

Marissa St James



*The Legend  
and the  
Laird*

# **THE LEGEND AND THE LAIRD**

by

**Marissa St. James**

**WHISKEY CREEK PRESS**

[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

Published by  
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS  
Whiskey Creek Press  
PO Box 51052  
Casper, WY 82605-1052  
[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

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ISBN 978-1-60313-154-4

### **Credits**

Cover Artist: Rika Singh  
Editor: Stephanie Parent

Printed in the United States of America

## **Dedication**

To Jac Eddins who refused to let me give up when times were rough.

For my dad, who supported his daughters' dreams.

For Mom, who instilled in me a love of reading, who's put up with my rants and raves, listened to disappointments, and shared the thrill of success. Thanks, Mom.



**Dun Sgiath** (doon skeea) n. fort shield  
**Draoidh** (draoi) n. sorcerer, wizard

“The eyes are windows to the soul.”  
‘Tis often said, and true.  
How do you tell one’s character,  
When pale eyes stare at you?

She’s raven-haired and light of eye,  
In secret, does she weep.  
While vengeance sits upon her heart,  
Her own counsel does she keep.

For souls were lost to save her own;  
But she will have her day.  
And this lass will accept no less—  
It’s time, the price to pay.

*In the dark ages, they were known as soothsayers, druids. Every tribe and kingdom had them. These people were revered, looked up to with awe, for they could divine the future of king and peasant alike. Battles were fought with the blessing of these ancient fortunetellers.*

*Many began to see the advantages of using their powers to their own benefit and soon the cult as a whole became outcast. They were routed out and destroyed as heathens and betrayers. Those who survived destruction scattered to the far ends of the world. After settling in their new homes, some returned to their old ways, wreaking havoc on their surroundings.*

*Quite by accident, they discovered they could manipulate events to suit their purposes, and they returned to battles in the past to influence the outcomes to their benefit. A small single change in any event created ripples through time, and caused major changes in historical events.*

*The druids frequently dabbled in the lives of humans, until it became a game with them. Nothing was as it should be. They could easily 'hit and run' and not worry about getting caught. Once they mastered the ability to travel through time, it became important to them, provided hiding places when they were pursued. No humans could follow them, and few of their own kind dared to try.*

*Individuals of a splinter group were unhappy about what was going on. They were determined to put things to rights, but met with little or no success. They realized the mismanagement of time was a dangerous thing, and they needed to organize themselves to work as a force against their recalcitrant brothers. With plans in order, this small group made it their business to set things aright once again, and*

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*protect the human race against manipulation.*

*This small group has worked hard throughout the history of  
man. They have come to be known as the Guardians of Time.*





## **Prologue**

Her breath came in short gasps. He was close behind her, rapidly closing the distance between them. If he caught her... The tall meadow grass hindered her flight, but she continued to struggle through it, trying desperately to remain beyond his reach. Meredith glanced over her shoulder and saw him closing the gap. She'd had a good head start in her escape, but it wouldn't last. His long legs made it easier to gain on her.

Meredith almost fell on the uneven ground. Clumps of wild flowers hampered her progress. She failed to watch where she was running and landed on her stomach with a decided oomph. Meredith raised her head and spat out a mouthful of grass and dirt, then struggled to turn over onto her back. Her legs were pinned, making movement almost impossible. "You... play...dirty..." she complained between gulps of air.

"I know," he replied gleefully.

He didn't seem to be breathing hard at all, and that annoyed Meredith. "You never play fair," she responded more evenly. Her heart no longer pounded from her frantic run, but she couldn't be sure if he was teasing her, or if he was serious. Meredith regretted having neglected him lately, regret-

ted putting their work first, but he'd known what she was, and what to expect, when he 'signed on' to become her life-mate. He deserved better, and she fully intended to make it up to him, but not like this.

Aiden leaned over Meredith's body until he could grasp her wrists and pin them above her head. Straddling her hips was the only way to keep her still. She could buck him off if she had a mind to, but he could tell her efforts were half-hearted. He leaned forward again and nipped at her throat, felt her pulse begin to race again. He loved to tease her this way. "When did I ever play fair?" he asked, mocking. "Playing fair only prolongs the inevitable, and right now, I want to make up for lost time. Any objections?"

"We need to talk," she told him, ignoring his question. Even if she did mind, he'd ignore her answer.

"This is not the time for talk," Aiden replied. His patience dwindled. "I've waited too long to get you alone."

"You're going to have to wait a little longer." Meredith struggled with little success to get out from beneath him. She couldn't talk to him rationally when he had her pinned down this way—not that she would have minded under any other circumstances, but they'd put off this conversation too long.

"Don't you think it's about time we started our own agency?" she asked. Her eyes fluttered closed while she made a show of struggling to fight the temptation he offered. If he kissed her now, she'd be lost. He didn't.

"I don't want to talk about work," he whispered in her ear, then lightly bit her earlobe.

"You're not making this any easier," she warned, her voice becoming husky. She loved this man, but there was only so much she could take before she gave in to him, and now

was not the time to surrender.

“Mmm...maybe we should consider it later. Much later,” he whispered, and tried harder to distract her.

Aiden leaned back and waited for a response. She was taking too long, and he grinned. He accepted her silence as acquiescence and slowly leaned over her once more. “I want to bite your neck,” he announced in a deep dramatic tone, in a parody of a movie vampire. Meredith protested whenever he did that, but his warm breath against her throat excited her. If truth be told, it was a turn-on for them both.

She giggled and hunched her shoulders to keep him away from her neck. He could be a maniac sometimes, but she loved him in spite of his faults. Suddenly, something caught her attention. She struggled to sit up and free herself from his grasp. There was no one around but them, yet someone was shouting orders. Something was drastically wrong.

Aiden sat back on his heels and watched Meredith’s expression change from curiosity to determination. “Not again. Come on, Meredith. It’s about time we took a vacation, don’t you think? I’ve had enough adventure to last a while.” He rolled over onto the ground and lay on his back, his frustration evident. They had been planning to spend an extended visit with his family—at their insistence. He and Meredith had had little time to themselves, and it was his intention to make the most of these few days.

Meredith ignored his complaint, although she had to admit it was a valid one. They did deserve some down time. “Listen. There’s some serious trouble going on, and we have to set it straight. After we take care of this problem, we’ll take a nice, long, well-deserved vacation. When this is done, I promise to give you my undivided attention. Whatever the

problem, it shouldn't take long to sort out."

Aiden grumbled something about promises not kept, then got up and pulled his wife to her feet. His hands settled on her slender waist while he waited for her to whisk them away to wherever. The meadow, with its colorful flowers, vanished from sight while Aiden sighed in resignation. "I've got a bad feeling about this—"

\* \* \* \*

Iron shod hoofs thundered across the moor. The ground trembled and clods of earth flew in all directions. A dozen riders pushed their mounts mercilessly, only to pull them up short when they reached what appeared to be a solid wall of mist. There was no way around it. The horses stamped and moved restlessly while their leader rode back and forth along the barrier. He called out a string of strange words and waited. Minutes later, nothing had happened, and his patience wore thin. "She said it was the way in," he growled. "I will wring her neck for the liar she is!" His voice grew louder with every angry word.

"My lord!" one of the men called out. He pointed to an area that appeared to be shifting.

The leader rode toward the soldier who called to him, then halted where his man pointed and examined the spot. He laughed when a narrow opening appeared in the swirling wall. A door of sorts slid open, its two halves creating an ominous, damp pathway. Behind it was a small clearing, like a cave. Past the far end, the mist swirled and thinned briefly to teasingly reveal the valley beyond. The gap was wide enough for one horse to easily pass without fear of becoming lost. The leader urged his mount through, keeping it to a proud canter. His men were more reluctant to follow. What was to stop the

mist from closing and trapping them within for all eternity? The swirling fog before them danced on air currents, but offered no assurance of safe passage. The hazy walls churned and seethed as if they resented the unwelcome intrusion, as if they could tell the difference between friend and foe. The closing obscured the path behind the riders.

The leader reached the far end of the gap, where his horse reared up and pawed at the air. He waited briefly as the last of his men emerged from the gloom. He showed no concern for the fact their one means of escape from this cursed valley was closed to them. A cruel smile touched his lips and he shouted for all to hear. His words echoed eerily, carried on the warm breeze. "The child is mine!"

## **Chapter 1**

Lady Alycia MacDraoidh nervously stared out over the battlement, watching the servants going about their daily chores. While the activity pleased her, something didn't feel right. She looked beyond the keep and studied the landscape. They were surrounded by mountains through which there was no safe passage, unless one knew the words to open the way. Even then, one had to know the exact spot where the words were most effective. Their most important means of defense appeared undisturbed in the distance. She sensed no breach, but an ominous feeling sent shivers of apprehension racing along her spine. Her intuition told her it had nothing to do with the clan. For the most part, her people were content and eager to please their lady. She surveyed the land a little longer, then studied the outlying village, making mental notes of which villagers she had promised to visit the next day.

Many years ago, this part of the highlands had been unknown, unexplored by other Scots, and Dun Sgiath existed only as legend. Some two hundred years earlier, a new clan had been created by one of Alycia's ancestors, and a safe haven had been established. It was a well-known fact that a woman would seek ways to keep a meaningful peace, quicker than a

man would. Many of the tenants had been disowned by their families for one reason or another, or outlawed by English rule. Here they found peace and a quiet life.

Throughout the following years, the clan had grown and spread out across the valley. Today, they could supply most of their own needs. What they couldn't grow or make for themselves, they traded for. At least twice a year, a group of traders, who could be trusted with the location of the valley, went out to other parts of the highlands to bargain for needed items.

Lady Alycia studied the shield of mist that temporarily hid the mountains from view. The first couple to settle here had commanded fire and water. Together, when necessary, they created the misty shield to hide the valley from all outsiders. Anyone attempting to come through the mist uninvited could be lost forever—that is, if they managed to find the secret of getting through the misty wall. It was the nature of the boundary. On rare days when the mist was especially light, the inhospitable surroundings were enough to discourage most travelers. Dun Sgiath could not be seen from the passage into the valley. The mist hid its exact location from view most of the time. With a loch at its rear and mountains on all sides, Alycia was assured of her clan's safety. She felt comfortable with only a small garrison of men-at-arms for protection. They were the descendants of the original soldiers and kept their military standing, more for the sake of tradition than anything else. Most of them also worked at trades.

For generations, the keep had remained isolated and undisturbed, until the time Meredith MacDraoidh arrived to find sanctuary for a small group of villagers forced from their homes by English troops. From then on, tales of witchcraft



and strange goings on worked well to keep outsiders at bay. When Meredith's daughter came of an age to take her mother's place, Meredith and her husband disappeared. No one knew what became of them, and if they saw their daughter again, no record was made.

A brief smile tugged at the corners of Alycia's mouth. Other tales weren't so far from the truth, and had served the family well as protection against their enemies.

Something caught her attention—a sound. Alycia listened carefully. It sounded like someone shouting *mine* echoed several times off the mountains. An ominous feeling sent shivers through her. No one could enter the valley without her knowledge, so what she thought she heard had to be her imagination. She sighed softly, then left the wall to focus her attention on the work still to be done.

\* \* \* \*

A small hand reached up stealthily to snatch a roll recently removed from the oven. A plump hand was quicker, and gently grasped the small wrist. "What do you think you are doing, young mistress?" the woman asked. The girl bowed her head for a moment, dismayed she had been caught so easily. One day, she would win at this game they played. She looked up at the woman.

Martha tried unsuccessfully to hide a grin. Gently taking the roll from the child's hand, she split the small loaf carefully, then spread a generous amount of butter across its warm surface. "And where were you off to so early this morning, young lady? You know you aren't to be riding outside these walls alone."

"I know, Martha, but I only went as far as the village. I promised Mama I wouldn't go beyond. It's such a glorious

morning! I couldn't help myself." A brief glint of mischief in her eyes quickly vanished.

Martha handed the bread to the child. "Be off with you now, young mistress. There's still much to do here, and I'll not have you underfoot." The child smiled her thanks for the small indulgence, then wove her way between busy workers and out of the kitchen.

Martha shook her head thoughtfully. Everyone loved Mistress Raven. The ten-year-old didn't say much, but she didn't have to. Her bright smile and knowing pale eyes communicated far more than most people could with eloquent speech. For her own good, the housekeeper realized, the child would have to learn to hide the expression in her eyes. It could be her undoing.

Martha was a middle-aged, rotund woman who never married, and she loved the child like her own. It was unfortunate so much responsibility already rested on the young mistress's shoulders. The woman knew, only too well, what lay ahead in Raven's future.

Each chieftain of Clan MacDraoidh had one particular servant chosen for her discretion and wisdom. Martha had been specially chosen years before to serve Lady Alycia and didn't hesitate to speak to the mistress about any matter she thought might benefit the child. Despite her skills, Raven's mother didn't always see things objectively where her daughter was concerned. Martha not only felt free to state her mind, but often took it upon herself to see to Raven's welfare. It wasn't that Lady Alycia was a bad mother...but the present mistress of Dun Sgiath often seemed preoccupied.

\* \* \* \*

Raven strolled through the courtyard and headed toward

the garden at the rear of the fortress. She broke off a piece of the roll and popped it into her mouth, savoring the delicious taste of still-warm bread and melted butter. It was a game she played with Martha at some point every day, to see if she could snatch a roll or tart without getting caught. Raven had yet to surprise the cook, but one day...

She was acutely aware of the activity around her. The blacksmith worked diligently at his forge. A sheen of sweat glistened on his face and muscled arms while he hammered away on the sword he was repairing. He looked up and smiled at the goose girl who was barely larger than the birds she took charge of. The birds honked noisily and flapped their wings with annoyance as they were gently prodded along ahead of the child. Servant girls hurried by, carrying fresh rushes for the great hall. Raven spun around, taking in the flurry of activity. No one ever visited the fortress—it was too well-secluded. She wondered briefly what the occasion might be, then recalled Beltane was only a few days away. While the old ways were no longer followed, the first of May was still celebrated as the anniversary of the clan's establishment. She sensed this year's celebration promised something new, but rather than ponder on the secret, she let the thought slip away as she made her way to the garden.

A wall standing six feet high and a foot thick separated the garden from the inner courtyard. At one end was an archway allowing access to the rectangular area. Trellises along the inside of this wall supported roses of varying colors, from blood reds, to the palest pinks and golds, to the purest whites. Many years ago, when Meredith MacDraoidh first met her husband, she was presented with a rose each day until he had convinced her to travel back in time with him. Every gen-

eration since, the new chieftain's husband had added a new rose bush, until the wall fairly bloomed. Sweetly scented honeysuckle covered the longer wall. The yellow and white blossoms, with their narrow green leaves, beckoned to honeybees to take of their nectar. Rows of flowers created neatly trimmed borders to show their size and color to best advantage.

The lawns were kept meticulously trim for the occasional picnic. Raven strolled past several shrubs, which were evenly spaced along the main walkway. A marble fountain stood in the center of the garden. The prancing unicorn dominated one side of the basin and sprayed a thin stream of water from its single horn. Raven dipped her hand into the clear water in the basin and took pleasure in its coolness.

Near the kitchen, a small patch of earth contained herbs used in cooking, or for medicinal purposes. Raven studied the young plants for a few moments, reminding herself of each type and what purpose they served. Her mother frequently worked here, weeding and pruning. Raven understood some plants, depending on how they were to be used, were better picked when tender, while others grew to maturity. Along one side of the herb bed was a row of orange and yellow marigolds. The small, colorful flowers seemed out of place, but Raven knew they had their usefulness as well—chasing away unwanted pests.

Lady Alycia had the responsibility of looking after the health of all the servants in the fortress and the village. She had a wondrous knowledge of healing herbs and was more generous in her efforts to keep her people healthy than many other castle mistresses. She endeavored to pass the same knowledge on to her daughter. One day, Raven would be the

fortress's mistress, and needed to learn all her mother could teach her.

Raven sighed with relief. Lady Alycia was nowhere in sight at the moment. She wished her mother would more often just enjoy the day. Raven felt a little guilty, knowing she should be seeking out her mother, but the young girl wasn't in the mood for another lesson just now. She'd had enough for the day and wanted to enjoy these few rare moments of solitude away from the schoolroom.

Raven heard other children laughing, but chose to ignore them for the moment. They were not happy with her, nor did they quite trust her. She recalled several times when she had hidden from Thomas's unsuccessful attempts to find her, until the children had been called away to do their chores.

Raven never meant to hurt anyone with her frequent little tricks, but sometimes they caused embarrassment—like the time Thomas... Better not to think about what she did to him. It really had been an accident, but he didn't believe her. She couldn't help what she was. She never asked to be special. The chieftainship, and all that went with it, was her legacy, and it would always rule her life. She realized one day these children would serve her, just as their parents served her mother. In time, they too would learn the secrets in this fortress—secrets which were meant to be preserved, to protect everyone. She could not afford to alienate anyone, and she promised herself to try harder, to be patient and understanding.

Raven enjoyed the larger part of the garden where a riot of color burst from early summer flowers. She breathed in deeply, inhaling the scent of lilacs. Of all the flowers in the garden, lilacs were her favorite. The girl smiled as she fin-

gered a tiny bloom of the delicate cluster, then made herself comfortable on the lawn between two shrubs. No one bothered her here. This was her own place to be alone and let her imagination run free.

She had never been beyond the village, which lay not far from the fortress. Her mother had kept her here to be protected. In a few years, she would be required to leave the fortress for a short time to enter into an arranged marriage. She was expected to return Dun Sgiath to live out the rest of her life. It had been the way of the clan mistress for many generations, going back to a time when one mistress had been betrayed. While Raven was wise enough to understand the reasoning, she still wondered what good could come of all the special skills her mother insisted she learn, if she was to be shut away forever. She didn't like what lay in her future—didn't like the fact everything was planned for her. If ever she had the opportunity, she promised herself, she would do things differently.

She wandered over to the shrubbery and lay back against the lush green lawn to study the view before her. From this vantage point, the keep looked overwhelming in height. The gray stone battlements seemed to touch the heavens, while puffs of white clouds floated lazily across the summer sky. Sometimes, Raven wished she were as light as those clouds so she could rise up and float along with them on the same breezes, drifting aimlessly. She frowned as the clouds thickened and took on a dark, angry look. A storm was coming, she reasoned, but it wasn't an ordinary storm, and was practically at their doorstep—it felt very close. This one would bring great changes, and she wasn't sure it was a good thing.

Beneath the darkening sky, she saw a face. Dark hair hung

long and loose and swirled about stern features. Eyes the color of blue summer skies held the promise of adventure and shared secrets. The corners of a wide mouth turned up in laughter. "You are my future," Raven whispered, without knowing where that bit of information came from. "For good or bad, you will change my life." A vague thought tripped across her memory, something to do with the face in the clouds. When it failed to coalesce, she let it go, sure it would have some meaning at a future time. The dark clouds disappeared, and Raven took pleasure once again in the warm sunshine, quickly forgetting the laughing vision.

Her eyes drifted closed against the summer warmth. Her fingers interlaced, and her hands rested across her stomach while her thoughts drifted randomly. Raven's mind suddenly recognized the warning her mother sent to her thoughts. *Protect yourself, child, from the danger entering here.* The highland fortress had always been a safe haven, but Raven knew better than to ignore her mother's warning. This might be a test of her obedience and skills, or it might just be a whim on her mother's part. The ten-year-old sat up and, drawing her knees to her chest, wrapped her arms about her legs and concentrated on what she was expected to do. Closing her eyes, she set her mind to protecting herself.

The sound of horses' hooves clattering against the courtyard's cobblestones shattered Raven's concentration. How did they get beyond the mountains? There was no path, no tunnel. Without moving, she turned her mind to the sounds interfering with the orders she had been given.

"Where is the Lady Alycia?" a deep voice demanded.

The frightened elderly steward took a step backward, unable to answer. A gentle hand touched the old man's arm in

assurance, as a tall slender woman emerged from the great hall. Lady Alycia stood poised at the top of the steps, determined not to let anyone see her agitation. Which of her people, she wondered, dared betray the clan's existence to the outside world. "You are not welcome here, my lord," she spoke evenly, not allowing any emotion to show in her words. "We have nothing to offer you. Nor do we have anything you would want."

"Where is the child, woman? Bring her out. Now."

"No," the lady replied forcefully. "I'll not give her over to you to be controlled. Her future is set, and you cannot change it."

Raven was unable to hear much of the conversation, except the leader's command to bring out the girl. *Is he my father?* She didn't dare open her mind to the rest of the heated conversation. Her mother would know she had disobeyed. Booted footsteps were muffled by shouted commands. The girl heard the servants protest as they were dragged into the courtyard. Raven squeezed her eyes shut tight and covered her ears, blocking out the screams penetrating her mind. She didn't want to hear, or imagine what might be going on.

She didn't see the soldier approaching. When Raven realized the danger, she jumped up to run, but wasn't quick enough. She hesitated just seconds too long. He grabbed her long braid and forced her back onto the ground. Her mind went numb while she tried to fight him off, but she wasn't strong enough. Her fear kept her from calling on her training. Mercifully, the child fainted.

The soldier looked down at his captive in disgust. Only a child, and not the one his lordship was looking for. This one had light eyes, but not fitting the description they were given.



Before he could release his grip on the front of her gown, a solid object slammed into his skull and he fell forward, unconscious, leaving the girl pinned beneath him.

Raven was vaguely aware of a dull thud hitting the cobblestone pathway, then a heavy weight being rolled off her. She had no idea how much time had passed, and when she opened her eyes, she was relieved to see a friendly face. A small cast-iron pot hit the ground with a dull thud and lay partially on the grass and cobblestone. It took Raven a few moments to gather enough courage to assess her surroundings. With Martha's help, Raven stood on unsteady legs and clutched at her torn gown. She glanced about warily. An eerie silence lay across the keep. The soldiers had been sent to look for her. How was it she'd been left behind? Her pale gray eyes alone announced her identity. All previous clan leaders had pale eyes. Raven stumbled from the garden to the courtyard.

"You mustn't go there, lass," Martha insisted and firmly grasped Raven's arm. She nearly dragged the girl around to the far side of the castle, then eased her grip on her young charge. Raven bolted toward the front of the castle, then suddenly stopped. What lay in the courtyard was not a sight for young eyes.

Raven flinched at the touch of Martha's hand on her shoulder, the woman's words urging her to continue away. "Come, child," the voice said softly, but firmly. Raven looked up into the woman's brown eyes. "You can't stay here, Raven. We must leave now, but one day, you will return and set things to right."

\* \* \* \*

Weeks passed before Raven expressed her anger at having been driven from the only home she knew. Martha had re-

fused to speak of what had happened the day they fled, and Raven finally stopped asking, but she'd read the pain in Martha's eyes. Her childhood was gone, destroyed in an instant. She sat by a pond behind the small cottage Martha had found. The woman had managed to make a decent home for them.

The young girl studied her reflection on the still water and stared at the long braid hanging over her shoulder. The tied-off end almost touched the placid surface. Raven reached to her waist and withdrew a dirk from its sheath. Holding the end of her hair in her small fist, she wrapped the length of it around her hand, pulling it away from her head. With deliberate calm, she began sawing away at the thickest part of it.

Martha dropped the bucket she carried and hurried to the child. "What have you done?" she asked incredulously, staring at the ragged ends of Raven's hair.

"Burn it," Raven ordered, handing the chopped-off braid to the woman. "Never again will I be made vulnerable by long hair." Her eyes were filled with anger. "I swear, one day I will learn of the events that took place at Dun Sgiath, and I will right the wrong done to my family and my clan. I will avenge those who could not follow us—if it takes the rest of my life."

## **Chapter 2**

*10 Years later*

The young woman traveled the narrow path quickly, the bottom of her kilt swaying gently with every step she took. The dawn felt a bit chilled, but it would be warm soon enough. Her steps were silent and sure as she followed the small game tracks. Her companion stayed close behind her. Raven really wasn't in the mood for hunting and decided it could wait. The journey she'd embarked upon in the last few months had revealed no answers to her search. Long ago, she'd closed the door on memories too vague to recall. Now, they haunted her for justice to be done. Before this day was over, she and her companion would seek shelter at another keep, while she followed clues to the identity of the one face which plagued her dreams. If she could identify him, she would be a step closer to finding the truth of the intrusion into her home.

Raven stopped at a nearby stream and scooped clear, cold water into her cupped hands to quench her thirst. She glanced about, realizing this was the most peaceful spot they'd seen in a long time. Interlaced branches of surrounding trees filtered

out most of the sunlight and kept the air cooler, as well as offering shelter from storms. The quiet beauty of glen and stream provided a desperately-needed respite from the daily insanity she called her life.

At the edge of the glen, Raven slowly sank to her knees, keeping one hand on her longbow where she laid it on the ground. The sound of voices attracted her attention. Her companion knelt beside her and nodded when she placed a finger across her lips, urging him to silence. She tilted her head, indicating the direction of the voices. It was rare they came across anyone when hunting, but when they did, her curiosity was aroused.

It was barely dawn, and she knew she and her companion wouldn't be seen, but she set up her personal defenses against detection. Carefully pushing aside a few branches of the bush that hid her from view, she watched the three men talking and laughing as they broke their fast. Their voices were low, and their words failed to carry to her.

Raven recognized their plaids as being of the clan MacKay. She studied the faces of two of the men turned in her direction. The younger of the two had red hair, and his skin was almost a matching shade. She couldn't see his eyes as he stared at the ground in front of him. He seemed to be angry about something the older one had just said. A frown spread across his broad features, and his mouth tightened in a grimace. No, it wasn't anger, she realized, but embarrassment. The older man clapped the younger on the shoulder and laughed as he spoke. The younger one relaxed a bit and smiled reluctantly.

The older man had black hair with strands of gray at the temples. The lines at the corners of his dark blue eyes crinkled in merriment as they reflected the humor of his speech. His

tanned face made it obvious he spent a great deal of time outdoors. He laughed again, enjoying the discomfort of his young companion. Raven knew of this man and knew eventually, their paths would cross.

Raven smiled impishly at her companion. She was in a mischievous mood, and glanced around the strangers' small campsite, wondering what she could do. The small campfire was almost out, and she concentrated on the glowing embers, grinning with pleasure, as the dying fire grew stronger. Flames leaped up and danced on the early morning air like highlanders to the pipes. They swayed and flickered to a silent tune, turning in a circle, then stopped briefly and moved in the opposite direction.

"What's that?" The young redhead was startled to see the flames come to life, as if some unseen hand had just added twigs to the fire.

"That be the wee folk havin' a bit o' fun." The older man seemed to be more amused by his companion's response than the event itself, but he wasn't surprised. He had seen things like this before, and he knew someone was sporting with them. There were still a few around who could control the magic, though few believed in it anymore.

Raven sighed. These men were no fun to tease. Nothing seemed to surprise them, at least two of them.

She didn't have to see the face of the third man to know who he was, and to know he grinned at her attempt to play. Long ago, she'd forged a link with that one. Raven fingered the amulet at her throat. The corners of her full mouth turned up briefly in a smile as she recalled the night she had pilfered it. It had been a rather simple matter to get into the castle.

\* \* \* \*

*The guards on duty that night had been quite alert, but she'd still managed to slip past them, as silent and unobtrusive as a shadow. Creeping through the great hall to avoid detection was easier than she'd expected. She was disappointed no challenge had been made to her presence, and the lack took some of the fun out of her mission. She was in a mood to lead someone a merry chase. The steps leading to the second level were in partial darkness, but presented no problem. She stepped cautiously through the corridor, knowing exactly where she was going.*

*She stole silently into his chamber and kept to the shadows. This was all too easy. In the future, she would have to see that security was tightened around here. Her presence had been less obvious than that of a ghost. She stopped long enough to assure herself the occupant of the bedchamber was, in fact, sound asleep. Her eyes widened in surprise and her face flushed as she inadvertently caught a snatch of his dream. She placed a thought in his head, disrupting his private reverie. She was ultimately pleased with his resulting frown, but he didn't awaken...that would teach him to have such dreams... Tiptoeing over to the small table, Raven picked up the amulet and exchanged it with the copy she'd had made. She wasn't sure why she had worn the copy for a few days before making the switch, but it had seemed to be the right thing to do at the time.*

*She had been able to see every bit of detail, right down to the inscription engraved on the back, without ever having touched it. Someone glancing at the piece of jewelry would never know it wasn't the original piece, despite the fact she'd had something more worked into the design, something that wouldn't be noticed unless someone was looking for it. Raven grinned at her own joke.*

*The amulet was silver and etched with an intricate design of thistles. Nestled in the center of the design was a small ruby, oval-shaped, which gave the impression of an eye. It was from this blood-*

*red jewel, which Raven used to create her link, that she felt his essence was the strongest. By duplicating and replacing the original amulet, the link would be complete. Forging this link with him had been something of a challenge, for Raven had never attempted anything like this before. She was fairly certain he had his own skills, of which he was still unaware.*

*The rules set down by previous chieftains of her clan demanded she fulfill her duty, then return to the fortress she had once called home. She needed him to fulfill that requirement to her family. She'd been away from her home for too many years. Raven recalled a promise she'd made to herself: she would be the first to flout the demands placed on her ancestors since the second generation. Everything would be done when she was ready. It was time to change the rules.*

\* \* \* \*

Dragging her attention back to the present, Raven read his thoughts as if they were her own. He no longer took part in the conversation with his companions, but became silent, listening. He sensed someone close by, but knew instinctively they presented no threat. Raven had also been listening. His attention couldn't have been drawn to the same thing which drew hers. They were too far away for him to have heard them.

For several years he had been aware of an occasional presence, just as he was now—but he'd also learned trying to find them was a waste of time. He felt sure the warning which came to him was from this source. Although he had no idea who it could be, he had learned they could be trusted. His own instincts told him they would be meeting soon. "We have to leave now," he warned his companions. "There's an English patrol coming this way, and they know we're here." The older man and his still-blushing companion knew better than to

question him. Too many times the information he received in this odd way had protected their lives.

The leader of the trio whipped out his dirk and pivoted around at the sound of the rustling underbrush. A youth, about the age of their own companion, slowly stepped into the open, assuring the MacKay men he was alone. "There is a patrol," the youth spoke up, "but it isn't one that often comes through here."

"And what would you know of it, boy?" the gray-haired member of the trio asked the stranger. "Why would you be warnin' us?"

"I have no love for the English," he replied with a shrug of his thin shoulders. "They destroyed my village, killed almost everyone there for the sport of it."

"And how did they manage to miss you?" The leader eyed the youth suspiciously. The boy's speech was more like that of a lowlander, and they were friendly with the English.

The stranger looked up at the leader and held his gaze. "I was hunting. By the time I got back, there was nothing I could do. One day, I will find them and avenge my family's deaths."

"Strong words for one so young," the older man commented.

The stranger's gaze never broke from the leader's. *I have seen those eyes before.* Vague thoughts fluttered at the edge of the leader's memory. *How can I not remember?* The youth's black eyes seemed to bore into his mind, and he unconsciously pulled back his own thoughts.

The youth flinched slightly as if he had been struck. Something was going on here, neither one understood or expected. His thin frame shivered with the morning breeze, and he readjusted his hunting plaid.



The leader broke the gaze and turned to his companions. "We must leave now. You are welcome to join us if you so wish," he added, turning back to the boy once again.

"I thank you for the offer," the boy replied, inclining his head in a token of respect, "but my path lies in another direction at the moment. One day I may come to you, my lord. Until we meet again." The youth disappeared as quickly and quietly as he had appeared.

Two of the trio headed for their horses while the leader moved to extinguish the campfire. The flames died out completely, just as quickly as they had flared up. He glanced around once more for the non-threatening presence, knowing well he wouldn't find it. Sharp blue eyes looked in her direction, and Raven's breath caught in her throat.

She shouldn't worry, she scolded herself. He couldn't see her unless she allowed him to, and it wasn't yet the right time. She wondered if he had a touch of the second sight. Was he capable of using their link just as she was? She would have to study him more closely. She watched as he rode off after his friends.

The thin youth reappeared and scattered all signs of the campfire, just before the English patrol galloped into the glen and stopped, before almost trampling him. "Did you see any Scotch warriors hereabouts, boy?"

The youth made no response, but stared at the officer. A quiver of arrows lay against his back. He held the grip on his yew bow, holding it like a staff.

"Have you no tongue, boy?" The officer eyed the weapon while his mount danced skittishly, pulling away from the youth. The rider tightened his hold on the reins to regain control.

“Nobody’s been here but you,” the youth finally replied. “Better you don’t stay long in the glen. The wee folk don’t take kindly to bein’ disturbed.”

“Bah.” The officer knew there would be no sensible answers here.

The youth watched the English patrol take a different direction than had the Scots who left moments before. When the patrol had disappeared, no traces of the Scots were visible.

Raven’s companion left the brush to stand by her side and watch the last of the English horses’ dust settle. “Your illusions are improving,” he praised her.

“But...” she added, knowing he had more to say.

“You know they’ll be back.”

Raven glanced at him. “Not to worry, Aiden, they’ll be across the border into England before they realize they’ve gone in the wrong direction.” Raven collected her things and headed away from the glen. It was time to continue the search.

### **Chapter 3**

Raven seemed to always be hiding from someone. She hadn't expected to come upon anyone while she was hunting, especially MacKay clansmen. Two of the men always managed to pique her curiosity, and she wanted to know more about them. The one who had stared in her direction had few secrets from her. Delving into his mind now and again had proven entertaining. What had surprised her was the fact he had been vaguely aware of her trespassing. When she realized she was caught, she employed her seldom-used, droll sense of humor to create an escape. It wouldn't be long before he caught on to her and discovered her identity—but she would determine when the time was right to make herself known to him. She couldn't allow him to become fully aware of her. Not yet.

Earlier in the evening, she and Aiden had rescued a clansman from what could have been a disastrous fall. In gratitude, he offered them a place to stay the night and a hearty meal. As she looked around, she was beginning to wish they had rejected the invitation in favor of moving on. She studied the faces in the great hall, trying to ignore the disgusting conditions of the large room. Serving women laid platters of food

on the greasy, stained table. She saw Aiden grimace when he stared at the unappetizing fare and stared, unbelieving, at the rough dirty hands grabbing at meat and bread. Raven looked into her cup when it was filled, and refused to give the slightest consideration to what might be floating in the ale.

Raven and Aiden answered few questions, but watched men move about while they, for the most part, were ignored. These men were just as dirty, in manner and appearance, as the hall itself. Raven looked for one face, a key to the past. If only she could find him, then she could find the leader, fulfill the vow she had made long ago, and get on with her life. She and Aiden waited patiently while the men swilled down great quantities of ale. Raven didn't think there could be enough drink in all Scotland to satisfy this repulsive crew.

Aiden leaned toward her, speaking softly, and was rudely interrupted by one of the keep's sordid inhabitants. "Since when does a woman claim right of chieftain?" The man's foul breath hovered in the air, scant inches before her face. He touched the feathers clasped to her bonnet, and Raven instinctively pulled away.

"In my clan," Raven replied calmly and quietly, "it is the women who are chieftains, who keep the peace."

"And what clan has gone so soft, they need a woman to lead and defend them? I have never seen that plaid before." He stared at her pale silver tartan, with its narrow lines of yellow, emerald green and black. Other men in the room turned to watch the scene, expecting their comrade to put the stranger in her place.

"It's a small clan, far from here. You wouldn't know of it." Raven's features remained still, while her gray eyes studied her foe.

“Maybe I want to know more about a clan that lets its women rule. Maybe I want to find out what it takes to put a woman in her place.” The troublemaker leered and set two dirty fingers against Raven’s pale cheek. She didn’t flinch when those fingers trailed a path along the line of her jaw, down the side of her neck until his filthy hand came to rest against the slope of her breast. His leer grew wider, at what he perceived to be fear of him in her eyes.

Aiden jumped up from his seat, pulling his dirk from its sheath. Some strange force held him back, and he found he could only stare at the offensive hand on his student.

Raven remained stone-faced, her dark gaze holding the troublemaker’s by sheer will. She slowly raised one hand and clasped her slender fingers around the thick wrist. She tightened her fingers, steadily digging her nails into the dirt-encrusted flesh until she felt the blood between fingers and wrist. She didn’t hear the cheering and jeering of his drunken, grimy supporters. Raven finally loosened her grip and allowed him to pull his arm out of her reach. She watched his face become an angry snarl. “Touch not what you know not how to handle.”

The other men laughed at the insult.

“Donald!” the keep’s laird called out to his man. “They are our guests and should not be treated thus. Offer them more food and ale, and let peace preside.”

“This isn’t finished,” he warned, leaning toward the woman who had just demeaned him in the eyes of his friends. “Another place, another time, and we’ll see just where you belong.” His leer appeared briefly before he stumbled away in search of more ale.

“Why did you stop me?” Aiden’s words were barely

above a whisper, but the anger in them was unmistakable.

“You mean well, Aiden, but your interference would have proven nothing.”

“Sometimes, I regret having trained you to be a warrior. You seem to have forgotten your primary duty.”

“You forget who you are, and what I am.” Raven turned to her companion, noting his reluctance to drop the subject. She touched his arm, giving it a light squeeze, assuring him of her gratitude for his concern.

Raven considered the resumed activity, the buzzing dis-sention and the quick, furtive glances in her direction. She focused on the laird while he spoke quietly with one of his men, then set her mind to putting a quick end to the evening.

Her thoughts wandered, and she unthinkingly picked up her cup. When she realized what she’d almost done, she groaned in disgust and placed the cup back on the table, pushing it away. Looking around once more for the one face she needed desperately to find, she asked herself again if she and Aiden were expected to sleep in this room. Goddess, she hoped not.

\* \* \* \*

It was late, and the great hall was quiet. Her fears had proven true when she and Aiden were completely ignored. Raven would rather sleep in a bog than consider a night’s rest in this place. She stepped gingerly over drunken bodies lying sprawled on rushes stinking of waste and decaying food. Responsibility for their total drunkenness could be laid at her door—at least for this night. The only way she and Aiden would leave this place unmolested was to bring this entire slovenly clan to total incapacitation. She hesitated, one foot in the air, when the soldier at her feet noisily turned over to

make himself comfortable on the cold floor. Raven held her breath and waited for the drunken snores to resume. If it hadn't been for her vow to find one man, she would have turned around and walked out as soon as she'd entered. One evening in this filthy place was more than enough. The information leading her to this dank keep had proved to be faulty and, thankfully, it was time to move on. Even the dogs ignored the two humans passing by.

Once she and Aiden reached the outside, they stopped long enough to breathe fresher air, then, keeping to the shadows, made their way across the bailey to the stables. The guard snored softly, fumes of whiskey and sweat drifting about him. Raven's stomach lurched. The first thing she wanted to do was find a stream and wash off the stench of the place.

The pale full moon occasionally disappeared behind fleeing fast moving clouds. Raven adjusted her longbow more comfortably across her back. She had just reached the stable door when a small sapphire sphere popped into view before her. She jumped back, startled, and caught her breath as Aiden bumped into her. "You could scare a body half to death appearing like that," she whispered. "What did you think you were doing?"

"Well, someone had to warn you." The soothing female voice radiated warmth.

"Warn us of what? Say what you came to say. I don't want to stay in this pigsty any longer than necessary." Raven's sharp retort startled the entity within the sphere.

"This keep is about to be surrounded, though why anyone would want it is beyond me." The entity shrugged. "Anyhow, there's a steep path that'll take you into the woods. You

won't be seen going that way. Your horses are saddled and waiting. I'll join you again...eventually." Raven watched the sphere wink out and caught Aiden's smile.

As they descended the path on the north side of the keep, Raven spoke her mind. "Are you always turned by a soft voice? It hasn't escaped my notice how much attention you've paid to Martha over the years. I'd have thought the two of you would have reached a fair understanding by now."

Raven's bluntness didn't surprise Aiden. He cleared his throat. Now was not the time for confessions. "Not your concern. Martha is a free woman and capable of making her own choices, whether or not they lead to something permanent. The time to make an honest woman of her has come and gone. What was to be done, has been done."

"Now you speak in riddles." Raven waved a hand, dismissing further attempts at explanation. "Never mind. I just want to wash away the stench of this place and get some sleep." They walked their mounts through the almost hidden path until they were no longer in sight of the castle. Raven rubbed her forehead absently, willing the vague pain to go away.

They mounted up and headed in a northeasterly direction, relieved to be on their way to their next destination. Over the next few days, the tune Raven had been humming gradually disappeared, while her impatience grew with the lack of reliable information.

\* \* \* \*

Aiden wandered off in search of game for their supper. The sapphire sphere stayed just ahead of him, bobbing along the evening breeze. "Will you stop bouncing that way," he complained. "It's distracting."



The sphere settled in one spot, then grew larger, until its base touched the ground. “That’s the general idea,” the young woman teased in a lilting voice. She stepped from the blue light until she stood squarely before the warrior. “It’s no fun, you know, you being out here and me in there,” she pouted.

Aiden laughed. “And whose fault is that? It was your bright idea. You set this up to keep her from finding out.” He held both her hands in his, rubbing the backs of them with his thumbs, while his demeanor took on a serious note. “How much longer do we continue this masquerade, Meredith? I miss my wife.”

“As long as it takes her to settle down, I suppose. I don’t know what arrangements Alycia made for her before she died, if any.”

“And here I thought you knew everything,” he said with a chuckle and raised her hand to his lips for a gentle kiss.

“Alycia was too secretive, by far.”

“And what of Raven?”

“Raven, my darling husband, has her own demons to deal with. If she’d come to terms with the past, then we could all get on with our lives.”

Aiden glided his knuckles lightly over her cheek, marveling again at his wife’s wit and wisdom. No woman, clan chieftain or milkmaid, could ever come close to what he felt for her—and to think, once upon a time, he wanted nothing to do with her beyond his obligation to the newly-formed clan. What would his life be like now, if he had walked away that Beltane night? He shuddered to think on it.

Meredith turned away from Aiden for a moment, then handed over two rabbits. “McNab won’t miss them,” she told him with a wink.

“You didn’t skin them?” he teased, laughter in his eyes.

“Hey! Be glad you got supper...and do your own skinning.” She stopped a moment, as if reading his mind. “Just make sure you don’t confuse Raven with me.”

“Impossible. She doesn’t have your lightness of spirit.”

“Very funny.” Meredith paused. “I have to go, Aiden. She’s beginning to wonder what’s taking you so long.”

“One more kiss, lass.” Aiden drew her close and drank of the sweetness which always brought him to her side. “Ah, Meredith,” he whispered resignedly. “How long has it been since we’ve seen anything of a normal life?” he asked rhetorically, then laughed. Life had never been ‘normal’ for them.

Meredith reluctantly withdrew from Aiden’s embrace and backed away from him, toward the sapphire sphere. “I love you, Aiden,” she whispered as she stepped into the pale blue glow. When the light surrounded her, the sphere reduced in size until it was the bouncing ball Aiden and Raven were used to seeing.

\* \* \* \*

Raven lay on her plaid, staring up at the darkening night sky. The half-moon shone brightly, leading a path across the glen. The aroma of roasted rabbit lingered on the still air. The horses were hobbled for the night, and their soft blowing barely disturbed the quiet.

“When will you give up this search, Raven? He must be dead by now, or we would have found some trace of him.” Aiden tossed bits of twigs onto the low campfire. “It’s time you were seeing to the business of the rest of your life. Bad enough your mother didn’t see fit to make arrangements for you when you were young. Had she done so, you would not be here.”

“Don’t think to speak against her,” Raven snapped at the

unintended criticism. “She may not have been the best of mothers, but she was all I had. I *am* seeing to the rest of my life. I will not rest until I know for certain he is dead, either by my hand or another’s. I made a vow to find the man responsible for my mother’s death, and he is the only one who can tell me. I don’t know what became of the rest of the clan. I often hear their screams in my sleep, but I cannot remember what happened that day.”

“And will the chieftainship die with you? The clan still needs someone they can trust. It’s unique, you know. No other could replace you or your family in that position. You have special talents that could be used on a larger scale. With your abilities, you could go further and help unite other clans. There will come a time when clan unity could save Scotland.”

“How am I to be a chieftain if there is no clan to lead?” Raven sighed and looked at her companion. “The chieftainship will not die,” she spoke quietly, barely above a whisper. “Both commitments will guarantee the survival of clan MacDraoidh if anyone yet lives, besides Martha and me.” She reached up and touched the soft black curls surrounding her face. Since the day she’d hacked off her braid, she’d never allowed her hair to grow long again. It was part of her penance for not being able to do anything, or recall what happened. She recalled only the vulnerability she felt that day. It wasn’t enough.

Perhaps Aiden was right to worry.

The next day they rode in silence, each with his or her own thoughts. Raven wondered what places were left for her to search. She had yet to find a single clue of the scar-faced soldier. How could he disappear so completely? His was a countenance that dwelled in nightmares. A face scarred as badly as his would not be easily forgotten. The sapphire

sphere suddenly popped up in front of Raven, startling her horse. She quieted Starfire, then kept the mare at a steady walk. "Tell me about this guy of yours." A voice emanated from the sphere. "Is he a hunk?"

Raven stared quizzically at the glow floating along ahead of her. The light it cast made the path visible to her and Aiden. She glanced at her companion, but Aiden seemed to be deep in thought. "I don't understand what you say. Your words are strange to me."

"I asked if he's cute, handsome...a hunk." The light voice sounded amused.

Raven shrugged, not understanding the odd words, and wondered how her unseen companion would have known about her mother's arrangements for her. Or perhaps the entity was only 'fishing,' an expression Aiden used on occasion. If he didn't have a pole and twine, she understood he was searching for information. No one else knew what her mother had done, and even Raven wasn't sure anymore.

"You forget. What you are capable of doing, I can do also, and more."

Raven sensed a grin. She turned wearily in her saddle and noted a matching grin on Aiden's face. There was something here she didn't understand, but she promised herself she would know in time. "This is a safe place to stop and rest," she told him. "We start early. There is no real rest until this search is finished."

It was time to tend to the rest of her business.

## Chapter 4

James Alexander MacKay slouched in his chair and stared at the document on his desk. How had he gotten himself into this mess? He had been polite to Lord Carlisle's stepdaughter, and manners had somehow been mistaken for courtship. The nobleman was showing signs of impatience, waiting to see the chieftain's mark on the paper. True, Jamie was expected to marry. Having no siblings, the responsibility of an heir fell to him alone. Andrew was the only person to know the truth of the matter, and he'd been sworn to silence long ago.

Andrew sat back in the window seat. Despite the warmth of the sun glowing through the window, he felt the cold stones behind his back. The spring day was bright, but the weather couldn't dispel the foreboding he felt. Andrew seemed to pay no attention to his nephew's dilemma, preferring to stare at the distant mountains. Jamie's future lay somewhere beyond those mountains, but the younger man refused to do anything about it. Sometimes, Andrew didn't understand his nephew. Willing to try one more time to get Jamie to see reason, he never turned from the highland view he loved. "Tell Carlisle outright why you cannot sign that foolish paper. It is the only way to end this farce."

“You, of all people, know I can’t do that. No one but you knows of that other business, and until I’m shown proof it is done, I can do nothing about this, except delay him longer. Even if nothing stood in the way, I’d sooner cut my own throat than be wed to that...that harridan.”

Andrew laughed at the apt description, but had to agree with Jamie. Before either could comment further, a rap on the library door drew their attention. The young servant lost her balance when the door was shoved open. Andrew rose quickly at the disturbance, turning in time to see a stranger grab the girl’s arm before she fell. The girl quickly stepped back, moving closer to the door. She crumpled the edge of her apron within her fingers, nervous over the intrusion into the chieftain’s library. She opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted when a pleasant female voice cut in.

“Rather a messy solution, I would think, and your people would have the untimely chore of choosing a new chieftain.” The newcomer stood before the desk as Jamie dismissed the servant girl with a nod.

Jamie and the newcomer studied each other carefully, while Andrew watched the scene with amusement. He had a fairly good idea who their guest was and had expected her to arrive eventually.

Jamie sat back and ran the feathered quill through his fingers, slowly, contemplatively, never taking his blue-eyed gaze from her. There was a kind of arrogance in her stance. He liked that. It meant she wasn’t easily intimidated. One hand rested lightly on the hilt of a broadsword, while the other remained loosely at her side. A dirk was sheathed at her belt. Her black hair was partially hidden beneath a dark bonnet. Pinned to the bonnet was a clan badge with what looked to be

a thunderbolt, holding three merlin feathers securely in place.  
*Chieftain?*

Her pale skin gave contrast to the blush on her high cheekbones. Something about her pale eyes was rather unnerving when she returned his stare. She refused to look away or be forced to back down. She was dressed in black, from her linen shirt and breeches, which hid nothing of her slim figure, to the fitted knee-high boots. The light silver tartan, with its intercepting lines of emerald-green and black, and two shades of yellow, presented a plaid unfamiliar to Jamie. The lower part of the tartan was caught within her wide belt, holding it in place. A larger version of her clan badge held the gathered wool at her shoulder.

Jamie studied her weapons again. *Can she really use that broadsword, or is it only for show? It should weigh her down, yet she manages it adequately.* It was rare when a woman learned to use a weapon other than a dagger. Even then, she didn't often learn to wield it with any proficiency. Her serious demeanor remained unruffled under his scrutiny. He strongly suspected an impish inclination lay beneath her indifference, waiting to escape, if only for a moment. Brief incidents of subtle humor flashed across his memory, and he was sure of a connection.

Unbidden, his thoughts turned in another direction. The betrothal contract. Lord Carlisle was desperate to marry off his stepdaughter, Cordelia, and believed Jamie was the only man capable of handling the willful young woman. Cordelia was beautiful, with her slender figure, hazel eyes and thick ash-blonde hair, but she was intolerably demanding. She'd left a month before, and his home was still being put to rights. The term 'witch' was too kind for her. There could be no comparison between Cordelia and the woman who now stood

before him.

"I know who you are," he finally commented while he glanced, once more, over the supple figure, before returning her stare. "You...are my conscience." He grinned again.

Raven was well aware of the distracting thoughts racing through his mind. Her eyes widened briefly at the sudden change in thought. His revelation startled her, although it wasn't quite what she expected. The link between them, indeed, must work in both directions. She would have to study the matter further. *If he is stronger than I originally thought, he could interfere with my plans...unless I can control him.* "If that is what you believe..." She allowed the rest of her statement to go unfinished. "I've come here to fulfill two promises made. Fulfilling one will depend on the results of the other."

Andrew glanced at Jamie, then the woman. "Exactly who are you?"

Raven slipped a ring from the first finger of her left hand, placed it on the document before Jamie, then stepped back and resumed her previous stance.

Jamie picked up the ring and studied the emblem, while Andrew looked over his nephew's shoulder. "That is the signet of the Clan MacDraoidh." Andrew turned to Raven. "How do we know you didn't steal the ring?"

Jamie raised a hand to ward off further questions from his uncle. "Clan MacDraoidh no longer exists," he goaded, no longer amused. He tossed the ring onto the desk where it bounced once, before settling on the contract, like some sort of omen.

"Then," she concluded, reaching into the pouch on her belt, "I must be a ghost." She reluctantly pulled out a folded sheet of parchment with a broken seal and placed it next to



the ring. Introducing herself was no problem. The contents of the document could very well be. “May I introduce myself. I am Raven Althea MacDraoidh. Chieftain of Clan MacDraoidh—if, as you suggest, there is still a clan to lead.”

Aiden remained quiet, leaning against the library door, his arms folded across his chest. His presence was ignored.

“Andrew, you know where to find the document.” The older man quickly left the room. Jamie didn’t seem disturbed by her words and kept his gaze focused on her. “We’ll wait for Andrew to return.”

Raven nodded and took a few moments to study her surroundings. She felt comfortable in the room, despite the subtle wariness of the two male occupants who belonged there. She strolled over to the window where Andrew had been seated earlier and rubbed at her temples, wishing she could ignore the vague pain hiding there. It was becoming harder to hide her frustration. She was tired, but despite her weariness, she was aware of the men’s thoughts and preferred to deal with them later.

The gardens beyond the window showed recently turned earth and young plants. She imagined the smells of rich dirt and fertilizer, seedlings for herbs, flowers and vegetables. They reminded her of a place she once called home, and would again one day.

The library itself wasn’t large, but one where a person wouldn’t mind spending a good portion of his days. She stepped over to the shelves and lightly touched the leather-bound books. The library was as extensive as the times allowed, since books weren’t easy to come by. Tapestries on the outer walls kept out the chill while the hearth held a small, crackling fire. The heavy desk, and the chair behind it,

took up much of the space in the room. Two simple ladder-back chairs sat against the far wall. Raven chose to make herself comfortable in the window seat.

Aiden glared at her. *What is so important about that document, that you didn't say anything?*

*Because there was nothing to tell,* she fired back at him with her thoughts. She could read his mind easily when he allowed it, like now.

Andrew returned, disrupting the mental conversation. Raven was grateful; the vague pain in her head was beginning to interfere with her concentration.

Jamie opened both documents and carefully studied the signatures. Andrew looked over his nephew's shoulder, and after making his own comparison, nodded. After a few moments, they looked to their guests. "It seems," Jamie concluded, "you are who you claim to be. Then again, there is nothing to say you didn't steal this copy. No one knows what became of Clan MacDraoidh. They occasionally traded with outsiders, but no one has seen any of them in years."

Raven's eyes darkened even further in fury. Three quick strides brought her to the desk. Slamming her palms onto its surface, she leaned forward. "There were at least two who left there unscathed, or almost unscathed. I was one." Her voice was low with controlled anger, and she hesitated long enough to yank off her bonnet and hold it in her clenched fist on the desk. "Have you yet wondered why my hair is short or why I dress as I do, in a manner unbecoming a woman? I'll tell you why. When I was ten years old, Dun Sgiath was invaded. I heard the screams of the servants, but never saw their fate. I can only imagine what happened to them. The invaders were looking for me. I suppose they believed my mother would

turn me over to them to save her people from pain—or worse. They were wrong about her letting me go. I was in the garden, too afraid to move. When I finally did have the sense to run, one of those soldiers grabbed me by my long braid. I managed to escape with the help of our cook.

“Several weeks later, after shock had been replaced by anger, I took a dirk and hacked off my braid, vowing I would never again be made vulnerable by long hair.” She fingered the thin side braid, emblem of a tried warrior. It looked odd resting against the rest of her short curls. “Until I know for a certainty what happened there, I will never allow my hair to grow longer than it is now.” Raven took a calming breath, then stepped back and rested one hand on her broadsword, almost daring either MacKay to defy her claim.

“Who is he?” Jamie gestured toward her companion.

“Aiden McConnell, my mentor and traveling companion.”

“And her guardian,” Aiden spoke up for the first time. He straightened his stance and took a few steps into the room to stand by Raven’s side. “She may be a warrior, but she is still a woman.” He ignored the fury in Raven’s eyes.

As if by magic, the young servant appeared. “Ready a room for our guest,” Jamie told her. “Lady MacDraoidh will have the bedchambers next to mine. Her companion can find a place in the barracks.”

“As the lady’s guardian, I’ll be staying close by her side.” Aiden’s words brought a scowl to Jamie’s features. “Until she says otherwise.”

Raven watched Jamie and Aiden glare at one another like two roosters in a barnyard. The MacKay chieftain was trying to probe her mind, searching for some hidden agenda. Raven

raised a protective shield against his fumbling attempts. *He may be clumsy, but he has more skill than I thought—or has the link between us lain dormant until now? He could be a problem. Time enough to consider what to do.* “As to that,” she pointed to the creased document, “nothing is to be said about it, until I am ready to acknowledge it.” She considered the issue closed, her decision final. After all, what good was it to be the leader of a ‘mystic’ clan if her word was questioned? No one questioned the word of Clan MacDraoidh’s leader. She turned abruptly and left with Aiden. The servant quickly followed behind her.

This woman was all business, Jamie thought when the door closed behind her, and he tried to assess what little he’d learned. He’d tried to probe her mind, but came up against a wall protecting her thoughts. *Apparently her moods change abruptly. What I thought might be an imp has disappeared to be replaced by a vengeful clan chieftain.* “What do you think, Andrew?” Jamie asked of the older man. “Something doesn’t quite fit.”

“Aye, she never said anything about fulfilling the contract. She plans to ignore it, to suit whatever purpose she has in mind.”

He glanced down at the unsigned betrothal contracts and scowled again, wondered if he would ever find a way to avoid it. *Just say no,* said a feminine voice that popped into his head, startling him. It laughed and vanished.

“She will be complying with the agreement between our clans, sooner than she thinks. Contract or no, she is surely hiding something, but sooner or later, she will slip up. All women do.”

## **Chapter 5**

Raven placed her saddlebags in a corner of the bed-chamber, then stood before the window looking out over the loch. In her mind, she went over what she knew of the MacK-ay chieftain, and recalled the face of a boy she had seen in the clouds years ago. That hadn't been the first time she'd seen him. She had met him several years earlier, when she was three or four years old. At that age, he hadn't made much of an impression on her. Her second sighting of him garnered a little more curiosity for the role he would eventually play in her life.

Black hair and warm blue eyes rarely left her thoughts since that day. He'd grown to become a handsome young man, with broad shoulders and a muscular frame, earned from years of hard training. Seven years ago, he had become chieftain after his father's death. In this clan, it wasn't only right of birth justifying his claim to be clan leader. The chieftain had to prove himself as warrior, father, protector and unbiased judge to his kinsmen. Wisdom taught him to listen to the counsel of his uncle and the older men, and weigh their advice before making decisions. He was known for tempering fairness and justice to the best of his ability.

Raven not only knew his background, but was also acquainted with the workings of his mind. About the same time he first became chieftain, she had made her presence known in his mind. That awareness occasionally offered guidance, often warned of danger, and on rare occasions, displayed an odd sense of humor. At first, he'd chosen to ignore the unexplained thoughts, but eventually began to see the accuracy of the messages and gave them more heed.

She had gently prodded him into allowing her to occasionally intrude into his thoughts. She needed this special link which would take them beyond chieftain and warrior. Her smile quickly became a tight grimace as she rubbed at her temples—laird and legend. The dull, nagging pain in her head was distracting, and being in the presence of James MacKay was distraction enough. She hoped her new challenge would prevent him from enforcing the document she'd presented before she was ready.

\* \* \* \*

Raven sat alone in the great hall, barely touching her supper, aware of the many pairs of eyes glancing her way. She scanned the thoughts of others, picking up curious, as well as hostile attitudes. They judged her an oddity. While female warriors were rare, they did exist in the highlands. Raven had no intention of testing her skills solely for the purpose of being accepted. Neither was she foolish or naïve enough to believe they would accept her at face value. The dilemma was nothing new to her. With this clan, any success she gained hinged on their acceptance. The sooner that occurred, the sooner she could get on with her business.

A woman passed by, intent on her duties, and Raven studied her with interest. She was tall, slender, and appeared to

be close to Raven's age. The servant moved from one table to another, refilling cups of ale and directing other servants to refill platters. Occasionally, Raven heard the woman's throaty laughter in response to some remark made by one of the men. Several times, the serving woman neatly evaded a wandering arm trying to slip about her waist. The servant glanced up at the head table. Raven followed the direction of the look and was surprised to see Andrew's tight grimace. *Now this is interesting, and could be useful*, Raven thought, and tucked away the mental note for future reference.

Raven sipped her ale and looked up when the other woman stopped to offer her more drink. Something about the woman triggered a vague memory, one Raven had difficulty recalling. Still, she realized she might very well need this woman's assistance in the future. "I would have a friend," she casually remarked in a low tone.

Annie MacKay was the housekeeper and handled the duties ordinarily belonging to the lady of the castle. She'd heard the rumor of a female warrior, but paid little heed at the time. Rumors had a way of traveling quicker than wildfire and more often than not were wrong. Now, she recognized the low voice beckoning to her, and looked into the pale eyes. This was the woman Annie had waited for, but she hadn't expected the warrior and woman to be one and the same. Annie glimpsed into the light eyes again, while pouring more ale into the cup Raven held out to her. With a brief nod, she replied, "I would be a friend, my lady." Annie nodded again, then hurried on to her duties, unaware of Jamie's interest in the brief exchange.

Raven finished her meal and slipped out of the great hall. Once in her chamber, she stretched out on the bed and re-

laxed. The small room was devoid of frills and offered no distractions, just as she liked it. Her mind was a jumble of thoughts collected throughout the day, and she took her time sorting them out. More important to her was the layout of the castle and the people who worked within. Raven cleared her mind and willed herself to sleep until the castle inhabitants were settled for the night. Late hours were the best time for snooping around.

\* \* \* \*

It was after midnight when Raven made her way to the battlements. The nearest guard challenged her approach. At least one guard was alert. "I am Raven MacDraoidh."

"She is free to come up here, as well as go anywhere on MacKay lands. She is welcome as a guest," Jamie told the guard, then turned his attention to her, "but I think there is more to her visit than we know." It was almost as if he was waiting for some response from her. Raven's eyebrows shot up at this. "Somehow, I knew it wouldn't be long before you found your way up here." He nodded to the guard, and the man returned to his rounds.

When the guard was out of hearing, Jamie turned to her again. "Are you searching for flaws in our security? Are you here to spy for another clan?" His tone was brusque and demanding.

"And how does the MacKay chieftain judge so quickly, when he knows almost nothing of me?" She tried to tamp down her irritation.

Jamie shrugged. "You lost no time in searching out our defenses. I can only think you come here to betray my clan."

"Yes, I came here to learn your secrets, but not for the reasons you suppose," she responded sourly. "As if the chief-



tain of Clan MacDraoidh would set one clan against another when her clan has struggled for centuries to be recognized by them. A useless cause in my opinion. Every clan cares only about its own survival. War has taught nothing about unity beyond the immediate battlefield. If it's good for one clan, they will fight. If it benefits all, they care not. If the clan is made up of disowned members of other clans, all the more reason to avoid them, or look down on them with suspicion—just as you have done.” The last words no sooner slipped out of her mouth than she regretted them. Diplomacy had never been one of her strong suits.

Raven looked out over the wall. This side of the castle had been built near the loch, making access to the keep difficult, if not impossible. The dark waters reflected silver streaks of moonlight, creating a luminous pathway on the still waters. The sight was breathtaking. The openness of it all gave her a sense of freedom she rarely felt. She was bound to a clan and a way of life from which there was no freedom...none but death. She watched the clear night sky and picked out constellations. “I wanted an undisturbed look around.” Her tone mellowed. She paused a moment, again looking out over the calm water. “Such a sense of peace I feel,” she mused. “I don’t suppose it will last very long.”

“No, lass, I don’t suppose it will, since we are all barbarians.” Jamie studied her. She was tall for a woman. He was just over six feet in height, and judged if he held her close, he could easily rest his chin on the top of her head. Her high cheekbones held a soft blush, barely visible in the nearby torchlight. She turned slightly to face him. Such thoughts, he warned himself, were better left alone. As long as she refused to state her real reasons for arriving here as she did, he would

be wise to keep his distance. Still, there was something in her eyes he couldn't quite read, but he knew, in time, the answers he sought would be there. Torchlight showed a brief smile on her lips. "Something has amused you?" he asked.

Raven glanced at him, then turned away and leaned against the crenellated wall, determined not to look at him again. "Not really. My thoughts, like the deeds I must accomplish, are many."

"What deeds are those?"

Raven ignored the question.

"Why did you come here, Raven?"

She shrugged. "It was time. There is much to be done." She knew her answers were not the ones he wanted to hear. "If you will excuse me." She pushed herself away from the wall and wrapped her cloak about her. "Good night, my lord."

*Curious, he thought as she walked toward the door, the way she closed herself off, changing the subject abruptly. The one reason she should be here, and she refuses to acknowledge it. Why? How do I unravel the mystery that is the legend? No matter her reason, she is a puzzle and will prove to be an interesting challenge either way.*

## Chapter 6

“That was quite a first impression you created on your arrival. What else have you done in the last few days?”

Raven started at the sound of the entity’s voice. “Must you do that? Can you not warn a person when you’re about to make an appearance?”

Meredith paused. “Sorry. Thought you heard the warning bubble burst. Anyhow, as I was saying, you made a great first impression. What do you do for an encore?”

Raven glared at the sapphire sphere, wondering if there were some way to burst the meddlesome thing. “Rather cheerful, aren’t you?”

“Why not? I can’t wait to see what you’ll do today to endear yourself to MacKay and his clansmen.”

Raven gathered up the items on the bed and turned to her chamber door. “I’m off for a quick swim in the loch before anyone else is around. Care to join me?” Her polite sarcasm wasn’t lost on her uninvited guest.

“In that icy water?” The entity gave an impression of shivering. “I don’t think so.” There was a pause. “Um...what about Aiden?”

“What about him? He can take his own quick swim

when I'm done."

"That wasn't what I meant..." The sapphire sphere shrunk itself to the size of a fist, then bounced along in midair until Raven reached the edge of the loch.

Raven stripped off her boots, breeches, and loose full-sleeved shirt, leaving only a thigh-length shift for modesty's sake. She dove into the water and, after adjusting to its cold temperature, leisurely swam out a few yards. The loch was too deep to go far. She turned and swam parallel to the shore, burning off excess energy, unaware she was being watched.

Jamie stood before the window in his bedchamber and stared at the lovely mermaid splashing about in the cold water below. She must not have realized what a good view he had of the loch, or she wouldn't be down there now. He watched her dive beneath the water and disappear for a moment. The ripples were barely still when she surfaced and took a deep breath. She brushed her dripping hair from her face, then took her time using strong, steady strokes to return to the shoreline.

Raven moved to the grassy bank and draped the linen sheet about her shoulders, blocking Jamie's view of her. She sat on a rock, turned her face up to the bright sun, and let it warm her chilled skin. She used a corner of the linen to absorb most of the moisture from her hair, then briefly rubbed her hands through the black mass to free the curls.

"You do know you have an audience," Meredith told her.

"Yes, I've felt the MacKay watching the last few minutes. Do you think we could make his morning difficult for him to deal with?" Raven glanced to the side, a wicked smile on her face. Jamie wasn't especially pleased to discover Raven wasn't what he expected, coming to him as a trained warrior. She'd

given him something to think about. She knew he waited for her to say something about their betrothal, but she intended to ignore that particular duty until she decided the time was right to honor it. For the present, there were other things of greater importance to her than a betrothal she didn't want.

"Well, well, well. I didn't think you had it in you to be a tease." Meredith's comment brought Raven back to the present. She was pleased she could keep her 'sometimes' companion guessing at what she might do next.

"I have my moments," Raven concluded and concentrated on her hose. She eased it slowly up her long slender legs, then stretched out her limbs. With the linen sheet still about her shoulders, she knew Jamie wouldn't see anything of consequence. After slipping on her breeches, she adjusted them at her waist. She dropped her shirt on her lap, then let the linen sheet fall from her back. Raven slowly pulled off the wet, clinging shift and dropped it onto the grass beside her. Her pale skin glowed with dampness, and she hesitated a moment before slipping the dry shirt over her head. Raven stood and adjusted the shirt's wide sleeves and fitted laced cuffs. She buckled a wide belt about her slender waist, gathering the shirt's fullness. Raven stretched lazily, enjoying the warm sunshine. She bent down to gather her things, then strode toward the keep. She casually glanced up, saw a shadow in one of the windows, and chuckled.

"I congratulate you. Keep him guessing, and he'll be your slave." Meredith was impressed with Raven's devious behavior. It was rare when the warrior indulged in such antics.

"I don't want a slave. I want him to understand he will never truly know me. I want him to let me be."

"You won't do it that way. That little show you put on

may just backfire on you.”

“I will honor my commitments when I am ready, not when someone else demands it of me. I will honor only the commitments I choose, not those others have chosen for me.” A look of determination crossed her features as she marched up the hill toward the keep. She heard Meredith sigh and ignored it.

“Don’t forget,” Meredith continued her argument, “it’s a legal document. He can take it before the king if he insists it be honored.”

“Since when has the chieftain of Clan MacDraoidh answered to the king? Especially when the clan has never been recognized.” Raven quickened her step and entered the keep.

Jamie stepped back from the window, not sure what he felt, besides desire for Raven. He was angry with her for her performance. Why should her presence matter to him? If he hadn’t found the existing document a few years earlier, he would have completely forgotten about a ceremony that had taken place when he was ten and the girl child was barely three. Ten-year-old boys didn’t like girls to begin with, but to be legally married on the parents’ insistence... Jamie wondered what his father had been thinking. Under ordinary circumstances, a betrothal would have been arranged and been sufficient, but the marriage was to protect the girl, he’d said. If anything happened to the mother, the child would be reared by her husband’s family. The mother had been murdered, or so rumor said, seven years later, but no one knew what had become of the child.

In those seventeen years since the proxy marriage, Jamie had forgotten about her. So why was he angry with her now? He shouldn’t care, but she belonged to him. Who did she

think she was, behaving in such a scandalous manner, for anyone to see? Somehow he had to convince her of the wisdom of honoring the marriage contract, sooner than she would like. It was either that, or he'd be taking a few dips in the cold loch himself.

\* \* \* \*

Weeks passed quickly, and Raven slipped into a routine of sorts. Each morning she broke her fast alone, watching the servants go about their daily chores. She learned their quirks and habits, until she could make a game of what they would do next, or how they would go about doing it. Chores weren't just chores. They gave her a fascinating insight into the way people accepted their lot and did what was expected of them.

Raven juggled a roll between her hands, then quickly broke it apart. The fresh bread brought back bittersweet memories she preferred not to recall. For the last ten years, she struggled to become more than she was meant to be, and finally made peace with who and what she was. If only those around her could accept her as easily—but she knew what held them back.

It had been the same with her playmates when she was a child. She was grateful she didn't have the moonbeam eyes the legend spoke of. It was bad enough to have the pale silver they always called *witch's eyes*. Aiden had warned her many times, as she was growing up, that a thick skin was necessary if she intended to be the clan chieftain. He always said what she couldn't hear, couldn't hurt her. He, like the others, never knew she could read their thoughts.

She finished the bowl of porridge Annie had set before her, then used her dirk to cut off a piece of cheese from a

large wedge on a platter. None of the men lingered in the great hall this morning. Raven heard their distant shouts and laughter beyond the open door. “What amuses them?” she asked Annie, when the woman appeared to clear away the dishes.

“They train near the loch. Anyone who makes a poor showing gets tossed into the cold waters, a reminder to do better the next time.” Her wide smile showed her amusement at the practice.

“Thank you for that warning. I’d not like to get dunked myself. Once this day was sufficient. Still, I don’t think I could come up with a more powerful inducement to do my best.” Raven smiled, then, taking another bit of cheese, left the hall to follow the sound of cheering.

Raucous laughter followed a loud splash, and Raven appeared in time to see one of the younger men struggling to climb out of the water. The sight amused her, and she was grateful not to be close to the lad when he shook his head, like a great dog shaking water from its fur.

Several soldiers practiced with sword and dirk. *They’re good, but they could be better. When the time comes to put my plan into action, there are certain things Aiden could teach them to give them advantages over their enemies.* Being accepted as a female warrior would be difficult at best, but she doubted they would allow her to teach them anything. Aiden had taught her some unusual moves to give her an advantage over her larger and heavier opponents. He’d once told her some of the techniques she’d first learned came from people in the Far East. At times, even her mentor had difficulty trying to overpower her. The memory of those times made her smile with satisfaction.

*They’ll toss you in the loch before they’ll ever let you teach them*



*anything*. Raven frowned at the familiar voice whispering in her ear.

*No, they won't. They wouldn't dare. Now go away. You're distracting me.* Raven heard the soft chuckle and knew when the entity had vanished.

She strolled further downfield, stopping to watch Andrew take his place with a longbow. He took his time and readied his stance. He nocked an arrow to the bow, and sighted along its shaft to the target, while he steadily drew back his arm, pulling the bow taut. Raven saw the look of intense concentration on his features. The arrow flew straight and true, striking just off center of the target.

"Well done, sir," she called out as she approached them.

"Perhaps you can do better," Andrew called back good-naturedly. "You claim to be a fighter. Here's your chance to prove your skill." Andrew thought it was time she proved her claim. For several days since her arrival, she watched the goings on in the keep, studying the fighting men, watching the servants with a keen eye. Her companion, Aiden, had said little since they arrived, and questions left unanswered clouded Andrew's understanding of their true relationship. No matter. Andrew had promised his brother he would protect Jamie's wife when she arrived. She came second only to Jamie. A grin spread across his face while he waited to see if she would take up his challenge.

Raven gave a careless shrug and reached down for a bow lying close. She pulled an arrow from a nearby quiver. Before she could nock the arrow, she straightened slowly at the sound of a menacing voice behind her. The male laughed low and suggestively. He slid one arm about her waist and pulled her against him. "Perhaps the wench would prefer more

amusing entertainment than pretending to be a warrior. Maybe she needs to be shown how to be a woman.”

Raven bristled at the insult and subtly shifted her weight. In the corner of her eye, she saw Andrew take a step forward to interfere, then, to her relief, watched Aiden stop both him and Jamie with a warning look. With a slight nod, he directed their attention to her. She'd have to prove she could defend herself without help if she was to be accepted. Raven slowly slid her hand along her captor's arm, as if enjoying his hold on her. When she thought he was sure of himself, she rammed her elbow into his midsection, knocking the wind from him. He released her and doubled over, trying to catch his breath. Raven spun around and placed a hard kick behind his knee, knocking him on his back. With the arrow upended in her hand, she laid the point against his throat with just enough pressure to break the skin and release a drop of blood. “Which target do I aim for?” she hissed. Hatred and anger flickered briefly in her eyes as he lay perfectly still. Her threat was clearly understood. She moved away from him, and he cautiously got to his feet.

“Ho! No need to become hostile.” The soldier eyed Raven malevolently, feeling braver once the arrow's tip was removed from his throat. He heard the muffled sounds of a few chuckles from the other men. He dabbed at the tender spot on his throat and found his fingers were smeared with a few drops of blood. *No woman will get the better of me. I'll wait. A more suitable opportunity will come, and I will get her for trying to make me look the fool.*

Turning purposefully, Raven picked up the longbow from the ground and nocked the arrow. Keeping her fury under control, she took her stance, sighted the target, and slowly re-

leased the arrow. She didn't bother to look at the target, but dropped the bow and stalked away. Jamie and Andrew stared at her arrow where it sat quivering in the split shaft of Andrew's shot, just off center. "I wonder what she can do when she's in a good mood," Andrew quipped.

"Where do you think you're going?" Jamie called after her.

Raven stopped and clenched her fists by her sides. Forcing her features to appear neutral, she slowly turned to face the MacKay.

"You came here looking for a challenge. Now you walk away?" Jamie called out again, but there was no response. "Ewan. Show us what you can do."

Ewan, who moments before had been amused by her defense tactics, was suddenly at a loss for words. "Take her on? Jamie, surely you don't mean..."

"Afraid she can beat you as well?" Jamie asked.

"Tricks she uses," one of the men declared disdainfully. Ewan quickly stepped aside as another soldier moved forward. "She wants us to think she can fight, but it's nothin' but tricks. Probably that amulet she wears." The man was surely superstitious. He continued his speech while Andrew and the other men formed a semi-circle about her and her opponent.

Raven waited for him to finish. She was unaware anyone had seen her amulet, and more than slightly annoyed and growing bored with the same words she'd heard time and again. The young soldier spoke as if she had suddenly vanished, despite the fact she stared at him.

"Witch's tricks, is it?" she snapped back. She fingered the amulet at her throat. "You think this little thing protects me from the likes of you? You think I cast spells instead of doing

an honest day's training? Do you challenge me, good sir?" Her tone was mocking. From the corner of her eye, she noted Aiden joining the group and standing next to Andrew and Jamie. The group of men stood back, knowing what to expect. Raven unbuckled the wide belt at her waist and handed it, with its sword and dirk, to Aiden, never taking her eyes from her challenger. She took the amulet with its ruby center and handed that to Andrew. "Take care it doesn't bite, Andrew. You will never know what it might do when I don't have full control of it." Andrew laughed, but stopped when he got a good look at it. He looked at her, surprised, not able to say anything.

Jamie glanced at the amulet, felt for his own at his throat. A look of surprise registered on his face. Raven winced. He'd noticed, and he knew. "I'll tell you the story one day," she answered, once again knowing his thoughts. She turned back to her challenger. "Now, sir, are you ready?" She grinned. Her disdain disappeared to be replaced by amusement.

Roger was the young man Raven had seen that day in the glen, with Jamie and Andrew. He was over six feet tall. His wiry build offered little evidence of years of hard training. Those who didn't know her thought the challenge was utterly foolish. Raven held out her hands, wiggling her fingers, beckoning him to come at her. He lunged and she neatly sidestepped him. Catching his balance, he turned and looked at her. She was still grinning. Several more times he went after her from different directions, but she still managed to avoid him. And she still grinned. The men watching chuckled in amusement.

"If it's dancing you prefer, Roger, we could call for a piper."

The young soldier resented the taunt and renewed his attack. His anger got in the way of his thinking clearly. Raven

stood straight, waiting. "You call that fighting? It seems you have not learned your lessons very well. Will you let a mere woman beat you?"

Raven circled him slowly, like a wolf stalking its prey, preparing to move. She decided to put an end to the game, and grabbed his arm as he came at her. Bracing herself, she pulled at his arm, and with a quick twist and his own momentum, managed to flip him onto his back. Before he realized what had happened, she had her knee on his chest, pushing her weight against him, and pressed a *sgian dhu* against his throat. The others laughed. "Never underestimate your opponent. Size is often deceiving. Sometimes tricks can help, but magic has no place in battle, or hand-to-hand combat. Training and alertness will always be your best friends." Raven winced, thinking how much she sounded like Aiden, then offered Roger a hand in friendship as he got up. For a moment he eyed her warily, but her wide grin won him over.

"Perhaps you would prefer more of a challenge." Raven spun around to face the MacKay. Jamie's face was alight with amusement. "No slight to you or your skills, Roger," he added quickly, glancing at the chastened soldier. "Or perhaps I am the one in need of a challenge." He stepped back and waited for Raven to respond.

Raven's hands clenched at her sides, once more impatient to take up the challenge. If she could best him, it would take away any doubts the others might still have of her, stop the gossip she heard in the great hall at mealtime. She would finally be accepted by them. Drawing herself to her full height, she waited for him to say something before accepting his challenge. She didn't have long to wait.

Jamie's gaze flickered over her slender form in a way that

made her blush. She began to have second thoughts. Perhaps this wasn't a good idea. The advantage was definitely his. He stood more than a head taller than she did, and was twice her size. It wouldn't take much for him to hurt her, but he couldn't take back his challenge now. Then again, what better way to know another warrior than to oppose him in battle? He had to admit she was quick with her hands and feet in defending herself, but how well-trained was she in the use of weapons? He slowly withdrew his broadsword and seemed to be studying the shining sharp edge of it. "We've seen how well you use a longbow, and a dirk seems to be your favorite weapon. What can you do with a sword? Are your skills just as good, or are you half-trained, wishing you could do better?" He wanted to taunt her, make her angry enough to act rashly.

Raven caught Aiden's flinch at the insult, but said nothing. She shrugged her shoulders in response to Jamie's calculated slur of her skills. Without taking her eyes from him, she held out a hand for someone to pass her sword to her. Roger was more than happy to take the weapon from Aiden and place it in her waiting hand, then step back. No one willingly went up against Jamie, and he thought Raven was foolish to even consider it. What did she know?

The broadsword was a heavy weapon no woman would even think to wield. But Raven was no ordinary woman, nor was Aiden an inconsiderate teacher. Years before, he'd had a special sword made for her, lighter in weight, but still needing two hands to manage. She held it up before her in a mocking salute, then firmly gripped the hilt and waited for Jamie to make the first move. She easily fended off his advances. He was toying with her, making her look foolish, and it angered her. Steadying herself, she wielded her weapon, forcing him

to take the defensive. Jamie grinned as he parried her blows. The sound of steel against steel rang out across the moor as Raven forced Jamie to back away. A few more steps and he'd get a dunking. She concentrated on forcing him further backward.

Their audience formed a larger circle, giving them more room. Jamie continued to back away, but not far enough. Their positions reversed, and he faced the loch as they continued to thrust and parry. Jamie stepped on a small rock and, losing his balance, fell backward. The onlookers laughed at the mishap as their laird lay still for a moment. "It wasn't a fair contest," Raven admitted as she stood over him. She held out her hand, offering assistance.

Reaching up slowly, Jamie accepted her offer. The next thing she knew, she was flipped into the air, then found herself lying on her back, trying to catch her breath. She stared at the sky, at first seeing nothing. A moment later Jamie's face filled her vision. Her heart pounded as she felt his warm breath against her cheek. "Never," he whispered huskily, "underestimate your opponent."

There was something in the depths of his blue eyes—something she wasn't sure she wanted to see. "The next time, I promise you, I won't," she replied. She forced herself to remain calm. He pulled her to her feet, and she gazed serenely at him. Raven casually dusted off her clothing and collected her belongings, then went back into the keep. At least they hadn't tossed her into the loch for losing. Thank the goddess for small favors.

\* \* \* \*

Later in the day, Jamie found Raven on the battlement walkway overlooking the loch. After the incident near the

loch, she had deliberately stayed away from everyone. “You handle a bow well, as well as your other weapons. What else am I to find out about you?”

Raven was startled by the voice beside her. She was so deep in thought she had failed to hear his footsteps, or take note of his presence in her special way. She was still fuming over his having bested her earlier in the day. His men would never take her seriously if she could be defeated by trickery, so she refrained from saying anything. Let him think what he would.

“A bonny sight, the highlands, especially at sunset.” He tried again to get her to talk with him.

“Aye, it is a bonny sight,” she agreed. The darkening sky was streaked with amethyst and edged with tangerine and pale gold. The colors gradually faded to black as the sun dipped below the horizon. Here and there a star peeked out, waiting for full darkness before its own light could be appreciated. This time of day was Raven’s favorite, for it had a calming effect on her mood, and her anger. “I fear I have a quick temper and it takes a while to recover. The sunset helps,” she admitted, almost apologetically, “for how can anyone remain angry after watching such a beautiful sight?”

“I can think of only one sight to possibly surpass the sunset,” he commented. His hand went to her chin and gently raised her head. His kiss was warm and soft and held a hint of something more. Raven quickly stepped back, a look of surprise and something else in her eyes. He thought he sensed an aura of confusion about her, but still there seemed to be something more. He didn’t like what he felt. “Is something wrong?” he asked, wanting to understand her reaction. *Is it fear I see in her eyes? What has she to fear?*



“We have an agreement, MacKay,” she warned.

“Do we? A sennight from now, I’m required to hear clan grievances and pass judgment. I need you there, Raven. There is more going on than meets the eye, but I cannot have you by my side, as the legend of MacDraoidh, unless we announce our marriage. Do not force my hand with your stubbornness. This is important to me, and to the clan.”

Raven turned her back to him and slowly rubbed her hand against the smooth stone before her. She appeared to be weighing her responsibilities. “My stubbornness!” she exclaimed defensively, whirling about to look up at him again. “I did not come here to fulfill a betrothal. As far as I am concerned, it does not exist until I am ready to acknowledge it. I cannot, and *will not* put the needs of your clan before the justice owed mine.”

“How long before you find satisfaction? Can you not deal with both?” he asked softly, and leaned toward her as if to steal another kiss.

Raven expected him to lash out at her in anger, but found, instead, she did not know how to deal with this new tactic of his. “N-nay, my lord, I cannot. Please, excuse me.” She turned on her heel and quickly left. She fought the urge to run from him as fast as she could. When he touched her, a jolt slammed through her, like a bolt of lightning. Such a thing had never happened before. It scared her, but she refused to let him see the fear buried within. She had a duty to fulfill to her future, her family and her clan. He spoke true of her responsibility to honor the betrothal contract set out by their parents, but now, she realized with a certainty, she couldn’t do it. Marriage to the MacKay chieftain would mean the end of her freedom. She could not abide that. Once she achieved her

goals, Raven intended to leave. A promise to her own clan no longer mattered.

Jamie watched her flee into the keep. Something was wrong within his clan, he could feel it, but he knew Raven was capable of rooting out the problem better than he could. If it meant breaking his promise to her, so be it. There was too much at stake to indulge her whims indefinitely. If he could convince her to work with him, they could solve both their problems and settle down to the normal business of ruling their clans—and he knew just what he had to do to accomplish his goal.

## Chapter 7

Raven bristled at the idea of overseeing security within the keep, but concentrated on becoming familiar with the routine of the MacKay's service. It was one thing to decide to watch her. She knew they didn't exactly trust her. The position was nothing more than that of a glorified chatelaine, seeing to it things ran smoothly, and taking responsibility for the wellbeing of all who worked here. It wasn't a position she was trained for, and she resented Jamie's attitude toward her. If she'd wanted such a job, she would have come to MacKay as his bride-to-be, not as a warrior. She didn't intend to comply with the contract until she had fulfilled the promise made to her dead mother. After that, all bets were off, as Aiden liked to say.

Somewhere in Jamie's thoughts, a few nights earlier, she became aware of his concern that something was not right within the keep. He had also given voice to his concerns. Allowing the situation more consideration, perhaps she had been too harsh in her decision. As much as she hated to admit it, being put in charge of household security gave her the opportunity to subtly question servants, to spend her time studying them. Raven saw this particular duty for what it was. In the

eyes of others, it was meant to put her in her place. Mentioning their betrothal when she'd first arrived had only been a means of proving who she was. Since that time, and until a few nights ago, he had said nothing more about her taking her place by his side, and she was grateful for that discretion. For that matter, he'd barely spoken to her since that night, except to issue orders. She didn't like the confusion churning within her. It destroyed her concentration and made her less effective in her duties. She had to put Jamie out of her mind.

For the most part, she reluctantly came to terms with who and what she was, and wished those around her could accept her as easily. Wishful thinking on her part. She had been here since early spring, and summer was well underway—long enough for her to become familiar with established patterns. She still heard comments, whispers behind her back. They all feared her pale eyes—“witch's eyes,” they continually called them when they thought she couldn't hear. They did not know she could read their thoughts. When would she no longer have to prove herself to others? The question was discouraging.

*Perhaps when you stop trying so hard,* a familiar disembodied voice responded.

\* \* \* \*

For the next few days, Raven practiced with some of the men. No one mentioned the mock battle between her and the laird—at least not within her hearing. She fought harder, finding resentment still lingering with every perceived comment. What she lacked in size and strength she made up for in cunning. Sometimes she was heard laughing as she did something totally unexpected to thwart her opponent. She worked long and hard each day to the point of near exhaustion and the next

day would begin again. Whenever Jamie appeared, she always glanced at him blankly and stalked away. Andrew looked at the chieftain for an explanation, but got only a shrug in reply.

Raven took her meals in her chambers to avoid Jamie as much as possible. "My lady," Annie spoke as she placed a supper tray on a nearby table, "your purpose here will come to naught if you continue like this."

"Not entirely," Raven replied as she downed the ale and refilled the cup. "I have a promise to keep. Nothing else matters."

"But what of the Legend?" the housekeeper asked gently.

"Damn the legend!" Raven's tone was bitter. "All my life it has been the legend." In her anger, she threw the cup of ale across the room, spraying its contents as it traveled. The cup thudded against the door and dropped to the floor. Raven stared at the mess she had created and let go her anger. "I'm sorry, Annie. I should not be angry with you. None of this is your doing."

"You need to talk, my lady. Something has hurt you deeply, and you need to let it go. I'll listen if you wish to speak."

"No. I can speak of it to no one. 'Tis something I must live with." Raven could discuss it with no one because she didn't know what *it* was. She rubbed her temples, willing the ache in her head to disappear.

Annie silently studied her mistress for a moment as if considering what to say in response. "I remember the massacre that day. It was awful."

Raven turned quickly and stared at the maid. "How could you have known? No one knows who...wasn't...there." The realization there might be other survivors of that horrible day

gave her a glimmer of hope for the clan.

“Do you not remember me, Lady Raven, or have I changed so much?” Annie studied Raven’s blank expression, then her own eyes took on a faraway look as she recalled that fateful morning. “I was ill that day. Your mother had come early in the morning with her herbs. I’d finally fallen asleep for a short time when the shouting woke me. I was alone, and I peeked out a crack in the door. I saw all the soldiers in the courtyard. Someone on horseback was shouting orders. I was frightened, so I moved from the door and hid...”

Raven suddenly realized this woman might have information she needed. “The leader. Did you see the leader? Annie, what did he look like?”

“I never saw his face. He never turned.”

“Blast.” Raven thumped a tight fist against the nearest bedpost, then did her best to calm herself. “No matter. I will discover his identity.” She rubbed at her temples, willing the ache to disappear.

Annie laid a hand on Raven’s arm. “Do not shut out Jamie. He’s a good man and will understand your plight. The two of you have strengths to compliment the other’s weaknesses. Lady Alycia made a good match for you in the Laird of Clan MacKay.”

Raven flinched at the mention of her mother’s name. “Annie, I will do what I must, then be gone from here.”

\* \* \* \*

Later in the day, Raven strolled through the great hall, after her conversation with Annie gave her more to consider. Now, she was looking forward to enjoying a perverse pleasure in testing Jamie’s patience. Several servants were murmuring together and glancing about. When they saw Raven watching

them, they quickly scattered and returned to their duties. Raven caught enough of their thoughts to figure out what was going on. *So the great Lady Cordelia has finally arrived. How long has she been here and why didn't I hear the commotion?* Raven wondered if the object of this new, as yet unconfirmed betrothal, was as miserable to deal with as the servants let on. She hid a grin on hearing another complaint about the visitor's unreasonable demands. Raven wasn't sure if she hoped Cordelia's visit would be a very short or a long one. Either way, the lady's presence might prove entertaining.

Cordelia entered the great hall as if she were the lady of the keep. She stopped at the bottom of the steps to the upper chambers, and paused a moment, looking about for Jamie.

Raven knew the instant Cordelia spotted them. Raven spoke to Jamie of nothing important. Her only goal was to draw attention. Cordelia looked every inch the highborn lady. Her ash-blond hair hung long and loose about her shoulders, contrasting with the deep green gown she wore. Jealousy flashed in her eyes as she moved toward them. Raven didn't need to read her mind to know what she was thinking. Cordelia wouldn't tolerate any competition. She always got what she went after, and the laird of Clan MacKay was no exception.

"The lady arrives," Raven muttered, then spoke up, when Cordelia drew close. "We will speak of this later, Jamie." She laid a hand lightly on his arm, as if conveying a personal message. Raven made sure Cordelia noted the gesture, and took secret pleasure in seeing sparks flare in her eyes. Raven thought she might derive a little satisfaction in annoying the woman—on behalf of the servants, of course.

Cordelia was followed by a demure-looking woman.

Maid? More likely companion. Maids didn't follow their mistresses so closely. Red-haired and dark-eyed, the companion halted a few steps behind Cordelia and kept her hands clasped before her. Her slender, ramrod-straight figure drew the attention of several off-duty guards. Raven recognized the look in their eyes and felt a smidgen of pity for the woman. Out of curiosity, Raven tried subtly to enter the woman's mind and found a wall surrounding her thoughts. That was surprising. So this woman was more than she appeared to be. Raven tucked that bit of information away for future reference.

Raven gave Cordelia a slight nod that bordered on disrespect. She spun on her heels, quickly picked up a goblet, and strolled over to a table where she made herself comfortable. She picked at the venison as she assured herself of Cordelia's motives for arriving unannounced. The throbbing in her head was stronger than usual, as if issuing a warning. While she'd dealt with vague, but frequent pain, she'd never had headaches before coming here. Where was the Lord Carlisle, she wondered. Surely he wouldn't let his precious daughter travel alone.

"Who is that creature?" Cordelia asked disdainfully, and possessively slipped her hand through Jamie's arm. She spared a glance for the woman seated at the table. When the woman stood, Cordelia noted how her belted tunic set off a slender figure and long legs. She moved with a grace Cordelia wouldn't have expected from her. A flash of jealousy crossed her face and vanished as quickly. If this woman was some sort of competition for Jamie's affection's, then Cordelia wanted to know about it—but she couldn't imagine Jamie showing interest in such an unfeminine being.

"She is Raven MacDraoidh, new to my service."



“MacDraoidh. It doesn’t sound like any clan name I have ever heard of.” Cordelia sighed. “She is dressed strangely for a servant. What does she do here?”

Jamie chuckled. “No servant, that one,” he replied matter-of-factly, then added as a word of warning, “Never address her that way. I doubt she would be anyone’s servant. She is a trained warrior.”

Cordelia wrinkled her nose at the preposterous idea. “Why have I never heard of her?”

“Because she picks her battles with care, and shuns attention as much as possible.” Jamie glanced at the woman by his side and hid a smile, knowing battle lines were being drawn. A challenge of sorts had been issued and accepted. If Cordelia planned to do battle, he knew she had already lost. Raven didn’t seem the kind to let anyone, or anything, stand in her way any longer than necessary. Jamie suddenly realized, with distaste, that he was the prize in this battle. The lines had just been drawn and he didn’t like the idea of being caught in the middle. However, this struggle, he concluded, might prove very interesting—particularly when they didn’t have much time, because he was about to wield the only stroke in this fight. He’d give them a few days to sharpen their claws on one another, then put a quick end to it.

“Jamie,” Cordelia began shyly, implying a feigned sweetness. She turned her attention to the man who had just joined them. “May I present to you Lord Gavin MacAllister, my brother.”

Raven sipped her ale and glanced at the stranger standing by Cordelia’s side. He was tall, but not quite Jamie’s height. His long blond hair was tied at the nape of his neck. Hazel eyes looked about him and took in the occupants of the great

hall. The long straight nose, full mouth and square jaw-line did little to enhance the air of boredom that seemed to surround him. Raven tried to concentrate on him, but found, to her surprise, she was unable to penetrate his thoughts. A second one, and so close to Cordelia. On a whim, she tried reading Cordelia's thoughts and found nothing but chaos. Raven quickly pulled away and closed her eyes briefly.

*What did you expect?* came a soft, familiar voice. *Blondes aren't known for their intelligence...at least not where I come from. Remind me to tell you some blonde jokes sometime.*

*Blonde jokes?* There was no response, and Raven wondered if she should take seriously her unseen companion's comment. The entity had a very strange sense of humor.

She again considered Cordelia's brother. There was something else about Gavin MacAllister that struck Raven's senses. Something she should know. She didn't recall having ever met him, but something hit a familiar note. A memory, perhaps? The very idea sent a vague pain through her head, one she could do without. He would bear watching. Better yet, these two would provide the perfect diversion for her—or perhaps the three of them, she amended when she caught the glance Gavin gave the companion. She wasn't sure what was in that look, but it appeared interesting. At the very least, Jamie would be too busy with his guests to wonder about her.

The next morning, Jamie entered the great hall and glanced about for his very absent wife. The night before, he had spent a good bit of time going over the contracts signed by his parents and Lady Alycia of Clan MacDraoidh. He had to decide what to do about them—claim her as his wife, or let her go. He knew what he wanted to do.

"Annie, have you seen Raven this morning?" The house-

keeper was always aware of the comings and goings of the keep's early risers. Jamie waited in the kitchen, watching the maids ready a meal for the soldiers who were just now being relieved of their duties. Annie was so efficient, Raven would have little to do once she accepted her role as mistress of the castle. That would leave her free for the more unusual duties he had in mind for her.

Jamie noted the amused gleam in Annie's eyes. "Well?" he prodded.

"Raven left at dawn. Took her cloak, packed some food and rode out."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No, just said she had some thinking to do, and she'd be back in a day or two."

Jamie nodded, then gave little thought to the departure, having already accepted the fact Raven was one to move quickly once she got a notion into her head. Unfortunately, her absence would leave him alone with Cordelia. Maybe he should do the same—disappear for a day or two and hope she would be gone. He sighed, knowing it was too much to hope for.

The next two days, rain fell steadily, but still she didn't return.

"You two have a lovers' quarrel?" Andrew grinned.

"No, but something is wrong, and I know she's in trouble. I can feel it."

## Chapter 8

Getting away from the keep unescorted wasn't easy. Raven was surprised to find that Jamie was still abed when she went down to the great hall. Even the soldiers on the walls had not yet been relieved from duty and come in for a meal before retiring. She needed the time alone, to work out her ideas for a new security plan. If she could find enough men to qualify, then she would establish a system of security seen nowhere else in Scotland.

The chestnut mare was content to amble along the countryside after a good run. The road was unusually quiet as it wended through the woods. No one traveled to the nearest keep or town. The mare tossed her head every now and again, as if sensing something vaguely disturbing to her. Her rider was oblivious to the action.

The illusion Raven adopted took little effort to hold. In her place was a rider who seemed fairly young. His long, dark hair was tied back with a strip of leather. A few loose strands dangled beside the face that seemed a bit too feminine. Dark eyes had a faraway look. Raven reinforced the illusion of a young man, then let her thoughts slip back to her plan. A half-smile hinted at the plan's possible success. A dark cloak was

draped across the front of the saddle, placed there as the day warmed. As pleasant as the day was, Raven sensed there would be more rain before nightfall. It wasn't such an agreeable thought, she concluded, but that was the way of the highlands.

The mare tossed her head once more and her step faltered as a man, raggedly dressed, stepped onto the path, blocking her way. "Well, well. What do we have here?" he asked, as he thoughtfully eyed the horse and rider. "I believe I'd like this mare for myself." The animal looked to be sound and strong, he decided, a bonus for this particular venture. He looked up at the rider, waiting for some response. The youth showed no fear. The thief wasn't sure that was such a good sign. Only a foolish person showed no fear—but he wouldn't let that worry him.

"I think not," the youth replied calmly, anxious to be on his way now, before an altercation was forced on him. He wanted no trouble. "She answers only to me."

"I'm sure that could be changed." He gripped the bridle and ran a rough hand slowly down the mare's muzzle. "All females are fickle. They'll answer quickest to the one who has the most to offer." The thief chuckled at the double meaning. "A lesson you'd best learn quick, laddie," the thief advised, looking up at the rider.

The rider's attention sharpened. The man's speech proved he was no ordinary thief. There was something especially peculiar about the way he spoke. The brogue. Even for an uneducated peasant, the brogue was poor. What did the English want? No, more like Lowlanders. What would they be doing this far north? What was the intruder up to? A second man appeared, better dressed but still giving the im-

pression of a peasant. Raven watched them carefully. This was to be no ordinary theft. Did they know? She sensed the illusion held. How could they know?

The second man's tone was casual. "Why don't you get down from there and let my friend have what he wants."

Again, Raven sensed the double meaning, and worried they were able to see through the illusion. "As I said, she answers only to me. Neither he nor you could command her."

"We'll see about that," the second thief concluded as he drew a sword Raven hadn't seen a moment before.

Raven raised one eyebrow and drew a sword from the saddle sheath. Swinging one leg over the mare's neck, she slid off Starfire's back. Her face brightened with a grin as she held her sword two-handed and waited for the other to make the first move. She directed a soft Gaelic command to the mare and the animal obediently moved aside, out of reach of grasping hands. Starfire backed away, pawing a warning in the hard-packed soil of the path.

The armed intruder moved first, lunging at Raven, but only met steel. Swords clashed against one another as she kept pace with her attacker. The intruder was stronger and more experienced, but Raven's smaller stature allowed her to move quickly and remain out of harm's way. Her sword remained in her tight grip as she continued to use the little tricks she'd learned. She still needed both hands to wield the specially-made weapon, but heaven help anyone who got too close. Her thrust could be just as deadly as that of any man twice her size.

Raven's grin disappeared as two more armed men appeared. One looked vaguely familiar, and she almost lost her concentration when she recognized him. Scarface. Raven

fought harder but wasn't fool enough to believe she could handle them all. The trick now would be making her escape in one piece, then she needed to follow them, find out who Scarface served... A moment later, her plan was brought to nothing. A well-placed sword thrust through his side, into his lung, put an end to the one man who had answers to the questions plaguing her.

Raven could fend off the two swordsmen before her. Aiden had taught her well—but what of the third armed thief? As she met their swords, stroke for stroke, a thought niggled at the back of her mind. Thieves didn't wield swords well—they were more apt to slash and parry. These men were trained warriors. Who and what were they really after? More importantly, who sent them? Raven failed to see the third swordsman circle around to come up behind her. Suddenly her arms were caught in a tight grasp, forcing her to drop her weapon. She stopped struggling when she saw the other two swordsmen before her, their weapons threatening. None of her tricks would help her now. Raven heard the mare snorting, and was relieved she was still free. It wasn't Starfire they wanted after all...

"What do we do with the lad?" one thief asked. He glanced away, his interest still on the mare. She was a magnificent animal, and the desire to claim her showed in his eyes.

"His lordship wants the boy dead. Seems this isn't the first time he's made off with noble property."

*His lordship? What member of the nobility have I crossed to deserve this? Or is it an excuse?* "A lie!" Raven insisted. "That mare is mine and always has been. What is it you're really after?" She fought to protect herself, but knew the battle was lost. One managed to grab her arms behind her back, and she

struggled a moment, but her captor only tightened his grip.

“His lordship doesn’t think so, but he doesn’t want to waste the time seeing you tried for theft.” The leader started to turn away, then ordered the first, “Kill him.”

Raven, on hearing the quiet order, ceased to struggle and stood tall. “A curse on he who takes my life,” came the half-whispered words. As they were spoken, the illusion faded, and the youth’s appearance changed. The tanned skin paled, and dark eyes became pale until they seemed to be completely blank. The contours of the face softened, giving them a more feminine appearance. The youth’s voice was a softer pitch, but no less menacing. “Your children will be cursed forever. You cannot kill the Draoidh without bringing ruin upon yourselves.”

“What did you say?” The leader turned to face the prisoner, aghast with what now stared back at him. “You are the witch the villagers speak of. His lordship never said we were after a woman.” He considered her words of a moment ago, then amended his command. He stepped forward and placed his hand at her throat as if searching for something.

“It isn’t here,” he concluded. “You know what to do, but don’t kill her. His lordship may want her dead, but I’ll not have her curse on my head. When you’re done, leave her to the wolves.” They laughed heartily, sheathed their weapons, and left her to face her fate.

After a few hard punches and well-placed kicks, Raven blessed the darkness that enveloped her senses.

\* \* \* \*

Some level of consciousness began to seep in, and with it came the awareness of searing pain. She felt the grass, cool and wet beneath her cheek, and tried to focus on her sur-



roundings. The rain had come, light but steady. It must have been raining for some time, for Raven's clothes were soaked through. Her side was afire with pain, and the slightest movement made her too aware of it. She couldn't think what had happened to her, but in a moment, the memory came surging back. They actually believed she would have cursed them for all eternity. Too late, she had recognized two of the men, but could do nothing about it. At least she knew Scarface was no longer alive, leaving her no path to follow. She had surely put a scare into the others and saved her life in doing so. She would have laughed if it had been possible. The Draoidh could do many things, she thought, but calling down curses? At least it was beyond her ability. That was worth a painful chuckle.

"Thank goodness you're awake."

Raven opened her eyes to the familiar voice. The blue crystalline bubble floated above her. "Why are you here?" she groaned.

"What happened?" Meredith demanded quietly. Anger quickly took over what little patience she had left.

"I ran into a tree?"

"This is not the time for humor. Who did this to you?"

Raven ignored the question and groaned as she slowly rolled over and tried to get up. What had they done to her when she'd finally passed out? They should have killed her outright. The thought teased at something on the edge of her memory, then slipped once more into darkness. Killing her would have been more merciful, but what did they know about mercy? She worked herself into a sitting position and held her breath until the agony subsided. A hot bath and a warm bed would feel good right about now.

“Who did this to you? Tell me, and I’ll see they’re dealt with. The Draoidh are not to be trifled with.”

“You are a bit late,” Raven gasped bitterly. “I do not need a keeper.” She struggled to her knees and bit her swollen lip every time a flash of pain assailed her. She stumbled onto the muddy pathway and thought blearily of her destination, wondering how long it would take her to return to Castle MacKay. For the first time since she had become a warrior, she was helpless—a fact she strongly resented. Jamie would use the incident to make his point, then confine her to the castle. Raven had always been able to protect herself, but this was more than she had bargained for. She tilted her face upward into the steady rain, and vaguely wondered why the blue bubble didn’t look wet. It was twilight, and she wanted nothing more than to rest. If she drifted off to sleep now, she was afraid she might not wake up again. She had to find shelter.

The mare snuffled at Raven’s hair. The curls hung limp, wet and stringy. “You did stay, Starfire. What would I do if you had gone off, or if they had taken you?” Raven finally got to her feet, then stumbled, but managed to catch her balance. If she fell again, she wouldn’t be able to move. Reaching up, she held on to the saddle and urged the mare to kneel. Getting herself settled on Starfire’s back wasn’t easy. Raven tried to take a deep breath, but it hitched in her lungs when the effort was too painful.

She ignored her unwanted companion’s demand for answers as Starfire stood and turned away from the wood. “Can’t read my thoughts?” she mocked, and hissed at another stab of pain. “I wonder why that is.” She barely drew breath to speak those few words.

It was almost dark. Taking her time, the mare picked her

way along the path, then onto the road leading back to Castle MacKay. Raven was hardly aware of raindrops bouncing off the leaves of the trees, or the dull thud of Starfire's hooves on the road. She couldn't think clearly. She was cold and wet, and could just about draw a breath without the pain cutting through her like a well-aimed sword stroke.

When she finally reached the courtyard of Castle MacKay, Raven left Starfire to the care of one of the stable boys. The blue bubble was gone. "See that she's thoroughly rubbed down and fed. Give her an extra measure of oats. She's more than earned it this day." Her breath caught on every word, and she hissed with the pain. Raven rubbed the mare's nose affectionately and whispered, "Thank you, my friend. No one could have helped me as you have this day." Starfire nickered softly in response and nodded her great head, as if understanding her mistress's gratitude. Raven stepped away and watched the stable boy lead the mare into the stable.

She slowly took a ragged, shallow breath and glanced up into the almost-darkened sky. If she was fortunate, she had missed the evening meal. She didn't want to answer any questions right now concerning her absence from the keep. Tomorrow or the next day would be soon enough for that. She didn't want to hear Aiden's 'I told you so,' and she was sure the *blue lady* would tell him. They seemed to have an unusual rapport.

Raven stepped into the great hall, hesitating briefly just inside the door. Her dark cloak was soaked and hung in heavy folds down the length of her body. The hood was pulled forward to obscure her face. She concentrated on getting through the room without calling attention to herself. The soldiers knew she drank often, and for once, she hoped they would be-

lieve she was drunk. It was something a warrior did. They never knew of the secret pain she held at bay with the bitter-tasting ale.

Most of the warriors had finished their supper and left to attend to their duties or seek entertainment. Others laughed and talked quietly as they enjoyed their ale. She was soaked to the skin and wanted nothing more than to get to her chambers and out of her wet clothing. Jamie glanced her way, but remained where he was. His eyes told her she owed him an explanation for her disappearance two days earlier. She was in no hurry to oblige him.

Cordelia and her companion sat by the hearth, talking quietly and working on their embroidery. When they noticed the newcomer, they put their heads together and whispered back and forth like a couple of conspirators, while they kept glancing up.

Aiden and Gavin were the only ones left seated at the high table. Aiden slouched in his chair, enjoying his wine. His thoughts were on other things—a bouncing sapphire bubble in particular. He sat up straighter when he recognized Raven, then stood and placed his goblet on the table. Never looking away, he made his way to her, concern on his face for her bedraggled appearance.

Gavin made no move, but watched the new arrival walk stiffly toward the steps beyond the far end of the dais. He sipped his drink and watched her over the rim of his cup. His features remained bland. Was there no one who could follow simple orders?

Every step Raven took was a painful reminder of the afternoon's events. She slowly made her way through the room, hoping others would believe she had imbibed earlier in the

day.

“Raven, are you all right?” Aiden moved closer, eyeing her critically.

Raven groaned softly with frustration and pain. Her hood was pulled forward, keeping her face in shadow. She could only imagine the bruises forming, and didn’t want him anywhere near her, especially now. He saw too much.

A pale, bruised hand appeared from the folds of her wet cloak, and she lifted it as if to ward him off. “Let me be,” she replied brusquely. “My comfort is more important to me at the moment than answering your questions.” She regretted being rude to her mentor, but it was the only way to force him to keep his distance. She sidestepped him and continued on her way, pointedly ignoring the man, and trying not to show the pain that constantly wracked her slender body.

Aiden stared after her, a puzzled look on his face that quickly turned to disgust. He turned away and finished his drink before leaving the hall to see to his duties.

Raven stumbled as she reached the steps to the upper chambers. She bit her lip to keep from crying out, and barely managed the climb up the steps, out of sight of everyone. Her hand shot out from within her cloak and pressed against the wall for balance, then she awkwardly managed to get to her rooms. She carefully entered her chamber and, with her back to the door, closed it partially before collapsing on the stone floor. Let them think it’s nothing more than too much drink, she thought, and lapsed into unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \*

Jamie called a halt to the discussion concerning the Sutherlands. In his mind, the lowland clan was guilty of attacking MacKay farmers, but Raven insisted they proceed cautiously.

Her judgment had always proved sound, and he was, for now, willing to allow her the time she'd requested to prove her theories. He didn't have the sort of training she'd had for the second sight, but maybe, over the years, he had somehow learned something from her. He thought of the first time he'd actually met her—when she'd failed to say anything about being his wife. He had known who she was before she'd said a word, proving to him some kind of bond had evolved over the years. He said a silent prayer the connection was still intact.

Jamie thought it unlike Raven to disappear without leaving word with anyone, but it didn't surprise him she had defied orders—again. He felt a sense of relief when he saw her enter the great hall but knew, by the stiff way she held herself, something was wrong. She didn't want anyone's attention at the moment.

Jamie walked the long hallway to his chamber and wondered how he came to have a warrior wife. She was like no woman he had ever known. He stopped one of the servants. "Go below and tell Annie I have need of her healing skills. Send her to Lady Raven's chamber." He caught her arm. "Tell no one of this." The little servant nodded and hurried away to do the laird's bidding. Jamie instinctively knew there was no overindulgence of ale this time, and wished he could get to the bottom of whatever problem plagued her. He pushed open the door to Raven's chamber and found her shivering and barely conscious on the cold stone floor. She lay curled in a tight ball, soaked to the skin. Gently lifting her chin, he caught his breath when he saw her face. There didn't seem to be a spot that wasn't bruised.

"There was one too many," she told him, her voice threatening and weak. She tried to laugh, but it came out as a gasp. "I

could handle two of them—but there were three. One too many. Then he killed Scarface, just turned and stuck him with his sword.” She moaned softly as she tried to take a deep breath, but bit back the pain instead.

“Who is Scarface?” Jamie asked, trying to make sense of her ramblings. “Try to relax, Raven.” He ran his hands expertly over her body, trying to assess any further injuries done to her. There were no broken bones that he could detect, but she flinched under his gentle touch. “You have some sorely bruised ribs,” he told her softly. “We have to get you out of those wet clothes.”

By the time Gwen arrived with Annie, Raven had been stripped of her drenched clothing and wrapped in blankets. “Do what you can for her,” Jamie told the woman before leaving the chamber.

Raven’s eyes fluttered open as she tried to focus on the stranger who sat beside her. “You know who I am?” she asked hoarsely, not recognizing her friend.

“Aye, my lady. Rest now and don’t worry. You’re safe.”

“I would have a friend.” Raven gasped for air as she spoke, but she had to be sure of her safety.

“I would be a friend, my lady. You are safe now.” Annie repeated her words of assurance, then worked deftly to tightly bind Raven’s ribs. The broth she prepared with syrup of poppies promised to give her mistress a long sleep free of conscious pain.

\* \* \* \*

Dreams floated through her drugged brain. Brilliant red swirled thickly. Bright light reflected off steel while other clashes of metal vibrated through her head. Screams? What was happening? She was running from someone, but she

couldn't get away. Someone was reaching for her, grabbing at her dress. She frowned. She didn't wear dresses. Maniacal laughter followed close behind her. Her sword was out of reach. She was being kicked and beaten mercilessly. The dream faded to black and slipped from her memory.

Raven heard muffled voices in what seemed to be an argument, then it was quiet. The painkiller was wearing off, and a portion of her mind cleared. She was near a fire but she felt a bone-chilling cold, and a sharpness in her chest as she tried to draw a deep breath. She felt as if she were drowning. *Is this what it feels like to die*, she wondered. Part of her wanted to give in to the numbing sensation and let it take her over. Strong hands raised her head just enough to force a warm liquid down her throat. Mulled wine, she thought, as she recognized the taste, with more of that bitter taste mixed into it. She wanted to tell this person to let her go, let her drift into the numbness sitting at the edges of her senses. What sounded like Gaelic words were almost incoherent.

"No, Raven, death is not better," a deep voice replied softly, understanding. Strands of damp, black hair were gently brushed away from her face. A cool wet cloth was laid on her hot forehead in an attempt to reduce her fever. "When the pain lessens you will think differently."

She was cold. She felt the weight of the blankets covering her, but they couldn't keep out the cold. Her skin burned, but still she continued to shiver until her whole body shuddered violently. She couldn't stop it. Raven was dimly aware of someone slipping in behind her, drawing her close in an embrace, an attempt to share body heat. She wanted to fight the presence at her back, instinctively distrusting it, but she didn't have the strength. An arm wended its way about her waist,



trying to hold her still. She barely heard the deep voice near her ear, willing her to trust. She thought he spoke Gaelic, but her mind could only focus on the blessed warmth slowly seeping through her. That small clear part of her brain slowly fogged over again. She drifted into a peaceful sleep, comforted by the whispers slowly fading from her mind.

When Raven gradually became aware of her surroundings, Jamie was crouched before the fireplace. A thick candle burned on a table near the bed. "How long?" she asked hoarsely, her throat dry.

Jamie turned and grinned, then brought a cup of water to her parched lips. "Slowly," he advised softly. "It's been four days since you returned to the keep." He paused. "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?" She tried to focus her eyes on him, but the effort was too much. She wearily closed them again.

"Disappear."

"That wasn't my intention. I had to deal with old wounds that haven't healed properly."

"Who attacked you?"

"I don't know," she replied stubbornly.

He was sure she lied. She was hiding something, and he was determined to find out why.

There was a moment's silence and Jamie asked again, as he poked at the fire in the fireplace. "Who attacked you, Raven? Who is Scarface?" He controlled the anger building within him. He was tired of her evasiveness and was determined to get some answers. Again there was silence and he turned sharply to face her, ready to demand a response of some kind, any kind. She had drifted off into a natural sleep.

Jamie sighed, then stirred the ashes and added peat to the

low flames. Even in summer, a damp chill pervaded the darkened room. Jamie watched the flames take hold and build. His thoughts were interrupted by Aiden's appearance. "She woke for a few moments," he told the former guardian without looking at him. "Her fever is broken, and she should have natural rest now." Jamie rose and turned to Aiden. "Who is Scarface?"

Aiden glanced from his student to the MacKay laird. Hearing the hateful nickname for the man, surprised him. "How did you hear that name?"

"A number of times she has said, 'Scarface is dead.'"

"Is he now? He was her only hope of finding out who was responsible for the attack on her clan. Be grateful he's dead. Perhaps now, she'll give up this obsession of hers and concentrate on more important things." Aiden paused a moment, then turned away from the bed and gave his attention to Jamie. "Are you truly betrothed to this woman?"

"Not for long," Jamie replied.

"It's a pity you think it best to end the betrothal."

"All things reach a point of change," Jamie replied cryptically. "She needs a man who can tame her to more 'civilized' ways."

Aiden laughed. "Heaven help the man who thinks he can tame that little wildcat." He slipped from the room, chuckling.

Jamie let go a deep sigh, wondering what he was going to do about this woman, then realized he had a plan of action, after all—one she wouldn't like, but neither would she be able to weasel out of it.

## **Chapter 9**

Raven was bored. There was only so much sleep a person could indulge in without becoming lazy. She was tired of being coddled and waited upon like a great lady. Her ribs hurt less, making breathing less painful, but she wasn't allowed to take part in training. Annie threatened to have Jamie lock her in her bedchamber if she so much as attempted to lift a sword. Raven scowled at the threat. She was anxious to get back to the practice field before her skills became too rusty. Even Goeffrey, the young stable boy, could undoubtedly handle a broadsword better than she could.

She might be a warrior, but as a woman of slight stature, she relied on speed, skill and tricks Aiden had taught her. In her room, where no one could see, she handled her broadsword, raising it slowly to regain lost strength. The weight of the weapon Aiden had had made specially for her allowed her to wield it, although she needed both hands. It was lighter than the typical sword. She swung it slowly, easily, determined not to overdo. When she judged she had done enough for the day, she left her bedchamber to resume her duties.

Though she still moved stiffly, there were things she could do that wouldn't interfere with her recovery. She took

her time, pacing herself, and gradually increased her activity. Her mood improved along with her flexibility. When the weather permitted, Andrew allowed her to go to the training yard for a light workout. If he had known what she was doing when she was alone, he would have severely limited her practice. She engaged in short distance foot races with some of the others, to rebuild lung capacity.

The moment Andrew sensed she'd had enough, he sent her back to her chamber, or the solar. Raven would never admit her gratitude for the restraints he placed on her. She refused to admit when she'd had enough, and scowled when he sent her away. She knew he was a better judge of what she could handle now, and that he had only her best interests at heart. After all, he had been chosen to look after the welfare of the Draoidh, and protect her from harm. If she'd paid more attention to him, she wouldn't be in this situation now. She couldn't wait for the day she would be whole again.

\* \* \* \*

Raven experienced mixed feelings when she saw Cordelia clinging to Jamie like a leech. Anyone would have thought the woman couldn't survive without him. Long ago, Aiden had tried, unsuccessfully, to explain to her the meaning of a symbiotic relationship. She wondered about Jamie's efforts to find excuses to avoid her. Were they real, or did he have a hidden agenda? To anyone else's observation, Raven seemed to find it all rather amusing, and only shrugged when he looked to her. She might be his betrothed, but she had no intention of making their relationship public until her own plans had been fulfilled, no matter how long it took. If there was a way to cry off, all the better. If only she could goad him into breaking it off. The more she thought about it, the more she realized how

difficult it was to suppress emotions she didn't want to acknowledge or understand—like a flash of jealousy, every time she saw Cordelia around him. She refused to let anyone see how the situation affected her.

Raven grinned, and Jamie's teeth clenched as if he were in pain. Cordelia stood at his side, chattering like a magpie about some nonsense. Jamie's eyes glazed over and Raven caught his thoughts. *Will she never close her mouth? She can go on forever about nothing.* It was difficult to keep your guard in place when you were being nagged to death. Raven found great amusement at his expense. She wasn't surprised Cordelia had yet to marry. Did Jamie truly resent the fact the woman's father believed the MacKay laird would be the perfect match for her? He might be grateful Raven had arrived when she did. Did he wonder how long it would be before she, herself, acknowledged their relationship, if she indeed had any intention of doing so? Jamie found a reason to excuse himself and joined a group of his men.

Moments later his attention was brought back to Cordelia with her cry of outrage. "How could you be so clumsy!" she screamed at the maid who had accidentally bumped her arm. The serving girl was in a hurry to serve some soldiers who had just entered the hall. Cordelia's wine spilled down the front of her gown and quickly soaked into the fine material.

"I beg your pardon, my lady," the maid whispered fearfully. "It was an accident." The poor girl daubed at the stain, not knowing what to do. She was well aware of the woman's volatile temper. Cordelia raised a hand to strike the girl for her clumsiness, but was stopped by a force latching on to her wrist.

Cordelia looked up to find a pair of pale gray eyes staring

at her. "The maid said it was an accident. There is no call to strike her. Have your maid rub some salt into the stain before it dries and it will be easily removed. It should come out completely without ruining your fine gown." Raven's sarcasm was evident.

"How dare you touch my person. You are no better than a servant yourself."

"I am no servant, and I will not allow you to strike anyone because of an accident that was clearly your fault. No one strikes the servants, or anyone else around Castle MacKay, while I am here. Do I make myself clear, *my lady*?"

Cordelia read the veiled threat in Raven's words and noted the warning in the too-light eyes. Who did this woman think she was to issue threats and lay her hands on a titled lady? She pulled her wrist free from Raven's tight grasp and said nothing, but the look of hatred in her eyes was a warning that Cordelia didn't consider this incident resolved until she got her satisfaction.

Later in the evening, Jamie stopped Raven on the stairs as she was going to her chamber. "You handled that like a warrior," he mused.

Raven had no doubt to what he referred. "She is treated as she would treat others. I will not stand for her abuse of the servants. It isn't her place to discipline them." Jamie gave no response. "Would you have stepped in if Andrew had stopped her?"

Jamie shrugged. "Would you have seen Gwen disciplined?" he asked as he lightly stroked one finger against Raven's cheek.

"There was no need. She clearly apologized for an accident that wasn't her fault." Raven pulled away from him. His

touch sent shivers spiraling through her.

“I need you, Raven,” he whispered as he feathered a kiss beneath her ear. “Stay the night with me. No one need know.” Light kisses trailed down her neck in invitation.

Raven closed her eyes a moment, reveling in the heady sensations. The idea was so very tempting. No one knew of the betrothal. They could be discreet. Raven opened her eyes, wondering what had gotten into her, then suddenly shoved him away. She kept her voice barely low enough so her words wouldn’t carry. “If your need is so great, I give you leave to seek out Lady Cordelia. I’m sure she would be most willing. I’m sure you will find her more entertaining in bed than in the great hall.”

She was angry. How dare he treat her this way! Her search for a particular scarred face brought her to the MacKay Clan—not a betrothal agreement, and certainly not a face she had seen in the clouds when she was a child. She was in charge of household security. She never gave him reason to believe there would be more, despite the written contract. She never made the agreement, her mother did, and she saw no reason why she should be held to an agreement made by others.

“If I wanted Cordelia, I would have gone to her long before this.”

“You’ve clearly had too much to drink if you think I would be willing to welcome you to my bedchamber. Our parents made this arrangement, not I. Good night, my lord.”

Jamie called softly after her. “You are a cold hearted wench, Raven MacDraoidh.”

Raven stopped long enough to glance back at him. “There is a simple solution to that problem, my lord. Set aside our betrothal and find someone more suitable to your needs. Lord

Carlisle is most anxious to have you sign the marriage contracts he sent to you. Perhaps you should rethink that decision.” Raven turned her back to the chieftain and continued to her chamber, realizing the admission she had just let slip. For the second time since they had met, she acknowledged the legal document standing between them—and the first time had been only to prove her identity. She tried to hide the fear she felt. What would he do now with her admission, if he’d caught it? Why did she continue to plague him with her jealous responses?

Raven stopped in the corridor, beyond Jamie’s sight. Jealous? Was she truly jealous of Cordelia? There was no reason to be, just as there was no comparison between her and the devious lady. Jamie was welcome to Cordelia and whatever she had to offer.

Jamie watched Raven stalk away, anger seething just beneath the surface. The time for playing games was over. The time for her to indulge in her fantasies was past. It was up to him to finally take control of the situation. In the last few days, he had conceived a plan to force her to acknowledge her responsibility to his clan, and he decided now was a good time to put it into action. In two days’ time, she would learn not to underestimate the Laird of Clan MacKay.

\* \* \* \*

Cordelia’s resentment of Raven’s constant presence within the keep walls grew steadily. Little did she know her resentment only served to immensely please the warrior woman. Raven was a thorn in Cordelia’s side, and the sooner it was plucked out, the better. Cordelia knew she was being watched, but she was willing to bide her time. Eventually she’d deal with the clumsy servant, but first things first. A lit-



tle help with the problem was what she needed.

Cordelia's brother, Gavin, seemed to spend most of his time in the great hall, eating and drinking, but never imbibing so much that he didn't know what was going on around him. This morning, for a change, she found him in the solar entertaining two maids with his outlandish tales. Sometimes, Cordelia envied him. Gaining someone's trust and admiration was a simple task for him, but his greatest satisfaction came when he had them under total control, using them as he wished. Attractive women were always the easiest to manipulate. "If it isn't asking too much, may I have a word with you, Gavin?"

"If you will excuse me, dear ladies." Gavin gave the maids a bow fit for royalty as they left the solar giggling.

"Really, Gavin, they are only maids and not deserving of your attention," she commented petulantly. "Why do you treat them as if they were deserving of more?"

"Where does all the gossip come from, dear sister?" he reminded her. He spoke as if she were a small child who had to be shown how to reason. "You will get more out of them if you treat them kindly... a small fact you seem to have forgotten." A look of resentment flickered across Cordelia's features at the subtle reminder of the ruined gown. She would get even with that servant. "Now what is so important you found it necessary to interrupt me?"

"What are you going to do about that female warrior? You came here with me to see to it Jamie finally signed the betrothal agreement, and you have done nothing toward that end. As long as that woman is around, she is a problem. I *will* be clan mistress—and the sooner the better."

"It isn't so simple, Cordelia. Raven MacDraoidh has become a problem I hadn't counted on. The laird has an unex-

pected interest in her, and I have yet to find out just what it is. It seems little is known about her, as if some magic conjured her up from nowhere.” Gavin paused a moment as if in deep thought.

“What do you know of this legend of the Draoidh I’ve heard some talk about? It seems she is somehow associated with it,” Gavin said, and sank into the high back chair near the hearth. He unconsciously began thrumming his fingers lightly on its arm while watching the expression on his sister’s face. Apparently, this was something she was unaware of. Scatter-brained Cordelia would never have thought to associate Raven with the legend. That amused him. He might never have thought of it himself, but he wasn’t about to admit it. In his defense, no one had heard of the Draoidh for many years. If not for him, his younger sister would never have anything in her life.

Gavin was willing to bet his quarterly allowance on Raven’s identity, but at this moment, thinking about the problem bored him. He sighed, and casually picked imaginary lint from his black doublet. “There must be something around here more entertaining than listening to the wind blow through the hall?”

“I don’t know anything about any legend, Gavin, but you had better get Jamie to sign that agreement soon. Papa is counting on you to convince MacKay it’s in his best interest to agree to the match.” Cordelia paced the solar, wishing she knew how to handle the situation herself. Coming on to Jamie wasn’t working. She saw how he treated other women who tried, and she didn’t want to become one of them. Her hints of late brought no satisfactory results. She had relied on others for so long—especially her brother—that she lacked the con-

fidence to take action herself.

“All in good time, dear sister, all in good time.” Gavin was all too aware of her dependence on him. Most of the time he found the situation tedious at best, but this once, she would prove herself useful to his own plans. He didn’t really care if she married Jamie or not, but a plan within a plan was not so easily discovered. Yes, this betrothal would suit his needs just fine. Gavin got up from the chair and placed a brotherly kiss on Cordelia’s forehead, then strolled out of the solar in search of something more interesting to occupy his time. Perhaps one of the maids he was flirting with earlier would be free for...

Gavin entered his chambers and left the door slightly ajar behind him. He was busy looking for something and failed to hear the footsteps creeping into his room, or the door latch catching quietly. The hairs on the back of his neck stood, and he spun about to face the intruder. A lascivious smile spread across his face. “How did you know I was about to seek you out?” he asked huskily and slipped his arms about his visitor’s waist. “You could not have arrived at a more propitious moment.” He backed away and sauntered toward the door.

“Where are you going?” she asked, afraid he was about to leave.

He slid the bolt home and returned to her. “You didn’t think I would leave you here, feeling needy?” He bowed his head closer to hers, wanting to taste her red lips.

“Of course not,” she replied, her voice sultry and inviting. “You wouldn’t dare.”

## **Chapter 10**

Raven was in a good mood, in spite of the fact Andrew had already sent her from the training field for the day. She had done well and was making steady progress in regaining her skills and strength. When she wasn't concentrating, the younger men were able to toss her about like a sack of flour. One young man was horrified at having flipped a woman over his back. Raven had caught her breath and let him help her up from the thick grass at her back. In turn she'd grabbed his arm, and with a sudden kick to his stomach, flipped him over her head before she got up—a move she'd learned from Jamie—the hard way. Her opponent landed on his back with a thud and had the wind knocked out of him. The others laughed, and she'd felt better with her small success.

With nothing of import to deal with, she wandered into the kitchens to see what was going on, and how the supper preparations fared. She stayed longer than she intended. Laughter erupted from the kitchen help as she told whimsical stories of loves lost, battles won and dragons slain. The kitchen maids watched wide-eyed as she dashed spices into the mutton stew as if preparing a spell, as she spoke of love potions. They marveled at the sense of humor they had never be-

fore seen. "...truth to tell," she declared at the end of one tale, and the help laughed uproariously.

The aroma of freshly baked bread filled the kitchen as two lads used wide paddles to shuffle the loaves from oven to table. For a moment, Raven was transported back in time to those days when she tried to snatch rolls from Martha without getting caught.

One lad stopped a moment and, looking at Raven, asked quietly, "Can you tell us the Legend of the Druids?"

Raven wiped her hands on a linen cloth and studied the boy. "And what would you have heard about that?" she asked, surprised the subject should be brought up.

"Only that they exist in secret and cause trouble for the clans." He looked at Raven, now unsure that he should have said anything. Overhearing Lady Cordelia's brother asking questions of the maids had roused his curiosity.

Raven looked up and exchanged glances with Annie, who had been bringing out honey crocks. *Truth to tell—almost*, Annie thought and saw Raven's imperceptible nod.

"So. It's the tale of the Druid Legend you'll be wantin.' Well, I can give you the tale as it was told to me when I was a wee lass. It seems the druids are an odd people, the strangest anyone has ever looked upon."

"Like you," another child piped up.

"Many druids lived here in the past. Some of you might even have druid forefathers in the long ago," Raven shrugged, and replied with a knowing smile. "It's said they can see everything the highland clans do, good or bad, and that they can often control a man's thoughts and actions. That is, if they've a mind to. More often than not, they would not interfere in the goings on of the clans. 'Tis said that one day, a druid will

be chosen to rule Scotland—”

“That’s treason!” the boy gasped.

“Perhaps,” Raven agreed. “They believe men didn’t have the sense to rule themselves, that only the druids had the wit and wisdom to do so, and thereby unite the clans against the English. I don’t know if that’s possible, or even a wise thing to wonder about. They test every generation, searching for the one who would serve their needs. I believe it’s a bad idea supported by good intentions. ’Tis only a tale, but tales tend to have a wee bit of truth in them.” She sighed, then gave the boy a rare smile. “Now we’ll be gettin’ back to work. There’s still much to be done before the laird is served his supper.”

Raven turned her attention to the hot stew and began filling bowls. Did she do the right thing, revealing a bit of the legend? It would be interesting to see who would accept and who would scoff at the tale. Servants being who they were, she knew her words would travel fairly quickly throughout the keep and undoubtedly beyond. There would be speculation about her true identity—that was what she counted on most. Those who believed might well lend support when they were needed. Those who did not, could easily be manipulated to her needs. This might be a way to find some clue to the man who haunted her past. Scarface might be dead by the hand of another, but the man who led the soldiers that day could very well still be alive. Until she discovered his identity, her promise to her mother would never be fulfilled.

Raven didn’t like to use people, but she had learned long ago it was sometimes necessary. She wanted to know who could be trusted before anyone else learned she was now the essence of the legend. Most of the servants believed she was an unusually attractive lass caught under bad circumstances,

who had drawn the attention of their laird. She meant to keep it that way as long as she could. No one need know she was really Lady Raven MacDraoidh, the reluctant betrothed to the laird of Castle MacKay.

## **Chapter 11**

The great hall rang with laughter. Wine and ale flowed freely, adding to the high spirits. Venison and wild boar were plentiful, along with cheeses and breads, followed by sweet deserts that were made only for special occasions. Sensing Raven's discomfort over the promise to make changes, Jamie decided now was the time to make his announcement. He glanced at her as she sat with other warriors, paying little attention to the conversation around her.

Cordelia sat next to him on the dais, sure of her position in the castle. Jamie had hinted earlier at having made a decision about the betrothal contract, and she was more than ready to assume what she concluded was her rightful place by his side. She had put special effort into her appearance for this feast. Her blonde hair hung loosely as befitted a maid. Her pale blue velvet gown enhanced her slender figure. Her cheeks held a rosy blush. She was sure it was in anticipation of the announcement. It surely could not have been the wine she had nervously drunk, waiting for him to speak. Once he told his people of their betrothal, she would find a way to be rid of that terrible female warrior. Even now, the woman had the nerve to sit with the soldiers and stare at her, as if she had a



smudge on her face. If that woman wanted to be treated like a man, then she would be banished to the barracks and live with them. Soon, Cordelia assured herself.

Refilling his goblet, Jamie stood and waited for everyone's attention. "As you know," he began when everyone was quiet, "a few months ago a stranger came to Castle MacKay. She offered her services as a warrior to our clan. There were those who doubted her skills and there are a few who still doubt, but I'm sure she will win them over eventually. She has been more than welcome. But...I tell you this now, she is no longer just a warrior. I expect you will give her the same respect you give me. May I present to you all tonight, the new mistress of Castle MacKay, my wife, the Lady Raven MacKay."

Soldiers and peasants alike were struck dumb for a moment, and the great hall's occupants stared in surprise. They had not expected to hear this sort of announcement. A betrothal, perhaps—but a marriage? One that had stood secretly for years? Raven glowered at him, not at all pleased. Cordelia sputtered with anger. "Surely you jest, my lord!" she whispered furiously. "Your words cannot be taken seriously. My father has offered you my hand in marriage, and you bind yourself to someone like that? This cannot be a true marriage. You have made a fool of me, my lord."

"It's unfortunate," Raven added as she stalked to the dais, "but I must agree with Lady Cordelia. We are not bound as you claim."

Jamie slapped the document in question onto the table and invited both women to read it. Cordelia grew angry, and Raven paled.

"You made a fool of yourself, Cordelia. I never made any

promises to you,” Jamie whispered, wishing to spare her any further embarrassment. “You made too many assumptions—and it is a true marriage arranged by our parents many years ago. We have never told anyone of it, but I find it must be made known now. There are no secrets between my wife and me, and I’ll no longer keep it from my people.”

“We were betrothed,” Raven insisted. “Betrothals can be broken.”

“Read it again. We were married, Raven, to protect you. Your mother must have had some idea you would try to break the contract, so she saw to it no paths leading in that direction were left open to you.”

A memory intruded in Raven’s mind. A little girl holding a bunch of wilted flowers, her small hand crushing their short stems. An older boy looking down at her with a scowl on his face, blue eyes filled with resentment. Raven closed her eyes. He was right. What she always thought was a simple betrothal was, in reality, a legal marriage. Granted her mother had stood proxy and signed for her, but it was no less legal than if she had signed the documents herself.

Whispers began to multiply throughout the hall. Their chieftain was wedded to this strange woman. To end the speculations, Andrew stepped forward and spoke to Jamie, loud enough for his voice to carry. “My congratulations on your marriage, my lord.” Barely whispering, he added, “’Tis about time you did something about it.” He turned to Raven and, bowed to her. “Lady Raven, you have my best wishes and full support. Any thing you wish, you have but to ask.”

“Your chieftain’s head on a pike,” she mumbled sourly. Andrew tried unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh as he backed away. “Thank you, Andrew,” she replied politely as she at-

tempted to hide the dark feelings controlling her at the moment. Cheers rang out while crofters and servants stepped forward to welcome their new mistress to the clan.

When the cheering settled down, Raven realized she didn't like the dark thoughts crowding her mind. Neither did she like the way Jamie seemed to be gaining control of her life. He had no right to do that to her. No one controlled a Draoidh, and no one controlled her—least of all the man who claimed to be her husband. It was time to regain her own control and act as if the announcement held no importance—because to her, it didn't.

Her only satisfaction was to watch Cordelia leave the hall in a huff of anger, followed by her companion. In a way, Raven didn't blame the woman, but there would be the devil to pay. Gavin remained seated and continued to drink his wine. Raven wished she could read his thoughts. He was up to something. Gavin noted Raven staring at him, and with a slight nod of his head and knowing smirk, he held up his goblet in a mock salute.

Raven refused to let anyone else witness her displeasure with Jamie's surprise announcement. "If you will permit me, my lord..." Raven's moods were like quicksilver, and a look of mischief quickly replaced the brooding in her eyes. Jamie nodded slowly, and she turned away. What was she up to now?

As she walked away from the dais, she tugged at her linen shirt, a sure sign she was up to something. Most of the tables had been cleared away to make room for entertainment. Raven sauntered seductively to one of Jamie's guards and, standing before him, looked up into his eyes, her hands resting lightly on her slender hips. She read his thoughts. She was the

chieftain's wife, and he was beginning to panic. How could she act so wantonly after the laird had just announced their marriage? The guard stepped back warily, and as he did so, she slipped his sword from its sheath, then turned the blade to the guard's chest. No one moved. Beads of sweat stood out on his face as he stared at her uncertainly.

*Serve him right*, Raven thought as she stepped back and the corner of her mouth turned up slightly. *He should be afraid. Next time, he'll pay more attention to his weapon.* After a moment's hesitation, she held up the sword in a salute, then held out her hand for another guard's blade as well.

Raven stood back from everyone, crossed the swords over her head, and quickly placed them on the floor. She was grateful they weren't the huge claymores, but they were still too heavy to be held up for long. These swords were lighter than the usual weapons the men kept by their sides.

She was aware Jamie watched her, never before having seen this side of her. Let him wonder who she really was. With one hand on her hip and the other gracefully over her head, she looked at the musician. "Piper, if you please..." The skirl of bagpipes started slowly, and Raven began the intricate steps of a sword dance. It was a difficult dance that required skill and concentration. One wrong move could result in serious injury. The music picked up speed, and Raven matched the pace. Her steps were light, and she barely seemed to touch the floor as she moved around the crossed blades. While she continued to dance, her attention was drawn to the sound of laughter. Her feet continued the lightning quick steps as she looked at Jamie. He was pleased and saluted her with his cup of ale. Her rare bright smile slowly disappeared, and her footsteps slackened as the piper's tune faded from her

ears. She stared, as if in a trance, at a shimmering image of a silver dagger behind Jamie's left shoulder. A slender hand held the weapon and rose, as if preparing to plunge it into his broad back. The hand seemed to change, and the blade was turned upright in a salute, then faded away. Raven briefly closed her eyes and swayed slightly.

"Is something wrong, Raven?" Jamie asked as he stood before her. Aiden stood by his side, concern evident in his features.

She slowly opened her eyes and stared at them for a long moment, having no idea how they'd come this close without her being aware of their movement. "Nay, my lord. It's been a long time since I've danced like that." Moving aside, she reached down quickly to grab the hilts of the swords, and presented them to their owners. "I thank you, good sirs, for the use of your weapons." The guards laughed, a hint of nervousness in the sound, and bowed to her. She turned to Jamie and spoke lightly. "If you will excuse me, my lord, it's been a long day, and I find I'm quite exhausted."

Raven returned to her chambers and thought about what she had seen. The hand that held the knife was not as it appeared and seemed to change as it rose to strike. In its downward path, it changed again, and she'd noticed it was like that of the clan brooch Jamie wore with his plaid. The hand was small, definitely feminine. Raven realized with dread that a woman was going to bring about events to cripple the clan, or worse, bring about near disaster, with perhaps more far-reaching results. But it was also a woman who would bring the situation back to rights.

It had been years since the sight had come to Raven, and it always unsettled her when it happened. She knew only too

well that visions were not always clear, and sometimes they failed to come to pass. For the most part, events had to unfold naturally in their own time. She knew these events would affect many lives, but had no idea what her part in it would be. She was certain Jamie was at the heart of it. Too many people would unknowingly depend on the choices she would make—or *were* they hers to make? She pushed aside the premonition, knowing only it was not the time to consider it. She had a more important matter to deal with at the moment.

\* \* \* \*

Raven became furious when she turned her thoughts to events of the day. The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. She paced the length of her chamber. How could he have done this to her? She had to say something about the Draoidh. Only Aiden, Jamie, Andrew and Annie knew that about her, but she had made a point of not saying anything of what she believed to be their betrothal. She had hoped to keep her true identity a secret from everyone else until she had found the MacDraoidh clan slayer. When Jamie failed to mention the fact of an actual marriage at their first meeting, her hopes had soared that he hadn't realized who she was. If he had known, at least he hadn't said anything, but it was only a matter of time before people put it all together.

She stopped her pacing when realization struck her. Earlier in the evening he'd said nothing about a betrothal, but had announced their marriage. Raven frantically searched for her copy of the document and reread it more closely than when Jamie had insisted, or Martha had first handed it over to her. It was a proxy marriage certificate, but legally binding. She was his wife in every way but one. Her fury increased. "How could you have done this to me, Mama?"

Raven listened to approaching voices. Cordelia's laughter was barely audible through the thick hall. Was she still angry over the turn of events? At the moment, it didn't sound like it, but Raven couldn't tell for sure. She was sure Cordelia and her brother Gavin were only a small part of the problem, one Raven could do without. A door opened and shut quietly. Cordelia wasn't alone. So much for marriage, Raven snickered.

Using the connecting door, Raven entered Jamie's chamber but found it empty. Had he decided to take her suggestion and go to Cordelia? She wouldn't be surprised. No, that wouldn't make sense after his announcement earlier this evening. The thought of that declaration rekindled her anger. Why should she care if he availed himself of Cordelia's company, as well as her charms?

If Raven were to be totally honest with herself, she would acknowledge the attraction she felt for Jamie. The problem was she didn't *want* to feel anything for him. He stood in the way of her keeping her promise to her mother. She went to the side table and poured a goblet of wine, then made herself comfortable in the chair by the hearth and waited.

When Jamie entered his chambers a while later, Raven was sipping her second cup of wine. Her anger hadn't cooled a bit. If anything, it was slowly simmering. He was aware of a pair of knee-high boots stretched out before the hearth. He grimaced when he sensed her anger. She wasn't the only one angry, but he'd had his own reasons for announcing their marriage. It was long past time to put aside games.

Raven leaned over the arm of the chair and eyed him malevolently. "What, my lord, possessed you to tell everyone we were married?"

“So, you do admit you were aware of the fact.”

“I thought it was only a betrothal, but that is beside the point. Do you not realize the danger you create for your people? Do you realize you have now rendered my own plans as worthless?”

Jamie stepped over to the chair and took the goblet from her hand. “How much of this have you had?” he asked, ignoring her question. He finished the little wine that remained in the vessel. He wasn’t used to having his decisions questioned by anyone, especially a woman.

“Not nearly enough. I want an answer, MacKay.”

“You demand nothing, my lady. Did it not occur to you that you should be taking your rightful place by my side, as mistress of the keep? There are responsibilities I would share with you that I could not if you were only a warrior.” He leaned over her until she felt his warm breath against her cheek.

“Andrew is your second in command. It’s his place to share that responsibility if it should become necessary.” Raven’s heart began to pound, and she knew she had to get away from him quickly. She forced him to back away, and stood before him. “Do you know anything about the Legend? By telling people I’m your wife, you place your clan in jeopardy.”

“As my wife and clan mistress, there is less likelihood of an attempt being made on your life. Now you have the protection of the guard instead of being one of them.”

“I don’t need or want their protection. What kind of warrior would I be if I’m forced to allow your guardsmen to extend your protection to me?”

“You would remain a live warrior,” he replied quietly, his voice dropping to just above a whisper. “I want to make use of



your skills, Raven, but I would be limited if you remain as you have been. I would not be able to explain your presence during certain matters.”

“I cannot accept this logic of yours. You leave too much to chance.”

“Chance? How do you explain that?”

“By being overprotective, you leave yourself vulnerable.”

“Don’t you think I’ve taken all that into consideration?”

Raven looked up at him with something akin to pain in her eyes. How could she ever make him understand? She didn’t think there was any way. What was done was done. She’d have to deal with it as best she could. “Good night, my lord.” Raven headed for the connecting door.

“Raven...” Jamie called to her and she stopped, but didn’t turn. “Tomorrow is the quarterly assize. I expect you to be in the great hall, by my side.”

Raven bowed her head, as if in resignation, then entered her own chamber. She quietly closed the door behind her and shot the bolt.

\* \* \* \*

Several people were in the great hall, breaking their fast, their light conversation no more than an annoying buzz. Raven leaned back in her chair and rested her cheek in her palm. Her eyes drifted closed. Jamie deliberately bumped her arm, knocking it from the chair arm, jolting her awake. “Good morning, my lady,” he greeted her cheerfully, after sitting beside her.

Raven ignored his good mood. Her own temper still smoldered from the previous night. She turned her attention to the small groups of villagers wandering into the great hall. They found places to sit and carry on their conversations.

Tables had been set up, leaving a center aisle in front of the dais for hearing complaints. She wondered how she had ended up here and mentally chided herself. She had trusted Jamie to keep his word and not say anything about their betrothal—an agreement that turned out to be a marriage contract. All it needed was her signature, which Jamie had insisted on the night before. All these years, her mother's signature had stood in place of her own. Cordelia had left in a huff, while her brother remained, drinking wine, silently watching the celebration. Replaying the last evening's events in her mind wouldn't make it go away, as much as she would have liked it to.

Cordelia had breakfast sent to her chambers and refused to come down to the great hall. Just as well, Raven thought—one less problem to deal with at the moment. Gavin sat at the end of the table on the dais. His dark eyes stared at her, but his features remained bland. Raven felt a chill race along her spine and looked away from him. What was it about him that made her wary? She was grateful when Andrew called the assembly to order.

Jamie leaned toward her, but kept his gaze on the assembly. "I need you to use your 'special talents' while I judge cases," he half-whispered.

"Why?"

"I will explain later. It's better if I don't influence your impressions." He sat back and gave his attention to the first complaint.

Soldiers wandered in and sat at far tables. Many were yawning, either from having been relieved of late-night guard duty, or reluctantly roused from their beds to face the day. Everything faded from her sight and hearing except for Ja-

mie's men. She sensed something, and it piqued her curiosity. Sitting straighter in her chair, she focused on their thoughts, fascinated. Her own thoughts whirled about in her head, and she toyed with possibilities. *Was this the way to improve security*, she wondered, recalling the one night she was able to sneak in and out of the castle without being detected. Granted, she had advantages over them, but maybe that could be changed.

Raven's attention returned to the complaints being made. While she listened to them and asked herself why Jamie required her presence, she decided how to test the soldiers.

Two men stepped forward and bowed their heads in respect. *Do you know these men?* Raven sent the question to Jamie's mind.

Jamie glanced at her, surprised to have her question in his head. *No, they're strangers here.*

*I don't like what I feel from them.*

"What brings you to MacKay lands?" he asked the strangers.

"We seek work, my lord."

"Where do you come from?"

"We were a week in Glasgow," the taller of the two spoke up, "then we took to the road again."

With an elbow resting on his chair arm, Jamie absently rubbed at his chin.

*Give them work in the stables. Your stable master could use the help. In the meantime, we can keep an eye on them. They hide the purpose that has brought them here.*

*Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer*, advised a voice Raven hadn't heard in a while. *I've been watching them, dear girl*, Meredith commented casually.

*What do you know of them?* Raven asked.

*Only that they're trouble. You do right sending them to the stables where they can do little damage.*

Raven nodded slightly. She was vaguely aware of the men glancing at Gavin. One man nodded imperceptibly. Raven tossed it off as nothing, then turned her attention to the soldiers milling about the hall. *Hmm. Now this is interesting.* Raven watched several guards standing about as if waiting for something. Had they been summoned? There seemed to be more than usual at any given time, and they appeared to be restless. So intent was her curiosity in them, she failed to hear Jamie close the court, until the guards, grumbling about being kept waiting for no reason, rose to leave.

*Hold.* She called to their minds, and four stopped to look around. Raven couldn't say why she had issued the command, or in that way, but now that she had, an idea began to form in her mind. She made a mental note of the four who had responded to the silent command. Added to that, Andrew stared at her oddly. She was on to something. Perhaps this was the way to improve security. She wanted to give the idea a few days to ferment, before taking any action.

*You always said you wanted to change the way the Draoidh did business. Looks like you might have found a way.*

Raven held back a grin. Meredith's compliments were rare, and she'd take whatever her mentor had to offer.

## Chapter 12

“Don’t expect us back for a few days,” Jamie told Andrew. “I’m sure you can deal with any problems that might arise.”

Andrew raised one eyebrow. “I’m sure I can muddle along, lad.”

That brief conversation took place several hours earlier, after Jamie had concluded the clan court. Jamie had no real interest in hunting today despite what he’d told Andrew, but he didn’t want to reveal he was more interested in getting better acquainted with this woman he called wife—and he wanted no distractions. He had to confess, last night’s surprise announcement had forced her into a situation she wasn’t ready to take on, but he had the clan’s best interests to consider first. He was beginning to think of her as a cut gem, with many facets to her personality. He would never be bored with her, because he never knew what to expect next.

Once she seemed to have put aside her anger, she’d been bursting with energy and enthusiasm, and danced until she was exhausted. The sword dance was dangerous and far from simple, but she had executed the steps with grace and confidence. Her reasoning for cutting it short didn’t make sense to

him. She seemed vulnerable, yet the hidden rage still dwelt beneath the surface, and he wondered why it remained. Was there something more than what she'd let on?

Those of the Draoidh, as they were called, brought distrust to many people. Was she the witch the legend also spoke of? Did she really want to see the highland clans unite and live in peace? She was fascinating, and at the same time, not someone he could trust completely. Yet he'd been more than willing to honor the marriage contracts agreed on by their parents. Jamie didn't like the way these facts warred with each other in his mind. He meant to settle matters once and for all time, and find out exactly what she was up to.

He watched her carefully as she stepped silently and seemed to glide through the forest underbrush. He studied the soft angles of her face. Leave it to her to defy tradition. Secretly, he didn't mind at all. The sight of her kilt swinging gracefully about her slender hips made him smile in appreciation. The wool plaid stockings emphasized her long slender legs. Her light deliberate steps spoke of a self-confidence and determination she rarely showed anyone.

Raven stopped at the edge of a clearing when she spotted a young stag on a hill. He stood still, sniffing the air, his proud head displaying a crown of antlers. His soft coat looked like velvet, and his large black eyes remained alert. He stood motionless for a few moments, then a horse's whinny sent him fleeing to the protection of the deeper forest. Raven watched him disappear, then saw five riders come into view.

The riders stopped in almost the exact spot where the stag had been. After a brief conversation they split up into two groups and rode off in opposite directions. Raven watched silently, listening to their thoughts. These men belonged to An-

gus Sutherland and were out raiding. She recognized the two riders who had attacked her and left her for dead. They were a mere few yards away from where she now stood. They had killed the one man she needed to question. She felt as if they were trying to goad her into doing something foolish, but she intended to repay them for their deeds.

They were also looking for her now, she'd discovered as she picked up their thoughts before they rode out of sight. They knew that somehow she had survived the attack, and Angus wanted her. A stray thought intruded. There was someone else, someone more powerful looking for her as well. Angus knew who and what she was and wanted her found before she could fulfill her duty to her family. Angus wanted her for his own purposes, then he planned to make a deal for her with this other person. At least Raven wouldn't get caught again unaware. If only a name was revealed, she could make short work of this vendetta and get on with the rest of her life. Now that she thought about it, what *was* there for her, once she fulfilled her promise to her mother? When her fury had abated, she realized she really wasn't sure how she felt about the marriage and the recent turn of events.

Jamie quietly approached Raven from behind, forgetting what had happened the last time someone had made the same move. She was in another time and place when she whirled around in a half crouch, a *sgian dhu* in her hand. The three-inch weapon was just as deadly as any dagger. She watched him warily, but she saw one of her attackers. She waited for him to come closer and slashed out when he made a move.

He cursed himself for forgetting what Raven had done to the soldier who had come up behind her, shortly after she'd arrived at Castle MacKay. She was fast and, at the moment,

very dangerous. He waited cautiously for her to move against him. Aiden had trained her well. Raven slashed at him again, and he grabbed her wrist. He squeezed it until the numbness forced her to drop the small weapon. In a continuous motion, he spun her around and effectively locked her arms within his own. Raven kicked furiously, trying to free herself from his iron embrace, but only succeeded in tiring herself out. She'd never get free kicking air.

"A lesson, my lady wife," he whispered when her movements slowed. "For every action you take, there is always another action to answer it. Was that not included in your training?"

Raven came to herself and ceased fighting him. Having confronted her demons after the last attack she'd withstood, she would have thought she'd feel more at ease with herself. Instinct and self-preservation had taken over. There was no imminent danger, that she should be casting aside careful thought and planning. It was a rare occasion when someone bested her in a confrontation, since she'd learned many tricks to make up for her smaller size. None would work now. She didn't know why she had turned on her husband. On second thought, yes she did. She bowed her head and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry, Jamie. I didn't think," she apologized, and waited for him to ease his hold on her.

A more pleasant sensation replaced her anger when she felt the warm kisses trailing down the side of her neck. She became aware of his desire for her as she turned her head to give him more access. His grip over her arms became a gentle embrace. She felt an answering heat whirling within her.

Jamie slowly turned Raven about to face him and studied her features. Her eyes were darker, almost black, but he



knew the Draoidh were not hidden through tricks. If either of them had had doubts before about acknowledging their arranged marriage, those doubts were gone. “Come, my lady. I know of a little-used place we can go and not be disturbed. Raven placed her smaller hand in his and followed him into the clearing, knowing full well, she could trust him with her life. Whether or not she would, was another matter.

The small cottage was neatly hidden among the trees, with a side shelter to protect their horses. While Jamie saw to their mounts, Raven surveyed their surroundings. The scent of pine floated on the light breeze whispering through the trees. A blanket of needles carpeted the earth. A few feet behind the cottage, a small brook gurgled as it flowed over water-polished stones lying in its bed. The peaceful spot reminded her of the home Martha had made for them after...

Inside the cottage, Jamie put the saddlebags in a corner and set about lighting a fire in the hearth. Anyone using a cottage like this was expected to replenish firewood or other supplies used so it would be ready for the next traveler who searched for shelter.

Raven stood before the hearth as the kindling caught fire and allowed herself to become mesmerized by the growing flames. She could stay here forever in this peaceful solitude. Such a contrast to the anger she had felt the previous night when he announced their marriage—and the shock on Cordelia’s face had been priceless. How could Raven reconcile her anger and such peace? Could there be more to this marriage than a sense of duty? To be able to shut out the rest of the world and remain here with this man who was her husband was all she’d ask for—at least for the moment. She released a soft sigh, knowing she asked too much. Her responsibilities

would never allow her to have a quiet, peaceful life. Her very existence put others at risk. Better to be seen as hard and uncaring, than to see others hurt because of her. She wanted to shut away that other existence, just for the night, long enough to enjoy the taste of a normal life. After that, she knew she should walk away from it.

When the fire was burning brightly, Jamie stood and drew Raven closer, wrapping his arms about her. He wanted to protect her from whatever demons haunted her. He wanted to love her, keep her safe. He wanted *her*. He was amazed he could love such a complicated woman. He wanted what every other man desired from life—hearth, home, a good woman by his side, and an heir to carry on after him. Jamie regretted surprising her the way he had the night before, reneging on his promise to keep their marriage a secret until she was ready to fulfill her part of the contract. He had a feeling that, if matters were left up to her, she'd manage to find a way out of the agreement made by their parents. Whether or not he could convince Raven to share a lifetime with him remained to be seen.

Raven tentatively rested her cheek against his chest, and her arms slowly wound about his waist. "I'm sorry, Jamie," she whispered. "Turning on someone in that manner has become second nature to me. I don't think about it anymore, I only react."

"I understand your reasoning." He reached up and cupped her face between his warm palms. His thumbs gently glided across her cheekbones. "But you have to learn to let go of the past, and stay your hand when there is no threat. Don't worry, Raven, you are safe with me. No harm will come to you." He removed her cap and toyed with a small curl, gently pull-

ing it, only to have it spring back. It was like her, willing to go a different way, only to snap back to its original form. Warm kisses touched her soft cheeks and brushed away the tears in her eyes. His kisses blazed a path from her ear, along her jaw and across her lips. His hands explored the curve of her spine and pressed gently against the small of her back. The small flame he was eager to ignite within her threatened to engulf him. "Come, my lady wife," he whispered in her ear, "there is no one to disturb us, and I have much to teach you."

\* \* \* \*

Raven slept, nestled within Jamie's arms. She had been well trained as a warrior, but until last night, knew nothing of the ways of lovers. Jamie's patience and gentleness had been well rewarded with her eagerness to please him, but now, her dreams became a whirlpool of color and sound. Pale faces were surrounded by thick black hair, and many pairs of black eyes focused on her. She refused to let phantoms from the past intimidate her. The many voices faded away as one became prominent. *You have done your duty, my wee Raven*, her mother spoke gently from a distance, and yet sounded so close. *It's time you return to your home in Dun Sgiath and take up your duties. You must leave him now.*

*No, mother.* Raven whispered to the dream image. *I love him. I won't go back without him.*

*You must. After having been betrayed once, it has become the way of the MacDraoidhs for generations and will be forever. You must return where you will be safe.*

*Safe as you were? I won't leave him. I'll not go back. I'll not go back,* she whimpered in her sleep.

"Raven, you're safe. Wake up, lass. You're safe." Jamie's voice penetrated her dream, bringing her back to reality. He eased

her head to rest against his shoulder and stroked her hair.

For the first time she could remember, Raven trembled with fear, and clung to him, trying to shake off her mother's command. She refused to tell Jamie what had upset her. Telling him would do no good.

"It was only a dream, *mo cridh*." He knew when his gentle kisses succeeded in turning away the fear from her mind. Her response relit the flame that had burned between them hours before. Jamie wasn't as adept as Raven at reading minds, but wherever 'back' was, he'd do everything he could to keep her close by his side. 'Back' could only mean more trouble.

When Jamie slept again, Raven thought about the dream. Her mother's words made her head hurt. She'd already come to the conclusion her headaches were due to her refusal to remember the past—something rather important. Why would her mother insist she go back to a place where she didn't feel safe? Raven sighed softly, and renewed her determination to do what *she* believed to be right.

\* \* \* \*

Days flew by, filled with loving and laughter, but underneath it all, Raven hid the growing headaches. Side by side, they explored their surroundings. Jamie showed her well-hidden places that had been favorite haunts of his when he was a boy. He'd never had anyone to show them to—until now, and it gave him great pleasure to share them with her.

Jamie decided to stop at a tavern for the night, since they'd started out later than he'd planned. "You are at fault," he told his wife as they dismounted, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "If you weren't so charming, we might have been on our way as planned."

Raven blushed profusely and spoke up in a huff. "Do not

lay that at my door! Where is that well-known resistance you are so proud of?" she teased, then winced. A flicker of pain shone in her eyes but vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

When they arrived, Jamie was both surprised and pleased to see two old friends he'd fostered with years earlier. They hadn't changed, preferring to hold on to the devil-may-care attitude of their youth. They teased Jamie over his 'newfound' seriousness since becoming his clan's chieftain. The three men reminisced on their misbegotten past, leaving Raven's attention to wander.

The tavern's single room remained in partial dimness. Several tallow candles burned slowly, causing shadows to dance on grimy walls. The smell of sour ale and old grease tainted the air. Voices from other tables occasionally rose in anger or laughter. The barmaid scurried back and forth serving food and drinks, while trying to avoid sly pinches and roaming hands.

A fist hitting the table startled Raven, bringing her to the present. Dylan MacLeod studied the woman sitting across from him and sipped his ale. "Is it true you are a soldier?" he asked in mock belief.

Raven returned his steady gaze, bored with foolish questions. He was no different than other men, believing women were only good for childbearing and cooking. That attitude continued to irk her.

*Where I come from, your attitude would fit in quite nicely,* a familiar voice whispered in her head. Raven didn't appreciate Meredith's comments at the moment.

"Go away," she mumbled.

"My lady?" Dylan asked, not sure he'd heard her correctly.

"I am. A fighter," she added, determined not to let her ir-

ritation show. A perusal of his thoughts proved she was right about him.

"You should be at home, minding your embroidery, and leave the fighting to men," he continued verbally jabbing at her.

"I'll wager I sew a wound better than I sew a fine seam." The conversation did nothing for her simmering temper. Neither did Jamie's silence. Raven didn't have the patience to deal with fools, but she understood he was only part of the anger she held back.

She caught a glimpse of Jamie's thoughts. *So. He also believes it's past time for me to learn my proper place.*

*I am in my proper place,* her thoughts shot back to him. *Proper for this time in my life.*

Jamie winced. "My wife—" he spoke quietly, intending to end Dylan's not-so-subtle interest, despite his words to the contrary. "My wife is a warrior above all else. There are things she must see to before she settles down to home and hearth."

Raven stood, not taking her gaze from Jamie. There was a hint of bitterness in his voice. She understood the remark for the subtle complaint it was meant to be. She gave her plaid a quick tug, a sure sign her anger was barely controlled. "I'm sure you gentlemen can carry on without me. I will see to our rooms. My lord..." She gave Jamie a slight nod, spun on her heel and marched out of the taproom.

Dylan's cousin, Allen, who had remained silent all this time, chuckled approvingly. "Your lass has a great deal of fire, Jamie. Hold on to her, but don't get burned in the holding." Allen leaned forward in his seat. "Is she as good as I've heard...as a warrior, that is?" he added quickly. "Is it true she

took on three English soldiers?” His face flushed when he realized his meaning could be easily misconstrued.

Jamie sighed and finished his drink. “You heard right, ’tho I believe she got the worst of it in that one. She does have her own sort of tricks to make up for her lack of size.” Jamie stood and finished his drink, putting an abrupt end to the conversation. “We should be on our way. We have a great distance to travel yet.” He shook hands with his former mates, then headed up the steps to find their rooms for the night. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be there either. Raven’s silence could burn just as well as a tirade. But this time, silence won out.

\* \* \* \*

Jamie hesitated a moment then entered their room where he found Raven staring out the window. “What’s got you so upset this time?” His hands slowly glided up and down her arms.

Raven stiffened at his touch, then spun around to face him. “How dare you speak of me as if I were a mere possession of yours? I can see I’m not worthy of respect...not yours or your friends.”

“You are given greater respect than most warriors I know, and that for your skills alone, not for any experience on a battlefield. But they were right. You ignore your duties as mistress of Clan MacKay. It’s time you took your proper place.” Raven ignored him and turned to pick up her saddlebags from where they lay near the door. “Where are you going?”

“Anywhere that isn’t here. I’ll not provide you and your friends with entertainment.”

“You will not leave without me, madam.”

Raven whirled and tossed the dirk sheathed at her waist.

Jamie ducked as the blade whooshed through the air, close to his head. The dagger quivered in the wall. "If I meant to hit you..." Her words trailed off, her meaning clear. She gave him a contemptuous glare and stalked out of the room.

Jamie pulled the dirk from the wall, wondering if he would ever understand her. Her lightning-quick moods were too much. It was long past time she settled into the more secure role of clan mistress.

Raven went to the stable and saddled her horse, intending to take advantage of the fading daylight. Castle MacKay was a three-day ride at a good pace, but she wasn't sure she wanted to return there just yet. She needed to put distance between herself and Jamie, and his friends.

She couldn't abide being with them.

She headed north, urging her mount to greater speed. Her short black hair flew about her face, but was barely noticeable in the moonlit darkness. Starfire answered her signal to run full out and Raven blinked back unwelcome tears, blaming them on the wind.

She wouldn't cry, she told herself. Warriors didn't cry. She should have laughed at their criticism, but she hadn't. She'd gotten angry. They'd thought little of her, and one man was determined to control her life. She should be grateful that up till now she'd been able to make her own choices. She'd never had a father or brothers to exert control over her, but now she did have a husband, and she was beginning to resent him.

Raven slowed her mount's pace. There was nothing to be gained by killing her mare because she was angry with Jamie. She heard her mother's voice offering council. *Go back to the beginning to find the answers you seek. What you find will be the key*



*to your future.* Raven changed direction and headed for an empty crofter's hut about an hour's ride away.

\* \* \* \*

Raven pulled her plaid about her and built up the fire in the fireplace. Where was the beginning to which she must return? There were so many beginnings in her life. One answer stood out, and she didn't want to accept it.

She ignored Jamie when he entered the croft some time later and tossed his saddlebags into a corner of the room. "You sorely try my patience, my lady," he said calmly. He stood by the hearth and held out his hands to warm them. "One day, I'll not follow you." She continued to ignore him. "What does it take to reach you?" he asked with a weary sigh. "You are my wife, Raven, but these past few months I have watched you become a stranger. I understand you less now than that day you stepped into the library." Jamie reached out and grasped her wrist. He failed to see the strange, vacant look in her eyes.

The warrior in Raven fought back, and Jamie's anger rose to match hers. "You fight me almost every time I try to touch you. Something as simple as taking your hand, and you're ready to do battle. You never flinch from my men when you train with them. Is that it, Raven? Must a man treat you roughly before you respond to him? Is this what you want?" Jamie goaded her, then shoved her to the dirt floor, frustration fueling his actions. He pinned down her legs with one of his own, and held her wrists above her head. Raven tried to wriggle free but could barely move. Jamie stared at her. What he thought was anger in her eyes, was replaced with a fear he'd never seen before. He slowly released his grip on her wrists and rolled away from her, his anger too hot to make apology. "Get some rest," he said without looking at her

again. "Tomorrow we ride on to MacKay lands."

Raven scooted away from him, then ran from the croft into the dark night. Jamie sighed, unable to believe what he had just done—what he'd almost done. Never before had he forced himself on a woman, but he had nearly done so tonight. She was driving him mad. Once they returned to Castle MacKay, he would avoid her unless they were in the company of others. Until her volatile moods settled—if they ever did—he could no longer trust himself alone with her.

He must have dozed for a moment. Something woke him. He looked around the room but saw nothing at first. There it was again, the sound of sobbing. The dying hearth fire was the only light in the room. Jamie got up and followed the sound. In a shadowed corner of the room, he found Raven kneeling on the dirt floor, rocking back and forth. She was bent over, holding her head in her hands, sobbing.

Jamie fell to his knees beside her, at a loss what to do. "Raven, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you, lass." The sobbing continued as if she hadn't heard him. He moved over until he knelt in front of her.

"Please, Jamie," she begged. "It hurts so much. Make the pain go away."

Jamie gently pried her hands away from her head and tipped her face to look up at him. There was a great deal of pain in her eyes. He cursed himself, believing he had put it there with his earlier actions. "I'm sorry, Raven. I didn't mean to cause you any pain."

She shook her head, not understanding what he was talking about. "I can't take the pain anymore. It keeps getting worse. I don't want to remember. Make it go away."

She didn't want to remember. He had been angry with

her, but he hadn't actually hurt her. Realization hit him. "Raven, look at me. You just said you don't want to remember. Is this pain because of those nightmares that have been plaguing you?" Raven barely nodded.

Jamie sat on the floor, easily pulling her onto his lap as he leaned against the wall. "This has been going on for months, hasn't it? All that anger was to hide the pain. Why couldn't you trust me to help you?" It all made sense to him now. He reached for the cloak that lay crumpled on the straw near him and draped it over her. Holding her snugly against him, he tucked her head against his shoulder. "You have no choice but to trust me now. Tomorrow, we return to the keep."

"I want to go home," she whispered, her voice sounding like that of a little girl. "I have to go home."

"Tomorrow." He tucked the edges of the cloak to fit closely about her, then leaned his head against the wall at his back. If he'd realized sooner, they could have avoided the harsh words between them, the misunderstandings. Aware of the source of her pain, they could find a way to deal with it—if she would trust him.

A few hours later, the chill in the hut awakened Jamie. Raven was up and repacking her saddlebags as if nothing had happened the night before. "I have to go home," she told him matter-of-factly.

"We should arrive at the keep in time for supper," he agreed. Jamie watched her carefully. She was still hurting but refused to admit it.

"No. I have to return to Dun Sgiath. My home. The answers I need are there. I have to go back to the beginning to find the answers to the future."

"That makes no sense."

“Maybe not, but I have nowhere else to go. I can’t continue to live my life with pain and nightmares. The answers have to be somewhere, and that’s as good a place as any to begin looking for them.”

“All right. First we’ll return to Castle MacKay, for a day or two, then take you home. I want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do.” He saw the distrust in her eyes and gently pulled her into his arms. He cradled her for a moment. “A week at most, lass, then we’ll go to Dun Sgiath. I promise.”

## Chapter 13

Dealing with Cordelia on a daily basis proved to be wearying, even for Raven. Silently, Raven blessed the servants for taking so much abuse from the woman. Cordelia had a knack for irritating anyone she was near for any length of time. Demands on the servants, her fawning and simpering attitude around Jamie—it was enough to drive someone to drink—something Raven was seriously tempted to do, but was determined not to.

“What is wrong with you?” Cordelia demanded. “I said I wanted a goblet of wine. I am not in the mood for warm ale.”

All eyes turned to her and conversation halted. Several diners at a nearby table wanted to see what she would do to her newest victim. The serving girl jumped back out of reach, half-expecting Cordelia to throw the cup and its contents at her.

Jamie sent the girl away, then pushed his own goblet before Cordelia. “You needn’t have done that, my lord. The girl should pay closer attention to her betters.”

“And you should pay better attention to what you ask for. You asked for a cup of ale.”

“Were I mistress here...” she let the comment trail off

and glanced at Raven.

“But you are not,” Jamie replied.

Cordelia sat back, pouting like a small child. She reached for Jamie’s cup and sipped the wine, as if this in itself were a small victory. She glanced about, hoping no one had noticed Jamie’s soft-spoken chastisement. Raven stared back, her features giving no hint of her thoughts.

Raven sat at one of the lower tables, not caring for any company. The throbbing in her head was gradually growing stronger, and she fought to ignore it, to keep it from getting the best of her. Raven turned her back on the loud merriment and marched up to her chambers, anxious to put the noise behind her. No one knew the seriousness of the headaches. The last thing she wanted was anyone’s pity.

A fire burned low in her bedchamber hearth. The glow did more to cast shadows than chase away any gloom, but the near darkness was just what she needed.

Someone moved in the shadows. Raven whirled about and watched the dark shape detach itself from the shadows near the hearth. “What do you want, Gavin?” She recognized him, but kept her guard up.

He stepped into the dim light. “I had to assure myself you are all right. You don’t seem yourself.” He stepped closer.

Raven took a quick step back. She sensed he’d consumed a goodly amount of ale, but he wasn’t drunk. He knew exactly what he was doing, but she wouldn’t let him try to intimidate her. “My health is none of your concern. Please leave my chambers. I did not invite you here, and you are not welcome.”

“I have waited a long time to find you alone. You were never meant to be mistress to Clan MacKay. You were meant

for so much more, and I want to give it to you. Anything you want. Let Cordelia be the chieftain's wife. It's all she's wanted," Gavin added, as he reached out and gently caressed Raven's cheek.

Raven barely flinched, sensing he wanted so much more than just this simple touch. At the moment, he was easy to read. It was obvious he believed she wasn't happy here. "Anything I want, you say," she replied thoughtfully. Her voice took on a deceptively soft quality. She took a few steps across the room, then turned at the door.

"Anything, my lady. Just say the word and I will take you from here this very night. MacKay doesn't appreciate you."

"And you do?"

"More than you know."

"Perhaps there is something you can do for me." She looked up at him, an innocent expression on her face, her eyes revealing nothing. "You can leave my chambers immediately. I did not invite you here, and I do not want to see you here again. Do I make myself clear? What MacKay does or does not appreciate is of no concern to you."

Gavin's features darkened with anger. "You will be mine, sooner or later, Raven." He grabbed her wrist and held it tightly, then eased his grip. Turning her hand over, he gently placed a kiss on her palm. "Do not doubt my word on that." He released her, and his angry gaze turned to the smug look of assurance. He took a step back, gave a mocking bow, then turned and left her chambers.

Raven shoved the door, but it remained slightly open. She paced the room, angry that Cordelia's brother would think he had rights to the laird's wife. She rubbed at her temples where the throbbing slowly built to a pounding pulse.

Why did the headache increase whenever he came close to her? Was it her strong dislike for the man? She applied more pressure, but the pounding continued.

Her eyes burned, and she fought to hold back the tears. *Warriors don't cry*, she reminded herself over and over again, as if it could lessen the pain. Her pacing took her to a dark corner, where she turned her back to the wall and slid down until she sat on the floor. Raven clasped her arms about her legs and rested her forehead on her knees. "Make it go away," she cried, "make it stop."

*The time is long overdue for you to make peace with the past. Then you will look to the future.*

"Raven?" Jamie entered her chambers through the connecting door between their rooms. "Where are you, lass?" He followed the sounds of her sobbing and found his wife curled up in a dark corner of the room, and knelt beside her. "You seem to like dark corners lately," he said, half-joking.

"Warriors don't cry," she sobbed, a hitch in her voice.

Jamie pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arms about her slender body. "Don't be fooled, lass. Warriors have been known to weep, they just don't tell anyone about it."

"I can't do this anymore. Make the pain go away. Please. Stop the pain."

"The headaches again?" he asked softly, gently rubbing one hand up and down her back.

"It hurts, as if someone plunged an axe into my head. I can't stay here, Jamie. I want to go home. I *have* to go home." He had promised her a week, then she would go home to Sgiath.

Jamie tightened his arms snugly about his wife and rested his cheek against the top of her head. He sighed in de-



feat. Trouble was brewing for his clan. He'd hoped to find the source and put an end to it before any serious damage was done, but he needed her help to accomplish it. He'd pushed, cajoled, and even threatened to gain her assistance. Everything he had done involving his wife had been wrong. He wondered if his marriage would be the price he had to pay.

## Chapter 14

Her mother's voice haunted her. For once, Jamie understood Raven's need to return to Dun Sgiath. More than ten years had passed since she'd last been there, but she needed answers only a return home could provide. Had her clan been completely destroyed that day? Raven had always believed so, until she met Annie at Castle MacKay. Now she needed to know for sure. She accepted Aiden's company without complaint, but he'd been her traveling companion for years. If only Jamie didn't insist on accompanying her. Barely a month had passed since their return to Castle MacKay. Despite her argument that Jamie needed to remain with his people, the MacKay laird refused to stay behind. He wasn't about to let Raven make this journey on her own...

\* \* \* \*

Jamie and Aiden accompanied Raven on her northward journey. No one knew what to expect at the highland fortress that had once been Raven's home. Would they find Dun Sgiath abandoned, or might someone have taken it as their own? What would Raven do, confronted with her past?

They forgot their questions when they arrived before the misty barrier that protected the MacDraoidh' valley. Aiden

stopped before it, sensing something ominous. The first time he came here with Meredith and a group of ragtag villagers, the mist had seemed more threatening. Truth to tell, he preferred his first reaction to it. Now it whirled about aimlessly, as if its original purpose had been lost and forgotten over time. It sent a shiver of foreboding along his spine. Neither of his companions seemed to sense what he did. Should he trust Raven's instincts? At this point, he wasn't sure, but for now, he would follow her lead. Leave it to Meredith to disappear when she was needed most—or did she know something she wasn't sharing? He would have to have a word with her.

Aiden urged his mount to follow his companions through the mist. Whatever was to happen would happen. He could only hope they'd be prepared.

\* \* \* \*

Starfire halted in the middle of the bailey, halfway between the heavy iron gate and the steps leading up into the great hall. Raven glanced about with a sense of relief. It was short-lived. A sinister chill seemed to surround her for a moment. Instinct made her push it away and establish her mental shield against it. She glanced around, surprised to find no one else had sensed the chill. What was it about Starfire's hoofs clopping on the cobblestone that seemed to touch on a memory? Some distant, long-forgotten thoughts brought on the vague beginnings of a headache. Perhaps coming here wasn't such a good idea after all, but she wasn't a coward to turn and run. She intended to see this through, to find the answers that had been eluding her for years.

The door at the top of the steps pulled inward, disrupting her thoughts. A man, whom she judged to be not much older than herself, slipped through the opening to face the strangers.

“Welcome to Dun Sgiath,” he greeted them. He didn’t speak loudly, but his voice carried across the bailey.

Raven saw the wariness in his eyes despite his greeting, and realized the reason for both it and her own misgivings. There were no guards—the risk of greeting strangers was great. He took much on faith. There was something vaguely familiar about him that gnawed at the edges of her memory. She tried to ignore it as well as her growing headache.

“We would greet your master,” Raven said. Had someone claimed the keep for himself? That couldn’t happen, she chided herself. The keep was promised to the Draoidh and Clan MacDraoidh. No one else would be allowed to lay claim to the rich valley.

“We have no master here. The mistress has been away these past ten years. We await her return, if she still lives.”

*Lucky you, a familiar voice whispered in her head. Servants like that are hard to find.*

Raven chose to ignore Meredith’s comment, when a name and a boy’s face flashed in her mind. “Thomas?” she asked incredulously, making a connection between a memory and the man who stood before her.

“I be Thomas,” he replied, still wary. “I am steward here.” He watched the strangers dismount and approach him. His brown eyes widened with surprise and delight. “Raven? It is you!” In his excitement he picked her up and twirled her around. “You’re alive, and you’ve come home!” He stopped suddenly, remembering himself, and put her down. “Forgive me, my lady. We didn’t know if you were alive or dead. We’ve heard nothing of you since...” His words trailed off.

Jamie chuckled at the reception that left Raven flustered. “That is Aiden McConnell, my mentor and former guardian,”

she said, directing Thomas' attention to one of her two companions, "and this," she added, as she nodded toward Jamie, "is my husband, Jamie MacKay, chieftain of Clan MacKay."

"So you finally went to him," Thomas said with a laugh. "Took you long enough."

"Did everyone know of the marriage before I did?" she complained with a wry smile.

"No," Thomas replied. "The old priest told me in confidence. He said someone had to be told before you returned, and he had faith you were still alive. I was the most logical, since I was the eldest of the surviving children."

He paused again and stepped closer, not thinking of the implications of his actions, and lightly touched her hair. "But what is this? You dress as a man and wear the braid of a warrior? What happened to your long hair? This isn't the Raven I remember, the girl who took such pride in her long hair."

A flicker of jealousy flashed across Jamie's features. Had there been something more between them as children?

"Time has a way of changing us all, Thomas." She hesitated a moment and studied the man before her. "Talk of change. If I recall correctly, your father was the miller."

Thomas stood straighter, as if feeling the need to defend his position. "Aye, he was—and a good man."

"That he was. Take no offense, for I meant none. It only makes my point on how time has changed us. We have become what we must."

Thomas relaxed and nodded. "Come, my lady." He stood to one side and gestured toward the open door. "Let me show you to your chambers. You are staying, are you not?" He gave Raven a hopeful look.

"Aye. At least until I have found answers to my ques-

tions.” Raven stopped long enough to accept a cup of wine and take it with her. They followed the young man to the upper chambers.

Jamie stood to one side with Aiden, watching Thomas to see where the steward took Raven. Thomas paused a moment, slightly embarrassed. “We have kept your chamber in readiness, my lady, always hoping for your return. As it has become a custom of the Draoidh, we expected you would return alone. Your chamber wasn’t meant for two.”

Jamie intervened. “My wife needs her rest. Put us close to her chamber and that will do for us for now.” He watched Raven step into the dimly lit chamber and close the door.

Thomas stopped before an oak door. “Your chambers, my lord,” he addressed Jamie courteously. “If there is anything you need, you have but to ask.” He stepped away, leaving Jamie to explore the room.

Jamie was satisfied to find this room was almost directly across the hall from Raven’s. He didn’t like the idea of leaving her alone, what with the constant headaches, but he was becoming adept at making a mental connection with her. He intended to keep it open and subtle between them so she wouldn’t know about it.

Aiden was shown to the room just beyond Jamie’s. He thanked Thomas, then entered the chamber and closed the door behind him.

Once she found herself alone in her chambers, Raven seated herself on the edge of her bed and sipped at the cup of wine she’d brought with her, willing the pounding in her head to go away. She saw the sapphire glow dimly lighting a dark corner of the room, but chose to ignore it. The only other light came from the hearth.

Raven's chambers had not been changed in the years since her childhood. A single window faced the east garden, showing a picturesque scene of flowers in bloom, shrubs and grass neatly trimmed. It was as if she had stepped back into the past, erasing the last ten years.

The laughter of children drew her to the window. Several children ran about the grounds in a game of hide-and-go-seek. One girl with long, dark braided hair stopped for a moment and looked up at the windows. Despite what appeared to be a happy time, the child seemed sad. Raven stared at the small face and gasped at the shock of seeing herself as a child. She gulped down most of her wine as the girl joined the other children and their laughing voices faded into nothing—or so it seemed in the waning daylight. “The wine isn’t going to solve your problem, Raven,” Meredith’s familiar voice admonished, startling Raven.

Raven remained silent a moment before responding. She was tempted to ignore the woman, but thought better of it. “It takes away the pain for a little while, let’s me ignore whatever is fighting to be remembered. I am content.”

Meredith’s rare temper flared and the cup in Raven’s hand flew across the room, spattering a trail of red liquid in its wake. “That is a lie. You are no more content now than when you began this journey of vengeance. No more crutches,” the voice declared. The glow alternately dimmed and brightened, then remained translucent, allowing Raven to see only a silhouette within. She heard a sharp sound, like someone snapping their fingers, and all traces of the spilled wine vanished. The silhouette became more substantial and moved closer. The glow faded. “No reason for someone else to clean it up.”

There was nothing to show—or even hint—that any

wine had been spilled—but that wasn't what shocked Raven. Meredith stood before her and waited. Even in this dim light, Raven could see the other woman's features clearly. It was as if she were gazing into a mirror. Pale eyes stared back into her own. Meredith's black hair was longer, and hung loosely about her shoulders. There were no lines in her oval-shaped face to give hint of her age. Her gray peasant-style gown failed to hide the curves of her slim figure.

Meredith briefly acknowledged what was running through Raven's mind. "You cannot run forever. You need to settle with the past and move on, Raven."

Raven sat on the edge of the bed, looking exhausted. She let out a sigh. "You sound like my mother," she murmured. "There is one thing I would ask of you," she added, sounding reluctant to change the topic of discussion. She had no intention of facing any demons at the moment. If she could avoid them altogether, it would suit her immensely.

Meredith brightened considerably. "What might that be?"  
"Go...away."

Meredith blinked at her, as if not sure she'd heard correctly. "As you wish—for the time being." She moved to stand before the sphere and turned sharply, studying her descendant. She refrained from making any further comment. Now was not the time. The sapphire glow brightened and seemed ready to consume her. Meredith stepped back and became one with the pale light. It faded until the corner was once again in near darkness.

Raven lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. She was tired of following whatever it was that kept her going, kept mocking her. If only she *could* make an end of it.

\* \* \* \*



An autumn storm whipped about the walls of the keep, howling and whistling through chinks around windows. That day long ago—and it was day—a different sort of storm had ravaged the keep. Raven tossed and turned in her bed, seeing in her nightmares the destruction wrought by the long-ago storm. Thunder crashed despite a clear sky. Crimson color everywhere. *Don't look! You don't want to see the destruction.* A voice warning her to stay away. She ignored it, determined to see for herself what had happened.

Thunder cracked like splitting wood, and Raven ran from her room, down to the great hall. She was vaguely aware of booted footsteps hurrying down the steps behind her, trying to catch her.

“Raven! Where are you going? Don't go out there. You'll catch your death!”

“If I go with them the servants will be spared!” she called back.

The servants in the great hall looked at one another with the same thought. Had their mistress lost her mind? They followed Jamie.

More footsteps. Cold and dark. Torch light flickered wildly in the storm. Raven stopped just outside the door, avoiding what looked to be a crimson patch of wetness. “All the blood,” she said, barely above a whisper. She glanced about, as if danger lurked within the storm. “You should have done as they wanted. You should have given me over, Mama! You often said how clever I was. I would have found a way to defeat them!” Her voice rose and grew louder with every sentence, rivaling the fury of the storm. “You had no right to sacrifice their lives to protect me. They were loyal to you, loyal to the death. Now the guilt lies in me! So much blood.” She

gazed down at the rain puddles, but saw dark pools of blood.

Raven was unaware of the servants gathering at the door, watching her.

Jamie pushed through the crowd into the courtyard. When he got close enough, he flung a hastily-grabbed cloak about his drenched wife and scooped her up into his arms. He shook the water from his face and eyes with a toss of his head, then hurried back into the keep, his long stride taking them out of the downpour. Servants quickly stepped aside, and he had no doubt they were wondering if the newly-returned mistress of Dun Sgiath had lost her mind.

Raven reached an arm about his neck and turned her face against his shoulder, weeping for the past. Her memories returned with a vengeance. She remembered that morning when Martha tried to spirit her away, tried to keep her from seeing the destruction that had been wrought—but Raven had slipped away when the cook stopped long enough to toss food stuffs into a burlap bag. She had to see, and fear made her cautious—bodies and blood everywhere. The soldiers were gone.

Jamie held firmly to the precious bundle in his arms and ignored the wide-eyed stares. When he reached Raven's bed-chamber, he eased the door closed behind them, then quickly stripped off her soaked shift. He placed her in bed and tucked her under the warm coverings. His own clothing had been soaked through, and he quickly undressed. The wet garments landed on the stone floor, and rushes stuck to them in a soggy mess. He loosened the cords holding back the bed curtains, then climbed into the bed behind his wife and drew her close, desperate to ease her uncontrollable shivering with his own body heat. In a short time, Raven settled and relaxed against

him. Her breathing evened out as she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. Jamie sighed in relief and allowed himself to finally relax. The night wasn't over yet, for either of them.

\* \* \* \*

Jamie sat on the raised dais in the great hall and sipped from his goblet of wine. He turned in his seat and watched Raven approach. Her steps were quicker and lighter than he had seen in months. The change pleased him, but there were still matters that needed resolving. "Good morning, my lady," he greeted her with a smile. "You are looking well-rested."

Thomas, who had been seated beside him reporting on the repairs to the roofing after the rains had ended, stood and signaled a servant to bring a meal to their mistress.

"Half the day is gone. I should have been attending to business hours ago. I didn't return to Dun Sgiath to sleep away the time."

Jamie refrained from commenting on the previous night's revelations. Better the subject came from her. "It was a long night for us all," he replied in summary. He watched Raven pop a piece of bread into her mouth. Her cheeks turned pink and she glanced away from him, embarrassed by the subtle reminder of what they had eventually shared. "You should blush more often, sweeting," he added, keeping his voice low. He leaned toward her, handing her a cup of ale. Her blush deepened to crimson.

"Thomas," she asked, determined not to give any more thought to the night's late events, "Where is Martha? I have yet to see her since our arrival."

Thomas looked bewildered. "Martha? She's been gone for years."

"Gone from here, yes. She looked after me for years after

the massacre. She is the one who got me safely away.”

Thomas hesitated, and glanced from Raven to Jamie and back again. He wasn’t sure how to answer her strange question, then decided the direct truth would be best. “My lady, Martha died with the others. Mairi and I, being the oldest of the children, were responsible for getting the younger ones to safety. We knew there would be no escape for our parents. It was a great loss, not only to the clan, but to us, for we had only one or two adults to guide us. The children had to survive to serve you when you returned to take your rightful place. We waited until we thought all the soldiers had gone. When I thought it safe, Jonathan, Dugal and I crept back to the keep. I found Martha in the kitchen, barely alive. Her last words were concern for your safety. She loved you very much.”

“You couldn’t have,” Raven argued. “She looked after me for years, made certain no one knew I was still alive. Only one other person knew. Aiden.”

“How does Aiden come into this?” Jamie asked, with a suspicious look directed toward the man at the end of the table, who chose to remain silent. He appeared to concentrate on the meal before him, ignoring the conversation.

“Martha knew him and trusted him. She knew I wanted to be something other than what the Draoidh Legend demanded, and it was necessary.” She paused a moment and glanced at her mentor. He maintained a passive expression, revealing nothing of his thoughts.

“Now that I think on it,” Raven continued, “it was a bit odd the way he appeared. He and Martha seemed to have their heads together quite often. I thought he was taken with her.”

“I am sorry, my lady, but it couldn’t have been Martha,”

Thomas insisted "I buried her myself."

"Martha *couldn't* have died all those years ago," Raven argued. "She kept the little cottage that sheltered us, kept our existence secret from the rest of the world."

*Uh oh...busted.* Raven caught the words and glanced up to see a sapphire glow flicker and disappear. Jamie and Thomas followed the line of her stare, but saw nothing. She focused her mind and searched the castle. If Meredith was here, Raven would know where to find her.

"Please, excuse me," she said and stood abruptly. "It seems there is more to this tale than I ever realized. Thomas, you have my gratitude for all you have done for Sgiath and our people."

Thomas bowed his head to his mistress and was rewarded with one of her rare smiles. For a moment, he saw the child he remembered, the one he and the other children had distrusted. He smiled to himself. Had she outgrown her little tricks? Somehow, he didn't think so.

\* \* \* \*

Raven stood on the wall-walk overlooking the valley. She saw the bare, narrow path leading up into a secret place. It drew her, but she fought the desire to go there. It was for the Draoidh Legend, not for someone like her. She was too much the warrior to take part in any sort of ritual.

Raven looked out over the castle lands. Dun Sgiath lay nestled in a band of green between the mountains and the loch, protected by both of them. The noonday sun warmed the loch's surface with its brilliant rays and sent glittering sparkles over the rippling waters. To the north the mists hung over the peaks. In all Scotland there was no greener place.

Scattered amid the low hills, sheep grazed peacefully,

fluffy splotches of white against grass-covered earth. The village was quiet. Some of Raven's former playmates lived there now, rearing families of their own. She couldn't hear them, but she could see a few young children playing games, just as she had long ago, with their parents. It seemed more than a lifetime had passed since they were young.

"You can't avoid me forever, Meredith," Raven said. Meredith would be close by and would hear her quite well. "Tell me about Martha." Raven turned her back to the wall and leaned against it, waiting for a response. Although the remainder of her memories of that fateful day were finally restored, there were more unanswered questions. "Martha hit the soldier who attacked me."

Meredith wasn't sure what she should tell Raven. A sense of guilt hung over her. Her form remained indistinct within the sapphire glow, and she allowed the sphere to fade away. She was getting rather tired of it anyway. Aiden's reference to the 'good witch of the north' had long since become boring. Meredith's appearance changed and sharpened, until she appeared before Raven. Her strong resemblance to Raven stunned the young woman once again.

"Martha is alive. Why do you play these sick games?"

Meredith morphed her appearance and spoke in Martha's voice. "Would you have followed me had I appeared as myself?"

Raven's eyes widened, shocked to hear Martha's voice coming from Meredith's mouth. "No, I suppose I wouldn't have," she answered reluctantly. "But—"

"No buts. You would have fought me—and lost. Too much had happened to allow me to approach you as a stranger."

"Why did you never say anything? You had ten years to tell me the truth."

“Because,” Aiden spoke up from the doorway, “there was never a right time to fix the problem. Until last night, you fought the return of your memories of that day. Now the truth is out.”

“Aiden? What do you know of this?” Raven looked from one to the other, confused.

“I know everything—have known since the day Meredith spirited you away from here to keep you safe. Over the years, you made comments about my ‘flirting’ ways. Happily, the flirting was always with my wife, the first of the Draoidh.” Aiden slipped his arm about Meredith’s waist and drew her closer. He kissed the top of her head, relieved the charade was finally over.

“The first? But that was over two hundred years ago.”

“The concept of travel through time is too difficult to explain,” Meredith told her. “Suffice it to say, we can be where we are needed, when we are needed—and we were needed here, in this time and place.”

“Then you are the rightful clan chieftain.”

“Not at this time. Imagine, trying to explain to your clansmen why you never age. It’s your place, Raven, your time to serve as the Draoidh. Aiden and I will be staying around until this *little* problem of yours is solved once and for all time, but I have a feeling our job isn’t yet complete.”

“I would be grateful, Lady Meredith.”

“Suddenly we’re formal!” Meredith laughed. “Plain Meredith will do, thank you very much.”

“Thank you, plain Meredith,” Raven responded, a gleam in her eyes. “There *is* one immediate problem. We could be twins. If you intend to make your presence known to our clan, your appearance would take some explaining.”

"I don't think so." Meredith's eyes darkened, and her skin coloring took on a light tan. Her hair lightened from its natural black to a deep mahogany. "It really doesn't matter. Aiden and I have some catching up to do, so don't expect to see either of us for a while." She glanced up at her husband as she spoke, a hint of mischief shining in her eyes.

A flash of color caught Raven's eye. For the first time, she noticed the matching amulets the couple wore. She touched her own and thought of the match Jamie wore. "How did you—"

"Don't ask," Aiden cut in. "You don't want to know." He gave Raven a knowing grin. Arm in arm, he and Meredith descended the nearby stairs, leaving Raven alone on the wall-walk.

How could someone who had lived two hundred years earlier be here now?

*Don't think about it or you'll drive yourself crazy,* warned a disembodied voice. An added chuckle faded and disappeared.

\* \* \* \*

Early next morning, still half-asleep, Jamie reached out to gently pull Raven closer to him—only to discover she no longer slept. The bedding had grown cold. On her pillow was a single yellow rose, the last perfect bloom plucked from the castle garden. He smiled at the sight of it, for only Raven would think to do the unthinkable. His calloused fingers touched the petals, soft and velvety as her skin. He glanced about the room and saw her cloak was gone. She'd left the fortress, probably for her morning ride. He couldn't judge the time from the gray dawn filtering through the window, but it seemed late. He stretched and smiled, a smile that turned into a thoughtful frown. Maybe last night had been too soon for



her after recalling the memories of her mother's death. In the darkness, she had turned to him for comfort and assurance. One thing had led to another. Was she regretting last night's choices even now? He looked to the rose again and smiled. No, the time had been right. Too bad she'd left early.

Jamie dressed quickly and went below stairs, where he greeted Amos in the kitchen. He stood a moment, watching the baker remove fresh loaves of bread from the oven and shuffle them from the paddle onto the table.

"If you're looking for Lady Raven, she left a few moments ago," he offered, as if reading Jamie's mind. The baker looked toward the huge hearth where the boy lazily turned a handle, with an apparent lack of enthusiasm. "Turn that spit, boy, before those birds turn to ash." The boy put more energy into his work and turned the spit more vigorously over the fire. The baker continued his work, settling unbaked loaves into the oven. "Have to watch them all the time," he said, with a nod at the youth. As if he suddenly recalled Jamie's presence, he gestured toward the door. "If you hurry, you might catch her."

\* \* \* \*

The grey light of dawn slowly brightened across the horizon. The dull color reminded Raven of the storm two nights earlier. Something about the storm had opened her mind to past events she had not been witness to, but often imagined. For the first time in years, the remainder of the night had passed without the dull, annoying headache that had become a constant companion. Still, sleep had eluded her. Restless, she saddled Starfire and gave the mare a good run in the pre-dawn. She reined up and dismounted, allowing the horse to graze nearby. Raven stood a few feet from the edge of the cliff

looking out over the loch. The dark frigid waters ran deep and led to the distant sea. This was one way the clan might be vulnerable, but an enemy would have to have wings to scale the vertical cliffs. She didn't trust the mist at the valley entrance to keep the clan safe from outsiders. It wasn't the dense barrier she once knew it to be. Heavy clouds gathered slowly, obscuring the dawn, and promised rain.

Raven paused a moment, watching the storm approach. The cold wind chafed her face, turning her cheeks redder. She closed her eyes and recalled warmer times when she rode to these same cliffs to pick flowers for her mother. If Lady Alycia ever knew how far she'd gone from the keep... Raven didn't want to consider the punishment she might have endured as a result. Loss of freedom would have been the worst thing Lady Alycia could inflict on her daughter.

For a time, Raven stood there, lost in the past. Starfire whinnied, and Raven became aware of Jamie standing behind her. He slipped his arms about her waist and drew her against him, wrapping the edges of his cloak about her to engulf them both. He felt so good. Raven rested her folded arms on his and leaned her head against his shoulder. She closed her eyes for a brief moment and tilted her head to better enjoy his quick kisses. "Have you ever seen a more glorious sight?" she asked, her voice a reverent whisper.

"Aye, there's no sight more glorious than the one I hold at this moment. Every day you look more like the confident warrior who entered my library that morning, and announced she was my betrothed. You look happier and rested now."

"I am happier, now the headaches have been banished. As to rested..." She turned in his arms and looked up at him with a satisfied smile. "You've kept me a mite busy for that."

Jamie's devilish grin lasted only a moment, then he looked out over the loch and became serious. "We have to be returning to Castle MacKay soon," he told her with regret. "Once the snows come we won't be able to travel, and we've already been away too long."

Raven wrapped her arms about his waist and rested her head against his chest. She listened to the steady beat of his heart. "You're right, of course. Andrew must be worried about you." She looked up into his eyes. "I wonder if he's still angry with me."

They turned away from the cliffs and, hand in hand, walked toward the grazing horses. "I doubt it," Jamie said. "I sent a messenger to him, to let him know we were all right and we would return before the snow. You've had some time to heal, *mo cridh*, and I would give you more but..." He let his thought drift away.

Raven sighed. He was right. She couldn't expect Andrew to run Jamie's affairs indefinitely. She could dream of a life without the responsibilities they carried, but it was time the chieftain of Clan MacKay returned to his duties. The affairs of her own people were in good hands, and the clan itself was well looked after. Ever on the move, another plan brewed in her mind. What would next be expected of her was something else again.

## Chapter 15

Raven rode beside Jamie at a leisurely pace. The horses were allowed to pick their own way along the road. “Do you think me so bad, Jamie?” Raven blurted out.

“Did I not defend you with my friends?” He glanced at her, wondering if this were some sort of trap, where no matter what he said he would be doomed.

“Aye, you did, but you didn’t sound very happy about it. I want the truth, Jamie.”

“The truth.” Jamie sighed. She didn’t really want to hear the truth. “I might be happier if you could find a balance between your warrior ways, and being my wife.”

A frown passed over Raven’s pale features, while she gave his comment serious consideration.

“When Aiden was your mentor, it was all well and good that you learned to defend yourself. Heaven knows I could never abide a simpering, helpless wife, which would have been the case, had I wed Cordelia. You and I are wed, and as my wife, it’s important you take over duties as mistress of Castle MacKay.”

“Your castle is so well run, I find there is no need for me there, as keep’s mistress. Even if there were, I know little of

running a household. The need to avenge my mother's death has ruled my life, and I am no closer now to finding the man responsible, than I was the day it happened."

"I understand your plight, Raven, but can you not find some way to compromise? I don't demand you give up your promise to your mother, but I would like my wife at my side."

"I will consider it." Raven applied a little pressure to Starfire's sides, and the mare picked up her pace, eager to be moving faster.

The day was warm for early fall as Raven and Jamie followed a path through the forest to within a couple miles of home. Some of the leaves were turning color with the approach of autumn. Still the air was soft and warm, unlike the raw cold that would soon arrive. Raven knew only too well that days such as these wouldn't last long. With the harvesting about done, there were the rest of the winter preparations to finish, but she was in no hurry to return to the castle and try to learn her duties. Ever since her missing memories had been restored to her, Raven felt a sense of inner peace. There was still the matter of avenging her mother's death, but now was not the time to think on it. She wouldn't let that need consume her as her anger had. The issue would be dealt with when the right time came. Until then, there were other things that demanded her attention.

Raven leaned over and patted Starfire's long neck and spoke softly to the mare, then grinned as the mare tossed her head in response. The sound of rushing water caught Raven's attention, and she gave Jamie a questioning look.

The laird said nothing, only smiled at his wife. He dismounted and led his horse to the nearby stream. They left

their hobbled mounts to graze. A still silent Jamie invited her to follow the path ahead of them. Birds chirping in the fir trees were welcoming sounds. Sunlight filtered through the thick branches above their heads, creating bright patches before them. The MacKay laird paused to enjoy the view of Raven walking along the path ahead of him. For the moment, he was a carefree youth again, watching a bonnie lass. She wore soft leather shoes that silenced her every footstep. Her black breeches molded to her form, almost like a second skin. A wide belt cinched her slender waist over the black linen shirt that reached to her slender hips. She was never without the dirk that sat comfortably sheathed at her waist. When she'd first arrived at Castle MacKay, he'd wondered if she was actually capable of using the weapons she carried on her person. It hadn't taken long to learn she was quite proficient at using them, even more so than some of his men. That was a thought he didn't like much. He listened to the call of a jay, warning of intruders in the wood.

Jamie turned for a moment at the sound of a rustling shrub. It was only a hare hoping to get safely back to its home. "Go your way. You're safe from us this time." He laughed as he watched the small bundle of brown fur scurry away, then turned his attention back to his wife. The trees had thinned out, as they followed the path closer to the stream, allowing the sun to shine brighter. In all the MacKay lands, this was his favorite spot, but seeing it through her eyes... The look of awe on Raven's face said what words could not. Jamie forgot what he was about to say when he gazed at her.

The stream's cool waters rushed down from the hills to fall over a stony four foot drop. A huge boulder forced the water to go around it, creating two waterfalls. Spattering wa-

ter droplets created a gentle mist that floated in the air above the rushing waters. The sun's rays caught the droplets, creating a myriad of prisms that formed a pale rainbow arching across the falls. The rushing water overpowered any other forest sounds while it tumbled restlessly over the rocks to continue on its way as it joined the stream.

Jamie stood behind his wife where she stopped to stare, mouth agape. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close, delighted with her reaction. Raven was never at a loss for words, but never had she been so quiet. Her silence was usually fueled by anger or agitation. Even her thoughts seemed jumbled at the moment—what he could read of them. Jamie rubbed his cheek against the top of her head as she leaned back against him, entranced.

"It's beautiful, Jamie," she whispered. "Do you feel the power, there?" She turned slowly in his arms and continued her observation. "One day we will be able to put that power to use. I'm not sure how, but I do know it will be done." Jamie said nothing, just smiled and kissed her. She had such strange ideas at times, he mused.

She shrugged. "I can't see the future. It's something I know, but I don't know how," she murmured when he ended the kiss.

Raven stepped back and slipped out of his embrace, a mischievous grin on her face. She raised a finger to his lips and stopped the question he was about to ask. Sidestepping, she slipped between the trees and disappeared from sight. Believing she sought a moment's privacy, Jamie remained where he was and turned his attention to the scene before him. Perhaps she was right. Maybe there was a way to harness the power that he couldn't imagine.

Jamie waited, and time seemed to slip away. She hadn't returned. Further back, beside the path, Starfire stood grazing next to his own mount, so he knew Raven couldn't have gone far. He listened carefully, but heard nothing beyond the forest noises. Swishing sounds came from the branches above his head, but a squirrel scampered across the limb, as if it hadn't a care in the world. Jamie cleared his mind for a moment and concentrated on Raven, but found nothing to tell him of her presence. She couldn't have disappeared that quickly...and without a sound? He turned in a circle, confused, feeling like a fool. How did one misplace a wife? He turned his head quickly when a pinecone bounced off his shoulder. "Raven, what are you doing?" Looking up, he spotted the squirrel sitting on the branch, chattering away as if it were laughing at him. "You haven't seen one missing wife, have you?" he asked the small creature staring back at him. "No, I don't suppose you have."

Two more pinecones bounced off his head and shoulder. "Now stop that, you little..." Jamie's attention focused on laughter coming from a branch above the squirrel. He raised his arms to protect himself against a bombardment of pinecones. "Raven..." He started to call out a warning.

Raven's laughter turned into a scream as her foot slipped from the branch and she plummeted to the earth ten feet below. She landed on her husband, knocking him to the ground, leaving him breathless. "You broke my fall." She gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek in gratitude.

"Aye," he groaned, "and I think you broke my back when you landed."

"Jamie!" Raven scrambled to get up, only to have him hold tightly to her and roll over until she was pinned beneath him. "You're not hurt. At least not badly."



“What did you think you were doing, up in that tree? You could have broken your neck...or mine for that matter.”

“I suppose I could have...” She looked almost apologetic as she lowered her eyes. “But I didn’t,” she added brightly, glancing up at him again. There was a moment of silence while Jamie studied her pale eyes, which seemed even lighter than usual if that were possible. Raven slid her hands up his arms, across his broad shoulders and clasped her hands behind his neck. Jamie lowered his head to offer her the lingering kiss he knew she waited for. “It’s getting late,” she said softly, and pulled away from him. “We should be getting back to the keep before someone begins to worry about us. You did tell them we would return in a week’s time.”

“You’re right, of course.” Jamie’s tone was serious as he got to his feet and pulled her up onto hers. “Andrew would probably send out all the men to look for us, and leave the keep defenseless.” From the gleam in his eyes, Raven knew his tone didn’t agree with his mood. She headed in the direction where they had left their horses. As she walked by Jamie, he gave her a quick swat on her backside, making her jump. She turned quickly and glared at him, only to have him laugh. She relented and joined in the laughter.

They rode side by side back to the castle in a comfortable silence, but they returned, acting as though the last few days had never happened. When they reached the bailey, one of the young boys waited to take the reins and lead the animals into the stable to be tended. Once dismounted, Jamie reached for Raven. She jumped away from him, and her laughter rang out as she ran to the entrance of the keep with the laird right behind her. Just inside the great hall, she stopped short. Most of the men were sitting at the tables waiting to be served sup-

per. Unable to stop quickly, Jamie bumped into her, then looked around to see why she had stopped so suddenly.

Andrew stared at them, alert to any possible trouble. Both were out of breath and looked as if they were being chased. The men watched their laird and lady with open curiosity, not knowing what to make of them suddenly bursting so playfully into the hall. Jamie straightened to a more regal stance and gallantly offered his arm to his wife. Raven accepted it in a courtly way, then in a dignified manner, they strolled across the hall, past the head table.

Cordelia glared with hostility as they went by. There was no mistaking her jealousy. Gavin sipped at his wine, seemingly paying little attention to the goings on.

A few feet from the staircase leading to the upper chambers, Raven turned suddenly and pulled Jamie's bonnet down over his eyes, then fled up the stairs, laughing.

"Raven!" Jamie bellowed, all sense of decorum forgotten. Taking the stairs two at a time, he chased his impish wife. The soldiers' deep laughter echoed from below as they enjoyed the scene. A playful scream filled the upper hall just before a door was slammed shut.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Raven stretched lazily, reluctant to leave the comfort of her warm bed. The last few days had been, for the most part, too enjoyable to let go and return to normal routine. She gathered her resolve and forced herself to rise to meet the day.

Annie arrived with a tray and set it on a table before the hearth. She made herself comfortable in a chair next to Raven, and listened to tales of Raven's journey with Jamie. When Raven finished, Annie contemplated her mistress. "Perhaps,

my lady, if I might be so bold as to suggest..." Annie began, her tone quite serious. She paused, unsure if she should continue.

"I know I won't like the suggestion," Raven replied. She, in turn, sounded resigned to hearing the worst. She picked up a roll from the tray and spread a little honey over it. She licked up a drop of the thick spread before it could fall from the roll, then bit into the bread.

"You are the MacKay's wife and the chatelaine. Do you not think it past time you took up the duties of wife? It seems you and Jamie have made a good start of it."

Raven's eyes narrowed and her posture stiffened. The cup of ale she'd picked up remained poised in midair. "That's quite out of line, Annie, even for you."

Annie blushed with embarrassment. "My lady, I didn't mean that!"

"I would hope not!" Raven finished her drink.

"I meant wifely duties, like seeing to the meal planning, and looking after the villagers, sewing and mending. Embroidering fine clothes." Annie glanced about the chamber in discomfort and fidgeted with the edges of her apron.

"Sew." Raven took another small bite, chewed it thoughtfully and swallowed.

Annie nodded vigorously.

"On cloth."

She nodded again.

"You know full well I could never sew a straight seam. I do so much better taking needle to flesh than stabbing at cloth."

"It won't hurt to try, my lady." Annie paused at the unintentional play on words, then went on. "There will come a

time when you will no longer be a warrior. Even a man must, at some point, admit he can no longer fight.”

“Speak of it again when that day comes. Then we shall see.”

“Why wait? Jamie will be wanting an heir, while you’re still young.”

“Thanks for that. You make me sound as if I’m on the verge of old age.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.” Annie stood to leave, and picked up the tray her mistress had finished. “If you’ll be needin’ anything else, my lady...”

“No, thank you, Annie, but I will think on your words.”

## Chapter 16

“There has got to be an easier way to send messages,” Jamie grumbled one morning when he’d finished penning a note to be taken to the village.

Raven leaned over his shoulder to read the note and its destination. “Perhaps there is an easier way.”

Jamie reached up and gently grasped Raven’s wrist to bring her forward. He moved the chair back, its legs scraping along the stone floor. With more room available, he set his wife on his lap. He wrapped his arms about Raven’s waist, and slowly ran one hand up and down her spine, taking pleasure in her little shivers. He liked the changes in her. Since their return from Dun Sgiath, she was more like the wife he’d hoped for. Granted, she would never be the typical lady of the castle, but they seemed to have reached a compromise. “What does my lady wife have on her mind?”

“The day of the assize, I had an idea and tried it out on a small scale. I wanted to see how many of the men would respond to a thought command.”

“I recall that. I wondered what was going on, but you never explained yourself.”

“Because I wanted to think out the idea. I needed to

weigh the advantages against the disadvantages. There were four or five men who responded to the silent order. I admit they were confused. In a way, it was amusing. First, I need to find just how many men are able to receive such commands.”

“And how did you come to create such a plan?”

Raven blushed and glanced away from her husband’s astute gaze.

“What have you done, Raven?” he asked warily.

She bit her lip, hesitant to admit her past trespass. If she didn’t confess, she couldn’t explain her idea. Necessity won out over embarrassment. “Sometime—before I actually came here, I managed to enter the castle without alerting your guards. I found my way into your bedchamber and switched your amulet for the copy I had made.”

Jamie reached for the amulet with its ruby stone and glanced down at it. He rarely took it off, so how would she have known... “You switched them?”

Raven nodded, proud of her accomplishment in spite of the fact his men had not been able to detect her presence. “I was in and out, and no one was the wiser.”

“I can believe that. What has that to do with your plan?”

Raven took up Jamie’s quill pen and scrap of paper. On it, she drew three boxes and put a name inside each—hers, Jamie’s and Andrew’s. Lines between the boxes connected them. Then she attached vertical lines to each, and added more boxes below. “This would be like a small, specially-trained army. These men would be responsible for handing down commands. Rather than sending a rider to pass on orders, one of us,”—she pointed to the three filled boxes in turn—“would send a silent command to the next in charge, and he would hand it down to the next. I don’t think we’d

need more than three levels of command. The third level would always be with the rest of the soldiers. This would save the life of a courier, and orders could not fall into enemy hands.”

“And hopefully confound the enemy.” Jamie looked up at his wife. “Let’s see how it will work out. Call in Andrew and the others you’ve chosen and we’ll try it out.”

\* \* \* \*

The next few weeks flew by as Jamie, his wife, and his uncle put their plan to work. Finding and training the right men wasn’t as difficult as Raven thought it might be. The men chosen were the most trusted of all his soldiers, and showed the most promise in their abilities at silent communication. Day after day, they traveled throughout MacKay lands, taking care of clan business while Raven pushed their training. Before long, she was satisfied with her results and decided to put them to the ultimate test.

Dougal, Allen and Michael were reassigned to night guard duty. Jamie was the only one privy to Raven’s plans. As she had the first time, she intended to enter the castle by stealth, to get past the guards. If, after all these weeks, she succeeded, then she could consider her plan a failure. She hoped it wouldn’t come to that. She’d had too much fun eluding and teasing them into becoming the kind of warrior she was. Everything was planned, and the last test was set.

\* \* \* \*

Something awakened her—a sound? A feeling of foreboding? Uncertain, Raven dressed quickly and silently, then made her way from her bedchamber to the stairs and the wall-walk above. An ominous chill that had nothing to do with the night made her shiver in the autumn air. Raven walked along the

battlement looking out over the land. Everything seemed to be as it should, yet a disturbing sense told her something wasn't right. Most of the harvesting was done, and the sky was clear except for a few stray clouds. Those wispy clouds sailed across the full moon as millions of stars twinkled like newly polished diamonds against black velvet.

Raven's thoughts returned to the present when one of the guards approached her. "What is it, Roger?" she asked as he stepped next to her. Roger was a distant MacKay cousin. He leaned his tall, lanky form against the wall and studied the landscape for a moment. He had his auburn hair tied back at the nape, and a heavy cloak covered his uniform. Torchlight reflected in his green eyes. Raven had liked the young clansman from the first time they met.

For his part, Roger would never forget how easily she had flattened him with one of her many tricks, then admonished him and his friends never to underestimate their opponents by their smaller size. Although he'd blushed with embarrassment, he'd accepted the criticism in the spirit it was intended. That was then. Now, she waited for him to speak.

"What do you see out there?" he asked and pointed toward the village.

"Torchlight," she replied simply. She peered again, this time more carefully, where he gestured. What looked to be torches grew rapidly and lit up the dark night. She sniffed the night air. The light wind shifted and now came directly at them. Raven caught a whiff of acrid smoke, of burning wood, thatched roofs, and daub.

"Stay here," she ordered. Raven opened her mind and found that Jamie had returned to the great hall shortly after she had left his chambers. She bolted through the door and



took the steps two at a time, regardless of the danger of falling and breaking her neck on the stone steps. "Annie," she shouted at the entry to the large room, "get your medicines and prepare to ride. We'll need bandages, herbs, salves...everything you can gather. Be quick about it." It wasn't until she stopped to catch her breath she realized no one knew what was happening. Off duty men-at-arms, as well as Jamie and Andrew, stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Someone's torched the village," she called out. "The far end of the village is engulfed in flame."

"To your mounts," Andrew shouted and headed for the barracks to awaken the rest of his men.

Raven looked to Jamie. "So it begins."

\* \* \* \*

Raven brought Starfire to a halt while Jamie and his guards rode past. The spreading conflagration lit the late night sky. Orange fingers reached upward, sending sparks undulating in a dance of destruction. Even at some distance, the heat scorched her face and the brilliant light mesmerized her. Starfire danced restlessly, anxious to be away from the flames and danger. Raven shook off the strange compulsion to stay and watch the hungry blaze. She rode on. Much had to be done if they were going to save anything of the village.

Children huddled together near the stream, weeping with fear and pain. Little ones sought comfort from older siblings. One child cradled her arm against her thin chest while her older sister rocked her, and crooned comforting words while their parents worked frantically to douse the flames.

The test Raven had planned was forgotten and new orders issued. She sent two of her telepathically trained men to the furthest end of the village to control the fire from there.

The men assessed the situation and sent back reports in the way they'd been trained. Andrew had been uncomfortable with the new method, but he had to admit, decision making was quicker without the need to have one of his men ride back to report and receive orders.

This end of the village had little water, and the men used swords and axes to knock down, or hack away anything that threatened to keep the fire going. They used grappling hooks to tear down hovels too far gone to save. What fires they couldn't put out, they did their best to contain. Everyone had escaped. That was one thing to be grateful for. Jamie rode from one end of the village to the other, assuring himself the people were safe, then he headed to the far side of the village to help his men put out smaller blazes.

A short time later, in the chaos of the night, no one noticed three figures fleeing, awkward shadows running, carrying a large heavy burden between them.

\* \* \* \*

Raven watched pale-colored tendrils of light drift across the eastern horizon. Gazing about, she realized much of the village was lost. Villagers and soldiers had worked together throughout the night to save what they could. The damage could have been worse—lives might have been lost, had it not been for her specially-trained warriors. People huddled in groups, too dejected and tired to do anything more. One or two huts remained standing, their thatched roofs gone with the flames.

Within the walls of one hut, Raven sat on a low stool and watched Annie tend to a child's burned arm. Raven leaned over and picked up the rag doll the little girl had dropped. "Here you are, little one," she said and handed the toy to the

girl. "She's going to need you to look after her now. Take good care of her." The child looked up at Raven, her soot-stained face streaked with tears. She accepted the doll, a vague smile on her small face. "Your father and mother are outside waiting for you," Raven continued with a gentle smile. She touched the child's head, then watched her leave the hut.

As the little girl left, she passed Andrew on his way into the hut. Raven saw the anger blazing in his eyes and knew something was dreadfully wrong. "We found this outside one of the huts." He thrust out a bit of cloth. "We ride after the Sutherlands."

Raven rubbed her fingers across the dirt-encrusted scrap of cloth. "I thought there was a truce of sorts between our two clans."

"There has been an uneasy peace between us, but that was before these raids started. Every time they have managed to find our most vulnerable spots. Someone is spying for them. We can't let this go without seeking justice."

Raven recalled the shadows she'd glimpsed the night before, sneaking away from the village and wondered about a connection. "What does Jamie have to say about this?" She looked up at the clan steward.

"Nothing yet. I thought to find him here with you."

Raven glanced outside the hut, an uneasy feeling stealing over her. "M'lady," Annie whispered. Raven turned her attention to the other woman. "Your amulet. It glows."

The small blood-red stone, centered in the gold-carved amulet, pulsed with a soft light. Raven held it away from her body to get a better look at it. "This has never happened before," she murmured. "Annie, Roger will help you get these people to the castle. Salvage whatever you can." Raven strode

out of the hut and looked at Andrew. He followed her through what was left of the village. *He won't be pleased with my decision*, she thought, but at the moment what he thought was of little concern to her. She couldn't begin a search to find Jamie—not yet.

“That scrap of cloth was found here,” Andrew told her when they reached the furthestmost hut. All that remained of someone's home was a blackened shell.

Raven stood near the doorway and peered inside. The roof beams had collapsed and lay criss-crossed on the floor. “At least Jamie wasn't caught in here when the roof collapsed.” She glanced again at her amulet. “Where are you, Jamie?” she asked in a half whisper. The small stone pulsed on as if in rhythm with a heartbeat.

Andrew grimaced at her words. “The Sutherlands must have taken him. We ride after them.” He glanced at the bit of tartan in tucked into Raven's belt.

Raven saw where his gaze settled. She pulled out the scrap and rubbed her fingers on it, getting a true feel of the fabric. “You're not to go after anyone. The men are too tired, and there is too much to be done here. Look at it, Andrew,” she commanded and held out the scrap. “This came from a plaid no one wore. This scrap was left here for us to find. Jamie was taken, and not by Sutherlands, but I do believe they hold him now. We have an enemy who wants to see the two clans at war again. Until our people are settled and tended to, no one will be riding anywhere.”

Andrew paused, frowning, and for a second Raven feared he would defy her. He nodded, not liking her decision, but went on his way.

\* \* \* \*

Raven strode into the great hall and was stopped by the myriad of voices besieging her. Most of these people were without homes now, and it was doubtful any of the huts could be rebuilt before the winter set in.

*History has a way of repeating itself in one way or another, Meredith thought to Raven. When I first arrived at Dun Sgiath, there were almost no inhabitable crofts for the people. It wasn't any picnic having all those people living within the castle walls for close to a year.*

*Your support is most gratifying,* Raven thought back with a sharp edge of sarcasm. She cringed, inwardly, at the daunting task before her.

Worried tenants surrounded her, some demanding, others pleading to know what would become of them. Andrew went ahead of her, pushing his way through the crowd to clear a path for the castle's mistress. Raven followed close behind, moving toward the head table. She waited for the noise to lessen before speaking, and decided what was to be done.

"Quiet down, the lot of you!" Andrew shouted above the din. Like a pond ripple, the loud voices gradually quieted until everything was still. The castle steward waited a moment longer before speaking again. "There are decisions to be made, but nothing can be done with all this shouting! Have patience and you will get answers." He stepped back to allow attention to focus on Raven.

Raven stood on a bench to get a better view of the people crowded together. Children with soot-smudged faces and eyes rimmed red from smoke stood by their parents, who didn't look any better. It had been a long night fighting the fire. "I am sorry you all lost everything, but we can be thankful no lives were lost. To begin... Annie, see to it there are enough

blankets to go around. Parents will sleep here in the great hall. Lady Cordelia..." Raven turned to the blonde woman and noted the glint of hatred in her eyes. She ignored it and went on. "You will take charge of the children. There are three fair-sized chambers in the south tower. You are to see to their preparation and that there are enough adults to oversee them. You will work with Gwen..."

"I refuse to work like a servant!" Cordelia glared at Raven, daring to provoke her hated rival. "And I will not deal with the likes of that woman!" She stared pointedly at Gwen.

"If you wish to remain here, you will do your part to help these people. You tried hard enough to become mistress, now you have a chance to prove your worth. If not, you may return to your father's house. I will not tolerate any arguments. I have neither the time nor the patience to deal with foolishness. You will be charged with the care of the children for as long as they are here.

"And now to other matters. Roger, you are to take a hunting party out at first light. We'll need plenty of game to feed all these people." As she issued orders, a vague thought intruded. Where was Gavin in all this?

"Where is the chieftain?" a male voice called out. "Why isn't he here to make the decisions? Who are you, that you try to replace him?" A ripple of murmurs flowed through the room as people began to question Raven's right to authority.

Andrew spoke up, quelling the disturbance before it got out of hand. "You all know Lady Raven MacKay. Do you not have trust in the wife of your chieftain? Jamie trusts her to do the right thing, and by law she has the right to speak for him."

"Where is our chieftain?" another voice called out again.

*Truth to tell...* Raven took a deep breath. The time had

come when she would have to tell them something, although she feared they weren't ready to hear. "Your chieftain isn't here. During the blaze, while the rest of us were busy trying to keep the fire from spreading, he was abducted." Whispers spread as quickly as the fire in the village had earlier. "I know where he is and I will deal with that in time. Until then, we have more important things to see to." The whispers grew louder.

"You show no concern for our laird, and you his wife," someone called out.

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one. Jamie would understand."

"Don't you even care what's happened to him?" a male voice shouted from the back of the great hall. Someone was trying their best to stir up dissention.

"Certainly I care, but I cannot do anything at the moment. First things first, and that's to get you good people settled. You may very well have to live within these walls for the winter months ahead."

*Those are vile words, girl,* Meredith interrupted in her quiet way. Raven felt the tickle of warm breath near her ear as her unseen companion voiced her opinions. *I hope you aren't forced to do that. You'll be bouncing off the walls before the winter is over, and I don't want to be the one to pick up the pieces.*

"How can you stand there and not be concerned for our laird's welfare?" Now she was certain someone was deliberately trying to stir up trouble, and Raven meant to find out who was responsible.

"Have you no faith in the Draoidh?" Raven shouted to be heard above the growing noise. "For years you have looked to my family with superstitious fear, and yet you have called on

us in your time of need. I am here now, and I promise your chieftain will return to you.” Raven stopped a moment, listening to the complaints that were quickly turning to doubts. “Look at me!” she demanded. “What do you see?”

“I see a woman who doesn’t know her place!” a man called out. “We don’t want some woman telling us what to do!”

Raven scanned the group, trying to locate her antagonist. A man who had, some weeks earlier, sought work at the keep drew her attention. Their gazes locked for a moment, and in that brief time, Raven was aware of the hatred festering in his mind. What was behind that hatred, she wondered. Her anger dissipated a bit. *I will deal with you in time*. His eyes widened at the intrusion into his thoughts, and a flicker of fear showed itself.

“So be it.” Raven turned to the older man by her side. “Andrew, you are in charge. My efforts would be better appreciated elsewhere. I will be in the library when you’re done here.” She jumped from the bench on which she had been standing and angrily strode from the great hall, not once looking back.

Andrew entered the library an hour later. Raven stood by the window, her back to the room. He could tell she was deep in thought. Her cloak had been carelessly tossed over the back of the chair by the desk. “The men will begin tomorrow, rebuilding what they can. We’ll get as many crofts done as possible before the first snows.”

“It doesn’t leave much time.” Raven replied.

“I will assign as many soldiers as possible to see the work is done quickly.”

“Thank you, Andrew. Without your help, I think I would



still be out there, arguing with them over priorities.”

Andrew nodded, then quietly left the room. He had much to see to.

Raven worried about the heckler and how she’d given herself away. Who was he reporting to? There was more going on here than the disappearance of a clan chieftain. The MacKay clan might believe she had little concern for their leader, but she knew her priorities. She had the skeleton of a plan worked out in her head, but she needed Andrew’s help—and that of one other—to make it work. Aiden would be that other, for he was the only one she trusted without reservation.

“What have you discovered?” Raven asked without turning from the window. She had been waiting for Meredith’s return.

“More than I cared to find out,” Meredith replied, stepping from the sapphire glow. “This idea of yours is too vague. It could backfire, you know. You haven’t left yourself much leeway for getting out of here.”

“I’m not worried about that at the moment. Did you find Jamie?” Raven turned to face the other woman. Her eyes betrayed the pain she held at bay.

If Meredith didn’t know the MacDraoidh chieftain as well as she did, she might have thought Raven saw this rescue strictly as a duty. This was one of those rare times when Raven couldn’t hide her true feelings. Meredith felt a certain satisfaction in that fact. “Yes, I did find him. Jamie was wounded. I don’t know if he was hurt during the fire, or if it was from fighting off his abductors. He’s not doing all that well. Sutherland isn’t concerned with Jamie’s welfare.”

“I suspected as much. I’ll need you to guide me to him,

since we won't have much time. We have to get in there and get him out as quickly as possible."

"How do you plan to do that? He's not what I would call a man of small stature."

"A small amount of nightshade should take care of that problem."

"Nightshade?" Meredith paused a moment. "Ah, I see what you have planned. Clever girl. If all goes well, we should be able to do this within a few hours. When do we go in?"

"I will be going in sometime in the afternoon to see Jamie. When I leave there, I'll meet up with Andrew, then he and I will arrive by late afternoon, willing to ransom Jamie. I'm sure we can come up with a price Sutherland would like."

"I don't know about that. I have a feeling the price he'll be looking for will be rather high for you."

"Are you saying I can't afford it?" Raven's eyes narrowed in scrutiny, leaving her to wonder why Meredith seemed to suddenly back off from this rescue mission.

"Maybe. I'm saying the price to you personally could be rather high. Be sure you think this through before you go there. I can only help you so much, and still avoid being caught."

"I have been warned. At the moment getting the MacKay back to his clan is most important. Anything else is of second concern."

"If you say so," Meredith replied, doubt in her voice. Raven's plan was a bit off the wall, but they didn't have time for anything more. All Meredith could do now was hope they could pull it off.

"I'll meet you there," Meredith concluded, then stepped back into her sapphire bubble and vanished.

Moments after Meredith left, Andrew entered the room. Raven continued to stare out the window, but saw nothing of the outside world. "The men will work in shifts, and keep their weapons with them at all times," she said without preamble. "Those I personally trained will be placed in charge of the groups formed. This will tax their strength and patience, but it will prove their mettle. They will have to protect the families as well as work." Raven went on to more important matters, not pausing to allow Andrew to say anything.

Andrew listened to Raven's plan of action and shook his head with misgivings. It was a foolish and dangerous plan, and he tried to talk her out of it. "How can you remain so calm, as if none of this really matters to you? Does it? Or are you just pleased to take control of the situation now that Jamie is gone? You have never really cared about my nephew, have you?" he accused. "Until the night he announced your marriage, you stayed away from him. Were all those times you spent together just an act on your part? Is the alliance between you only a means to advance your own goals?"

"You are the second to question my actions since this attack. Don't let my calm appearance fool you, Andrew. It may seem as if I don't care, but I am worried, and very angry. I cannot let that anger cloud my judgment. Until those responsible are dealt with, you, and everyone else will have to trust me. You wouldn't want to see the damage the Draoidh can inflict by venting anger. We can be a very destructive force."

Andrew gave no further response. Years ago, he had agreed to become one of two protectors to the Draoidh. He never expected to be dealing with a woman like this one. She took too many risks, accepted little council from others. Her plans would either succeed or condemn her. If she failed now,

the Draoidh would be lost to the clans. There were no others to take this woman's place.

The next morning at dawn, Raven assured herself that sufficient food had been prepared for the men before they began their work. The noonday meal would be brought to them. They had their orders to keep their weapons close to hand while they worked to restore the village, as much of it as they could before winter set in. If Andrew resented being given orders from a woman, he hid it well. The men weren't of a mind to accept a woman's authority. Andrew showed his confidence in her by quelling any grumbling in the ranks and supporting her orders.

Andrew accepted that Raven was well within her rights as Jamie's wife to take charge in his stead. He would take the lead only if she asked him, and he knew she wouldn't. It was up to Raven to prove herself capable—not solely by her marriage. Perhaps she had the right of it. When this day was done, she would either strengthen or destroy the respect she'd previously earned.

Raven wasn't one to be content with just giving orders. She spent the day working with soldiers to repair as much damage as possible. The men replaced thatched roofs and cleared burned-out huts of debris. She had to keep herself busy and allow some time to pass before she put her plan into action.

She listened to the soldiers' grumblings while they reluctantly set about their tasks. She was well aware of the fact they resented her for not sending a search party for their chieftain, but she didn't see any reason in announcing every part of her plan. What was the point of having a mentor if you couldn't take advantage of their skills? Meredith was the perfect entity

to keep Raven abreast of what was going on.

Let them talk and think what they would. Maybe they had decided she wasn't such a good wife after all. Maybe she wasn't the best choice for their chieftain. She didn't seem concerned about his welfare. Andrew kept their complaints to a minimum and assured them she had the laird's best interests at heart. At the moment, she put the needs of the tenants before the needs of their leader. She needed time before putting her plan into action. Andrew would give it to her.

Raven watched the soldiers continue to work in shifts, helping the villagers restore their homes and prepare, again, for winter. Time was short.

The next morning, when she failed to appear for the morning meal, Andrew sat back, knowing the time had come to put her plan into action. All he could do now was wait for her orders.

## Chapter 17

Worn slippery stairs led into the bowels of the castle. The low slanting ceiling prevented ill-spaced torches from casting much light along the tunnel to the dungeon cells. Rather, they cast dancing shadows and created deception between light and dark.

An old woman adjusted the tray resting against her hip. She'd managed to switch the flagon of tainted water for one of good ale. All she had been able to pilfer from the kitchen was a cup of broth and half a loaf of bread. That was more than the Sutherland laird was willing to allow the prisoner.

She touched the wall for balance, ready to make her way down the stairs, but jerked her hand away. Slime covered her fingertips. She shook her head and rubbed her fingers together, then wiped the disgusting substance on her drab skirts. There was no help for it. The light was too poor to trust her vision. She fretted at the uselessness of wiping her fingers, only to dirty them again to keep her footing.

She stopped at the foot of the stair and gave her eyes a moment to adjust to the torchlight at the far end of the corridor. Six partially-closed doors lined each side of the corridor, and at the far end sat a single guard.

“Are you sure you will not be seen?” Raven asked, glancing at the apple-sized circle of light next to her.

“I’m sure, but if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll dim the light.” The sapphire glow faded to a deep purple and little bigger than a pinprick. “Only you can see me now.”

The sapphire bubble held steady in midair. “What are you waiting for? We don’t have much time to pull this off.” The old woman looked up and made an impatient noise in her throat that sounded suspiciously like a growl. “You’re getting good at that,” Meredith complimented her companion with a chuckle. “Let’s see what else you can do.”

Raven shook her head and readjusted the slipping tray, pushing back the ointment and bandage strips on one side. She stopped before the guard.

The middle-aged soldier sat on a three-legged stool, leaning back against the mildewed wall, his beefy hands folded and resting against his oversized belly. The thick, close walls swallowed his steady snoring. The stool tipped back at a precarious angle.

Raven took a step closer, hooked one foot around the stool leg nearest her, and gave it a quick, hard yank. She moved back quickly as the stool bounced off the opposite wall and dropped. She watched, with pleasure, while the guard tried to right himself before thumping to the cold hard floor. A metal box clanked against the wall, and its contents rattled.

Meredith chuckled. *That should make his day*, she commented to her companion.

The rudely-awakened guard swore under his breath at sight of the old woman. “What’s your business?” he demanded, masking his embarrassment with his brusque manner and clambering to his feet. He glanced around, looking for the

source of stifled laughter that had not come from the old woman. He had heard rumors the dungeon was haunted, and his eyes widened at the thought it might be so. His replacement wouldn't arrive soon enough to suit him.

"The laird sent me to tend the prisoner," the old woman said. She shifted the tray to a more comfortable position on her hip, as if it were too heavy for her to handle. "Hard work for someone like me, but he doesn't trust the young girls to tend a handsome prisoner," she added with an amused cackle.

"I've never seen you in the keep before." The guard eyed her warily.

"Sometimes I stay in the village, sometimes here. I have no family, so I come and go as I please." She waited while the guard tried to decide whether or not to believe her. She sensed there was something about her he didn't trust. Her homespun clothing hung loosely on her small frame, and she brushed wisps of long white hair away from her wrinkled face. Clear blue eyes reflected nearby torchlight. He didn't like the way she watched intently, or her short patience.

"Will you ignore the laird's orders? A dead hostage is no hostage. It'll be on your head if he bleeds to death." She shrugged her thin shoulders as if she didn't care if she saw the prisoner or not. What should it matter to her if the prisoner lived or died?

The guard mumbled something under his breath, then ambled along the narrow corridor to the corner. He removed a key ring from a hook on the wall, then glanced back once to be sure she was right behind him. She was too quiet for an old hag. All the old women he knew jabbered incessantly, talking his ears off. He turned a key in the lock of the last cell and pulled open the heavy door. From the wall sconce beside the



cell, he removed an unlit torch and set it ablaze. He placed it in a wall bracket just inside the cell, then stepped back out of her way. "Be quick about it, old woman. I don't have all day." He looked over at the tray she carried, searching it for possible weapons. He helped himself to most of the bread.

The old woman stepped into the cell, while the guard remained a step behind. "Don't you have something more important to do?" she asked, with a glance down the hall to his post. On the floor beside his stool was a box of weapons. That accounted for the metallic rattling moments earlier. Guard duty had been assigned to him as a punishment for laziness, along with the task of sharpening and polishing those implements. The guard flushed but made no move to leave.

"Go on. I'll call you when I'm done."

The man stood, his expression sullen, and considered what he should do.

"Do you think I'd help him escape? I'd be daft to try. I don't need your help, but if he should be trouble, I'll call you."

The guard still doubted, not completely trusting her. Still, she was frail and a woman. He could easily subdue her if necessary, and the prisoner was in no condition to aid in any rescue attempt.

"You had better have that work done..." the crone reminded him.

With a final glower, the man left the cell, closing and locking the door after him.

The old woman placed the tray on the floor next to the pallet and looked around. The smell of fetid straw combined with the dank musty odors that emanated from the walls. A pair of mice skittered through the straw and darted into a

small hole in one corner. She hated to think what else had been in here before. She knelt beside the still figure on the filthy pad and gently stroked his cheek. "Jamie. Jamie, wake up," she called to him in a soft whisper.

Jamie woke slowly, distantly aware of the warm papery feel of dry skin caressing his cheek. The voice sounded like... "Raven?" he asked, still groggy from his feverish sleep, his voice hoarse from thirst. He opened his eyes and peered up at the old woman. "Are you a prisoner here, too?" he asked. His eyes drifted close again.

She laid her fingers lightly across his lips. "Speak softly, my lord," she warned in a whisper. "The guard will be listening for any conversation. I'm not a prisoner. I've come to see about getting you out of here." Raven glanced back at the door, then raised Jamie's bloodstained shirt and cleansed the wound in his side. It had been left untended for too long, and the flesh around the wound had reddened with inflammation. Raven breathed a sigh of relief to find it wasn't as serious as she'd first thought, despite the beginnings of infection. Left untreated... She shuddered to think what might have happened if he'd been left alone too much longer.

"Are you alone?" he asked. His mind cleared with his new hope.

"For the moment. Andrew is awaiting my return."

"You know you can't get me out of here, Raven. There's only one way I'll leave this place."

"Yes, I know. The Sutherlands mean to see you dead for the destruction brought on their clan."

"Leave, Raven. There is nothing you can do. I'll not let them destroy you too. You must lead the clan. I give you that right as my wife."

“Are you so anxious to be rid of me?” She smiled down at him, and the old woman’s façade faded, allowing Jamie to stare into his wife’s pale eyes. His own eyes widened briefly at the change in her. He’d never before witnessed her ability to create illusion, to appear as someone she wasn’t.

“No, but I want you safe.”

“I couldn’t be any safer.” She finished bandaging his side, then sat back on her heels. “Do you trust me, Jamie?” she asked, her visage searching his for the truth in his reply.

“I trust you with my life.” He accepted the bit of bread she gave him and chewed it slowly. He continued watching her as she reached toward the tray and picked up the tankard of ale.

“Good.” She sighed with relief. “Drink this, it will ease the pain.” Raven remained silent as he drank the liquid, hoping he wouldn’t notice its unusually bitter taste. “Not the *best* ale in the castle,” she commented at his expression, “but it’s better than what Sutherland wanted you to have.” He held out the tankard to her. “It’s good you trust me. What I must do, is difficult enough.” She glanced back at the door, alert for any sound that would tell her the guard was near and eavesdropping on their conversation. She sensed nothing and turned her attention back to Jamie. “I’ve put a small amount of nightshade into the ale. In about two hours you will appear to be dead.” She laughed softly at the look of alarm on his face. “Have no fear. That condition will last no more than a day. It will take longer for your wound to heal than to carry off this charade. Andrew will arrive in time to claim your body for proper burial. Of course, he will be appropriately angered over your unexpected death. The drug will eventually wear off, and Annie will look after you until you have completely

recovered. In the meantime, you will be protected.”

At mention of her family, Jamie saw the pale sapphire glow in the cell’s darkest corner. *A good ev’nin to you, Lady Meredith.* Even in his thoughts his words were slightly slurred. The glow brightened in recognition of the greeting, then paled again to avoid possible detection. Raven pulled the thin blanket over him, giving him little protection. He shivered with the dampness. His lack of strength helped the herb in the drugged ale to take effect more quickly.

Raven continued with her explanation while she tucked the blanket about him. “In two hours time, the guard will check on you and believe you to be dead.” She leaned over and kissed the corner of his mouth. The potent brew was already working, and she expected no response. She wasn’t sure how much he understood as he sank beneath the effects of the drink. The drug was as dangerous as the sword that had pierced his side. Still it was the only way to get him out of that keep alive, and without further bloodshed. If her plan went awry, she would be held responsible. She sat back and watched his eyes close. “No matter what happens, Jamie, never forget I love you.” Her words, never before admitted, were barely a whisper.

Raven turned her attention to the corner of the cell and nodded her head. The pale sapphire glow brightened momentarily in response. Raven watched while the silhouette of a young woman formed within the glow, then faded, leaving only the sapphire light pulsing in the corner. *Please watch over him, Meredith,* her thoughts conveyed to the apparition. *I must leave to see the rest of the plan is carried out.* Once again the glow brightened, then dimmed in response. The MacKay laird would be safe from harm. The rest of her plan had to be

quickly completed. If the guard discovered too soon what had taken place here...

Andrew had balked at the plan, but this deception was the quickest way she could think of to free Jamie from the Sutherland dungeons. If Raven was right, someone was going to a great deal of bother to rekindle old feuds between the Sutherlands and MacKays, and they wanted Jamie out of the way permanently. Who stood to benefit from Jamie's death? Andrew? He would give his own life to protect his nephew. Raven trusted the MacKay steward implicitly. That left her with no obvious suspects. "Guard!" With her disguise in place and a grip on the tray, she called out in a cackling voice.

In a few moments the guard released the old woman from the cell and locked the door while she waited. "He is doing poorly," she commented, and trudged along the hall to the stair. She shifted her burden as if it had become heavier since leaving the cell. "He won't survive the night. If his wound had been tended sooner he might have been saved. Now you will have only a dead hostage on your hands." The old woman shook her head and continued on her way. She lifted her head slightly and smiled a small tight smile, praying she had done the right thing. Now it was up to Andrew, Annie and the Draoidh to protect her husband. There was little more she could do for him. Once Andrew played his part, it would be time for her to go home.

\* \* \* \*

The guard followed the shrieks and headed toward the rear of the castle. They could only mean one thing—the laird had another serving girl trapped. He stopped in the doorway of the small kitchen and watched the poor girl try to keep the table between her and the laird's unwanted advances. The

guard cleared his throat to gain the man's attention. He was instantly rebuked.

The laird whirled about and glowered at him. "You know better than to bother me when I am involved in my favorite pursuit," Laird Sutherland reprimanded him without looking away from the girl.

"My lord, the MacKay steward is here and demands to speak with you."

Sutherland turned to the guard. "He does, does he?" He sighed with chagrin at this unwelcome interruption. He leered back at the girl. "I'm not done with you, by any means." He straightened his attire and stalked out of the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

Raven stood quietly by Andrew's side, patiently waiting. The great hall of the Sutherlands was in dire need of repair. The walls were covered with grease and soot from the huge hearth at one end of the hall. The dry rushes underfoot had not been replaced for some time and crumbled to dust when stepped on. Raven shuddered to think about the vermin that might be hiding in the corners and beneath the stacked tables. It wasn't much better than the keep where she and Aiden almost spent a night.

With eyes gazing straight ahead and hands by her sides, Raven waited patiently for the laird to arrive. Raven knew little of this laird beyond his hatred of the MacKay clan. For the hundredth time, she tried to think of who might want a war between the two clans. What did anyone have to gain by it? She quietly exhaled a breath of frustration and decided this was not the time for distraction. She forced herself to focus on the present.

Andrew stood at attention, one hand resting on the hilt of

his sword. He remained alert for any danger that might threaten his nephew's wife. *Show no surprise or concern for anything I may say or do.* Raven's words couldn't be heard by others, but echoed in his mind. By now he should be used to her invasion of his thoughts. At least she did it rarely. He watched her neutral expression while she waited for Sutherland to speak up.

Angus Sutherland was a big man with shoulder-length brown hair streaked with gray. His dark eyes seemed lost in a puffy face that plainly showed the excessive consumption of food and drink. Years earlier he had been known for his prowess in battle, but now he had lost the lean grace and sharp reflexes of a warrior. He shifted his bulk in the high-backed chair and sipped wine from his goblet. With slow, deliberate movement he placed it on the table before him and silently, shrewdly glanced at his guests. Angus Sutherland regarded the woman before him with curiosity.

The woman who stood patiently waiting was dressed in soft leather boots, dark hose and shirt, with a wide belt about her waist. She also wore an unfamiliar tartan draped over one shoulder. Her hair was short and sported two braids. Her bonnet held three merlin feathers, the mark of a chieftain. It amused him to see a woman dressed like a man, expecting to be acknowledged for her rank. There was something about her, as if she were more than the chieftain she claimed to be. Either way, she didn't fool him. He knew the fairer sex too well, better than most men, to be taken in by their games. If she waited for him to offer greetings and refreshment, she was facing disappointment. He had no intention of making any such offer. He masked his lascivious smile while he thought of ways he might detain her—for all her unusual dress, she was an attractive

woman, and he longed to get his hands on her slim body.

Sutherland continued to regard the woman before him with idle curiosity. He caught an unguarded flash of fire from her pale eyes. Again, he entertained the idea of some ruse to keep her with him for a while. How much fight did she have in her? He welcomed the challenge. It might prove interesting.

Raven watched a spot over his shoulder, aware of everything going on. She didn't have to read his mind to know his thoughts. The laird's hot stare disgusted her, but she gave no sign. Andrew's company comforted her during this unpleasant task. It was worth it to save Jamie from the Sutherland dungeon. They didn't have much time to execute their plan. If it didn't work, her enemy, whoever it was, would win. Raven refused to let that happen.

"Who might you be?" Sutherland's gravelly voice broke the silence in the hall. Three of his men who had been talking quietly among themselves turned their attention to the newcomers. The handful of coins held by one made it obvious they had placed wagers on how long it would take the laird to catch the woman.

Andrew spoke first. "This is the Lady Raven MacKay."

"Lady? I see no lady. More likely MacKay's strumpet," Sutherland scoffed. He noticed the tic in Raven's jaw and was pleased to have scored a hit. His gaze moved slowly from Raven's face, down the length of her slender body, then returned to her pale gray eyes. He didn't care if she was MacKay's wife or not. She excited him, and his mind filled with thoughts of what he would do with her once the MacKay was dead.

*This little piggy went to market*, a disembodied voice whispered irreverently in Raven's ear. *He means to keep you for him-*



*self. The price is your husband's life.*

*You're a mite late with that bit of information,* Raven retorted, tossing the thought back to her unseen companion. She would never understand what passed for Meredith's sense of humor. *Why are you not with Jamie?* Raven sensed a shrug.

*For all intents and purposes your husband is dead,* Meredith replied. Raven sensed Meredith's attention shift to the stairway leading to the dungeon. *What is taking so long for the guard to get up here and inform Sutherland?* Meredith's concern for the success of their plan began to waver.

Andrew's hand tightened on his sword hilt, but Raven stopped him with a thought. *Do not react. You know he's baiting us,* she warned him.

The MacKay steward relaxed his stance and studied the seated warriors.

"Then you have no eyes. I am wife to James Alexander MacKay, laird of Clan MacKay."

Her boldness set him back a moment, but he quickly recovered himself. Yes, this one would give him fine sport. "Never thought MacKay would take a warrior to wife," he continued to bait them. "What gives you the right to wear that?" he demanded, pointing to the offensive braid.

For the first time, Raven turned her gaze directly on the Sutherland. "I have earned the right." She stood straight and tall, arrogance once again in her posture.

For a moment, her penetrating stare discomfited him. He shrugged off the feeling. He wasn't about to let the woman intimidate him. "Then, woman, you are naught but a witch." He wanted to taunt her, to see how far he could push. In the past this little game had always worked for him. He never had to push long or hard to get the results he desired.

Raven remained calm and spoke quietly, but her voice carried. "Are not all women witches, my lord? Some are simply more adept than others at casting spells," she replied with a feigned innocence that didn't fool the laird. She paused briefly. "Let us get to the point. I am here to bargain for my husband's freedom."

Sutherland leaned forward and picked up his goblet. He gulped down the liquid, then held out the cup to be refilled. At his bidding, a timid young page hurried to him with a flagon of wine and poured the liquid with a shaking hand. "Now why would I want to release him? As long as I hold him prisoner, the raids on my clan will stop. No, Lady Raven, I have no intention of releasing your husband."

Raven faced him, undaunted. "It has come to my attention, my lord, that we have a mutual enemy. The same person or persons responsible for the attacks on your clan have also caused grave destruction on Clan MacKay. Less than a sen-night ago, one of the MacKay villages was put to the torch. Fortunately, no lives were lost, but the destruction was almost total. It has taken us this long to settle our tenants and prepare them for the coming winter. The night of the fire, my husband was taken prisoner, and this was left behind." Raven held up the scrap of cloth, the Sutherland plaid. "Someone is determined to have Sutherlands and MacKays destroy each other. For what purpose, I do not know."

The Sutherland warriors listened intently to the conversation. Raven showed no emotion but began to worry. Time was growing short. Where was that guard? Why hadn't he appeared to give his laird the news of Jamie's death? If he didn't arrive soon, her plan would fail.

A soldier entered the hall and hurried to the dais. He

spoke softly to his laird and, although she could not hear his words, she breathed a silent sigh of relief. It would all work out now. She felt Andrew's hand on her arm. He knew what she was waiting for and was ready to act.

Angus turned to his guests. "My condolences, Lady Raven," he said. "It seems your husband has died of his wound." Angus didn't trouble himself to pretend remorse.

Raven lowered her head in apparent grief. "It is as I feared. I ask you allow us to take my husband home for proper burial." She looked up at Sutherland, her eyes clouded with unshed tears.

"I cannot allow that. I have no way of knowing you will not attack my clan to avenge your husband's death. I will allow your man to take your laird and return to your clan, but you will remain here as hostage."

This was an unexpected turn of events. Andrew's gaze darted to Raven, then back to Sutherland. A muscle twitched in the MacKay steward's jaw. He barely hid the fact he was not at all pleased with Angus' decision. "Will you not allow the lady to bury her husband?" Andrew asked.

"No, I will not."

Raven gave Andrew a warning glance. "I accept your terms, my lord. May I say my farewells in the courtyard?" Raven asked with grave respect.

"You may... with a guard present."

"As you wish, my lord." Raven bowed her head to Sutherland's will and kept her anger under control. Her broadsword and dirk were taken from her. Angus made a show of examining her specially made sword, testing it. She hadn't exactly counted on this turn of events, but neither did it surprise her. This had to be the high price to which Mere-

dith had earlier referred.

The guard led Raven out of the great hall where she stood in the courtyard and watched Jamie's body being placed across the packhorse's back. The animal balked at the awkwardness of the weight, but Andrew spoke softly, calming it. Raven stepped forward, only to be stopped by her guard grasping her arm. "I wish to say goodbye to my husband," she protested. The guard, uncertain, relented and watched her step forward.

Raven brushed a wisp of dark hair away from Jamie's face. She leaned forward to kiss his cold cheek and whispered, "If you remember nothing else, and no matter what you may think, I do this for you and your clan."

The guard led her away to stand near his laird. Angus watched the woman in silence, suspicion crawling about his thoughts. She was too quiet, and had yet to shed a tear for her dead husband. As if reading his thoughts, Raven startled him with her simple truth. "Warriors never cry."

Andrew mounted his horse and took up the second animal's reins. He gave Raven an imperceptible nod as she stepped back, acknowledging he would carry out the rest of her plan. His mouth tightened when Angus moved closer to Raven. There was nothing for Andrew to do now but leave. He had to trust she'd be all right.

The laird took a firm hold of Raven's arm, as if he expected her to jump onto one of the horses and ride away.

Raven remained still while Andrew rode out of the courtyard with his nephew's body on the second horse. When they were safely out of sight, she pulled her arm free of Angus' grip. She would never allow him to lay claim to her. He ran a puffy hand down the length of her arm in suggestion of more intimate contact. Raven swatted away his loathsome paw.

Angus grabbed a fistful of her short hair and yanked her head backward, leaving her throat vulnerable. With the point of a dirk, he drew a drop of blood from the underside of her jaw. "Strike me again, and you'll see how quickly I can draw blood from that slender neck of yours." He leaned toward her, withdrew the dirk and planted a wet kiss on her throat. Raven groaned with disgust, but the laird chuckled. In his mind she enjoyed it, just as they all enjoyed his attentions. Angus backed away and glanced at her guard. "Take her to my chambers and lock her in. I will deal with her later. I'm sure she will be most cooperative when she's had time to consider her situation."

## Chapter 18

Raven paced from the window to the locked door and back again. She shuddered, remembering Angus' wet kiss. To keep him away she would go so far as to cut her own throat. She prayed it would not come to that. Night fell slowly, preventing her from seeking escape. By day too many watchful eyes would mark her movements should she escape the chamber. At the very least, Jamie was out of Sutherland hands. If she knew Aiden, her teacher would wait until the last minute for her to join them. She had other plans.

She felt the presence of a guard outside the door...as if that would stop her. Angus was taking no chances on her escaping him. Still, he was a pawn. Someone out there wanted the two clans at each others' throats—despite Angus' belief to the contrary—and Raven meant to discover who that someone was.

A young serving girl entered the room carrying a tray of bread, cold slices of venison and a goblet of wine. She said nothing, set the tray on a table and stepped back. The girl glanced about her, like a doe entering a glade and unsure if a hunter lurked nearby. She bit her lip and wiped her red, roughened hands on her apron while she watched the prison-

er. She had heard the men talking earlier and listened to their accusations that the laird's guest was a witch. Two or three steps backward brought her closer to the door, all the while cursing under her breath at her luck. No one wanted to be the one chosen to serve the strange woman.

The girl avoided meeting Raven's glance when Raven studied her. The witch's pale gray eyes seemed to look deep into her own brown ones. It was a moment before Raven noted the marks on the servant's face. The girl flinched when Raven moved closer and touched her cheek. The fading light made it difficult to see, but when Raven looked more closely and saw the swelling, she became angry.

"Who did this to you?" Raven demanded. The girl backed away in fear, and Raven immediately softened her voice and tried again. "What is your name, girl?"

"Myra," the servant replied softly, afraid of what this woman had in mind.

"Myra," Raven repeated just as quietly. "Who beat you?" She studied the girl's bruised features. Myra said nothing. "Did your laird do this to you?"

"Yes," came the hesitant whisper. Myra gathered her courage and with a great deal of encouragement, told her story. "Angus believes all women in the castle are to serve him personally, here in his chambers. He stalks us or sends one of his guards after us until we're finally caught. Some of the other girls have been bound before he whips them. It's worse when he's drunk because he pursues us that much harder. Jennie couldn't work for a month after he got through with her. I was fortunate not to have been punished so severely." Myra suddenly stopped talking. She wasn't sure who she should fear more, the Sutherland laird who could beat her to death if he

chose, or this woman who was believed to be a witch and could place her soul in danger.

*We'll feed Black Angus on droopwort  
'Twill make it shrink and make it short.  
Make widows and the maidens snort  
When finally they end his sport.*

Meredith's rhyme made Raven burst with laughter. She slapped her hand over her mouth to stifle the sound. The girl would be terrified if she knew an unseen voice spoke to her.

*It wasn't that funny*, Meredith fussed, a bit annoyed. Raven's mirth turned to a frown. She was beginning to understand Meredith's strange sense of humor—and that worried her.

"Myra, I have an idea that may put an end to your laird's lecherous ways. Might you be interested?"

Myra had stepped back at Raven's unexpected outburst, wondering if the prisoner were daft, but the next words piqued her interest. Anything that would put an end to the beatings the laird was known to give would be welcome. Anything except... "You aren't going to kill him, are you?" she asked hesitantly.

"You need not worry about that. What I have in mind is worse, and he will wish he were dead. From what I've been told, this will be harmless to him in all ways but one. It will be a temporary measure at best, until I can put a more enduring plan in place. There is a woman I've heard of whose appetites are a match for his. At least he'll not bother you or the other serving women again. She'll keep him too busy for him to stray."

Raven explained to the girl what she needed and what she



was to do. Myra's face brightened with hope. "I know the plant you speak of. It causes great drowsiness. Are you sure it will work as you say? It seems too good to be true."

"You know what I am, Myra, I'll not deny it. You are not to tell anyone what you are about, but I promise, if you do as I say, Sutherland will never again lay a hand on a woman in lust or anger. One day you will speak of this to your grandchildren, of how you bested the mighty Angus Sutherland. Yes, I think I should arrange a meeting with one special woman who will forever cure him of his roving eye."

The doubt in Myra's eyes faded, and a new confidence replaced it. For the first time, Myra felt able to take care of herself, and she liked the feeling. She rubbed her hands on the coarse wool of her skirts and smiled at Raven. "Will you be needing anything else, my lady?"

Raven smiled back as a second plan formed. "As a matter of fact, there is something you can do," and she beckoned the girl closer.

A short time later, after carefully going over their plans, the serving girl left the chamber and, after nodding to the guard, made her way back down to the kitchen. The great hall was quiet. The three soldiers who had been there earlier tended to their duties. Two children set about wiping down the high table in preparation for the evening meal. Myra grinned, knowing what would happen this night, her first night of freedom. Delicious aromas escaped from the kitchen and floated in on the draughts in the room. Continuing on her way, she snatched a small loaf of bread as she passed through the kitchen and out the back door into the courtyard.

She marveled at the fact Angus had been fool enough to give the confiscated weapons to a young squire. The sword

was unlike any other in the way it was made. The weapons carelessly lay on a bale of hay in the stable, while the squire tended to his duties. The maid sheathed the sword on the saddle and stuck the dagger in the waistband of her apron. She took up Starfire's reins and led the mare through the courtyard to the still open gates. She thought it strange no one tried to stop her. Despite the awkwardness of the skirts, the girl managed to climb on the mare's back. She dug her heels into the animal's sides and set off at a trot, eager to be away.

As the distance from the keep increased, the girl sat back and took a deep breath. She laughed. As her sense of freedom took over, the façade of serving girl fell away and Raven relaxed. The sapphire glow appeared briefly before her. *And this little piggy had none*, Meredith quipped, pleased with herself. *Or he won't have any soon enough. Hmm...maybe not. See there in the distance? An armed escort for Lady Letitia headed this way. She arrives sooner than expected. I'm about to turn the tables on our dear laird. Give me a moment... Okay. Myra thinks she misunderstood your directions and has accepted the new ones I just gave her. Give it a few days and Angus will never again look at another woman—he won't dare. Letitia will cure his roving eye. She'll be more than enough for him.*

Raven sensed her companion's satisfaction in a deed well done. If the last minute changes benefited the Sutherland serving women, so be it. Their goal to set Jamie free was also accomplished. Raven was relieved, as well, to be away from that place. Another order of business was to discover who had been behind this scheme to begin with, but that would have to wait. Her path was set now. It was time to move on.

\* \* \* \*

The real Myra made herself comfortable in the bed-

chamber, enjoying the luxury saved for the laird. This was the first and last time she'd have opportunity to taste of the comforts reserved for her betters. Her only worry was that Angus might return to claim his prisoner before the guard outside the door changed. After the guard was relieved of duty, Myra nonchalantly stepped back out of the room. "Yes, my lady," she said, then gave the guard a tentative smile when he closed the door. She hurried away. She had no desire to be around when Angus realized he had been tricked. As far as she knew, the lady had remained in the chamber when she left, and the guard would attest to that. If the captive lady kept her promise, then Myra, as well as the other women in the castle, would no longer have reason to fear Angus' appetites. Myra would know soon enough.

\* \* \* \*

Aiden stood beside a cart and watched the road, waiting for some sign of Raven. Where was she? She'd told Andrew she'd meet them on this road before dark. It was almost that now. He studied the road for a few moments longer, looking for some sign of movement to let him know she'd left Sutherland land and was on her way to join them.

Aiden's gaze followed that of the older man's and he, too, stared at the darkening road. He thought he heard a noise coming from the wood, but after glancing about, he dismissed it as his anxious imagination. He didn't like being separated from Raven like this. He was her guardian, and she was making his job very difficult.

"We can't wait any longer," Andrew decided. He unhitched his horse's reins and mounted up.

"What about Raven?" Aiden asked. "Should she not be here by now?" He had been angry earlier when Raven left him

out of making the plans for Jamie's rescue.

"Aye. She should be, but we can't wait any longer. She can take care of herself if it comes to that. We have to worry about Jamie right now."

\* \* \* \*

Raven remained out of sight and watched the two men looking after her husband. She should be there to care for him herself, but she couldn't...not now. She concentrated a moment, knowing she could reach a part of his mind despite his deathlike condition. *I will do what I must do, my lord. I only ask that, if nothing else, you will remember me with kindness.*

She took a deep breath to steady herself, then turned and rubbed her mount's velvety nose. "Time for us to go home, Starfire," she whispered. "There are people waiting for us to return to the fortress. Our time here is over. The need of the Draoidh has been fulfilled." Raven mounted and turned the sturdy mare's direction deeper into the forest, on a path that would take them home.

\* \* \* \*

The late afternoon sky was gray, and the mist hanging thick in the air promised to turn to rain before darkness enveloped the land. A lone figure leaned against the wall of the battlement, apparently deep in thought. "Good to see you back from the dead, nephew," Andrew greeted him. "How is your side?"

Jamie gave no response beyond a shrug. The wound he'd received was healing well, thanks to Raven's and Annie's care.

"She'll soon be back, lad. Probably just ran into a bit of trouble breaking away from the Sutherlands." Even as he spoke, Andrew knew the emptiness of his words, but he hated to see his nephew like this. It had been a full day since the

drug Raven gave her husband had worn off. There had been danger in giving him the herb, but it was the only thing they could have done to get him safely away and avoid bloodshed. Thankfully, he had survived it well.

“You know better than that, Andrew. Nothing stands in her way unless she allows it. I don’t recall anything after she gave me that drugged ale, but at one time, I could swear she called to me. She said she must do what she must and asked if I did nothing else, that I would remember her with kindness.” He paused and sighed. “She won’t be coming back.” He reached for the amulet he always wore, and turned his attention back to the moors. The misting air grew heavier with moisture. It would rain soon.

He didn’t hear Andrew leave. “Why, Raven?” he asked in a whisper. “Why leave me now, when we have so much to share?” His only answer came from the soft patter of the beginning rain.

\* \* \* \*

Raven stood not far from the edge of the cliff, delighting in the delicate hues of the sunset. The sun slowly lowered itself beyond the horizon, the colors deepening until they eventually blackened with the arrival of night. Myriads of stars gradually made their presence known with their twinkling array, like so many polished diamonds.

Her mind wandered aimlessly, inconsequential thoughts floating through her brain. How much time had passed since she’d returned to Dun Sgiath? Raven thought back to the day she’d aided in Jamie’s escape from the Sutherland dungeon. She hadn’t exactly explained her plan in detail to Andrew. The trade itself hadn’t been planned, but it had worked. Having a body turned over to Andrew wasn’t what he’d expected,

but he'd kept his own council. He'd had enough sense to obey Raven's warning glance and not question. He'd left the Sutherland keep with Jamie's body and Raven's strange words to treat the laird with care. Several days later, she spoke with Meredith and was relieved to know Jamie would make a full recovery. It pleased, and at the same time, saddened her to know he'd finally stopped asking for her.

It felt odd, realizing she loved her husband, something she never thought would happen. Raven sighed, knowing her private confession held little meaning now. She couldn't go back. It wasn't safe. Not for her or for those she cared about. In time they'd either grow to resent her, or forget her. She sighed again and turned away from the cliff. The only thing left to her now was a promise made long ago. After that...

## Chapter 19

Six months after Raven vanished from Sutherland lands, Annie stopped in the middle of the bailey, feeling very uncomfortable. It was hard to believe she had once called this place home. Dun Sgiath. She didn't recognize anyone, as servants working nearby stopped what they were doing and stared at her. Most outsiders didn't know of the existence of the fortress, so no one ever wandered in.

"What can we do for you?" Mairi asked as she wiped her hands on her apron. She watched the strange woman with caution. The clan would never trust again, as they did once, long ago.

"Good day to you." Annie's cheerful greeting hid the nervousness she felt. She couldn't explain what had brought her back after all these years. She'd wanted to ignore the strange summons that had filled her thoughts, and now that she was here, she again began to doubt the wisdom of her trip. Maybe Andrew had the right of it, when he tried to talk her out of coming here, but without success. Jamie would be angry if he knew where she'd gone, but it didn't take much to rile his temper these days—and what would he do to Andrew, when he realized his uncle had accompanied her? "I'm here to

see Lady Raven.”

“We don’t have visitors here,” Mairi began warily, but was interrupted as a young boy stepped out of the great hall.

“Daniel said we have visitors, Mairi?” The housekeeper looked to the mistress as she stepped out after the boy.

“I would be a friend, milady,” the newcomer said as she stared at Raven. Her eyes went wide as she took note of Raven’s swollen body.

Raven turned, slowly, one hand resting against her back to ease the discomfort that was with her constantly. “Annie!” Raven’s eyes lit up as she looked at her friend. “It’s good to see you. Come inside, come inside. You must be tired from your journey. What brings you to Sgiath?” Raven stopped her questions long enough to briefly speak with Mairi. “Have Joan prepare a chamber for Annie. Then I would appreciate it if you would bring some refreshments to my solar.”

Annie waited as Raven settled herself onto a cushioned chair. “I see you’ve been keeping secrets,” she commented, amused. “I imagine you’re no longer wielding a sword. Rather difficult for a pregnant warrior.”

Raven shrugged. The secret wasn’t one she wanted to keep, but it had been necessary. “How is Jamie?” she asked softly.

Annie hesitated before speaking. “Jamie is... Jamie. He’s never forgiven you for drugging him and disappearing. He’s forbidden anyone from ever mentioning your name. You can’t imagine how pleased that’s made Cordelia. We thought you were hard to live with when you were having those nightmares, but that was nothing compared to the way he’s been acting these last months.”

“It wasn’t something I wanted to do, Annie, but I had no



choice. Angus Sutherland would never have released Jamie alive. There is too much danger for the MacKay clan if I stayed there. I will not be responsible for innocent bloodshed. I lived through it once; I will not do it again. I will not put Jamie's people in that danger."

"You could have explained to Jamie about the child and your fears for his people. He would have understood much better than you give him credit for. You would have been safe there. He would have seen to it. Now everyone is miserable with Cordelia trying to run things. She thinks she can gain his approval by taking charge. All she's managed to do is create more chaos. Everyone prefers your way of doing things, and they miss you. No one mentions your name, but Jamie knows everyone is thinking of you and wondering why you disappeared. Even Jamie, for all his bluster and refusal to speak your name, misses you terribly. Why don't you come back, Raven? We need you. Jamie is lost without you, but he'll never admit it."

Raven sighed. "I cannot." She noted Annie's scowl and caught her thoughts. "It has nothing to do with pride, as you think, Annie. What I am about to tell you, you are not to repeat to anyone, especially Jamie." She waited for Annie's promise of silence before continuing. "There is a traitor in Castle MacKay." Annie gasped. "Your clan is in danger as long as I stay there. That is one reason why I had to leave. The other is this child. Being the child of the Draoidh puts its life in grave danger. At least here, we are both relatively safe."

"But the clan would have protected you with their lives. You know that. Jamie would do anything to keep you and his child safe. He does know about the child, doesn't he?" Annie looked to her friend and mistress, waiting for an answer.

Raven remained silent.

“Oh, Raven. How could you not tell him? Unless it isn’t his child.”

“How could you think such a thing? Of course it’s his child. He would do anything to keep me there if he knew, but I will not let his clan sacrifice their lives for me, or the babe. You, better than most, understand how loyalty to the Draoidh brought almost complete destruction to Dun Sgiath. My mother was murdered. Tenants were slaughtered. Even children were made to pay with their lives for trying to protect the legend. Many of my friends did not live to grow up. I will not allow that to happen again. Those responsible will pay for what they did. I will see to it personally when the time is right. In the meantime I will do all that I can to protect those I love, even if it means I can no longer be a part of their lives.” Raven shifted uncomfortably against her cushions. “Promise me you will tell no one what I have just told you. And you won’t tell Jamie about his child.”

Annie reluctantly gave her promise to Raven. “In return, you must promise you will tell Jamie.”

Raven nodded. “When the time is right and I know the child will be safe, yes, I promise I will tell Jamie.”

The conversation took on lighter tones, now that Annie was satisfied, in part, with Raven’s word. Raven squirmed uncomfortably and winced in pain.

“When is the child due?” Annie asked carefully as she watched her friend. Raven held back a stifled cry as she caught her breath.

“It seems the child has decided now would be a good time to make an entrance.”

“Oh Raven! What makes you think you have to do this alone,

like you do everything else? I'll get Mairi to come and help."

\* \* \* \*

Raven's struggle to birth her child ended with a healthy squall from an indignant reddened infant. The warrior smiled in relief. "I believe this has been the most difficult battle I have ever been a part of."

"That may be," Annie agreed, "but this battle brings new life and new hope. And here is the legacy of the Draoidh."

Raven stared down at the bundle Mairi carefully placed in her arms. Tiny fingers grasped one of hers and held on tightly, while eyes darker than her own stared up at her. Raven's eyes shone with tears of happiness as she gently kissed her new son's head. Suddenly she stiffened as new pain shot through her. "Take him. Quickly. It would seem the battle isn't quite over. Remember your promise to me, Annie."

## Chapter 20

*Three years later*

The small room with its bare stone walls felt like it was closing in on her. Eight men sat about a long table that took up most of the space. Usually it didn't bother her, but today she was anxious to be free. That wasn't about to happen. Lately, it seemed whatever she wanted—and truth be known, it was little—she seemed to wind up with just the opposite. Sometimes she wondered if it was Meredith's weird sense of humor at play, but Meredith hadn't returned since their earlier meeting.

Raven sat back and gave thought to the conversation with her counterpart, while half-listening to the bickering advisors. Earlier in the day, Meredith had been present, and the two of them had studied the map of Flodden Field before anyone else came into the chamber. "It will do no good to warn him," Meredith said. "He will die in this battle—and what they do to him won't be pretty."

Raven glanced at her companion, still in awe of the strong resemblance between them. "How do you know what the future holds? Can he not change his destiny?"

“Raven, it won’t matter. What the future is to you is history to me. History should not be tampered with—for any reason.”

The conversation faded from her mind, replaced by the continued bickering voices of the advisors. What good was the power of the Draoidh, if they couldn’t use it to change things?

*When you change history, you don’t change one event, Meredith’s voice whispered in Raven’s mind. Changing one event creates a ripple effect, much like a stone tossed into a pond. That one little change spreads outward to affect other things. Leave well enough alone, Raven. You are a warrior. You know the importance of choosing your battles. This one is not to be tampered with.*

Raven released a barely audible sigh. *As you wish*, she thought to her unseen companion. She did, indeed, know the importance of choosing her battles. If an event couldn’t be altered, what was the point of expending the energy? She turned her full attention to the other advisors.

For the last three years she had listened to plans to control the finances of Scotland, to wage her battles, or plan entertainment. At moments like this, she wondered what possessed her to come to the Scottish court. For the first year, it had been a matter of protecting her child and what was left of her clan. Since then, it always came back to the same thing—she’d had no choice but to stay. James always managed to find a reason to keep her at court—problems to be solved, disputes to be settled—and he wasn’t above using her son’s safety as a final excuse to keep her close. Lately she’d been feeling trapped by his excuses. If her enemy were to find her here, unprepared... Even in this well-guarded castle, she felt vulnerable. Time was growing short, and whoever she’d been hunting had become the hunter and was closing in on her. Ra-

ven mentally shook herself free of her thoughts. Very soon, she'd find the reasons she needed to override the king's objections to her leaving. She realized that soon she'd be making a final stand to keep her promise to her mother. She wouldn't hide.

Here in the council chamber a group of the king's most trusted men were discussing whether or not the king should go to battle as he said he would. It didn't matter that the kings of Scotland and England were related by marriage. They intended to engage in battle just the same. The bandying about of opinions had gone on for far too long now, and Raven tired of listening to the same repetitive arguments. No matter how many times they 'discussed' the issue, the answer was the same. She had heard their excuses a hundred times, stating why they shouldn't heed her advice. As Meredith put it, the council told Raven to butt out—several times. She was only a woman, and the men thought it best to ignore her. What did a woman know of battle and strategy? They considered her nothing more than amusing in her advisory position. It didn't matter that she'd proven them wrong on many occasions. She was in a place where she didn't belong, even if King James did want her here.

"Enough of this arguing!" she shouted, slamming her fists into the hard arms of the chair as she jumped up. The men looked up at her as if she were a disruptive child, not at all pleased with the interruption. "You will cease criticizing me as if I were not here. Do you see these?" she asked defiantly and held out the ends of the short braids she wore at her temples. "These are the plaits of a warrior. They must be earned, not taken for granted. I have earned them in battle and for planning battle strategy. Do not look down on me as a mere

woman, for I am more than I appear to be. You would do well to not take my words lightly.”

“How do we know your words are true and not a means to seek the king’s favor?” one of the advisors sneered.

In a flash, Raven’s dagger quivered in the table between his hands. “Do you doubt me now, my lord?” She stood straight and looked about her. “I have no need to seek favors of anyone, but I cannot say the same for the lot of you. Every last one of you is a preening peacock, currying favor wherever and whenever possible. What do any of you know about battle beyond a duel of so-called honor? I see no warrior’s braids on any of you. Therefore, I expect to be heard and given due respect, if not as a warrior than as the Draoidh. In that capacity I wield a great deal of power. Now.” She straightened her stance, then pulled her dagger from the table and replaced it in its sheath at her waist. “Is there anyone who will deny me my right to speak?”

No one said another word, while they avoided looking in her direction. James sat alone at the end of the long table, finding amusement in the goings on before him, silently agreeing with all she had just said. He was determined to hide the laughter welling up within him, but found it difficult. Raven always managed to provide entertainment for him when his advisors met. It was one of the reasons he refused to let her leave his court. No one else could provoke his council as she did, but she could hold her own against them. “Shall we continue?” he asked quietly, when he had everyone’s attention. Raven seethed with anger. James loved it.

“As for you, Your Highness...” The irate woman turned her undivided attention to the king. “Even to consider this battle is sheer folly. You are too quick to spill Scottish blood

for a lost cause. There is no way you can win.” Raven took a subtle deep breath and let it out slowly, attempting to regain control of herself. In spite of what Meredith had told her, Raven had to try once more to change his mind. Now, she recognized the limit of her temper and James’ patience.

James raised his hand in a gesture dismissing his advisors. They got up to leave, but Raven didn’t move. James waited for the door to close behind the last of the men before he burst into laughter. “You do very well in battle against my council. As it is, I do believe they hold some fear of you, but they will never admit it. If you were a man they would chew you up and spit you out again. As is, they were holding back.”

“What makes you think they haven’t tried?” she retorted.

“Because there has been no blood letting. They resent the power you wield. They think I should have control of it. After all, I am the king...”

“You may be king, but you don’t have the strength it takes to wield my power. No man ever has.” She understood how men served their king, many looking for more favorable positions. Only a woman could wield the power of the Draoidh, but a man had to hold it in safe keeping. It was a convoluted means of protecting her, but had worked since Meredith MacDraoidh was first granted the power. With the exception of issuing a warning of sorts when one or the other was in serious trouble, Raven’s husband, Jamie, had no idea what his amulet held. Raven hesitated. “But it may change in the future,” she added as an afterthought, then continued. “Scotland and the Draoidh are separate entities, politically speaking. As for this battle,” she continued, deftly changing the subject, “if you go to Flodden Field, Your Highness, you will not return alive.”



“Do you threaten me?” His eyes narrowed as he waited for a reply.

“There is no threat, implied or otherwise. I only know what I know.” There was no reason to tell him of her look-alike companion, and every reason not to. “Are you so anxious to embrace death? Is it really necessary that you declare war on England to the benefit of the French?”

“We have an auld agreement with the French.”

“Yes, I know about that,” she replied impatiently. “Would you jeopardize your own people for the sake of a diversion? Few Scotsmen will return from this battle, but you will not be one of them. The Sassenachs mean to wipe us out. Your son is very young. Will you leave those fools who counsel you to be regents for him if you should die? Think carefully on your decision, James. For once done, it cannot be undone.”

## Chapter 21

Several days later, Raven and the king studied a map, discussing strategy for the coming battle. James was determined to lead his soldiers, and nothing Raven could do would change his mind. Heavy, crimson velvet curtains were tied back at either side of the high-backed chair sitting on the small dais. A small table, set to one side, held a silver tray with an untouched flagon of wine and two goblets. No other chairs or comforts graced the stone-walled chamber. An empty fireplace dominated one side of the room. The sparsely furnished chamber assured the discomfort of its frequent occupants. Here, in this chamber, business was conducted, complaints heard, and decisions rendered. James, the chief occupant, preferred supplicants did not linger overlong. Raven liked the room because it offered few distractions.

Raven and the king, the only two occupants at the moment, stood to one side, heads bent close together in low conversation. Soft laughter punctuated the discourse, but she noticed how he kept glancing at the door, as if he were expecting someone. With that thought, the door opened quietly, and one of the king's servants announced the visitor who strode in. The servant bowed his way out and closed the door

again behind him. Raven stiffened when she heard the name, then slowly straightened, but didn't turn to face the newcomer. After three years, what was he doing here, of all places? How did he find her?

"Ah, Lord MacKay, welcome."

"Your Highness," Jamie MacKay bowed low before the Scots king. "I am here at your summons."

The king cleared his throat, embarrassed to have been caught in his little ruse to get Jamie to court. Raven had said scarcely anything about her husband and her real reason for wanting to remain at court. He'd decided to interfere, but this wasn't quite the meeting he'd planned. "Yes, so you are. 'Tis good to see you. You haven't been to court since your father was laird of Clan MacKay." James watched carefully as his visitor's gaze flickered over the form of the third person, one who also wore MacKay colors. This might prove to be amusing after all, the monarch said to himself and smiled.

"I apologize. Duties to my clan have kept me busy of late. Rogue English soldiers have plagued the highlands with their mischief."

"That indeed is a problem. May I present my advisor, Lady MacDraoidh. Of course you know her," he added, as if the thought had just occurred to him, "since she is your wife." Raven reluctantly turned slowly on her heel, wishing she were any place but there. She faced Jamie. "Lady MacDraoidh has proven to be a valuable aide—but I'm sure you would know about that. I understand she established an unusual means of communication with some of your men-at-arms, and the result has been quite satisfactory. We have tried the same methods here, but unfortunately, with less than successful results. You will have to tell me how you managed to do bet-

ter.” From the dark looks Raven and the laird exchanged upon seeing each other, James decided he didn’t want to get caught in the crossfire. Perhaps the meeting was not one of his better ideas. “At the moment there is something I must see to. I’m sure the two of you can find something to talk about for a few moments.” A strategic withdrawal was called for, and with that quick decision, James abruptly left the chamber to the estranged couple.

Neither said a word as the door closed behind their monarch. Jamie studied his wife. Raven had changed since he last saw her. Her disappearance shortly after she arranged his *death* and freedom from the Sutherland dungeon had left too many unanswered questions. No one seemed to know where she had gone. It was as if she had ceased to exist.

She was even more beautiful now than the last time he’d seen her, if that was possible. But something was different. His gaze went to her eyes. There was nothing there. No hint of anger, surprise, or emotion of any kind. Her straight, stiff stance hinted she might be hiding more now than when she was plagued with those nightmares. How long ago had that been? Oh yes, nearly five years had passed since she recovered the memories of that day when she was a child of ten. A thunderstorm somehow had reawakened those memories, but after that chilling night at Dun Sgiath, she had become unbelievably lively and happy. Unfortunately, it hadn’t lasted long. Three months later, the day he’d been rescued from a sure death, she’d disappeared without a clue. “I see you still honor the MacKay clan by wearing our colors.”

Raven saw the brief flash of anger and hurt in his summer-blue eyes and noted his bitterness at the mention of honor. He was still angry with her after all this time, despite

keeping it in check. She had hoped in time he would have forgiven her and understood she did nothing without a good reason, but now she could only give him indifference. It wouldn't do to let him see the anguish that constantly tormented her since the night she'd left him. How could she explain her decision was for the good of the MacKays, to protect them? Anyway, it was four years too late to be offering any excuses. She knew she'd lost his trust long ago, and there was no use mourning it. "By the king's order I cannot wear my own colors."

"A rather unusual order—although I've heard he has never recognized Clan MacDraoidh. How long has it been since he issued that command?"

Raven shrugged. "Since I have been at court. Almost three years. As I am still your legal wife, I am expected to represent your clan. James recognizes Clan MacDraoidh only when it suits his purpose. It seems now is not one of those times."

Jamie barely flinched. *Your clan, not our clan.* "That can be easily remedied, my lady," he replied sourly. "I was planning to come to court anyway when the king's summons arrived. I intend to ask his highness to allow a divorce. Clan MacKay needs an heir, and I can see now you have no interests in that direction. Cordelia is still willing to marry me and give me what I need." He waited to see if the mention of Cordelia would create some kind of reaction. Raven had always harbored a passionate dislike for the woman.

"I don't imagine she is any more willing to give you an heir than I was, my lord, but I suppose that could have changed as well. I cannot see her willing to do anything that would destroy that perfect figure of hers." Raven winced at

her callous remark. Even she wasn't the same since... She strolled over to the small table and picked up the flagon, then glanced over her shoulder. "Would you care for some wine, my lord?" she asked casually, as if the talk of divorce were some insignificant matter. Jamie shook his head, briefly recalling the last goblet she had offered him, and shuddered inwardly. With an indifferent shrug, she turned her attention back to the goblet.

She would rather break than admit to what she truly felt, he decided. She hadn't changed. Not really. She would never allow him to get close to her. For a few moments, he entertained the hope she would want to be a part of his life again, but it was time he finally admitted to himself it would never happen. He allowed bitterness to seep into his thoughts and let the truth fade into oblivion. She had what she wanted. Wasn't it the legacy of the Draoidh to rule and manipulate through others? She'd found she couldn't do that with his clan, so now she employed her talents on behalf of the king. King James loved women, and his indiscretions were no secret. Was Raven his current mistress? In the three days he'd been kept cooling his heels, he'd never heard a word on that score. Or perhaps it was a closely guarded secret. It didn't matter anymore. She had shown no jealousy when he mentioned Cordelia. Three years ago, Raven would have antagonized the blonde to no end for pursuing him. Now, he could see she didn't care.

The chamber door opened and closed quickly. "Have the two of you had sufficient time to become reacquainted?" the king asked with good humor. There was an uncomfortable silence. James cleared his throat. "Lady Raven, you have my permission to withdraw. We will discuss that other matter

later.” Raven bowed to the monarch. “Your Highness.” She turned and faced her husband briefly. “My lord.” Politely inclining her head to him, she glanced into his face, then left the chamber without another word.

How could James have done this to her, summon her husband to court and not offer her a word of warning? And Jamie... Obviously Jamie had no intention of forgiving her for that last night. How could she explain to him, after three years’ absence from Castle MacKay, that the danger still existed? It was even greater now. She couldn’t risk the lives of his clan with her presence. The deaths of her mother’s people all those years ago would not be repeated. She didn’t want that responsibility. She didn’t want to be the cursed legend—but she was, and she had to live with it. Raven had promised herself, when she was a child, she would live her life differently, would change what the legend expected of her. That was another promise she’d been unable to keep for the most part. Where would it all end?

Angry with herself, Raven made her way to the stables and had Starfire saddled. She rode out, not giving any thought to where she was going, and approached a field where some of the new soldiers were training. She didn’t like what she saw. “Who taught you to wield a sword?” she shouted vehemently and dismounted. Her quick stride brought her before one of the young men. “You handle your weapon like an untrained squire. How do you expect to hold your own in battle?” She came at him with her own specially made broadsword, drawn, and proceeded to attack. The youthful soldier, who was a head taller and at least three stone heavier, stepped back in alarm. Lady Raven’s temper was well known. “Defend yourself!” she shouted angrily and launched another attack on him.

All other practice bouts stopped as the men turned to stare at the woman in their midst. The hapless soldier was forced to fend off her deadly advances.

There was no reason to Raven's blows, and they only served to fuel her anger even further. Putting what power she had left behind her strokes, she continued to advance, keeping her opponent on the defensive. He had all he could do to protect himself from her wild strikes. Not until she felt his blade slice into her arm did she return to her senses. She looked at the blood trickling slowly down her arm, then shook her head. The soldier expected some form of discipline to be forthcoming. To his surprise, Raven sheathed her sword and looked up at him. "Well done," she said, then turned and strode away, drops of blood trailing behind her.

A warrior needed a cool head. If she hadn't been so angry, he would never have managed to cut her. She deserved the wound. She took a cloth from her saddlebag and wrapped it around her arm. The gash wasn't deep, but before long it would hurt something fierce. How had she allowed her anger to rule over her good judgment? What had brought such fierceness when there was hardly sufficient cause? The king. If only the king had not seen fit to interfere, she would have been able to deal with the situation, eventually. She chided herself for not facing the truth, for allowing fear to take precedence over being honest with her husband. When had she ever been a real wife? She had turned tail and run, not even giving him the opportunity to understand what drove her. The deaths of too many people weighed heavily on her conscience, and she didn't want the responsibility of more. She was running from herself more than wanting to protect those she cared about. Maybe Jamie could have helped if she'd confided



in him, but it was too late now. She couldn't change what she was, no matter how much she wanted to. He wanted to be free of her to marry Cordelia. So be it.

Raven didn't want to think anymore about duty or anything else. Ian was the one person who could make her feel better. As soon as she tended her wound, she planned to seek him out and find comfort in his company.

\* \* \* \*

Raven headed toward the nursery but was stopped by the king. She had no choice but to put off her visit and accompany him to supper. She kept her presence brief at each meal in the great hall, always providing a plausible excuse to escape early. Protocol said no one left before the king, but her position as the Draoidh gave her the excuse to leave when she was ready. Until now she had always been one to linger, to scan minds for plots and deviltry. Jamie found this unfamiliar behavior intriguing, and wondered how long it had been going on. He asked subtle questions and found that no one knew anything more than he did—or else no one wished to answer his questions. The latter conclusion was plausible, for his relationship to the lady was unknown at court, although he found it odd her choice of plaids was never questioned. Those at court had taken for granted she was a MacKay. If they only knew what she really was, would they still welcome her? They all feared the Draoidh for what they could do. It didn't matter that most of the tales were nonsense.

Raven made her excuses and left the hall shortly after supper. Jamie finished his ale and requested permission to leave the king's presence. King James easily approved, and his sly grin said he knew what the MacKay was about. Jamie followed Raven at a discreet distance. The chilly corridors were

lit with torches placed at intervals, casting shadows in corners and door recesses. Raven's short quick steps took her into a part of Sterling Castle usually reserved for the royal family. What would she be doing here, unless his suspicions were correct and she was the king's mistress? It seemed the only plausible answer. The corridor was narrower than the last one, and several torches placed closer together were set in wall braces, making the way more brightly lit than any other passageway. He heard several voices. From the sound, Jamie could tell the royal nursery was nearby. Raven let out a low soft whistle. A small dark-haired child raced out of the chamber with arms outstretched. "Master Ian, come back here this instant." The nurse stopped in the doorway, a smile on her round face, as she watched Raven pick up the child. "Sometimes he's too quick for me, my lady," the woman admitted with a chuckle. "He has more energy than he knows what to do with."

"Is that right, my sweet?" Raven asked softly. She tousled the black curls. "We'll have to see what we can do about that. Have you been a good boy? Are you listening to your nurse?" She kissed his forehead and hugged him. In turn, the child flung his small arms around his mother's neck and planted a wet kiss on her cheek. Raven laughed.

Jamie continued to watch his wife, fascinated by this side of her he had never seen. He had to conclude she wasn't always the cold, hard woman he thought her to be. So why did she allow people to see only the negative side of her personality? The boy spoke up, catching Jamie's attention.

"I have a new puppy, Mama. Sometimes he sleeps on my bed." Ian laid his head against his mother's shoulder, just as Raven noticed the nurse's smile disappear. Raven didn't sense

any danger, but turned slowly to see Jamie approach them.

Ian straightened in his mother's arms at the approach of the newcomer. *Mama?* Jamie reached them and stared a moment at the child before he cupped the boy's chin and gently turned the small face to him. There was no doubt in his mind this was Raven's child. Curly black hair framed the child's fair features. Blue eyes looked up innocently into his own blue ones. The legend in this small boy? That couldn't be right. Never had a male child been born to the Legend. At least that was the way the tales went. Jamie looked to Raven's impassive features but found no answers.

Ian sat straighter in his mother's arms, and a knowing look flitted across his face. A small hand reached out to the man staring at him and touched a stubbled cheek. "Papa," he said softly, but with surprising surety.

The two adults faced each other. "I never told him," Raven whispered.

Jamie reached out once more and touched the curls tentatively. He knew with certainty this was his son and heir. "You had no right to keep him from me," he said calmly, not wanting to upset the child. He couldn't take his gaze from the boy.

Raven closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She admitted to herself it was past time for confessions. Maybe, if she explained to him the reason for the secrecy, he would forgive her. Then again, after all this time, it wasn't likely. Raven gave the boy one more kiss and hug, then set him on the floor. "Time you should be abed, my lad. I'll be here tomorrow to see you." He ran over to the nurse who waited patiently for him, a smile on her face once more. "Ian," Raven called softly to her son, and spoke a few words of Gaelic.

"I love you too, Mama."

"You had no right..." Jamie repeated softly, watching them disappear into the nursery. The nurse, standing in the doorway, made a brief curtsy, then turned away to give her full attention to her charge.

"Come with me." Raven turned abruptly and proceeded to walk away. Her kilt swung gracefully about her hips. Her soft leather shoes made no sound on the stone floor as she strode silently through the hall. He was right. She should not have kept the child from the father, although she truly believed she had the best of reasons for her decision. Ian's safety was first and foremost in her mind, and she wasn't sure the Clan MacKay could protect him against an unknown enemy. She wouldn't let the past repeat itself. Looking back over the years, she realized she'd handled everything poorly.

Jamie grabbed Raven's arm and forced her to stop. "Answer me, Raven. Why did you never tell me?"

Raven shook her arm free of his grasp and turned to the closed door behind her. She shoved it open and ushered her husband into the small room. "I will not allow the past to *repeat* itself. I couldn't live through that again."

"What are you talking about?"

"I won't let the nightmares become reality again. I lived it once...I won't put Ian through it."

Jamie's patience wore thin. "Are you talking about Sgiath and what happened when you were a child?"

"What else did you think?" Raven tried to remain calm but felt her control slipping. "The danger still exists. That's why I left you three years ago. You and your clan are safer without my presence. At least here, I can keep him much more secure until the danger is past. I will not take the responsibility of your clan being destroyed because of

me, and what I am.”

“That was not your decision to make, Raven. You had no right to disappear without a word. How do you know the same thing would happen to us? We could fight back if it came to that. The clan would have protected you, but you didn’t give us a chance. You could have shown some faith in me, in us. It seems for three years time you’ve been quite safe, but you still had no right to keep my son from me.” Jamie took a deep breath and slowly released it. “I make you this promise, Lady Raven. I will end our marriage, since it seems to be what you truly want, and I *will* have my son.” To say anything more would have been a waste of time and words. The anger flashing in Raven’s eyes only served as a warning not to push her. He needed time to sort out his thoughts and make plans. One way or the other, he would take Ian back with him.

After Jamie closed the door behind him, leaving Raven alone, she dropped to her knees. Her eyes brimmed with moisture while she kept repeating softly, “Warriors don’t cry. Warriors don’t cry. Warriors don’t cry.” Two wet streaks on her face, and tears that wouldn’t stop, failed to confirm the lie. Jamie would have to petition the king for his son if he wanted to take the boy back to MacKay lands. Raven was about to lose everything, and she didn’t know what to do about it.

\* \* \* \*

Raven burst into the small council chamber unannounced, startling the men who were deep in discussion. “All of you out,” she ordered. “Now.” The dozen men who served as the king’s advisors fumed that this woman had the nerve to burst in on them and demand their departure. “I said now,” she repeated vehemently. They moved quickly. They’d heard

a number of stories about her volatile temper and had seen for themselves her penchant for throwing daggers. The last man to leave the chamber shut the door quickly and quietly behind him.

“How dare you send him away!” She stood before the table, eyes blazing, one hand resting on the hilt of her sword, ready to do battle if it came to that.

James sat back in his chair, knowing he wouldn’t make short work of this woman’s tirade. “You forget yourself, Lady Raven,” the king reminded her.

“I forget nothing. Where is he?”

“You came to me for reasons of safety, and now you demand to know where he is?”

Never had Raven felt such anger. She clenched her hands, trying to regain control. “No. You have held him here for three years to assure yourself of my services. I may have come here first of my own free will, but it wasn’t my choice to stay indefinitely.”

“Three years? He only arrived in court a few days ago.”

“I speak of my son, not my husband. Where is Ian?”

“In the royal nursery where he belongs.” The direction of the conversation became confusing. Surely she wasn’t worried about the lad who was being well cared for...

“The nurse said you gave instructions Ian was to be taken elsewhere.”

“I gave no such instructions.”

Raven turned to leave.

“You forget yourself, Lady Raven. Attend to your duties. My guard will mount a search for the boy.”

“’Tis you who forgets himself, James. The Draoidh oversees the clans in ways you cannot. You may be king of Scot-

land, but you do not rule the Draoidh. Better men than you have tried and failed.”

“’Tis treason to speak to your king that way!”

“Treason? I think not, but call it what you will. You will not interfere in my search for my son. If you do, I will cause you such havoc it will take the rest of your natural life and beyond to straighten it out.” Raven stormed out of the council chamber knowing she had pushed too far. No one spoke to the king as she just did and lived to repeat the tale.

James knew she was right. He’d been holding Ian to gain her services, but it had also served her own purposes—until now. The Legend was the conscience of the kingdom. Through all the generations of her family, no king had dared exert power over the Draoidh. The threat of retaliation was too strong to ignore, and the Scots kings sought an uneasy alliance with the powerful women of the Legend.

James shook his head and grinned. Raven was beautiful when she was furious. No wonder no one commanded the Legend. With that kind of fury, no one dared.

## **Chapter 22**

Days had passed since King James left with an army of ill-prepared soldiers. Raven was left to her own devices and used the time wisely. While James hadn't officially ordered her to remain at Sterling, a stern look from him said enough. He expected to see her there when he returned. Knowing what she did, she had no intention of wasting time. She wasn't about to sit back and wait, worrying about her son, while the king rode off to his death. The council would be too busy vying for regency to have any concern about her own son. Raven gathered supplies then set out, riding from village to village. Every stop brought her closer to MacKay land. Every stop made her more anxious.

Wearied from travel, Raven stopped at a wayside inn for a night of rest. Perhaps there would be news, something to send her in the right direction. The stench of spilled ale, rancid food and unwashed bodies clogged the air in the small inn. A cloaked and hooded stranger sat in a shadowed corner, seemingly content to sip the sour liquid that passed for wine. Raven listened to boisterous laughter and caught snatches of conversation in the hopes of discovering some clue leading her to her son. After hours of sitting quietly, and scanning though-



ts of newcomers as they arrived, she concluded there was nothing here to help her. Early in the morning she would ride out again.

How many more villages would she have to search? The more time slipped away from her, the less confident she felt. No one had seen the MacKay chieftain, with or without a child, or heard any stories regarding a small boy. That didn't mean Jamie hadn't taken Ian. She wasn't about to let him get away with stealing her son from her.

Raven glanced about and noticed there was no sapphire bubble bouncing around. Meredith's unusual absence didn't bode well, and Raven wondered what the other woman could be up to. Might she have had something to do with Ian's disappearance? Raven didn't think so. It was just as well the time traveler wasn't around. Raven wasn't in the mood to put up with the happy chatter, odd questions, and strange expressions. Raven's mare, Starfire, plodded on, as weary as her rider from the trek across the highlands of Scotland.

The next morning, Raven left another inn and rode until she reached the top of a rise, where she paused. Dark, menacing clouds reflected the anger welling up within her. She stood on the windswept crest with her cloak billowing about her slender body, and tears once more blurred her vision. Where was she to go? There was nowhere else, unless she turned toward the lowlands and England. No; wherever he had been taken, it was somewhere in the Highlands, somewhere she hadn't thought to look. Or somewhere she didn't want to go. Whoever had Ian had hidden him well—for she had heard no rumor of him, and such a child would be remembered.

She raised her fists to the skies. Never had she known such bitterness. "Why?" she demanded of the storm brewing

above her. “Why is this legend forced on me? You have made me something I want no part of. You left me alone, Mama. You left behind a defenseless child to take your place. I was never fully prepared to deal with your legacy. What good are these powers?” she shouted into the howling wind, “if I cannot protect those I love most?” Jamie, Ian, and one last, well-kept secret. She fell to her knees and covered her face with her hands. The tears flowed freely, releasing the emotions she had denied for so long.

Raven looked up, spent tears leaving wet streaks on her face. Her eyes glistened. “I am what you gave me. I have responsibilities to fulfill. But I promise you, Mama, I will find your grandson, but he will one day make his own choices. The Legend will live or die with my child.”

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Raven breathed a sigh of relief. She didn’t want to be caught at Castle MacKay come dawn. There would be no place to hide. Castle MacKay may have been her home for a few months, but it still wasn’t safe for her to remain. She couldn’t sense her son, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t here. Raven meant to take him back from Jamie, then flee deep into the highlands, where they would be safe for a while. There were a few people about the highlands who would be happy to hide the son of the Legend—people she trusted. When the time was right, she’d be out in the open again, ready to face whatever enemy stalked her.

She hugged the wall of MacKay’s castle, moving stealthily. The guards were unusually lax in their duties on the outer wall. If she were in charge, she’d have them all disciplined—but she wasn’t in charge, and she had her goal to obtain. Her entrance into the castle’s inner courtyard wasn’t quite as easy

as the first time. After having taught a group of soldiers how to communicate her way, she had to be careful. One guard on the lower wall, overlooking the courtyard, stopped a moment as if listening. Raven knew he sensed her presence but couldn't *see* her. She clung to the shadows, became one with them, and set her personal shield against him. She couldn't afford to be caught out now. He stood peering in her direction for several minutes, watching, then shrugged and moved away, satisfied nothing was amiss, and continued his patrol.

Raven heard whispering near the stables and saw two men darting from one shadow to the next, heading toward the inner castle wall. She focused her attention on them and recognized them as the two men who had shown up one day, some four years earlier, looking for work. She was surprised to see they were still here. What could they possibly be up to? She listened intently to what conversation she could pick up from them. So that was it. One had a soft leather bag at his side, the strap crossed over his chest. They had pilfered something from the stables, or somewhere in the castle. They were mere thieves, ready to move on. Strange they should have waited this long. She gathered from their thoughts someone waited for them. Let them go. She would deal with them and their thieving ways at another time. There was more important business to see to at the moment. She waited until they disappeared in the deeper shadows before her next move.

Several soldiers were in the barracks, playing at dice and laughing. Someone stood in the barracks doorway, carefully monitoring the courtyard. Something had caught his attention. Probably the two thieves, but Raven strengthened her mental shields so the soldier could no longer feel her presence. She was becoming careless. Clutching her dark cloak about her,

she continued to make her way to the garden. Shadows stretched out before her, making her passage easier. She recalled making this same trip several years ago. That particular little jaunt had been on a lark. She'd wanted the tenants to know how easily someone could sneak in and out again without being caught. Now she was on deadly business.

She approached the narrow door leading to the kitchen and the servants' stairs to the upper chambers. Softly closing the door behind her, she opened her mind to the tenants. It wasn't the smartest or safest thing to do, but she didn't have time to waste. She scanned the thoughts of those she could read, then closed her mind to their questions and replaced her protective wall. No one must know she was here. There was no hint of a child in the upper levels. What had they done with him? Could he be with one of the families in the village, hiding in plain sight? Not likely. Jamie would know she'd come for her son and would keep him close. Raven held her sword tightly by her side and changed the angle of the weapon to keep it from hitting the steps as she ascended. She held her dirk tightly in her right hand, ready for anything, then stopped, half-crouching, listening to the footsteps that stopped when she stopped.

Raven stepped quickly to the door in the middle of the hall and glanced about her. Unless something had changed, this chamber should have remained empty. She opened the door just enough to slip through, then shut it again soundlessly. She gave herself a moment to adjust to the darkness, then made her way across the room to the connecting door and listened carefully. Another door opened quietly and closed again. It didn't matter who was around, she wasn't going to let anyone stop her from doing what she came here to do. The

connecting door was unlocked. She winced when the latch clicked softly as it caught behind her.

She crept into his room after checking to be sure no guards were about. She'd taught them well, but hadn't instructed them in the art of reading shields. There was no way they could know she had returned, not with any assurance.

Jamie lay sound asleep in the large poster bed, his breathing slow and steady. Raven approached him, her steps silent. Scattered rushes barely made a sound when her foot scraped the stone floor. Raven held the dagger in her fist, ready to strike if necessary. She prayed it wouldn't be.

She gently pressed the tip of the blade against Jamie's throat, and his eyes suddenly opened, as if he'd never been asleep. "Where is my son? Where have you hidden him?" she demanded, her voice barely above a whisper. Anger seethed beneath the surface of her apparent calm.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he responded carefully. In truth he had no idea what she was about.

"You said you would have your son. Now he's gone. What have you done with him?"

"I've done nothing." He flinched as the dagger's point jabbed into his throat, drawing a bead of blood. Jamie knew better than to make any sudden moves when she was like this.

An arm suddenly encircled her, pulling her away from her husband, while a large hand squeezed her wrist until it went numb. She was forced to drop her weapon.

Someone lit the fat tallow candle on a nearby table. Its light cast two misshapen shadows on the wall. Drops of tallow solidified as they dribbled down the side of the candle. Raven closed her eyes. Andrew and Roger. The younger soldier had recognized her after all, and reported to the steward. He

moved the weapon out of harm's way.

"Did you come back to murder your husband in his sleep?" Andrew demanded bitterly.

Raven remained silent.

"Answer me, woman. What is so important you would come creeping back in the middle of the night? If you wish your freedom, there are easier ways to procure it. I always knew you didn't want this marriage." His arm about her chest grew tighter with his anger.

"Let her go, Andrew," Jamie said quietly. He rubbed his throat, then glared at the slight red stain on his fingertips.

"I'll have her locked in the dungeon, until we can try her for attempted murder."

"Let her go, Andrew," Jamie repeated wearily.

"Jamie, she tried to cut your throat."

"Ian is our son," Jamie replied. He sat up, not taking his eyes from his wife. He knew his uncle had to have heard that part of the conversation. "Have you never seen a mother desperate to find and protect her child?"

"Chi..." Andrew suddenly made a connection. Now he understood Annie's silence concerning those days. He remembered the night, several years earlier, when he'd escorted her to Dun Sgiath. She had disappeared within the castle for three days, and not a word to him. "A child, Jamie? You never said a word."

Jamie's eyes darkened to something akin to resentment, and he glared at his recalcitrant wife. "Because the Lady Raven chose not to inform the father." He pulled the pillows up behind him to lean more comfortably against them. He looked from Andrew to Raven, not sure he could or should trust his wife anymore.

“We’ll speak on it later. Leave us alone.”

Andrew glanced doubtfully at the intruder. She should have stayed away. He couldn’t trust her with his nephew.

As if reading his uncle’s mind, Jamie spoke once more. “It will be all right.”

The two soldiers reluctantly left the bedchamber. Andrew looked over his shoulder before closing the door behind them. Their expressions said they would be right outside if their laird had need of them.

Feeling a little calmer with his uncle gone, Jamie glared at his wife. Her pale skin looked almost white. He sensed strong pain coming from her, and it helped to lessen his anger. “Tell me what happened.”

“You threatened to take him, then he was gone. The nursery maid said a woman came to her, claiming to be sent by you to take Ian away, that the king had given his permission. After your words, what else could I think, but that you’d gone through with your threat, and used someone to hide your treachery? I didn’t want to believe you would do this to me, to our son. I’ve searched the highlands for word of where you might have hidden him.”

“Raven, I was angry when I found out about our son, and I spoke in anger, but I swear to you, I would never have taken him away from you. I knew he was safe.”

Jamie paused a moment to study his wife. He’d never seen her look so utterly defeated. “Come here, wife, you look exhausted.” Leaning forward, he took her hand and gently tugged on her arm until she lay beside him, staring at the ceiling. “A few hours’ sleep will clear your head, then we can think on what to do.”

He was too calm, Raven thought with some suspicion,

but gave it little more thought. He was right. She was exhausted mentally and physically, too tired to think clearly. Her eyes drifted close, but rather than sleep, her long dark lashes grew moist with tears. "Warriors never cry," she murmured in defeat.

Jamie chuckled as he wrapped his arms about her and drew her closer. "Oh, yes they do, my love. Warriors do cry, but only when they're alone, and they will never admit it." He kissed the top of her head and felt her slowly relax. A single tear escaped from the corner of her eye to trickle down the side of her face and disappear in her hair.

"What is this?" he asked, gliding his hand over her arm. He felt the light bandage.

"It's nothing."

"'Nothing' doesn't require a bandage."

"I was careless. Angry," she responded sullenly.

"What am I to do with you?" he sighed.

No answer was forthcoming.

What indeed should he do with her, he wondered. It felt good to hold her again, even if it wasn't under the best of circumstances. For three years he tried to put her out of his mind and heart, trying to put Cordelia in that place, but he couldn't do it. Finding out he had a son only served to strengthen the fragile bond between him and Raven. She was here now, and he made a promise to himself to do everything within his power to convince her to stay. Together they would search for Ian. How long would she stay this time? If only...

\* \* \* \*

After reluctantly leaving Jamie's bedchamber, Roger returned to the great hall, and Andrew headed to another bedchamber, above stairs—one not his own. He shoved the door



open, scaring Annie half to death. "Why did you not tell me about the bairn?" he demanded of her.

Annie was none too pleased to be startled out of a sound sleep. Her heart pounded, and she sighed with relief to realize it was only Andrew. "What's got you riled, like a bear with a wounded paw?" she asked sleepily. "You scared ten years off my life, Andrew MacKay."

"What of the bairn, Annie?"

"What bairn? You're not making sense. Go back to bed and sort out your own dreams." She pulled up the coverlet and made to turn her back to him, when he sat on the edge of her bed.

"I'm sorry I startled you, lass, but I need to know about the boy. Why didn't you tell me about the boy?"

"What boy are you talking about?" This strange conversation could wait till morning. She wanted to go back to sleep.

"Jamie's son, Ian."

Annie turned to Andrew, her face pale. "How do you know about him?"

"So. It's true then. Jamie has a son."

Annie sighed. "Aye, it's true, he does."

"Why did you not tell me that night?"

"I couldn't. Raven swore me to secrecy. She believes whoever murdered her mother years ago will try to get their hands on her son."

"The murderer must be dead and gone by now. It's been too many years."

"Fourteen years isn't so very long a time, Andrew. Raven knows what she's about, even if we think she's a mite daft. Have you forgotten we were chosen specially to serve the Draoidh? Do you recall what I told you of that day?" She saw

the look of doubt in his eyes. "I know, she's a strange one. She always was. When we were children, she didn't know how to deal with the rest of us because of her differences. She had a nasty tendency for playing little tricks on us, and, of course, we didn't like it. We didn't understand why she did the things she did, and Lady Alycia never said a word about it. We often shunned her, out of mistrust and fear. If it weren't for Martha... I suppose our treatment of her, and her own conscience, stayed with her, and she's learned to keep her own council."

"Get to the point, woman," Andrew gritted out, impatiently. He got up and began pacing. He didn't like leaving Jamie alone for long with that woman—even if she was his wife. There were limits to his trust. "Why did you not tell me about the boy, about Jamie's son?"

Annie sighed again. There was no getting around it this time. "She made me promise not to tell anyone. As I said, she fears for the boy's life—and the lives of others. She's afraid what happened to her clan when she was a child will happen again, and many more innocent people will die."

"Not likely," he replied tersely. "She doesn't trust us to keep the boy safe."

"It isn't a matter of trust, Andrew. You must understand that. To her mind, no place is safe for a child of the Draoidh." She gently laid a hand on Andrew's arm, willing him to look at her again. "'He who controls the Draoidh, controls Scotland.' A child of the Draoidh is always vulnerable until she comes into her own. The fact that Ian is the first male child born to the line makes him even more vulnerable to the clan's enemies. Raven saw the aftermath of what they did to her mother and the clan, then blocked it from her memory. It has

haunted her all these years, and she would wish that on no one. Her intentions were well meant, Andrew.”

“Maybe they were, but Jamie still had a right to know about his son.” Andrew patted the hand still resting on his arm. “Promise me one thing, lass.”

“What might that be?” She eyed him warily, not wanting to make any promises that might compromise her trust.

“Never again will there be secrets between us, at least nothing of this importance.”

“Aye, there shouldn’t be,” she replied, careful not to give a promise she wasn’t sure she could keep. “We are both committed to serving the Draoidh and their families. There should be no secrets between us.”

Andrew leaned over and kissed the housekeeper. “Go back to sleep, Annie. I’m sorry I startled you awake. I’ll see you come mornin’” He gave her a quick kiss, then got up and left the bedchamber, quietly closing the door behind him.

Annie slid down under the coverlet and made herself comfortable against the pillows. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Sleep wouldn’t come easily now. Already a guilty conscience pricked at her. She hadn’t made a promise. She’d only agreed they shouldn’t have secrets. She might love Andrew, but her loyalty first belonged to the Draoidh. There was one more secret that had to be kept at all costs, even if it meant losing his love and trust. If only she’d seen the leader that day, seen his face. Perhaps this would be all over and done with, and Raven could settle down to a normal life with Jamie. Sometimes, Annie wondered if it was worth all the secrecy.

## Chapter 23

For the last few days, Raven sensed the guards stationed in the hall not far from her chambers. They might not be directly at her door, but she felt like a prisoner, nonetheless. Jamie had every right to set guards on her. Even she had no idea what she would do next. Her behavior might have seemed erratic the night she sneaked into Jamie's chambers, but it was typical of her. She used common sense when others came to her for help, but when it came to her own personal problems, she acted on emotion, rarely on logic.

Raven awoke from what felt like a drugged sleep. She sat up and covered her face with her hands. She hadn't had a bad night like that since the childhood memories returned. Her body ached and her head pounded. If she'd dreamed, she couldn't recall any of them. She took her time dressing. If she knew Jamie, she wouldn't be allowed anywhere without an escort. A half-hour later, a servant brought a tray to her. Andrew accompanied the maid. The girl set the tray on a small table near the hearth, then hurried out of the room. Raven sat on the stool and waited, not sure what Andrew wanted. For the first time she realized she couldn't read him. When had he learned to shield his thoughts from her?

Raven sipped the ale. Her eyes narrowed, as she studied the potent liquid. Andrew sat on the edge of the bed, since there was just the one chair in the chamber. "I am four different people, Andrew," she began without looking up at him. "I can't seem to reconcile with any of them." She spoke in a hushed voice, as if she hadn't the energy to speak. "I'm a warrior who has proven herself in personal battle and earned the right to be called a warrior—although some would disagree with that. The skills are there, but truly untried on a greater scale. There is Lady Raven, a wife who is not a wife. Thirdly there is the mother, who cannot find her child. Lastly there is the legend. That blasted legend controls every aspect of my life and leaves me nothing. No choices are truly mine to make." Raven sat forward, leaning over the small table, and faced her husband's uncle. She rested one elbow on the table-top and jabbed at her temple with one finger. "Despite the return of those long-forgotten memories, it's as if a part of me remains in pieces, and I cannot make them fit to fill the void. I know what happened, but I don't know who is responsible. One trouble piles up on another, until I'm weighed down with the burden of it all."

Andrew had little sympathy for her. His concern was solely for his nephew, and the fact Jamie was stuck with this woman as wife. "A warrior doesn't allow his problems to fester. He finds a solution and moves on. You are no warrior. You might have the skills, but you lack the integrity. You run from most of your personal battles.

"No matter what you are, which role you choose to play, find a solution. Deal with it. It's up to Jamie to decide what's to be done with you. If it were my choice, I'd take my son, set you aside, and forbid you from returning to MacKay

lands—for good. But it isn't my decision to make." Andrew stood. "You're not to leave these chambers without an escort until it is decided otherwise. Again, if it were my choice, I'd keep you here under guard. Jamie allows you freedom you don't deserve." Andrew rose and left the room, leaving her alone.

For the next few days, Raven remained secluded in her chambers. She refused to attend meals in the great hall, and Jamie had trays sent up to her chambers. She tired of the whispered gossip. It annoyed her that she couldn't go anywhere without someone trailing after her. Her only concern was how to find Ian. Had Jamie sent anyone out looking for the boy? She had no idea, since no one was allowed to speak with her. It was frustrating, not knowing.

She hadn't seen anything of her husband since that first night and had lost count of passing days. Where was Meredith when she was needed? Raven hadn't seen her or that foolish little bouncing bubble since about the time Ian disappeared. Could Meredith... No. Raven refused to believe one of the Draoidh would be so devious as to snatch the child of the present Draoidh. What would be her reason? Raven could make no sense of the situation and slammed her fists against the stone wall of her small room. She shook out her hands, grateful the wall hanging had taken some of the blow. Better her hands than her head. If she hadn't been so stupid and come running after Jamie in anger, she could be in the highlands, still searching for her son.

\* \* \* \*

Jamie sat at the head table and watched Raven stalk past him, flanked by two of his men. He hadn't seen her since the night she arrived, and Raven didn't bother to look at him. He

wondered where she had been. Her face was *flushed*, as if she'd been on a long hard ride. It amused him to think she'd given his men a merry chase. She had a thick wall about her thoughts lately, and he hadn't been able to penetrate them. He didn't know how to deal with her any longer, didn't know how to get his wife back.

Andrew tried to convince Jamie to set aside his wife in favor of Cordelia. Jamie was reluctant to do so, despite telling Raven he would never again pursue her. When did everything become such a mess? He would never admit it to his uncle, but he wanted that warrior to return, the one his men had come to admire and respect. More than that, he wanted back the woman who was his wife and the mother of his son, the woman he loved. There was no denying it. He loved Raven, and nothing would ever change the fact. She amused him with her wry sense of humor. He admired her fighting skills and unusual leadership abilities. He took pride in her refusal to let anyone best her, despite her small size. Could she change? Until Ian was found, Jamie would never really know.

Jamie was aware of the way Cordelia hid her pleasure in this turn of affairs. He didn't need any special ability to read her thoughts. More often, she appeared by his side, wanting to spend more time with him, trying to work her way into his affections. She believed there was nothing Raven could do about it. After all, hadn't Raven caused the problems that destroyed what trust Jamie'd had in her? Now Raven had to live with it. It was a good thing the Lady Cordelia couldn't read *his* thoughts.

\* \* \* \*

Someone moved in the shadows of Raven's chambers. For a moment, she hoped it might be Jamie, waiting for her in

the dark, but she knew better. He was avoiding her, and well she deserved it. Raven turned swiftly, recognizing the intruder. "This is becoming an annoying habit of yours, Gavin. What do you want?"

He stepped out of the darkness. "I hoped to plead my case once more, my lady. I can offer you much more than MacKay has, or ever will. He holds no respect for you. You are the Legend; you deserve respect from all the clans, including your husband." Gavin stepped closer, hoping to plead his case to her. "If MacKay had any respect or love for you, you would be by his side now in the great hall. Instead you are here, kept as a prisoner. He does little to help find your son. Perhaps he questions the boy's parentage."

Raven was never one to be easily swayed by words, but Gavin's gave her pause. She kept her features blank, but her mind turned over his words. Was it possible Jamie doubted Ian was his? He already stated his intentions to set her aside. No, she couldn't believe he would go so far as to think that.

"You come to plead your cause, and with your next breath you insult me. What is it you truly want, Gavin?"

"You, my lady. Come with me and I will do everything in my power to find your son and restore him to you. That alone should prove my loyalty to you." Reaching for her, he caressed her cheek then drew her close, surprised she didn't make a fuss. How many years had he longed for more from her? Perhaps now was the right time to convince her they belonged together.

Raven reached up and laid her hands against his chest as if to push him away. Before she could do more, he wrapped his arms about her and pulled her close. She was trapped against him, against the heat of his wanting. She had no leverage to push him



away and became angry with herself for her carelessness.

“And you do?” she replied, sensing where he was leading.

“More than you know.” He leaned closer, nibbled on her ear, then trailed kisses down to her throat. He took great pleasure in the soft moan that escaped her. Suddenly he lost his balance and was shoved backward. He stumbled but caught himself before he fell.

“Get out. Enter my chambers again without permission, and Cordelia will be taking home a corpse.”

Gavin retreated, not daring to turn his back on her. She was a formidable woman when she wanted to be. For just a moment, he caught a glimpse of the woman she was meant to be. A woman so loved, she’d forget about being a warrior and concentrate on pleasing him. The boy would be a rare, but welcome bonus. “Sooner or later, you will be mine,” he added for good measure.”

Raven bolted the door and leaned her back against it. How could he believe she would go to him? More to the point, how could she be so stupid as to believe him, even for a moment? Her desperation to find her son was leading her down a path of foolishness. It was no wonder Jamie no longer wanted her. She brought it all on herself.

Meredith remained hidden while she watched the scene below her. The last thing she needed was to have Raven alerted to her presence. Meredith kept her shields tightly in place, protecting not only her presence, but her thoughts as well. She didn’t feel the least bit guilty eavesdropping. The conversation was eerily similar to one she’d had with another nobleman shortly after Clan MacDraoidh had been established. He’d wanted her for what she could give him—if she’d been willing. Douglas was long dead, destroyed by his own warped ideas of how things should be. Meredith frowned. History repeating itself? Not if she had anything to say about it.

## Chapter 24

Raven sat at the table in the inn with Jamie while they finished their meal. At least he did. She'd barely picked at hers. Two weeks earlier, Jamie had sent one of the servants to Raven's chambers with word to pack what she needed for an extended search of MacKay lands. Someone had to know something, or have heard some word of an abducted child. After traveling through his clan's villages, Jamie and Raven traveled throughout the land surrounding MacKay territory. There were no clues of their missing son. Raven scanned the minds of several people to see if someone had heard or seen something without realizing it. She found nothing. How could one small child disappear so completely? The stress caused a heavy silence between her and her husband, growing every day, until now they barely spoke to one another.

Jamie finished his meal and glanced at his wife. Her scowl made him think better of saying anything. He sipped his ale, wishing there were someone to talk to, to get his mind off his son for a short time. He needed a distraction, needed to let go of the problem for a little while, then start fresh. He was just as worried as Raven, but it didn't do any good to constantly fret over it. He needed to think clearly again, to find the miss-

ing pieces of the puzzle.

“MacKay!” Jamie was startled by the loud and unexpected greeting. He knew no one in this area. To his surprise, he looked up to see his three old friends approaching. Jamie stood and welcomed them with a great deal of enthusiastic hugging and back-thumping in that purely masculine way of greeting. The trio took the remaining seats and waited for the barmaid to approach. The serving girl scurried back and forth with trenchers and mugs for the patrons in the small crowded room. “How long has it been, Jamie? Three years?” Dylan Mackenzie clapped Jamie’s shoulder and laughed.

“Four,” Jamie replied. While it was good to see his friends again, this wasn’t a night for reminiscing. He held back a sigh, remembering something Meredith had once said, *Be careful what you wish for...you might get it*. He’d wanted a distraction...

Dylan stared at Jamie’s companion. “Lady Raven. It’s good to see you again.”

Raven returned his steady gaze while she sipped her ale. She wasn’t in the mood for questions, foolish or otherwise. Neither did she care to indulge in idle gossip. She wanted nothing more than a few hours’ rest, then to resume the search for her son.

“Are you still doing battle with the English?” Allen asked and laughed. “That tale is still told around campfires.”

“The story is true and no, I don’t do battle with the English.”

“If you did, and had led the army at Flodden Field, we might have been victorious,” he added more seriously

“When was the battle?”

“Three—no, four days ago.”

*The Scottish army won't survive, and what the English do to James, won't be pretty.* Meredith's words came back to haunt Raven. "I tried to talk him out of it," Raven told them. "I told him he wouldn't return. The council must be in an uproar, deciding who will act as regent on behalf of the young king."

"Can no one settle the dispute?" Shane asked. Only once had he seen the council at work, and believed they were their own worst enemy. If left to their own devices, they could accomplish in a short time what it was taking England years to do, namely topple the Scottish government.

Raven stood. "Goodnight, gentlemen," she said bluntly, and left them to their conversation.

"That was rather straightforward," Allen replied, feeling as if he'd just been put in his place. While his curiosity was piqued by her brusque manner, he knew better than to ask.

"We have more important things to do now," Jamie half-explained when she was gone.

"No simple mistress, that one," Shane Frasier chuckled. Like his cousin, Allen, he admired the woman. "Why the bitterness I hear in your words, Jamie? I'd be proud to have a woman by my side who can hold her own in battle."

"You say that now," Allen replied, amused, "but you'll feel differently when you decide to wed. Which can't be soon enough for me. Ow!" he complained, then laughed when Shane punched his arm. "There's something more going on here, I'll wager, and it isn't your relationship to the lady."

"Are you sure you're not of the Draoidh, Allen?" Jamie asked. "You read others' thoughts just as she does."

"Draoidh? Clan MacDraoidh! Of course! But I thought that clan was wiped out years ago," Dylan commented.

"Very nearly were, as I found out a few years ago. Raven

and I were married when we were both quite young. She was but three, and her mother stood in her stead. I had no reason to believe they'd survived the massacre of her clan."

"Were those responsible ever found?" Shane asked. He downed the last of his ale.

"No, and she's sworn to hunt them down if it takes the rest of her life." Jamie glanced at his three friends. "Have you heard or seen anything to do with the abduction of a small boy, black curly hair, blue eyes, about four years of age?"

The trio glanced at one another, thoughtful for a moment.

"Come to think of it," Dylan spoke up, "We did come across a boy about that age."

"He had gold hair and blue eyes." Shane elbowed his companion.

"Aye, you're right. He did. Sorry, Jamie. One of your tenants?"

"My son. If you should hear anything or see the boy, send word to my uncle. He'll know how to find me." Jamie stood. "Good to see you again, but dawn comes quickly." He bid his friends good night, then went up to his room.

\* \* \* \*

Raven stared out into the moonless night, so lost in thought she didn't hear anyone enter the room. Jamie stepped behind her and stroked her arms. "Is it as bad as all that?"

She shivered and stiffened at his touch. "It could be worse. You haven't seen the council when they decide to discuss matters of state." She turned to face him. "They are most successful in agreeing to disagree. I'm afraid that until young James is old enough to rule, this country will exist in chaos. But, at the moment, that is none of my concern. I only want

to find Ian and go home.”

“That is the most sensible thing you have said in a long while. Too long you have ignored your duty to the clan. It’s long past time you took your proper place.”

“You have made it clear you intend to set me aside once Ian is found. Yet still you speak of my ‘proper place by your side.’ I don’t think you know what you want.” Raven toed off her soft leather shoes and lay on the bed. She pulled the bed covering over her, a clear signal to Jamie to keep his distance. At the least she didn’t run off this time.

Jamie shook his head and wondered if he’d ever understand her. Her lightning moods were becoming too hard to bear. He could understand her worry for their son, but there was more to it than he cared to know anymore. He was tired of chasing her down. After he’d almost died at the hands of the Sutherland clan, she’d disappeared for over three years. She was a volatile mix of anger, fear and resentment. Too many times she’d run off to deal with something alone, or just avoid it. She never sought help from him or the clan. He refused to continue down this path for the rest of his life. Enough was enough.

When this was done, and Ian was safe at home with him, he would seriously consider setting aside his wife. Let her find someone else to father the next Draoidh. It wouldn’t be him.

Jamie sighed and unfastened the brooch holding his plaid at his shoulder. After pulling off his boots, he wrapped the plaid about his shoulders and lay on the bed, his back to his wife. He was fooling himself, and knew only too well what he’d do. After all, someone had to keep her out of the trouble she courted. He had a feeling the whole situation was finally coming to a head. It was one of those rare times when his

heart and mind agreed on what he should do. One thing he was sure of—all too often, love was a bother.

\* \* \* \*

In the early dawn, Raven slipped away from the inn, figuring Jamie would expect her to head back to Castle MacKay. After all, when they returned they were supposed to cobble together another plan to search for their son. She intended to keep looking for Ian, but she'd do it on her own. She headed southeast for several miles, then circled around to avoid the village and headed north, to her home. She missed that bouncing blue bubble. Where was Meredith when she needed the woman? All these years, Meredith had always been within calling distance, but ever since Raven left King James' court, the blue bubble had vanished. Even the king was gone, leaving her no one to spar with.

Raven urged Starfire to greater speed. The mare could run like a shooting star fleeing across the night sky. The mare answered her signal to run full out. Raven fought back unbidden tears. It seemed she was doing that a lot lately. She wouldn't cry, she castigated herself. Warriors didn't cry, no matter what Jamie said. He thought little of her. The one man who should have supported her was determined to control her life. She should be grateful that up until now, she'd been able to make her own choices. She'd never had a father or brothers to exert control over her. Even Aiden, when teaching her how to use a sword and defend herself, never tried. He reasoned with her. Now she had a husband she was beginning to resent. Better to leave before she ended up hating him.

Raven slowed her mount's pace and heard her mother's voice, offering the same bit of advice that had sent her to Dun Sgiath to regain lost memories. No, they were never lost, she

finally admitted to herself. She had refused to remember and accept. The storm that night forced her to call forth the memories and deal with them. *Go back to the beginning to find the answers you seek. What you find will be the key to your future.*

Hadn't she found the key to her future, found some peace with the past? Maybe there was something more she needed to do, or perhaps the words held new meaning, something to do with finding Ian.

There was a crofter's hut where she and Jamie had spent some peaceful time alone. That time seemed longer than four years ago. It wasn't far away, and she could appreciate the solitude of the place this night. Raven settled Starfire in the lean-to and left a ration of oats for her. Then she went into the hut and pulled her plaid about her while she built up the fire in the hearth. She mulled over her mother's words. Where was the beginning she should go back to? There were so many beginnings in her life. One answer stood out, and she didn't want to accept it. She intended to revisit her past only once more, and that was when she could finally keep her promise to her mother.

The hut door opened and slammed against the wall. Raven jumped to her feet in alarm. Her eyes widened at the sight of Jamie. He tossed his saddlebags into a corner of the room. "You sorely try my patience, my lady," he said calmly as he stood by the hearth and held out his hands to warm them. "One day, I'll not follow you."

She again took her place crouched by the fire and ignored him.

"What must I do to reach you?" he asked wearily. "You are my wife, Raven, but these past few years you've become even more a stranger to me. I understand you less now than the day you strode into my library." Jamie reached out, took



her by the wrist and stared at her. The anger was gone from her eyes, replaced by a fear he had never seen before. He released his grip on her arm. "Get some rest. Tomorrow will be another long day."

Raven scooted away from him, then ran from the hut into the dark night. Jamie sighed. She was driving him crazy. He believed that as long as he lived, he would never understand her. Once they returned to Castle MacKay he intended to avoid her, unless they were in the company of others. He could no longer trust himself alone with her.

\* \* \* \*

He must have dozed for a moment. Something woke him. He looked around the dim room, lit only by the fire on the hearth, but didn't see her. There it was again, the sound of someone sniffing. Jamie got up and followed the sound.

She shook her head. "I can't do this anymore. I can't be the strong one anymore. There is so much more to lose than was lost. Mama keeps telling me to go back to the beginning. What beginning?" Her voice rose in frustration. "I can't go back again. Once was bad enough, forcing the memories into the open. What else is there?"

Jamie reached for her hand, then pulled her up and into his arms. He brushed away wet strands of hair from her face. Her eyes were red and puffy, glazed over with tears. Raven stood face to face with him, and he brushed at a single tear sitting below one eye, then studied her face a moment. He drew her closer, as if that one gesture could solve all her problems. Never had Jamie seen her more vulnerable. All those times she'd been seriously hurt couldn't compare to the inner turmoil she was experiencing now. "Such a sorry pair we make," he confessed quietly. "You are forced to live in my world. I

wanted a wife and instead got a warrior, and an advisor to kings.” He paused and glided his hand up and down her back in a comforting gesture. “Why couldn’t you trust me to help you?” he asked. “You have no choice but to trust me now. Tomorrow we return to the keep.”

“Tomorrow I go home,” she whispered, still with a touch of defiance. “That is where it began. That’s where it will all end.”

A few hours later, the chill in the hut awakened Jamie. Raven was up and tying down the flap on her saddlebags as if nothing had happened the night before. “I’m going home,” she told him matter-of-factly.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” Jamie watched her carefully. He could tell she was still hurting but refused to admit it.

“I’m going back to Dun Sgiath. The answers are there. This time it will be finished. I will either find my revenge or die trying. There is nothing left for me.”

“Nothing left? What about our son? What about Ian? Does he count for nothing?” Jamie demanded of her.

“He is part of this. I didn’t want him to be, but fate has decreed otherwise.” She headed for the croft door. “Do as you will, Jamie.”

“Aye, I will. I will search on my own for our son, and when I find him, do not expect me to be returning him to you. Do what you must, but don’t think you’ll have him back. Ian is my son, my heir. If he means so little to you, then we no longer have a marriage.” Hurt and anger spilled out with the cutting words. Raven stared at the floor before her, as if ready to change her mind and give up her plans. She stood straight, hiked her saddlebags higher on her shoulder and stepped out of the croft, closing the door quietly behind her.

“I will not go after you again, Raven!” he shouted through the door. “No more!”

Jamie waited until he heard Starfire trotting away. “No more,” he repeated and got his own horse saddled, then rode away in the opposite direction.

## Chapter 25

His words kept coming back to haunt her. *I will not go after you again, Raven! No more!* They hurt more than she would ever admit to anyone, even herself. In a moment of clarity, she realized how foolishly she was behaving. Yet all that truly mattered was keeping her promise. Doing so meant Ian's safety, she realized. Whoever had sought her out years ago would be looking for the next Draoidh. Soon it would all be over. Then what would she do? She had no idea. At the moment, she had a bit of business to take care of.

Raven had known about certain clandestine meetings for some time, and arranged one of her own. She intended this meeting to be the last time she involved herself with the affairs of Jamie's people. When she arrived at the abandoned stable, she found one of Jamie's soldiers there, preparing his mount to ride. "Aren't you supposed to be on duty?" she asked.

Roger flushed profusely. "Not till midnight, my lady," he answered. He was too familiar with the Draoidh and what she was capable of doing to attempt lying. She'd embarrassed him on more than one occasion, and he didn't want that to happen again. He waited, fidgeting, anxious to leave. No rendezvous,

no matter how intriguing, was worth angering this woman. Some of the others claimed they'd seen her turn someone into a toad. He wasn't sure he believed that, but he wasn't going to risk it. He did know she could reach into his mind and manipulate his thoughts if she chose to. As soon as he could, without offense to her, he took his leave and hurried to his saddled horse. "Good man," Raven called after him. "That little package isn't worth the trouble she'd cause. Stay out of trouble, and stay away from her."

Roger's mount moved away from the stable, but he had second thoughts and turned the animal about to face the clan's mistress. "She's not like that," he said quietly, "not really. She's more vulnerable than you think, my lady."

"Lady Cordelia is not to be trusted."

"Beggin' your pardon, my lady, but have you ever taken the time to know her? She acts the way people expect her to act, but I've seen her weep when she thinks she's alone. It's that maid of hers I don't trust. Olwen has some sort of hold over Lady Cordelia—more than she should."

"Tears are a woman's best weapon to get her way. You let her tears get to you. Every man does."

"I have three younger sisters, my lady, and they all know how to use their tears to best advantage. This isn't the same thing. I've learned to tell the difference."

"So you say. Be off with you, and say nothing of this conversation to anyone, especially the Lady Cordelia."

Roger nodded. "Aye, my lady."

Raven watched him turn his mount and ride back toward the castle. She climbed to the loft, made herself comfortable and waited. The sun dropped low in the sky, leaving shadows to creep across the loft floor. Company should be arriving

shortly, unless Roger said something. Raven doubted he would. Roger usually kept his word. He still had some fear of her. That made her wonder if Cordelia did, or was it all an act as Roger claimed.

Could Cordelia be as vulnerable as Roger saw her? Raven had no doubt about the young warrior's feelings for the woman. She just hoped he wouldn't get burned. At the same time, she intended to keep a closer eye on Cordelia to see if he was right, or if the woman was playing him for a fool, along with everyone else. Servants sometimes got a hold on the people they served, using subtle manipulation. Could Olwen be doing that, or was Roger making excuses for Cordelia's behavior?

Raven watched when Cordelia approached, slowly, cautiously, almost as if she expected a trap of some sort. "Roger?" she called softly. "Where are you? I know you're here."

"Sorry, but Roger was called back to duty. I'm sure you understand."

Cordelia jumped at the sound of the disembodied voice. "Where are you?" she demanded. "If you think you'll get back into Jamie's good graces, you had better think again. I want him and I'll keep him."

"How does it feel to want, Cordelia? You want Jamie, but you plan clandestine meetings with Roger. You can't play games and still expect to get what you want."

"Ask yourself that question. I suspect observation better suits you. You seem to care more about being a warrior than you do your husband. At least I would never betray him."

"Not yet, leastwise," Raven replied, uncomfortably aware Cordelia's retort had hit its mark. She refused to give Cordelia the satisfaction of knowing that. "And what about you? Are

you so sure of your feelings for Jamie? That brother of yours insists Jamie's the best match for you, but whom does your heart yearn for, Cordelia? Is it Jamie, or Roger? If I hadn't sent Roger back..." She let the implication trail away. "As far as my husband is concerned, you can try all your tricks, my dear sister, but what I have, I hold. Jamie and I have a bond no one can touch, or even think to break. Even if our marriage were dissolved, that bond would always be there. You would always have doubts about his fidelity. Is that what you want?"

*Sister?* "I am not your sister!" Cordelia focused on the word, and failed to hear the rest of Raven's speech. The very idea sent unpleasant shivers racing along her spine. In her pique she had shown more than she intended. She bit her lip and paused, regaining her control. "Such foolish notions you have."

Cordelia sounded more like the highborn lady she aspired to be, but something about the act rang false. "Ah!" Raven said slowly, drawing out the word. "He never told you. We may only be stepsisters, but... Perhaps that's just as well, but if you place any value on your miserable life, you'll not stay at Castle MacKay much longer. It may be dangerous to your health."

"You'll not chase me from a castle you don't want," Cordelia replied defiantly. "You're not the castle mistress. You never were, and it's unlikely you ever will be."

Raven climbed down the ladder, glancing at Cordelia. She didn't want to turn her back on her rival for Jamie's affection. She wasn't ready to accept Roger's word that Cordelia was harmless. No one was ever truly harmless. Raven brushed off bits of straw from her clothing. "By the way, when you see our dear father, tell him he'll soon have to pay the piper, if he

still wants what I have.”

Raven sauntered to the doorway, then paused a moment. “And Cordelia,” she added, “I wouldn’t stay here overlong. There are rats hiding in the straw.” Raven disappeared around the side of the stable, but her laughter lingered in the still air.

Cordelia held her breath and raised her skirts to her ankles. She hadn’t thought of the small, crawling things that inhabited barns when she agreed to meeting Roger. She glanced warily about, terrified she might catch sight of the vermin. With skirts held high, she dashed from the dilapidated structure. She needed to have a long talk with her stepfather.

\* \* \* \*

Cordelia mumbled to herself, angry she’d let Raven get the best of her. How was she to win Jamie for herself, if she couldn’t stand up to the woman? Compared to Raven, Cordelia was a mouse, afraid of her own shadow. Well, she wasn’t that bad, but she didn’t have much to recommend her to him for a wife. Beauty was a bonus to a highland chief, but he also wanted a hardy woman who could bear healthy sons, one intelligent enough to order his home and rule in his absence. When she returned to Castle MacKay, she went straight to her bedchamber. Servants watched in wonder and kept out of her way, recognizing her black mood. She wasn’t screeching at them, belittling someone for some imagined wrong. When she got to the foot of the stairs leading up to the bedchambers, she glanced up and caught one of the maidservants gaping at her, open mouthed. “What are you staring at?” Cordelia snarled, unlike the lady she claimed to be. “Do you not have chores to be done?”

“Y-yes, milady,” the girl stuttered.

“Then get to them.” Cordelia returned the stare until the



girl hurried off. She turned and glanced at the half-dozen servants preparing for supper. "Well, what are you all staring at? Have you nothing better to do?" Everyone scrambled to be elsewhere. So much for small miracles.

Cordelia paced back and forth across her chamber, grumbling about the unfairness of things. Someone rapped sharply on her chamber door. "Go away!" she called out. "Leave me be!"

The door opened slightly, and her brother slipped into her room. "I've been looking for you," Gavin said.

"What do you want?" she snapped. He was the last person she wanted to see at the moment.

"Aren't you in high spirits this evening." He made himself comfortable in the only chair in the chamber and watched his sister pace back and forth, still mumbling incoherently.

"I've come to tell you, I've made arrangements for you to return to Father. Olwen will pack your things, but she won't accompany you back."

Cordelia's head snapped up, and she glared at her brother. She never did like the supercilious way he treated her. "What right have you to give me another lady's maid? Olwen is doing well."

"You need someone a bit older, someone with more maturity. Olwen is too young to know of love and life. She's always closed herself off from the family and the rest of the servants. How can she advise you?"

"She's done well to this point. You don't change horses in midstream."

"Perhaps not," he shrugged, "but it's done. You'll be leaving first thing in the morning."

"Why? Have I not grown closer to Jamie in the last year?"

Why would you undo what I've accomplished so far?"

"It's taken you three years to accomplish what you have. There is a better way to go about it, but I need you away from here."

Cordelia plunked down on the edge of the large bed. "It no longer matters," she huffed. "I no longer wish to be Jamie's wife. When I think on it, I don't believe I ever really wanted him for a husband, but that's beside the point. I've met someone else."

Gavin jumped up from his chair. "Who is the miscreant? I won't have him or anyone else ruin my...our plan to be rid of Raven and convince the laird to marry you instead. You will do as I say."

"You are not my father, Gavin."

"No, I am not, but I'm the only blood kin you have left. It's my responsibility to see you make the best match possible. I can't do that with you constantly causing problems about here."

"How long have we been here, Gavin?"

"Too long. This should have been settled years ago. Even Father has given up on the match."

Cordelia jumped up and stood toe-to-toe before her brother. "And who is to blame for that?" she demanded.

Gavin laughed. "Well, well, the mouse finally roars." His dark eyes lit with amusement. "Be that as it may, you are still leaving in the morning. Olwen will be here to pack your trunks, and the new maid will be waiting for you in the morning. You'll be on your way shortly after dawn, with a hand-picked escort to see you home."

Gavin stalked out of his sister's chambers, leaving her to fume about the sudden change in plan. Moments later, Olwen

arrived and began pulling out Cordelia's gowns and refolding them for packing. Cordelia folded her arms across her chest and stared at her former lady's maid. "Was it at your request Gavin decided to keep you here?"

Olwen glanced up. "Oh, no, my lady. I had no choice in the matter. His lordship decided I was to stay here and he'd find another to wait on you."

"I don't like this sudden change of plan," Cordelia mumbled, turning her back on Olwen.

"Did you say something, my lady?" Olwen asked, not looking up from her work.

Cordelia chose to ignore her. *I'll be glad to be quit of this place, she thought. It's brought me nothing but heart pain and embarrassment. The only good to come of it is meeting Roger. And now we're to be parted, possibly forever.* A single tear rolled down her cheek, and she quickly swiped it away. No use dwelling on the past. She was subject to her brother's whims. It didn't matter what she thought or felt—her feelings were of no consequence. It was the way of things, but one might think a woman would be used to it. *I will never get used to it.* She stamped her foot in silent defiance, unaware of Olwen watching her.

\* \* \* \*

Gavin stopped beside a door, then glanced along both ends of the corridor. No one was in sight. He slipped into the room, quietly closed the door and leaned against it. His form shimmered and faded away, leaving Meredith still leaning against the oak door.

Step one complete. Cordelia would be on her way in the morning, out of her brother's clutches. If all went well, Meredith expected to have both culprits within her grasp in a short time. The next part of her plan relied on Cordelia un-

wittingly playing her part. Meredith crossed her fingers in hopes all would go accordingly—if the right people fell into the trap. Would they?

## Chapter 26

Cordelia glanced about the courtyard, but did not recognize her surroundings. She turned to the captain of her escort and found they were accompanied by only two men. Where had the rest of her brother's handpicked men gone off to? They were all trusted soldiers. They were all—gone. She looked around her and saw one man entering what she assumed was the barracks, then sighed with relief. How had they disappeared so quickly, horses and all? The entire journey seemed like some strange dream, but seeing that soldier enabled her to relax. At least she hadn't imagined them.

A heavy door scraped open, and Cordelia's eyes widened. How had Raven reached here so quickly? The woman had been on the borders of MacKay lands with her husband when she left. How would Raven have known Cordelia was headed here? She glanced about once more. Where was here?

"Welcome to Dun Sgiath, Lady Cordelia. Come inside. Your rooms are ready and I'll have refreshment brought for you. I'm sure you're hungry after your long journey. By the way, I'm Meredith MacDraoidh, one of the guardians of time, quartered in this highland fortress." Meredith turned away from the door, then looked back to see her guest still on

horseback. "If you expect an engraved invitation, you've got a long wait," she said, a hint of sarcasm in her voice. She turned again, this time walking away from the door and into the great hall.

One of Cordelia's remaining escorts helped her dismount, then led away the horses. Cordelia followed her host into the keep, both cautious and confused. "What is this place?" she demanded when she stood in the center of the great hall and looked around. The walls were bare, but clean. None of that customary smoke and greasy look appeared on the overhead beams. In fact, they seemed new. "What's become of my escort?"

"Your escort?" Meredith responded, on the verge of laughter. A young man approached the trestle table and set down a heavy tray. "Do you mean this escort?" She laid a hand on the young man's shoulder, and his appearance changed. Meredith grinned at her guest's open-mouthed stare. "Or do you mean this escort?" Her own appearance changed, until two familiar young soldiers stood before Cordelia. Another change, and Cordelia saw a perfect likeness of her brother. A moment or two later, Meredith dropped the illusions and thanked the servant for his help.

"And Roger. I saw him in the escort. Is he an illusion as well?" Cordelia feared what the answer would be.

"He's the real thing. I'm not *that* mean."

Cordelia slowly released a breath, relieved to know the man she'd come to care for was real.

Meredith gestured to her guest to take a seat and partake of the meal placed before her. "As I said, this is Dun Sgiath, home of the Draoidh."

"The Draoidh is just an amusing story," Cordelia scoffed.

She stared at the plate set before her, as if she expected the food to change into something horrific.

"I assure you the food is real," Meredith spoke up, then stabbed a bite of venison with a small dirk and popped the bit of meat into her mouth. It amused her to watch Cordelia's hesitation, the hint of mistrust.

"The Draoidh is quite real. I took over the castle a few years ago, brought my own staff here. The Draoidh have been here since before the days of King Arthur. We are the guardians of time. Our job is to keep history on track, and not allow anyone to try to change it." She shivered involuntarily at the memory of a few historical events she wished she could have changed. Sometimes she forgot how barbaric the Scots could be.

"But Arthur was...at least a thousand years ago! Then the legend must be true, that the Draoidh are witches." Cordelia shook her head as if to clear her mind. Such things could not be! "You appear to be of an age with me."

"At least that long. I'm much older than anyone thinks—but we won't go into it." Meredith dismissed that subject with a wave of her hand. Let the woman believe she had magic or some such nonsense. It was easier for Cordelia to believe in witches than for Meredith to try explaining the concept of time travel.

"Why am I here?" Cordelia asked. The woman relaxed a bit and took a tentative bite of venison. "Hmm. Rather good. I'm surprised."

Meredith bristled a little at the insult to the food she had provided. "We are not so provincial that a good meal cannot be found here. Anyhoo, as to the reason you are here. You're going home to your father, are you not?"

“Yes. Gavin, my brother, decided it was more prudent to send me home than have me stay at Castle MacKay.”

“What became of your lady’s maid? She should be traveling with you.”

“He kept her with him. I suspected something was going on between them, but I had no proof until now. It’s just as well. She was becoming most bothersome.”

Meredith nodded. “They’ll both get their comeuppance, eventually. More to the point. I have something needs transporting. The sooner the better, for safety’s sake.”

Aiden strode into the great hall carrying a small, squealing child on his shoulders. Aiden held the boy’s hands to help the little one maintain his balance until they reached the head table. Then, in a swift movement, he swung the boy from his perch and handed him over to Meredith.

“You know he won’t sleep, Aiden. You’ve got him all excited.”

“Warm milk and he’ll settle for the night. Always worked for me. Work for you too, buddy?” Aiden reached over and tickled the boy.

Cordelia stared at the dark curly hair and blue eyes. “That isn’t... Tell me it isn’t...” she said, suddenly more fearful. What were these people doing with Raven’s son? While the warrior woman was riding all over the highlands in search of clues of her missing son, the boy was here, happy as a lark. What in blazes was going on?

“Okay, it isn’t Ian.” Meredith glanced at Cordelia and shrugged, then turned her attention back to the lad.

“Auntie, I want to play.”

“It’s time you retire to the nursery, my dear boy. Go with Janet, and she’ll read to you. Where’s a kiss for your



auntie?" Ian gave Meredith a sloppy kiss, making her laugh. "A few years from now, you might want to refine that, sweetie."

One of the village lasses had been asked to look after Ian during his short stay at Sgiath. They took an instant liking to one another. Meredith handed the boy over to her. "Here you go, Janet. Read to him a while till he settles for the night. Thank you." She watched Ian go willingly to his nanny and wave to Meredith as he was carried above stairs.

Aiden took a seat beside his wife and helped himself to a bite of her supper. "Does she know?" he asked, with a nod toward Cordelia.

"I was just about to tell her." Meredith turned to Cordelia. "I've been watching you for some time, and I've come to the conclusion you aren't the big bad witch you make yourself out to be."

"I am not a witch!" Cordelia exclaimed.

"In my world, a witch isn't necessarily someone with magical skills. It also refers to a woman with a disagreeable personality."

Cordelia gasped at the description, then closed her mouth. Her cheeks turned a lovely crimson when she realized the description had fit her behavior in the past. She lowered her gaze in embarrassment.

"Don't worry about it, Cordelia. Other matters are more important at the moment. I have something of a proposition to make. I want you to take Ian with you tomorrow. Take him to his grandfather."

"His grandfather? And be accused of snatching the boy from his bed?"

"I don't think so," Meredith responded. "I've planned this very carefully, and unless something totally unexpected oc-

curs, there shouldn't be a problem."

"You know what they say about the best-laid plans," Aiden whispered. He gently nibbled Meredith's earlobe, making her shiver and laugh. A sidewise glance at Cordelia, and he burst into laughter himself. She had rolled her eyes heavenward with a deep sigh of boredom.

"You expect me to transport Raven's boy? Why?"

"There is no need for you to know why, but understand this. Either you are part of the problem, or you're part of the solution. At this moment in time, you're part of the problem. If I were you, I'd rethink my answer, very carefully."

\* \* \* \*

Meredith sat alone in the great hall after she'd had Cordelia shown to one of the bedchambers. Her mind sifted through one idea after another, looking for the most effective way to bring to a favorable conclusion the mess they were all dealing with. She had hoped Raven would do it on her own, but enough was enough. She sat on the trestle bench, elbows on the table, with her chin resting in the palm of one hand.

This revenge thing had gone on long enough. Meredith wanted it finished. It was time she spent some quality time with her husband. How long ago had it been when she promised him they would get away, just the two of them? That could mean trouble. Not good. Granted, Aiden had been remarkably patient with the whole situation, but Meredith couldn't expect that to go on indefinitely. She had to draw the line somewhere, and this was as good a time and place as any.

Aiden sat beside her and leaned back against the table. "It was a good idea to include Roger in the escort. That alone kept Cordelia on her best behavior."

"Give her a break, Aiden," Meredith replied softly. "Cor-

delia has spent her life thus far living up to the expectations of others, doing what they wanted her to do. She's finally found someone not involved with her brother or stepfather. Someone who is willing to accept her for herself. Roger sees a different woman."

"Point taken." They were quiet for a few moments, when Aiden slipped his arm about Meredith's waist, pulling her close. "What's my favorite girl mulling over in that devious brain?" he asked.

"You," she replied and looked up at him.

"Really. I would have thought you'd be scheming again."

Meredith laughed. "Of course, but you're the reason." She sat back on the bench and studied his features for a moment. He looked tired. Anyone would be, trying to keep up with Raven. "I was just thinking about the promise I made to you before this whole mess got started." She snuggled against his side and wrapped her arms about his. "I said we'd spend time together when this was done, but it's taken far longer to resolve than I expected. I have to make an end of it."

"I thought the whole idea was for Raven to settle accounts, then we get back to our lives."

"It was...is, but it's taken far too long, so I'm just...helping things along." She looked up at him again, a hint of regret in her eyes. "Oh, Aiden, I'm sorry I dragged you into this. Had I known it would take this long to resolve, I'd have found a way to settle matters long ago."

"Just think of the advantage we have in traveling through time. We can take up where we left off and not damage anything—at least I hope not. When you think about it, we lose almost nothing, but gain a great deal."

"Are you sorry you married me?" she asked. A frisson of

doubt and fear showed in her eyes.

"Now why would you think that?" Aiden hugged her closer.

"Because I've neglected you something terrible. I don't mean to," she added quickly. "I just never expected this situation to last this long."

"Meredith, my love, my sweet," he began, and gave her a noisy kiss, making her laugh. "I married you for better or for worse. Stolen moments have, on one occasion in particular, proven productive," he teased. "Things aren't going so well right now, but I'm in it for the duration. I expect to have many more years with you and all your adventures. Eventually things should slow down."

Meredith stared up at him, one eyebrow raised.

"Shouldn't they?" he asked, a hint of doubt in his voice.

"Honestly? I wouldn't count on it." A sly smile turned up the corners of her mouth. She got up from the trestle bench and gently tugged on his arm. "Come on. We've got a lot of scheming to do, and the night isn't getting any younger." The gleam in her eyes hinted at something more than scheming. Aiden willingly followed her up the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

The following morning, at dawn, Meredith had her hands full with a tired and grumpy four-year-old. She understood exactly how he felt and tried to stifle her own yawn. Ian wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep. Meredith managed to get some porridge into him. "The more things change..." she chuckled, when Ian was finally dressed and ready for his journey.

"I don't want to go," he whined.

"Ian," Meredith warned gently, "what did I tell you

about this journey?”

“I don’t want to see my grandda. I want to stay here. Where is Mama?”

“Your mama will be here in a few days,” Meredith whispered, “and then you can come back. Right now it’s time for you to go on a great adventure with Auntie Cordelia.”

“She doesn’t like me,” he pouted.

Meredith held back a laugh. “Then show her what a charming little fellow you can be. I’m sure you can win her affections in no time at all.” She kissed the tip of his nose. “Uncle Aiden will be going with you, so you’ll be safe.”

Cordelia arrived in the great hall and asked for something to break her fast. Apparently, she’d had a bad night as well, given the dark circles under her eyes. “You should get more rest, Cordelia. You look as if you didn’t get any sleep all night.” Meredith got up and unceremoniously plunked Ian onto Cordelia’s lap.

Cordelia sputtered in protest. She hadn’t the faintest idea what to do with the child. They stared at one another for a moment or two. “Auntie Meredith says I should win your affections,” he mimicked the conversation of moments ago.

“Did she now?” Cordelia replied. The corners of her mouth turned up in a small smile. She would never admit it to anyone, but she had a feeling it probably wouldn’t take him long to win her over. “What am I to do with you?” she sighed, resigned to the situation.

Ian shrugged his small shoulders. “Like me?” he asked in round-eyed innocence.

While the two began a tentative conversation, Meredith moved away to stand beside her husband. She slipped her arms about his waist and pressed her head against his chest to

listen to the comforting sound of his heartbeat.

"Are you sure this will work?" Aiden asked, kissing the top of her head. He, too, was tired after their busy night, and he had his doubts about the trap Meredith was putting in place.

"It should. Everything has been put into motion, and I don't want Ian, or anyone who's unnecessary to the plan, to be here until it's over. I don't want to give our prey the chance to snatch him and make a run for it, or to hurt anyone else."

"I should stay here with you...just in case you need help."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Aiden. This is the last place they'd search. Their minds work on elaborate plans. They don't know how to think small, or simple. In the meantime, I have everything well in hand. I promise." Meredith drew her arm through his, and they strolled out to the courtyard where a small entourage waited impatiently. "I'll send you a message when I'm ready to have them all return."

"Be careful, sweetheart. You're not invincible, despite what you may think."

"Nice to believe it could be so, but I promise I will be careful. It's long past time this came to a head. Raven will never settle down until these matters are resolved."

"Do you know who is responsible for her mother's death?"

"I think so. I have reason to believe there's a bit more to it, and I don't think that will fall into place until the last moment."

"I'll wait for your summons. Hopefully, we can make this quick. You still owe me that quality time. It's a good thing we can time travel, or our daughter would never get to see us."

"I know. I miss Gillian terribly, but we do have that advantage." She thought of his comment earlier about one productive moment, which had resulted in their beautiful young daughter. Whenever they could get away from her guardian duties, Meredith and Aiden managed a few stolen moments together, shutting out the rest of the world. Now that the current adventure was almost at an end, she wanted to give her little family her undivided attention. "You know," Meredith gazed up at him, mischief in her eyes, "maybe we should visit our families when this is over."

Aiden groaned at the thought. He didn't mind visiting his parents, but Meredith's sister was another story—but fair was fair. "Are you sure you want to go back to the twenty-first century? Think of all you'd miss here." Meredith gave him a look he knew meant she wouldn't give in. "Sure," he relented. "We should do that. We owe both sides a visit, I suppose."

Meredith seductively slipped her hands up his chest and over his shoulders, then laced her fingers behind his neck. Stretching, she kissed him, soft, sweet and teasing. "There's more where that came from," she whispered. Her eyes darkened from the black to the sheen of polished obsidian.

"Save it for the bedchamber," Roger called out, laughing. Roger mounted up, frequently sending glances in Cordelia's direction.

"You're just jealous," Meredith called back, not taking her gaze from her husband's eyes. She rubbed the horse's neck, letting strands of its mane run through her fingers. "He's right though. You'd best be on your way. The sooner we spring this trap, the sooner we can get some down time. I love you, Aiden."

"And I love you, my sweet lass." They might not have

much time alone together, without the rest of the clan clamoring over some wrong needing to be made right, but they didn't lack for adventure. Aiden gave her one last quick kiss, then eased out of her embrace and mounted up, ready to leave Sgiath. He moved his mount to Cordelia's side, then reached over and took Ian from her. Riding sidesaddle was difficult enough without having to hold on to a small child. This 'adventure' couldn't end soon enough. He was more than ready to go home.

"Will Mama be here too?"

"I expect she will...if all goes well." She realized the boy was about to ask something else when she interrupted him. "So many questions, my dear. Mind your manners, as well as your grandfather."

"Take care, Aiden." Meredith turned to her husband then added softly, "I expect this will finally be over in two weeks' time."

Meredith watched the small procession head toward the portcullis. Roger urged his mount forward and stopped beside Cordelia. He intended to remain by her side for the rest of the journey. Another soldier stationed himself on the far side, next to Cordelia's maid. Both women would be well looked after.

Just before they moved out, Ian twisted about in Aiden's arms. "Goodbye, Auntie Meredith. I love you."

Tears filled Meredith's eyes, and she fought to keep them back. "I love you, too, Ian. You'll be back home before you know it."

"You take care," Aiden replied, low enough so no one could eavesdrop. "I just hope this doesn't backfire on you."

"It shouldn't. Now be off with you." She gave Ian's small



foot a gentle shake, then stood back. Aiden's mount stepped slightly to one side, then moved ahead of Cordelia's mare. Horses, riders, and loaded carts slowly left the bailey. When the portcullis closed again, Meredith turned to Thomas, the steward of Sgiath. "We have rooms to make ready and the rest of our plans to prepare." Thomas nodded and hurried away.

"It has to go well," Meredith whispered when he was out of earshot. "It's long past time to make an end."

## Chapter 27

The leader reined up several feet from the misty curtain and signaled the twenty men following him to halt. It obstructed their view, just as it had fifteen years earlier. He recalled the words to open the path and waited, his patience wearing thin.

As it had then, the path opened with wisps of mist curling about in the chill air. His horse reared, anxious to be away from the ill breeze. The leader tugged on the reins and kicked the horse's sides, urging the reluctant animal into the mist.

The twenty riders moved forward, as they had years earlier, each wishing he could be anywhere else. The thick mist prevented them from seeing anything but the path their leader followed. From where they entered to a point just beyond the mist, the distance was no more than fifty feet. They kept their mounts to a cautious pace. When the last rider entered through the barrier, the mist quickly closed around them. The riders lost sight of one another and called out, trying to locate their companions. Like ships on the sea, they were isolated, cut off from one another by thick fog. The horses whinnied in fright, sensing this was no ordinary mist. Moments later, the sound of horses and riders faded to nothing, as if they

had completely vanished.

Not until he reached the far side did Gavin realize he was alone. That fact did nothing to soothe his temper. He pulled on the reins, forcing his horse to move in a tight circle. "Roland! Dougal? Where the blazes are you all?" No one answered. "You cowards! You can't do such a simple thing as follow me through that blasted fog. Find your way out, then head for Dun Sgiath. We'll deal with that wayward clan just as we did the first time, but this time we'll make sure they are wiped out completely. When that's done, I'll deal with the lot of you." Gavin growled with disgust, kicked his horse once more, and sent the animal in a full gallop toward the castle.

Gavin rode into an empty courtyard, puzzled to find no one greeting him as courtesy demanded. "MacDraoidh!" he shouted. "Why are you not out here to greet your brother?" Nothing stirred. Raven was there—he knew it. "You are just as cold as your mother was." He continued to shout, hoping to draw out Raven into the open. "Your mother was an inhospitable witch. She didn't have the decency to offer food and drink to me and my men. She practically laughed at me when I made my demand of her, but I'm here now—and she isn't.

"I'll make my claim again, Raven. Only this time, you're the one to give me what is mine."

"And what might that be?"

Gavin wheeled his horse about until he faced Raven.

"What do I supposedly have that you could want?" Raven, astride Starfire, moved slowly into the courtyard, the horse's shod hoofs clacking on the courtyard stones. The sound sent up eerie hollow echoes.

Starfire came to a halt, hooves dancing for a moment before she was still. Raven dismounted and, for the moment,

kept the mare between her and Gavin. She drew her sword from its saddle sheath. Her movements were slow and deliberate. She never took her gaze from Gavin. She raised a hand and waved it, as if beckoning Jamie to join her.

Jamie stood just inside the courtyard and took a step forward, drawing his own sword. He met with resistance, a barrier that blocked his way. Using the tip of his blade, he tentatively touched something. It was solid, but unseen. "What have you done, Raven?" he called out. She gave no sign of response. Did she even hear him? He had no idea. He shoved the sword back into its sheath and worked about with his hands, trying to find a way through whatever kept him back. He followed the barrier to his left, keeping his fingers on the solidness. It butted up against the stone wall. He tried in the other direction, only to find no gaps there, either. He looked to Raven, angry and helpless to do anything more.

Raven spoke softly to her mare. The animal snorted and shook her head, as if understanding. Raven gave Starfire a slap on her flank and sent her trotting toward the stable. Once the mare was out of range, Raven addressed Gavin. "Now tell me what it is you want...brother. What could I possibly have to warrant this demand?"

"I want what I came for fifteen years ago. The original treasure is too old now for me to control and train to my will. I want the boy."

Raven frowned. "What boy do you speak of?"

"Do not play the fool with me—sister. I want the heir to the Draoidh. I want your son." A dark shadow passed over Gavin's face.

Something registered in the back of Raven's mind. A voice giving orders—a bit younger, but the same voice. She

remembered something about history repeating itself. Why hadn't she recognized the voice long ago? Months spent in the same castle, and an unwanted visit to her chambers. She had been a fool for not realizing earlier who he was.

"Bring him to me, and no one need be hurt."

They circled each other warily, swords at ready, neither breaking eye contact. Raven sensed his overconfidence. She tried to read his thoughts, but only caught enough to know he was sure he could defeat her. Someone was shielding him, because he had no power of his own. He was being used, but believed he was the user.

Gavin lunged, swinging his heavy broadsword. Raven was ready. She caught the force of his blow on her own blade and turned it away. She had to be more careful. Gavin was a powerful opponent.

"You gave the orders that day. You killed my mother and sent your soldiers searching for me. They killed everyone they found. Anyone who stood in their way. But you came away with nothing." Metal clashed against metal with Gavin's attack. Raven withstood the onslaught and continued to bait him. "Who was behind it then? You certainly weren't."

Gavin swung at her again, nicking her arm. He stood back a moment and grinned. "I planned it, I saw to its execution. I wanted you for myself. I wanted the power you wielded. You were but a child then. I would have wed you when you were a bit older. Your mother would have lived, had she given in to my demands. She could have led a comfortable, quiet life under my rule. I would have had total control of the Draoidh, but she stubbornly refused to give you up to me."

"No, you wouldn't have ruled. No man can wield that power. The lifemate can only hold it, see it isn't abused. He is

a safeguard. Without her lifemate, the power was useless to my mother. She had nothing beyond the gifts she was born with. It has been that way for many generations. It would have done you no good."

Gavin forced her up the steps leading to the great hall entrance. "I would have found a way. I still intend to. Where is the boy?"

"I don't know," she replied. Instead of further retreat, Raven made a sudden advance, causing Gavin to back down a step. "And if I did know, I would never tell you."

"Is he worth your life? Let me have him, and I'll let you live."

"You get your hands on him, you'll kill me just the same. If you didn't, you'd live in fear I'd hunt you down." Raven kept at him, wanting him to talk. The more he said, the less he concentrated on his swordsmanship. She managed to keep a distance between them, making him work for his strikes, despite his longer reach.

She couldn't keep it up much longer. He backed her against the steps once more. A strong blow set her off balance, but she managed to regain herself before she could fall. Her sword dropped, clattering on the granite steps.

Gavin believed he had her and moved in for a deadly thrust. She rolled away from him, and his sword hit the stone steps. The force snapped the blade in two. Raven's weapon had fallen out of reach, but she grabbed the dagger from her belt and waited for him to make his next move.

He'd been outmaneuvered, and he didn't like it. His features darkened with anger. He tossed aside his broken blade and pulled his own dagger from its waist sheath. He went after Raven.

The tussle for domination grew tense, each combatant

gaining the advantage for a moment. Raven, a head shorter and a good deal lighter in weight, had a distinct disadvantage. Gavin grabbed at her, trying to get her arms down, or get beneath them for a killing strike. From a distance they appeared to be dancing, but the steps were deadly.

\* \* \* \*

Jamie turned his head a moment when he heard horses approaching. He relaxed when he saw it was Aiden. Others approached behind him and stopped beneath the portcullis. Aiden slid off his mount and came to Jamie and the courtyard. "Why are you just standing here?" he questioned Jamie. He would have kept walking quickly, almost running toward Raven and the battle—until he bounced off something that knocked him flat on his back. "Not the time for fun and games, boys and girls," he said.

"Some kind of barrier," Jamie said, stating the obvious. He held out a hand and pulled Aiden to his feet.

Aiden reached out before him, feeling for something. "There's a shield in place to keep anyone from interfering. What have you done, Meredith?" he ground out.

"This isn't your wife's doing," Jamie replied. "Raven set up the force. I'm afraid she's on her own." He and Aiden turned their attention to the ongoing duel.

Raven had been forced to retreat. One by one she backed up the steps. The top one was a bit deeper than the others, and she misjudged it. She toppled backward. The force of Gavin's rush caused him to trip, and he fell along with her to the top landing. The hard impact and his weight on her as he fell knocked the wind from Raven's lungs. It took a moment before her muscles relaxed enough to allow her to draw a shallow breath.

Gavin saw his advantage. He had her left hand pinned and squeezed her wrist until he heard the dagger clash to the stone. Without her weapon, she would be nothing. His smile was dark and evil and his eyes glittered with hatred. He raised his hand a few inches, drew it back. He froze.

While Gavin prepared to strike the final blow, Raven managed to wriggle enough to gain hold of the dagger in her boot. She had prepared for this dangerous eventuality. After striking the final blow, Raven let the dagger fall from her hand. It rattled as it fell ominously down the steps.

From where the others gathered behind the invisible shield, no one could see if either combatant had survived the duel. A richly dressed older man ran to the shield. "My daughter! Is she all right?"

Aiden grabbed his arm to keep him from bouncing off the shield as he had done moments earlier. While he held on to the nobleman, Jamie moved forward and jabbed cautiously outward with his sword. The shield was gone. The three men hurried forward.

Roger and Cordelia, still mounted, rode forward, hesitant to hear any bad news. Either way, it wouldn't be good for Cordelia. Olwen followed behind her lady while the rest of the escort fanned out behind them.

It was over. A puddle of blood seeped down the step, but there was no indication to whom it belonged. No one moved.



## Chapter 28

Raven lay still at the top of the step, as still as the dead man lying over her. She waited for her heart to slow its rapid pace, her breathing ragged and shallow. Until this moment, she had been unaware of the people who stood watching, waiting for some sign of movement. Slowly, she curled up into a sitting position, pushing Gavin off her. His body tumbled and rolled down the half-dozen steps to the cobblestone courtyard. She took a slow, deep breath and prepared herself for the inevitable questions and accusations. No one said a word. A quick scan of their thoughts showed her they were well aware nothing would have prevented this confrontation. They accepted the fact it was long overdue. No one moved. What were they waiting for?

Raven dropped the dirk she held tightly in her fist. She had no further need of it. Her reasons for becoming a warrior were now fulfilled. There was nothing left. When she finally stood, she quickly scanned their thoughts. Most were relieved her need for revenge was satisfied, but somewhere in the group, one mind seethed with anger. Raven couldn't single it out.

When the riders moved into the courtyard, she caught sight of Cordelia sitting sidesaddle. Jamie stood beside Corde-

lia's mare, holding the reins, gently stroking the animal's neck. His features told her nothing, only that he waited. Raven groaned silently. *Have I sacrificed all that is important to me for the sake of revenge?* For all the years she had stayed away from the MacKay stronghold to protect the clan, it was obvious to her Jamie had sought out Cordelia's company. The silence was unbearable. She looked at the blood on her hand and remembered the day her mother died by her stepbrother's sword. She looked up once more and saw that not one facial expression had changed. Her eyes were brimming with unshed tears. She wouldn't let them see her weep. Warriors didn't cry, she reminded herself, but it was over, all of it, and in the long run, she had lost everything. Without a word, she turned away from them and stepped toward the heavy door that opened into the great hall. "Where are you going, lass?" An older man gazed up at her from the foot of the stair.

"I have sacrificed all to avenge my mother's murder," she retorted. "What more would you have me give?"

"Not quite," a woman's voice called out. Cordelia's maid stepped forward. She appeared older and no longer acted like the servant she had been for the last few years.

Cordelia's mouth dropped. "What do you—"

"Quiet," Olwen ordered. "He was no more competent than those other fools, when this clan was first established." She glanced at Gavin's body, disgusted, her eyes glowing with hatred. She looked pointedly at Raven. "It is past time I dealt with the lot of you, but especially you. You have thwarted my plans for the last time."

"You would kill me before witnesses?" Raven asked tiredly. She had suffered enough intrigue to last the rest of her life.

"They will see just how weak you truly are, then I will

deal with them.”

“No. First you must deal with me, Morgan.” Meredith stepped out from the shadows of the partially opened door.

It was Olwen’s turn to be surprised. “How did you...”

“You forget my ability to get around.” Meredith raised an eyebrow, waiting for a response. When none was forthcoming, she continued. “I have suspected you for some time, Morgan. I should have realized long ago, when you tried to interfere with the guardians. You had another believing he could rule Scotland. Did you promise Cordelia she could have Jamie? How many others have you duped into believing you?” Meredith paused. “It doesn’t matter anymore, because I intend to put an end to it once and for all time. The Draoidh has enough to do without having to deal with the likes of you every time you decide to pop up out of nowhere.”

Morgan wiped her sweating palms on her storm-gray skirts. Raven would have been easy prey, but Meredith was another story. She hadn’t expected Meredith to make an appearance. Morgan raised her hand and sent a small ball of fire flying at Meredith.

Meredith held out one hand, and the flames dissipated to nothing. “Is that the best you can do?” she chided her opponent. “After all the stories I’ve heard about you...that’s all you’ve got?” She shook her head in feigned disbelief and rubbed her hands together. From the corner of her eye, she saw Raven step away from her. “The rest of you might want to step back as well. This might not work and it might backfire on you. I hope not, but you can never tell.”

Aiden rolled his eyes. “Get on with it, Meredith. I’m ready for a long vacation.”

Meredith grinned. “One vacation coming up.” She

pointed at Morgan and repeated a few words in a language no one else understood. She noted the look of amusement on her husband's face. He understood.

*To a secret place  
That's crystal clear,  
Take Morgan  
Away from here.*

Morgan's eyes widened when she discovered she couldn't move or ward off Meredith's incantation. "I have not been defeated," she shouted angrily. "I will get the better of you, Meredith MacDraoidh. Do not think for a moment that there is anyone who can protect you against me."

"I don't need anyone to protect me. You can see the head guardian for yourself. About time he dealt with you." Meredith sharply clapped her hands once, and her adversary vanished. She slapped her hands together, as if brushing off loose dirt, and smiled triumphantly.

"Wha...where did she go? What did you do to her?" Cordelia nervously glanced about, as if she feared Meredith might turn on her. After all, Olwen, or rather, Morgan, had been her maid. Cordelia could be held responsible for the woman's actions.

Meredith took a threatening step forward. "I should deal with you next. You brought a lot of this trouble on the Draoidh." She caught Aiden's warning glare and backed down. "But I'm willing to give you a break—this time. You did help me out a bit.

"Morgan...or Olwen isn't dead, if that's what you're thinking. I sent her into cold storage, where she can't do any

more harm. The boss can deal with her now. Her magic has been—how shall I say it—put on ice. She won't be returning anytime soon."

Two soldiers quietly approached and, with her permission, took away Gavin's body. There was nothing they could do about the puddle of blood seeping into the cracks between the stones. Unnoticed, Meredith passed her hand through the air over the stain, and the stone appeared clean once more. She glanced about, hoping no one would ask any more questions. There was more than enough unexplained activity for one day.

"Perhaps, now, there is something I can give you." The distinguished looking rider smiled knowingly, then raised a hand and gave a signal. One of his men dismounted with a squirming bundle under his arm.

Jamie turned to Cordelia and reached up to help her dismount. Her eyes shone with something akin to triumph.

Raven choked back a sob. She didn't need to remain there and watch her stepsister gloat over her victory. Raven was ready to bolt, but forced herself to remain still. After all she'd been through, she refused to act the coward now.

The older man turned his attention back to Raven. "It would seem my grandson prefers his mother's company to that of mine. I return him to you, my daughter."

Raven glanced toward the stranger. The fact he was her father only vaguely clicked in her mind. Her attention was elsewhere. The small child who had been set on his feet ran clumsily toward her and hurried up the steps. She knelt down and opened her arms to him. "Mama!" he called and threw his arms about her neck. He placed a wet kiss on her cheek.

"Ian." Her voice was barely more than a whisper as she

hugged him to her. A warrior didn't cry, she reminded herself once more, but tears flowed freely down her cheeks. She was no longer a warrior. She was a mother reunited with her son.

Cordelia moved to stand beside Jamie, tucking her small hand beneath his arm. She looked up at Raven with a smile that conveyed a great deal. She had won and Raven lost. Jamie had made his choice.

Raven knew the blame lay within herself. If she hadn't left him three years earlier, she would still be at his side as his wife. It was over now. Raven had made the choice to keep a promise to her mother. She looked down into the small, innocent face staring back at her. At least Ian was safe now and back with her, where he belonged. She intended to spend the rest of her life looking after him.

Meredith quietly disappeared into the shadows of the doorway, then stepped out again a moment later. A small hand fit into hers and two little girls, holding hands, stepped out from the shadows.

"Mama!"

Raven looked up and stretched out one arm to welcome the little girl who called to her. "I missed you, Mama," the child exclaimed as she, too, hugged her mother.

The second little girl, a bit older than Brina, stood by Meredith's side, holding her hand, watching the reunion of mother and children. She looked around at the small group. Her eyes lit when she found the one person she looked for. "Daddy!" she exclaimed, and ran forward, to be snatched up and held tightly in her father's arms.

Aiden hugged his daughter and glanced at his wife, a question in his eyes.

"Brina needed someone to keep her company. Who bet-

ter than a ‘*distant*’ cousin?” Meredith grinned at the double entendre, pleased with herself when Aiden shook his head. *What am I going to do with you?*

*I think we could come to some . . . arrangement.* Meredith’s features suddenly held an innocent look. She watched contentedly as the woman she’d once looked after greeted her own children. She glanced at the group of people who stared back in astonishment. No one ever suspected Raven’s son was actually a twin. “Come, Brina, Ian. We’ll go inside now.” Taking a small hand in each of her own, Raven turned toward the entrance to the great hall.

The older man slowly approached her. “I am your father. You have grown up to be a strong and courageous young woman.”

Raven and her children turned together, paused and focused their attention on him. The twins looked from their mother to the gray-haired man before them. “You made me what I am,” she replied without emotion. She was tired and unwilling to have this confrontation now. He refused to back away.

“No, Raven. I could not be a father to you. Your mother forbade it, but I loved you both dearly. After your mother died, I did everything I could to see to your welfare. As much as I hated the idea, Lady Meredith provided reasons why I should continue to stay away. Claiming you would have put you in more danger. Her reasons were valid. I had no idea the danger existed so close to me.

“I didn’t make you a warrior, but I provided the tools. If I couldn’t be there to protect you, then I wanted you to be able to protect yourself. It was up to you to decide what you would do, and you chose wisely. While you could not change

the Draoidh, you have proved yourself a courageous young woman. I am proud to call you my daughter.”

Raven stood straight and tall as she looked into her father’s eyes. She didn’t expect the love she saw there, and knew he spoke the truth. It was the Draoidh that kept him from her all those years, and a promise to her mother. Raven bowed her head in a token of respect. She would not soon forget this day.

“Lady Raven,” Cordelia spoke up, for the first time showing Raven respect. “I pray you don’t hold my brother’s transgressions against me. While I admit to scheming to gain Jamie’s affections for myself, it was half-hearted, and I knew nothing of Gavin’s designs on you. Had I known what he planned, I would have done what I could to stop him.”

“I’m sure you would have,” Raven replied, doubt evident in her voice.

Cordelia bowed her head in contrition, but what could she expect after the attitude she had shown? She suspected it would be a long time before Raven trusted her.

Lord Carlisle cleared his throat. “Cordelia, come with me.” Holding out his hand, he waited for his stepdaughter to join him. The blonde beauty wistfully looked up at Jamie. She would never have him, but had no regret. Releasing Jamie’s arm, she approached her stepfather, then glanced back to find Roger studying her, waiting. She blushed prettily, then followed the older man into the great hall. She could only hope.

\* \* \* \*

It was late, and Dun Sgiath was quiet for the night. Raven strolled along the walkway, deep in thought. She had stayed away from the great hall, choosing instead to have supper in the nursery with the twins. Her father, the Lord Carlisle,



Cordelia and Jamie had their supper in the large room, along with the warriors who'd accompanied them here. There had been no boisterous laughter, none of the usual bragging warriors took part in. It had been very quiet—too quiet. She had scanned their minds and found they were uncomfortable here. Highlanders were a superstitious lot. They all knew what she was, and they firmly believed this place held the secrets of her powers. It would be wasted effort to try to convince them otherwise.

She still found it hard to believe she no longer had to keep the twins hidden. The threat to their young lives was now silent. They were free to be normal children—as normal as children of the Draoidh could be. What *was* normal? Ian was his father's heir and would one day become the MacKay. Andrew would see to Ian's training when the boy was old enough. There would be no fostering for this MacKay heir, as was the custom. Ian was also a part of the Draoidh lineage, but Raven had no idea what his role would be. Never before had there been a male child born into the family. She half wished she could look into the future to see what it held for her son, then decided it was better she could not.

Brina would, of course, follow in her mother's footsteps and carry on the legacy. Could the clans be united? No one had ever been successful in that endeavor, but perhaps it just wasn't the right time. Meredith had explained that certain of the Draoidh were chosen to be guardians of time. Would Brina have a hand in that? Raven didn't know the answer to that either.

The view from the wall-walk was quiet, serene, belying the earlier deadly confrontation with her stepbrother. When she left the twins in the nursery, they were still chattering with Gillian about their great adventure. Raven winced,

grateful they'd failed to understand the true danger they'd been in. Neither did she envy the nurse who had the unenviable task of settling the trio for the night.

"Where did you take him?" Raven asked without turning. "It was hard enough knowing the necessity of keeping Brina hidden—but to have Ian vanish as well..."

Meredith remained silent for a moment, feeling only a touch of guilt. "It had to be done."

"You could have told me, said something of your plans. Instead you had me riding all over Scotland looking for my son, acting like a bigger fool than I already am."

*That's the first time you've ever admitted to being vulnerable.* Meredith kept the thought to herself, rather than sharing it with Raven. "I needed you to appear powerless. Had you been told what was going on, my scheme would have been for nothing. When it comes to the children, your thoughts and feelings show too readily on your face. You're much more vulnerable as a mother than a warrior."

Raven spun around to face her 'twin.' "Do you realize I could have killed my husband? After his threat to take Ian... I came very close, out of cold rage, for what I thought he'd done."

"I'm sorry about that. I miscalculated your reaction where he was concerned. Had I known you would lay the blame at his door, I might have done things differently... Don't say it. Even the Draoidh aren't *all* knowing. We do miss little things every now and again. We're only human."

"Anyway, I had an idea who was responsible for this whole mess, but I had to draw them out. It's unfortunate Annie didn't recognize Gavin's voice, but then again, it's changed a lot over the years." Meredith shrugged.

"I never expected Cordelia's maid to be behind the whole plot," Raven admitted.

"To be honest, had I been able to see through her disguise, I could have saved us all years of grief. You could be well settled with your family, ruling your clan.

"Morgan is very good at deception. She always wanted the power of the Draoidh, but the Boss knew she would abuse it. She gave me no end of grief many years ago. She failed to defeat Arthur, then had to devise another plan, find another target." Meredith appeared thoughtful for a moment, as if her memories had taken her back to another time. "At least she won't be a problem for a while. The Boss will see to that."

"What about Arthur?"

Meredith shrugged, but said nothing for a moment. "You know King James went to Flodden Field."

Raven nodded.

"They found the English a couple weeks ago, the ninth of September to be exact. As I told you, James didn't survive the battle. I'll spare you the details of what was done to him afterward. Most of the Scots died there. You will have the unenviable job of keeping an eye on the young king, to try and save him from the regency. Don't interfere, but don't let them run roughshod over the country or the new king."

Meredith listened to the sound of heavy footsteps coming up the staircase onto the wall-walk, but didn't turn to see who approached. "The MacKay is tired of all this intrigue. Perhaps it's time you and your husband had that long overdue chat..." She silently counted her fingers, humorously calculating. "Six years overdue?" she asked, one delicate brow raised in question. Raven sighed in resignation. It was time to stop running and start living.

Meredith conveniently vanished as Jamie stepped through the doorway behind her.

Raven turned, and her pale gray eyes stared fixedly at a point far beyond the outer wall of the keep. An image formed in her mind. Smoke swirled about a muddy field, sometimes thick and blinding. She heard the dying screams of men as they fought. Swords clashed and cannons sent more men to their deaths. Crimson coats and numerous tartan plaids intermingled in the melee. Bodies of dead warriors lay scattered about the field, covered in mud and blood. She closed her eyes tightly against the sight of the carnage and shook her head to clear it of the vision. She instinctively sent it back to the future where it belonged, and wondered if her beloved highlands would ever know peace and prosperity.

“What did you just see, Raven?” Jamie stood beside his wife and studied her closed features for a moment. She hadn’t changed much in three years, although there was a new kind of maturity about her. That may have come about with motherhood. After all, she had taken on the full responsibility of two children and kept her warrior status intact. King James had made her a special advisor in the hope she could do for the palace guard what she had done for her own clan’s warriors. That was the only time he had known her to fail. Yet, she really hadn’t failed, because the king’s advisors, all men of the nobility, had refused to take her seriously. The Scots not only lost that battle, but their king as well. Now a very young child was the Scottish king and those advisors were acting as regents, with more fighting going on among them, than...

Raven recalled the night she saw the hand at Jamie’s shoulder, holding a dagger. That, too, was done. While she’d almost cost him his life, she could breathe a sigh of relief that

he and his clan were safe.

Raven refused to look at him, but kept her now cleared gaze focused beyond the wall. "Perhaps it's not such a good thing for the clans to be united. In unity, they will be destroyed, and there is nothing to be done about it."

"Then there is nothing to be gained by brooding over it, is there, lass?"

Raven turned her head to face him. She was tired. If he had something to tell her, she wished he'd do it quickly and leave her to pick up the pieces alone. She was certain now that he meant to free himself of their marriage. In a way she didn't blame him. What kind of wife had she been in the past? Her promise of revenge for her mother's death had always been uppermost in her mind. There had been little room for anything else. Until the twins. Their births meant she had not only a murder to avenge, but two small lives to protect.

*Just say it*, she pleaded silently. *Just say you intend to set me aside and take Cordelia to wife*. Her eyes burned and she fought back tears. Warriors don't cry, she kept repeating to herself. "What do you want from me?" she asked him, her voice shaky. *Just say it*, she thought again and waited for him to pronounce the words that would end their marriage.

"I want my wife back," he replied softly. "I need her by my side. I want her love."

Her eyes flew open, and she stared at him in disbelief. Surely, she must have heard him wrong.

Jamie opened his arms and waited for her to make her decision. Raven stepped into his embrace, wrapped her arms about him and rested her cheek against his shoulder. Her tears fell, soaking his shirt. For the first time she felt a sense of relief.

She was finally home.

## Epilogue

Jamie sat back and watched his grandchildren, young Bruce and his sister Althea, play quietly in the great hall. The little girl had the look of her mother, and every past generation of the Draoidh. Ian, his twin sister Brina, by his side, listened to the complaints of two tenants, just as Raven had sat by his side years before. Two years earlier, Jamie stepped aside as the MacKay, turning over all responsibilities for the clan to his son. He was proud of Ian, the first male born to the Draoidh. If only the boy would find himself a wife, Jamie would be satisfied.

Althea looked up at her grandfather and smiled. She was so much like his beloved Raven. The first few years of their marriage had been stormy, but they weathered them and came back stronger. Althea's gray eyes brought back such vivid memories.

Raven had joined her own mother ten years earlier, after promising she would never again leave him. The pain of her loss had been difficult, but her dying promise that they would be together again one day made the emptiness bearable. Raven would have been pleased to see the legacy of the Draoidh carried on in their granddaughter. The little girl climbed onto

Jamie's lap and threw her arms about his neck. "I love you so much, Grandda," she announced in the sweet little voice he loved to hear.

"And I love you, *mo cridhe*." He hugged her with all the love he had to give. "But your old grandda is a wee bit tired and would rest before supper. Be a good girl and play with your brother, now." Althea planted a wet kiss on his cheek and obediently rejoined young Bruce. The small boy, only two years older than his sister, watched them intently for a moment, then turned his attention back to his game.

Jamie walked slowly toward the staircase, and Brina turned to him. *Are you all right, Papa?* She asked the question just as Raven used to, with her thoughts.

Jamie turned slightly, looking over his shoulder, and smiled at his daughter's concern. So much like her mother, he thought again. He directed his reply to her. *I'm fine, child—better than I've felt in many days.*

Brina cocked her head as if doubting his words, but said nothing more. She nodded to him, then turned back to the business at hand. Her father had been acting a little strangely the last few days. There did seem to be some subtle change in him for the better, but she wasn't sure. She shrugged. He was missing her mother more than usual.

Jamie sat in the high-backed chair by the hearth in his chamber. He felt so tired now, and especially alone. Ian was the MacKay laird and well-liked by the clan. Andrew, Ian's great-uncle, had done well by him, teaching him discipline and honor, and to use his weapons well. Brina, too, was a credit to her mother's legacy.

Many years earlier, Raven vowed to change the way the Draoidh did some things. One of those changes was to allow



Brina to follow her heart. Her choice of husband had been a good one. Raven would have approved.

Two months after Raven kept her promise to her long-dead mother, Lord Sinclair worked out betrothal contracts with young Roger for Cordelia's hand in marriage. The young soldier was wealthy in his own right. His father, chieftain of a small clan, owned a good deal of land. Roger was good for her. He didn't allow her to get away with much, but still spoiled her. It was the perfect match, with a deep and abiding love—something Jamie hadn't been sure she would ever find with her temperament.

Every summer Cordelia brought their children for a visit. Like his own twins, Roger's children were now grown with families of their own. Cordelia had wept bitterly when Raven died, sure her stepsister had never forgiven her for the spiteful attitude she'd had when they were younger. It took both Jamie and Roger some time to assure her Raven held no grudges, and had died peacefully after a brief illness. Raven never had patience with anything that took a lot of time. The quicker something could be done with, the better she liked it.

Memories from the past slipped back into the recesses of his mind. He'd been doing that a great deal lately, taking out favorite memories, examining them, then sending them back for safe keeping.

Jamie slowly looked up and saw the flickering glow in the darkest corner of the chamber. "Welcome, Lady Meredith. It's been a long while since you came to call." He chuckled as he recalled the many visits she paid him over the years, the way she'd managed to uncover a sense of humor in Raven.

"You've done well, Jamie. Never before has a man kept faith with the Draoidh."

“Ahem.” The glow faded, and a second figure stepped up by Meredith’s side. “Never before? What am I? Chopped liver?”

Meredith laughed and wrapped her arms about Aiden’s waist. She gave him a smacking kiss, taking delight in his feigned hurt feelings. “Where you’re concerned, my love, it goes without saying.” She pouted prettily. “Now you’ve ruined a perfectly serious moment.”

Aiden stared at her, one eyebrow raised. “We’ll discuss this later, wife.”

A quick blush tinted Meredith’s cheeks, then she struggled a moment to regain a serious demeanor. “As I was saying before I was pleasantly interrupted...” She glanced at Aiden and grinned again, then turned back to Jamie.

“Where was I? Oh yes. You did well protecting a daughter of the Draoidh. I know it wasn’t easy. We are well pleased with you.” The sapphire glow brightened, then flickered again.

“The deed may have been difficult at times, but well worth the effort,” Jamie replied while more memories flitted through his mind—memories of Raven’s stubbornness and determination to protect herself and her adopted clan, the tricks she played on unsuspecting friend and foe alike, her refusal to ever be held back or held down by anyone or anything.

A second sapphire glow appeared beside the first and seemed at times to blend with it. “You speak of me as if I were no longer here, my lord. Have I become a mere part of your memories? Something to be taken out on occasion, then stashed away again?”

“You have always been more than that to me, Raven.

How I have missed you, my lady.”

The second glow brightened with pleasure. “Then it’s good I have come. Your time here is at an end, Jamie. Come with me, now.”

Jamie sighed. The offer was enticing. “I cannot. I’m not of your legend.”

“Do you refuse what we offer, my lord?” Raven asked, a touch of hurt in her voice.

Meredith interrupted them. “You are more of the Draoidh than you know. For many years we awaited someone like you, with the courage to offer protection to our kind. Now we have a place in the highlands where we can be of service to the clans and they need not fear us. You are more than welcome to join Raven now.”

“Will you come with me, Jamie? Ian and Brina have taken their rightful places as our heirs.” The second sapphire bubble shimmered and faded, and in its place the slender form of a young warrior female appeared. She was just as lovely as the first time he’d ever seen her. With a short sword at her waist and a dirk in her wide belt, she looked the same as she had years earlier, right down to her short curly hair. At this moment she wore the MacKay tartan rather than her own clan’s plaid. She reached out to him. “It’s time for us to go, my love.”

Jamie stepped closer and took her hand in his. His own stance straightened and he felt the years fall away, until he was once again the young laird in the library that day. He held her close and kissed her with the passion he had missed all these years. It felt good to hold her again. The soft blue light returned to flow through and around them until nothing could be seen of the four figures. The room faded to darkness once again.

\* \* \* \*

Brina's attention drifted away from the proceedings in the great hall, and her gaze turned upward.

"What is it that draws you away now?" Ian teased in a whisper.

"She's come for him."

"Who has come for whom?" Ian asked, curious.

"I thought he'd been acting rather strangely of late." She glanced at her brother and saw the confusion in his eyes. "Mother has come for Papa. I think he's been waiting for her. They're together again."

"It's about time, don't you think?" Ian concluded with a grin. The twins nodded in understanding and once again listened to the proceedings before them.

\* \* \* \*

Ian's mind drifted elsewhere. His parents had had a solid marriage, despite the early turbulent years. Brina's courtship wasn't what he would have termed 'normal,' but she was happy. What was it about the Draoidh that its people couldn't go about their affairs in a predictable manner? It made him yearn for a bit of adventure.

*Be careful what you wish for...*

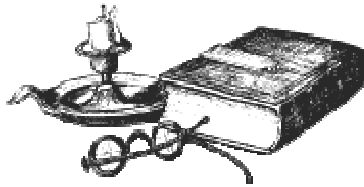


## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marissa St James is a lifelong New England Yankee. She began writing as a hobby when she was a teenager, then turned it into a career after earning a degree in Humanities. She's established a reputation for being a "picky" editor. She's had three romance novels published, as well as co-authored three short story collections.

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