the castle. The muted sound of the wrapped oars grinding on oarlocks and water swirling past the tiny prow was all she heard. With deliberate movements the oars were lifted from the water and returned noiselessly to cut another swath. Occasionally the even rhythm was broken by the soft splashing of a fish breaking the surface nearby in a continuing search for food.

Cadelinn broke from her reverie, speaking her first thought.

"Fergus, how the devil did you find, Sir Angus? Or was this something the two of you thought up together?" She was curious and unmindful of the other ears listening to her every word.

"Nae, Cadelinn. I went out as we had planned to secure a skiff for the crossing. As I neared the water's edge, Sir Angus stepped out of the darkness. I swear, he must be able to see in the dark the way he casually walked up and scared the life out of me." Fergus chuckled, glancing at the back of Sir Angus. "And all he had to say for himself was, 'Tis time you showed up, lad. Where's the lass?"

It must be a family trait, Angus thought. This way of speaking whatever was on their mind.

"Do you think just because you're the great MacBaron chief, that gives you the right to go wherever and whenever you please?" She asked The MacBaron.

"Och, temper, love," Angus answered. "Earlier you seemed concerned for my welfare." Though Cadelinn could not see his smile she knew it was there from the tone of his voice. "Surely you were thankful when I fetched you down from that castle wall. Mayhap I should have shown you the back way out of the castle from your chambers. Your mood would not now be so foul if you hadn't risked your neck in your escape. Why you insisted on taking the hard way, when a much easier exit was so close at hand, I'll never understand. But then, what man ever understood the ways of women? Was I mistaken or were you about to throw your arms around me for coming to your rescue?"

"That was when I thought you were my brother!" She spoke in a low voice.

"Ah, perhaps I should have let you dangle a little longer," he grinned at her in the darkness.

At last they reached the shore. Cadelinn stood up, eager to be away from his taunting jibes and uncouth manner. She was caught off guard when the two men moved over the side to bring it along the rocky shore. The narrow vessel tipped, throwing her straight into arms that held her vise-like against an iron chest.

"I knew you'd fall into my arms sooner or later, lass. 'Tis happy I am I didn't have long to wait." His warm breath caressed her cold cheek sending shivers down her spine. For once in her life she was

speechless. Her heartbeats quickened beneath her jerkin. She opened her mouth to protest.

Angus bent his head and covered her open mouth with his. It was a soul-shattering kiss that warmed her from her toes to the top of her head. His kiss was demanding and pressed hard against her lips. Her open mouth allowed his tongue to twine with hers and she heard a low groan come from deep in her own throat. Her hands on his nape clasped him tighter as she returned his passion with fervor. She started moving her tongue with his, following his advances. When she thought she was going to faint from the extreme sensation it brought her, he lifted his mouth from hers. He had stopped walking, and his breathing was ragged. Candelinn nestled against his neck. She prayed he would not say anything. A humorous jest from his mouth at this time would have been her undoing. He let her feet slide to the ground, still holding her in his embrace.

The sound of horses' harnesses and bridle bits rattling nearby brought her back to reality. In the fog shrouded darkness, there appeared to be at least a hundred riders, all huge men wearing surcoats of chain mail, draped with the MacBaron tartan. They looked ready for war. There was no doubt in her mind, that if their chief had become a prisoner of the Comyn's there would have been just that.

Duncan came forward, leading two large stallions. Fergus quickly claimed the bay while Angus clasped Candelinn's hand, leading her to the huge black. As Duncan released the reins into his chief's hand, Duncan spoke to her.

"'Tis happy it is to see you safe, lass."

She wouldn't exactly call being with The MacBaron safe, but she replied with kindness. "Thank you, Duncan."

Before she could protest, Angus swung her into the saddle and lithely jumped on behind her. His steel arm encircled her waist, pulling her tight against his chest. He kicked his destrier into a gallop and his men fell in behind him. The wind blew Candelinn's hair into his face and she hastily gathered the wayward tresses in her hands and pulled it in front of her to cover the ends with her tartan.

Her thoughts rushed in upon her, demanding answers she couldn't give. Was he sincerely taking her to the wedding or was he carrying her off to his castle like a common reiver? She glanced questioningly at Fergus, who seemed to be having the time of his life, grinning at one of the MacBaron warriors and kicking his mount to stay up with him.

When they had crossed the boundary into their own lands, the MacBarons stopped long enough to light several torches. The clan gradually dispersed going their own way, the torches announcing their homecoming, until only a score or so of the huge clansmen was still following their chief.

Taking notice that they were indeed headed in the direction of Helena's home, Candelinn allowed herself to relax against the man seated behind her. She found his warmth comforting and his strong arms around her making her feel safe and protected.

Sir Angus slowed the pace and turned aside at a small burn. He reined in his horse and dismounted. He turned and reached up to grasp Candelinn's waist and lifted her easily from the saddle. He held her in a semi-embrace while her legs regained the strength to stand on their own. He released his hold and stepped away. The rain having stopped, she removed her soaked tartan and removed her backpack holding the clothes she would wear to the wedding and set it aside.

Fergus approached his sister and handed her a skin bag filled with *usquebaugh* to warm her wet, tired

body. Not asking what it contained, and thinking it water, she took a large gulp and gasped as the fire from the *usquebaugh* burned its way down her throat.

Fergus realized his error and overcompensated for his failure to warn her of the flask's contents, started pounding her on the back as she coughed, gasping for air. Unable to speak, she felt she was being flogged.

"Enough!" the voice commanded, causing Fergus to freeze, his hand poised menacingly above ready to strike again.

While Candelinn was composing herself, drawing air into her lungs she heard the highlanders around her laugh.

"I dunno' think the mistress is as tough as ye thought, m'Laird," one jibbed Sir Angus. "A wee swallow of Scots ale fairly chokes the lass."

Angus looked at her and their eyes met across the backs of the horses. "'Tis not her talent of drinking *usquebaugh* that I am interested in. She suits me very well the way she is."

Embarrassed, she turned to pick up her leather bag, only to find it already loaded onto one of the clansmen's horse. She ignored the taunting remarks of the clan and picked up her wet tartan and draped it over her shoulders, taking great pains to see that the folds of the plaid were just right.

Upon hearing the men once again mounting their steeds, Candelinn turned abruptly, her finely shaped jaw set in determination and walked straight into a solid wall of chain mail and muscle. She stood firm, raising her chin to glare at Angus, ready to do battle with his mocking words, only to stop dead. She realized his gaze was not on her face but was fixed upon the brooch, reflecting in the torchlight, still pinned between her breasts. Self-consciously she covered it with her hand and tried to step away, but the way was barred.

He brushed her hand away from the brooch and unpinned it, his hands touching her neck sent her pulses racing. He removed her rain-soaked tartan, letting it fall to the ground. She watched his face as he concentrated on wrapping a MacBaron plaid around her shoulders, securing the brooch once again at the center of her breasts.

It felt warm and dry compared to her own, the heavy woolen folds enclosing her comfortably. But it still rankled that he treated her with such familiarity.

"I'll wear my own, thank you." She tried to take it off, but to no avail as his hands were still holding it tight around her, refastening the brooch.

"I think not, lass. You will wear my plaid on MacBaron lands." His voice evoked no argument.

She glanced at her tartan thrown in the wet mud and decided she would have to give in to him, this once, or show a childishness she was not feeling.

He followed her to the waiting horse and lifted her onto the saddle, his strong hands branding her hips with his possessive hold, through the breeks and tartan. She stared down at the pommel of the saddle while the chief climbed up nimbly behind her.

No words were exchanged between Candelinn and Angus as they continued on in a northerly direction.

She tried to keep her back straight in front of him but he pulled her back against him as she had been earlier. She finally relaxed in the shelter of his arms. He felt warm and comfortable against the cold. She stared at his gauntleted fists held in front of her as they lightly touched the reins, leading the mighty stallion through the boulder strewn moors and braes. Every once in a while his warm breath would caress the top of her head or her cheek and cause her heart to quicken. Between her mind running rampant and her body's traitorous feelings for the man behind her, she thought they would never reach their destination. But as the time passed and she leaned her head back against his shoulder, her eyes closed and she drifted off to sleep.

Angus looked down at her and moved her legs to one side of the saddle so she could rest easier. Her head rested against his chest and her face was open to his gaze. It was hard to control himself from kissing her. She looked so seductive lying there in his arms. She had no idea what she did to him. His loins tightened with want of her. He knew he would have her. She would belong to him in all ways. He smiled at the thought of it and squeezed her a little closer.

The sun was slowly rising over the bracken and the clouds had all but disappeared as they came in sight of the Keith castle. Candelinn sighed and opened her eyes to look around her. She saw the familiar outline against the morning sky, and knew they had finally made it. She looked up at Angus smiling down at her and realized she was reclining across his thighs. Embarrassed, she sat up straight and moved one leg back across the saddle.

Now that the time had come to dismount she was almost reluctant to leave the warmth and comfort of his arms. Angus dismounted and reached for her. His hands spanned her waist and lifted her to stand beside him on the cobblestone courtyard.

"I made good on my promise. You arrived safely to the wedding." His voice was kind and swept over her like a gentle caress.

"Aye, Angus, thank you." She stepped away and, ignoring the cramped muscles in her legs, went to retrieve her bundle from the other clansman. She clutched her leather bag and ran up the stairs to where her dearest friend, Helena, the bride to be, embraced her. She didn't notice the dancing gleam in Helena's eyes at the sight of the MacBaron plaid draped over her shoulder.

Angus and his clan however, watched her climb the stairs with a gentle swing of her hips. They noticed and all agreed silently, the lass looked good in their colors.

The time for the wedding had almost come. Helena stood in front of the mirror examining the image before her in her long, flowing wedding gown. The antique lace that had belonged to her mother surrounded her slender neck and wrists, contrasting beautifully with the pale yellow of the satin, which extended to just above dainty slippers. Around her arm she wore a small band of the MacBaron plaid in honor of her husband-to-be.

Her face glowed above the lace with radiance. Her wedding day had come. She was so happy this was a love match and not an arranged marriage as was usual for a young woman of her station. She would belong to her husband Richard forever after this day.

Caught up in her thoughts she stood in front of the mirror, not seeing her reflection as she remembered their first meeting. She had been out riding one sunny afternoon, and her horse had suddenly gone lame. Richard had found her leading the limping mount slowly back to the castle. She had never been away from the castle without an escort, but this day found her father's gillie busy and she was in too much of a hurry to wait for someone else. This time, impatience had paid off. He was so handsome and gallant that

almost at once, she came under his spell. He had brought her back to her home across his knees, leading her mare behind them. It had been love at first sight and he was never out of her thoughts after that fateful day.

They met often after that and her father, who had been thankful for his daughter's safe return, had made him more than welcome at the castle. Now at last she would be his bride.

"Helena," Candelinn interrupted her thoughts as she came into the room. "You are the most beautiful bride in the world. I'll bet the women in the courts of London could never compare to you."

Helena seized her friend's hands in a tight clasp and exclaimed in feigned formality. "Thank you, Mistress Comyn." She bowed low, giggling excitedly. "I feel truly beautiful this day. I am so lucky, Candelinn. I pray someday I will be with you at your wedding and you shall be as happy as I am at this moment. The only sadness that enters my thoughts is that I will be living farther away from you. Promise you will still come to see me as often as possible. And if Sir John continues to be such a beast, why, you could come and live with me. Think of it, Candelinn! I know Richard would not mind. The Castle Strathness will be our home and it is said to be very large. Since Sir Angus gave it to Richard for a wedding present, he would have no say in the matter."

"Helena, don't talk such nonsense. I can't live with you, but I do promise to come to visit at every opportunity. Although, if I am banished from Lochindorb, I may have to think again on your offer," she teased.

She knew full well that after she returned to Lochindorb, she would not be able to leave again. There was no telling what the punishment would be this time. He may turn her away from his door completely and wash his hands of her. It was nothing less than she deserved. As long as he did not force her into marriage with Simon. She would rather die! Candelinn removed these sobering thoughts from her mind and forced a smile.

"It is time we appeared downstairs. I think I heard the bishop arriving as I came down the hall to your room."

The two girls slowly descended the stone steps arm in arm. Candelinn did not realize the vision she presented to the onlookers gathered below in the great hall. One man in particular whose physique and appearance stood out from the others, felt his breath catch in his throat at the sight of the copper-haired beauty.

In all his adult years, many a lass had thrown themselves at his feet; but this one who held herself away, resisting him, was the most desirable, and the only woman he'd wanted this badly.

Her red-gold hair was pulled away from her face, showing a slender neck of satin textured skin, emerging from the heart shaped neckline of her gown. It was a heavily embroidered, pale blue velvet the color of a clear Scottish sky. He realized this was the first time he had seen her dressed so formally. The effect was startling. She was magnificent! A little too much of her breast showed over the top of the gown for his comfort and he would have liked it to have had a higher collar, but she was indeed the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

This is the lass that men will fight battles for, he thought to himself. And I shall be at their head as hypnotized as the lot of them. This is the woman that will be mine. No other man will ever touch her.

When the two girls reached the bottom step, Helena's father stepped forward offering Helena his arm. It would be the last time that he would have the right over her husband. He would be the one to escort her to the kirk where the bishop was waiting with Richard to perform the ceremony.

Sir Angus, still leaning nonchalantly against one of the rough-hewn walls, saw Simon de Keith approaching Candelinn. Swiftly he moved away from the wall and took long strides to reach her before her would-be-suitor. One of the MacBaron clansmen stared openly at her with mouth agape and lust in his eyes. He felt an elbow jab forcefully into his side and let a whoosh of breath escape his lips, as his chief passed by him. Suddenly the crowd separated and Angus was there, bowing low and offering her his arm. A gallant smile covered his countenance.

Candelinn felt happiness flow through her that it was he who came to get her. She thought it would surely be her brother who would escort her to the chapel, but she did not see him in the throng of people. Simon however she did see, backing stiffly away before the MacBaron's warning frown. She saw the look of intense hatred on Simon's face, before he lost himself in the crowd.

She placed her nervous fingers upon his muscular arm and took a deep breath for courage, descending the last step. She felt small and lost so close to his massive build towering over her. Her heart pounded with his nearness while he stood directly in front of her, forcing her to brush against his chest as she stepped down. She wondered if he could feel her fingers shaking against his arm. His touch was possessive as he escorted her toward the chapel. But when she managed to look up at him, he was smiling gently down at her.

"Sir Angus, could I have a private minute with you after the wedding?" She had to warn him about Simon. The hatred she had seen earlier had frightened her.

"Aye, Candelinn. You could have a private word with me any time you want. Is it important, you look worried?"

"Yes, it's very important. Your life could depend on it." She whispered against his arm.

He looked into her eyes wondering what could have caused her such great concern. And she was concerned for his life. She truly cared for him. He would find out as soon as the wedding was over and put her mind at ease, no matter what it was.

They crossed the courtyard to the chapel. Men from both clans were lined up on each side of the walkway forming a long colorful path for the wedding party to pass on their way to the kirk's door. The MacBaron's were on the right, the Keith's on the left. Richard was the first to reach the walkway, carrying his clan's banner proudly. He stepped aside as Sir Kenneth and Helena approached. Sir Keith carried his clan's banner in one hand and his other arm held the hand of his daughter. Angus and Candelinn were next in line and when they approached, Richard handed Angus the MacBaron pennant. Angus grasped the pole and stood aside. Sir Kenneth bowed smartly to Richard before relinquishing his daughter to her future husband. Bagpipes were heard coming from the kirk, playing a slow march for the wedding party's entrance.

It was a breathtaking sight to all when Sir Kenneth, Chief of all de Keith's started down the walkway, carrying his colors that reflected his dress. Five paces behind came the handsome young couple, the bride breathtakingly beautiful. A band around her arm was that of the MacBaron clan in honor of her husband. These two were followed by Angus, the chief of the MacBaron's carrying his colors in one hand with Candelinn on his arm, rivaling the beauty of the bride, with her copper hair pulled back from her face letting curls hang down the back of her neck. Her eyes sparkled in happiness for her best friend.

Many of the gathering had eyes only for the last two walking down the path. A majestic warrior, Laird to many, a strikingly handsome man, leading one of the most beautiful women in the Highlands on his arm. *What a striking couple*, their audience thought.

When Candelinn and Angus entered through the doors of the family chapel she forgot momentarily her anxiety as she grabbed his arm with both her hands.

"Oh look! She exclaimed excitedly. "How beautiful and festive."

The usually somber pews were decorated with fresh pine boughs held in place with large silver ribbons, which was the de Keith clan emblem. A large silver banner covered the stone wall with three gold stripes crossing it vertically below one red stripe across the banner's top. The de Keith shield.

Sconces along the walls were lit and the tall white tapers at the altar finished off the joyous atmosphere of this holy chamber. The bishop in his flowing robe faced the room. Smiling he nodded to the couple approaching him to give them reassurance.

Angus squeezed her hand before he left Candelinn by the side of Helena and bowed handsomely before stepping around to stand beside his brother, placing his standard into the floor sconce. The bridal party stood and waited until their respective clansmen filled the chapel.

The words of the prayer spoken by the bishop joining the two in wedlock were beautiful and moving. When Helena and Richard knelt for the final blessing, that of forming their bond of man and wife, Candelinn's eyes found those of Angus and for those few moments were frozen to the MacBaron chief.

Something incredible passed between them at that moment. It was as if they were being joined together for life instead of the two kneeling silently in front of the altar. Candelinn realized at that second that she loved the great chief of the MacBaron's. That she had somehow lost her heart to him. How it had happened didn't matter. But the fact remained, she was madly in love with him! Candelinn did not know how long she had been mesmerized in this newfound revelation until he suddenly flashed a bright contented smile, breaking the spell. Could he read her mind? She looked away just in time to see Richard and Helena stand and turn to face their friends and fellow clansmen as the new bride and groom. When Richard bent to give his new wife a kiss, the Highlanders that had gathered to witness the ceremony brought a roar of approval and well being forth. They proceeded slowly down the aisle, leading the way to the banqueting hall, the well-wishers reaching out and pounding Richard on the back in congratulations.

Candelinn found herself being jostled among the happy throng until suddenly she was free and standing a little behind the crowd, a strong arm encircling her tiny waist. Instinctively she moved a little nearer to him in the protective presence she felt at his side. She slowly glanced up and was not surprised to see the ever-present smile on The MacBaron's lips above a fine strong chin. His eyes followed the newlyweds as they disappeared through the door. He reached down and grasped her hand in his.

"Come." He moved from the chapel into a small room near its entrance. There was a table and chairs and he sat her down in one before going to the other side of the table and sat down himself. "Now. What did you want to talk to me about? I would know what is upsetting you."

She placed both arms on the tabletop and clasped her hands together. "It's Simon de Keith, my Laird. He's a traitor." She spit the words out before she could change her mind, knowing that now she was a traitor to the Comyn clan for doing so.

"Those are strong words, lass. Do you know what you say?" His voice had turned very serious. "Please explain."

He reached across the table and placed his hands on hers. She tried to pull them away but he kept them firmly in his grasp. His thumb started rubbing on the back of one and the caress calmed her down.

"He has promised my cousin to help put him on the throne of Scotland." She went on to inform him of Simon's visits with her Sir John and her eavesdropping outside the door. "They want you dead, Angus. Be very careful, they are evil men."

"I like it when you call me by name. I want you to always do so."

She raised her eyes to meet his. She saw no worry there at all. "Angus, this is serious. This is no time to be flippant."

"The fact that Sir John wants me dead is no great surprise. I've known that for some time. But for Simon to be so traitorous to the de Keith's and still appear here today is unforgivable. He will be taken care of. What has he to do with you? I've noticed his attention toward you?"

"Sir John wants me to marry him." She spoke the words with disgust.

He knew the answer but needed to hear her say it. "Are you agreeable to this match?"

"Surely you jest! He makes my skin crawl!"

He liked the conviction of her voice and squeezed her hands. "Do not fear, Candelinn. He will never have you. Don't concern yourself on that score." He felt her hands relax under his.

"Tell me you love me?"

Her head snapped up to stare into those dark brown eyes that made her melt. The man could read her mind. Now she was sure of it. "Aye, I love you." she spoke the words. "But I haven't a clue why! You're arrogant, bossy, way too courageous for your own good and you'll probably get yourself killed one day for being so careless!"

Angus threw back his head and laughed joyfully. "Candelinn, you do my heart good. First you say you love me, then you berate me for my faults. I knew you did, you know?"

"Knew what?" Though she knew what he was talking about.

"I knew you loved me. I knew it for sure during the wedding ceremony. Your face tells your every thought, did you know that?" He picked up her hand and kissed the palm. His tongue slid across the skin and she felt like hot coals had been dropped down inside of her. The room was suddenly too close and terribly hot. She jerked her hand back from his.

"And you're brazen, besides." She had to get the last word in for once.

Angus walked around the table, and helped her to stand. He took her hand and tucked it in his arm and walked out of the room, smiling at the world like a cat that had caught the mouse. He slowly led her from the kirk across the cobblestoned yard to the banqueting chambers inside the keep, where there was food and dancing and much celebration.

As they entered the room, Angus's gaze went over each of the guests. The face of Simon de Keith was not there among the crowd.

The pipers were warming up, the notes of the bagpipes skirling forth. Everything was merriment as Candelinn rushed to hug Helena and give Richard a small peck on a blushing cheek. It amused her that this was Angus's brother. She bet the MacBaron Laird had never blushed in his life.

"I'm so happy for you both. The wedding was beautiful! And I pray your life together will be as grand." She hugged Helena again, oblivious of the presence behind her waiting patiently for her to finish talking with the newlyweds before he offered his brother his own congratulations.

Angus watched her every movement as Candelinn turned first one way, then another, gesturing with every part of her body in her excitement to accent her conversation, missing nothing. Uninhibitedly feminine in her actions, Angus was reminded once again that a woman of many facets stood before him. It would take years to uncover everything about her and he was looking forward to the chore.

Helena's soft voice brought his attention back to the present.

"Thank you, Candelinn. Having you here has made everything perfect. Our life together will be bonny, never fear. I shall make it so." She peeked shyly at her groom. "May yours be as happy, when the time comes."

A deep voice murmured softly for Candelinn's ears alone, whispering over her shoulder.

"Aye, it will be."

She did not need to turn to know it was Angus. If only his words could come true. But things like that only happened in fairy tales. She knew Sir John would kill her before he let her marry The MacBaron, even if he asked.

Suddenly there was a shout from one of the pipers for Richard to take his bride and start the Highland fling. He offered his new wife his arm and led her onto the floor to begin the dance. After much cheering and applause other dancers joined them and Candelinn found herself swirling about the room in the arms of the MacBaron chief.

While they danced Angus looked at the small oval face with its large, sparkling green eyes. When the beat increased, her fiery hair worked loose, allowing silky tendrils to fall in wisps around her face. Her nose was lightly touched with freckles and sweetly curved lips smiled at him. When he twirled her round and round to the wailing sound of the pipes, she threw her head back in happy abandon and laughed aloud. How he wanted to kiss her!

When they approached the door that led to the battlements he moved their bodies in that direction. The way was open to let out the smoke from the room and allow fresh air to come in. His strong arms maneuvered her through before she knew what he was doing. He held her until they were in a dark corner against the stone wall. He pulled her into his arms and crushed her against his chest before she knew what was happening.

A warm hard mouth covered hers and she met it with a passion that surprised her. She wrapped her arms around him, holding him close. She opened her mouth, willing his tongue to enter and aggressively moved her own on his. The skirl of the pipes could still be heard and the sounds, along with the man in

her arms, sent her passions roaring through her small frame. He lifted her up and with one hand on the curve of her buttocks, pushed her against his arousal. The juncture of their legs met and she felt in him his driving need. In wild abandon she moved against him, her entire body out of control. He kissed her again and again, each time deeper and more probing. Cadelinn wanted more and more and hoped he would have the stamina to stop before it was too late because she knew she could not. If he wanted to take her here and now there was nothing she would do about it. Her body screamed for his possession. She groaned as his tongue played a dance with hers, moving in and out and wrapping itself around her own, burning with each touch.

Angus moved one hand down to cup her breast, round and full and straining against his palm. His thumb rubbed the material over its tip and felt it harden. She was writhing against him and he voiced a deep growl of satisfaction. He wanted to carry her away this instant, in the fashion of his ancestors before him, to a heather covered glen and make love to her with unleashed passion. To make her belong to him for all time. But... this was neither the time nor the place. She had no idea what she was doing to him. She didn't realize the danger she was in, giving herself so completely to his advances. She didn't realize how hard it was for a man to stop, once he had been worked up to this extreme. But he could wait. He wanted their first time to be in a bed and have her fully knowledgeable of what was taking place. It took most of his willpower to remove his mouth from her sweet lips. His eyes gazed down at the passion filled emerald stars shining up at him.

He took deep breaths of the cool air blowing in from the highland hills into his lungs, as he set her down on her feet and rested his chin on the top of her head.

Cadelinn was happy for his arms around her, or her legs would have buckled. It took awhile for her heart to stop beating so fiercely as she rested her cheek against his hard chest. Did admitting her love for him make her into a brazier? She should be ashamed but the awareness of him made it impossible. She had loved every second she had been in his arms. She closed her eyes. She wanted him to kiss her again.

"I thought we needed to cool down after the fling, my love. But instead my body is on fire for you. There is no cooling to be done with you in my arms." he kissed the top of her head.

"Aye," she smiled into the darkness. "It was most hot."

"You were the hot one and I am most pleased. I would have been disappointed had you not shown your fire matched mine. We are evenly met I think." He was enjoying their banter. He had expected her to be screaming into the night by now. He enjoyed this submissive behavior, knowing it would never last. But he loved it when she was a little spitfire, too. He loved her to distraction, he admitted to himself. It worried him that he was open to hurt and he felt vulnerable for the first time in his life.

"You make me lose control, my Laird."

"Angus, my name is Angus."

"Angus, then. We will not do this again. I would not want you to think me impure. And my body has a mind of its own when it comes to you, I'm afraid. You make me lose control."

Angus threw his head back and laughed. "Ah, Cadelinn. I know that you are pure. And we will do this again. So set your mind to it."

"Cadelinn, lass." Fergus interrupted them. "I've been looking all over for you."

Candelinn immediately stepped back away from Angus, feeling a little embarrassed that her brother had caught her in such a compromising position.

Fergus looked from one to the other wondering what he had interrupted. "I wanted to show these highlanders that a Comyn could swirl a fling or two and you were nowhere to be found."

Candelinn was thankful for the reprieve. "I'd love to, Fergus." She walked over to him and placed her arm through his. As they turned to back into the banqueting hall, Fergus once more looked over his shoulder at Angus still standing in the semi-darkness.

Fergus bent closely to his sister's ear. "What was going on out there? Do I need to defend your honor?"

"You would fight The MacBaron for me?" she smiled at how silly he would look against the giant Highlander.

"If I have to. Do I?" He sounded worried but sincere.

"Nae, Fergus. My honor is still intact. But it's nice to know you care so much."

After one quick dance, Candelinn told Fergus she was tired and was ready for bed. It was true--she felt suddenly exhausted but it was more from her battle of wits on the battlement than the excitement of the day.

"The bride and groom have not even retired yet, lass. You can not retire before they do!"

"But, I have to get up early. I want to leave an hour before dawn tomorrow morning. Will you be ready?" She wished she had not come to the wedding. Her mind was all confused and the fact that her cousin would be waiting for her didn't sit well all of the sudden.

"But Candelinn, we don't have any horses. We came on The MacBaron's, remember?" he said.

"Oh, I had forgotten. Well, we can use the same horse that you rode here on. If we leave early enough we won't ride it hard and can release it to return to MacBaron lands when we reach Lochindorb." She turned to look at her brother's disgruntled expression. "Will you meet me at the stables?"

"Candelinn, sometimes you try my patience," he mumbled. "But, aye, I'll meet you at the stables."

Candelinn, seeing Helena and Richard surrounded by guests and well-wishers, decided she would write a note for her friend in her chambers and quietly left the room unnoticed by all but one.

Angus, a frown furrowing his brow stood at the opposite end of the hall watching her disappear. After she had flounced from the room, his frown finally smoothed itself out and the corners of his mouth turned gradually into a wide grin. He shook his head, thinking of the impudent lass. She had taken control of his mind and this was not a good thing. His mind should be alert and on guard in these troubled times of Scotland. If his thoughts were not clear it could mean death. This made him think of Simon de Keith and again and searched the crowd for Sir Kenneth. He spotted him sitting at one of the tables. Angus made his way across the room to the de Keith's side. He had to inform him he had a traitor in his clan.

~ * ~

Candelinn placed her letter to Helena where her friend would be sure to find it, and crawled into the

feather bed, sinking into its comforting folds. She snuggled deep under the wool coverings, traced over the day's events in her mind and gradually drifted dreamily off to sleep. Her dreams brought back many of the day's activities, pausing repeatedly on certain happenings. The way Helena had looked both lovely and innocent in her gown; Angus standing at the foot of the stairs, his blazing eyes daring her to refuse his arm; the wedding ceremony with all its traditions, and Angus holding her gaze with his own; and finally her thoughts were filled with only one thing, Angus. The few minutes on the battlements with him alone, caught up in the excitement of the celebration, kissing him, her pulse racing at his touch, her mind crying out for more. Silently she tossed and turned in her sleep, disturbed by the constant thoughts of the man. Why had her body reacted so passionately to his embrace? It had always been so easy before, holding men at arm's length. No other man had stirred her at all until this one. Was this what loving a man did to you? What was so different about Sir Angus MacBaron that made her love him above all others?

Once more awake she sighed gently into the darkness, bringing her arms up behind her head. *Everything!* Everything was different about the man. He stood out in a crowd making everyone else seem inferior. When he spoke, all listened and when he moved across the floor like he owned the world, heads turned his way. Not just feminine heads, which she could understand because he was so virile and handsome, but men too watched his progress. She could remember everything about him. His black velvet jacket covering those broad shoulders, his tartan thrown over his left shoulder and fastened with a gold filigree brooch, an exact duplicate of the one he had given her, only larger. His slender waist and hips and his powerful legs beneath his kilt. Where so many of the men either had straight, spindly legs or fat flabby ones, his rippled with muscles at every movement. She even recalled the skean-dubh fastened to his leg showing the jeweled hilt of his dagger. Though other men were dressed the same and some even more elaborately, they still could not compare.

She turned and pounded her pillow and rolled on her side in disgust. He was the most arrogant, swaggering, stubborn Scot she had ever met. And she loved him.

Six

Stealthily Candelinn crept down the cold steps, her boots and pack in her hands. She silently went through the service entrance that led to the kitchen area, to return shortly carrying a parcel wrapped with cloth. The candles in the hall were burning low, throwing shadows against the rough-hewn walls. Candelinn wrapped the MacBaron tartan around her shoulders and opened the huge oak door that led to the outside.

She bent down, laying her bundles aside to slip on her animal skin boots before stepping through the portal into the cold crispness of the pre-dawn morn. Her packet once more clutched to her, she made her way quickly down the stairs to the stables, trying hard not to make too much noise on the cobblestone courtyard.

She found Fergus with the horse bridled and saddled outside the stable door, clapping his arms together against his body to keep warm, and his breath causing white puffs of vapor in the frosty air. When he saw his sister coming toward him, he let her feel his foul mood.

"'Tis about time. I'm near frozen waiting on you. You could have at least waited until the sun came up

and took the chill off."

"I wanted to leave before the MacBaron's. And it will be a gorgeous day and you'll warm up after you've ridden a few miles. Here." she handed him the tiny bundle she carried so carefully. "I brought you something from the kitchen. It's naught but a piece of cheese and some bread, but I knew you would growl at me if you didn't get to break your fast."

Fergus, feeling ashamed for snapping at his sister, clamped his mouth shut and took the offered gift, tucking it securely inside his jerkin. "There was no heed to hurry then, because the MacBaron's have already left.

He was helping Candelinn into the saddle and climbing on behind her.

"They're gone!" she exclaimed.

"Aye, though they left this horse for us to ride, which was mighty kind, I thought." He kicked the steed into movement. "The MacBaron clan is one of the largest in the highlands and the chief was probably anxious to get back to take care of running it."

The rattle of the harness and the hooves pounding on the cobblestone echoed loudly in the courtyard. The guard at the gate waved in recognition and slowly raised the creaking portcullis for them to pass under it. They were soon riding swiftly over the crest of the first hill.

Fergus ignored the MacBaron boundaries once again and guided the horse deep into the Reelig Forest. The thick trees protected them from the wind and he slowed the mount to a leisurely walk.

Candelinn's nerves were uneasy and she kept looking around for any trace of a black tartan. She did not want to face Angus after admitting her love for him the previous day. And the fact that she could never have him made her heart heavy. Once back in Lochindorb she would probably never see him again. The way was free of other riders and the morning stillness should have quitted Candelinn's fears but instead it only seemed to increase them.

A movement caught her eye and she looked quickly to their left. Through the copse of larch she picked out the vague form of a rider keeping pace with them, paralleling their movements from a distance, his MacBaron tartan barely visible in the mist that was slowly settling around them. She squinted as she watched one of Angus's clansmen awhile longer. But seeing that he kept his distance she set her sights on the way ahead, dismissing his importance. Perhaps he was, after all, just seeing them safely across their lands. He was probably there to make sure they did not poach or something. But these nagging thoughts did not calm her nerves overmuch.

A short time later, as they continued deeper into the forest, she thought she saw a flash of black and red move swiftly behind one of the great boulders. Candelinn shook her head, and decided it was her over-active imagination as Fergus, sitting calmly behind her, rode along seeming to notice nothing unusual as he finished the remains of his meal.

The mist grew thicker and heavy droplets of water fell to the ground from the boughs of the trees. The path twined narrowly through the ever-thickening forest, bringing them nearer to the Comyn boundaries.

Suddenly, from the dense forest an out of place sound caught her attention. A sense of dread settled upon her as she recognized the sounds of harnesses jingling in the quiet early dawn. Her skin began to crawl with fear that it could be a band of brigands out to do mischief. Fergus turned at a large boulder

and abruptly reined in the horse, bringing it to a complete stop. Candelinn looked straight ahead, a gasp escaping her lips.

Their path was blocked by a large number of the clan MacBaron. In the center their chief sat waiting calmly, his arm resting lightly on the pommel. Angus sat straight up in the saddle and moved his destrier forward a few steps to intercede the visitors.

"What took you so long, lass? I began to think you were swallowed up in the moors or had lost your way in the mist," he chuckled at the shocked look on the young woman's face.

The sight of him blocked her senses. "What are you doing here?" It was the only thing that came to mind to say.

"This is my land, Candelinn. I belong here. I thought I'd save you the trip of returning my horse." He nodded at the stallion snorting and stomping beneath her legs.

"But how will we get to our cousins'? It is many leagues from here." She couldn't believe he would be so cruel as to make them walk the rest of the way.

There was a gleam in his eyes that should have been her warning. He moved his large black horse nearer to her and her brother. His arms moved so swiftly that even Fergus was caught unaware. Candelinn felt herself raised from the saddle, two strong hands around her waist and placed roughly across the MacBaron's knees.

Fergus reached for the hilt of his sword sheathed at his side. Then he saw the huge men move in closer, challenging him with their eyes. He quickly changed his mind.

"Fergus, my young friend. I would hate to see you harmed. My men are overprotective of their Laird, so make your movements slow and easy. Don't be foolhardy, lad."

Angus looked down at Candelinn, his steel arms clasped tightly around her. She returned his gaze in wonderment.

"Angus, put me down!"

"Sorry, lass. I can't do that. It is much too far to the Castle Glencairn." A smile slowly formed at the corners of his mouth while he waited for his words to strike home.

"Glencairn! I'm not going to your Castle Glencairn!" She remembered his oath and slapped her thigh with her fist in emphasis. "You promised! You said I could have safe passage across your lands. Is not Sir Angus a man of his word? What of your knightly oath?" She questioned, fire striking forth from her eyes.

He mocked her with his own as he softly answered. "You misunderstood, Candelinn. I vowed you safe passage to come to the wedding. I didn't say anything about your return."

Her eyes went wide with surprise at his audacity. "You are truly kidnapping, me? Then you are the reiver I once accused you of being." She grabbed for her dirk but fingers of steel caught her wrist before his other hand deftly removed her small weapon and casually handed it to Duncan.

Angus kicked his horse into action and chuckled above her head. "Aye, lass, when it comes to you I

guess I am."

The clan fell in behind him, letting the Laird set the pace. Candelinn looked at them, how a few moved up to be at their side and the rest looking like they were enjoying the venture--were all smiling and nodding at one another.

Candelinn realized how helpless she was, balanced precariously in front of him, and forced herself to relax against his broad chest within the safety of his strong arms. His heart beat steadily and calmly through his leather jerkin irritating her all the more. How dare his beat so slowly when hers was pounding against her own jerkin so furiously. She knew instinctively she would not have stabbed him with her dirk, even had he not taken it away from her.

The warmth from his body encompassed her, removing the chill of the heavy mists. The heavy fog grew so thick, Candelinn could barely see a few feet in front of them and wondered how Angus could tell where he was going. But on and on he traveled, not even stopping when Candelinn knew that midday had come and gone.

She could hear the clansmen talking low amongst themselves, yet Angus did not say a word. She knew no amount of arguing would help, so she too saved her strength. Angus had captured her like the border reivers she had heard about, who crossed into England stealing cattle, horses, grains, and women--only to escape in the night and lose themselves on Scottish soil. The Scots thought this humorous when it happened to an English lord, but at the present time and similar circumstances, Candelinn could see nothing funny about it. Didn't he know what would happen to him for this deed? Her cousin would declare war upon the MacBarons. He could be killed! She must escape and return to her cousins before he found out. If Lochindorb could not keep her imprisoned, then Angus MacBaron would not be able to either! She could not bear to think of the man holding her in his arms in danger. If he wouldn't see to his own safety, then she would do so for him.

Candelinn's hair, now damp from the moisture in the air surrounding them, clung to her cheeks and neck. She shivered as the cold slowly seeped through her wet clothes into her weary bones.

Angus recognized how cold she was and pulled his tartan off his shoulders and draped it around her for added warmth. Candelinn snuggled beneath the heavy folds and felt the heat from Angus's body still clinging to the wool. It smelled of his scent and she stuck her nose beneath the edge, breathing in his fragrance.

Candelinn then looked behind them at Fergus to see how he was faring. He returned her gaze, looking ashamed for his helplessness. Candelinn's features cleared and she bestowed a smile of understanding his way. It was not his fault they were in this predicament. There was nothing he could have done to stop it. She knew she had to be careful lest Fergus was put in a position that for the sake of honor he would have to challenge the Laird MacBaron. She couldn't let that happen. He was the only family she had left. If she allowed the Laird to kill her brother in a foolhardy challenge, his death would be on her own head.

Candelinn cursed herself. If she had not been so determined to sneak away to Helena's wedding it would never have occurred. The fault lay at her door alone and because of her impetuosity, Fergus had to suffer along with her.

She shifted her weight slightly and found herself staring at the iron studding on the chest of Angus's leather jerkin. She moved her eyes upward and realized how he towered over her. Candelinn studied the smooth fit of the jerkin over the broad chest and shoulders and the strong muscled neck of a fighting man emerging as an extension of the powerful body. Unconsciously, her eyes traveled higher examining the

strong chin and the proud tilt of his head, the straight bold nose. His lips were full and she longed to taste them. Finally her scrutiny moved up until she was caught and held by dark brown eyes and she felt a constriction in her throat.

She could read nothing from his expression. Their eyes were locked together and he looked deeply into hers as though he were reading her mind. His lips parted slowly into a smile, his white even teeth close to her cheek as he spoke, his warm breath flowing across her face.

"Don't fear for you brother, lass. He will come to no harm. He is young enough to be educated in the true ways of Scotland and he will soon lose his loyalty to the Laird of Badenock."

She frowned at him. *What did he mean?*

"You care so much for the Red Comyn, then?"

Candelinn hesitated. Did she care for her cousin? Though she had lived under his roof for over five years, there was still no love between them. His hatred for her mother had killed any feeling she could ever have had for him in years past. Her mind was searching for a suitable answer when she heard Angus's laughter rumbling from his chest.

"'Tis what I thought. Your hesitancy gives me all the answer I need." He reined in his horse beside a swift running burn still protected by the huge pine and larch trees.

"We'll camp here, lads." He slid from the saddle and reached up grasping Candelinn by the waist to stand her beside him. He kept her captive between his body and the huge stallion. "Duncan, see if you can find some peat to start a fire. Fergus," he added, "you might give him a hand once you've secured the horses. As soon as they both moved away he turned once again to look down at the tantalizingly beautiful woman still held in his embrace. He had wanted to kiss her all day and would not be denied any longer. He bent his head and covered her mouth with his. It started out as a gentle caress moving over her mouth with practiced ease. Then she opened her mouth and slid her tongue between his lips to meld with his. That was all it took for his lips to crush against hers in driving need. He raised his head and again covered her mouth, sucking her tongue and wrapping it with his. When he finally pulled away she found her arms around his neck clinging to him. She slowly let go and let them slide down his chest, to rest there, feeling his heart against her palms. He was as shook as she was at the short encounter and she was glad. She smiled up at him. She heard his breath escape before he took her arm and led her to the lee side of a huge rock. There he spread the tartan for her to sit upon. She sat down exhausted, not only physically but also from the slight weakness in her legs.

He stood like a giant before her, making her feel a little insecure. His legs apart, boots placed firmly on the ground and arms bent at the elbow with his hands at his lean hips, he looked down into the puzzled eyes staring questioningly in return. He felt a pang of guilt knowing she didn't fully understand what was happening to her. The fear of the unknown was always the worst.

"Do you fear me, Candelinn?" he asked.

"No," she said and meant it. Intuitively she knew he would never harm her. In fact, she felt safer and more protected when he was near than she ever felt anywhere else. "Should I be?"

"Nae, lass. I would never harm you. But I won't be dissuaded now I have made up my mind."

"What have you made up your mind to do, Sir Knight?" Her voice had dropped to a whisper.

"You will know your future soon enough. Have patience. Relax and enjoy the ride. I've seen you riding across the greens many times when you thought you were unnoticed." He opened his arms and looked up into the thick damp mist. "The weather never deterred you before, don't let it now."

She stared up at him in shocked silence. How could he have seen her riding many times unless he had constantly been on Comyn lands? With so many questions running through her mind, she merely nodded in answer and he turned and strode away.

She looked around, taking in her surroundings. She had never been in this part of the Struy Forest before now. The thick trees dripping with moisture and large boulders scattered nearby that offered shelter from the winds which were building to a high pitch. She could hear the River Glass nearby rushing to the sea, but the mist had settled so low that she didn't know from what direction the sound came.

Suddenly an idea struck her. If she could find the river and follow it north, sooner or later it would lead her to the Beaully Firth, not more than five miles from the Keith clan. There she would be safe and Angus could be spared a war.

She looked around and saw no sign of Angus and Fergus was laughing at something Duncan had said as they bent over the peat now smoking and smoldering in front of them. She dare not try to get his attention or it would draw other eyes to herself. She would have to go alone. She knew Angus was fair and would not hold her brother responsible for her escape. And with her gone, Angus would surely release Fergus to be on his way.

She slowly stood up against the rock and inched her way around it, feeling the cold damp surface against the palms of her hands as she worked her way along its slippery side. Cadelinn watched closely to see if any of the clansmen noticed her retreat but they were all engrossed in their own duties and ignored her completely.

At the edge of the boulder she hesitated only a second to guess the direction of the river before letting go and running into the darkness. Carelessly she slipped on the wet turf and fell to her knees only to stand and hurry on.

Her heart was pounding beneath her breast, her breath coming in short painful gasps. She looked back over her shoulders to see if she was being followed.

"Oh," she gasped, bumping into a hard rock surface of male chest. It was Angus and he glared down at her. She stammered the first excuse she could think of.

"I was in need of privacy."

He seemed to relax, though his eyebrow arched doubtfully. "If 'tis true," he motioned to one of the boulders nearby. "Step behind there. You will have your privacy, then I will escort you safely back to camp."

Cadelinn looked into his face, knowing he had read the lie on her lips. She stepped behind the large rock anyway, putting her hands over her face.

She was a fool to think she could have made it very far, anyway. If he hadn't caught her now, he would have later. He was a very determined man. And she would have been on foot and he could travel much faster on horseback. She was going to have to make him understand the danger he was placing himself

in. She stepped back around the rock to confront her captor.

Angus merely took her arm and began leading her in the direction of the campfires, their light flickering through the trees. As he pulled a branch aside for to step in front of him he whispered low against her cheek.

"Scotland is not big enough, Candelinn. I would have found you and brought you back."

She snapped her head around expecting to see his usual mocking grin and was surprised at its absence. For once his face was serious as he looked into her eyes, never wavering from their stare.

"Angus, you must listen to me. What you have done will bring the entire Comyn clan down upon you. I would not have your death on my conscious. Don't you see--this is folly," she pleaded.

"You fear for me lass? That is twice you have acted like I could not take care of myself. Have you no faith in my abilities? Do you think I fear your cousin?"

"No Angus, but you should! My cousin is not known for his kindness. He is an evil man and I have told you he wants to kill you anyway!" She pleaded for him to understand. "You aren't invincible, you know." They had come to the place where he had left her earlier. She sat down roughly on the ground folding her arms across her breasts and leaned back against the rock. *The man was impossible!*

He stood over her, one arm resting on a ledge of the boulder above her head. Candelinn's chin was turned obstinately away from him, as if she was taking in the movements of the clansmen sitting near the small campfires, roasting freshly caught hare.

How could he make her understand, Angus pondered as he stared down at that stubborn chin? How could he explain to her? That from the moment he had been near her on the night of their first meeting; when her hair was curving around her shoulders as she walked in the leather breeks outlining her slender hips; with a waist a man could easily span with his hands; with her emerald eyes flashing with spirit. How could he explain to her how she had bewitched him? He had gone to Annandale trying to force her out of his thoughts but it hadn't worked. Everything about her was imprisoned in his heart. In spite of her brave show of independence, Angus knew behind that stubborn wee shell was a woman. A woman who craved someone to love her and protect her always. If he could just persuade her that they were meant to be together, like the moon and the stars, like the heather and the glen. That she was his other half and he would never be whole again until she was his completely.

How could he explain to her the way a man feels, deep in his gut, when his country is on the verge of war? When the thought of tomorrow is so unsure that he wants to grab at what happiness he can, when he can. That she was a Comyn and he a MacBaron and they could never have the normal courting rites that was so important to a lass.

He had taken her into his keeping and it was just a matter of time before she realized it was where she wanted to be. She had admitted she loved him and he would never give her up. She was his for all time. Even if he had to fight the entire Comyn clan single-handedly.

He looked at the rain-drenched maiden, trying to control her shivers huddling closer to the hard surface of the stone behind her and fought an overwhelming urge to take her into his arms and warm her as she had never before been warmed. Her hair now completely loose from restrictions was hanging in wet tangles around her shoulders. Her knees, mud-stained from falling on the wet turf, were pulled up under her chin. He made a mental note to do something to make her more comfortable as soon as possible and

walked away to see to his men, leaving her all alone once more.

Candelinn watched as Angus walked into her line of vision on his way to the warm fire where Duncan and Fergus were cooking their evening meal. He squatted on his haunches and talked to them in a low voice for a few minutes before standing once again and going in the direction of the horses. Candelinn had noticed the muscles rippling under the heavy breeks as he sat near the fire.

Beside Fergus's slender build, The MacBaron looked a man of iron. He moved gracefully across the ground and Candelinn felt herself warm despite the rain that kept falling upon her from above them. She had told herself once she wanted a man. Well, here he was. She had never encountered anyone that could claim to be a man as much as this one. If only she knew what he was going to do with her. Was he going to hold her for ransom? That seemed unlikely all things considered. The wealth of the MacBaron's was well known, so money could not be the reason. Was she to be his mistress? Would he force himself upon her? If he did, would he be cruel or would he be gentle? She recalled the night of the wedding when she had let herself go to the extent of embarrassment, she realized he could be a little of both. The mixture of the two would be not only exciting but also quite fulfilling, she knew in her heart. She drew her attention back to the present as she saw Fergus approaching with a well-done piece of rabbit hanging from a charred stick.

"Here, lass. You must be starved. After you eat this you'll feel a little better. The chief said you were looking tired and hungry."

She reached out and took the offered meal, not mentioning the fact that Fergus had called Angus, 'the chief'. The smell of the cooked meat made her realize how very hungry she was and she took a large bite from the still smoking meat and burned her lip. "Damn!" she cursed, licking her parched mouth.

"Careful, lass. I wanted to talk to you while I had the chance to say how sorry I am that we're in this mess. Sir Angus seems not so bad to me. Do you think you will mind it so much being under his care? I know it's not quite the thing, but we don't yet know if he means you harm or no'. It may just be a ruse to make Sir John come after us so he can take him on his own lands and under his own conditions. I dunna' ken. His men are close-mouthed and appear to think highly of their chief. As far as I can tell, anything he does sits well with them. I'll do whatever you think, lass. Just give the word."

Candelinn looked kindly at her brother. What did he think, he could do alone against a clan such as this? He looked calm about the entire episode, like it was some great adventure he was having. Maybe he was right. They really didn't know if Angus meant them harm. Maybe he was just trying to call Sir John out. Would she mind terribly if her cousin came to harm? The thought of an encounter between the two made her shiver. It was not fear for Sir John she realized, but fear for Angus. She was overwhelmed with concern for his safety. What if something happened to him? Would she be able to bear it? Though he seemed unconcerned with her cousin and his clan. Now that she had finally met the man that had stolen her heart, she did not want to let him go. She also realized with their families disputing against each other that nothing could come of it. Angus probably had his pick of all the most beautiful women on the isle of Britain. What could he possibly see in someone like her? The jealousy of all the women that had been with him before turned her stomach into a knot. She didn't like the idea of his arms wrapped around someone else. She loved him and she would work to make him love her back.

It would not be so bad staying at his castle. She knew Helena and Richard would be there in a few weeks after their honeymoon and she would get to see her friend again. Even when they made their home in Castle Strathness, she would still be able to see Helena more often than she could previously. These thoughts put a rosier glow on her predicament and she looked back at her brother putting his mind at rest.

"We will bide our time, Fergus. Perhaps you are right. Maybe we will come to harm. And if we don't, we have seen something of Scotland, right? We are traveling over land that was never safe to us before." She tried to make it sound as if it would be fun to go gallivanting across the wet countryside with a band of strangers. She turned back to her meal and started eating it now that it had cooled sufficiently, hoping her brother would not question her further.

He seemed satisfied and smiled and nodded at her before returning to the fire to capture his own portion of the evening fare.

Replenished, Candelinn began to realize how cold she really was. The wet had seeped through her clothing to her skin and she felt her teeth chattering as she looked around for something to wrap about her. But there was nothing to be had that was not already wet or in use by the men gathered around the campfires. Thinking about moving nearer to the warmth of the fire, she had not noticed Angus striding up to her with a heavy animal skin thrown casually over his arm.

"Come with me, lass. I have something to show you." He reached down and pulled her to her feet. Her new vow to make him love her made her realize the way she must look to him sitting like a soggy, dirty lump upon the ground.

He wrapped the animal skin across her shoulders and led her in the direction of the horses. There, in a secluded corner of the camp, was the MacBaron tartan hung from a pine bough as if for a curtain. She looked at him questioningly.

"I thought you would like to get out of those wet clothes. I borrowed some dry ones from one of the smaller of my men. I'm afraid even they will be much too big for you, but they are clean and dry." He motioned to a bundle lying under a rug near the tree.

She was so touched, she was speechless. She could only nod as she walked around behind the plaid curtain and began to strip out of her wet clothes. Her fingers shook as she stripped the leather jack over her head.

"I'll stand guard for you." She heard his voice on the other side of the barrier. "My men are not used to seeing a naked druidess in their midst." She could tell he was smiling by the sound of his voice.

She felt exposed with only a woolen tartan separating them. She bent and retrieved the borrowed jerkin and hastily put it on. The breeks were more difficult because of her wet skin, but once on she had an extra handful at the waist to keep them up. She searched beneath the rug and found a leather tong. Wrapping it around herself it made the perfect belt to keep the breeches from sliding back over her hips. She wrapped her wet clothes in the rug to take with her. She took a deep breath and emerged from behind the curtain to face Angus.

He was leaning with his back against the tall pine and immediately pushed himself away and came to join her when she appeared. Without a word his hands were on her, rubbing down her arms and legs. When they started massaging her body, Candelinn struggled.

"Angus, what are you doing? You don't have to maul me!" she groaned from the pain. He had no idea how strong he was.

"Hush, lass," he commanded. "If I was after a woman, this is not the method I would use to woo her." He continued rubbing her briskly, working his way down her body to her feet. "There. That ought to get

the blood going."

He had completely misunderstood her complaints but looking at him as he knelt beside her on the soft carpet of pine needles made her realize she did feel much warmer. Whether it was his massaging or his nearness, she was not sure.

Angus stood up and threw the animal skin back across her shoulders, pulling her close under his arm to give her added warmth. His weight almost made her legs buckle but she cuddled near to him, enjoying the warmth of his body next to her.

"Now you can retire without catching a chill," he added. He turned and picked her up to carry her the rest of the way. As he bore her across the camp, she noticed a pallet of animal skins tucked under the edge of a large rock in a space that appeared dry and protected from the wind. She wondered where he would sleep, for surely these skins were his own and without them he would spend a wet night.

Fergus had seen the direction the chief was taking his sister and started to stand up and object. Duncan put his hand on his arm to stay him and shook his head. There was nothing he could do, so he squatted down again next to the fire. But his eyes stayed in the direction the two had gone.

She didn't have long to wonder because he threw back the top skin and lay down drawing her in beside him. She opened her mouth to protest but he put a finger over her lips

"Don't start screaming, Candelinn. We carry no extra skins and the added body heat will do us both no harm." He rested on an elbow, looking down at her. "Unless you want to sleep on the wet ground, for I assure you I'm not going to."

Like a frightened rabbit, Candelinn was on her feet, hugging the fur to her that Angus had thrown around her shoulders. Between her fear and her anger she stood sputtering, her eyes glaring in The MacBaron's direction before she turned to stomp back by the fire. She stood hesitating, glancing around at the men already curled under their animal skins. Fergus didn't even seem to notice her with his back to the fire. She finally chose the tree nearest the fire to sit propped up against it, staring into the flames, hugging the fur around her shoulders.

Angus watched her from his pallet, his eyes hidden in the darkness. She had spunk, this lass. He would see how long it took her to change her mind.

Damn! The man made her mad! Hadn't he given one thought of what Fergus would be honor bound to do? He surely didn't think she would trade her brother's life for the opportunity to spend a comfortably warm night in his arms. One look at her brother's back convinced her that her brother would not have done any challenging this night. It didn't matter, Angus gave no thought to her circumstances just thoughts of his own. He was an arrogant, stupid, thoughtless rogue!

As the cold damp ground seeped through her borrowed breeks her anger cooled rapidly. She had to honestly admit that she would have liked to sleep curled into his warmth, his arms about her. At least she would be warm and dry.

She watched the two guards when they circled the camp, not realizing that when they returned occasionally to throw more wood on the fire it was for her benefit. Ordinarily they would have let the fire die out.

It was the wee hours before Candelinn's head rolled towards her shoulder in exhausted sleep. The late

hours of the night before coupled with the restless sleep had taken its toll. She never knew when the giant shadow came to tenderly pick her up to carry her to the rock overhang and carefully cover her with skins before pulling her to his warmth. Candelinn cuddled closer to Angus in her slumber. Her buttocks wriggled against his groin and he groaned into the dark. He took deep breaths and tried to cool his lusty thoughts. It was going to be a long torturous night.

When his eyes finally closed his arm was around her waist, holding her back tight against his chest, there was a definite smile on his lips.

Candelinn woke as moist lips covered hers. She had rolled over on her back and was resting her head on Angus shoulder. She opened her eyes to see that it was the time between night and dawn, yet she could see his face was only inches above her. Her arms wrapped around his neck and added her own movements to the kiss. Their tongues immediately joined and the power behind the kiss increased in passion.

He pulled her to the side and slid his hand down the small of her back, leaving a trail of scorching sensations along her spine. He released her mouth to kiss the side of her neck before shoving the jerkin aside to kiss the rise of her breast. With shaking fingers he undid the jerkin to fall open and expose the two full globes to his assault. The minute his mouth closed over one, Candelinn moaned aloud as fire shot through her. She felt herself moisten down below at the junction of her legs and slid that part of her closer to Angus, feeling his hardened manhood pressing against her. He cupped her bottom and pulled her tighter toward him. She moaned again and started moving her hips across him, making him groan aloud. He lifted his head from her breast and buried it in the crease of her neck. His breath was hot and ragged. All his other movements he had stilled.

"God, Candelinn, you do not know what you do to me." His voice sounded like a croak. "If we continue I will not be able to stop from making you mine completely."

She didn't quite understand. She had been so carried away she didn't care if they stopped or not. In fact, her body needed some unknown fulfillment and she snuggled up to him, her pelvis once more touching his swollen member. His hand clasped her hips and stilled her motion. "Lass! I would rather not take you here on the ground for your brother and the clan to see. But if you don't lie still it is going to happen."

Those words stopped her completely. She had forgotten where they were. "It's all your fault." She shoved at his chest. "I can't think clearly when you do these things to me."

He chuckled, finally getting a little control over himself. "I am happy this is so, Candelinn. For you do the same to me. I want you as I have never wanted another woman. And you will be mine. I have much to teach you about the ways of men, lass. And I admit I will enjoy every lesson. Tell me again you love me."

"I do love you." It would be stupid to deny it.

She wanted to ask when he would teach her the ways of men, but could not bring herself to be so forward. But each time they were together it was harder to stop. Was he insinuating she was no good at lovemaking and needed to be taught the proper way of it? It hurt her feelings that he would think so. How was she supposed to know what to do if she had never done it before? He had his nerve to say those things. Well, if he was so disappointed in her she would just keep her distance from him in the future.

He threw off the covering and brought himself lithely to his feet. He smiled down at her, her hair in

disarray from sleeping and lovemaking. He knew that was what she would look like in the morning and he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her again. But sanity won out.

"And do you care for me, Angus?" She wanted so badly to hear him say the words.

He ignored the question. "You may have five minutes of privacy before we ready to leave. Be quick about it." He smiled and turned and walked away.

When Candelinn had her privacy and went to stand beside Fergus, she was more herself. She smiled at him. There were questions in his eyes but she ignored them.

The rest of the clansmen had already started to mount when Angus crossed to her side. The day was clear and the sun was just peeping over the mountains beginning to shine. There was moisture clinging to Angus's hair where he must have been to the river to wash.

Candelinn wished she could have done just that instead of feeling disheveled from the previous night. Angus looked fresh and alert while she felt a disaster without washing her face and brushing the tangles from her hair. Self-consciously she tried to smooth the tangled locks away from her face.

Angus motioned for Fergus to mount with the men before turning to Candelinn.

"Make haste, lass. We have a long way to travel this day," he demanded.

His tone irritated her. She stood her ground, feeling brave with Fergus only a few feet away mounted on his horse. If she was so lacking at lovemaking, she was not going to ride against him all day.

"I want to ride with my brother." She looked him directly in the eye, trying to read his thoughts but nothing showed. His face was blank. Instead, he put his hands upon his hips and challenged her.

"Nae, lass." That was all he said but a little of her bravery flew at the tone of it. She squared her shoulders and tried one more time, her false bravado still heard by the MacBaron.

"Then I would rather walk!"

What had gotten into her? Angus wondered. She had been more than fine when he left her not half an hour ago. Before she couldn't get close enough to him and now she didn't want to be near him. Would he ever understand this wee woman, glaring up at him as if he had done something wrong? Was it because he had not admitted he cared for her? For God's sake, would he be going through all this if he didn't care? The woman was exasperating!

The men were now all mounted on their horses surrounding Angus and Candelinn. They looked from their chief to the fiery-haired beauty on the ground defying him. All of them to the last number admired her for being brave enough to stand up to their chief recalling that he had told them she was a brave lass, and indeed she was. They did not know of a man who could have stood defiant against The MacBaron and live to tell the tale.

The silence was deafening. No one spoke and only the harnesses clanking against the armor and the horses snorting in the cold morning air, broke the eerie quiet. The huge men on horseback waited to see what their chief would do to this tiny, strong-willed lass.

Angus stared into her eyes for a few seconds, opened his mouth to speak, then changing his mind

clamped it shut and turned to gracefully mount his destrier standing by his side. He should just pick her up and put her on his saddle and be damned. But he admired her spirit and wanted to never break her of it. As he comforted himself in his saddle he looked up at the curious glances of his clan. He smiled his usual smile at the question written on their faces.

"Well lads. You heard the lass. She wishes to walk. Ride on to the castle and we will follow. Let them know at Glencairn that I'll be there this eve." He moved his eyes to look down at her, openly mocking her. "Or, if the lady walks too slowly, it might be on the morrow." He turned to Duncan, close at his side as always. He winked and whispered so Candelinn could not hear.

"Have my mother's room made ready. I think the lass will have need of it by the time we arrive."

Duncan laughed aloud, as did a few of the men near enough to overhear, including Fergus. He well knew how obstinate Candelinn could be once she'd made her mind up.

"Aye, sire. It will be taken care of. See you at Glencairn."

Fergus hesitated until he saw Angus motion at him with his head to go.

The pounding of mighty hooves shook the ground Candelinn stood on, while she watched all the men save one, leave the camp. Her heart beating against her chest sounded as loud to her ears as the echoing hoofbeats of the disappearing clansmen.

She waited for him to get back off his horse and come after her. Was he going to make love to her now? But instead he leaned casually with his arm resting against the pommel of his saddle and spoke softly. "Well, lass. What are you waiting for? The direction is that way," he motioned after the riders with his head. "Of course, if we take our time we will have another night to spend in each other's arms. This time without an audience."

She turned and stomped off in the direction of Castle Glencairn. They made good time for the first hour or so, because Candelinn's anger helped to lengthen her stride as she hurried to stay in front of Angus and his destrier following directly behind her every step of the way.

Angus smiled at the straight back moving in front of him. Once in a while an unladylike word mumbled in anger came to his ears. He heard the words "damn, rude, arrogant, obstinate" and "pond frog". *We were back to pond frog again.* He was surprised that a young mistress of her breeding would know some of the unladylike curses coming out of her mouth. Though the words were brash, it tickled him immensely. *God, she was something!* He admitted to himself that he liked her that way. When that little spit fire of a lass bent to his will, it would be of her own choosing, not his. The expectation of that day made a stirring in his loins. It was just as well she had her back to him, he chuckled, or the ill-concealed bulge in his breeks might cause her to run the many miles to Castle Glencairn.

The adrenaline in her system flowed strongly, fed by her fiery temper, giving her the extra energy to cover the Scottish countryside at a brisk pace. Every now and then a wayward pine branch would catch her clothing only to be snatched away and left crumpled on the trail behind.

Candelinn, her legs beginning to weary, continued to trudge along, cursing Angus with each breath. She did not reason in her mind why it was Angus's fault. If she had only kept her big mouth shut. Each time her footsteps started to lag, the nose of the huge stallion would nudge her on her way. Once when she raised her eyes to The MacBaron, the mocking challenge made her more determined than ever.

Though the air was cool, the sun beating on the back of her neck seemed unbearable after awhile. Her feet felt leaden in the heavy boots and it took all her strength to put one foot in front of the other. Kicking disgustedly at a rock in her path, she struggled on. She thought she heard a chuckle behind her but did not turn to see if it was so.

Once when she passed a small stream, Candelinn ignored the presence of Angus behind her and dropped to her knees, splashing cool water on her flushed cheeks and around the back of her neck.

Angus slid from his mount and led the stallion to the stream to drink, feeling a twinge of sympathy for the slender lass bending low over the water. But it was up to her when to decide she'd had enough. He would not sway her mind.

Going to his pack tied onto the horse's saddle, Angus withdrew a piece of dried venison. He tore it in two, and approached Candelinn offering her a piece.

Candelinn looked at the outstretched hand. Her stomach ached for a taste of the food. Stubbornly she shook her head and started walking away.

Angus remounted his horse, and still chewing on the venison, followed the straight back of his hostage. They traveled on this way throughout most of the day, neither speaking to the other. Angus watched her stumble and fall many times. He wanted to offer her assistance, but kept his silence. Finally she stopped, collapsing in a heap, exhausted.

"Damn!" Angus slid off his horse and knelt beside her, rolling her over into his arms. His heart caught in his throat at the tears running down the dirt-stained cheeks. He spoke one word, harshly.

"Enough?"

Candelinn closed her eyes and nodded before hiding her head in his chest and sobbing.

Angus let out a sigh of relief as he hugged her close. "Thank God!" He felt drained of strength from watching her torment herself. Every time she had stumbled he had felt as though he were stumbling, too. He felt her sobs become less against his chest and spoke softly, reassuring her that she should have no fear of him and all would be well.

"What made you so upset? You were all love and passion this morning, then you refused to even ride with me. What changed?"

She didn't want to tell him. He would probably laugh. Bit by bit her walls were torn down. Maybe she was just too damn tired. Whatever the reason, she told him the truth. "I don't know how to kiss you right. You said I needed lessons." Big tears ran down her cheeks.

He rested his chin on the top of her head so she would not see his smile. "God, woman! If you kissed me any better I would never let go of you."

"Really?" her voice sounded so soft.

"In fact I almost didn't this morning. And the lessons I was talking about were the things a man and a woman learn about each other while making love. You have no knowledge or experience yet and I look forward to teaching you those things. You are far from lacking, love. Next time tell me what's bothering you. And that's an order. You know I would never knowingly hurt you." He spoke into her hair.

He stood and picked her up in his arms, gently placing her into the saddle before climbing on behind her. He changed her from riding astride to resting sideways across his knees. He pressed her cheek against his chest. Candelinn, exhausted, was gratefully aware of the support and comfort she felt in his arms. Angus held her close and kicked his steed into motion. They would arrive at his castle tonight after all. He could not resist the slow smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Seven

Candelinn, snuggling in her sleep against a warm shoulder, was vaguely aware of being lifted gently from the standing horse while dogs barked their welcome in the background. Faintly, she heard the sound of breakers on the castle walls and smelled the salt in the air as she was carried upstairs and lain gently on a soft, warm bed. A heavy woolen blanket was pulled up and tucked under her chin and soft lips brushed against hers, before sound sleep once more overcame her.

She woke with the sun shining in bright golden splendor across the bed. The animal skins that covered the windows were tied back allowing the bright daylight and fresh air to flow into the room. The refreshing breeze was cold and moved her hair against her cheek in its briskness.

Candelinn stretched luxuriously and looked around the strange room before putting her bare arms beneath the coverings for added warmth. She exclaimed in surprise. She was completely nude in the bed. Had Angus undressed her?

The man of her thoughts faced her across the floor, standing at a side door to an adjoining room. Her mind was trying to recall the night before and without realizing it she pulled the wool blankets up tight against her chin.

Angus looked strikingly handsome in a green hunter's kilt and a white linen shirt left casually open at the throat. Slowly he crossed the room watching as the too large eyes recorded his approach with great uncertainty. He noticed her knuckles turning white, clinging to the blankets pulled tight around her.

He bent down and kissed her gently on the mouth. When he stood up he smiled. "No need to be so modest, love. After last night you have nothing to hide from me."

"You didn't!" she exclaimed, her eyes growing wilder.

"Aye, I did. And enjoyed it immensely." He chuckled.

"That was beastly unfair," she croaked.

"Aye, but not so beastly that I let my animal instincts take control. More's the pity." He turned back to the door speaking to her over his shoulder, a smile on his lips. "I had water brought in earlier if you want to bathe. I'll have the chambermaid bring fresh clothes for you to wear. Better hurry. We break the fast in half an hour's time and I expect you to be downstairs." When he reached the threshold he turned again to face her, bowing low. "My Lady." He reached out closing the door behind him.

Cadelinn sat up oblivious of the blankets now falling around her waist and stared at the closed door, his mocking tone of voice still ringing in her ears. The simple everyday words had taken a possessive form coming from his lips.

"My lady indeed," She scoffed. She jumped out of bed. She was rested, it was a beautiful day and a feeling of lightheartedness filled her that she had never before experienced. She was captured by her reiver and brought to his castle! And she was filled with happiness about it! She was nuts! But nothing would take away her feeling of joy and she swung her arms wide and danced around her room in gay abandon. She did not hear the outer door open until a soft, timid voice interrupted her twirling.

"M' Lady. I brought ye some clothes."

Cadelinn spun around to find a bent frail woman, her arms full of feminine clothing. Her anger quickly disappeared as she noticed the frightened eyes staring up at her as if she were mad. She smiled in apology at the gray-haired woman whose lined and wrinkled face was indisputable evidence of her many years of age.

"I apologize for my actions, madam. I assure you I'm not an eldritch. I am just happy to be here and I'm not out traipsing over the greens again this morning. I did look a little silly, though, didn't I?" She smiled in kindness hoping to make the chambermaid more relaxed. She looked as if she were going to flee at any moment. "Let's see what you have brought me to wear."

She approached the woman and gently removed the clothes from her arms. The lady started to bow and remove herself but Cadelinn stopped her.

"Please don't leave. I mean you no harm. My name is Cadelinn... Comyn. You may call me Cadelinn. What are you named, may I ask?"

"Rowena, my Lady. Did ye say ye'r name was Comyn?" Her eyes were wide with astonishment. "A relative of Sir John Comyn, mayhap?"

"Aye, Rowena, we are distant cousins. But fear not, there is no love lost between my cousin and myself. It does seem rather strange, having a Comyn in the household, does it not?" Cadelinn jested, trying to make Rowena more at ease. The chambermaid shuffled her feet against the thick carpet, her head bent low in embarrassment.

"Aye, my Lady. But the chief knows what he is about. 'Tis not for me to question his Lairdship's doings."

"Nor I, it seems. I would appreciate it immensely if you were to help me with my bath, Rowena. I feel strange being in the home of The MacBaron. Would you be my friend, please?" Cadelinn asked.

"Aye," she smiled. "I would want to be ye'r friend my lady. Ye should be in the bath now, if I may say so, my Lady. Else you will catch ye'r death of cold."

At that Rowena lifted her chin to smile at the lovely maiden standing in front of her still nude as the day she was born. This was a pleasant change over the English mistress Seton. At least the Laird had never let her sleep in his mother's chambers. This alone meant the lass in this room meant more to him. She was happy that the Laird had found a nicer, more beautiful Scottish lass at last.

Candelinn laughed at the strict reproof coming from the mouth of someone who had just moments before had been meek and mild. Without further ado, Candelinn climbed into the water, now lukewarm, and began to wash herself. She felt more at ease in this strange castle with someone she could at least call friend.

Candelinn came down the wide stone staircase and wondered where Angus had found such beautiful women's clothing. Perhaps it was from a relative or one of the women of the clan. The gown was a light gray wool, heavily embroidered around the sleeves and bodice. It was trimmed with lace and seemed to fit very well except for the bodice of the gown was a little snug around her full breasts. How convenient that someone in this cold place was almost the same build. Perhaps around her own age. She would soon find out. Perhaps they would also be at the meal where she was to join Angus.

Duncan was standing outside the large, oak door to the main hall. He bowed and opened the door for her. "This way, m'Lady. Sir Angus awaits you."

"Thanks, Duncan," she moved passed him to enter the immense hall where, gathered around the tables, the Laird's guard along with many more of the clansmen and her brother sat partaking of the food as if it were to be their last. Fergus hailed her from his place at a long table.

"I began to wonder if you were ever going to come out of hiding, lass. That walk must have used up all your energy. I do not remember the last time you slept so late."

"Good morning to you too, brother. If I am so late why are still eating? Does not the Laird have something to keep you busy? No battlements to walk? I must inform him how you love that duty." She was feeling too good to let Fergus spoil her day. She looked away from her brother's scowl to see Angus beside her.

"You look very refreshed after your long sleep, lass. Do not let your brother get you down. He thinks it's a great adventure to be with a wild band like this. Come, your meal awaits you. And may I say you look very lovely this morning?"

He took her arm and led her to the front table, sitting her on his right. He sat down next to her and filled her plate from his trencher.

"What's the matter with you, Sir Knight?" She questioned.

"Why do you think something is the matter with me?" he asked.

"Because you were never a popinjay as you are today. It makes me nervous. 'May I say you look very lovely this morning' just isn't you. Are you ill?"

Angus laughed. He had thought he sounded stupid too, but he so wanted her to feel at home. "Tch, tch. You need to feed yourself. Your temper is showing, lass."

"Hmph!" was her only reply. She was very hungry this morning, having eaten almost nothing the day before, and made short shift of the food before her. It was all excellent and she realized Angus must have a fine cook in his kitchen.

"I thought you may want to ride over the nearby countryside and see what your new surroundings look like," he invited. "I'm sorry I cannot allow you to go alone, but if you want I have time to escort you and show you the scenery until shortly after noon. Or would you rather stay indoors with the other women

and learn the household routine?"

She knew he mocked her for it was as though he could see in her mind once more and knew that she would like nothing less than to be once more a prisoner behind four walls. She almost jumped at the chance to see the lands in the daylight. All thoughts of escaping had flown. She was happy here and she would see the man she loved every day. Come what may she was committed to him.

"You know I would rather see your lands, Laird, if I may?" She tried to answer meekly.

"Angus. Call me Angus."

"Okay, Angus."

"You're right. It worries me also when you are too sweet. We both know you will do what you damn well please. 'If I may', indeed. He smiled and their eyes met.

She stared into his dark brown orbs and suddenly felt renewed. She returned his smile.

Angus knew the agony it would cause to ever keep this lively lass a prisoner inside castle walls. It would be the cruelest thing anyone could do to her. And seeing the joy in her green eyes, he knew he could never hurt her. Not this bonnie lass who had stolen his heart so readily. A lump formed in his throat, leaving him speechless. He simply nodded in her direction before he stood and stepped away from the table. "I'll be in the courtyard in a quarter of an hour. Be there, I will not wait." He turned and started walking to the door.

Candelinn stared at the back of Angus's head as he marched through the door. She knew he meant what he said. She would be there or he would leave her. She knew she had no riding habit proper for a lady to wear, so she decided she would search out the men's breeks she had worn the day before and put them back on. They were more comfortable than the long gowns that always seemed to get in the way. And if she rode astride, which was her preference, she knew that an unseemly amount of leg would show. So the breeks it would be.

Candelinn joined Angus in the courtyard in the allotted amount of time and stood looking around the outside of the castle for the first time. It was gigantic. He could house several score of men easily inside these gates. The clan MacBaron must indeed be huge.

Angus walked over to her while Duncan finished saddling a small bay mare standing quietly next to Angus's large black stallion. A frown crossed his forehead as he appraised her attire.

"What happened to your gown, Candelinn?" he asked sharply.

"I thought these would be more appropriate for a long ride," she answered looking down at her slender legs enclosed in the leather breeks of yesterday.

"Well, you thought wrong. Go and change. I will wait a few more minutes."

"But what difference does it make?" She asked. "Besides, the gown is not a riding habit, it will be ruined," she protested.

"If it is ruined, there are others." He stated, dismissing her argument with a wave of his hand. "I don't like you dressing like a man." He raised his arm and pointed back to the entrance of the castle. "Now go and

change. Immediately!"

"What difference can it possibly make? I wore them yesterday and no one seemed to mind."

"Candelinn, do not argue with me. From now on you are in my care and I don't like you in men's breeks. It shows too much of your... your... You will not ride on my lands in that fashion. Go and change or stay here. You have your choice." So saying, Angus turned and strode over to his stallion and busied himself tightening the girth on his saddle, completely ignoring her standing there with her hands clenched at her sides. Angus knew he sounded like an ogre but as much as he admired the slim hips of his captive he did not like the way other men looked at her when she was dressed thus. He had never felt possessive of another woman before and he did not like it one bit.

Candelinn bit her lip to keep from screaming at the broad shoulders turned away from her. "Damn!" she muttered and headed back into the castle to change back into her gown. She knew it would be useless to throw a fit of temper, because she still would not get her own way in this matter. And she wanted so much to see the lands belonging to this powerful chief but more importantly, she wanted to check out the land in case she found the situation intolerable here and wished to flee.

Once outside the drawbridge, Candelinn could see how the castle sat on a knoll overlooking the sea. The castle was completely surrounded by water, making it an island when the drawbridge was up. The smell of fresh salt air filled her nostrils and the sound of the surf gently slapping the rocks on the other side made her feel exhilarated. The sea. How she would love being so near the water after living inland for so long.

Later in the morning, riding along the shores of the sea with the wind blowing her hair back from her face, she'd completely forgotten how angry she had been earlier. She still wasn't as sure in her seat, riding sidesaddle, but the sun and the air blowing through her loose tresses made her feel alive.

Angus kept his stallion back apace so as to see Candelinn in full view in front of him. She was lovely. Nae, he corrected himself, not just lovely... she was breathtakingly beautiful. Her head was thrown back taking the full force of the wind against her pink cheeks. Her hair falling around her waist blew in the breeze and tangled itself at her back. The purple of the mountains in front of her made the scene worthy of a painter's canvas. She rode with the fluid grace of an expert. Her back was straight and she kept her seat well. Not like those English women with their hair tied up severely beneath their bonnets and their restrained style of riding. They were afraid to let themselves go, to enjoy riding with the uninhibited pleasure of this highland lass. He had to admit to himself that she seemed more self-assured riding astride than sideways on the saddle and decided he would have to do something about that.

Candelinn climbed a rugged path and looked over her shoulder to see if he was still close behind her. She laughed with abandon at the enjoyment of her ride, knowing that Angus was alone with her showing her his properties.

Angus spurred his horse and soon closed the space between them to be by her side.

"You approve of these lands which belong to a MacBaron, love?"

"Aye, they are very beautiful. But what is ahead over those hills? Shall I see them today?"

His relaxed expression became one of stern hardness. Candelinn reined in her horse beside him and looked questioningly at his profile.

"Nae." Angus said in a low voice, his attitude tolerating no argument. His stiff back forbade any further discussion. He looked overhead at the sky, checking the distance the sun had traveled from the eastern horizon since they had left the castle.

"It's time for the midday meal. The others will be waiting." He turned his mount abruptly in the direction of Glencairn, leaving her to follow on her own.

Slowly he picked his way along a rock-strewn path, winding from the top of the knoll, down to the windswept beach. An aura of sullenness enshrouded him deep in his own thoughts.

The quick uneven steps of Candelinn's horse broke the rhythmic timing of a walking gait as it stumbled over an obscure root hidden beneath a fine layer of dirt. Riding sidesaddle, Candelinn found she did not have the control without both legs on the side of the mare. Before she knew it, the horse lost its footing and floundered over the edge.

Angus heard the commotion of falling dirt and wheeled his horse about and found only an empty trail before him. "Nae!" He roared in anguish spurring his great war-horse forward. Angus leaned high up over the thick black mane as the powerful legs grappled for a footing, the brute strength of his muscles rippling beneath the sweat-glossed coat as he surged up the hill, carrying the MacBaron chief at a break neck speed.

A battered heather bush, torn free and trampled, was the only sign of any mishap to confront Angus as he scoured the way of the path with the eyes of a hunter. He approached the tattered clue and looked ominously down the sloping side of the knoll. At the bottom stood Candelinn's mare, but there was no sign of her. Without hesitation he directed his horse over the edge, charging down the slope. His horse skidded to a halt and Angus leaped from his saddle, his expression that of a wild man as he searched for some sign of the flaming red hair. The little mare stepped forward, exposing the form of Candelinn sitting on the ground, her back propped against a large granite boulder.

"Candelinn!" Angus reached her side even as he spoke her name, his voice reflecting his grim expectancy.

"Angus?" Bright green eyes looked up, surprised at the tone of his voice. He looked frightened.

His relief knew no bounds. She was not hurt. His whole being had been filled with fear for those short moments. Now that she was in his care, he could not bear the thought of losing her. His hands shook as he lifted her to her feet and buried his face in her neck. He trembled as he stroked her tumbled hair. "Don't ever scare me like that again." His body was filled with agony as the ice in his veins slowly melted with the feel of her safe in his arms.

Candelinn responded to his intense feelings with womanly instincts. She wrapped her arms about his neck, and clung to him, her head nestled against his head. As the minutes passed, Candelinn could feel the pounding of his heart slowing to a steadier beat, but still he held her in a tight embrace.

"Angus?" She tilted her head to look up at him. "I fear there is no breath left in me, you hold me so tightly." Slowly the great arms relaxed, allowing her to slip gently to the ground, but not letting her go.

"I am unhurt. My horse stumbled and threw herself off balance. I'm afraid I am not as good at controlling a horse riding sidesaddle. So it was partly my fault. We reached the bottom before she could stop and I caught my gown on a thorn as we crashed through the bushes." She removed his hands from her waist and stepped back. "I was just looking to see what damage had been done. See?" she offered

the hem for his inspection.

"Damn the gown!" He brushed it aside without the slightest notice. "It was you I was concerned about, not this miserable piece of fabric!"

"Well, as you can see, I'm perfectly fine." She spread her arms and twirled gaily about before his appraising eyes, giggling lightheartedly. He did care for her. He would not say the words but it showed on his face when he thought she had been injured. What a wonderful favor the little mare had done her this day.

Suddenly she was caught and brought roughly against his chest. His lips covered hers completely before she knew what was happening. The kiss was brutal and demanding all at once. Passion flared instantly. He kissed her again and again as if he could not get enough of her. His tongue was like scorching flames as it grappled with her own. She was about to lose herself when he raised his head to hold her in his tight embrace and stared over her head across the sea. "Aye, you are fine, all right. Never must you scare me that way again!" He had let go of her and stepped away, frowning down at her. He felt like he had lost ten years off his life.

"But, I like the end result, Sir Knight. That made it worth the risk." She laughed up at him.

He cast her a roguish grin. "Perhaps we could stay a little longer. I know a quiet little glen not far from here." He took a few steps toward her.

"Oh nae, MacBaron," she skipped easily out of his reach. "I'm starving. Where's that meal you said was waiting?"

"Who needs food when there is love to be made?" he teased wickedly.

"I do." Candelinn countered saucily, turning her mare around between her and Angus so that when she swung lightly into the saddle not too much of her leg was revealed to Angus when she wrapped her knee around the pommel. "Come, I'll race you to the stables."

Without waiting to see if he would follow close behind or not, Candelinn spurred her mount. She would never refuse a challenge and thought that perhaps Angus would be the same. Maybe at this one thing she would be able to get the better of this laird. She bent low over the pommel, kicking her sprightly mare, running as fast as she dared on a strange horse. She raced along, the little mare's feet hardly touching the ground as they sped toward the castle, the salt spray covering horse and rider with a fine mist as they ran. But as Candelinn was entering the castle grounds Angus flew past her to turn and wait at the portcullis. It was her turn to feel beaten. And the feeling was not near as bad as she would have expected. She was not at all surprised. For Angus was a man fully capable of doing just what he set out to do, even if it were winning a short race against a young maid. She was beginning to realize that deep inside she admired this mighty Highland warrior way too much. She thought back to the many times she had bested the other men she had known. Compared to Angus they had been children. He was the only real man of her acquaintance.

"You ran a good race, my Lady." He reached over and brushed a drop of salt spray from her cheek.

"But not good enough to win." She smiled, her green eyes still flashing with the thrill of the competition. "Perhaps next time I'll plan my strategy differently, so I can beat you," she said as they walked their mounts to the stable.

"You are a saucy wench, do you know that?" he teased.

"Aye, sire. So I've been told."

"Hmmpf," was his only comment.

He jumped off his horse and came to her side. He lifted her down from the mare, his hands lingering at her waist as he held her gently in front of him. Her disheveled beauty, so pure and innocent, left him spellbound and he stood staring at her speechless.

She rested her hands on his chest, moving her fingers down the center opening of his jerkin. Her eyes raised to his, looking down at her. "Thank you, Angus. For a lovely morning."

Did she know what she was doing to him with her fingers moving up and down his chest that way? The woman was messing with fire and she was going to get burned. He placed his hand over hers and stilled its motion. "You're welcome. But always remember you will never ride alone. Agreed?"

"Agreed. Let's go eat, I'm starved." She smiled at him as if she would like to eat him first. A provocative smile full of promise.

"You are walking on the edge, you little temptress. You, the innocent virgin, dare to challenge me? If that look was a gauntlet, I gladly pick it up. You are messing with the lion in his den, my love."

For once she agreed with him. "I had better hurry and change," she said breathlessly. "I'll be late for the meal." Careful not to look at him she gathered her skirts and hurried inside.

She heard his laughter echo across the courtyard and she entered the castle. "The lion in his den, indeed." It was the lioness that was the stronger of the two, as he would soon find out.

Angus followed a few steps behind, his eyes never wavering from the petite redhead in front of him. *My God she sets my soul to burning*, he thought. *Let nothing happen to keep her from becoming mine.*

His mood was pensive as she disappeared from his sight. Angus didn't want to rush her but with Edward in England killing as many of Sir William Wallace's followers as he could find, how did he know if he would have many tomorrows to spend with her?

Angus spent the afternoon training with his warriors, a constant exercise to keep them ready for battle.

Fergus found Candelinn on the way to her room. "I would talk with you, lass."

She looked at the serious expression on her brother's face. "Come, we'll just go to my room." She put her arm in his and led the way. "Why are you not training with the men?"

"Because I need to talk to you Candelinn. This situation between you and The MacBaron bothers me more than a little."

They had reached her room and Fergus had closed the door behind them. "Candelinn, I have no way of protecting your virtue! I am but one man against a clan of barbarians. And I am angry at you because you do not seem to see the danger."

"I fear no danger here, Fergus. I am more protected here than at Lochindorb. Angus wishes me no

harm."

"Aye, he does. He is going to make you his mistress. I hear the clan discussing it." He waved his hand around the room. "Why he even put you in his mother's room, right next to his."

"His mother's room? I didn't realize." She looked around the room with more interest. She remembered Angus coming through the connecting door and decided Fergus must be right. His room was probably beyond that portal.

"See what I mean! Since I cannot fight the whole clan for you then you must help to save yourself." He was pacing back and forth across the floor, waving his hands in agitation.

Cadelinn went to her brother and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry you are disturbed, Fergus. You're right, I will move my things to another room this day. But who knows if that will still the passion between us. Fergus, I love him. When I am with him nothing else matters. I care not whether we are bound by the vows of marriage."

"Cadelinn! Don't speak thus," he pleaded. "You're sure, this is what you want?"

"Fergus, answer me this. Would you rather live at Lochindorb than here?"

"There is no evil here, like I felt around Sir John. And I like the clansmen; they are all honorable men and keep their Laird in high regard. Nae, I would rather be here with you, than with the Comyn clan."

"Good," she smiled. "Then let's take it one day at a time. Maybe nothing will happen to me. But remember, if it does, it will not be rape, for I truly love the man and will have no other."

Fergus nodded. His only concern was Sir Angus. How did they know he wasn't playing Cadelinn for a fool, taking a little revenge for the kidnap and ill use of his kinswoman by one of the Comyn ancestors? He left his sister's room feeling not much better than when he had entered.

Cadelinn waited until she was alone and stared at the adjoining door through which Angus had stepped this morning. Cadelinn felt herself pulled as if by some magical force to its portal. Her finger shook apprehensively as she reached for the large handle and slowly pulled it open. It swung easily on its well-oiled hinges, opening silently.

Her breath caught in her throat, her grip tightening on the door latch. Her heart pounded uncontrollably as she gazed about the large room. Heavy chests and wardrobes lined the walls, but the dominating presence was a massive four-poster bed, its heavy velvet curtains pulled back, revealing the ornately carved headboard, bearing the crest of the clan MacBaron. Heavy tapestries covered the walls and a rug covered most of the floor. The room gave off an air of total masculinity. The large easy chairs by the fireside were designed for a man of no small stature. It was Angus's private chambers!

Cadelinn cautiously entered the room listening for any sounds of approaching footsteps. She could still hear the clanking of weapons against each other in the courtyard and knew Angus and his men were still training. She worked her way around the wall, gingerly touching the soft skins and furniture with her fingertips, as if in a haze. The richly grained furnishings were like smooth satin to her touch. But still her eyes were riveted to the massive bed. Unconsciously she moved across the floor toward it. Her arm encircled one of the posts, weakly sliding down it until she sat on the edge of the bed. Her hand caressed the pelts near her side, her thoughts wandering to the image of Angus reclining against the thick furs. What would it be like to lie here with him, wrapped in his strong embrace, she wondered? A shudder of

excitement coursed through her body as she imagined the feel of his hands upon her.

Her dazed state of mind slowly cleared, reality taking its place. Candelinn suddenly leaped from the bed, backing away from her disturbing thoughts. She quickly retraced her steps, slamming the door behind her, escaping from her yearnings. Her body desired that which her mind refused to acknowledge.

Candelinn collapsed on her own bed, a wave of shame washing over her. Fergus was right, she could not stay this near Angus. His advances were becoming bolder and her own defenses were weakening rapidly. She knew if he came to her room in the night, she would probably not have the will to resist his advances. Her body trembled at the thought of his touch. She must distance herself from the temptation. With a castle this size, surely there was another room she could call her own.

Resolutely she stood and walked to the outer door. Determined to find safer quarters while Angus was still training, she slipped quietly through her own door into the dim hall. She would find an empty bedchamber as far as possible from the MacBaron chief.

Satisfied that no one was paying her close attention, Candelinn proceeded to inspect the upper regions of the castle, searching for a room that would meet her needs. There were several levels, all connected by winding stone stairways. Pitch-soaked torches lighted the narrow corridors as she made her way from door to door through the smoky haze of the wall-hung sconces.

None of the heavy wooded doors were locked, making her access to them a simple matter. Each room contained the furnishings of a bedchamber, their beds and chests waiting invitingly for its occupant or an honored guest. Candelinn dismissed these rooms as too rich for her needs and continued searching. The way grew narrower the further she traveled from Angus's chambers, and the central living core of the castle. At the opposite end of the castle she finally found the perfect room. It was deserted and dirty from lack of use. She crossed the grime-covered floor and pulled the dusty skin back from the window. Below her was the broad expanse of the sea, stretching to meet the horizon. The air was fresh against her face after the musty contents in the room behind her. The view was breathtaking.

To the right she could see the huge mountains gently sloping down to the flat lands along the beach. Small white crofter's cottages dotted the landscape and sheep, grazing on the countryside, were but tiny specks of white and black to her eye. It was a peaceful picture.

To the left her vision was blocked by nothing but the rising purple mountains desolate and stark in their intensity. Candelinn wondered once again what lay among those mountains. *What was it about those hard, craggy hills that Angus didn't want her to see?*

She recalled the cold, almost angry look that had crossed his face and the way his mood had instantly changed, when she had asked to go riding over them. What could have possibly upset him at her suggestion? Maybe there would be run-down crofter's cottages or some of his people starving. She brushed this aside as an impossibility. On their ride earlier in the day, they had passed many a crofter's cottage and all seemed in good repair and happy to see their Laird. He was well loved by his people. So it had to be something else. She shrugged her shoulders questioningly, then turned back into the room she meant to occupy.

It was similar to the room where she had spent the night before but smaller and the furnishings were less ostentatious. In this room the bed was small and the furniture more austere. It was closer to the type of room one of the chambermaids would sleep in, rather bare and harsh. But it would suit her purpose. If she was going to avoid him successfully, this would be the most logical choice.

The rest of the day Candelinn spent cleaning the tiny room and moving the few clothes Rowena had brought her into her new chambers. The light of day was rapidly diminishing inside the tiny room as she finished and stood back to examine her accomplishments. Although it was still a simple room, it shone with her efforts at making it tidier.

Candelinn looked at her hands now containing small blisters on the palms of each from scrubbing the crude floor. She would never have dreamed of cleaning like this. It just wasn't done for a lady of her stature to do menial labor. But it felt good to see the room and know she had contributed to its spotlessness. And Fergus would feel much better.

"God in heaven, preserve us! Me Lady, what have ye done?"

Candelinn turned to look at the shocked face of Rowena. She had her arms bent, her hands resting on her hips and staring around her.

"I moved my room. It is nothing for you to worry about."

"Does my Laird know?"

"No."

"He's going to have a screaming fit."

"Just don't mention it to him. He will never know the difference." She came over to the elderly woman and put her arm around her.

Rowena shook her head. "Aye, he will know soon enough and he's going to have a screaming fit I tell ye."

"Do not worry, Rowena. He will not be angry with you."

"'Tisn't me I'm worried about. Ye haven't seen the Laird's temper. But you will... aye, it's a comin'. Will ye look at ye'r hands!" The maid exclaimed taking her mistress's hands in her own. Palm up the blisters were swelled to breaking and Rowena gasped at the pain the lass must be feeling.

"It's nothing, Rowena. Bring me some salve and it will take the soreness away." Her stomach reminded her that she hadn't eaten in several hours. "Rowena, could you please bring me a light repast. I'm simply starved."

"But me Lady," Rowena interrupted. "'Tis only a short time before ye will dine. The Laird is back and is waiting for ye downstairs in the hall. One of the maids saw ye coming in this direction and I was just coming to give ye the message. Would you rather I tell him ye want to eat here in ye'r chambers?"

"No Rowena, that is not necessary. If you could bring me some fresh water so I could wash the dust from my hands and face, I will change into something more suitable and be right down."

Rowena nodded and swiftly left Candelinn to start preparing herself to dine with Angus. She shuffled down the corridor, shaking her head. The lass had no idea who she was messing with. She was going to feel the Laird's wrath for sure.

Angus had been waiting for Candelinn for a very long time. He was about to go to her room to get her when he looked up in time to see her descend the last few steps. With open admiration he watched her graceful figure move toward him. The soft gold velvet of her dress accented her natural coloring and the curved neckline of the too tight bodice dipped low over her full, round breasts.

Instantly Angus stepped to her side ushering her toward the table, his hand resting lightly at the small of her back. He seated her in the place of honor at his right and took his place, leaning toward her, giving her his full attention.

"I hope you've brought a healthy appetite. The MacBaron's do like to eat well." He smiled at her. He filled her plate with food as he would a child. The venison and rabbit stew, with a large slice of the rounded loaves of bread and a piece of cheese, for her first course.

She was so hungry she ate it all. She was careful however to keep her hands palm down, so the Laird would not notice her blisters with his ever-attentive look. Candelinn struggled to keep up the pretense of cheerful banter with her hands tender and sore to the touch. Angus was happy she didn't play with her food the way some women did and the fact that her appetite was healthy made him know she was comfortable in her new home.

Talk flourished with the meal and soon Candelinn joined in, readily accepted by the clan. Conversation was spirited and when the occasional remark concerning the Comyn's was brought forth either Fergus or she managed to parry the thrust with wit and good humor. She was introduced to all the men at the front table and was happy to learn most of their names. Once or twice her remarks were a little sharp and not altogether ladylike. But always Angus let her speak her mind and when she would look at him, daring him to argue the point, expecting his displeasure, he answered with a smile and a silent toast with his drinking cup, motioning her to continue on.

As the dinner progressed, talk settled into one major topic. Robert the Bruce and the crown of Scotland. Candelinn found herself sitting back in her chair, listening with enjoyment to the political bantering between Angus and his men. Her concentration gradually shifted to the few women seated around the room. All of them seemed much older, indeed they were of a very matronly dress and attitude and seldom joined the boisterous talk of the meal.

Candelinn straightened her shoulders, taking a deep breath as she arched her back, easing the stiffness from sitting so long on the hard chair. The already tight-fitting bodice strained to the limit, barely covering the pink of her nipples.

Angus bent low to her ear, his gaze riveted to the front of her gown, threatening to spill its bountiful treasure.

"My Lady, while I would personally find the idea of viewing your delectable breasts without restriction a most pleasurable pastime, I fear I would be hard put to hold my men at bay. May I suggest instead that you take pity on this poor soul and breathe with a little less profoundness."

Candelinn whirled her head in the direction of the mocking voice, nearly bumping his nose with hers, gazing point blank into laughing dark eyes. A crimson flush brushed her cheeks as she sat forward a little in her chair. She opened her mouth to retort when Colin, one of the clansmen farther down the table, broke into his chief's thoughts.

"Sir Angus, do you think the English will try to roust Sir James from castle Douglas?"

Angus faced the interrupter, one of the younger, more adventurous of his clan. "Aye, Colin. They have tried before and I'm sure they will continue until an English Lord resides in the Douglas stronghold. If Edward could take over the Douglas's and the Bruces he would control the border." He looked back at Candelinn, leaning forward primly in her chair, her breathing noticeably more shallow. There was still a pink blush to her cheeks. He tried to put her at ease by bringing her into the conversation.

"Your cousin has a castle near the border also, does he not, Candelinn?"

Her eyes met his, bringing her back to the question and temporarily forgetting her discomfort.

"Aye, my Laird. Dalswinton is near the border."

"Did you ever stay there, lass?"

"Nae. When Sir John traveled to the Lowlands, Fergus and I remained at Lochindorb."

"Aye, and Candelinn fair loved it when the chief was not in residence. Did ye not, lass?" Fergus interrupted. "She kept all that remained at the hunting seat of Comyn in a muddle, trying to outguess her next move." He chuckled at his new chief.

"Aye, I'll bet she did. 'Tis something I will keep in mind." Angus replied softly, watching Candelinn glare in anger at her brother.

She tossed her hair behind her shoulders. Angus was quick to grab it, caressing it lightly with his thumb across the back. His eyes stared into her shiny green orbs. When he pulled her hand to his lips he noticed the barely discernable flinch. A dark frown descended upon his face as he turned her hand over palm up, for closer inspection. The swollen blisters were revealed to him. A sharp gasp escaped Candelinn's lips as she winced in pain trying to withdraw from his firm grasp.

"What is the meaning of this?" He demanded, examining the reddened blisters. "What in Christ's name have you been doing?"

Candelinn raised sheepish eyes to look directly into his reproachful face. "'Tis nothing serious. I but did a little cleaning..."

"Cleaning?" His eyebrows raised in indignation. "We have maids for any cleaning you may feel necessary." Tenderly he touched the painful hands. "Just what were you cleaning, anyway?" He raised a skeptical glance in her direction.

"My room," she murmured.

"Your room!" He barely controlled his anger. "You are not here to do the work of a servant. This is your home now." A slow smile eased the seriousness of his face. "Lass... sweet lass. If there is anything you want done or desire, just say the word. But never, ever do this to yourself again." A light kiss brushed the injured palms, sealing the sincerity of his request.

He released her hands and stood up. "Duncan, I will meet you at the stables and see that new filly you've been babbling about since morn."

"Aye, my Laird." Duncan beamed, heading out the door.

Angus turned to Candelinn. "Have Rowena put something on those hands. And then go to your chambers and get some rest. No more work!" His voice brooked no argument and she only nodded.

Candelinn rose from the table after he had left the room and made her way to her new chambers. Alone there she undressed, changed into a sleeping gown and flopped down on the skins of her bed. Angus had said this was her home. If only that could be. When she was in his presence erratic things happened to her pulses and her usually sensible mind abandoned her, leaving her completely irrational and unable to cope with the simplest things. She looked at her palms where he had given them such a tender kiss. She wanted so to feel his arms around her holding her close. It must be because she was so tired from the unused to labor she had done this day. She was just tired, that's what was causing her to have such heated thoughts. Her body warmed just thinking of him. She closed her eyes and a feeling of drowsiness overcame her. Soon she was fast asleep.

Eight

A loud crash woke her. With a start she sat straight up in her bed. Angus stood in the reflection of the fireplace that had burned low in her bedchambers. His legs were braced apart, his hands on his hips and he glared down at her in a black temper.

"What the devil do you think you are doing in this room?"

"I was trying to sleep."

"Get the hell up!"

"Don't curse at me like that!"

In two angry strides he was at her bedside. She clutched at the coverlets in vain as he jerked them away from her, throwing them on the floor.

"Now!" He yanked her from the bed, dragging her out the door, literally pulling her down the hall one step at a time. When they got to the stairs he picked her up and carried her down the rest of the way. They passed a frightened Rowena huddled in the shadows, cringing from the savage wrath of her Laird.

Candelinn heard her voice as they passed by her. "I told you he was going to have a screamin' fit."

Candelinn could not help the grin that crossed her face at the elderly clanswoman's words. She should be trembling in fright but instead she had her arms around Angus's neck and rested her head against his shoulder. He smelled so good. His hair was still damp from his recent bath.

Angus ignored her and continued on till he reached his room. He burst through the door and kicked it shut behind him. Without pausing for breath he stormed across the room and threw her onto his bed.

When Candelinn realized she was not in her old room but in Angus's she got to her knees and moved to

the far side of the bed, looking back at the mad man before her. He stared down at her with outrage burning in his eyes, his breath coming in short gasps.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Angus saw no fear in the woman whose eyes looked so innocently back at him. God, she provoked him. "You don't seem to like the bed next door, so you can sleep here instead," was his feeble answer. He had gone in to kiss her goodnight and when she wasn't there he immediately thought she had run away. He had never known such pain at the thought of losing her.

"I was trying to distance myself from you."

"Why, for God's sake?"

"Because when you kiss me, I cannot think straight. And all I could think of is you... and the fact that I... wanted you to make love to me." There she had said it all.

How he loved hearing her answer. He put his knees on the bed and came against her. He grabbed her and pulled her into his arms. His mouth covered hers with such hunger she could hardly breathe.

With her confession all restraint disappeared and she wrapped her arms around his neck pulling his mouth harder against her own. Her lips parted and her tongue entered his mouth to wrap around his. She sucked at his until it was fully into her mouth and heard him groan. He released her lips, still holding her in his iron embrace. His breath was hot against her neck and he kissed her there. She bent her head away giving him access to silky skin. Her body throbbed with expectancy for the unknown she was aching for.

"I will slow down and take it easy, my love. I want this night to be one we will remember the rest of our lives. You are mine and I will have you. I will wake tomorrow with the taste of you on my lips." He let her go and got off the bed to shed his clothes, leaving them to fall in a pile on the floor, never taking his eyes from the woman in the bed. He left only his braies on so as not to shock her too soon.

Cadelinn regarded the dark hairs on his chest as his shirt was removed, the strong muscles rippling in his arms as he removed the rest of his clothing except for his braes. *He was magnificent!* What was it she read in his eyes? Was it a feeling of love for her? There was a tenderness hidden deep that she had never before seen. A tenderness that was for her alone. He pulled her to stand beside him as he gently untied her nightrail and pulled it over her head tossing it on the floor.

She was the loveliest thing he had ever seen. And he wanted her for all time. He ran his hands caressingly down over her body. "You're exquisite." He opened his mouth but further words were choked off with his emotion.

He pulled her to him, pressing their bodies together before his lips found her mouth again. His tongue plunged deep, tasting her sweetness. When his tongue withdrew hers followed it, never losing the touch of it.

He finally stepped back to stare intently into her eyes. Their gasping breaths were the only sounds in the quiet room. "Now you finish undressing me," he said softly his voice barely a croak.

She had felt his swollen manhood pressing against her body but her virgin mind was hardly prepared for the protruding bulge when she glanced at his braies. Her eyes flew to his in one small gesture of fear but the glow in his eyes was somehow reassuring. Cadelinn took a deep breath before she reached out with

trembling fingers to his waist to untie the drawstring in his last remaining garment of clothing. She fumbled, untying the knot, but he stood devouring her naked body with his eyes, not offering to help.

When the material fell about his feet revealing all to Candelinn's eyes, he gently picked her up to lay her back onto the bed, his body crushing her into its folds.

He draped his knee over her as his mouth closed over hers in fierce possessiveness. Her heartbeats came rapidly against his chest. The natural instincts of women since the time of Eve took over and brought them fresh and new into her mind. Her hands moved over his back, the muscles rippling beneath her palms. His lips continued to move passionately over hers again and again, each time with more vigor and strength.

Candelinn could taste the slight lingering flavor of the *usquebaugh* and the results intoxicated her, her own mouth responding in a way she could never have imagined.

He ran strong fingers over her nude body as she lay next to him. His hand caressed her breasts before his lips moved away from her mouth, leaving a trail of fire from her neck down to the firm mound held in his hand. His tongue teased its peak into hardness and he gathered as much as he could into his mouth. Candelinn groaned with the fever to which it brought her. His passionate heat consumed her and the building within her gathered momentum making her want to explode.

His fingers left her breast, though he still kept the peak in his mouth, while his tongue raced back and forth across its crest. He slowly edged his body to her side so his hands could explore all of her perfect body that had tormented his mind for so long.

Every inch of Candelinn's body was tingling with a new unknown sensation. An unfulfilled craving deep within her crying for more. Her hands ran lightly through the dark curly hair of his chest, touching one of his male hardened nipples, hesitating to feel again, arousing Angus more than her inexperienced mind could dream. He groaned deep in his throat.

When his hand slid down between her thighs to rub firmly across the tender nub nestled in her silky folds, Candelinn gasped at the pleasure pouring into her body. When his fingers entered the moist center of her being her body arched upward, searching for more. She thought she was going to faint from pleasure. Her head rolled back and forth on her shoulders as his thumb rubbed against her nub driving her wild. His mouth claimed hers once again with a rapid moving tongue, teasing with its sensuous movements.

At the moment she thought she was going to explode with this new and wonderful feeling, Angus parted her thighs and brought his body between her legs. She could feel the pulsating manhood, resting at her entrance. He slipped himself a little inside of her and stopped.

Her body ached for a release from this torment and the man stopped. She looked at him and saw his hesitation. "I love you," she whispered pulling his hips closer to the junction of their legs. "I want all of you. Now." She kissed him long and hard as her body arched upward to meet him as he plunged deep. He felt the virginal restriction give way and her body stiffen in the pain of first love. He stopped his movements until she started to move her hips against him seeking her fulfillment. His body took control of his movements and he held her buttocks tight as he plunged into her body over and over.

Candelinn took up the rhythm, urging him on. The initial pain had been replaced by an indefinable ecstasy. Her back arched to meet him thrust for thrust. Her senses were exploding. Her hands could not bring him close enough and he also seemed to squeeze her tighter into his embrace, forcing himself as

deep within her as possible. Finally the heavens exploded and she screamed his name and she heard him moan hers as the peak of their climax was reached together. They remained locked together for some moments of time, waiting for the world to stop its spinning.

Their bodies slowly fell back to earth. His breath hot against her neck whispered to her in the old tongue of the Gael, which she had never learned to understand. Candelinn knew they were love words and she remained cuddled next to him. His heartbeats finally slowed down to normal and he slid to her side, keeping her in his embrace. He kissed her temple and his eyes absorbed her passion-flushed face before he tenderly brushed a stray curl from her forehead. Finally he closed his eyes, a smile upon his face.

Candelinn relaxed against him, her lids heavy with sexual exhaustion, a sigh of satisfaction escaping her lips. Making love had to be the most wonderful experience of her life. She wished she were not so tired, for she would like to do it all over again. A feeling of contentment settled upon her as he lay next to her comforting her with Gaelic words of endearment. The mighty warrior had taken not only her body and her virginity, but also the very soul from within her. She was his for all time. With her cheek against the soft down of his chest she snuggled deep into his embrace, her arm thrown over his stomach. She drifted off to sleep, dreaming of her knight in shining armor, the MacBaron tartan hanging from his left shoulder.

He made love to her most of the night and once again as the light of gray dawn slowly crept into the room. It was as if his passions were unquenchable and he couldn't get enough of her. Like he was trying to fill his cup to last him a lifetime. At last, finally content, he kissed her lips softly and lay back and closed his eyes.

Candelinn awoke the next morning in the soft feather bed. She stretched her arms luxuriously, keeping her eyes closed against the bright morning sun. A smile creased her lips thinking of the night and the many hours of lovemaking that had passed between them before dawn had filled the room. Her cheeks grew pink in embarrassment as she remembered throwing all caution to the winds and responding passionately to Angus's expert tutoring.

She sat up and saw her discarded nightrail on the floor beside the bed. She reached for it and slowly slipped it over her bare shoulders. Meanwhile she noticed that Angus's clothes were no longer in a pile on the floor nor anywhere else in the room.

Candelinn knew by the angle at which the sun filtered into the room that she had slept overlate. She rose with a bounce, a lighthearted tune escaping her lips as she crossed the room to look out the window at the MacBaron lands stretching before her. Today they were even more beautiful, for today they were much closer to her heart. She knew it was all Angus's doing, this feeling of contentment, but nonetheless she felt exhilarated.

Candelinn decided to dress in the nicest gown that she could find before going down to encounter Angus. Today she wanted to look her best. She smiled to herself as she went through the door to her adjoining chambers. She was not surprised to find a bath waiting for her and when she opened the door of the wardrobe to find her few pieces of clothing had miraculously returned to their former spot. Rowena had been busy.

Bathed and refreshed, Candelinn walked down the hall to the door to the stairway. Before opening the door to descend the steps into the hall she stopped to catch her breath and felt her hair to see if it were still in place. Self-consciously she pushed open the door expecting to find the chief and his clansmen gathered below her. But an empty room greeted her. Empty of people, with one lonely place set at the head of the table.

She went down the steps and into the room. She was curious about everyone's absence and had just got to her place at the table when one of the serving maids entered through the opposite door leading to the cooking area.

"Good day to ye, me Lady," the small maid held her hands together in front of her. "Would ye be ready to eat now?"

"Yes, Jocelyn, please," Cadelinn answered. "I'm sorry I'm so late, but I am indeed famished," musing to herself that making love all night had certainly improved her appetite. Patiently she sat at the empty place waiting for the return of the serving maid with her food.

When all was set in front of her she ventured to question the young woman.

"Did your chief eat much earlier?"

"Aye, me Lady. The Laird and the clansmen have gone long since."

"I presume he won't return until this evening then?" Cadelinn inquired, trying to sound nonchalant, and not reveal her disappointment at not waking in time to kiss him before his departure.

"Och, nae, me Lady. They will be gone for several days. A messenger came at dawn from Sir Robert de Bruce, himself. Even me own Archie has gone with the Laird to give aid. They will rout the English from our Scotland borders yet."

Cadelinn's heart stopped. He had gone to war! Whatever would she do if something were to happen to him?

"Is my brother still here?"

"Nae, mistress. He also rode with the chief." The maid stood nervously by the side of the table, wringing a corner of her apron.

So the two men most important in her life had gone into danger. She did not like to be the woman left behind to worry about her men. This was a totally new experience for her and her heart felt heavy with anxiety and dread.

After only a few mouthfuls of food she found her appetite gone. She found herself leaving the room and wandering listlessly through the halls. Without realizing where her footsteps had taken her until the cold air hit her face, she was standing in the courtyard. Looking around as if coming out of a trance she saw Duncan coming her way. His middle-aged form moved like a younger man and he stood straight and proud in front of her. His usual scowl furrowed his brow.

"Would the mistress like to ride today?" She thought his voice sounded sharp.

"Are you upset because you were left to be my guard, Duncan?"

"Nae. 'Tis an honor to be worthy of the care of ye, my Lady. The Laird knows what he is about. I'll saddle the horses right away." Duncan turned and moved across the courtyard in the direction of the stables.

Cadelinn stood in isolation watching the clansmen that were either too old or too young for battle, going

about their daily chores. Each one in their turn gazing with admiration at the chief's lass.

Slowly she strolled in the direction Duncan had gone and wrinkled her nose as she passed a small shed with a fence around it. It was where the chickens and eggs were used for the table and feathers were being dried for ticking. From the squawking coming from inside the wooden shed, Candelinn knew this would also be where the falcons trained for hunting were kept. The stench from the wet feathers was stifling and she quickened her pace to meet Duncan just as he was coming out of the stables, leading two horses. One was a mare, a smaller version of the huge black horse Angus rode, except for the stockinged white feet.

Candelinn approached it gently, putting her hand out letting the velvet nose nuzzle her open palm while her other hand rubbed down its sleek neck.

"She's beautiful!" She spoke as to herself but Duncan had silently approached her side and answered.

"Aye, she is. The Laird thought ye might like her. She was brought in last night from one of the other steadings so we'd best keep the ride short so as not to tire her."

"You mean she was brought to Glencairn especially for me?" Candelinn questioned, a surprised look on her face. She was very touched that Angus would be so thoughtful. He was a kind man.

Duncan's face showed no response and only a grunt came from his mouth. He bent over to cup his hands to give her a boost into the saddle. "Did ye not bring a cloak? The winds off the sea get cold this time of year."

Duncan, she decided, was the epitome of a dour Scot. Since she'd had no time to make a riding habit, she sat sidesaddle and was just settling the material of her gown over her legs. "Perhaps I should go back inside and find something," Candelinn started to get back off the horse.

Duncan waved his arm to stop her. He stepped through a small door into the gatehouse. He soon returned, carrying the familiar tartan of his clan and handed it to her.

"Duncan, do you have an extra bow and arrow? If we happen to pass some game, I would love the practice."

He stared at her as if she were crazy. She read the look. A woman wanting to hunt? But he nodded and went back into the stables, returning with his own bow and arrow and a spare for her, which he handed her.

She immediately slipped her arms in the straps of the quiver and rested the arrows against her back. The bow she draped over the pommel of her saddle.

Candelinn draped the woolen plaid around her shoulders and decided humorously that the MacBaron tartans must be numerous to be so easily at hand when needed. But as the two riders crossed the heavy timber and iron drawbridge, Candelinn was thankful for the sturdy wool and the warmth it gave her.

Duncan led the way, taking a trail unknown to Candelinn. As soon as they crossed the clearing, the gillie turned sharply into the trees away from the sea and its sandy beaches. The small black mare hesitated at the swishing branches of the fir returning to their original position behind Duncan. She threw her head high, her nostrils flaring, and pranced to the side nervously, refusing to obey her rider's command. Gently Candelinn stroked the sleek neck, crooning softly to settle her. She turned her back down the trail, then

retraced their steps at a walk. Candelinn's soothing words never faltered as she eased the snorting mare into the edge of the forest. After penetrating the dense foliage several yards, the forest floor cleared, leaving a thick brown carpet of needles to cushion their steps.

In a relaxed position, with one leg thrown easily over the pommel of his saddle, Duncan watched his young mistress approach.

"Ye handled her well, my Lady. I've been watching from here the whole of it and I can tell ye the Laird would be proud." He gifted her with words of admiration that did not come easily to him.

"Thank you, Duncan," She nodded her head in a brief bow. She knew what it took for him to say those kind words and felt honored. "She's a little skittish yet, but we'll get along fine." Candelinn bent over the flowing mane, patting the black neck reassuringly.

Duncan placed his foot once more in the stirrup and turned his horse deeper into the wooded forest.

Candelinn followed his lead, feeling grateful for being away from the castle into the fresh air.

The man that was always foremost in her thoughts popped once more into her mind. Perhaps Duncan could answer a few of the many questions plaguing her.

"Duncan, do Sir Angus and Richard have any sisters?"

"Nae." He didn't even turn his head to acknowledge her.

"Are both their parents dead?" She knew the father had to be dead for Angus to be Laird but had heard nothing about the mother.

"Aye, long since." He continued to stay ahead of her, his back stiffening at her persistent questions.

"How did they die?" She asked, hungry for any information she could get about the man she had so willingly made love to the night before.

Finally Duncan halted his horse and turned in the saddle, a dour look upon his face.

"Perhaps, ye should ask the Laird, m'Lady," he said sternly.

Candelinn felt she had been put firmly in her place for being so inquisitive. She opened her mouth to answer but he had already turned around in the saddle and his horse was moving away from her. She clamped her mouth closed, and kneed her horse to follow.

When they were in the thickness of the forest, Candelinn suddenly heard the crushing sound of an animal moving through the bushes in their direction. She watched as a wild boar broke into view, heading straight in their direction. Without thought she grabbed her bow and fitted the arrow, aiming and releasing it with rapid speed. It hit the head of the boar at the same time the arrow from Duncan's arrow hit. They were within an inch of each other and the boar died instantly. Candelinn was overjoyed that she had not lost her knack. She smiled at Duncan, only to find him gawking at her with his mouth open.

She fought to keep from laughing at the poor dour Scot. He looked absolutely aghast.

"You aren't going to faint, are you Duncan?"

"Aye, I may--I am that shocked."

She did giggle then. "I have been known to shock men before, so you are not alone."

"Does the Laird know you shoot like that?"

"No. And I'd appreciate it if we kept it our little secret for now. I would not make him upset."

Duncan nodded and turned once more to stare at the two arrows sticking out of the head of the dead animal. He started his mount once more, moving in the direction they had been going.

Silently they wove their way through the trees and around the wild berry thickets, crossing an occasional stream. Duncan did not offer further conversation, preferring instead to direct his attention toward the passing scenery. Candelinn too, in respect for Duncan, rode in silence, admiring the beautiful countryside belonging to The MacBaron. Golden shafts of sunlight filtered down through the dense evergreen boughs touching the floor of the forest like spotlights. And each sunny spot boasted tiny white wildflowers growing in clusters eager for the light. Tall huckleberry bushes tugged gently at her tartan as if bidding her stay. Several times small woodland deer were startled by their silent procession and sped gracefully from sight.

Candelinn could see the break of sky ahead a short distance and knew they were returning to open spaces once more. She followed Duncan obediently, though reluctant to leave the peaceful surroundings.

The brightness of day blinded her momentarily as she blinked away the tears from too much light. A quick look about her showed the Castle Glencairn on the far side of the meadow. They had come full circle and Candelinn, much to her chagrin, had not even noticed the direction in which they had been riding all afternoon.

"Duncan, you rascal. You've been leading me in a circle all afternoon," she chuckled gleefully, slapping her leg with her gloved hand. "Some woodsman I am. If Fergus hears of this... Duncan, promise you will not breathe a word. He would never let me live it down." She tried to bring a friendly atmosphere back that they'd had at the beginning of the ride.

Duncan shrugged his shoulders noncommittally and turned his horse toward the castle.

"Duncan! Wait Duncan! You must promise me." She galloped after him, slowing as she drew abreast. "Come on, Duncan." She pleaded laughingly. "Speak to me. Say you'll not give me away."

Duncan's rigid features held their doubtful frown as he continued on unmindful of the nagging beside him, plaguing him like a worrisome mosquito on a hot summer's night. At the drawbridge, he turned and looked into mischievous green eyes, sparkling up at him. That was his downfall. This comely lass, egging him on to humor was more than even an experienced warrior could fight. His mouth twitched at the corner, which was the closest thing to a smile in many a day and the wrinkles around his eyes, deepened. If the truth would have it, he could not bear to have his bonnie wee mistress shamed any more than she.

"I'll say naught, my Lady. Never fear," he answered softly. Then clearing his throat gruffly, once more painting the appearance of the dour Scott he portrayed, he led the way into the courtyard.

Candelinn, once more lighthearted, followed the warrior into Glencairn. Her mood turned somber as she stared at the cold forbidding walls rising before her. It was so empty looking. Empty at least of the one

man that made it feel less imposing.

Cadelinn faced the direction of the cold mountains and craigs outlining the skyline and ventured to ask her escort one more question.

"Duncan, could we ride in the direction of the hills on the morrow? I would love to investigate that part of the lands your Laird controls."

"Nae, lass," his answer was curt. "My Laird would have my head if I let ye ride among those rocky craigs."

"But why, Duncan?" She braved. "What is so mysterious about those mountains?"

He kicked his steed and walked him the last short distance to the stable, once more ending the conversation abruptly. There was nothing for Cadelinn to do except follow him.

Damn! She thought. *I'm going to ride those mountains if it's the last thing I do!* She took one last look over her shoulder at the snow-covered peaks, and closed the gap to reach Duncan's side before they dismounted. She handed the reins to the stable boy and walked sadly toward the castle.

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Angus stood beside his friend, James Douglas, beneath the canopy of the trees in the forest surrounding the Douglas ancestral home. Their clansmen, still mounted behind them, remained silent and ready, awaiting The Douglas's command.

Jamie Douglas, as he was called by his close friends, looked with reminiscence at the Douglas Castle, its stone walls reaching into the misty fog. His gaze took in the surroundings where he had lived and played as a child--the Kirk of St. Bride, erected in honor of his family's saint; near the kirk lay the small village of Douglasdale, still slumbering in the early daylight, the mist hanging heavy over the rooftops. Silence prevailed except for the Douglas water, a narrow burn, rippling through the quiet barony.

Angus knew what his friend was thinking and his heart ached for the loss. Jamie had called and he and his men had responded. That in itself would let this Highland chief know his friend was with him in this heartwrenching deed.

The Douglas's eyes fell on a small cottage near the castle grounds at the edge of the wood. It was the home of Thomas Dickson, his father's old and trusted servant. He looked over his shoulder and silently motioned one of his clan to dismount and come to his side. When he approached, James pointed to the Dickson cottage.

"Someone should inform Tommy what we are about this day, so he will not be harmed."

"Aye, Sir James. I will see to it myself."

"Tell him that we will attack when the English leave the kirk of St. Bride after services. There is a quarter of a mile of clear ground between the kirk and the castle gates so we will have them in the open. The cry of the Douglas slogan will be the warning. He is to make certain that none of the loyal Douglas followers go to kirk this day. If they want to pray, tell them to do it afterwards when there will be a need."

"Aye, m'Laird." The man at his side nodded before turning and disappearing into the wood, working his

way toward the side closest to the servant's whitewashed cottage.

The morning seemed overlong and the men of both clans, having dismounted, sat quietly under the ever-dripping branches of the trees. Even the sky was foreboding with its heavy clouds hanging close over Douglasdale.

James Douglas looked at the man standing by his side and placed a heavy-gauntleted hand upon his shoulder. "Angus, my friend, I want you to know I am honored by your presence beside me. I will never forget this that you do by my side."

Angus put his hand on top of his friends. "I just wish there was more I could do."

Both men turned and watched while the castle gates opened and a procession of some two score men walked in the direction of the kirk. The time passed with interminable slowness while James and Angus and their kinsmen waited for the doors of the small kirk to close behind its members. Once the enemy was inside and hidden from view, James motioned the clans behind him to move out of hiding. Stealthily, they moved one at a time, across the uneven ground to the kirk. They would wait for the service to finish and stay hidden until the entire English procession was once more in the open on the way back to the castle.

Angus leaned against the cold walls, waiting for the sound of the opening of the doors. He and his clan were on one side of the kirk and The Douglas and his clan on the other. Once the English were out of the kirk they would be surrounded on two sides.

The swinging doors drew his attention once again to the moment at hand. He jerked his head back sharply so as not to be seen around the corner of the kirk. The Englishmen, deep in conversation with each other, did not notice the score of tartan clad men from the two clans at their backs.

The leader of the clan Douglas did not see the bent frail figure of Thomas Dickson until it was too late to warn him. He was coming across the open space of ground waving his sword in his hand, bellowing, "A Douglas! A Douglas!" Before James could echo the call to alert his men, an English soldier had pulled his sword and slain the elderly servant.

Hatred raged through both chiefs as they led their men into the fray. Their mighty arms were quick and deadly as the Scottish warriors charged into their midst swinging their heavy claymores at all sides. The clans combined made fast work of the few Englishmen not already slain by the two leaders.

When the fracas ended, of those that remained alive, most were wounded. Eight frightened Englishmen were led at sword point toward Castle Douglas.

The gates of the castle had been left standing open, making it easy for the two Lairds to enter with their prisoners. The only remaining occupants within the castle were the Scots porter and cook, forced into service by the invading English. Busy with their duties, they knew not of what had happened in the kirkyard. The cook was busy preparing the midday meal when the Scottish warriors entered and The Douglas was more than happy to take over the roll of host in his own home. The men had survived days on bannock cakes, *usquebaugh* and fresh spring water and their appetites fairly screamed with the odor of freshly cooked meat.

James sat at the head of the table with Angus on his right, filling their stomachs once more from the Douglas cellar. The men around the tables were boisterous over their victory, eating and drinking aplenty as they hurled insults at the prisoners chained together in the corner of the room.

Once sated, James Douglas relaxed back into his chair thinking what must be done next. He faced Angus at his side. "It's an empty victory this day. It will just be a matter of time before more of the English will come with greater number and stronger reinforcements. "

"Aye, 'tis so. Even if you could hold your own, they would wait until you were gone helping The Bruce once again to take it back away from you. I would wish it were not so," Angus replied.

The decision lay heavy on Jamie's mind and stuck like bile in his throat. He had promised Sir Robert the Bruce that he would give him allegiance with his life if need be to see him on the throne of Scotland, and he would keep his word. He and Angus had both sworn fealties to The Bruce. He glanced once more at his friend taking a long swallow of his ale. At least Angus was not bothered by these damnable English, constantly trying to take over his lands. James realized he could not help Sir Robert and protect his lands at the same time. He could not be in both places at once. So, since the Castle Douglas was not safe with him gone, he would make it impossible for any Englishman to reside there. Never again would an Englishman live in his ancestral home.

A cruel smile twisted his mouth as he sat drinking from his cup. Abruptly he sat foreword, pounding his fist on the table.

"We are going to raze this castle, my lads. But first... we are going to fill the Douglas larder, to its brim."

"Here, here!" echoed the men, not yet fully understanding the words of their chief. Angus understood however and felt a heavy burden settle over his shoulders. May God never force him to make such a decision.

James ordered everything that was easily transportable carried out of the castle and taken to a place of safety. Gold, silver, clothing, some furnishings, ammunition, and armour, the things that would be of greatest use and need. Next he ordered all the bins containing grains, corn, meal and malt opened and their contents dumped into the cellar of the castle.

When the last storage bin was empty, the prisoners were brought forth. They stood huddled together at the door leading down into the dark regions of the cellar fearful of what was about to take place. One by one they were put to the sword and their corpses thrown down the steps, their blood mixing with the grain below them. Their carcasses sank beneath the layer of corn, like bodies in a bog of quicksand. Each man had been put to death by the Douglas chief himself, feeling somewhat revenged for the death of Thomas Dickson, a frail old man that could not have possibly defended himself. James then commanded the heads of the barrels and puncheons to be knocked out, letting the liquid of ale and wine mix together as it ran over the carnage. Last of all he dumped all the salt into the pit, making it all together unusable for the enemy English.

An eerie calmness settled upon the men as they gathered about the chief of the Douglas clan, The MacBaron standing by his side. For several minutes James Douglas stood motionless, his back to them, his stance straight and proud as he stared into the open hole, his expression dark and unrelenting as he viewed the grisly scene of destruction below him.

"Clear the castle," he said, a tone of finality in the quiet timbre of his voice. "'Tis time to fire it." A bitter hatred burned in his soul. Hatred for King Edward, for the invading English soldiers, and sorrow for the home he was about to lose because of them.

The servants fled the castle as the clansmen splashed oil on every burnable surface inside its walls. With

the remaining oil, they soaked the torches, setting them alight.

Angus watched while James alone took several torches in hand and walked up the steps for the last time and threw them inside the front doors of the castle. He waited as they caught, sending the oil fed flames rapidly throughout the castle.

James stood at the door, his features devoid of expression until the intense heat drove him back to the courtyard. It was done. There was nothing else he could do. He turned his back on the blazing inferno and ordered his men to mount. He shook Angus's hand and pounded him on the back, but uttered not a word. Without looking back at the fires that were lighting the sky, James kicked his steed into a gallop, yelling over his shoulder to his men.

"To Annandale! To the aid of Robert the Bruce!" He saluted Angus as his men also headed north.

"To Glencairn, lads! I would like to be home!" Angus kicked his steed into motion leading his men away from the tragedy behind them.

~ * ~

Cadelinn wandered the halls of Glencairn aimlessly. Her only companions were the great watchdogs who had befriended her with unnatural easiness and padded quietly at her side. Her hands rested on their craggy heads, as they accompanied her through the echoing corridors of the deserted castle. With careful deliberation she memorized the shields of all the ally clans hanging from the walls. Each shield bore its own colors and crest. She spent hours studying the intricate embroidering on the tapestries telling of the history of the clan MacBaron and their many heroic battles.

It did not take long for the over-active Cadelinn to become completely bored within the confining walls of granite.

The women of the clan, with the exception of Rowena, were still a little in awe of the Comyn lass who wandered through the castle halls and chambers. Except for a nod when encountered, few words had passed between them. If she could only convince them that she was not the enemy her last name implied. Cadelinn was also aware that by now they knew she was not the lady of the manor, but their chief's mistress. The cleaning maid had undoubtedly spread the word of her night in the Laird's bed. Her own unmade bed would have been evidence she could not deny. Through no fault of her own she would never be honored as their Lady. That honor was saved for the Laird's wife only. She must earn their respect and friendliness, she knew well, but Angus did not make it any easier for her.

She wandered to the window and looked out over the waves of the sea rippling with the incoming tide. She trailed her fingers along the window's ledge, and envisioned the tall proud warrior astride his powerful destrier leading his men into battle. That he was a mighty warrior she was convinced but anything could happen on the field of war. She would not think of what life would be like without him. She forced those thoughts from her mind immediately.

Perhaps a ride would calm her restless spirit. It was a cold grey day but she was undaunted. Even a chill was better than being cooped up in the confines of the castle. Her prison walls were stifling to one who was accustomed to her own pursuits. She missed Angus. She even missed Fergus. At least he was family, someone that she could talk with freely.

She crossed the room to a cupboard built into the walls, and opening it, removed the man's breeks she had kept there since her arrival. She threw them on the bed, and quickly undressed and donned the

breeches, shirt and boots. She threw her hair behind her shoulders in a gesture of defiance and strode out the door. She could imagine the shocked look on Duncan's face and chuckled mischievously. With his chief gone he would be powerless to stop her.

The last time she had gone riding, she'd spent the entire day following the dour Scot about the countryside. Dressed in the attire of a proper young lady she had been forever rescuing her long skirts from the clutching branches of the bushes lining the path. She skipped lightly down the stairs, her green eyes sparkling as she imagined the look of consternation she would cause on the gillie's face.

"Hah!" she scoffed aloud, letting the front door swing closed behind her. She could hardly wait to see Duncan's face. His eyes would fairly pop out of his head. *The old curmudgeon!* She hummed a jaunty tune as she crossed the courtyard in anticipation of confronting her guard.

In the stable, the only shocked look she received was from the wide eyes of the stable boy. While he saddled her mare, he kept glancing at her over his shoulder only to quickly turn away, his cheeks pink with embarrassment at her boldness.

Duncan had not yet appeared when Cadelinn was mounted and ready to leave. She looked around at the empty courtyard, an idea forming in her mind. If she could just get through the gate without being stopped she would be able to ride straight south to the mysterious mountains. She pulled the tartan over her head like a hood and steadily walked her horse toward the gate, holding her breath as the portcullis opened with aggravating slowness. Once across the drawbridge she would be free. Free to ride where she pleased. Free to gallop across the moors as she used to do without Angus or Duncan on her trail.

Once away from the castle she threw back the hood of the MacBaron tartan, setting her flowing, copper-hair loose. The breeze blew frosty off the sea, refreshing in its crispness. She shook her head with abandon, taking the full force of the gusting wind in her face. She spurred the black mare into a ground covering canter, setting her direction for the mountains jutting against the grey-clouded sky.

Oblivious of the cold, Cadelinn rode her mare continuously southward and climbed the grassy braise at the base of the ominous mountains before her. The rugged terrain grew more challenging to the nimble footed horse. Cadelinn pushed forward, picking her way down the steep sides of a gorge no longer passable by the bridge, long since deteriorated to splinters of rotted wood, hanging precariously by a single strand of raveling rope. Forced to dismount by the sheer steepness of the far side, she followed the little mare, letting her pick her way to the top using her tail for a hand hold on the nearly vertical climb. Once more on a crest of the rise she remounted. It was like exploring a wild deserted land. The few sheep she sighted were stragglers from other herds and now in their wild state they kept their distance. The only sounds accompanying her journey were the steady beats of the mare's footsteps on the rocky path. To a less stalwart soul, the quiet would have been unnerving.

The trail was uneven and strewn with sharp boulders. She passed through a copse of birch bordering a swiftly flowing stream. The branches of the trees dripped freely with the heavy mist that had started to settle around her. On she traveled, as if pulled by a lodestone. She must find out the secret of these mountains. The purple heather on the smooth and breasted hills was the only color except for occasional clumps of bright anemones that clung to the crevices of the rocks. The blues and violets of the mountains as she climbed seemed to blend with the darkening sky. The force of the wind increased, whipping her hair into a tangled frenzy. The rain began to fall in earnest, soaking through her clothing in a matter of minutes. Stubbornly she trudged ahead.

Cadelinn kept sight of the sea, always bearing in the same direction so she would not become lost in her strange surroundings. The air turned icy, blowing against her cheeks, turning them red and chapped.

The rain-drenched tartan hung limply around her shoulders. Her hair clung to her cheeks in damp tendrils. The smell of crushed wet rushes, sweet-soaked heather and peaty mud filled her nostrils. She shivered as she looked back to see that a blanket of fog had descended behind her, completely blocking her way home.

"Damn!" She swore out loud. Now she was stuck in this God-forsaken place until the mist blew away with the sea breezes. Surely somewhere nearby on the side of this mountain there would be a crofter's cottage or shepherd's hut to take refuge in. Not too far ahead she saw a high cliff looming high into the fog, threatening to cut off her path forward. She urged her mare slowly around its base, being careful not to slip on the rain-slickened rocks. Candelinn looked up searching for some break in the low-lying clouds. If she went high enough, perhaps she would be out of the mist and more able to see her way, she reasoned. Then she could find shelter of some sort and wait out the night's storm. Darkness rapidly surrounded her and she dismounted, leading her horse along the unfamiliar path. The mare had become jumpy and nervous as they continued to climb the black hills to snow level and Candelinn stopped several times to rub her nose and pat her neck reassuringly, her gentle voice soothing the frightened animal.

Patches of snow dotted the ground and Candelinn realized that all too soon the rain would change to snow and her need to find shelter was becoming more and more urgent. Once more she climbed onto the mare's back, the cold wet saddle adding to her misery. Nearing the crest of a particularly rugged ridge, the solitary cry of the curlew cut the air and scared the horse, causing her to rear. Candelinn was caught off guard and she fell with a thud onto the wet turf. Unharmful, but shaken, she lay there hearing the hooves of the horse gathering speed as it traversed back down the mountainside. She sat up and looked around, catching sight of a huge white cross standing sleek against the black hills. It stood like a beacon alone on the top of the mountain. Nearby a large lip of rock overhung from the mountain, forming a ledge. If she could get there, it would provide her with shelter under its edge until the rain stopped. On wobbly legs she rose to her feet and sloshed through the soggy, smelly peat to reach her destination. She had to climb a little higher to reach the shelter and she scratched her tender hands against the rocks as she scrambled over them.

The cross was farther away than she had first thought, but always she kept sight of it as she inched her way forward. On hands and knees she crawled under the stone roof and collapsed in a dry spot as the first flurries of snow whipped at the entrance to her cave in the ever-increasing force of the wind. Though her place had been dry, the moisture from her clothing soon dripped into the dirt making it as uncomfortable as it had been out in the open. Tears of despair ran down her cheeks. Would she ever learn? Every time she tried to defy Angus something unpleasant happened to her. If he were only here now she would never go against his word again. She sobbed into her hands, her body slumped against the ground in anguish. She didn't hear the call the first time it echoed up the mountainside. When she raised her head it was as if she could not believe her ears.

"Candelinn!" Her name was called, muffled by the howling of the wind. "Candelinn!"

"Angus!" She screamed with a voice shaking from chill. Candelinn crawled out from under the boulder to stand in the gusting snow.

"Angus! I'm here! By the cross!" She stared into the blizzard-driven snow blinded by the frozen flakes stinging her eyes. The black stallion, bearing the tartan-clad chieftain materialized in the blowing curtain of snow, standing like giants against the white background.

When he stepped down from his horse she ran, stumbling across the uneven ground to where he stood, her arms thrown wide to embrace the man she loved who had come to save her from certain death. But, instead of returning her embrace of love he clasped her forearms in his strong hands, his fingers bruising

her tender flesh and shook her soundly.

"I told you not to come up here! What in the hell do you think you're doing? You crazy little fool! I ought to thrash your impudent hide!" He pulled her up against him, then he would start shaking her again. He shook her so vehemently Candelinn was certain she was losing her head as it bobbed back and forth on her shoulders. She had never seen him so angry. Tears rolled off her cheeks, full of sorrow for herself and her predicament. She was pulled once more against him, crushed in his arms, so tightly she could barely breathe. But, oh, it felt good to feel him embrace her. Then she began to get mad at the way he had treated her.

"It's reassuring to my mind, Laird, to know you missed me and are happy in your heart to see me again." She jerked out of his arms and started to walk away from him. She didn't see the pain in his eyes that reached to the depths of his heart. She had taken only a few steps before a hand of steel grasped her arm to whirl her around into his arms. He held her close, saying nothing for several moments before releasing her just enough to stare down into her face.

"Why, Candelinn? Why did you come into these mountains?" His voice was soft but she knew his anger hadn't completely vanished yet.

"I just wanted to see what these mountains held." She whispered into his chest. "I've been riding all day and I didn't see one single thing. What is so mysterious about them that you and Duncan were so absolute about keeping me away?"

He clasped her shoulders and turned her around to face the cross standing like a foreboding omen against the dark sky.

"Take a long look, Candelinn. That is why I refused to allow you to climb these hills. They are dangerous beyond belief. A man was killed over that cliff. A man who had ridden these mountains many times and knew their dangers." The sudden change in his voice caused Candelinn to raise her head upward, looking into his dark brown eyes filled with emotion.

Angus continued on, his voice low and tense. "He was hurrying late one night, to reach the bedside of his wife who was in labor delivering their second son. It was a night such as this when the wind blows cold off the sea and the snow blocks the view so that visibility is impossible. But still he braved it trying to return to her side. He loved her beyond danger. Beyond thinking clearly. Otherwise he would never have been so foolish. His horse reared when something scared it or slipped on the rocks. We will never know, but both he and the horse went to the bottom of the ravine, not to be discovered for three days." His voice was almost a whisper, barely heard over the sound of the storm. His face had turned as white as the snow that still fell heavily and lay like a cushion at their feet. "His wife grieved for him so deeply that in spite of the two sons he had left her, she died within a month of a broken heart."

Candelinn turned in his arms, holding herself nearer, her hands resting on his chest. She knew the answer but had to know.

"Who was he?"

"My father."

Her back stiffened as if he had just slapped her.

He stared at her. "Now do you see why I have forbidden you this journey, lass?"

She gazed up at him, blinking away the snowflakes gathering on her lashes. "Why didn't you tell me?" She loved this proud MacBaron. She took a step closer to him bringing their bodies together. Slowly she raised her arms entwining them about his neck. She rested her cheek against the wet tartan at his chest.

"I should not have to explain, Candelinn. You should do as I say. I am your Laird." He pulled her tight against him.

Only Angus would think that was a suitable answer. She didn't have the energy to argue and as she listened to his heart beating in her ear. Enclosed in his arms, she was safe.

He lowered his head and kissed her softly on her lips, the tension draining with the growing passion of their finding each other on this night.

"My love. This is not the place I would choose to have you at this moment. I know it would be very uncomfortable making love under that rock cleft of yours, but if we do not hasten to Glencairn..."

Still holding her tightly, he led her to the horse, and lifted her into the saddle. He reached in his saddlebags and pulled out a large dry tartan. Angus climbed on behind her, turning the black, to begin their long trek home. The powerful destrier picked his way gingerly among the slippery rocks, unmindful of the two people on his back snuggled deep within the folds of the single tartan. So engrossed in each other they remained oblivious to the rising mist and the passing of the storm. The steed, his reins resting loosely across his neck, carried them easily down the steep incline. Using a little known trail he brought them out of the mountainous craigs to the safety of the beaches bordering the castle Glencairn.

Angus handed the reins to the waiting lad from the stables before reaching to lift Candelinn from the saddle. He crushed her to his chest before carrying her across the courtyard, through the now empty hall, straight up the stairs to his room. They both hurriedly undressed, anxious for the feeling that the other could give.

Candelinn was standing nude, more than ready for this sober faced Scotsman to enfold her in his arms and press his warm body to his when she suddenly remembered his hasty departure of their previous time together. She grabbed her shift, holding it clasped to the front of her body, concealing it from appreciative dark brown eyes.

"What are you doing?" Angus asked.

Green eyes shot new revived fury at him. "You left without so much as a farewell kiss. You used me like a common slut that didn't rate being told you were leaving and would be gone for some length of time." Angus's eyes roved over the slim bare legs and the barely concealed breasts. In her agitation Candelinn didn't realize she did not have much of her covered from his lecherous eyes. He slowly walked to stand in front of her, staring into her eyes shooting their green fury.

"But I did kiss you farewell. You were just asleep and didn't know it," he answered calmly, his manhood growing at the sight of this enticing picture before him. If she only knew how he'd ached for her during his absence. The sleepless nights when he'd roll over in his sleep to clasp her to him only to awaken to empty arms.

"Why didn't you tell me you were leaving?" She asked harshly, as she relived again the frustration of the morning of his departure.

"I didn't know until I had gone downstairs and the messenger was there." He was trying to be patient with her but it was difficult when he wanted her in his arms and bed as she was before, warm and willing and eager for his lovemaking.

"And you couldn't bother to walk back up the stairs and tell me! Oh no! That was too much trouble, wasn't it?" Her anger was making her throat to constrict, causing difficulty in speaking her mind, not rejecting his soft calm voice that was trying desperately to appease her ire. "Your lust was satisfied, so what did you care of my feelings? To be left here, dumped among a bunch of strangers that knew you'd brought me here for only one reason, to satisfy you animal needs. Well, I'm not a whore of the night to be used and cast aside until you decide you're body needs release again." She spat the words out, her teeth grinding. She flung her shift against his chest before stomping over in the direction of the adjoining door to the other bedroom.

Angus's own temper flashed when he read her intent. With two giant strides he was at the door, barring her way.

"No one will ever call you whore, and I will not allow you to say those words again!"

He yanked her into his arms to roughly lift her and carry her back to the bed, throwing her into the middle of it, his hand not releasing its hold on her wrist to prevent her from scrambling out the other side. He fell on top of her, his legs between her flaying limbs until his own long legs imprisoned hers. His mouth enclosed hers, smashing her lips against her teeth. Her taste once again on his lips softened his anger. He nibbled gently on her lips, his tongue probing until she relaxed to open her mouth to meet his invasion with her own. He released her wrist to cup a full round breast in his huge palm. She knew she was lost when his lips moved to nuzzle into her neck leaving a trail of fire to her breast. The softness of its peak rapidly transformed to protruding hardness before he moved his mouth to the other one, giving it equal time and attention. He started moving his body in erotic stroking action, his hot pulsing shaft rubbing across the core of her being. It brought such an ache in her lower regions, causing her to arch upwards, begging for the feel of him to be inside of her.

He resisted, wanting to keep her unfulfilled, making her passion grow. He stopped moving against her and brought his roaming hands down her body to probe, tease, and wander away, only to come back to tease again.

Candelinn was soon purring into his mouth and neck, soft mewling sounds that was the music to his ears when he finally slid himself inside her, enclosing his shaft in a hot tight embrace. He had wanted to continue with her torture but she was writhing against him, his name coming over and over on her lips. She scratched at his back, bringing him closer to her. His deep slow strokes rapidly increased in tempo until they both reached their exploding orgasms together. Angus screamed something Gaelic and lay spent, still in each other's arms, their gasping breaths and sweaty bodies showing the fulfillment of their completion.

Angus was the first to move, sliding off the small body to lay by her side, his arms still holding her close to his chest, her head on his shoulder, her breath teasing the hair on his chest. Minutes dragged by as they lay enjoying the feel of each other.

"I've missed you, sweetheart. I've ached for this. Dreamed to just hold you in my arms. God made you just for me and you will know no other. Never again do I want you to say whore, or mistress or anything else that would make what we have together on a lesser scale than it is. Even without the blessings of the Kirk, you are and will always be my Lady MacBaron."

He waited for her words of love that she had given so freely the previous time they had been together, but no words were forthcoming. He smiled tenderly at the sleeping form in his arms before sighing deep and closing his eyes to sleep the deep-drugged sleep of a man fully content.

Nine

In the warmth of the bedchambers, lying nude next to the warm body of Angus, his gentle snoring filling the room, Candelinn felt content once more. He was exhausted since he had no more arrived at the castle and found her gone than he had taken off for the hills in search of her. But... she smiled at the sleeping man beside her. He was not so exhausted that he would go to sleep without first making love to her. Her danger in the mountains had seemed to drive his passion into a frenzy and it showed in their lovemaking. He had taken her to the ecstasies of completion repeatedly until both were so satiated, he finally relaxed, falling into a deep slumber.

Her bones felt weary and her body, now warm, craved sleep. But before it enveloped her she had to reach out once more and put her arm across that muscular chest by her side and rest her head on his shoulder. She closed her eyes in peace. Her chief was home!

In the early morning hour, a tender kiss on the outside of her eyelids woke her. She opened her eyes and looked deep into dark brown orbs gazing down at her with love. Beneath the tender gaze, Candelinn saw the strain of the past weeks on his face.

"Was it so bad, Sir Knight?" She cupped his cheek in her warm palm.

Angus leaned his head into the comforting presence of her hand. "Aye, lass," his eyes stared at some distant object in the room, reliving the past. "The tragedy to my good Lord James was dire indeed."

"Was he harmed?" She continued to stroke the side of his face with her fingers.

"Nae. But his Castle Douglas had been taken. Edward had sent Sir Robert de Clifford, the Earl of Cumberland with a large army of soldiers to take it over in Sir James absence. 'Twas a sad day for The Douglas to see an Englishman residing in his ancestral home. But we got it back and they will never be able to take it again." He would be no more specific than that. The trip weighed heavy on his mind.

Her hand had stopped its movements against his face, frozen in dread.

"Angus, could the English take Glencairn?"

"Nae, Candelinn," he assured her. "They could never make it this far into the Highlands. But if they had the courage to be so foolhardy, my MacBaron's would make quick end of them. 'Tis nothing to worry a bonnie lass like yourself. I would be sure you came to no harm," He smiled.

"Angus, don't jest. You are in more danger because of Sir John and Simon de Keith's rage. She clutched him tightly, bringing his head to her breast. "I'm so afraid for you."

He chuckled. He thought it amusing that she worried about him. She had not been around him long enough to realize the fact that it would take more than a Comyn or Keith to take his blood. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her. "Do not fear for me, lass. Your cousin will soon have to see to his own safety. I will fight to get Robert de Bruce on the throne of Scotland, no matter what. That will sorely upset the Black Laird of Badenock's plan for the kingdom. But I care not! He would either kill our country or give it to England on a silver platter. And this is something that not only I but also many of the nobles of Scotland want to prevent. Now, my lovely..." He grinned at her, the troubles of his countrymen momentarily put aside, his lascivious expression leaving nothing to the imagination. "Enough of such serious talk... there are far more important things for us to do."

He moved his head to kiss the naked breast peaking out from under the coverlets and his hands cupped her buttocks, pulling her close to his already swollen manhood.

"Surely, you jest, Sir Rogue!" She playfully shoved at his chest until he released her to stare into laughing brown eyes, a grin on his face.

"Och no, my Lady, but I am most serious."

"You can't be wanting me so soon after last night. I thought you were never going to let me get to sleep." She jokingly pulled at the hairs on his chest, keeping her head down so he could not see her blush.

"It seems your memory of last night, does not quite agree with mine. I had this brazon in my bed, demanding more and more of this poor knight." He reached out and gently lifted her chin, bringing her face close to his. "I will never get my fill of you, love. For as long as heather grows on yonder brae, I will still want you. And I expect to live a long life. Course ye are a wee lass, do you think ye will have the stamina to go the distance?"

"Oh Angus. Yes! Yes!" She threw herself on top of him, bringing him closer and closer until all the fires of passion were alight and the rest of the world was completely blocked from thought.

The first person she saw when they came downstairs was Duncan, who stood by the door, holding his bonnet in apprehension. "Are you unharmed, m'lady?" he asked softly.

Candelinn put her hand on the shoulder of the commander. "I'm well, Duncan. Truly! It wasn't your fault that I decided to ride without you. And after being so cold and miserable after I lost my horse, I promise you that next time I'll tell you." She said.

"There will no be a next time." Angus's spoke behind her. "And Duncan has learned his lesson, I think. He will not let you out of his sight henceforth." He was feeling in too good of a mood to reprimand Duncan more today. He had said all he wanted to say to him the night before when he had found Candelinn gone. The woman was changing him. He was not normally this accommodating and he was not sure that it was not a weakness.

"'Tis true, my Laird. The lass will never be free of me again. I would not like to be banished to the far reaches of your lands."

Angus laughed and slapped his hand on his commander's shoulder. The usual taciturn face held a hint of a smile before he took himself off to the dining hall.

Dark clouds scudded across the northern sky, pushed inland by the ever-present winds blowing off the Sound of Sleat. Satin slippers feet picked their way nimbly across the uneven surface of the cobbled courtyard. Candelinn, holding her skirts aloft lest they drag through the puddles formed by the recent rain of the day before, made her way toward the stables.

One of the grooms looked up at the sound of her steps as she neared the door and hurried forward to open it for her.

"Mornin' m'Lady," the shaggy-haired youth bobbed his head in greeting.

"Hello, Ethan. I've come to see the mare. I was told by one of the kinsmen that she had returned safely and I came to check for myself." Candelinn craned her neck, trying to catch a glimpse of her favored mount. "Where is she, Ethan? I do not see her."

"In the last stall, mistress. She's still a little skittish from spending the night in the storm." Ethan led the way to the rear of the stables, motioning for her to follow.

When Candelinn reached the closed stall she stepped up, balancing on the lower slat of the half wall separating the mare's stall from the empty one next to her. Affectionately she ruffled the black forelock and scratched the velvet ears, happy to see that she had returned home safely.

"As ye can see, m'lady, she fared well in her journey down the mountain. Her only injury is on her right front leg. There is a deep cut just above her fetlock." The groom looked up at the sound of Candelinn's gasp as she strained forward trying to see the injured leg in the shadows surrounding the little mare.

"'Tis nothing to worry ye'rself about, mistress. I've cleaned and packed it with a fresh herbal salve and moss. 'Twill be good as new in no time. Ye've my word on it."

Ethan excused himself from her presence and busied himself in another part of the stable leaving Candelinn alone with the black mare. She stroked the silky neck and continued speaking in a soft voice, oblivious to the sounds and smells of the earthen-floored stable.

Strong arms encircled her, clasping either side of the rail on which she was perched. Warm breath sent a shiver down her spine as Angus nuzzled her neck. Candelinn giggled with delight.

"Och, my Laird. Do you always sneak about the stables seducing innocents like a reiver in the night?" She turned to face him fully, batting her thick full lashes outrageously and placed her hands upon his chest, making a token effort of resistance.

"Only the bonniest of lasses tempt me thus." He grinned wickedly before kissing her soundly on the lips. He lifted her high and set her carefully on the top railing. With his arms wrapped securely about her for balance, he buried his face in the high round curves of her bosom exposed above the bodice of her dress.

"Candelinn, love, if you only knew what you do to me." He kissed her thoroughly, running the gamut from breast to temple, leaving her breathless with rising desire as she clutched the back of his head, her fingers entwined in his thick dark waves.

"Hmmm," she sighed brazenly, relaxing fully against his protecting arms, her head tilting back exposing the fine curve of her slender neck to his wandering kisses. "I hope you're prepared to finish what you start, Sir Knight." She looked into his eyes to find the dark pools mirroring the depth of his passion.

"Have you ever known me not to finish what I start, my saucy lass?" He swept her into his arms, ready to carry her back to the keep and his bedchambers.

"Hello Candelinn, Angus." Fergus leaned casually against the doorframe, a heavy frown of disapproval belying his casual address.

"Fergus." Angus nodded, still holding Candelinn, refusing to relinquish his hold on her despite the presence of the Comyn lad.

Candelinn, however, responded with a deep flush upon her cheeks, embarrassed at the thought of the little scene her brother had just been privy to.

"Angus, please put me down," she pleaded, feeling as though the snow off the Grampians had just been dumped on her.

Slowly he let her feet slide to the ground, making sure of her balance before releasing her.

"Well, Fergus," he cast a disparaging look at the young man. "Of what service can we be to you?"

"I've come to see Candelinn. I would talk with her alone." He answered brusquely, refusing to give ground before the imposing figure of the MacBaron chief.

"Oh? It's plain to see you've a storm brewing within you, lad. But I'll not have you bring grief upon your sister. If it's a quarrel you've a mind for, I'll gladly hear you out." He had been expecting this for some time. In fact he wondered what had taken the lad so long to approach him. Fear perhaps.

Fergus nodded and stood aside leaving the doorway open for Candelinn to pass through.

"Angus," Candelinn placed her hands on Angus's arm calling his attention to her. She lowered her voice so only he heard her words. "You will not harm my brother."

Angus raised an eyebrow at her and smiled. With his hand between her shoulder blades, he pushed her out the stable door and pulled it closed behind her.

Candelinn found herself standing outside in the courtyard. She could not hear the words spoken inside the stable, but she clasped her hands in agitation for what was going on inside. She made her way toward the entrance to the keep. There she waited. The two seemed like they were taking an unbearable long time to have their little 'talk'. Suddenly the door was swung wide and Fergus came out first, holding his nose, the blood dripping into his hand. He glared at her across the cobbles and turned and walked the other way.

Angus followed him and made his way to stand in front of her. He smiled. "Well, where were we when we were interrupted?"

"Angus, you hurt him! I asked you not to."

"He said something I didn't like! He's damn lucky! It was such a light tap I didn't even break his nose."

"What did he say to make you hit him?"

"It was a talk between men, Candelinn. I will not tattle on your brother. Forget it. Just know that all is

well, now."

The barking of the great hounds interrupted the two as their attention was drawn to the clattering hooves of horses crossing the drawbridge as MacBaron clansmen entered the castle grounds.

Candelinn suddenly recognized the only woman dismounting with the fierce looking Highlanders. Her shrill scream echoed across the yard.

"Helena!" Before the fair-haired woman, still wrapped within the heavy folds of the cloak could respond, Candelinn had thrown her arms about Helena's shoulders, hugging her affectionately, threatening to squash the breath from her in her fervor.

"Candelinn," Helena gasped. "It's good to see you too," she teased, returning the hug. "Richard told me you were here with Angus so I begged him to come see you. So much has happened since our wedding, I would not let him rest till he brought me to Glencairn." She lowered her voice so only Candelinn could hear her words. "What was The MacBaron thinking of? Kidnapping you like that?"

Candelinn laughed heartily. She was amused with her friend's obvious distress over a matter commonly held among the clan as a great adventure. Wherever the MacBaron clansmen gathered, Candelinn knew the story was told and retold. Undoubtedly that was how Richard and Helena had found out that she was with Angus.

"Let's go inside and I will tell you everything." With her arm still around Helena's shoulders, she led her into the keep.

Angus was still outside, greeting his brother. "Richard, by all that's holy, what brings you to Glencairn?" He pounded his brother on the back.

"I had to come and see if the rumors were true. My brother is causing quite a scandal, you know. The Highlands are fairly singing with the gossip. No fiery cross moved as fast as the news of The MacBaron."

Angus threw back his head and laughed aloud. "Ah, 'tis good to see your dour expression again, little brother!"

"*You* are going to marry the lass, aren't you Angus?"

Before he could answer he saw Fergus approach to shake Richard's hand. His nose was a little swollen but it looked like the blood had stopped flowing. He ignored Angus.

Richard noticed the nose and looked between the two antagonists. Angus appeared not bothered at all, but Fergus seemed in a bit of a mood.

~ * ~

Candelinn stood by the roaring fire in the hall, assuring her best friend that she was fine.

"Now take a good look at me! Have I been harmed in any way?"

Helena studied the rosy cheeks and healthy glowing complexion of the fiery-haired woman twirling about for her inspection.

"See?" Candelinn held her arms out and raised her skirts, exposing trim ankles. "No shackles or anything. Care to examine my back for lash marks?" She teased mercilessly.

"Enough!" Helena threw her hands up in surrender. "Living the life of a kept woman seems to agree with you. Faith, Candelinn, who would have believed it? My mother told me often enough what a wild hellion you were. I'll bet she just about choked when she heard that Angus had taken you. And what of Sir John? What did he have to say about this?"

"There's been no word from him. And what's more, I care naught for his opinion. This is my home now, and Angus the center of my world. I love him, Helena, as I could no other."

"Has he offered to marry you?" Helena asked, worried over her best friend's future. Before Candelinn could answer, the heavy front door creaked on its hinges intruding into their conversation.

"Here they are. The two loveliest women in all of Scotland." Angus strode across the hall, smiling broadly with Richard and Fergus in close pursuit. He wrapped his arms about Candelinn from behind and hugged her to him, rocking from side to side. "I see you two managed to sneak away for a few minutes. I hope everything has been explained to your satisfaction, Helena." He looked at her over the top of Candelinn's head, his brown eyes twinkling with mischief.

"The Black MacBaron has captured the most valuable prize on Scottish soil and plans to keep her." He watched Helena's face turn pink. He could not resist the urge to tease.

"At least until the ransom is paid."

Candelinn swirled in his arms. "You blackguard! So now I am to be used to replenish your coffers." She punched him playfully in the stomach.

Helena sighed with relief. Never before had she seen either of them so carefree. Her eyes met those of her husband standing next to her. He shrugged his response. She slid her arm through his. "I hope you did not inherit any of the insanity in your family, love."

"Nae. I am a stalwart husband and citizen. The 'bad blood' in the family was saved for my older brother alone."

Richard turned once more to his brother. "So this is my brother who had the lasses from all of Britain at his heels. Candelinn, I must tell you, he saw you once and couldn't get you out of his mind."

"It must be a family trait." Angus countered. "I seem to recall when a certain lass had a lame horse and the younger MacBaron was found at the Keith castle much more than Glencairn."

The creaking of the great front door interrupted the merrymaking. Duncan entered with a heavy frown on his forehead. "News, my Laird. Two groups of visitors have just crossed onto MacBaron lands."

"Two? Who are they Duncan?"

"One is The Red Comyn with about twenty clansmen and the other is the English miss with her guards."

"They're coming at the same time? Damn! How long till they arrive?"

"Within the hour."

Candelinn's face sobered at once. Her cousin was coming after her! Angus took her hand and squeezed it.

"Fear not, lass. I've been expecting him before now. He took his sweet time about it, though."

"And who is this English miss that is coming also?" Her mind was suddenly filled with jealousy. She had never known such a feeling before and didn't like how it made her feel.

"Mistress Letitia Seton. She wanders all over Scotland at her whim." He sounded almost too casual.

Helena spoke up. "Letitia! I know her well. In fact, hasn't she had her eyes on you for quite a while, Angus?"

Angus looked to his brother for support. "You will be staying, of course."

"I wouldn't miss this for anything in the world."

Candelinn listened to the exchange and wondered what was going on. For a man normally so self-assured, Angus looked immensely tense.

They all stood in the courtyard waiting for the arrival of the visitors. Candelinn and Fergus were nervous of their first meeting with their cousin. Angus looked totally uncomfortable and the scowl on his face would have scared away twenty men. Richard had the brightest smile his wife had ever seen on his face. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, rocking back and forth on his heels. It was a good thing she loved him, Helena thought, otherwise she would be wondering whatever made her marry into such a wild, barbarian clan. They found humor in the stupidest things.

Sir John Comyn was the first through the gate, led by the few members of his clan over the drawbridge. Candelinn saw the beautiful woman riding by the side of her cousin as he came through the portcullis to stop his horse in front of her. Instead of watching her cousin's approach, however, her eyes could not leave Mistress Seton. The woman wore an elegant green velvet riding habit that fit her slender frame snugly. Her skin was pale and translucent under a crown of startling black hair. The lovely apparition slid unaided to the ground and ran toward them with arms outstretched.

"Angus, darling!" She exclaimed, throwing her arms around his neck.

Candelinn stepped aside, rather than be trampled, and let go of his hand. She felt her blood began to boil as she raised a skeptical eyebrow at the man who stood grinning meekly at her over the green velvet shoulder. It did not matter that his hands were still at his sides and the London beauty was doing all the hugging. Emerald eyes flashed dagger points of rage at The MacBaron.

Angus unclenched the woman's arms from around his neck and turned her around, nodding in the direction of Candelinn.

"Candelinn, I'd like you to meet Letitia Seton. Letitia this is Candelinn Comyn."

Letitia moved her head to barely acknowledge the introduction with a slight nod before turning back to the man at her side.

"Angus, darling, you have much to apologize for. You rogue..." She snapped her head back at

Candelinn to slowly let her eyes slide down her length. "What is she doing wearing my gown?"

Angus groaned, running his hand through his thick hair.

"Her gown?" Candelinn screeched.

"You gave Candelinn, Letitia's clothes?" Richard mumbled to his brother.

"She had to have something to wear," Angus groaned. He turned to Candelinn. "You had to have something to wear," he repeated like an idiot.

Suddenly there was so much confusion, Angus's ears were ringing from all the screaming going on at once.

"Get my clothes off! This instant!" Letitia stomped her foot on the cobbles in a tantrum.

"Believe me, I can't take them off soon enough!" Candelinn retorted with venom. Her eyes blazed saber sharp, cutting the Laird of the MacBaron's to ribbons with their glare. She spun on her heels and flounced off, headed in the direction of the keep.

"I can't believe you would put Candelinn, in her clothes," Richard was still mumbling, shaking his head.

"I thought you were going to help!" Angus spoke out the side of his mouth at his brother.

"I think this time you are going to have to survive on your own. Even I am anxious to see you talk your way out of this."

"Oh how horrid!" Helena exclaimed. Covering her mouth with her hand.

"Angus, what is she doing here?" Letitia grasped his arm. "I thought Sir John must be mistaken when he told me the rumors."

"What's the meaning of kidnapping Candelinn and Fergus like a common reiver? What the hell did you think you were doing? I demand an explanation!" Sir John's voice roared.

"Hell!" Angus swore beneath his breath turning to see Candelinn running up the steps to the door of the keep. He threw up his hands in defeat. He turned back to the enraged Red Comyn and shook his head. "Frankly, Sir John, at this moment I don't know what in the hell got into me. Come inside. We will talk over a cup of usquebaugh. I feel suddenly in need of a strong drink." He ignored Letitia and left her side in chase of Candelinn striding up the steps taking two at a time, leaving the rest to follow him.

Candelinn hurried through the front doors, storming down the hall, mumbling beneath her breath. "How could he just stand there and let her drape her skinny body all over him? And how many more are scattered about the Highlands? If he thinks I'll be one of many, he has another think coming! I'll not share his roguish hide with the likes of Mistress Seton! Never!" She mumbled on calling The MacBaron a few choice names no lady should have ever heard, let alone spoken.

Angus strode through the door, following the cursing figure across the passageway and caught her arm just as she was starting up the stairs that led to the chambers above.

"Oh, no you don't! You will come down here and face your outraged cousin. And... you will hold your

head high in the face of Letitia, understand?" He spoke the last softly but with a touch of steel.

"No, I will not!" She snapped, trying to jerk her arm out of his iron grip. "I am going to change these clothes! She was your mistress, wasn't she? And you put me in her clothes! I may never forgive you for this, Angus! If I had a bow at this moment, I would probably shoot you! Damn you! You cur!"

Angus ignored her sarcastic barbs and continued to pull her into the small private chambers at the side of the hall. Once inside he shoved Candelinn into the nearest chair. Letitia and John Comyn were right behind them followed by Richard, Helena and Fergus. Once everyone was in the room, Fergus closed the door behind him for privacy. Everyone was looking from one to the other in consternation.

Angus went directly to the sideboard and poured each a drink. His hand shook visibly as he filled each goblet. He lifted his goblet and downed its contents, feeling the warmth seep through his rattled nerves. He refilled his glass once more before moving away from the table. He had just handed the last drink to Sir John when Fergus spoke up.

"Sir John. What brings you so far from Lochindorb?" He could have bitten his tongue off for sounding like a fool. He was trying to calm the electricity going through the room and that was just the first thing he could think of to say.

Sir John grunted into his goblet.

Fergus looked over at his sister, straightening her gown as Angus glared at her from across the room. The Laird of Badenock and Letitia in turn were glaring at the MacBaron chief. Richard and Helena were sitting side by side across the room, the only two that looked like it was a celebration as Richard was raising his glass to toast his wife.

Fergus's eyes went back to the most imposing figure in the room for guidance. Sir Angus finally smiled over the rim of his cup, removing some of the anger that had crossed his brow and nodded in the direction of the Laird of Badenock.

"Your cousin is wondering why you and Candelinn were here with me, Fergus. As long as you're here, I'd like to introduce you to Mistress Seton. Letitia, Fergus Comyn." He shot Candelinn a look of ice, daring her to say a word.

"Humph!" Came from her chair as she hid her face in her drink, pretending it held her total attention.

Sir John crossed the room to stand in front of Angus, his florid face showing his rage.

"I'm waiting for an explanation. This little episode could have caused out and out war, but I wanted to get the facts from you first."

Angus glared at his opponent. If that was all it would mean it wouldn't matter. For with their different political interests sooner or later they were sure to meet on the battlefield. Angus turned to look at Candelinn who had regained some of her composure and sat silently waiting for his answer. For the first time in his life he was unsure. Unsure of how Candelinn would take his next words. If his gamble didn't work it would definitely mean war between the MacBarons and the Comyns, for he was not letting her go... but if it did work, she would be his and he would know once and for all that she wanted to stay at his side. He had been waiting for this moment.

He walked to the fireplace and leaned casually against it. He put one booted foot on the hearth, and

rested his elbow on the stone mantle. He looked into his drinking cup at the cool liquid it contained. Cautiously he cleared his throat and faced the occupants in the silent room, awaiting his words. The corners of his mouth slowly curved upward.

"Sir John, relax. Do your cousins look harmed?" His words were calmly spoken not revealing his taut nerves. "Fergus is here because of his sister." His eyes dared the young Comyn to refute the words.

But Fergus only smiled and nodded to his cousin. "'Tis true, Sir John." He did not want to return to Lochindorb and live under the Red Comyn's rule. He was happier at Glencairn than he had been since his parent's death. Sir Angus stood for no laziness among his men and expected them to work hard upholding these lands. Fergus had labored harder for Angus than his cousin, yet had found a fondness for the MacBaron chief that he had felt for no other. He watched as Angus's eyes came to rest on Candelinn and wondered what he would say about her presence at Glencairn. Fergus held his breath in anticipation and waited.

"As for Candelinn..." Angus's deep voice rang in the hall with authority, leaving no room for questions. "She is my wife. Is that not so, my love?"

Candelinn's green eyes widened slightly, giving the only appearance that this was a total surprise. Her gaze locked on his, seeing the love that she so wanted revealed within their depths. She knew if she answered in the affirmative in front of these witnesses, she would indeed be Lady MacBaron by Scottish law. A law also accepted by the crown of England as valid... And if she refused and said no, Angus would never ask her again. This also she knew.

The MacBaron curved his lips into his usual smile as he read her answer mirrored there. She took a deep breath and smiled at him in return. Finally she broke the silence once more heavy within the chamber.

"Aye, my Laird. And you are my husband." Though her voice sounded much unlike her own, it was all she could force from her lips.

The confusion in the room became utter chaos.

Richard MacBaron burst out laughing, spewing his drink out of his mouth. Helena was leaning close to him whispering. Letitia was screeching at the top of her lungs. Fergus was smiling from ear to ear, and Sir John looked like he could commit murder.

Letitia screamed. "You can't have married that hellion, Angus! Tell me it's all a lie! You don't know what you're saying. Sir John told me how rebellious she is and you will rue the day you called her wife!"

Sir John was growling something at Fergus, but the uproar fell on deaf ears. Candelinn heard nothing. All she saw was Angus bearing a brilliant smile as he crossed the room to her side.

His eyes sparkled as did hers in return. He bowed low, taking her hand in his to gently turn it and place a kiss upon its palm. As he raised his head, she could read the mischief in his face.

"I would that we were alone right now, my Lady MacBaron."

Her heart screamed the ecstasy she was feeling. "And I also, Sir Knight." She whispered.

He bent closer giving her a kiss. His mouth covered hers with such promise. Though his lips didn't linger

the message was clear. He loved her! And she could now call him husband.

Fergus interrupted their privacy, handing each a fresh drink. Eyes twinkling, he raised his glass. "To the clan MacBaron." His relief for his sister knew no bounds. He suddenly felt free. There was not another man in the country of Scotland he would rather have for a brother-in-law. Now he would be able to legitimately make Castle Glencairn his home.

"I'll expect to see you in the MacBaron plaid by the evening meal." Angus brooked no argument, just gave him a simple command.

Fergus nodded, happy to oblige.

Angus and Candelinn raised their cups to the original toast to the clan, but Sir John set his goblet down noisily on an empty table. Angus, seeing this, straightened and crossed the floor with easy strides.

"Come, Sir John. For this one day let us forget our differences." He reached out and handed Sir John his unfinished drink from the table. "Drink to your cousin's happiness. She deserves that much from you."

His voice was still friendly to the ear but held enough strength behind it to let the Comyn chief know that it was not a request but an order.

Sir John, a frown creasing his forehead, nonetheless slowly raised his glass to his lips to drink.

"I'll tell the staff to prepare a feast for us all." He continued. "Surely, Sir John, you would not leave without staying to eat and rest the night." He silenced any would be protests with a wave of his hand.

Letitia, her chin raised to a haughty angle, crossed to his side, staring with hatred at Candelinn before speaking. "I came to spend a few days with you, Angus." She pouted, tracing the weave of his linen shirt lightly with one immaculately manicured nail. "Surely you would not turn me out in the cold or has the MacBaron hospitality changed so much now that you have a bride? 'Tis a shame I took so long in coming, it seems I wasted my time." She smiled slowly up at him, her insinuation an obvious invitation which did not go unnoticed by Candelinn as she sat talking with Fergus across the room.

Candelinn looked across at Letitia staring daggers through her and raised a triumphant eyebrow.

Angus ignored the stab at his marital status and walked to the door, opening it to summon the chambermaid who appeared immediately. "Show our guests to a room so they may rest and refresh themselves. Candelinn?" He held his hand for her to clasp. "May I escort you to our chambers?"

It was amazing how the 'our' made her heart skip a beat. Candelinn accepted his offered hand, happy to be away from Sir John and Mistress Seton. It was as if she floated on air up the steps to their rooms. A dream she'd never dared hope for happened. She was married to the man of her choice, and he loved her as much as she loved him. As they approached the room she smiled to herself, picturing in her mind how he would sweep her into his arms and carry her into their room, closing the door behind him. But instead, Angus opened the door to her chambers, bowed low over her hand at its portal and left her alone. She stood, watching his retreating back whistling down the hall.

Cadelinn stamped her foot. *Damn him! If he thought he was going to get away without explaining, he was crazy!* Just when she felt so happy and ecstatic he leaves without a word. *Hell!* She looked down at Letitia's gown and almost ripped it in her haste to take it off. She slipped into a dressing gown, realizing it was probably Letitia's too and paced the floor renewing her anger and jealousy at Letitia's appearance on MacBaron land. She stared at the discarded garment lying on the floor and suppressed the urge to kick it across the room. Since she had nothing of her own to wear, she would refuse to join the feast. Under no circumstances was she going to wear another gown that belonged to Mistress Letitia Seton!

She paced back and forth across the room wondering what her cousin would think if she were to wear her men's breeks to dinner, or when she didn't show up at all. Well, Angus could think of an explanation. She wasn't going to worry about it. A tap on her door interrupted her silent storming. She yanked it open, thinking it was Angus on the other side, but was surprised to face Rowena, smiling brightly, a beautiful beige gown, draped over her arms.

"Och, me Lady! Look at what the Laird sent for ye to wear! 'Tis so romantic what he has done this day. The clan is buzzing with excitement. And I am so happy for ye, me Lady."

"Thank you, Rowena. The Laird did cause quite a stir didn't he?" She chuckled. Cadelinn took the gown and slowly unfolded the material to hold it up in wonder. It was the most exquisite gown she had ever seen. The beige satin shimmered in the light absorbing different shades of color from the room. Ecru lace adorned the low scalloped neckline and the sleeves at the wrist. Embroidered silver roses trailed down the long flowing skirt.

"Oh, Rowena! It's beautiful! But where on earth did Angus get such a gown?" Cadelinn hesitated. "'Tis not one of Mistress Seton's is it, Rowena?"

"Nae, mistress. Sir Angus said to be sure and tell ye that it was worn only once before, and that was by his dear mother on her wedding day."

Cadelinn looked with renewed interest at the lovely creation she held in her outstretched arms. It looked as though it would fit perfectly. Even the bodice was larger than the ones she had been wearing and she would be more comfortable in it. While Cadelinn was admiring the dress, two chambermaids hurried in with buckets of hot water for her bath.

She slipped into the water, soaking, her mind going over the events of the day. She finally remembered her small leather bag that she had brought from Helena's wedding.

"Rowena, did I have a leather bag delivered when I first arrived?" She asked.

"Aye, m'lady. Your blue dress is hanging in the wardrobe."

"I didn't even search for it. Well at least I will have something to wear tomorrow. But tonight I will honor Angus's mother by wearing her gown."

Suddenly she was anxious for the feast, anxious to wear the gown and feel attractive once again. She wasn't completely over her anger at Angus, but it had diminished with the lovely gown.

After toweling herself dry after her bath, she stood before the mirror examining the image she found there. Slowly she ran her hands over her body. The high full breasts, the small waist, her rounded hips, smooth thighs and long shapely legs. *Funny how I never paid much attention to how I looked before I met Angus*, she mused. A smile crept to her lips. She had to admit it was hard not to be aware of it with his remarks reminding her daily of her beauty and perfect body. Of course, he was not altogether objective where she was concerned, but oh how nice it was to know he felt that way about her. And he was her husband now.

Cadelinn giggled wickedly. "Aye," she said aloud. "I'll show that cold-blooded English witch what it takes to warm the blood of a Highlander."

Rowena chuckled at her lady's outburst and called attention to the things laying on the bed. Slippers the same shade as her gown, a silk chemise, and even a tartan scarf to show she was now a true member of the clan MacBaron. Angus had also sent a gold filigree girdle to hang round her tiny waist. He had thought of everything!

When she was completely dressed, she attached her gold brooch to the clan-plaid scarf around her throat. Rowena brushed her hair until it shone and pinned it up on the crown of her head, leaving a few curls to trail seductively at the nape of her neck and about her face.

Rowena stood back and admired her mistress. "Ye will do the Laird proud, me Lady. There has never been a more bonnie Lady MacBaron. Not even the young chief's mother herself could have looked so beautiful this day."

Cadelinn was deeply touched by the elderly woman's sincerity. On impulse she gave her a big hug.

"Thank you, Rowena. You are very sweet and I don't know what I would do without you."

A small noise caused her to release the blushing woman and turn to see Angus standing in the doorway. He was dressed similarly to the way he had been dressed at Richard and Helena's wedding, but more elaborately. Cadelinn's voice caught in her throat. *What a handsome man he is!* His strength and masculinity seemed to fill the room. Neither seemed to notice when Rowena, seeing the look in their eyes, discreetly took herself out the door to close it quietly behind her.

Angus was afraid to speak for fear his voice would fail him. This woman, his bride, made him want to forget the guests waiting down in the banquet hall. To whisk her away to a place of secret privacy was a wish hard to deny. Instead of speaking his thoughts he crossed the room to stand only inches from her. He looked deep into her jade-green eyes sparkling back at him and slowly pulled her to him to kiss her lightly. He then reached for her hand and slid his mother's wedding ring on her finger. It was a gold band with diamonds in the shape of a sprig of heather in the center. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the ring on her finger. He grinned his usual winsome smile and offered her his arm.

Dimpling slightly, she put her hand through it, allowing him to lead her out the door and down the stone stairway, neither of them saying a word.

At the foot of the stairs, Angus stopped, causing her to look up into his face. He placed his free hand over the top of hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Rowena is right, sweet Cadelinn. You do me proud."

Her questions and accusation from before were completely vanished with his words. All she could think

of was this man beside her. Her husband. He filled her thoughts as he continued to lead her across the floor into the main hall.

Duncan stood at the entrance waiting for them. He doffed his blue bonnet and bowed low to Candelinn. "Tis a grand sight you are m' Lady. I'm proud to have you for my mistress."

Angus raised his eyebrow at his first in command. He had never heard him sound so eloquent. But he understood the affect Candelinn had on the clansmen. A few still acted tongue-tied in her presence.

Fergus was next in line to greet them. He proudly stood wearing his MacBaron plaid and kissed his sister on her cheek. Angus put his hand on Fergus's shoulder. "Do you feel better now, lad?"

Fergus smiled and nodded. "Aye, I have never been happier, my Laird. And I have never seen my sister look so beautiful. 'Tis proud I am of you, my Lady," he bowed from the waist.

"Thank you, Fergus," she curtsied in return. Angus continued on, his wife's hand still held on his arm.

The clan's roar was deafening as they recognized their chief and his new bride. The news had spread fast, as it usually did among the clan. No wonder that the fiery cross could travel across so many miles in such a short time. Nothing about their chief passed by them.

Candelinn could see her cousin standing near Mistress Seton on one side of the room. His cold, steel grey eyes looked as if he could kill the man she clung to.

Candelinn understood his feelings. For now he would know that he had been foxed. That she and Angus had not had a real wedding but were now husband and wife because of those few words spoken in his presence. That he was, in fact, one of the witnesses required by Scottish law to make them legally wed, a clever ruse that he would no doubt try to avenge.

Anyone could tell that this was no ordinary feast, but a celebration. A celebration of the chief's marriage. If Sir John had disliked Angus before, his hatred would have increased tenfold for being made a fool of.

Candelinn tightened her grip on Angus's arm as the crowd moved closer to them in congratulations. When he felt her tense he mistakenly took it to mean that she was shy at the sight of so many kinsmen coming toward her. He pulled her closer to his side while he introduced some of the men and women still unknown to her as they passed. There were too many for her to remember all their names, but was surprised and somewhat proud of the way Angus knew them all, stating the job each did for the clan. He knew his knights, their squires, the master of the hunt who cared for the falcons, the stewards, the musicians that played the pipes; he knew them all, down to the youngest farm laborer of the fields.

Angus spoke to each one in friendship and they showed their love for him by simply being there paying him homage on his wedding day.

They were so numerous they could not all be seated in the main dining hall and Candelinn noticed the doors were thrown wide and makeshift tables were placed in the courtyard loaded with candles and food and kegs of ale aplenty on all of them.

At the front of the hall at the Laird's table there were two new chairs for her and Angus. Each was decorated with white heather along the backs with a sprig at their plates. This was the emblem of the Clan MacBaron. White heather for purity and honesty; to protect the clan from evil that may come their way; and for bravery and luck in time of battle. The clansmen were in their way letting Candelinn know

that she now belonged.

She barely suppressed a gasp as she looked once again toward the two across the room as almost simultaneously they changed the object of their vehemence from Angus to her. The intensity of their loathing was staggering. Never before had she felt such threatening power emanating from another person as she felt from Letitia and her cousin.

Angus looked at the fear showing on his new bride's face as she hesitated in her progress across the room. Protectively, he put his arm around her waist to lead her to the front of the room where the huge carved chairs awaited them. He was proud of the cheers of his clansmen for making Candelinn so welcome. He knew from this day forth that she would be well loved and protected. For the bride of the chief would be guarded from harm if it meant giving their own lives to do it.

Candelinn felt the steady arm slowly leading her through the gauntlet of the cheering clan. *How can he ignore them?* she thought. *Surely he feels their hatred as much as I do.* But when she looked at the strong features of her husband she felt the fear lift from her shoulders. The self-confidence and absolute fearlessness of the clan chief surrounded him like an aura, touching all who came near him. Feeling her eyes on him, he looked down on her with a smile of love and devotion. He bent low and whispered in her ear.

"The clan is yours, my love, heart and sword."

The many congratulations and wishes for happiness filled the room reminding her that this was her wedding day; the only one she would ever have and she would not let the discomfort of Sir John and Letitia's being there ruin it for her.

Richard and Helena were standing awaiting their arrival to the head of the table. Richard slapped his brother on the back. "Well done, brother. Congratulations!"

Helena hugged Candelinn. "I have never seen anything more romantic in all my life. The way Angus said you were his wife. It was wonderful!"

"Aye, it was," Candelinn replied.

She sat down gracefully on the seat of white heather and looked up at her husband standing by her side, his arm raised for silence. The roar finally ceased and Angus brought up his goblet with one hand while the other rested possessively on Candelinn's shoulder.

"Clansmen and friends. We are gathered here tonight for one of the most important days of a man's life." He hesitated and looked happily down at Candelinn. She felt the warmth creep into her face and smiled at the man she loved. His eyes caressed her before he once more turned to face the room. "The last time I felt close to this was the night you made me your chief. Though that night was clouded with the death of my father, this one holds no sadness. For tonight I want you to welcome the newest addition to the clan MacBaron, my bride, Lady Candelinn." He ignored the narrowing of the Red Comyn's eyes, knowing the hatred they would hold.

The walls shook with the roar of cheers and he brought his glance once again to his wife and raised his goblet to his lips. Downing the wine in one gulp, he set his glass down and clapped his hands together for the servants to start bringing in the feast.

"Now I want you all to eat and enjoy yourselves on this day of celebration."

He sat back in his chair while food was piled high onto the tables. When each succulent tray passed his way he offered it first to Candelinn before taking his own share.

Candelinn's heart beat faster with the passion enveloping her at the solicitude and attention showered on her by Angus. She could never love him more than she did at this moment. For he had praised her and called her his bride in front of all the clan.

Candelinn's wave of happiness soon developed a ripple as Letitia, sitting on her right side, began dropping snide remarks of her past with Angus.

"You realize, of course, that Angus only married you to keep from fighting the Comyn's," Letitia said, bending over her place so no other person in the room could hear her.

Candelinn tried to ignore the sarcastic words but her back stiffened in spite of herself. "I can't imagine Sir Angus being afraid of any clan... can you, Mistress Seton?"

The other woman ignored the barb and continued, her jealousy of losing the one man she could not conquer eating away at her insides, causing her to forget that this was now Candelinn's home and she was at her mercy.

"Angus and I have been intimate for so long that I understand him much better than you ever will. Do you understand what I mean by the word intimate, Mistress Comyn?" Disregarding the fact that Candelinn was now a MacBaron.

Candelinn had reached her limit. Luckily the pipers were now playing and the meal was being removed for the dancing to follow. She slowly turned her head to look at the cold eyes of Letitia, the skirling of the pipes filling the room. She raised one eyebrow and spoke softly with venom, pronouncing each word distinctly so there would be no mistaking her meaning.

"I expect my husband had many dalliances before I came into his life, Mistress Seton. He is very handsome and too much a man to lead a celibate life. But get this straight in your befuddled brain... because I don't want to have to mention it again. I am his wife, and I intend to make sure Angus will not have the time or the inclination to seek elsewhere for his pleasures. So, were I his cast-off, Mistress Seton, I would turn my eyes in another direction to salve my wounded pride."

Angus watched the exchange between the two women knowing from experience that his fiery-haired beauty could take very good care of herself. When he saw the stupefied expression on Letitia's face, he chuckled knowing Candelinn had won this battle of wits.

He bent his head to his wife. "My Lady. Do you think you could honor an old married man with a Highland fling?"

Candelinn faced Angus, reflecting her thanks for the interruption. She nodded. "If you promise not to step on my toes, my Laird."

"I will try my best, my love." He stood and bowed before leading her graceful figure onto the dance floor. The evening passed swiftly with Candelinn dancing with as many of the guests as her legs would allow. She was having the time of her life, except for the few times she met Letitia's eyes across the crowded dance floor. Then the hate and jealousy was brought to the surface once again. Her own anger at Angus for giving her dresses to wear that belonged to his former mistress seethed beneath the surface.

She was thankful when Angus approached her at the end of the evening. She could hardly wait to be alone with this great chief, smiling like a Cheshire cat down at her. She was anxious to hear him explain away the accusations Letitia had made.

"'Tis late, sweetheart." Angus's eyes gleamed, openly admiring his bride, as he traced the outline of the dress across her breast with his fingertips. "I think if we do not retire soon, the celebration will go on all night and we will never be alone."

Cadelinn nodded, speechless at his boldness in the company of others and put her hand through his proffered arm. She almost blushed at the ribald statements that came to her while Angus led her from the room.

Upon reaching the doorway, Letitia stepped through the crowd, blocking their way. "Remember, darling, if you should find this country girl dull and lacking, I'm right down the hall. I'm sure you remember the room." She flashed her most seductive smile at Angus totally ignoring Cadelinn at his side.

"Angus, my husband," Cadelinn interrupted, speaking lightly with possessiveness. "Do we still banish unsuitables from the land?" She asked in cheerful innocence, raising a doubtful eyebrow in Letitia's direction.

"Your wish is my command, my love," he responded. He bent low, his eyes full of mischief as he smiled at her. "Shall I summon the guard?"

When Cadelinn turned back to Letitia, she found an empty doorway. She shrugged her shoulders in mock concern. "Alas, it seems she made good her escape." Laughing like two children, they left the celebration arm in arm, waving their good-byes from the stairs.

Outside the oaken panel leading to his bedchambers, Angus pushed open the door. But as Cadelinn would have walked through the opening, she felt strong arms under her knees and she was lifted and carried across the threshold into the room.

Angus felt his passions stirring for this, his own woman in his arms, something he'd never before experienced. He brought his mouth down in an emotional kiss upon her lips as he stood her down in front of him.

Cadelinn, her jealousy finally taking its toll and bursting through the surface, shoved against his chest. Free, she turned her back on him.

Angus immediately felt the coolness in his wife's attitude. "What's the matter with you?" he spoke, his voice harsh.

She swung to confront him. "I want to know about you and Letitia! She insinuated enough at dinner and I'd like to know what she means to you."

"Why you crazy little hot-head! You are my wife, not she!" He started toward her only to have her put her arms out to keep him at a distance. "I have touched no other woman since the day I met you."

"Oh no--you're not getting off that easily. Do you wish you had married that--that prissy English miss? Well, do you? Instead of a hothead like me? Did you marry me just because my cousin came and upset your little love-nest?" She shouted, storming back and forth across the room only to face him with each

sentence.

"You know damn well I would never be forced to do anything I didn't want to do."

"I suppose she's better at warming your bed than I am!" She continued her jealous rage. "But they say practice makes a body perfect. Well, is she?--Is she better?" she shrieked at him.

Angus thought quietly about the answer to her question. That some women were as cold as the snowy peaks of Ben Nevis and others were as hot as a sunny desert. That some women were built sleek for speed, while others were made supple for comfort.

Letitia--the cold English blood flowing through her veins; her cool aristocracy brought down from her family's origins. He thought of her in bed, where he had found release and nothing else, where she had always withheld any show of passion beneath that slender little girl's exterior.

Then... there was... Candelinn--the hot-blooded Scottish lass, even now shooting fire through those beautiful green eyes at him across the distance of the room. With a body that left no doubt in a man's mind that indeed there was a woman next to him in the darkness. Whose breasts could fill a man's hand and make him forget England and Edward and wars and everything else, except her writhing body, passion filled, meeting him every sensual step of the way.

Comparison between the two was impossible. For himself he would always want his own little Scottish bride... the one who even now was making his loins ache and his breeches bulge for want of her. No, there was no comparison. His face slowly broke into a smile, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

"What do you think, wife?"

Candelinn looked deep into his eyes trying to read his very soul. She knew this man of hers would not pander to her every whim by admitting what she wanted to hear. He would expect her to have faith in herself and their relationship. To know how he felt without his saying. Her anger disappeared with the coming of the familiar grin on his face.

Confidently she walked across the room, one slow step at a time, until her body touched the velvet cloth of his wedding finery. Then she moved her hands up his chest and placed them behind his head to entwine her fingers in the soft hair at the nape of his neck.

"I think... my Laird... that there is only one of us that could handle the chief of the wild MacBaron clan... and I am Scots enough to be certain it is not the English miss that you would have beside you this night."

Angus threw back his head and laughed joyfully, before lowering it to cover her mouth with his. He crushed her against him, his arms holding her tight against his chest.

Candelinn opened her lips to mate her tongue with his in wild abandon. The power of his kiss was demanding and she gladly gave herself to it. The fires deep inside her were ignited rapidly as her hands reached behind his head holding him as close as possible. He raised his mouth only to turn her head sideways and bring his fiery mouth down over hers again and again. Candelinn groaned deep in her throat. His clothes were in her way and she fumbled with his velvet coat trying to get it off his shoulders.

He undressed her with the same heated frenzy, only releasing her mouth long enough to reposition it in a burning trail down her neck. Her breasts flattened against his chest scalded him. His hands caressed her

down her back until fitting themselves on her buttocks, he lifted her up and pulled her tightly against his hardened member, the junction of their bodies pushed hard against each other.

He gently lifted her off her feet and carried her in the direction of the bed. Candelinn felt desire flow like molten lava through her veins. His hot, naked body squeezed close to her fiery satin flesh. Her hands moved slowly, purposefully down his back feeling the taut muscles rippling beneath her palms. She continued on to the curve of thigh and buttock and hip, wanting to caress every inch of him. Angus exulted in his dominance and demanded from her equal delight in surrender. Candelinn gave herself without reserve to the passions he aroused in her.

Angus lowered his head to a firm round breast, holding it in his hand, bringing his hot tongue to tease the darkened tip to rigidity. When he enclosed as much of her breast in his mouth as he could he suckled at it, still moving his tongue fiercely against its peak.

"Oh, my Lord! Angus!" Her voice was passion filled, a whisper of a groan.

Angus released her breast to move to its twin giving it the same attention till Candelinn was writhing against him, wanting completion. He did not want to find fulfillment yet, wanting to delay the ecstasy that pounded his heart and body. He lowered his head to move over her midriff, kissing her navel, lower to put his hands in the soft curls at the center of her thighs. His fingers found the entrance as his tongue found the hardened nub a few inches above it. When he felt her reaching her peak he removed his fingers and mouth and teased at her inner thighs with his tongue. Candelinn moved her hips trying to recapture his mouth as she craved release.

She reached between them finding his pulsating shaft and closed her hand around it. Her hand, hot and moving against him, made him forget his wanting to wait. He could wait no more, and lifted his body to cover her, penetration made easy by her moist readiness. His moan was loud as he felt her slender legs wrap around his back, bringing him deeper inside her.

Candelinn arched against him, matching his movements of meeting, withdrawing, and meeting again until the explosion of both their bodies finding their release at the same time made everything else in the world disappear with its power. Angus yelled his words of love, barely penetrating her consciousness, as he spent himself inside of her. This night their love for each other, sealed by their marriage as husband and wife, made their passion override any that had gone before between them. Angus shivered with his tremendous release and collapsed on top of her. His elbows held his weight off her, but he was unable to move. The only sound in the room was the gasping breaths of both as their hearts gradually slowed down to a normal beat. Angus stayed inside her. It felt too good to move and he didn't think he had the energy, anyway. He loved the feel of her lying against the entire length of his body. Her legs were wrapped around his and she slowly started moving her feet up and down his legs. He felt himself began to harden once more inside her and nuzzled her neck with kisses. Once more he led his passionate wife into the exotic world of love.

~ * ~

Candelinn woke with a feeling that someone was staring at her. She opened her eyes and saw Angus, his thoughtful gaze looking lovingly over her features, coming to rest on her soft tempting mouth.

"Is this tender looking lady lying here so soft and sleepy, the same vixen I went to sleep with last night? What other passions lay hidden beneath that cool exterior?"

Her face flushed a deep crimson in remembrance and she looked up at him, her face glowing with

happiness. "I think it is not the vixen's fault, Sir Knight... but rather the fox who inspired her so." She giggled, kissing the corner of his turned up mouth. Strong hands moved over her supple nude body, pulling her against his swollen manhood.

"I think I shall keep you prisoner here forever."

She quickly escaped his grasp, tumbling over him and out of the bed. "But, my Laird. There are more important things to take care of today. We do have a few guests still lounging about, remember."

He reached out a hand to catch her, but was a shade too late. "Och, love, do you nag at me already? Nothing is more important than what I had in mind. This cannot be the woman begging for fulfillment that I held in my arms a few hours past. What care we if there are guests or not? There are maids aplenty to see to their needs."

Candelinn turned to him, his bare chest revealed above the coverlets on the bed. The sight of him reclining lazily against the pillows tempted her to crawl back into bed next to him and begin once more the rapturous ardor of their wedding night. But first... She had things to do.

"Now, Angus, much as I would like to continue where we left off we must see our guests safely on their way. I want to be a perfect hostess for you and one of your wife's duties is to bid her guests good-bye." She smiled teasingly at him, keeping a safe distance as she circled around the bed gathering her clothes.

Angus stared at her lovely body as she quickly donned her chemise and started to walk to the wardrobe to slip on a gown. She found her original blue gown tucked back into a corner and pulled it out. This day she would wear her own clothes for the first time in ages and Mistress Seton be damned!

Angus recognized the dress from his brother's wedding. At least she had one dress to her name, poor lass. He chuckled to himself. She would definitely need new gowns of her own. He made a mental note to tell Rowena to instruct a couple of the women to start making Candelinn a new wardrobe. It was important for a lass to have her own things and as the Lady of the clan she had a reputation to uphold now. Why he hadn't thought of it before baffled him. He had been busy just trying to get her to love him and clothing had not entered his mind. But as he lay there feeling such contentment that he had never known before, his bride had full reign to have anything she desired on this fine day. He would buy her only the best materials for her gowns, for only the best would suffice the Lady of Castle Glencairn. He felt very smug with himself over this new commitment. He also realized why his new bride was in such a hurry to have their guests depart. She wanted Letitia Seton in her new home not a moment longer than need be. Wanting to tease her, he questioned.

"But, my love, what if they have decided to stay a few days and continue the celebration. I know Letitia for one, has always enjoyed my castle and all the attention that she receives from the clan and will not be anxious to trudge out into the cold so soon."

Candelinn jerked the dress over her shoulders, exposing her head and turned quickly in his direction. "I care not what Letitia Seton wants, my Laird. She will be gone from this castle this day if I have to escort her off MacBaron land myself." She dared him to intercede in the English miss's behalf, her green eyes afire with anger.

Angus brought both feet to the side of the bed and sat up on its edge. He ignored his nudity as he stretched nonchalantly. Then he stood and slowly walked to Candelinn, never taking his mischievously twinkling brown eyes from her wrath filled body.

"Never fear, my sweet." He wrapped his arms about her. "I am sure that Letitia is quite ready to leave us. She does not like to lose in any way and the bride of the MacBaron made it quite clear that in this one battle she had indeed lost. Is that not so?" he teased.

"I think I have married a very arrogant, conceited man and it will take some time to take the swelling out of his head. But if anyone can do it, this MacBaron should be able to."

"But you forget, sweetheart," he swatted her bottom as he moved away from her toward a chest to get his clothes. "I am the laird of this clan, and it is natural that I should be a little arrogant. 'Tis as it should be. Although, there were times in the middle of the night when I was not so sure who was the leader and who was supposed to be the follower." He leered wickedly over his shoulders.

"'Tis your fault, Sir Knight. My body has a mind of its own when you are around. You make me unable to think straight." She winked at him and ran through the door of their chambers to the cooler hallway beyond it. Angus was the only man alive who could embarrass her, and it was only because most of what he said was true. She had acted like a brazen the night before, and loved it. He showed her things that she had never known about, let alone imagined that the day would come when she would so aggressively return his lovemaking. She remembered the taste of him on her lips and felt shivers run down her spine. As soon as Letitia and Sir John were gone from the castle she may be the one to keep him prisoner in their chambers. She chuckled heartily, and went down the stairs to face a new day and her first one as the Lady of the clan MacBaron.

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Letitia was in a black mood when Candelinn entered the hall to break the fast. She snapped at the serving maid placing the food in front of her. She felt a woman scorned and she would never forgive Angus for denting her self-esteem in such a cruel manner.

Sir John sat next to her, frowning into his cup of ale. The hatred Letitia was feeling was nothing compared to that of the Black Laird of Badenock. To think that two of the Comyn clan had sworn allegiance to his sworn enemy made him feel murderous. He was losing followers quickly enough without his own flesh and blood deserting him. Candelinn had made a disaster of his plans to wed her to Simon de Keith and gain his following and support in his fight for the Scottish crown. With rancor filling him, he made a decision. He would go to Dalswinton and take care of James Douglas and Robert the Bruce. Then Edward would *have* to crown him king. He had waited long enough for what he believed was his rightful place. Determined to move quickly, he stood from the table as Candelinn approached. He ignored her and snapped unduly at Letitia.

"Ready your guards. We ride within the hour. I would be away from this Glencairn."

Candelinn stared at the two faces filled with intense dislike. Not even their foul tempers could mar her happy mood this day. Try as she would to be serious, she could not keep the corners of her mouth from curving upward in total abandon.

"But Sir John. You must wait to take your leave from Angus." Her gaze went from her cousin's to rest on Letitia. "I fear he slept later than is his usual habit." Her eyes twinkled mischievously as she noticed the English maid stiffening.

"Aye, lass." Angus interrupted merrily from the door. "'Tis something new for me to linger so long. But if not for you, I would still be abed, my Lady." He chuckled at the flush on Candelinn's cheeks as he approached and placed a hand upon her waist, pulling her close to his side. His smile at her

embarrassment sobered as his eyes encountered those of Sir John glowering at him over Candelinn's head.

"So you take your leave, Sir John? Help yourself to any stores you may need to aid you on your way."

It was politely said but the Laird of Badenock was not quite sure whether it was meant to speed his absence or truly be of service. It mattered not for the sooner he was out of sight of Glencairn the happier he would be.

Eleven

Angus stood with his arm around his wife's waist while they watched all the guests leave the courtyard. The Comyn part turned their mounts across the sun-spattered meadow in front of Castle Glencairn. A few days of wane sunshine and above freezing temperatures had melted all but the deepest drifts and the shaded areas. No words of affection had passed between Candelinn and her cousin at his departure. One of the Comyn clan had helped Letitia mount and sullenly she had left without a word to anyone.

Candelinn had hated to see Helena and Richard leave so soon, but Richard insisted they needed to reach their home before more snow could fall. She probably would not see them again until the spring when Angus had promised to take her to see Helena for a few days.

Candelinn leaned into her husband's warmth with contentment. She was heartily glad to see the backs of her cousin and his ilk out of her home. Their glares of hatred had unsettled her nerves, causing a deep inner fear for both herself and Angus. Their departure brought a sense of relief that washed over her like summer sunshine. When she raised radiant eyes to look up at her husband she found he was watching the fleeting expressions run across her face, from widened fear to heartfelt relief.

He smiled tenderly down at his captivating lass that fit so comfortably under his arm, curled to his side for protection from the deep fear of the animosity that emanated from the departing troop.

A giggle burst forth before she threw her arms around his waist to hug him close. "Oh, Angus, I'm so happy to see them depart MacBaron lands." She threw her head back to gaze up at her tall, broad-shouldered husband.

Angus bent his head and kissed her sweet lips, it was a light kiss barely touching hers. His eyes twinkled at her happiness. "Would you like to go for a ride, my wife? Or is that hug you just gave me an invitation back to our chambers to finish what I so wanted this morning when you escaped me?"

After the days of snow-enforced confinement, Candelinn thought even a short ride would be wonderful. "A ride across the braes would be much to my liking, my husband. And then perhaps we would be needing a place to warm up after our cold ride."

"You make me want to make the ride a very short one with your tempting words, love. You had better stop looking at me like that or we will never be away. This old married man has trouble keeping his hands off you as it is."

Candelinn wrapped her arms around his neck and laughed up at him.

Angus laughed out loud wrapping his strong arms around her and picked her up to swing her around in a circle. Their laughter filled the courtyard of the Castle Glencairn, bringing knowing smiles to all the clan within hearing distance. It was good to her their chief's happiness ring about the old granite walls.

Angus stood Candelinn on her feet and turned her towards the massive doors of the keep. "Go. Get your cloak and gloves, Lady MacBaron. You shall have your gallop." He smacked her backside to get her moving. She smiled an impish smile over her shoulder before running into the castle. He watched the swing of her skirts bouncing around her woman's hips as she departed. How he had captured her heart was a miracle. He did not deserve her, he knew, but she was his now and the problems in Scotland be damned. He turned and started walking toward the barn for their horses.

When Candelinn came hurrying, her MacBaron plaid cape around her, the smooth leather gauntlets on her hands, Angus was already leading his destrier and her small mare from the barn. They were both saddled and ready for the mounting. She wasn't surprised to see Duncan mounted, but she raised her eyebrows in question at Angus when she noticed Colin, another of the Laird's guard also mounted and waiting for them.

Angus helped her into the sidesaddle before smiling reassuringly, his hand resting on her thigh. "Just a precaution, love. We have too soon had enemies leave us." He patted her knee as he motioned to the bow and quiver of arrows draped over her pommel. "I brought these in case you want to show me some of this sharp shooting I've been hearing so much about." He turned and went to his own steed, vaulting into the saddle.

Candelinn frowned at Duncan and he met her gaze, although sheepishly. "The Laird would be proud, m'lady."

"I thought it was our secret," she whispered to him, riding next to her.

"I remember you telling me the fact that I had you lost was the secret."

Angus evidently heard and looked back over his shoulder with his eyebrow raised. Candelinn smiled at him innocently.

After so much confinement of late, the horses were as eager as the riders for the gallop across the meadow. Candelinn laughed gaily, filling the glen with the sound of it and let her mare have her way instead of keeping a tight control on the reins. Her three companions enjoyed the ride more than usual, just watching her happiness radiate over them all. They slowed the pace to make their way into the forest.

Angus had just pulled along side Candelinn, his eyes feasting on her cold-reddened cheeks when he heard the grunt of pain behind him. The chills of war filled his being at the sound of a wounded warrior. He turned to see Duncan sway in his saddle, an arrow in his neck. Angus grabbed his claymore, shouting at Candelinn.

"Take Duncan and ride for the castle!"

"We can fight, Angus!" She reached for her bow and grabbed an arrow. Her own fighting nature coming to the fore.

Angus swore, swinging his horse to grab the reins from Duncan's unmoving fingers where he'd clasped the pommel to keep from falling from the saddle. Angus handed the reins to Cadelinn who took them, her fear choking off any words. "Ride to the castle! Now!" He slapped the rump of the mare with his gauntlet-covered hand.

That done, he had no time to see to his wife and favorite kinsman. He and Colin turned to face the foe; four warriors racing toward them, dressed for battle in chain mail, while the MacBaron and his kinsman were dressed in leather breeks and jerkin, but swords drawn at the ready.

Angus faced the enemy as they too drew their swords. Only four against two. Had they not been cowards and came from their back to skewer Duncan, he may have let them live. For that deed, however, he would give no quarter.

When two of the men rode toward Angus their features changed to fear. The huge warrior they were going to try to kill was smiling--an arrogant smile. Though the humor did not reach the frigid glance of his eyes.

Cadelinn barely had time to notice another enemy break from behind to follow her and Duncan before the trees obscured the battle scene from her vision. After a mile of flight in terror, Cadelinn managed to slow the panting horses. She still held her bow and arrow in a tight clasp and a chill of fear raced along her spine. She hurriedly glanced through the trees behind them. When she saw no trace of anyone following, she wrapped the reins of Duncan's horse around the pommel of her saddle and placed an arrow against the bow, ready for firing. She had halted the horses in a thick copse of trees to stand quietly watching the way she had come. A lone horse and rider charged into the open space. She had the bow drawn to the deepest part of the arrow shaft. She breathed a silent prayer to Saint Columba, took aim and released the arrow. The enemy warrior never knew that his death had come by a terror-stricken lass. The arrow imbedded itself into the center of his forehead, knocking him off his horse. He was dead by the time he hit the ground.

Cadelinn glanced around the darkened forest. The sun had vanished and a cold rising wind made the treetops sing in wintry moans. She kept bringing her eyes back to Duncan, so grotesque, sitting slumped in his saddle with the arrow still protruding from his neck, his hands still frozen in grip to the pommel.

Cadelinn slowly started the horses walking, looking the perimeter for a familiar landmark, recognizing nothing. She knew that when Angus had slapped the mare, she had run in panic away from the castle, so she would have to circle back left to reach safety.

But what of Angus? Had he survived the malicious attack? Cadelinn's mind raced in concern for her husband, before forcing her thoughts back to her own troubles.

It had started to snow again while her thoughts wandered. Darkness would soon be upon her and she had to find shelter and give aid to Duncan. She knew naught about caring for wounds but she had to do something. She couldn't just leave the arrow in the poor man's neck, she told herself, striving for courage, dreading the thoughts of pulling it out of Duncan's flesh.

The decision of where to find shelter was removed from her hands. At that precise moment Duncan's stallion reached over to nip the neck of her mare. After that it was pandemonium. Her mare started swinging her head, her feet beating the ground, before kicking out viciously with her hind feet. Cadelinn was so busy trying to stay seated she didn't notice when Duncan fell from his saddle to roll down an embankment. Her first inclination of what was transpiring was when one of the stallion's hooves caught

her in a glancing blow against her leg. It brought tears of pain to her eyes before she could throw herself from the saddle.

She sat in pain-filled silence, rubbing her thigh and watched the loveplay of the two horses. The stallion's shrill whistle filled the forest. The mare answered in almost a scream when she kicked out at the stud. The fighting and neighing echoed through the woods before Candelinn jumped up, fright again registering in her mind. The noise could be heard over a large area of the forest. Any would-be attacker would only have to follow the sound through the trees straight to her and Duncan.

Candelinn spied the commander's black and red cloak and limped painfully to where Duncan lay, his face drawn and white as the snow falling on his still body. She dropped to her knees by his side, her trembling fingers reaching to touch his face. She knelt there beside him for several minutes until she was sure he was still alive. His breathing was shallow but the rise and fall of his chest was reassuring.

Candelinn took a deep breath before grasping the arrow with a firm grip. She raised herself to put her knee on his chest before choking out. "I'm sorry, Duncan." Then with the strength she never knew she had she yanked the offending weapon from his neck. Blood had already soaked his shirt and jerkin and now poured forth from the wound. She pulled up her gown and ripped the hem of her petticoat. She wrapped it around his wound trying to stop the flow of blood.

When she sat back on her haunches she noticed that Duncan was lying on the edge of a hollow and there was a huge cave-like overhang where they could find shelter. It was only her stubborn determination that gave her the strength to pull Duncan's limp body down the incline and into the cave. She spread his cloak to pull him half onto it, covering him with the rest of it.

The horses were now silent and Candelinn looked around the area to see if any other creatures stirred in her vicinity. She finally decided it was safe and limped to retrieve the horses and led them to the opposite end of the shelter. Once she had them secure she turned her ire on the stallion. "And you... you blackhearted jackass. You not only tried to break my leg but you unseated Duncan. How do you think I am going to put him back in his saddle? You're lucky I don't feed you to the crows." All the time she was cursing the horse she was untying the leather bag and rolled furs from behind the saddle. It was part of the equipment of the warriors, protection against the cold ground when away from their homes.

She took the furs to the cave to spread one out next to the unconscious man. She rolled him over onto the fur, then doubled his cape around him. She then searched the leather bag for flints. She stood holding them in her hand before looking around to see what she could gather for firewood.

There was a dead tree lying at the entrance to the hollow, plus numerous bushes nearby. She painstakingly gathered all the small dry twigs she could find before taking Duncan's claymore to chop larger pieces. After much effort and not a few swear words, Candelinn finally had a small fire going close to Duncan.

She knelt beside the unmoving body, fear for him causing a knot in the pit of her stomach. Her fingers on his ghostly white face only felt the cold. She stood, looking around, almost frantic, for some kind of an idea to help the man. A gust of wind blowing her skirts against his frame on the ground caused her to look for something to protect him from the wind. The only thing left was her cloak and if she gave that to him she would freeze to death. *What good would that do him with no one to take care of him,* she wondered?

Slowly and methodically Candelinn attacked the surrounding snowdrifts. She rolled the snow into balls about the size that her arms could reach around, carrying them to build a wall at the edge of the

over-hang. She'd had to stop and throw more wood on the fire several times, before she felt that the wall was high enough to protect Duncan from the ice-cold winds.

She slowly dragged one large limb across the fire before collapsing onto the furs with Duncan, covering them both with the MacBaron tartan. Her warmth from her exertions was the heat that Duncan needed.

She awakened twice in the night to pull another limb across the fire, only to crawl back beside the injured clansman.

Morning broke to find her lying silently awake, hesitant to crawl out into the cold. She was hungry, cold and worried for the man lying so quietly beside her. She eased herself out of the makeshift bed and gently gathered her cloak off the sleeping man. She made another trip for wood before picking up the bow and quiver to sling them over her shoulder. The snow was much deeper this morning than the previous day but had at least stopped falling for a short time.

When Candelinn returned to the shelter she carried two hare to be roasted on the fire. After skinning them and putting them on two sticks to hang over the fire she took the skins out into the snow and rubbed them as clean as she could. Then she very carefully cut two long thin strips from the furs under Duncan to make a drawstring type lace to tie the two rabbit furs around her frozen feet. The light slippers she wore with her gowns weren't very serviceable for trudging in the snow.

She then tore another ruffle off her under-clothing for bandages before taking her dagger and cut down the middle of her dress between her legs. The gown was clumsy and kept catching on bushes and dragging in the snow to hinder her every movement. She cut long strips from her cape to wrap around her legs, tying her now split dress to her legs, making a sort of breeches.

Satisfied that she could now get around better she smiled to herself. It wasn't very fashionable and Angus would have had another of his screaming fits but she could maneuver enough to care for herself and her patient.

She picked up the skin-bag of ale she had placed by the side of the cave on the previous day and went to Duncan's side. She gently lifted his head and unwrapped the bandage. She shuddered at the sight of the wound. When she poured some of the ale over the wound, a groan came from the lips of the man resting against her arm. He thrashed his head once and immediately stilled. She rewrapped the same bandage over the wound and poured more ale over the bandage. She would save her last ruffle she had torn off for the next day's bandage.

As she started to lay Duncan's head back down he groaned again and slowly opened his fluttering eyelids. Candelinn still held the *usquebaugh* in her other hand and brought it to his lips, giving him a few drops of the burning liquid. The survival kit of all Scots did its work on Duncan. His eyes opened wider to stare at the vision giving him another drink of the Scots ale. The color actually seemed to slowly return to his face and his eyes roamed around the makeshift shelter.

"I'm sorry Duncan, we are stuck here. You fell from your horse and there was no way I could get you back into the saddle. But if Angus doesn't find us, as soon as you're strong enough, we will find our way home."

He didn't speak, just nodded his head.

"Stay awake until I can feed you. I have some roasted hare waiting on the spit for you." She took one of the sticks holding a piece of meat and as soon as it had cooled sufficiently she proceeded to tear off small

bite-sized pieces to feed the wounded Duncan. He managed only two bites before he shook his head, wanting no more. She gave him another drink from the skin, which he accepted. After leaning him back to his makeshift bed, she went to an untouched snow bank to bring him a handful of snow to put small balls into his mouth. It was the only way she could bring him water and he drank greedily. Then he closed his eyes to return to sleep.

Cadelinn sat on her heels and stared at the man. She suddenly realized that this dour Scot had become her friend and under no circumstances would she allow him to die. She shook the brooding thoughts from her mind and stood up. She started gathering more wood for the time ahead. After stacking a huge pile in the back of the cave she started again on the wall of snow she was building to stop the wind. The heat from the fire had caused it to melt down some so she had to continually keep the top built up.

And so the day passed. Cadelinn either working or standing at the top of the hollow searching for signs of anyone else. She knew Angus was searching for her and would continue to do so until she either returned to the castle or he found her. He would never give up she knew in her heart. Could he have possibly been injured in the battle? Or possibly killed? Her mind refused to even consider such a fate. For to lose Angus would be to lose her will to live.

Duncan still hadn't moved when, at darkness, she climbed into the furs once again to share her heat and her MacBaron cloak. The snows continued to fall in huge flakes and the cold wind blew out of the north, but thanks to Cadelinn's efforts it was not bad in their makeshift shelter.

The same routine followed for three more days. Cadelinn hunted for any animals they could eat. Once she had found a tarmachan, a type of grouse, but the little babies trailing after their mother made her refuse to kill it. There was plenty of hare out on the snow so they would not go hungry. She gathered wood and tended the sick Duncan. He was awake a little more each day and his color had come back into his face. His injury was healing nicely and had not become infected.

On the last morning she awoke to silence. The wind had stopped blowing. She opened her eyes to look out the end of the cave and was relieved to see that the snow had stopped also. She hastily threw some more wood on the drying embers to kindle anew.

"Hello, lass." She straightened at the sound of Duncan's voice. His voice was hoarse and scratchy sounding but it was the most wonderful sound Cadelinn had heard in ages.

His eyes were clear and he was leaning up on his elbows. "How are you feeling?"

"I think, thanks to you, I'll live. So I'll not complain about any discomforts."

Cadelinn laughed. "You wouldn't dare complain. I have you at a disadvantage."

The dour face broke into a smile. Then he noticed Cadelinn's state of dress and a frown once more covered his face. His eyes roamed over her fur skin shoes to her beautiful blue dress, now ruined and wrapped around her legs from her thighs down, like a pair of breeks.

"Don't say one word about my unmaidenly dress. My slippers were inadequate so not to have frozen feet this is the best I could manage and my dress kept getting in the way and I had too much to do trying to keep wood on the fire, I couldn't fight with it all the time." She rambled.

The twinkling eyes were her only answer. "How long have we been here?"

"Five days." If she had shocked Duncan it didn't show on his taciturn face. "And that mongrel of a horse of yours ran off last night."

A frown crossed his face but he didn't speak of the sorrow of the loss of his favorite steed.

When Candelinn returned after her usual scouting trip Duncan was sitting propped up against the wall closer to the fire. He evidently had taken it upon himself to throw another piece of wood into the blaze.

"It looks like the storm is over," Candelinn said.

"We had best start for the castle. The Laird will be worried out of his mind for you."

"As I have been for him, Duncan. I don't even know if he survived the ambush."

"Och, lass. It would take more men than that to whip The MacBaron. Mark my words, lass. He's out roaming the countryside looking for you, lashing out at the horses and men because they can't cover the whole of Scotland in a day's time." He reassured her with a smile.

Candelinn couldn't help but return the smile, picturing her husband growling at the whole clan and especially at the great destrier he rode.

"Duncan, I have no idea where we are. I'm afraid I got lost in our run for freedom."

"I've been riding these lands all my life, lass. I doubt I won't recognize our whereabouts as soon as I look around a bit," he assured her.

"But Duncan, you lost a lot of blood and I'm not sure you will be able to travel."

"Nonsense. I've felt worse and ridden farther than we are going to ride today. I'm a MacBaron remember?" he spoke sure of himself. He was worried about his mistress. She had lost some weight and he had noticed the limp when she walked.

"M'lady, were you wounded with an arrow, also?" He asked abruptly.

Startled by his question, Candelinn mumbled. "No."

"Then what is ailing your leg? You walk like a cripple."

The fire flashed in her eyes before she retorted. "I am a cripple. That blackhearted nag of yours just about took my leg off when he decided he wanted to mount my mare." Candelinn's anger at the stallion made her forget to watch her tongue.

Duncan laughed until it hurt his neck. His mistress had turned beet red at her own words.

"'Tis sorry I am about your leg, mistress. That leaves us with some sort of a dilemma. I'm too weak to walk and you're not able and we only have your mare for the two of us. I think that would be too much for her carrying the two of us in the snow."

"Oh, I'm getting used to walking now. It was the first two days that were painful. Do you think you can mount my mare if I help you? She asked.

"I'll manage, lass. If you can saddle her, I can ride her," he vowed.

Once Duncan saw the sidesaddle he almost changed his mind but Candelinn forced the issue, even showing him how to drape his knee around the pommel, to keep from falling off. It was such a funny sight to see the dour Scot riding sidesaddle on the mare and she had to fight herself not to laugh.

They were a sorry sight when they began the long trek back to Glencairn Castle. A wounded man slumped over the saddle horn of a horse led by a strange looking person with rabbit skins for boots and carrying a quiver of arrows and a bow over a black and red plaid tartan. One glance around the countryside and Duncan knew where they were. He told Candelinn to keep the sun over her right shoulder until noon and they would soon be on the lands of the MacBaron she would recognize.

Duncan had fallen back into semiconsciousness, after a few miles of hard jolting on the back of the mare. Luckily he had tied himself to the saddle in case this happened. Candelinn was putting one foot in front of the other, her mind numb from the cold. She was agonizingly tired of walking another step, trying to make a path for the horse and man behind her.

The day was waning when they broke from the forest onto the meadow spreading out before them and Castle Glencairn. They hadn't progressed far when the lookout at the castle spotted the strange travelers approaching the castle. At his warning shout, Angus led a mass of men through the gates to check on the travelers. He had ridden the countryside from dawn till dusk every day and found no trace of his wife or commander.

Not recognizing the approaching pair for some few minutes, Angus stood with a fearful heart. At the shout that they were wearing the MacBaron colors, he ran to the barn to bridle his stallion. His fast beating heart and shaking hands making the job more difficult than usual. Not bothering with a saddle he had leaped onto the steed's back and was out of the barn and several yards along the way before any of his men could follow.

He raced his horse across the still snow-covered meadow to stop and stare at the couple in their dazed state. Candelinn's body was taking the steps her brain had told them to take, but it was a trance-like movement at this stage. Duncan was semi-conscious, not recognizing anything except the need to clasp onto the pommel of the saddle.

Angus's heart was wrenched from him as he gazed at Candelinn. Her hair was a mass of tangles hanging loosely around her bent head. Her trial of survival was evident in her dress and when his eyes touched the furs tied around her tiny feet, a rage filled his being. The fact that the bedraggled woman didn't even raise her head to the sound of thundering hooves heading straight toward her sent a vile curse from deep in his throat.

When he reached her, Angus yanked on the reins and was out of the saddle before his mount could come to a complete stop. He pulled the tired wee lass into his arms, crushing her against his chest. "Dear God, Candelinn," he breathed into her hair. His heart beat rapidly, feeling the trembling woman once more in his arms. The agony of losing her had been too real and he was reluctant to loose the bonds around her now.

Her name in the voice of the man she loved with all her heart and had feared for these last few days brought her out of her dazed state.

"Angus," was all she whispered before she collapsed into his arms. She was safe at last. Angus would take care of her and Duncan. He would know what to do.

One of the clansmen that had arrived on the scene by this time held his lady while the chief swung onto his steed, before taking her into his arms. He settled her easily across his thighs and his destrier to gallop back to the castle. He swung off the horse to carry his lovely wife up the stairs, shouting orders every step of the way. Maids jumped to do his bidding.

Angus lay Candelinn gently on top of the covers on the bed and started stripping off her filthy and ripped clothing. When he had peeled the fur from her feet he wrinkled his nose in disgust. She groaned beneath his touch when the cold air hit her exposed flesh. He pulled a fur over her naked body and went to throw a log onto the fire, bringing it ablaze once more.

The maids along with a couple clansmen brought in water for a bath and once the tub was full, Angus waved them from the chambers. He carried her across the room and settled her gently into the steaming water. Her eyes opened and she groaned as the hot water sent a myriad of painful needles flowing through her half-frozen limbs.

"I'm sorry, my love, but it's the only way." He massaged her body vigorously with soap and a cloth, until it turned pink and rosy, the circulation once more reaching the outer edges.

"I think my Laird has fair removed the skin from my bones." It was the first words she had spoken in a while and Angus snapped his head up to meet her perusal. Her exhaustion was evident in her green eyes, though she tried to move her lips into a semblance of a smile.

"'Tis worth this rough measure if it brings my lass back to the living. Though I would rather suds this body with gentle caresses." His hands still full of lavender scented soap moved seductively up over her stomach to reach higher and close around her breasts, his thumbs making tiny circles over their peaks.

Candelinn rested her head on the back of the tub, the warmth of the bath and her husband's ministrations causing her exhaustion to overtake her. Her eyes closed and reopened to stare into the dark brown eyes of her husband.

"'Tis a sorry state my husband, when your new bride cannot keep her eyes open long enough to take her husband to her. But I fear this is one night when the Lady MacBaron will not physically be able to carry out her wifely duties."

Angus laughed and lifted her from the tub, wrapping her in a towel and rubbing her dry. "We have a lifetime of nights to make up for it, my love." He wrapped her in a heavy robe and lifted her in his arms to easily carry her to the large bed. He covered her up with heavy furs and sat on the edge beside her, his hand resting on her other side. "Just try to stay awake for a few minutes, Candelinn. Some food should be on its way."

He had no sooner spoken than there was a tap on the heavy door. He stood up and crossed the room. He opened the oaken portal, took a tray from one of the serving maids and after reclosing the door came back to her side.

He placed a linen napkin under her chin and, like feeding a child, started to spoon the hot creamy soup into her mouth.

Halfway through she pleaded. "I cannot possibly swallow another bite."

"Just a couple more, lass, then you can sleep," Angus insisted.

Candelinn managed to swallow two more bites, then held her hand up to stop the spoon once more nearing her mouth.

"I can't, Angus."

He dropped the spoon back into the bowl. He bent and kissed her lightly on the mouth. "Goodnight, my love."

Candelinn slid down into the bed and closed her eyes, letting the heavy coverlets comfort her with their warmth.

Later, when Angus stripped his clothes off and slid in beside his bride she had not moved. He pulled her body close to his side. After the nights of walking the castle halls and battlements with his loss of her eating at him, it did not take long for Morpheus to overtake the great MacBaron warrior, sending him into a restful sleep, his arms wrapped around the satiny skin next to him.

~ * ~

Along the border regions, in the province of Galloway, trouble stirred over the crown of Scotland. With the dead of winter keeping most of the citizenry encamped behind castle walls, tempers were easily flared. All that had the interest of Scotland as their prime concern grew more on edge, nervous over the lassitude of King Edward. He still refused to name a ruler for Scotland and the Scots were on the verge of erupting under the accursed English rule.

In Annandale, at Lochmaben Castle, the atmosphere was no different. The weather had kept the five Bruce brothers ensconced within thick stone walls far longer than their active bodies were used to and the strain of Robert's career was showing in their everyday routine.

The great hall with the numerous banners representing the different branches of the clan adorning its granite walls was the scene of much heated discussion. Two of the brothers, Thomas and Edward, slouched moodily in the heavy chairs before the fire, their eyes riveted to the pacing Robert.

Robert the Bruce walked back and forth in front of the roaring fire, hands clasped behind his back, head bent in concentration.

Alexander, a scowl furrowing his brow was the first to speak. "Something has to be done! Could you at least speak to him? Or arrange a meeting? Even the Black Laird of Badenock has to admit that Edward is trying to kill Scotland."

Robert stopped in mid-stride to look across the room at his brother, a frown creasing his forehead.

"Do you really think the Red Comyn would listen to anything I have to say? He would rather be a puppet for Edward, as long as he could be called king, than stand up and fight for Scotland. He would sell the whole country for a gold crown upon his head!"

The youngest of the brothers, Thomas, rose abruptly from his chair. "But what if you sent a message saying you would meet him on neutral ground for a conference? Alex and I could deliver the message to Dalswinton, where his is residing until spring."

"And what neutral ground would you suggest, young Thomas?" Robert had stopped his pacing to listen

to his younger brother.

"You could always meet at the kirk of Friar's Minor at Dumfries. That should be neutral enough for anyone. Once inside, the two of you could be completely alone and without interference, mayhap, you could talk some sense into him. How much more can you stand? Edward has taken your Umfraville lands and given them to that traitor Ingram. You've got to try, Robert... If not for the clan... then for Scotland!" He pleaded.

"Perhaps you're right, Thomas. It might be worth it to try to get him to listen. Maybe he doesn't realize the problems our poor crofters are having of late."

"Bah, Robert! He knows." Alexander said, coming to his brother's side. "But, it is Scotland's last hope. Say you will do it!" He urged.

Robert's eyes slowly moved over the four younger Bruces in the room. Alexander and Nigel still leaned casually against the mantel awaiting his decision, while the other two voiced their opinions openly. They had always looked up to him and followed his commands. Where he led they would be by his side. Perhaps it would be worthwhile. If he could convince the Red Comyn, peace would once more reign over Scotland.

"Aye, Alex. Send the message. I'll do what I can."

One hour later, two men could be seen riding due west in the direction of Dalswinton Castle, on Comyn lands.

Another small band of warriors in full hauberk and chain mail was headed in the direction of the kirk of Dumfries. They were armed for battle in case of an emergency and the Bruce banner was held proudly by a man riding beside the leader.

The deep snow made the going slow and rough but the small army of men kept at a steady pace, leaving a deep trail as the horses floundered through the unbroken drifts, only to be gradually filled by the gentle snow falling in their wake.

When they arrived at the portals of the kirk, the leader, stocky in build, stepped lightly from his horse. He looked around at the empty kirkyard, its tombstones standing forlornly in the snow. He felt a chill pass through his body, a premonition of an unforeseen tragedy. He shook his head absentmindedly, deep in thought, as the snow fell from his helmet onto his shoulders. He glanced up at Alexander Bruce still seated in his saddle.

"Have the men dismount and wait on the lee side of the kirk. If he comes, I'll be waiting inside." He turned and started walking to the front of the kirk.

"Robert!"

He stopped in mid-stride and turned to face the younger version of himself, his eyebrows raised in question.

"Good luck. And may God be with you."

After Robert had disappeared inside the kirk, Alexander dismounted with his clan and the few of the Kirkpatrick clan who had been staying at the Bruce home, followed suit. Rather than going only to the

protected side of the kirk, he and his men stood a silent vigil on all sides so they would be alerted to the direction in which the Red Comyn would be coming, if he decided to come at all.

The day grew late and the bitter winter wind blew around the men huddled at the walls of the stone building, covering their still forms with a fine layer of blowing snow. Alexander was rapidly giving up hope that their offer to meet would be accepted, when one of his men drew his attention to riders approaching from a distance. They were barely visible through the steadily worsening storm, their horses and trappings camouflaged by the background of the forest.

As they drew near it was plain to see there were only five men, two of whom wore the Bruce colors, the other three the Red Comyn plaid. They drew to a standstill before the front of the kirkyard. Sir John stepped from his horse, throwing the reins to one of his men. Without saying a word he went through the door of the kirk and disappeared from view.

Inside, the Comyn chief removed his fur-lined cloak and helmet and left them by the door as he moved into the inner room where Sir Robert Bruce was kneeling before the altar in prayer.

The Black Laird of Badenock looked down on the praying man with contemptuous regard. He considered any show of spiritual humility a weakness in the character of the Bruce and subject to scorn. He felt exceedingly superior to see this man on his knees. He hated to lay aside these exultant feelings, but he wanted this business over with so he could get back to Dalswinton and to the warm fire awaiting his return. He cleared his throat.

Robert, hearing Sir John beside him, slowly stood and faced him. He approached the guardian of Scotland and nodded with calm control.

"Sir John. Thank you for coming. I'm sorry I asked you to come in this unbearable weather, but I thought it imperative that we meet."

"And what did you think so urgent, Sir Robert, that I should hasten out in this God-forsaken storm? Perchance even your scullery maid is ready to mutiny in the face of your hopeless situation." Sarcasm dripped from his tongue.

Robert ignored the barb, holding his temper in check. "Something must be done about Edward. He is killing Scotland, John. Even you should be able to see that."

"On the contrary, Bruce. I think Edward is doing an outstanding job. As soon as he names me King of Scotland--which I assure you is in the near future--he and I will get along quite well together."

"You're daft man!" Sir Robert's hand went to the hilt of his dagger in anger. "You will be nothing except his puppet, doing his bidding. He will continue to overtax our people until the poor crofters are starving and most of our lands are given over to England. Don't you give one damned whit for Scotland, John Comyn?"

"Since we are here alone with no witnesses, I don't mind telling you I am more interested in being king. I plan to look after myself in this matter. To hell with Scotland!"

Robert's anger surged through his body, boiling over in deadly wrath. His hand, lightning quick, pulled the dagger and without thinking, he plunged it deep into the chest of Sir John Comyn. The Bruce acted instinctively and it was over before he realized what he had done.

Sir John, his eyes wide with surprise, felt the pain move over his chest, numbing his senses. His eyes became glazed with the shock of the deathblow. His last haze-ridden sight was that of Robert the Bruce glaring hatefully down at him, his last thought was of all the plans he had made to become King of Scotland going unexplainable awry. Where had he gone wrong? Where had he failed?

Robert looked down on the man at his feet, and knew he was dead without even bending to check for a heartbeat. He drew his eyes slowly from the crumpled body on the floor to the dagger still grasped tightly in his hand. The blood of the Red Comyn dripped from its blade, spotting the floor with a growing pool of red. Robert stood frozen, aghast at what he had done. He raised guilt-sorrowed eyes and encountered the high altar where earlier he had knelt in prayer. Sickened by his sacrilegious conduct he fell to his knees, his head cradled in his hands. He had killed a man in front of the altar. "Oh my God," he prayed aloud. "Forgive me."

How long he stayed in that position he did not know, but when he finally rose to his feet, he knew what must be done. He would take what came from this tragic incident... Whatever punishment God deemed fitting would never compensate for the senseless act he had committed in rage. His guilt would plague him for the rest of his life, showing no mercy, giving no redemption from the flames of self-recrimination.

He drug his feet with mechanical action, moving him to the door. He swung it wide, the snow blowing against his face, bringing with it the clean fresh smell of the outside world, clearing the air of the odor of death behind him.

Alexander stepped in front of his brother, a question on his lips. Then his glance fell to Robert's hand still clasping the bloodstained dagger. He moved forward to step close at the same time his friend Roger de Kirkpatrick moved beside him.

"Robert, what in God's name happened in there?"

His voice was a low croak, as the words stumbled from his mouth. "I think I killed him."

Kirkpatrick shoved forward. "You killed him? By Christ, Robert, I'll make sure of it." He forced his way through the door of the kirk as a Comyn clansman approached Robert with drawn sword. He stabbed without careful aim and it ricocheted off Bruce's armor beneath his cloak. Alexander ran him through before the man could raise his arm to strike again.

Robert stood in a daze, seeing nothing of the surrounding chaos. There was only a brief moment for his decision, as he listened to the exclamations of Kirkpatrick inside the kirk and the wailing prayers of the greyfriars. He knew John Comyn was dead. At this moment Robert knew his spirit could either break or he could grasp his future by the throat. Had he been a lesser man he would have run for cover, to become an excommunicated outlaw among the heather.

But Robert the Bruce was a man with ideals. Yes, he had committed a sacrilege, but the liberty of all Scotland was more important than his own safety. He would not hide in the heather waiting for Edward to seek him out and destroy him. He would stand and fight like a man for the country of his dreams and free it from the chains threatening to strangle it to death.

Robert raised his head, the snow hitting him full in the face. There was confusion all around him, yet his mind was suddenly crystal clear. He stood straight, a man once more with a purpose and without looking to the right or left, strode with renewed determination through the deep snow to where his destrier was tethered. He mounted and with only a nod to his brothers, turned and headed back in the direction of Annandale.

Soon the little kirk of Friar's Minor was deserted except for the grey-cloaked men residing within its sheltering walls. The two clans had separated... each going in the direction of their own lands... each with heavy hearts.

One carried a burden of death across the saddle of one of the destriers, a feeling of hatred for the offender, craving revenge. The leader of the other clan, though moving with his men at the same speed, hindered as they were by the deep snow, seemed in a hurry. Not as if he were running from fear, but filled with a sense of his own destiny, as if he were headed in the direction of a great engagement, one that would change the history of Scotland forever.

"Nigel," Robert motioned his brother to his side. "Search out our friend Jamie Douglas. Scotland has need of his services."

Nigel nodded and turned his steed, making a fresh solitary path through the deep snow in the opposite direction.

Twelve

Candelinn slowly opened her eyes, awake at last from her restful twelve hours of rest. A few inches before her were smiling brown eyes over a freshly shaved cheek. "I've grown impatient waiting for you to awaken, my lady." He spoke softly as he reached out to tenderly brush her tangled hair away from her temple.

Candelinn remembered the trials and terror of the last few days and could only smile, knowing she was safe once again in the protective embrace of The MacBaron.

Angus's eyes slowly moved over her entire head while he inspected every detail, reassuring himself that she was here, alive and well, except for the great bruise on her thigh. He brought his eyes back to stare into loving green ones before asking.

"Was your ordeal in the elements great, my love?"

Candelinn hesitated briefly before saying. "I didn't think I would ever be warm again, but the worst was my fear for Duncan. I know nothing of wounds so didn't know what to do. I just poured ale on the wound and bandaged it." She confessed her feelings of inadequacy.

A tremendous smile creased his face. "You may have found a new medicine, love. Duncan is up and about already this morn, sitting in the dining hall, telling all who will listen of your bravery. It seems the Lady MacBaron has won another heart in the clan."

She blushed at the words of praise. "But Angus, I wasn't brave. When I removed that accursed arrow I was so frightened I cried and I cried from frustration before I ever got the bloody fire lit. Then I cried when Duncan lay there so white and still. I was so afraid that he would die. So you see, you would have thought me a weak-kneed simpleton instead of brave."

Angus threw back his head and laughed at her confession. He brushed her lips lightly with his own. "You may have cried, sweet Candelinn, but you went ahead and did what had to be done. Any other lass would have perished from the cold and hunger. My wife is more brave than any woman I have ever known."

She reached out with both arms to pull his lips to her own. She took the initiative of the kiss and her tongue probed, intruding into his mouth to touch his tongue, then retreat, in sensuous light strokes.

Angus groaned and took control. He grasped the back of her head and turned it sideways for a more comfortable position. His mouth took over, dominating the movements of their tongues and lips. He hand slipped naturally to cup a breast, his thumb and finger rolling a hardening nipple.

Candelinn groaned from the overwhelming desire to feel him inside her, and moved her body against him.

Angus raised his mouth to kiss her neck. "I've needed you, Candelinn. I almost lost my mind at the thought of never holding you like this again. You make me burn from hunger for you," he whispered against her skin sending his hot breath burning a trail of passion through her.

"I hungered for you too, my husband." She was too involved with the way her body was reacting to each caress to be able to think straight enough to say more.

A loud knock on the wood door broke them apart instantly. Their breathing was ragged and a black scowl crossed Angus's face before he stood to stride across the floor to yank open the door. It was the first time Candelinn had noticed he was still clothed.

Fergus smiled at Angus from the opening. He spotted Candelinn awake so walked into the room, not realizing he had interrupted what was to Angus something more important than a brother's visit. He groaned as Fergus strolled over to the bed, a broad smile on his face. "You don't seem to have suffered too much, lass. I thought surely you would have grown wings from listening to Duncan tell it."

"I'm fine, really. Just overtired." She hinted for him to leave the room so she could get back in the arms of the frowning warrior still holding onto the door.

"'Tis a good thing you surpassed us all in marksmanship or you would have gone hungry."

"As long as you can stomach hare for every meal."

Angus joined Fergus by the side of the bed. "She would also have been barefoot, Fergus. Did you notice her fur skin boots?" He pointed to the discarded skins on the floor where he had undressed her the evening before.

Candelinn justified her footwear. "Well, I had to have something. Those slippers were next to nothing."

The men's gaiety soon rubbed off on Candelinn and she laughed with them at the sorry sight she must have presented walking across the meadow, when Angus had found her.

"'Tis glad I am you're home safe, lass. The Laird was fair beyond himself without you. Had you been gone another day, I fear the whole clan would have stopped their duties to search for you. 'Tis not easy to live with my brother-in-law when he is in a constant rage." He grinned at the growl coming from the

man at his side. "But now I've seen you're okay, I can be about my duties."

"And about time," Angus said.

Fergus reached out and tugged a lock of her hair before he turned and strolled jauntily out of the room.

Angus quietly closed the door behind his brother-in-law before smiling lecherously to his wife as he made his way back to the bed and her side. He fell across the bed, lying next to her. Just before his mouth claimed hers once again, he asked huskily. "Where did we leave off, love?" His hand claimed her breast, pushing aside her flimsy night rail. When he pushed his frame against her body she could feel his readiness, fully hardened, through the coverlet. Candelinn's fingers locked in his dark curly hair at the nape of his neck pulling him closer. The breathing deepened and their heartbeats raced before Angus stood to remove his clothing.

A knock pounded on the door.

Angus shouted. "Who the hell is it?"

"'Tis Duncan. I came to see to the health of your lady."

"Damn! I need a lock on this door!" Angus swore. But he stood a moment dampening his fires of passion before bidding his commander to enter.

Candelinn put her hand over her mouth to cover the grin covering her face.

Duncan thrust the door wide awarding his laird only a cursory glance. The scowl on Angus's face didn't deter him a whit. After all, he'd had the lass to himself for the last thirteen hours.

"How are you, lass?"

"I'm well, Duncan. How are you? You were the wounded party." She smiled at his dour countenance, not the least intimidated.

"Thanks to you, I'm fine Can't abide the chain mail about me neck but otherwise I'm fit."

"I didn't do anything, Duncan. A tough MacBaron like you could have made it on his own."

Duncan's eyes twinkled at her self-deprecating remark and turned to Angus. "Has she explained how she came by her limp, Angus."

Angus noticed the gleam in his commander's eyes, so was immediately interested in the answer. "No. But the bruise on her leg is a large one."

Laughter rolled from Duncan when he saw the way Candelinn was scowling up at him as if she wished she had left him for dead. "I don't think the mistress will ever forgive my stallion, Angus. 'Twas when he wanted to mount her mare and she was in the way."

She glared at the two laughing men, refusing to see the slightest thing funny about her predicament at the time.

"I'll have to write down the date so we'll know when the foal is due. By the way, your steed returned."

"Aye, so Fergus told me. I would have hated losing such a sturdy animal."

"But, Duncan," Candelinn interrupted. "I thought now that you can ride sidesaddle you could borrow my mount any time you wanted to." She knew by the anguish on his face that she had paid him back in kind.

"Sidesaddle? What is she talking about Duncan?"

"Och, nothing, my liege."

"Angus, you mean you did not notice that Duncan rode all the way home sidesaddle on my mount? If he would have had a gown he would have looked most fetching."

Angus pounded his friend on the back. "'Tis lucky for you, I was so happy to see my wife, I failed to notice. Lord, but the clan is going to love this."

"They already know and I'd just as soon not hear about it again." The dour clansman was back in full force. All humor was gone from his face. He quickly changed the subject. "Did you find out the identity of our attackers."

"Nae, they were all dead by the time we were through with them so I couldn't question them. They wore no plaid but it's likely they came from the party that had just left the castle. The Red Comyn's looks of hatred were very evident. It was plain he didn't appreciate my stealing two of his clan, and Letitia's venomous glares at Candelinn was proof there was no love lost there." Angus's face was grave while he spoke his thoughts. "We'll probably never know but it's doubtful that either the English or the Comyn's will ever set foot on MacBaron lands again."

Quiet settled over the room, each thinking of the dastardly deed that could have caused the death of Duncan.

Duncan straightened from leaning against the wardrobe. "'Tis good to know ye'r well, m'lady. If I ever have to be wounded and stranded in the forest again, I hope you are there to tend me." His look was serious as he turned to exit the room. Angus walked over to him and whispered something for his ears alone. Duncan laughed and nodded and closed the door behind him.

Angus walked back to the bed, to resume his amorous pursuits.

"What did you tell Duncan to make him laugh?"

"I told him I wanted a lock installed on this door by tomorrow. The next person that interrupts will get sorry duty indeed, wife. Don't they know we would like a little privacy for God's sake." He once more claimed Candelinn's mouth in a passion stirring kiss. He pressed his body into hers in sensuous motions before he claimed her breast with his lips. She could feel his strong arms encircle her to pull her closer, his warm breath fanning her body.

The door banged against the wall, noisily breaking them apart. "Damn," Candelinn muttered into her husband's neck.

"Angus! English soldiers have been spotted riding towards Strathness on Dunkeld hill." Duncan shouted the words before turning to run from the room to alert the men to saddle their mounts

Passions rewards forgotten completely in that moment, Angus donned chain mail and grabbed his claymore on his way out the door.

Fergus and a score of clansmen were left to guard the castle as the rest of the men rode like thunder through the gate in pursuit of the enemy.

Time hung heavy on Candelinn with Angus gone. Though wishing he were with her, she felt free and alive. This was her home now, and she was Angus's wife. She tried not to think of the danger her husband may be in. *Had they engaged the English?* If anything happened to her arrogant warrior she would not want to live. She refused to dwell on the unknown. She would have faith in her husband and his warriors.

The next few days went smoothly. Candelinn had never been so content except when she had lain in her husband's arms. The snow had started again and lay thickly upon the ground. The wind blew huge drifts along the base of the mountains and it became impossible to get out.

Candelinn didn't mind the inconvenience. She had taken over the running of the castle and had fit right into her role of lady of the manor. There was plenty she still didn't know, but she tried hard to learn and was so kind and pleasant to all the servants they bent over backwards trying to please her. Because of this, the Castle Glencairn ran smoother than it had for years. The atmosphere was a happy one and the sound of singing in the kitchen or whistling in the stables had not been heard in such quantity since Angus had been a boy and his mother had been alive.

Candelinn took the time to listen to the children who came to her with their adventures of playing in the snow. She would insist they warm in front of the fire and have a cup of hearty broth, creamy with lots of barley, before they trudged home to their own crofter's cottage. Or she would listen with interest when the elderly told her of days gone by, even when they repeated the same tale to her a few days later, she still listened with the same rapt interest as hearing the story for the first time.

Slowly she became a MacBaron in thought, word and deed. Never was she without the clan brooch on her gown and in the cool of the evening she was never seen without the clan tartan pleated and hanging over her shoulder. When she heard something about the Comyn clan she would agree as if it had never been her own.

She had got to go hunting with Fergus and the clan on a couple of occasions, always bringing down more than her share of the kill. The men were open in their admiration for their mistress.

After days of absence a messenger came informing her that the laird was well. The English had taken flight when seeing the Black MacBaron and his mighty warriors coming down on them. But Angus proceeded on to Castle Strathness to reassure himself that his brother was prepared in case of attack. He had agreed to stay a few days to help train the younger lads of the clan.

Although in other parts of the country the antagonism with the English ran high, inside the boundaries of MacBaron lands peace prevailed over all. The death of Sir John Comyn had not yet reached their ears.

~ * ~

The fiery cross was ready. Two sides of the cross were coated with lamb's blood, and the other two sides set afire and fastened together at the center, forming a cross, by a strip of Bruce plaid. The blood still shone bright red on the adjacent sides of the charred wood. The sign of fire and blood had always been used in Scotland as the traditional means of calling the clans and their allies together in times of

crisis. Now, with Scotland on the verge of war with England, the fiery cross would once more travel the width and breadth of the land, rallying the clansmen and supporters of Robert the Bruce to his side.

The damp chill of a Scottish winter penetrated the heavy fur-lined clothing of the men, driving its icy fingers to the very marrow of their bones as they stamped about the courtyard of the Castle Lochmaben in a futile effort to keep warm. The ever present wind blew restlessly off the loch with threatening intensity, sweeping across the frozen crusted snow covered land, stinging the eyes and faces of the men gathered in small numbers about the courtyard.

Robert and his brothers stood outside the doors of the castle, informing the local clansmen and friends of his plans. The cross was held firmly in the Bruce's hand, a stern look etched his face as he walked slowly up to one of the younger supporters.

This tall lanky youth looked him directly in the eye acknowledging the honor of being called upon to carry the fiery cross... the cross that would bring Scotland a new King.

"Good Sir James, would you carry the news to our people? I need the stamina not only of a Douglas for this ride, but also a true and cherished friend."

James Douglas, his dark, normally stern eyes, lowered in humility at the words from The Bruce. He realized Sir Robert gave him this small honor not only because he was a staunch supporter of wanting to see him on the throne as Scotland's King, but was the only one of those present who had lost his entire family holdings to the English.

"Aye, my liege." He raised his head once more to look upon Sir Robert. "It will be an honor to carry the cross. This is the day many a Highlander and I have looked forward to. What message goes with it, sire?"

"Tell our friends we will meet on Palm Sunday, at Scone to crown the Bruce as the new King of Scotland."

The crowd went wild. It was what they had been hoping for, but to hear it spoken aloud by Sir Robert himself was cause for instant rejoicing. They pounded each other on the back, screaming their jubilation. Sir James Douglas was the only one near enough to hear Sir Robert continue in a quiet voice.

"If Bishop Wishart gives me absolution at Glasgow for my destruction at the altar, that is."

Sir James put out his mailed fist and clamped it hard on his friend's shoulder. "Have no fear, sire. God has forgiven you already. Or else he would not have sent you to save Scotland."

Robert's light blue eyes looked deep into sincere dark ones for an interminable minute before his body relaxed and he simply nodded.

The good Sir James took the fiery cross from the other man's hand and while the crowd still cheered, climbed astride his huge destrier. It was a horse of speed to travel quickly, the strength to carry such a mighty warrior astride his back and the stamina to last through such a journey. Sir James took one last look at Sir Robert the Bruce. His stern countenance broke into a smile as his folded fist covered his heart. "See you at Scone, my liege."

"Aye, James. At the time of Palm Sunday. Godspeed."

With a nod and a wave, Sir James turned his steed and without looking back started at a slow canter across the cobblestones in the direction of the portcullis already lifted for him to pass through.

The Bruce stood silently in the courtyard, watching the lone rider as he disappeared into the blowing haze of snow. So much was at stake and so many depended on him to make the decisions which would mean life or death to them and their families. Unconsciously he stroked his forehead with his gloved hand, oblivious of the man who had come to stand at his side.

"I found him on the track riding with his men for Annandale," Nigel broke into his brother's thoughts. "The black cloud of smoke was still billowing from beyond the hills where Douglas Castle lay in ruin, when I joined him. He still says naught of the burning, but his men have told me all that happened. Scotland will long remember the infamous deed of James Douglas, brother. You couldn't have chosen a better man."

"With the support of James Douglas and Angus MacBaron I feel I could go right to Edward's private chambers if need be." He stood for a time longer staring through the grated portcullis where the proud knight had disappeared into the forest.

From Annandale, in the province of Galloway, James Douglas rode due west to Kirkcubright and after telling James the Steward of the impending coronation and without hesitation, swung his steed north, following the well worn track toward the province of Ayr.

The weather cleared only slightly, making his cross-country trek a test of stubborn determination as much as physical stamina. While the arbitrary weather conditions made his travels harder, it also served to shield him from patrolling English troops who were sure to be staying close to their warm hearths.

In Ayr, the home of the Clan Ferguson of Kilkerran, James stopped and dismounted at a swiftly flowing burn, the center cresting over the frozen ridges bordering its glacial waters. He rested on his haunches, giving his horse a short rest before continuing through the deep snow to Kilkerran.

The sight of the fiery cross caused considerable speculation amongst the citizenry. When James repeated the message from Robert Bruce a great cheer arose, echoing against the hills. Even as he rode out of sight, their voices could still be heard rejoicing at the news.

When James entered the city of Glasgow, he was immediately swept up into the bustling activity. Slowly he made his way toward the home of Bishop Wishart.

A servant admitted the travel weary young man, showing him into a small room whose greatest attraction was the blazing fire in the stone fireplace.

The bishop was seated at his desk in deep concentration over one of his clerical books, his shiny pate reflecting the firelight.

James waited patiently for recognition, leaning the cross against a nearby chair as he removed his heavy outer garments one by one as the heat of the fire worked its way into his weary bones.

"Oh..." the stout little man looked up in surprise. "Sir James. What brings you so far afield in this most miserable weather?"

"'Tis Sir Robert the Bruce for which I've come," James answered. He drew near the seated man and sat down in a nearby chair. He began to tell of the events leading to Robert's decision to become the

crowned sovereign of Scotland.

"... and it lays heavy on his conscience. As you know, Robert is a most devout man, sincere in his faith. The death of John Comyn is a black mark upon his soul. His fervent hope is that you will receive him and grant him absolution for this most grievous of sins."

For several minutes the bishop sat, leaning back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the flickering flames in the hearth, as if in a trance. The only sound was that of his fingertips, tapping the desktop as his mind retreated deeper in thought. Should he give the Bruce absolution for the Comyn's death? He knew Robert had a fierce temper and steel too ready to his hand, but after listening to Sir James, he also knew Robert had regretted his sacrilege when his blood had cooled.

Aye, he would give Robert absolution. Bishop Wishart had waited ten years to crown a Scottish King. Now the hour had come, bleakly enough 'tis true, but he was ready. He would bring out from his treasury, where it was concealed, the old forbidden flag of the King of Scotland. The lion within his pasture of scarlet lilies would take to the wind once again.

Slowly his eyes moved from the brilliant fire to the patiently waiting Douglas. His deliberation at an end, he nodded his head in the affirmative. "Aye, I will see it done."

An audible sigh escaped the lips of James Douglas as he stood to take his leave of the bishop. "Sir Robert will be in Glasgow within a few days. I must hasten. The fiery cross has yet to complete its journey. I travel next to Argyll, to the Earl of Lennox at Loch Lomond and to the MacArthur at Innestrarynich."

He put on his outer clothes and bent down picking up the cross from its resting place, next to his chair. He carried it with him to the door and opened it. He bowed low before the bishop. "Bye your leave. We will meet at Scone."

The bishop rose from his chair and walked to the young man, placing his hand upon his shoulder. "Safe journey, lad. Godspeed."

Thirteen

"But, Candelinn, you must!"

"Oh no, Fergus. I am not going to go around the rest of my life saving you from your boasting."

"Och, lass," her brother persisted. "What was I to do when the lad Owen MacBride said you could do none of the things I and the MacBaron's insisted you could? You must show him we speak the truth."

Candelinn paced the floor of her chambers. Angus had not returned from Strathness and she was bored. She missed him and had been at a loss as to how to occupy her time this day when her brother approached her with his insane scheme. She stopped her pacing and swung on him, an idea forming in her mind.

"How much?" she asked.

"How much what, lass?" Fergus parried a little sheepishly.

"How many bawbees will you pocket if I win?"

Fergus looked at the toe of his dust-stained boots. His sister was too smart for her own good. He glanced from the corner of his eye before answering.

"Ten silver bawbees goes to the victor."

"Ah... ten. The last time it was a race for five, the wagers increase at each turn of events. I tell you, Fergus, one day I will lose purposely just to watch you pay."

"Och, Candelinn. It is all in fun."

"Fun! That is more than the lad earns in a month!"

"But he deserves to lose for saying the MacBaron's and I lied. If you don't do it for me, at least do it for the rest of the clan," he pleaded.

Candelinn knew she would enjoy the contest. She loved the feel of the bow, bending it to her will, before sending the long wooden shaft to its mark. It was always an exhilarating feeling. "I'll tell you what, Fergus. Do you know the family of Umphred MacBaron?"

"Is he not the father of the sick bairn you've been nursing of late?"

"Aye. And if the babe had more meat stock in his belly instead of bannock he would recover more quickly." She sighed thoughtfully.

"But what has this to do with the contest, lass?" His brows drew together.

"More than you know, dear brother. For if I enter the contest, and win, you must give half of your winnings to Umphred's wife for the sick bairn. And... you must make her believe it is from the goodness of your heart, for she is a proud woman. Well... What say you, Fergus? What happened to your tongue that is usually over-wagging?"

Fergus was deep in thoughts of his own. Five bawbees! That was the price on the new dagger he had been admiring at the silversmith's. But even so, he would still have the remaining five to buy it. And it would be worth it all to see the look on Owen MacBride's face! His eyes gleamed as he smiled at his sister. "'Tis a bargain then. Shall I tell them to set up the targets?"

"Aye," Candelinn replied, excitement starting to engulf her. "I will change and meet you at the gates in one hour."

Fergus shouted happily, walking swiftly out the door.

An hour later, Candelinn was at the front gates dressed in her men's breeks. The day was windy and she did not want to shoot with her skirts blowing around her legs, distracting her concentration. There was a crowd of MacBarons waiting at the portcullis with her horse saddled and ready. The gathered clansmen

separated, making way for the pair.

"Good day to ye, m'lady." "Greetings, m'lady."

She nodded to them and smiled as Fergus gave her a leg up into the saddle. The targets were set up at the edge of the wood and though it was not far from the castle gate, they let their Lady MacBaron ride, while they walked beside her horse.

His own clansmen awaiting their arrival surrounded Owen MacBride. He was a man of a score and five years of age with a florid complexion and mousy colored hair. He was tall and muscular and strutted in front of his clan like a peacock, sure of his victory. The fact that he was to shoot against a mere lass was degrading, but he would show these MacBaron's once and for all that his was the surer arm between the two clans. The MacBaron's could use a set down with their overblown arrogance. He had taken all he could of the constant bragging about their mistress; no woman could have all the talents they bestowed upon her. Hmmp! He would get this contest over quickly and cease their prattling once and for all.

Owen came to the edge of the wood and waited with his hands on his hips, while the MacBaron's fawned over their lady as she stepped from the horse. With her chin held high and her back straight, she approached him. She was a bonnie lass, he admitted to himself, and he almost hated to dishonor her in front of her clan. Almost, but not quite.

Cadelinn walked straight to the pompous MacBride lad and stood in front of his towering frame. "Is your bow arm ready, MacBride?" She asked saucily.

"Aye, m'lady. 'Twill be a shame to best such a comely lass."

Cadelinn raised an eyebrow as she busied herself, slipping on her supple gloves. "Are you so sure then that you have won?"

"Of course, m'lady. Women don't have the strength or sharp eye to aim the yard-arrow."

"Oh, really?" She asked, her voice full of mischief. "Owen MacBride, I think I am going to enjoy taking your ten silver coins. Mayhap after today you will think more of the females in your clan."

"Mayhap, m'lady. We shall see."

Fergus handed the tautly strung bow to his sister. Owen chuckled in self-confidence.

"After you, Lady MacBaron." Owen stepped back, allowing Cadelinn a clear shot at the target.

Fergus handed her the first arrow. "Show him the way of it, Cadelinn!" He urged confidently.

She nodded slightly, placing her arrow in position. The target was twenty meters away, fastened to a sturdy pine. Cadelinn focused her eye on the black bull's eye, totally ignoring the outer boundaries. She watched the way the breeze ruffled the boughs on the trees as she took careful aim. The clan grew silent as each man held his breath.

Cadelinn drew her arrow back, sighting down its shaft and released it. All eyes moved as one to the tree. The arrow was sticking just inside the bulls-eye, touching the outer perimeter. The clan MacBaron roared their approval.

Candelinn stepped back, making room for Owen MacBride.

"'Twas a lucky shot, m'lady." He drew his own arrow from the sheath at his back and set it in place, balancing it on the bow shaft.

"Was it now?" Candelinn said mockingly.

Owen pulled his string taut, bending the bow into a deep curve with muscular force, taking careful aim and let the arrow fly. It landed next to Candelinn's, a mere fraction of an inch nearer the center. The clan's groan was barely audible with the cheers from the MacBride's.

They were each to shoot three arrows. The one with the most near the center would be the victor. The clan was restless with Owen's good luck, and neither they nor the two challengers noticed the score of men led by their chief, coming slowly through the wood at their back.

Angus halted his men with a silent wave of his arm. He spotted Candelinn stepping up to take aim for her second shot. They looked from their lady to their chief and back to their lady, and waited. While Angus had been gone for a while, he did not know that the clan had often coaxed Candelinn into performing some skill for a visiting Highlander while he had been away from Glencairn. They had planned to keep the news of her escapades a secret from their laird, not knowing how he would take to the idea. But he had returned unexpectedly this day and now they waited nervously to see the outcome.

Candelinn released her arrow and watched it soar through the air, hitting directly in the center of the target. The men around her, still oblivious of the chief's nearness, yelled and pounded each other on the back in glee.

Silence prevailed once more as Owen stepped forward, a scowl starting to form on his brow. He shot too hastily and the arrow stuck in the pine, wide of the mark.

Candelinn walked up to him before preparing for her last shot. "Have you changed your mind as to the sharp eye of women?" She goaded.

"Nae, m'lady," he growled. "Ye could not do it again."

Candelinn shrugged off his stupidity and placed her arrow on the bow. She glanced at Fergus and her fellow clansmen staring at the tree, as they waited for her arrow to hit home. They had such faith in her. Candelinn's heart overflowed with love for them all. She could not let them down. It was no longer the fact that there was ten silver coins at stake, but the desire to show them once more that she was the very lass they wanted for their chief.

She pulled back the bowstring with her right hand, the arrow resting easily between her fingers. The heavy bow required a great deal of strength to draw the arrow into position and her arm shook slightly under the strain, as she stared down the long length of arrow to settle on the black target. Gently she let go the string. The wooden shaft landed with a thud so close to the other they shared the same hole, its tip sticking in the center of the bulls-eyes. She had won! Even if Owen were to make a bulls-eye with his last shot, he would not match her two.

The clan went wild. Fergus twirled his sister around in jubilation. His eyes shifted from her face, causing him to stop abruptly and Candelinn nearly ran into him. Puzzled, she traced the direction of his eyes and swallowed the smile on her face, replacing it with mouth agape. Her hand came up to her mouth to cover her surprise.

Angus was not three feet from her, astride his black stallion. His chin lay on his open palm, his elbow resting on the saddle horn. He stared directly at his wife, his mouth fighting to remain straight, his eyes purposely frowning, trying to look stern.

Cadelinn rushed to his side, sure he was very unhappy with her, but so very glad to see him after so long a time. "Angus! Don't be angry. It was all in fun... No one was harmed." She placed her hand on his knee. "Welcome home husband. I missed you."

Owen MacBride chose that moment to approach them, holding a leather pouch containing her winnings. He handed the bag to her and made off through the throng of men without a word. He went in search of privacy to mend his bruised ego.

Angus took the pouch from Cadelinn's hand and poured out the ten bawbees into his palm. His eyebrows raised and he stared down at Cadelinn, her eyes fixed on the silver coins resting in his hand.

This time his anger was real. "You need money so badly then? All you need do is ask, lass."

"No, Angus. They are not for me. It was Fergus's wager, not mine."

Angus looked to Fergus and motioned him nearer. "You had your sister do this to keep you in coin? I am sorely disappointed in you, lad."

"But did Cadelinn not explain, Angus? Half of it goes to the sick bairn in the cottage of Umphred MacBaron. 'Tis the only way she would agree to it."

"And where in God's name does the other half go?" He sat back in his saddle relieved his bride was not doing it for herself.

"To me, Angus. The clan and I decided this was the only way to cease Owen MacBride's boasting. His prowess with the bow is all we have been hearing about until we were fair sick of it."

Angus handed him the coins and stepped from his horse, his arm going around Cadelinn and pulling her possessively to his side.

"See that Umphred gets his share, Fergus, and I'll forget about it this once. But think thrice before you arrange such a match for your sister without my knowledge again." He turned Cadelinn toward the castle and walked beside her, leading his mount with his other hand. He motioned Fergus to bring Cadelinn's mare back to the castle.

Cadelinn looked at his thoughtful profile. "Are you so very upset with me, Angus?"

"Aye, love... Especially for allowing the likes of Owen MacBride to come nearer the target on your first shot." He turned his head to face her, his eyes alight with amusement. "It seems I will have to take time to coach you in the arts of archery as well as making love." He pulled her into his arms and nuzzled her neck affectionately, ignoring all the smiles of the following clansmen.

Once inside the castle he kept hold of her and went directly up to their chambers. He had been gone way too long without feeling her in his arms and he would not wait a moment longer. Once he had her inside their chambers he turned to shut the door and was happy to see that Duncan had taken care of his request while he was gone. There was a brand new lock fastened to the edge of the door and he smiled

as he threw the bolt home. No one was going to interrupt them this time.

Cadelinn immediately came to wrap her arms around her husband's waist and hug him tightly. There was no modesty in her, her need was so great for her warrior. She raised her head to stare into his eyes as his head lowered to capture her lips in a demanding kiss. The heat that surged through her body was immediate and as he was releasing her hair to fall down her back, she was busy trying to undress him, while their lips never left that of the other.

Angus's tongue moved forcefully into her mouth, stroking and coaxing her passions. He covered her mouth again and again like he could not get enough of her. Her body reacted in full force, moving her hands over his back, after his jerkin had hit the floor. Before she realized it she was standing nude next to his naked body. Clothes were scattered at their feet, oblivious of the two clasped together in fiery frenzy.

Angus picked her up and laid her on the bed, followed by his own body to recline on top of her, resting between her thighs. Her breasts crushed against his chest branded him, as her legs wrapped around him keeping him as tight as possible in her embrace. Angus cupped her breast and rubbed his thumb over her already enlarged nipples. She groaned. He lowered his mouth to its tip and began to tease its crest until she was becoming wild beneath him.

Cadelinn slipped her hand between them and grasped his hardened member. It pulsed in her palm with desire. Angus moaned against her breast. He would not be able to last if he did not enter her quickly. He reached down and removed her hand, but let his fingers enter the moist juncture of her legs. She arched against him in heated readiness. He moved his hand to grasp the roundness of her buttocks, raising her to thrust deep into her, the hot, tight enclosure almost his finale. Their joining was almost his undoing. He had thought of nothing else while he had been away.

With each movement of his thrusts, Cadelinn came closer and closer to release. Finally as she screamed his name in quivering orgasm, Angus allowed himself to pound into the center of her being, bringing forth his own gigantic climax, spilling himself inside of her.

Angus did not have the strength to move. He was surprised that they had both found completion so fast, when he would have liked to savor each touch. But the absence from the only woman he would ever love had made his body desperate for the wonderful satisfaction she gave him. Their breathing slowed and finally he found the strength to move to her side, still holding her in his arms. Her head rested on his broad shoulders and he heard her sigh. He smiled over the top of her head. *It was good to be home!*

Angus had just come downstairs and stepped out into the courtyard when the slow, rattling clank of the great chains and the creaking oak timbers letting down the drawbridge caught his attention. He recognized the rider entering under the portcullis immediately, though he was slumped in the saddle in exhaustion. Angus noted the fiery cross bearing the Bruce plaid, clasped tightly in Sir James' hand and rushed to his side.

"God, Jamie! The cross! Has something happened to Robert?" He helped the lanky frame of The Douglas slide from his horse's back.

"Nae, Angus. Robert is fit. But the Comyn is dead. The Bruce killed him at Greyfriar's Minor." He looked at his friend through bloodshot eyes.

God's blood! Robert killed the Red Comyn?"

"Let me catch my breath, Angus and I will tell you everything. I canna' stay for I must carry the word to

the clans of the Black Isle and Kintyre." He leaned heavily on Angus for support as they moved in the direction of the castle.

"Nae, Jamie lad." Angus scolded. "I will send one of my men to carry the word. You are dead on your feet and cannot help Sir Robert this way. Are the clans gathering for battle?" He asked. "Is that why you've traveled so far?"

"Nae, Angus. The news I carry is of greater importance. We meet Sir Robert at Scone on Palm Sunday to crown him King of all Scotland. With him as king we will do battle against England." James stopped his slow shuffling walk, watching the expression change on the man holding him up from concern to one of unbridled excitement.

"Oh, Douglas, 'tis great news you bring this day!" Angus yelled over his shoulder at Duncan. "Send young Fergus and Timmy to see me and saddle their horses. They will carry the cross the rest of the way while Sir James remains a guest at Glencairn."

"But Angus--" James argued.

Sir James flinched as Angus grabbed him in a hearty bear hug, pounding him soundly on the back.

"Gads, MacBaron! If I live to enter your castle, 'twill be a miracle. You're killing me! I'm a tired man, ye ken."

Angus laughed, helping the exhausted man into the keep. "I had no idea The Douglas was such a wee lassie. 'Tis gentle I'll be with you henceforth." He sat him in front of a blazing fire ignoring the scowl aimed in his direction. He ordered food and drink to be brought immediately from one of the serving maids.

"Palm Sunday will be a day for all true Scotsmen to rejoice. With Sir Robert leading the clans we will show Edward that only a Scottish king will rule our borders."

The heavy front door was thrown wide, banging against the wall. Fergus strode through the entry, his boots striking the stone floor sharply in his haste.

"Duncan sent me to find you. He said something about Sir Robert and a fiery cross..."

"Aye, Fergus. As soon as we've had food and drink I want you to carry the cross to Kintyre. Ride to the castle of Dunaverty and leave a message with Sir Neil Campbell. Tell him to send word to MacNeil of Barra and Angus Og."

Sir James interrupted. "I can make it Angus."

"I admit the Douglas is as tough as any MacBaron, but this once you will heed the wishes of a friend. You will stay until you get your strength back, then we will both ride together to see our king crowned."

"What message do I carry?" Fergus asked sensing the tension in the hall.

"Say to them, we will crown Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland at Scone on Palm Sunday."

"Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland? But, I thought Sir John was to be the new king. 'Twas what he always told us." Fergus looked from one man to the other for an explanation.

James stepped forward, looking Fergus squarely in the eyes. "John Comyn is dead, lad. There was a meeting between Sir Robert and your cousin in Dumfries and it resulted in the death of your cousin. Sir Robert killed him accidentally in the heat of anger."

Except for his eyes widening in surprise, Fergus showed no sadness over the statement. He stood silently, returning the intense gaze of James Douglas.

"I will leave immediately after the meal, for Kintyre." At Angus nod of dismissal, he turned and hurried to his place at the end of the table.

"Good lad" said the laird, proud of his wife's brother. "I must go to tell Candelinn. I would not want her to hear it from one of the maids. Rest, while food is being prepared and I will return shortly."

Sir James nodded, not relishing the duty his friend had to do.

Angus found Candelinn in their chambers putting her stitchery away in the chest. He walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her pulling her back against his chest. "'Tis not often I find my bonnie lass all alone in our chambers. I should take advantage of the privacy." His hot breath tickled her neck and she wriggled seductively against him. How was it that just being near her brought such heat to his loins? He would never have his fill of this impudent lass in his arms. But he had to speak seriously and did not know how the news would be greeted. He kissed her on her neck and turned her to face him.

"I have something to tell you, love. Sir James Douglas just arrived with the fiery cross from Robert Bruce. Your cousin was killed by his hand."

He watched the shocked expression cross her face. He knew she did not feel love for Sir John, but he was still the only family of her father's left to her.

"May God have mercy on Sir John's black soul... But, poor Sir Robert!"

He let out the breath he had been holding. Her thoughts were for Robert the Bruce. He bent and kissed her. A fleeting kiss that did not linger. "You make me very proud, wife." His voice was a soft croak, he was filled with such emotion.

She pushed her self away from Angus. "I don't have time to linger here with you, you lewd rogue. I must see to the Douglas's comforts. We must make him welcome."

He smiled as she smoothed her skirts and pushed the stray lock of hair out of her face as she headed for the door. He followed in her footsteps watching the seductive swing of her hips as she hurried down the stairs.

Later, Angus sat relaxing at the head of the table, while James ate ravenously. The Douglas chief's usual boisterous banter was strongly absent, his manner subdued as he wolfed down the venison stew. His deliberate withdrawal alerted Angus to the fact that his friend was troubled over the actions of the last few days. When James was ready to share his troubled thoughts, Angus would be ready to listen.

The MacBaron watched Candelinn as she played the role of the perfect hostess, continuously heaping more food onto the trencher for James. Carefully he watched for any reaction to the news of her cousin's death. An outsider would never have known that this woman had ever belonged to the Comyn clan. She showed no hysterics over the Red Comyn's death and when Angus caught her eyes she would smile

lovingly at him. She was indeed the perfect Lady for this clan of his. When Candelinn finally sat in her chair next to Angus he slipped a hand under the table to give a squeeze to her thigh.

He leaned his head near for her ears alone. "I've missed you sorely, lass."

"I too, Sir Knight, have missed your vainglorious airs about the place," she said.

"My vainglorious airs? From the way I hear it the morale of my men was getting lower each day I was gone and the blame, or so it would seem, rests upon your bonnie little head."

"That cannot be true, love. My clan has nothing but the deepest respect for me," she replied.

"Aye, love. 'Tis the truth. The younger men tell me that oft times you have been hunting with them and more than naught it was your arrow that brought home the game. I am indeed shocked." He strained to keep his face serious, when laughter was so close to the surface.

"But Angus. I heard you tell the clan what a braw lass I was and I would not have them think you lied."

"Had I known what an impudent lass you really were, I may not have been so anxious to steal you away and bring you to my lair," he continued to tease.

"Does the Black Laird MacBaron actually confess to being cowardly when facing a mere slip of a lass?"

Angus bent closer, his face only inches from hers. "A mere slip of a lass with flaming hair and a temper to match. But, never fear love, I would repeat my dastardly deed again and again for the rewards are great."

"'Tis truly blessed I am to have such a man around to keep me so humble and out of mischief." She was overcome with the love she felt for this Highland chief sitting beside her.

"Get that look off your face, sweetheart, or I will have to take you back to our chambers." He reached and caressed her cheek with the back of his knuckles. "I've been too long without you, fair maiden, so do not push this husband beyond endurance, with your hinting smiles. It would not be kind to our company if I were to throw you over my shoulder and disappear."

Candelinn's eyes quickly looked around the table. She had completely forgotten the important guest. Angus made her forget everything and everyone else when he was in one of his flirting moods. He made her brain turn to mush.

Angus laughed out loud and leaned back in his chair. Her cheeks turned pink and she could have kicked him under the table for flustering her so.

Sir James interrupted them. "I'm glad I lived to see the day that the mighty MacBaron was captured so readily by a wee lass. If only The Bruce were here, it would make it all complete. 'Tis true lass, we were both beginning to think the rascal would never be caught."

"You have it all wrong, my friend," Angus said. "'Twas me that did all the chasing. I had to become a reiver to capture this fair maiden or she would still be running from me."

"Don't listen to him, Sir James. As many times as I escaped from my cousin's guards at Lochmaben, I would have had no difficulty in escaping one MacBaron Laird. I stopped running the minute he caught up with me."

Both men laughed out loud, great booming laughs that drew attention from everyone in the room. It was a good sound, relieving their moments of stress for a short time.

That night in their chambers after a very fulfilling session of love making Candelinn rested her cheek against the shoulder of her husband. Her mind wondered to the days ahead when he would once more be gone from her to be with Robert Bruce. "Angus, could I accompany you to Scone? I don't want you to leave my side so soon."

"I would that it could be, Candelinn. But only men are allowed at the crowning of the king."

"That doesn't seem right."

"It has always been the custom," he explained.

"Then the custom should be changed," she argued.

"But I will miss you my little spitfire and I will return to you as fast as I can."

"I can't stand the thought of your leaving. We haven't been together much since our wedding night. 'Tis the truth I had you around me more before I became your lady."

"'Tis the way of things. We have the rest of our lives to make up for it. After Robert is King and Scotland is at peace we can grow old together. Then my attentions will probably drive you daft and you will be remembering these times as a pleasant interlude."

"I doubt that."

"Let's hear no more of it. The ride is long and if we run into trouble with the English I would know that you are here safe at Glencairn."

Candelinn, knowing it was futile to argue, nestled close to his body, throwing one leg over his thighs, her mind already forming a plan. Her hand trailed down his stomach, feeling the taut muscles tensing beneath her touch, only to find he was once more ready and eager for her.

Fourteen

On the morning that Angus and James was leaving for Scone, Candelinn lay naked on her bed, watching the man she loved putting on his hauberk and chain mail, readying himself for the long journey. He looked up at her as he finished fastening his leather jerkin in place.

"Are you not going to get up and see me to the courtyard?" He came over and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Nae, my love. I would not shame you and I know I could not watch you leave without crying. So it is

better if we part here." She wrapped her arms around his neck pulling his head down for a powerful farewell kiss. "Return safely and with haste, love."

Angus covered her lips once again passionately, his hands enclosing her firm round breast, teasing the nipple into arousal. He groaned hungrily and released her mouth.

"If I don't leave your side immediately, I will be back beneath the blankets with you in my arms." He stood up needing the distance between them. "Duncan is at your disposal, if you need anything. I'll miss you lass and I will carry the picture of you reclining there naked on the bed, in my mind until I return. Hopefully this will be one of the last times Scotland must come before our individual desires." He looked at her tousled hair fanning around her bare shoulders. He patted her cheek and before he could change his mind went through the door of their chambers, shutting it behind him.

Cadelinn waited to hear his footsteps echo down the corridor before she jumped out of bed and ran to her chest to retrieve her clothes.

"Leave me with Duncan, indeed!" She muttered, standing nude beside her chest. "That is what you think, my husband. Neither Duncan nor myself will be left behind this time. You are indeed in for a surprise. Aye, I will be beside you love, but I will be in the flesh not just in your mind."

Quickly she pulled on her leather breeks, then shoved her feet into the soft leather boots. She wrapped her hair into a knot and forced it under an old helmet that she had found in the keep. Without taking time to look at herself, she grabbed her MacBaron tartan and quickly left her chambers. Using the back stairs, she arrived at the rear of the castle where Duncan was waiting for her, huddled beneath his tartan to keep out the mist that was settling over them.

"M'lady, mayhap we should not do this. What if your brother should recognize you? The Laird will be quite ready to throttle us both if he finds out." Duncan held the reins of her horse, waiting for her to mount.

"We will worry about that when the time comes, Duncan. We already talked about it and neither one of us wants to miss the crowning of our new king. I will stay clear of Fergus, never fear. Besides, you lost the race fair and square, remember?"

"Och mistress, I remember." Duncan, just like the rest of the clan did not want to talk about his misfortune of betting with the Lady MacBaron and losing. It was common knowledge that when she made a wager, she seldom lost. Well, if the laird found out and lost his temper, it would be his punishment for listening to this slip of a lass. Duncan sighed and climbed astride his destrier to lead Cadelinn around the castle where the rest of the clan was waiting to leave.

The mist was hanging so heavy in the air that no-one noticed two new riders joining their ranks, staying at the rear of the procession as they went through the portcullis and across the bridge to the mainland.

Cadelinn watched Angus turn at the last minute and look up at their chamber window, hoping to see her standing there. A frown creased his brow as he turned once again and left the castle grounds.

Cadelinn was so ecstatic at being with Angus on his way to Scone that she rode, oblivious to the wet mist enveloping her.

Throughout the day they traveled, crossing the Glenaffric Forest, the Glen of Morriston, and followed the track leading along the edge of the Monadhliath Mountains, moving continuously in a southerly

direction.

When Sir James and Angus halted the men for the night, darkness had already enshrouded the clan. Candelinn slid unaided from her horse, hanging onto the pommel for support. Duncan was beside her as her feet hit the ground.

"Are you well, m'lady? It was a long ride we had this day."

"Aye, Duncan, I'm well. Just cold and tired. My laird doesn't seem to be exhausted at all though, does he?"

"Och, m'lady, it would take more than a days ride to tire the laird. Even as a lad he had the energy of two men."

She watched as Angus was walking among the men, stopping to talk with different ones. Candelinn stayed behind the mare under the trees out of his line of vision, hoping her husband would not look up and recognize her horse. Her eyes searched out Fergus and she was relieved to see that he was at the opposite side of the encampment at a safe distance.

When she swung her eyes back to Angus, she saw him stop at the edge of the camp to unlace his leather breeks to relieve himself into a bush. When several of the men followed suit, she hid her face against the horse, hiding her embarrassment. She heard Duncan's chuckle close to her ear. He'd noticed the face hidden into the horse's neck.

"'Tis the one bad thing about pretending to be a lad."

She hadn't thought of this part of the trip, only being near Angus.

Duncan stepped up to Candelinn's mare. "Would you like me to remove the saddle for you, lass?" He inquired in a low voice.

"Nae, Duncan. It would appear strange for you to be helping a young lad with his saddle," she said. "I will manage, never fear."

She threw the stirrup over the pommel and loosened the girth letting the saddle slide gently into her arms. It was heavier than she had anticipated and her legs almost buckled beneath its weight. It took most of her strength to carry it the short distance to a tree where she dropped it to the ground. Groaning with fatigue, she collapsed down next to it, catching her breath.

Already the flames from the campfires were blazing forth in the small glen. Candelinn looked around her for the first time, recognizing her surroundings. She was in Badenock territory! She and her brother Fergus had ridden this glen many times in her youth. It was within riding distance of Burnby Hall. The home she and Fergus had shared such a short time with her parents before their death. A sigh of reminiscence escaped her lips.

Through the smoke of the smoldering fires she saw Angus standing next to Fergus and the tall lanky figure of Sir James, wrapped in their own clan tartans, deep in conversation. Candelinn shivered from the dampness of the ground. How she would love to be next to Angus, near the fire. But she dared not let him find her as yet or he would certainly send Duncan home with her in tow. She would keep him at a distance and remain in her disguise for yet awhile. She wanted to be at Scone when the new King of Scotland was crowned.

Candelinn sat beneath the tree using her saddle to lean against, leisurely watching the MacBaron clansmen gathered about their chief, talking with great animation of the crowning of The Bruce. The men paid him every respect due their leader despite their easy camaraderie. His carriage was proud, erect, as a leader of men should be. Her breath caught in her throat at the show of strength across his shoulders when he walked around the fire, leaning low over it to place his own oat cake in the fire to cook. He and Sir James were sharing a flask of *usquebaugh* to warm their bodies and were more than likely talking about the great day soon coming in Scone.

Duncan leaned down beside her and placed a fried cake in front of her. "You'd best eat, m'lady. We have another long day tomorrow before we arrive at our destination."

Candelinn tore off a piece of the bannock eating it with undisguised relish. "Thank you, Duncan. We arrive tomorrow then?" She asked between bites.

"Aye. If the laird rides as he did today, we will. But it will be late when we make camp, so get what rest you can this night." He handed her the tartan that had been fixed to the back of her saddle and she quickly wrapped herself in its warm folds. Duncan stood to walk in the direction of one of the fires away from the chief, to gather some comfort from his comrades. What would the laird do to him when he found he had disobeyed his orders? Och! He was too old to worry over such a trifle and sat his tired body down next to one of the campfires. After he warmed a bit he would go back to where his mistress lay and sleep near by.

Candelinn used this time to discreetly slip away in the darkness to attend to her own private needs. When she returned she leaned against the tree wrapped in her plaid. Her sleep-heavy lids closed and soon she was dreaming of being enveloped in strong, warm arms, comforting her, and drawing the chill from her in peaceful sleep. She did not know it when Duncan returned and placed an extra tartan over her for added warmth, before he too leaned against a neighboring tree and was soon fast asleep near her feet.

One by one the men dispersed, each to his own bedroll until only Angus and James were left sitting before the low burning embers of the watch fire. Fergus, too, had left the fire circle and was already curled snugly inside his tartan, his back to the dim light thrown by the ebbing fire.

Angus sat quietly poking at a stray ember with the toe of his boot, waiting patiently beside his friend, who fidgeted next to him, wrestling with his own thoughts.

"At least those boot-licking English bastards will never use my castle again. We made sure of that, eh, Angus." He took a long draw from the *usquebaugh* skin he held in his hand.

"Aye, James. We made sure." He knew the anguish his friend still felt at the destruction of his family home.

"So my friend..." he slapped Angus on the knee. "It would seem the Douglas clan are a homeless bunch of scoundrels. Outlaws, one and all."

Angus chuckled, putting James once more at ease with brotherly fashion. "Och, Jamie, ever were you a scoundrel! Home or no, 'tis made little difference. You have a home at Glencairn any time you need it. But we've made our pledge to Robert and together we'll see the crown upon his head. I trust you remembered to fill your boot?"

"Aye. I would not have come without it. The precious soil of Douglas lands is in the care of my clansmen, have no worry on that score. And you, you have yours?"

"Aye." He nodded his head and looked once more at the fire. The two sat far into the night, watching the embers glowing orange and red, deep in their own thoughts. With a scant two hours left before sunrise, they bid each other goodnight and wrapped their tartans closely about themselves before laying down, their backs to the fire. Angus faced the direction where Candelinn lay sleeping in the darkness under the trees.

Duncan woke Candelinn at dawn. "Come, mistress. You must put on your helm afore someone spots that hair."

She opened her eyes to her long flaming locks hanging over her shoulder. She sat up quickly, wrapping it back into a knot and once more slipping it beneath her helmet. She looked around to see if any of the clan had noticed the disheveled appearance that would unmistakably prove she was not one of the men. But no, she was in luck. The rest of the clan was just rising, preparing for the long ride of the day. She stood and stretched her body as best she could without dropping her tartan and noticed for the first time that she was wrapped in two tartans. She looked from it to Duncan and noticed his dour face, trying not to meet her eyes. She removed it and handed it back to him. "Thank you, Duncan."

She went to her horse to find it already saddled. Duncan must have risen very early not only to saddle his own horse but to have hers ready and prepared for the journey ahead. Candelinn was ashamed. She would be sure to take care of herself and her horse so the dear, dour Scot would not have twice as much to do as the other men. She swung her still tired limbs into the saddle and once more she and Duncan trailed the rest of the clan, staying as far away from the leader as possible.

In the late afternoon they came out of the Grampian Mountains and crossed Glen Tilt to join the River Arde, following its banks to their destination. They took a short break against the river's edge near Glairgowrie before the last leg of the journey.

When they reached Mot Hill at Scone it was way into the middle of the night. Duncan nudged her, bringing her drowsing form alert in the saddle. Never had she been so tired. Her back ached along with every inch of her body. She was alert enough to notice many campfires of other clans and friends of Robert the Bruce in attendance. But even the thought of seeing the new King himself was not sufficient cause to wake her from her state of exhaustion. She did not see the startled expression on the commander's face as he stared directly into the face of Angus, riding in their direction through the rest of the clan. Candelinn was at that moment dismounting and this time her legs did not hold her and she crumpled to the ground. As she did so, her helmet slid from her head and her long copper hair swept over her face. When she finally managed to get to her feet, brushing her hair out of her way, she lifted her eyes and encountered angry brown ones glaring dangerously down at her. He had dismounted and was standing a little too close, towering over her.

"Angus." She mouthed the words but no sound escaped her lips.

"What the hell do you think you're doing here?" His eyes took in Duncan cowering behind his horse. "Duncan... rest assured we will discuss this matter later!" He took Candelinn's arm and jerked her to one side away from the rest of the clan. Never had he been so angry with a lass. He could just throttle her. When he was far enough away from the clan so they could not overhear him, he swung Candelinn around to face him. The sight of her made him bite off the angry words. Her hair was in disarray hanging over slender shoulders and her tartan was damp, held in place only by the brooch he had given her. He looked at her face and the sight of the huge tears rolling down her cheeks was his undoing. He would

never harm his sweet lass, but as soon as she was rested he was going to give her hell. But all he could do at the moment was pull her into his arms and wrap her in his warmth. He was ashamed of his weakness. He turned his head and spotted one of the campfires deserted, then pulled her near the fire and harshly set her down beside it.

"Stay here." He wrapped his own dry tartan around her and stomped off leaving her alone.

Candelinn watched his retreating back, the tears still flowing down her cheeks unbidden. She pulled his tartan up around her neck. It smelled of her husband and his warmth was still retained against her skin. What was the matter with her? She sniffed loudly. She had always stood up and fought for her wants instead of bursting into tears. She would have screamed at him that he had no right to tell her she couldn't come with him, regardless of the fact that he was her husband. Instead she was sitting here in a sodden heap upon the cold wet ground, crying.

"Och, my dear sister," Fergus's voice penetrated her misery, only to add to it. "I see you're still the same stubborn lass, always going where you want, regardless of the possible consequences. When I saw Duncan a few minutes past, I knew you were here somewhere." He chuckled at the thought of Angus's reaction to her sudden appearance. "Will you never learn?" He walked away shaking his head to rejoin the men.

Now she felt forsaken by her own brother. She turned her head away from him to look once more in the direction Angus had gone. She saw him talking to a man at the next clan's campfire. The man was fair of coloring and was as muscular as Angus, though shorter. When Angus knelt before him, with bowed head, Candelinn knew she was seeing Robert the Bruce, the man she had come to Scone to see crowned King.

"Arise, Angus." The warm friendly voice bid. "We have been side by side in too many battles for you to kneel before me. And besides, I am not the king as yet." He held out his hand for Angus to take upon rising.

"In my eyes, you have always been king, my liege." Angus spoke honestly.

"Even when you won the silver coins from me at the last race in Edinburgh?" Robert had a way about him that always put Angus at his ease. They both laughed over the past incident and walked nearer to the fire to share a drink, taking the chill from the night.

Robert watched his long time friend until he could keep the silence no longer. "What is bothering you, Angus? I've never seen you in this mood. Could I be of some assistance?" He leaned closer to his friend watching his face for expression.

"Aye sire. You received word of my marriage?"

Robert nodded. "And happy I was to hear about it, too. Is this marriage so bad, then?"

"Nae, sire. I truly love the lass.

"A man needs a good woman to warm his bed at night. Now if we could only convince Jamie that it is such bliss all will be well... If you love the lass, then why the scowl?"

"Did you hear my bride was of the Comyn clan, sire?"

"Aye, Angus. 'Tis delighted I am that at least one of that clan will be in good hands for the future. It is that she hates me for killing the Laird of Badenock that is bothering you, Angus?" Even though he had received absolution for the deed, Robert knew he would probably never forgive himself for taking another man's life in front of the altar.

"No. Never think that. Candelinn and her cousin were not close and she holds no ill feeling for you, of that I'm certain."

"Then what the hell is the matter with you?" Robert asked. He had never seen the MacBaron where he would not spit out what he wanted to say.

"She's an independent one, my bride. And, without my knowledge she has managed to travel here to Scone." He reached out and touched the shoulder of Sir Robert. "I know it is unheard of for a woman to be at the crowning of the king..."

"Well for the love of..." Robert burst out laughing. "My own clan sings the praises of the Lady MacBaron. Why every bard in the land has written lyrics about the lass. I am only going to be crowned once in my life and if such an illustrious lady, and my closest friend's wife, happens to be in attendance then so much the better. You can rest easy on that score. Maybe it will make up for the fact the Stone has been stolen."

"The Stone of Destiny? It can't have been."

"I'm afraid so. The men searched the entire Mote Hill and it was nowhere to be found. I sent a man to ask in the village and it seems that Edward has beaten us out of our stone. He was here not two months hence and has taken it back to England with him. I think he did not want any man to be King of Scotland. Did you ever see the stone, Angus?"

"No. Was it so great then?" he asked.

"Nae. 'Twas just a stone, but the words carved on its side by Kenneth of MacAlpine long ago, made it so important to a crowning. It read, 'If fates go right, where this stone is found, the Scots shall be monarchs of that realm be crowned'."

Angus read the agitation in the Bruce's words and tried to put his mind at ease. "Och, 'tis an old superstition. On the morrow we crown a Scot's monarch without the aid of the stone."

"Aye. Edward thinks this way we will not crown a Scottish King, but he is to be thwarted once again. For at this moment a goldsmith in the village is hammering out a new crown and a tattered old banner of the King of Scotland has been uncovered from safekeeping and tomorrow we will indeed have the crowning." Sir Robert stood and stretched his tired limbs and yawned. Angus stood also and held out his hand once again for Robert to grasp.

"I will let you retire, my liege. I'm sure you are as tired as I. I'm sorry I kept you so late but my problem was weighing heavily on my mind this night."

"Fear no more, Angus. All will be well on the morrow, and you can tell your lady that I am indeed honored that she went to such lengths to see the coronation." He chuckled in amusement. "I would that my fair Elizabeth were here. 'Twould be a welcome sight... But I have not noticed a lass in your camp. How do you keep her so well hidden?"

"She is dressed as a lad. She did so trying to deceive me. If the lass only knew that there is not a part of her that I would not recognize, breeks and all. I could pick her out of a thousand without a second guess." He ran his hand through his hair, shaking his head. "She needs a firm hand for sure."

As he strolled back in the direction of his own camp, he could hear Sir Robert chuckling behind him.

"God forbid!" Robert spoke to his back. "The mighty have fallen."

When Angus reached the spot where he had left Candelinn, his ire had completely disappeared. He looked down at her tear-stained face cradled against her bended arm and felt remorse for being so harsh with her. He went to the fire and added a few pieces of dried wood to the still smoldering embers and once more brought heat from its depths. Returning to his wife's side he crouched down next to her, pulling her close and enclosing the both of them in his heavy cloak. She snuggled to him for his warmth. Angus looked down at her and her eyes opened softly, shining up at him, questioning.

"Aye, love. All is well." He put his head next to hers staring into the glare of the newly revived fire. "But, Candelinn, it was not only for tradition sake that I asked you to stay at Glencairn. It was also for your own safety. We do not know if Edward knows of this deed of which we are partaking or not. But he is sure to have heard about your cousin and sent someone to avenge his death. Anywhere near a follower of Sir Robert is a dangerous spot to be in right now. And I would not have you harmed, you would know that, hmmm?" He looked down at his wife curled into his body in complete confidence. She had once more fallen asleep and had not heard a word he had been telling her. Angus shook his head in amused exasperation and rested his chin on the top of her head and leaned back to get what sleep he could.

Candelinn woke to find solemn brown eyes wandering over her face. When she remembered his anger from the night before she put her hand upon his cheek, trying to show him her love. She felt his jaw stiffen in her palm as she did so. "I could not stand to be away from you again. And please don't punish Duncan. I would have come alone if he had not agreed. I'm sorry I'm so stubborn, my love. I just can't seem to help it." She sat back and looked into his face, knowing the anger she would see there. But she was pleasantly surprised to see he was indeed clenching his jaw but it was to keep the grin from escaping the corners of his mouth. Finally he relaxed and his face shone with humor.

"Aye, you are stubborn, lass. But Robert says he is happy that you should be here. And to go to so much trouble just to see him crowned boosted his ego no small amount. So, today, my love, you will see our king crowned. It will be something you will be able to tell our children and grandchildren about."

"Thank you, love." Was all she said as the love for him shone like jewels from her sparkling green eyes.

"Of course in order to have children, it does require that I'm allowed the privilege of making love to you to my heart's content. It seems since my wedding night, I am sorely lacking in my duties." He bent down and kissed her. What had started out to be a tender quick kiss, became a hungry demanding kiss that neither wanted to stop. Angus was the first to pull back. "If you don't want me to take you right here in front of the whole camp you had best rise, my wife, and cool the oat cakes to break the fast." He threw back the tartans and pulled her to her feet. "Come, and I will show you where the stores are kept behind my saddle, then I will get the fire going for you. "

"But I don't know how to cook them." she exclaimed.

"No, but you will learn. If I am going to have you ride with me the rest of my life, then your duty will be to feed me."

The morning passed in jovial companionship. Cadelinn noticed how many more men had joined them during the night. Angus sat next to her relaxing after the huge bannock cakes she had prepared for them both. He told her some of the things that were going to be happening that day and who were the more important vassals that would be there for the coronation.

"Most of the clans are here now. It will be quite a sight when we all sign the roll of attendance at the coronation. There is Bishop Lamberton and the Bishop from St. Andrews in Glasgow and the Bishop of Moray that are going to reside at the crowning. Sir Robert's four brothers are, of course here, Thomas Randolph, an English knight, Christopher Seaton, Earl of Lennox, Earl of Athol, Earl of Menteith, Hay of Errol and brother," he was marking them off on his fingers as he spoke. "Barclay of Cairns, Robert Fleming, the MacNeils of Kintyre, Walter the Steward from Kircudbright and of course Sir James and myself. It will be one of the greatest gathering of clans in history, love. I'm secretly happy you will be here to see it with me. For it would be impossible to describe it to you. The only one that is missing is the Earl of Fife. According to Scottish history it has always been he that placed the crown on the head of the new Scots King, but in this case, we will have to do without him."

"Why Angus? Is he not for the Bruce?" she asked.

"Aye, Cadelinn, but he is still a very young bairn. So it will be impossible to get him here. He is staying with his sister, the Countess of Buchan, whose husband is an Englishman and is a devout follower of Edward. So I'm afraid we will have no family of Fife here today. It saddens our hearts, but, as far as the clans assembled, not enough to put off the crowning of our chosen king. Well, love. I must go and talk to Bishop Wishart and see if there is anything that I can do to help Robert. I will give you a few minutes to freshen up before we join the others for the actual coronation." He bent over her for a kiss before walking casually away, whistling a Highland fling.

Cadelinn watched his broad back in wonderment of the many facets of men enclosed in her husband's body. Yes, he was many men, but each was the one she had been looking for all her life. She would change none of him. He was indeed her perfect love.

Cadelinn managed to remove most of the tangles from her hair by the time Angus came back to take her to the coronation. She had carefully braided it in one long braid, then looped it at the nape of her neck, not completely hiding the fact that there was a woman in the presence of so many men but making her long flaming curls less obvious from a distance.

Literally hundreds of men were gathered around Scone Abbey as Angus, carrying his boot full of MacBaron soil under his arm, led Cadelinn through its doors. The townspeople had turned out in full force and the majority of the clans that could not fit inside the kirk were standing under the trees out of the way of the procession, waiting to cheer their new king when he stepped from the abbey's doors.

Inside the room was so crowded one could hardly breathe. Cadelinn once again saw Sir Robert at the front of the kirk near the altar with three bishops residing over the coronation. He turned and raised his hands for silence in the mulling crowd.

"Friends. This is indeed a great day in my life and I am honored that those of you that received my call by the fiery cross have managed to come and share it with me. As you may or may not have heard, the Stone of Destiny has been stolen and taken to England by King Edward, himself. This will not hinder us in any way... but we have no one from the family of Fife to do the actual crowning. I am at a loss as to who the honor should fall to."

At that moment he was interrupted by the sound of a horse coming at break neck speed in the direction

of the abbey. There was a loud uproar from the outside of the kirk over the approaching rider.

"What the..."

The doors burst open and in ran a beautiful lady in traveling clothes. Without hesitation she walked to the front of the kirk to join Sir Robert. The crowd went wild. They were screaming their excitement in the Gaelic tongue over the woman and Candelinn was baffled. *Who was she?*

She nudged Angus, whose face was a copy of other men standing around her, all wore broad smiles on their faces. "What is happening? Angus, who is she?" She placed her arm on his. He quickly covered it with one of his own, squeezing it. "Please, tell me what is going on?"

Isabel had turned and was shouting over the uproar of the clans, in Gael. Candelinn couldn't understand a word that was being said.

Angus bent down so she could hear his words. "A coronation is going on, my love. In real Scot's fashion. That lady is Isabel, The Countess of Buchan, and it seems she has stolen her husband's fastest horses and is here in the name of the family Fife to crown the new king."

Candelinn turned once more to face the countess and joined in with the rest of the men, screaming her welcome to the beautiful black-haired lady by the side of Robert the Bruce. That this gentle bred woman had defied England and her husband to be at this coronation showed a bravery beyond all imagination. Candelinn's heart swelled with pride for the women of the world. She would not be the only female at the Scot's coronation after all.

Finally everything quieted down and the bishops took turns praying for the new king. Bishop Wishart told the crowd of his granting absolution for Robert's deed at the altar at the kirk of the gray friars. Then it was time for all those present, as Sir Robert's vassals, to sign a petition vowing him allegiance and also, a copy of their beliefs that was to be sent to England and Edward. The words on this last parchment were echoed through the abbey to all present. "The Declaration of Scottish Independence: For so long as a hundred remain alive, we will never again bow beneath the yoke of English dominion. It is not for glory, riches or honors that we fight; it is for liberty alone, the liberty which no good man relinquished but with his life." Another uproar was heard from the men present, in complete agreement to the document.

One at a time the vassals moved to the front of the kirk before Sir Robert. Each carried a leather boot filled with the earth from their lands. When each one had bowed before the man they were to crown king, they upturned the boot, spilling the contents upon the floor in front of him.

Candelinn watched while Angus joined the procession of men filing past Sir Robert. A feeling of pride followed her husband as the MacBaron soil mingled with the rest. When all the vassals had spread the soil upon the floor it made a huge mound. When all the men were back in their places and Angus once more was standing beside Candelinn, Sir Robert kneeled on the top of the soil, next to the Countess of Buchan.

The gold chevron flew above his head on a tattered banner. Bishop Wishart brought out the crown. It was shiny in its hand-hewn newness, obvious to all present that it had sat on no former monarch's head. But it was as it should be. For now they were going to have a new Scotland, it was fitting that the crown should also be new.

And so with great ceremony Isabel Buchan bent and retrieved a handful of soil and, holding it out to the assemblage, began to speak.

"The earth you see before you represents all of Scotland. We have here before us a part of the lands from the Highlands to the north, the Lowlands to the south, all the coastlands and surrounding isles." She let the powdery dirt run through her fingers, sprinkling back onto the mound.

Bishop Wishart stood beside her with the golden crown resting on a velvet pillow. She reached out and clasped it in both her hands. The countess held the crown suspended in midair and looked to the people gathered before her.

"On this mound containing the lands throughout Scotland, kneels the chosen knight of those present, to bring our country to its own and release it from the bonds of England's rule. So, in the name of the family Fife, I Isabel, Countess of Buchan, crown ye, Sir Robert de Bruce, King of all Scotland!" The countess gently placed the crown upon his curly blonde head and reached his hand to bring him to his feet. Bishop Wishart placed the royal robe upon his shoulders and the Countess of Buchan knelt, kissing his hand before rising and stepping out of the way for him to greet his subjects gathered here to pay homage.

King Robert walked down the aisle. All stepped aside in awed quiet, bowing to their new king. But the instant he stepped outside onto the stone steps looking down on the hundreds of people gathered there, the crowd went wild. The cheering was boisterous and the pipers began to play a Scottish tune fitting the occasion. Though they still bowed as King Robert passed them by, they were more joyous than subdued.

The rest of the day was full of merrymaking and Candelinn and Angus walked among the clans toasting the new king and enjoying the party atmosphere. Candelinn suddenly noticed the absence of MacBaron tartans among the crowd. "Where have all our clansmen disappeared to, my laird?"

Angus looked down at Candelinn hanging onto his arm. "They are about somewhere, never fear. I must go back to the abbey to see Bishop Wishart, now. Come, I would have you meet him." He led her back through the crowd to the abbey, now empty of the hundreds of people outside its doors. Angus opened the door and bowed her into the kirk.

She wondered at his courtly actions until she stepped through the door. Duncan was standing at the entrance with a bouquet of flowers. He stepped in front of her and pushed them into her hands, happy to be rid of them she thought. When he stepped away, her mouth fell open. For lining both sides of the aisle to the altar the entire MacBaron clan that had come to the coronation stood at attention, facing forward. Bishop Wishart waited at the end of the long line at the altar of the abbey.

Angus bent low whispering in her ear. "I give you your wedding in the kirk, my love." He kissed her cheek. Her eyes stared up at him in joyous surprise.

Candelinn thought she might burst into tears at any minute, so touched was she by the thoughtfulness of the man beside her. She blinked her eyes to clear them and could not find the words to tell him how she felt. He acted like words were not necessary and he put her arm through his and started to lead her down the aisle.

As she passed each of the clansmen, they bowed their heads to her in proud acceptance of their laird's choice. When she and Angus stood in front of the bishop repeating the words to become joined in the eyes of the kirk, she did not realize how she looked standing straight beside the MacBaron in her men's breeks and jerkin. She could have been in the fanciest gown of lace and satin as she spoke her vows in a clear smooth voice so all the men behind her could hear.

"I now pronounce you man and wife... and 'tis about time, too. Laird, you may now kiss your lady."

Angus pulled her into his arms, giving her a powerful, passionate kiss that she thought would never end. By the time he decided to pull away from her, her legs were so weak she thought sure she was going to fall, but he held her erect, smiling down at her, knowing and pleased with the way he could make her feel. The clan cheered and her cheeks turned pink.

"I love you, lass, with all my heart. I never knew such joy as I have in your arms." No other heard Angus's words as the noise of the warriors drowned them out.

Candelinn put her hand on her husband's cheek. "And I love you, my husband. It's a fine thing you have done for me this day, Angus." The seriousness went out of her countenance to be replaced with her usual teasing twinkle in her eyes. "I suppose you have figured out a way for me to repay you for this grand deed?"

"Aye, I have. Shall I tell you what I have in mind?" Before she could answer he put his lips close to her ear and explained in great detail all the ways that he was going to have her pay, She slapped against his chest. "Angus! The bishop may hear you!" Though the idea of being his 'sex slave' warmed her immensely.

The clan pounded Angus on the back as if the couple had not already been to the wedding bed and bowed to their mistress as her husband led her once more outside the kirk. The clan separated from them and went to once more join in the revelry.

Darkness filled the village, the campfires once more began to grow around the abbey. Angus looked down at the woman hanging on his arm. "There is something I would much rather be doing at this moment, lass."

"Aye. I am in full agreement with you, Sir Knight."

It was all the encouragement he needed. Without another word he took her hand and led her away from the campfires to a small glen nearby. Here he spread his black and red cape upon the ground, pulling her against him. He kissed her passionately, showing her the fires he had kept at bay finally bursting into flame. Their tongues melded in flaming eagerness, turning both their bodies to a fevered pitch.

Angus released her lips to undress her, slowly letting the cool breeze caress her smoldering body. Naked she looked like a nymph in these wild times, a druidess of the forest. She felt brazen and free in her nudity. She moved up to Angus and tenderly undid his jerkin and helped him remove it, her fingers fanning over the fine, soft hairs of his chest. He was enjoying the roll change and stood erect as she finished stripping his clothes away until he too was stripped of all clothing, standing like a mighty God of old in the moonlight. His body was perfection! Truly a god could not have been so muscular and majestic as this Highland laird, standing before her.

Angus reached and pulled her toward him until her breasts were touching his bare chest. Slowly, sensually he brought her body against him until he held her in a tight embrace. Their bodies fused together as one as he kissed her once again. This time demanding instant response which she so gladly gave. He moved her to their makeshift bed and lay her down, covering her body with his own. The moon shone through the trees against their naked bodies and the scent of pine filled their nostrils. The skirling of bagpipes filled their ears as they clasped each other in their arms, hungry for one another. He slipped into her, the entire length of his shaft enclosed in her hot, moist warmth. She writhed beneath him, her body already reaching the peak of fulfillment for which she searched. Angus felt her tighten around him as she

exploded in ecstasy before he let himself go to reach his own satisfaction, praising God aloud at his final release. His wife was going to kill him, he decided. He gave to her every ounce of himself, as she gave to him. He had no strength left to remove himself, so propped on his elbows so she would not be crushed as he remained in her arms, gradually letting their breathing become slowed and normal. He wanted to stay there forever, feeling her beneath him. It was his favorite place for her, there in his embrace. "Til death do ye part," the bishop had said. He had not needed the words to know that was the way of it. For he would keep this woman beside him all the rest of his days.

Shortly before dawn and after many hours of sexual satisfaction they both got dressed and returned to the campfires where most of the men were still asleep and snoring from the late night of celebrating. Angus held her hand and led her under the same tree that they had slept beneath the previous night. He pulled her down next to him and covered them both in his tartan. Soon they were fast asleep, wrapped in each other's arms, exhausted from their strenuous lovemaking of the hours before.

Angus had no more closed his eyes when he was shaken roughly by Duncan. He opened one blood-shot eye, to glare at his first in command. "What?"

"'Tis the king. He wishes a word with you."

Angus slipped out beneath the tartan, laying Candelinn's head gently on the ground. After he had moved a few feet away from her, stretching his poor tired muscles, he spoke. "Only for the king would I have moved this morning. Take care of my lady." he said as he moved in the direction of the Bruce banner.

Fifteen

The clan MacBaron was ready to leave for their homeland. Mounted, they sat waiting, while Angus helped Candelinn onto her mare. Before Angus had reached his own mount, King Robert strode into his camp. He walked majestically, his royal robe swaying with his stride and came directly to Angus holding out his hand. Once again in comradeship, he stopped Angus when he started to kneel.

"Angus, I grant you the territories from Strathglass to Attadale, to hold in my name. Take this gift with my gratitude and guard it well from any English scoundrel that tries to take it from you." He handed over a bundle of papers pertaining to his bequeath.

"I am deeply honored, my liege. Fear not. No English sword will dare to be drawn in this territory after my clan MacBaron has finished with them." Angus spoke ruefully.

King Robert moved out of Angus's way so he could mount his destrier. "Go with God, my friend. And don't make it too long before you and your bonnie lass visit Elizabeth and me in Annandale. We miss you and little Margaret also longs to see you again. Make it soon, Angus."

"Aye. Perhaps with the summer months coming we can make the trip. Godspeed, sire. If you ever need my sword send word. I will come swiftly."

"Be away with you," he spoke gruffly, hiding the emotions of the moment.

Angus nodded slightly and turned his mount to lead his clan in the direction of Glencairn. Without looking back over his shoulder he headed over Mote Hill and away from Scone.

"Angus," Candelinn asked. "Why did the king wish your presence earlier today?"

"He wanted four of my best men to escort Countess Buchan home. She was anxious for her young brother and her own wee lad."

The clan traveled quietly for a while, each with their own thoughts of the happenings of the previous day. Candelinn didn't interrupt the deep concentration of Angus, riding silently by her side. She knew he would be thinking about the many changes this would make in Scotland. The battles that would have to be fought to prove to England and Edward that they were indeed serious about their new king and that they would no longer be under his rule. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that England's king would be outraged when he heard of the crowning of King Robert and it was only a matter of time until he would send one of his lieutenants into Scotland to avenge the Comyn's death and the crowning.

Candelinn heard the pounding of hooves coming from behind them and watched while Angus held up his hand to halt his clan. The rider wearing a Bruce tartan rode around the clan and slid to a stop directly in front of Angus.

"Sir Angus! The king sent me to tell you that we have received word that there is a band of English at Glen Garry. You will have to pass them to reach MacBaron lands." The messenger was panting between his words he had ridden in such haste. "You must take heed!"

"Thank the king for his warning." Angus replied, quieting his horse. "Now that we are prepared they will be receiving a surprise from the MacBaron's. Tell the king all will be well. Did he hear how many there were?"

"No more than a score and five, my laird. And you have with you more than that small number, so it should be no difficult task." The messenger smiled for the first time.

"Even twice that number would be no task at all. Thanks again, Thomas." Angus turned his horse around and yelled to the back of his following. "Duncan!"

Duncan, who had been guarding their rear, came through the clan to the side of his chief. "Laird?"

"You will take Lady MacBaron to Blair castle and stay there until you hear from me that all is well. Do you think you can follow that order without letting her talk you out of it this time? If you so much as let her stop to shoot a hare, I will skin you alive. Is that understood?"

"Aye, my laird." Duncan answered.

"Take a couple of men with you. It won't take overlong to clean up these English and I will meet you at Blair."

"But, Angus," Candelinn interrupted.

"No buts, lass. You will do as I say. Promise me this." He leaned nearer putting his face close to hers. His eyes met hers with seriousness. "How can I concentrate on fighting the English dogs if I have to worry about you being directly behind me in battle. Hmmm, my love?" he whispered.

Candelinn understood the worry on his mind. "Aye, my husband. I will do as you say. Just be rid of them fast and return to my side." She braved a smile and placed her hand upon Angus's cheek.

"Good lass." He kissed her quickly on the mouth and turned to his men. "Let's away, lads," he shouted. "To Glen Garry to roust the English!" He waved a salute to Candelinn and her small escort and led the rest of the clan straight west.

She watched him until he was almost out of sight before she allowed herself to follow Duncan's lead. She could only grit her teeth and pray there were indeed only a little more than a score of the enemy and Angus would not be harmed. This was the way of all women when their loved ones were gone to battle.

Candelinn could not keep her thoughts from Angus as they traveled through the afternoon. So engrossed in her inner concentration, she had not noticed the growing darkness. Duncan handed her a piece of dried venison, bringing her back to the present. She was surprised to notice the gloaming had already descended upon the small party. They had been riding for hours while her mind had been at the side of her husband. They were not in Atthol Territory, or far from Blair Castle.

A sound behind her drew her attention and she turned to see one of the men riding guard fall from his saddle, an arrow sticking out of his chest. She tried to scream a warning but before it cleared the air, the three MacBaron's were completely surrounded by enemy soldiers.

A sick dread filled Candelinn's being. She was helpless. There were too many of them and she would not endanger the lives of Duncan and the other guard.

The leader, a skinny man with a pointed beard rode up to her. "Well, well, what have we here? A Scottish wench in men's clothing? Do the Scots have such few warriors they have to send their women along to protect the old ones?" He looked with disgust at Duncan. He pulled a lace handkerchief from his sleeve and dabbed his nose.

Candelinn cursed the fact that she had not donned her helmet and tossed her long mane over her shoulder. She raised her chin in defiance of the sarcasm.

"You are mistaken, sir," she spat. "The women in Scotland don't want their men to be bothered with such weak-kneed snivelers they themselves could take care of! If the numbers were equal I would show you what I mean. My husband has more important things to do than be bothered with the likes of you!"

"Oh? And who might your husband be?" He asked.

At that moment another rider came from the woods to join the enemy. Candelinn recognized him immediately and her heart filled with dread.

Simon de Keith smiled, his evil intent plain to see on his face. "She is the bride of Sir Angus McBaron. You have done a good job this day capturing such as she."

Before Duncan could stop her she had blurted it out. "I should know when you find a rock a snake will be hidden under it. You'll rue the day you killed one of my husband's clan! He will hunt you down for this."

As Candelinn tried to kick her mare into any kind of motion, two men had blocked her way, each on one side of her horse, one holding her arm while the other took her reins.

Simon moved closer to her. "We will be happy to accommodate your dear husband, Candelinn. In fact, I am looking forward to it."

"What about the other two, Simon," Sir George asked?" "Shall we kill them?"

"No. I think not in this case. Tie them up against a tree and scatter their horses." He rubbed the point of his beard in anticipation. "This is one time when I think it will be best to leave witnesses. I will take the wench with me. Let's away."

Candelinn tried to fight against Simon, but was grabbed and settled in front of him before she had time to think. His arm held her in such a tight grasp she could hardly breathe and only loosened when she stopped trying to get away.

With Duncan and the kinsman tied to a tree with stout rope, Simon rode his horse in front of them. "You can tell The MacBaron that we have his wife hostage at Burnby Hall and if he brings us the head of Robert the Bruce we will let her go. But if not... Tell him she is lost to him!"

Duncan, sickened at the sound of the English lord's words, spit on the ground between two of the horse's hooves.

"There may be a beheading, but I think it will not be King Robert's on the platter!"

"Oh, it's King Robert now is it? Hah! Edward will be anxious to hear the news. Come men--Make haste to Burnby Hall. I am sick at the sight of these two." The disgust in Simon's voice made Candelinn's skin crawl. His hot breath on the back of her neck made her want to gag. Simon chuckled, kicking his mount into action.

Candelinn, sitting stiffly in front of Simon, watched over her shoulder as Duncan, his body slumped against the tree, disappeared from sight.

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Angus, elated with the victory of battle, was on his way to Blair Castle. It had been more of a skirmish than a battle he recalled with a smile, for the English didn't have a chance.

The advance warning from the Bruce clansman had enabled them to set a trap, surprising the enemy at their own game. Only a handful of them had escaped the sharp edged Scots swords and those were now, in all likelihood, beating a fast retreat across the border to England.

He chuckled remembering the scene as he watched them disappearing over the crest of the hill, kicking the flanks of their horses mercilessly in the headlong flight to escape.

His course to Blair Castle paralleled the well-worn track most of the day. Late in the afternoon he raised his arm motioning to his men as he swung toward the west, choosing a more direct route to Athol territory... and to Candelinn MacBaron, his wife.

He mouthed the words silently, smiling at the pleasure he felt just saying them. It was surprising how much this lass had changed him. In his bachelor days he had loved nothing better than riding over the Highlands with his clan in attendance, but now that Candelinn was his own the thought of her and Glencairn left him yearning for the peaceful life awaiting them at the castle. He chuckled and shook his

head. The wild MacBaron was indeed showing signs of a happily married man.

Blair Castle loomed up ahead. Angus stood in his saddle, and turned to his men, his helm held high in his hand. "To Lady Candelinn!" he shouted, "then home to Glencairn!" He replaced his helmet upon his head and resumed his seat in the saddle as a cheering roar followed his cry. He spurred his horse, increasing his pace, his men trampling the ground to keep up. The gatesman, recognizing the tartan hastened to raise the portcullis for the clan's entry.

Angus charged beneath the iron gate at a full gallop, pulling his mount to a rearing halt near the huge oaken door of the keep. He stepped from the saddle and ran up the steps to the door and banged his fist against its solid surface.

The owner of the castle, the Earl of Athol, swung the heavy door open. "Angus, what an unexpected pleasure! What bids ye in this territory? I thought ye were going to Glencairn after the crowning. But a welcome sight ye always are, ye ken."

Angus felt a fist close around his heart at the Earl's surprise--it could only mean one thing. He forced himself not to roar at the earl.

"My Lady MacBaron and three others were supposed to await me here. We were engaged in a little disagreement with the enemy so I sent them on ahead." He swallowed the lump in his throat before he asked the most important question. "They should have reached here last eve. Are they not here?"

The Earl of Athol saw the worry etched on Angus's face. "I'm sorry, lad. But I have seen no sign of them. Mayhap they lost direction."

Angus turned and went back to his destrier taking the reins from Fergus, who had ridden to the front of the group, overhearing the entire conversation and who was now holding the snorting beast.

The earl stepped forward to offer Angus any assistance, but the sound of the horse's hooves pounding across the cobblestone courtyard would have covered his words. The MacBaron clan was already on their way.

Angus knew they could not be lost. There was not a track in the Highlands with which Duncan was not well acquainted.

He had almost reached the place where Candelinn had been overtaken when riders came into view. One was holding the reins of an extra horse... Candelinn's mare.

Angus spurred his mount to encounter the riders, his mind awl with worry. It was Sir James Douglas and his clan along with Duncan and his man John.

"Where is she?" Angus's voice bellowed in agony.

"Lord Brenton and Simon de Keith captured her and took her to Burnby Hall. They were outnumbered many times over, Angus. There was nothing I could do." Duncan felt he had let his laird down and wished he had given his life to protect his mistress.

Angus reached out and placed a hand on his commander's shoulder.

Sir James came alongside. "We'll get her back, Angus, never fear. There is not a stronghold in Scotland

or England that can keep out a Douglas and a MacBaron together."

"Aye, James. I will get her back if I have to kill every English dog on this entire isle." He spoke with deadly purpose.

"Tell him what else he said, Duncan," Sir James said.

Angus glanced once more at his commander, readying himself for further bad news.

"The mongrels said that you must bring them the head of The Bruce. Only then would they let the mistress go free."

"Those swine!" cursed Angus. "They'll get a head all right, but it will not be his!"

"Aye, that is what I told the English scum."

"Christ's blood! Burnby Hall! It is covered on two sides with water from the River Teviot and Tweed and straight walls impossible to scale." Angus groaned.

"Sim the Ledhouse is among my clan, Angus. He is a craftsman in ladders and together we will think of a way to scale those walls, never fear."

"To Balgowrie!" Angus shouted, his steed leaping forward beneath his spurs, his anger and frustration apparent in the reckless way he rode, pushing his horse heedlessly across the open moors.

James and Fergus rode abreast keeping the pace behind Angus, the rest of the warriors following close behind.

The two men looked at each other, each with the same thought. "Aye," James nodded. "There will be no peace in Scotland till the lass is safely at his side."

~ * ~

Candelinn was shocked when they arrived at Burnby Hall to see the amount of English soldiers in the courtyard. How could Angus possibly rescue her against such odds?

Simon whispered in her ear as he lifted her from the horse. "After we take care of your husband my dear, you will be my betrothed again."

Candelinn spit on the courtyard in front of him. "I would never be betrothed to a traitor like you."

He backhanded her, knocking her to the ground. Sir George grabbed her arm and stood her up again, scowling at Simon. "Is all this necessary?"

"Aye, It's necessary. You don't know her. She needs to be taught a lesson in humility. Her cousin, Sir John, promised her to me before the reiver MacBaron took her to keep, and I intend to make it so."

Sir George had a disturbing premonition as he looked at the crazed eyes of the man before him. "Don't mar her too much, Simon. We're going to use her for our own end. Her life for the head of Robert Bruce."

Candelinn wiped the blood from the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand. Sir George kept a tight hold on her arm so she was unable to reach Simon so she could scratch his eyes out. But oh, the desire was strong.

"He will never betray The Bruce," the Englishman advised.

"Either that or the lass dies. But before I kill her, I will have her," Simon said. "She owes me that much."

Sir George laughed. "Very well, Simon. A gift for your loyalty to the king. Bring her in." He turned and went into the door of the keep.

Simon walked behind them admiring the straight back and swaying hips of the woman in front of him. She had shown no fear of the coming events and he found himself angry over that fact. He wanted her to cower and beg him to help her. Well, he decided, it was early days yet. He would see how she liked being on display.

~ * ~

Candelinn looked down at the men speaking to Sir George with lowered voices. She was locked in a wooden cage, hanging a half a score of feet above the men's heads. Her tiny prison was so small she could not stand but had to sit huddled on its floor or dangle her legs through the slats. Whenever she changed position it would cause the basket to swing on its rope, a perilous feeling to be sure, so she tried to move only when necessary.

At least, she thought derisively, the cold-blooded Englishmen allowed her to be lowered when it became necessary for privacy. This gave her an excuse to stand and stretch her legs at least a few times each day.

She sighed pensively, her head resting against the bars of her cell. *Burnby Hall!* To be a prisoner in what was once her home. Candelinn stared at the man sitting at the head of a long table below her. Many times her father had sat in that same spot and she had crawled up on his lap for a goodnight kiss. And these same halls and corridors where Fergus and she had frolicked in, she was not now even allowed to walk through any longer. She who had always hated staying inside castle walls was now locked within the miserable confines of a barred cage. Candelinn thumped the side of her prison contemptuously. After all the times she had successfully escaped from her cousin's castle, she grimaced in disgust. Here she sat the prisoner of the savage English and the traitor Simon de Keith with no way out.

Had her enemies only known, they would have been happy to learn they had chosen one of the most extreme forms of torture for this one Scottish lass.

Candelinn spent most of the day relaxing against the backside of the cage, as she was now, her legs dangling limply over the side between the slats. Her eyes were fixed on the patch of blue sky she could see through the high window across the room. Her thoughts were many and varied, each one taking up a little more time, helping to pass the hours of her captivity. There was no doubt in her mind that Angus would come. It was just a matter of when. She knew he loved her and she prayed he would not be hasty and put himself in peril. He was a mighty warrior in his own right, but with the number of soldiers she had noticed guarding Burnby Hall it would not be an easy task.

A sharp jerk on the rope suspending her cage caused it to rock violently and she sat upright instantly banging her head on its low top.

"Damn!" she cursed loudly, rubbing the injured spot. "What the hell do you want?" She looked down seeking the person responsible for her aching head.

"Ah, sweet Candelinn, such language. What would poor Sir John think of you were he alive today? The MacBaron's have not been a proper influence on you, I think."

"You low born cur!" Candelinn spat through clenched teeth. "You're a traitor, Simon de Keith, a turncoat of the lowest sort. Rotting alive with maggots crawling through your eye sockets would be too good for you!"

"You always did have a pretty way with words, my sweet," he answered coolly.

"You despicable fool! Do you think Angus will let you walk away from here unharmed? I'm his wife and he loves me. Do you think for a minute he won't retaliate? Aye, he will come, you'll see."

"The mighty MacBaron does not frighten me. I will see him skewered upon my blade before I am through, then will I claim the prize... You, Candelinn will then belong to me. And such sweet punishment I have in store for you."

"Bray, jackass, bray. While there's still breath in your body. For when the MacBaron's are within, and their war cry fills every corner and cranny in this old castle, know that your life is measured in minutes, Simon de Keith--and your blood will soon mix with the dirt upon the floor, seeping between the stones making a mortar too strong for any Englishman or traitor to ever tear asunder."

Simon stepped back as if shoved by the force of her words. A cold chill settled upon his thin, lank frame and he licked at his suddenly parched lips. He turned abruptly away and tripped over a stool at a nearby table. He set it aright and hurried from the room without looking back at Candelinn or the men whose table he'd fallen against.

Later that day when she was taken down from her heights to make a trip to the bathing chamber, she was surprised to see Lucy, her parent's old housekeeper peeking around the corner motioning her from the kitchen. Candelinn saw the soldier waiting for her at the entrance to the main hall with his back to her and she quickly stepped toward the kitchen to greet her parent's loving servant.

"Lucy!" She grabbed her in a hug. "I did not know you were still here."

"Aye. You're poor parents would roll over in their graves to see what's in their old home. The many times I thought about you, lass, and young Fergus I never dreamed it would be like this. I heard them mention you were married to The MacBaron, is it true?"

"Yes, Lucy. And he will be coming for me, never fear. Maybe you could keep an eye out for me?"

"Aye, lass. I'll do what I can. Now, you'd better get back before someone comes looking for you."

Candelinn nodded, brushing the wrinkled cheek with a kiss and went back to join the soldier waiting for her.

"It took you long enough," he mumbled, grabbing her arm and escorting her back to her cell. Once inside he closed the door and pulled on the rope, bringing her cage once more high up against the ceiling.

She had to grip the bars to settle her stomach. It always took a few minutes for the swaying to stop after

being raised so high.

~ * ~

The third day of her captivity, the guards below her were querulous and tempers were quick, as friction filled the castle. High above the men's heads and oft times ignored, Candelinn could overhear most of the conversations below her.

"I don't care what ye say. 'Twas a bad day for us when he brought the MacBaron wench to Burnby Hall. Have ye not heard of the black temper of The MacBaron? They say he becomes the devil himself when he looks at ye cold as death behind a sword flashing through the air so quick there's naught that can keep the pace. I tell ye, we'll rue the day he comes for her."

"But Lord Brenton and Simon de Keith do not seem worried." His comrade tried to reassure him. "These are stout walls, never fear. Not even the wild MacBaron can destroy them."

"So ye say. But to take his lady... Ye Gods! Brenton must be out of his bloody mind! With just his clan we are outnumbered two to one. Where are the reinforcements the king promised us? I tell ye, me skin crawls every time I walk these here halls waiting for The MacBaron to step out of the shadows."

"Oh, Taylor, me man. Ye've been nippin' too much of the Scottish ale. We may be outnumbered but we are disciplined in the ways of fighting. These Scots are barbarians, not soldiers. 'Twould take more than two to one to best us."

"Hmph, we'll see." The old guard turned and left the room.

Candelinn nodded knowingly. *Barbarians? Just you wait my lads. When The MacBaron scales these walls we will see just how disciplined you are in the face of avenging death.*

She suppressed a giggle at the thought of their scared faces as they scurried for cover before the fighting Scotsmen. She called down to one of the guards.

"Oh, Taylor, is it not time for my evening stroll about the gardens?" she asked.

"It's not a stroll in the garden ye'll be gettin' if ye don't mind ye're disrespectful mouth." He answered sullenly as he rose from the table and came and lowered her cage to the floor.

On hands and knees she crawled out onto the floor and stood up, using a post for support as she rubbed some life back into her stiff, cramped legs.

"Hurry it up now. Ye know de Keith doesn't like ye out of the cage for mor'n a few minutes at a time." The guard took her roughly by the arm, propelling her across the floor toward the narrow hallway outside the room. "I know the way, thank you very much." She spoke sarcastically, wrenching her arm free of his grasp.

"I've me orders to follow, wench. So mind ye'r manners or there'll be no more outings such as ye are used to gettin'."

"Would you have me relieve myself over your friends heads while they sat at their meal? I don't think de Keith would care for that!" When they reached the desired chamber he stood staring at her.

"The least you can do is allow me a few moments of privacy. There's no where else to go, and the guards are well placed. What harm can come of it? Surely you're not so cruel-hearted as all that?"

"Aye, wench, the guards are well-placed, and on the alert, too." He withdrew his hand hesitantly, unsure of his decision. "Och, all right, make haste with ye, lest I be found disobeying orders." He stood in the doorway watching her walk away.

Candelinn stayed in the small closet-like room for as long as she dared, enjoying the few minutes of privacy and walking about as briskly as the tiny space would allow for exercise. The risk of angering the guards to the point of denying her this one privilege was such that she never stayed beyond a reasonable time. Each time she had come to the chamber she looked to see if Lucy was near, but since that one time she had not seen her again.

Casually she strode along the hall, her hands in her pockets, looking at the tapestries still hanging on the walls. The most expensive ones had long since disappeared, but those that remained were entertaining enough for someone who spent her days in a woven, slatted cage.

Candelinn stopped before one of the tapestries, an old favorite from her childhood showing the clansmen at the hunt. She stood studying the pattern, deep in remembrance of days long past.

"So, here you are, sweet Candelinn." Simon sidled up to her, his hands clasped behind his back, his narrow chest puffed out like a crowing rooster.

"What ill wind blew you this way?" She replied mockingly, refusing to look away from the tapestry.

"Ah, the sweet words of love." Simon took her by the shoulders and spun her around to face him.

She pushed his hands away from her. "You are worse than the English, Simon de Keith. For they at least are fighting for their king, while you have deserted yours." She left him then, standing in the hall as she walked away with her head held proudly.

Anger surged through Simon as he was once more rejected outright by the fiery haired woman. He caught her a short way down the hall and jerked her backward, locking his arms about her struggling body. He spun her around, his mouth crushing hers beneath the fury of his kiss.

Candelinn broke free of his brutal kiss, gasping for breath. "Turn loose, Simon, I warn you," she demanded.

"You? Warn me?" He laughed viciously, his cold eyes staring hard at the neckline of her jacket, which had come undone revealing the full roundness of her breast. "It would appear that I am the one in authority at the moment, sweet Candelinn. And were I you, I would..."

A gut-wrenching pain seared his body, rendering his legs useless as he crumpled to the floor clutching his sorely abused groin.

With a smiling air of confidence, Candelinn proceeded to the doorway of the room where her guard awaited her return.

The guard noticed Simon behind, struggling to once more stand erect. "What's the matter with him?"

"I think it must have been something he ate," she answered.

Sixteen

Angus was not at this moment smiling as his wife was. His anger at the English was limited only by the number of curses he flung upon their heads. No mercy would be found at the point of a MacBaron sword. The gauntlet was irretrievably thrown upon the ground when Candelinn had been kidnapped, no quarter would be given.

His clan and the Douglas's were camped but a few miles from Burnby Hall, waiting to carry through their plans for rescuing Candelinn.

Angus sat in front of the peat fire, its embers smoldering in the rain. He held a dry branch devoid of its leaves in his hand and he used it to move the coals around systematically, trying to keep his mind off his wee lass. He and all the men were on edge for they knew that tomorrow was the day. Tomorrow they were going to charge Burnby Hall.

The plans were different from anything they had ever tried before and all they could do was hope that the weather would take a turn for the worse, and that the mist might indeed get thicker. They would need heavy fog to cover their advance on the castle.

He threw the stick in the fire and watched it catch alight. He moved back beneath the safety of a tree, protected from the rain and leaned against his saddle, lying on the ground and closed his eyes.

The next morning he awoke to rain falling on him from the trees. He sat up quickly. By day's light Candelinn would once more be safely with him. He stood and stretched and grinned from ear to ear. Sir James approached through the pouring rain.

"Something pleases you, Angus?"

"Aye, Jamie. I never thought I'd be so fond of a misty, rainy night in my life. Christ's blood, it's bonnie weather."

"'Tis true. It is just what we need. The English will not think it is so wonderful for their holiday celebration, however. I'm glad that this English king, bless his black-bastard's heart, picked such rotten weather to celebrate his birth, aren't you?"

Angus laughed. "Aye. And such a celebration we are going to give them." He pounded James Douglas on the back and laughing heartily, went to check on his men. Sim the Ledhouse walked briskly toward the two men. He was carrying a huge ladder at his side.

"What have ye here, Sim?" James asked his long time friend and clansman. "'Tis a way I have designed to scale the walls of any castle in the land, my Laird." Sim answered proudly. He took the ladder and stood it up showing the two chief's his new invention. The ladder could be stretched to extend as many feet as need be to reach the top of even the highest wall, and at the end of the top rung there were hooks made of steel that could grab the edge and cling to the lip of the battlements, enabling the climber to climb

fast and without worry of the ladder dislodging.

Angus slapped Sim on the back. "You've done a good job, Sim. My Lady will thank you herself when we get her away from those English carrions."

"Aye, m'Laird. I'll have the men load them onto the backs of the horses."

"Thank you, Sim. We will be ready to ride at dusk. Tie them securely. The English must not hear us approaching their gates. Tell Duncan I have need of him."

"Aye, m'Laird."

Duncan came rambling through the trees a few minutes later, his tartan pulled tightly around his shoulders trying to keep warm. The rain had continued to fall and the mist seemed to envelop the encampment. He walked up to Angus and Sir James in conversation and he interrupted them.

"Ye wanted to see me, Angus?"

"Aye, Duncan. I wanted you to cast your weather eye about and tell me if you think the mist will hold the rest of the day." Duncan was well known throughout the clan for his keen sense concerning the weather and seldom had he been proven wrong in his predictions.

Duncan looked about him before lifting his face for the rain to wash it clean. "My Laird, the mist will last for days to come. We will be safe at Glencairn with Lady MacBaron by the time it leaves us." He looked again at his clan chief and smiled his wrinkled face in pleasure. He had never ceased to blame himself for the capture of Candelinn and the thought of gaining her back this day brought warmth to his heart. He would never admit how fond he had grown of the tender Comyn lass who had invaded Glencairn and taken over his chief. But his days were indeed not the same with her absence.

Late in the night, the men started to move stealthily through the forest around Burnby Hall. Angus reined in next to a horse laden with heavy black rolls. "Are those the pelts I asked for?" Angus asked Fergus.

"Aye, Angus."

Angus nodded and pulled away from the loaded horse, moving next to Sir James. They traveled silently till they came to a clearing and stopped. Ahead of them stood the towers of Burnby Hall shadowed in the heavy mist but standing no less imposing than ever. Even from this distance they could hear the gaiety coming from inside. They were not thinking of Sir Angus and his clansmen. Nor did they consider he would venture out to recapture his wife on a night like this. They were filled with the joy of celebration, drinking, dancing and forgetting the worries of a war with Scotland.

Angus nodded to the men on both sides of him. He dismounted and led his horse back into the forest, handing the reins to Duncan.

"Stay here. And when you see the gates being lowered, bring the rest of the men under the gate." He looked at the last minute doubts etched on his friend's face.

"Still your doubts, Duncan. It would take more than a miserable castle and a few Englishmen to hold my lady from me. 'Twill not take long." He patted the man's shoulder and turned to join James at the edge of the clearing. He thought of the night he went to the Comyn stonhold to bring her the brooch. If it could only be that easy this night to go to her. But he needed the added number of his men to rout the English

from this part of Scottish soil.

Fergus was handing out the black furs among the men going with Angus and the Douglas. He had gotten these pelts from every crofter on surrounding lands in the past few days and had barely returned with them in time. Each of the men on foot were given one, and with Angus, James, Fergus and Sim leading the way, they crouched low, throwing the black furs on their backs and began to move very slowly across the open field, looking much like a herd of black cattle in the rainy darkness. A small herd already grazed around the castle gates. If the fog was thick enough, and the English drunk enough, they would be able to pull the ladders that Sim had made along with them, working their way slowly to the castle walls without attracting attention. When most of the clan was gathered at the walls, they would lift the ladders and scale the thick granite sides.

Angus inched his way across the mist-soaked moor, pulling one of the ladders along gradually with his right hand, keeping it flat upon the ground so as not to be detected by any of the guards on the battlements. The heavy fur pelt covered his back and kept out the soaking mist that covered the Scottish countryside.

Two of the guards standing near the battlements, raised their ale-filled horns to toast the king's celebration. One stared out over the hazy glen and saw nothing except the black hides of the cattle grazing their fill.

"Not even the bloody Scots would venture out on an eve such as this. It is too damnably wet! What say ye that we step inside where it's warm and refill our horns?"

"'Tis a dreary night to be sure. And I could use another draught to warm me blood." His speech was slurred from the over imbibing of ale. Both turned their backs on the ever-increasing number of black cattle that neared the castle walls as they went to join the revelry inside.

Angus crouched low against the wall waiting for the rest of the men to join him. One by one they surrounded the rough-hewn stone. The MacBaron chief signaled silently with his arm as he took Sim's ladder and stood it up against the wall. It fit and he heard the scraping of the hooks catching the merlon.

Angus was the first to place his foot on the rungs leading up the castle walls. He could hear the sound of the other ladders clamping into place. He swallowed hard, hoping that the night guards would not hear the sound of metal on stone with all the noise coming from inside the castle.

At this point in the rescue operation, as the clansmen were well aware, the most important element was still one of surprise. If the English were given any warning, some harm could come to Candelinn.

Angus felt his hands touch the top of the wall and in one silent movement vaulted over the edge, stepping aside for the men behind to follow.

The guards stood with their backs to the battlements in the open doorway of the upper story of the keep. Angus reached to his waist and pulled his dirk, motioning with his head for his men to wait. He crept up from behind and threw his left arm around one of the guards' necks, squeezing his throat making it impossible to cry out. Dragging him back into the darkness, his right hand drove the dagger deep into the man's chest. As life flowed from the victim's body, Angus lowered him quietly to the floor. He had not made a sound. James Douglas stood apart from his victim, a victorious smile crossing his usually stern features. He approached Angus, throwing out one arm in the direction of the open doorway. He bowed like a true knight.

"After you, Laird MacBaron," he whispered, grinning devilishly.

Angus clasped his heavy gauntlet upon Jamie's shoulder and squeezed it before running through the doorway, his clan close behind, eager to fight.

~ * ~

Candelinn eyed the revelry beneath her. The English dressed in their finery, their goblets filled, toasting their king. Women, selling their favors to the highest bidders, flounced around the hall in their tattered and stained silks and laces, soaking up the false compliments from the male fops in embroidered velvet.

Candelinn's eyes spanned the room. There was no man there that could compare in stature to the MacBaron. Compared to the broad shoulders of her husband these men beneath her appeared to be weaklings and sorry excuses for men.

Candelinn felt cramped and uncomfortable in her tiny prison and kept squirming about trying to find a semblance of comfort. Failing that, she continued to watch the show beneath her. They left her with such deep feelings of disgust she had an overwhelming urge to spit down on their powdered heads. *Anything, she thought, would be worth it to spoil their gaiety even for a short while.*

She sighed out loud and leaned her head against the slatted side of her cage and thought of other things. Her heart ached for want of her chief and a single tear pricked her eye. *Oh Angus, where are you?* Candelinn was still buried deep in her thoughts when a cry rang out filling the hall.

"A MacBaron!" And at the opposite end of the room the cry "A Douglas!" followed by the sound of thundering horses entering through the gates to Burnby Hall.

Candelinn quickly raised her head, her eyes wide with surprise, to watch Angus appear as if from nowhere into the room, standing majestically, his legs apart, feet planted firmly on the rush-covered floor. He looked ready to take on the entire population of the hall. His men came from behind him spilling into the foray of women screaming and running in terror. Men with arms drew them to fight while those caught completely unaware backed quickly against one of the walls.

As steel clashed against steel and the uproar in the room filled to a rousing crescendo, Candelinn's eyes never left the sight of her husband. He had seen her and was fighting with the strength of ten men, making a swath across the floor, leaving a trail of bleeding and dying English in his wake to reach her.

He finally reached the hook where the rope to her cage was fixed securely. Quickly he untied it and lowered the cage. Before she reached the floor and his waiting arms, Simon de Keith came up from behind him with a drawn sword. Candelinn screamed, but her warning came too late, and he thrust the narrow blade into the MacBaron's side.

Simon stepped back, his bloodstained sword held limply at his side.

Candelinn gasped aloud in anguish, covering her mouth with her hands at the telltale red dripping from the tip of Simon's rapier.

"So, Angus MacBaron, mighty warrior of the Scottish Highlands, it appears I have dealt you a killing blow." Simon's voice was a high-pitched whine, filled with excited arrogance. "I shall enjoy watching you die slowly, and know ye also that as ye go, the Lady Candelinn shall be mine."

Fergus and another clansman raised their swords to give Simon the death blow but were stopped by the face of Angus as he shook his head. He wanted no other sword to touch this one. He wanted to feel the thrust that would take the life of the traitor who had touched his wife.

With unfailing gentleness, Angus helped Candelinn to her shaking feet and turned to face Simon again.

"Oh, Angus, darling," she moaned. "He's hurt you." She stared at the material of his jerkin turning crimson from the wound.

Though the side pained him some, he stood straight facing his enemy. "'Tis nothing, lass. Keep behind me while I finish this."

Had she been able to see his face she would have seen his expression turn cold and deadly. Simon's eyes widened and he started to bring his sword back into play, when Angus with one continuous motion raised his arm, the one holding the heavy claymore, and brought it down with such vengeance that he split the culprit's skull from crown to neck, cutting his head in twain, as a great bellow of rage rent the air. All of Angus's pent up anger was spent in one forceful blow.

Candelinn barely had time to register Simon's death when the great muscular arms of her husband had wrapped around her and pulled her tight against his chest. She raised her face to look into his tired eyes just before his mouth covered hers. It was filled with longing and love, and vengeance and anger and overpowered her making her legs weak. It took the very breath out of her. It was over too soon.

"Och, lass. You are going to make an old man of me. My old heart can't take it when you are in danger." He gave her his usual breathtaking smile.

"I must take a look at your side, love, before you bleed to death. Come away."

"Not yet, lass. Wait till we empty the keep of the enemy. He looked around and was not surprised that the men with him had taken care of everyone while he had time to greet his wife. The dead were being pulled out of the hall and the prisoners were led out of the keep to fill the courtyard. The women and children were not harmed, but were immediately made ready for the trip to Scone where the Bruce's troops were still in residence. The new king would decide their men's fate and they would be with them.

Fergus came across the floor to greet his sister. He put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you well, lass? Or should we kill a few more of these swine to make up for it?"

Candelinn looked at how much her brother had changed since being with Angus. He had matured while she wasn't looking. He seemed self-assured and confident as he looked into her eyes. Gone was the young man she could coerce into any kind of mischief. In his place was a man who looked strongly determined in this place of their birth. She smiled up at him. "I fear my husband's influence on you, brother. You sound just like one of those heathen MacBaron's now," she chided.

Before they could continue a maid came hurrying across the floor to their side. "Lady Candelinn, are you unharmed?" It was Lucy wringing her hands in agitation.

"Aye, Lucy I am fine. Do you remember my brother?"

Lucy curtsied. "My Laird Fergus, 'tis good to see you again. Will you make your home here now?"

Fergus took her hand in his. Angus was following the interchange but the loss of blood was making him a

little dizzy.

Candelinn waved at Duncan and James Douglas to come to her aid. They quickly crossed the room to her side. "I need help getting my big bairn up the stairs and into a bed. He was injured and I can't get him to sit down so I can take care of it. Do you two feel up to the task?"

Angus had not heard what she had said to the two men but they turned and came at him like two grizzly bears. They each grabbed an arm and, without waiting for his objection, half carried and half dragged him up the stairs and out of the hall. Candelinn was smiling as her husband scowled at her and followed in their wake.

Fergus was still standing beside the maid. "I didn't know you were still here, Lucy. It's nice to know one so faithful to my parents has still been at Burnby Hall. But you shouldn't call me Laird. I'm just Fergus."

"Nae, my laird. Sir John had no issue and you are now the Comyn Laird. Has not anyone mentioned this to you? And your sweet mother herself told me Burnby Hall was to be yours. She even showed me in her old desk where she put the papers. Come, let's hope they are still there."

She led him through the halls to the old chamber that had belonged to his parents. His mother's room, which she had mostly used for her sewing and correspondence in the last years, still looked the same. Next door, he could hear Angus complaining loudly at Candelinn's ministrations and smiled.

Lucy went directly to the old desk where he remembered seeing his mother spending many hours bent over it at her letter writing. It was fond memories. Lucy pulled out a drawer and hit a hidden lever and the bottom popped up. Sure enough, beneath the false bottom was a stack of papers. Fergus brought them out and scanned the papers before his eyes. *Good Lord!* He had never imagined.

Lucy smiled at the young man before her. "Now I think I will see to feeding our hungry rescuers. Such a feast I will prepare for you, my Laird." She patted his arm as he still stared at the papers in his hands and left the room.

Angus, undressed and in the bed, was still nagging at his wife as she brought water and cloths to clean his wounds. His two friends stood at the door, smiling. Duncan watched the lass tending the laird and felt finally as if everything was right with the world. Jamie Douglas knew how hard it was for the MacBaron to be coddled. He was abnormally healthy and was never sick that he could recall and it was a picture he would long remember of the mighty warrior stuck in the bed with the wee lass giving him such fits. The two went out the door and pulled it shut.

"And I don't care what you say, we are going to stay right here until this wound has healed enough for you to ride. Now, lay still, Sir Knight while I cleanse your side."

God, his bonnie lass was becoming a shrew. He watched her feminine movements as she bent over his gash in his side, trying so hard to be gentle as she washed the blood away. There were a couple of times when he had to grit his teeth. He wondered if she were being unco' rough on purpose. After she had put salve on him and placed a bandage on his side, she then ordered him to turn over.

"Why?"

"Because, my husband, the sword went clear through you and I would repair the back as well."

"Only if you kiss me first."

She looked at the longing in his dark eyes and was happy to accommodate him. She bent over, trying not to touch his injury and placed her lips gently on his. But he was having none of that and pulled her down on top of him and crushed her mouth with his. The passion erupted immediately and when he finally released her she did not think she would be able to stand away from him.

"Did you doubt that I would come for you, lass?" He asked softly.

"Nae, my love. I knew you would come."

A fire kindled in his loins, burning hotter and hotter as he thought of all the lonely nights he'd spent without her, living with the nagging fear that the English would take their hatred for the MacBaron name out on her.

He rolled over so she could clean and bandage his back, all the while thinking of having her next to him in the bed. Once she was finished he rolled onto his back, grabbing her arm and pulling her back down on top of him.

He looked down upon her face lying against his chest and warmth caused an ache in his loins for the want of her, the taste of her filled his every thought.

Her eyes rose to meet his and he tried to read the meaning in them. Was that desire for him that shone so brightly or just thankfulness at being alive and safe?

"I would make love to you this night, lass." His words were husky, the desire evident.

"But, love," she leaned back to stare up at him. "Surely with your side..."

"Och, 'tis but a scratch. Besides, my bonnie wife," he raised his hand to gently run his index finger down her cheek. "I have other wants which far outweigh the pain of this sorry wound." His voice lowered into a timbre that made her heart jump into her throat. "I remember a night when a certain impudent lass stripped me of my garments and took her passion's release with me... If you were to undress and crawl next to me, you could repeat that eve and I would not have to strain overmuch." His eyes smiled as they gazed deeply into hers for the answer he so craved.

Candelinn felt a warm flush creep up to her blushing face. "I'm most certain the lass in question would love the opportunity to take charge of the MacBaron. It's not often his wife has him at her command." She whispered softly into his ear.

"Then please hurry, my lass. This is one night your reiver would not want to miss.

Epilogue

King Edward died June 7, 1307 at the age of sixty-eight at Burgh-on-Sands on the Solway shore of a severe attack of dysentery. He was the most resolute and inexorable enemy Scotland had ever known.

Robert the Bruce was to be Scotland's greatest king. He eclipsed the sun, blinding men with the brilliance of light from his helmet. His spirit did not falter and his purpose was never abandoned. At Bannockburn, in 1314 he finally acquired Scotland's independence. With 5,000 Scots fighting against 20,000 English he took the day.

Strong hands kept his head on his shoulders in the wilds of Scotland. His strength was of a blacksmith's arm and his speed as quick as a matador's. He had the attributes of a statesman, a cultivated intelligence, and a suavity of manner that made him a hero-king. He never forgot his friends and often forgave his enemies. His temper was humane and genial.

His story remains an epic.

Meet Mariah Legrand

Mariah LeGrand was born in Ponca City, Ok. I was the baby of seven. You know what they say about the 7th child. I have loved to read my entire life and usually read a book a day, when I am not writing. We moved to WA state when I was 16 and I had fallen in love with my sweetheart by the time I was 17. We married and are still together after 3 children and 3 grandchildren. I live on a beautiful island in the Pacific Northwest, and finally after working for many years, have the time to spend everyday writing. It's been my love since I learned how to spell. I always wrote things down, either in the form of a journal or story. I have many stories that will never leave the file cabinet. I taught creative writing for three years and decided I would rather be writing my own. Romance is my favorite genre and what I will always write.

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