

The Devil's Possession

Heather Waters



BERKLEY SENSATION, NEW YORK

A Dark Desire

Faith shut the door and sank against it. Suddenly, she had no strength in her legs. And when she looked to Draven again and glimpsed his nakedness, she had no strength in any other part of her, either.

“Cover yourself.” Faith pressed a hand to her heart, disgusted by the warm flush covering her body. She couldn’t possibly be attracted to this man, desiring him after what had happened to her two months ago.

Had she ever been more foolish than at this moment? Choosing to remain in this chamber with a naked madman whose powers she could not fathom? A sane woman would have fled the moment the door was opened. A sane woman would have run to her uncle and demanded the persecution of a man like Draven.

Instead of fleeing, she waited for Draven to crawl back beneath the covers on his bed, and opened the crumpled note in her fist.

Have you not the sense to stop this nonsense? Did you not see what I can do?

“Aye, I saw what you can do. But what proof have you that your powers come from such darkness? There is more than one being in this world capable of bestowing gifts and curses.”

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To Kyle.

*Every hero I write is inspired by you,
but none can compare to the real thing.*

All I can say is, "Thank you."

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To all of you, welcome to my debut.

One



It took ninety-seven lashes to force the first cry of pain from Draven Cameron. The thin leather strip ripped through his back like a razor, all the way to his bones. He bit down hard on his lip, drawing blood so warm, it was a welcomed relief to his near-frozen body. Clothed only in rivulets of blood, he shook from both the frigid cold and the ceaseless agony. If the lashings failed to kill him, he would surely die from exposure.

Lash number ninety-eight shot over his shoulder and bit him in the chin. Tears of pain filled his eyes. Bile burned his throat and nose. His knees buckled. Draven could take no more. He longed to cry out, to beg Harold to stop, but couldn't. Even if his tongue had chosen to work with his mouth, he would not ask for leniency he didn't deserve.

All they accused him of was true. He was guilty. He deserved to die.

"Stand him up!" Harold yelled from behind Draven. "He's owed at least two more afore we light the kindling on which we'll burn his devil self."

Burned at the stake. A fate he would share with his

mother. Draven all but welcomed the warmth of the threatened fire and the possible reunion that might follow.

Anything would be better than the feel of his skin splitting open again and again, each lash revealing his bone and sinew to the bitter cold.

“Devil!”

“Beat the evil out of him!”

The crowd’s taunts knotted in his belly. *Aye, beat the evil out of me.*

Harold leaned in close to Draven, his ale-rotted breath hot against Draven’s cheek. “Changed your mind yet, lad? Willing to share your magic with me in the name of war?”

Draven glared at him but said nothing.

Unseen hands forced him to stand on legs lacking the strength to keep him upright. He swayed against the ropes that bound his hands to the flogging pole. He could escape if he wanted. He could break free of his bonds and prove to them that all their accusations were true.

But he was ready to die. He *wanted* to die. He needed to have the sin of Bridget’s murder washed clean from his soul. Needed the guilt to go away, the rage in him to die. Her betrayal of him had cost her her life, and now would cost Draven his.

Kill me. Make it all stop.

Lash number ninety-nine caught him around the throat, strangling him. His eyes bulged. He couldn’t breathe. He gasped for air and sank down until his bare knees brushed the snow, and his arms suffered enough to break in two.

Thanks be to God, the world went black before his father could deliver lash number one hundred.



Lady Faith, niece of Clan Maitland’s chieftain, held her head high and directed her palfrey toward the gates of the Cameron bailey. The dozen accompanying clansmen filed in beside her and waited for Uncle Elliot to dismount before following suit.

"I am the Maitland. I come seeking council with the Cameron!" Elliot yelled to the men manning the portcullis.

A young, towheaded lad peered out above the high stone wall. "Laird Harold is occupied at the moment, sir. I've orders not to bother him with visitors."

"Uncle, please! Surely this can wait for another day." Faith kneaded the reins in her hands. She licked her parched lips and wished for rain strong enough to wash away this horrid day.

Instead, she received a tiny snowflake on the bridge of her nose. It lay there in all its mocking beauty and purity, scorning her for all the sins she had committed and would commit today.

"And let the bastard die afore facing me? I think not!" Uncle Elliot marched up to the portcullis and gripped the iron bars in his fists. Tilting his head back to stare up at the gate guard, he rattled the bars. "Open the gates, you rodent. I've enough men surrounding Cameron's lands to make the lot of you extinct, and I'll not be leaving till I've been given what I've come for."

The lad's wide eyes protruded from his thin face. "W-wait right here, sir. I'll speak with the laird."

Faith closed her eyes. Her body swayed atop the palfrey. Guilt flipped her insides around like falling autumn leaves. Yesterday, this had seemed a good idea. Yesterday, she had believed Draven Cameron to be dead.

But he wasn't.

She wished *she* was.

Peering up at the snowy catwalk, she inhaled the cold air and tried to focus on not retching. This morning, word had arrived that Draven's execution had not yet occurred. She had not known until her uncle told her moments ago. If she had, perhaps she would have had the courage to refuse this journey.

She sucked in the acrid stench of smoke coming from somewhere within the gates of Cameron and realized that her uncle had most likely just interrupted Draven's execution. She told herself to calm, that perhaps they hadn't come

too early, after all. Perhaps . . . perhaps the execution had already taken place. The death of a man with a reputation as black as Draven's shouldn't have brought her any remorse, but she couldn't bring herself to pray for *any* man's murder.

Not even Draven the Devil's.

The loud *clink, clink, clink* of the portcullis rising caused Faith's heart to skip. Cameron had granted them admittance. Gripping the reins tighter in her hands, she waited for Elliot to mount his steed, then followed him into the bailey.

The inhumanity of what greeted her on the other side of the stone wall froze her atop her saddle, unable to move, unable to breathe. More than a hundred Scots surrounded a large pile of timber. A stake at least ten feet tall was impaled in the pile's center. A man stood tied to the stake, his arms and legs bound by several lengths of rope, his head lolling toward his chest. Hay littered the bailey and covered a good deal of the timber, ready to be set afire.

Sweet, merciful God. Though life might flow through Draven Cameron's veins, the man was all but dead. Even from this distance, she could see the blood seeping from his lacerated flesh. Her chest tightened. An acrid taste burst from her tongue to fill her mouth and clog her throat. Gagging, she swallowed hard and forced herself to regain her composure.

Was this all a game to them? What sort of people were these to find entertainment in a man's death? Elliot would never have permitted such a thing. Death was a private matter, meant to be carried out with dignity and witnessed by only the dying, his judge, and the Holy Father.

Faith had arrived here with a strong dislike of Harold Cameron. She'd known him to be a brutal laird who beat his servers and cowered to his superiors. He worshiped only power and wealth—honor and faith be damned. But if she'd thought him a wretch before, his treatment of his son made her rethink her opinion of him.

She didn't dislike him. She *hated* him.

"Uncle Elliot . . . you must stop them," she pleaded,

forcing her gaze to Elliot's. "You can't let him be burned alive."

"I don't plan on it," Elliot murmured. He swung his leg over the side of his steed and dropped to the ground. A quick adjustment to his plaid, then he placed his hand on the hilt of his claymore and looked toward the giant man approaching them. "Harold Cameron, I've come for your son. I'll have war if you kill him afore I can inflict my own sort of punishment on the lad."

Flanked on either side by two ferocious-looking red-haired barbarians, Harold Cameron scowled. "Iain is still fostered by the Frasers. He's not due home for another sen-night."

"'Tis not Iain I want. 'Tis that one." Elliot nodded toward the pyre.

"Draven?" Harold asked, combing through his gray beard with long, bony fingers. "What's the bastard done now?"

"It's a delicate matter better told in private."

Faith watched as, one by one, the onlookers turned to stare at the interruption. A hushed silence filled the bailey. She swallowed the lump in her throat and slowly lowered herself to the ground.

"I'm afraid your visit is ill-timed. As you can see, his final punishment is about to be carried out," Harold said, pointing in the general direction of the crowd. "You're welcome to light the fire, if it will appease your need for justice."

Faith's hands clenched of their own accord. What kind of father was this, to talk so easily of murdering his own son? She stepped toward him, but Elliot blocked her with his arm.

"I have more men awaiting my signal beyond the hillside, Cameron," Elliot said. "The Maitlands outnumber your men four to one, and I will have war if my demands are not met today."

Harold's eyes narrowed, as though he carefully contemplated his choices. "Our people have never had reason for

war with the Maitlands. I don't wish that to change now." He turned to the man on his right. "Inform the people that today's entertainment has been postponed."

The man nodded and walked away. A few moments later, the boos and hisses from the crowd echoed around them. Faith shivered at the abundant thirst for blood and pulled her mantle tighter around her shoulders. Was there no love of God at all in this dreaded place?

"Come. We'll talk over ale." Harold motioned for Elliot to follow him toward the great hall.

"I would have him brought in for our discussion. I want to face him when I make my charge," Elliot said.

Harold shook his head and closed his eyes as if praying for patience. "Very well. Will! Bring him into the great hall."

Elliot nodded with approval and resumed his path to the hall. Faith stepped forward to accompany them, but Harold spun around and forced her to stop. "Where might you be going, wench?"

Faith glowered at him, and though he towered above her, she had too much fear filling her already to leave space for any more. "This matter concerns me a great deal, Laird Cameron."

Elliot slipped his arm in hers and gave her hand a reassuring pat. "Indeed it does. It is my niece who has reason to see your son punished."

Anger sparked in Harold's dark eyes. "Your niece?" He nodded in apology to Elliot. "My apologies, Maitland. I didn't know she was your kin."

As she followed Elliot and Harold toward the keep, revulsion churned in Faith's belly. Because Elliot Maitland held so much more power with King James than Harold, Harold would cater to Elliot's demands. More than likely, he would believe without question the accusations Elliot spoke against Draven and wouldn't feel the least bit remorseful at handing over his own child if it allowed him to remain in the Maitland's good graces.

When they reached the steps, Harold's guards stepped

aside to allow them entrance. Faith carefully maneuvered around them and into the hall where the aroma of roasting meat and stale rush made her stomach turn.

She waited for the men to sit, then turned to close the door behind them. "Uncle . . . I'd like to speak with you before we continue."

"Nonsense, lass. I don't have time to waste on idle talk." Harold lifted his cup, and a plump, large-breasted woman appeared to fill it with ale.

She moved to Elliot and did the same for him. The ale sloshed over the lip of the cup, splashing onto Elliot's plaid. Harold cursed, jumped up from his seat, and with the back of his hand, struck the woman across her pretty face.

"Foolish wench! Make your apologies to Laird Maitland."

An angry welt slowly rose across the woman's cheek. Her eyes pooled with tears as she faced Elliot. Faith rushed forward and grabbed the woman's hands, pulling her away from Harold.

"It's all right, lass. You meant no harm." Forcing her anger and loathing deep inside her belly, Faith tried to feign a calming voice. "What do they call you?"

The woman glanced at Harold, then turned her gaze downward. "Mary, my lady."

"Very well, Mary. Might I suggest you hurry and put cold water on that cheek afore it gets worse?"

"Maitland, I'll not have this lass ordering about my people—"

"Only a coward would strike down a lass, Cameron. Let her be, and let us resume our talk." Elliot rose and took Mary's hand, leading her safely to the door. "Go, lass. Do as my niece bids you."

Still unwilling to meet anyone's gaze, she nodded. "Thank you, Laird Maitland. And I am most sorry for my clumsiness."

"Nonsense. I've spilled more ale on myself than you could ever hope to spill in a lifetime."

Faith felt a wan smile spread across her face. If she had

ever needed proof that her uncle was a fine laird, he had given it to her now. But such proof had never been required. Elliot showed such courtesies each day with their clansmen. She turned her smile to Harold, pleased to see the look of astonished anger reddening his face.

"Might we continue?" Harold demanded through gritted teeth.

Faith glared at Harold, then turned back to face Elliot. "Please, Uncle Elliot? A moment?"

Elliot shook his head. "Later, Faith. I want to be done with this as soon as possible. Come."

He took her elbow, and they resumed their seats at the table. Faith tried to slow her heart, tried to remember all she'd been taught about controlling her emotions and remaining strong through any ordeal. Her spine throbbed as she fought to keep it straight as a broomstick, but inside, her blood was a raging river crashing against the rocks that were her bones.

"Well? What is it my son is being accused of now?" Ale dribbled down Harold's beard.

Faith focused on the small bead traveling through the tiny gray hairs until it plopped onto the white tunic beneath the man's plaid.

"First, I want your word that his punishment will be mine to deliver," Elliot demanded, pushing his own ale away from him. "I want you to allow him to return home with me this day."

"I'll agree to no such thing. My people demand to see Draven's death. They fear him; they want him gone."

"And gone he'll be . . . but not dead. He has matters to tend to before he can meet his maker."

Harold's lip curled into a snarl. "The lad's maker is Lucifer, and he'll not be waiting for Draven. He'll meet him today."

"Nay!" Elliot slammed his fist onto the trestle table, causing Faith's heart to leap into her throat. Elliot pointed toward the closed door, and Faith looked up to find her clansmen, John and Otis, standing guard. She hadn't even

noticed them enter. "One word to my men, and this place will be covered in Cameron blood, Harold. I warn you now, my request this day will not be denied."

Anger once again flushed Harold's cheeks. "Then make your accusation, and perhaps we will negotiate," he said, his hands clutching his cup so tightly, Faith thought it might split in two.

Elliot nodded to Otis and John, and they obediently stepped out of the hall and closed the great doors behind them.

"I would know why your son wasn't put to death yesterday as we were told," Faith said quickly, stalling for time. She was not ready for this confrontation.

"I'll not explain myself to you, lass," Harold growled.

Elliot reached out and squeezed Faith's hand in his. "I warn you not to speak to Lady Faith in such a manner again. She is, after all, to be my successor as Maitland chieftain."

At this bit of news, Harold's already wide eyes reflected the very doubt regarding her ability to hold such a position as Faith had felt these past few months. Everything she'd been raised to know, the strength, the courage, the leadership, no longer felt a part of her. The confidence she had spent her entire life building had been cast into the wind in one excruciating moment two moons ago, and she was afraid she might never find it again.

"Very well," Harold said, his hatred for Faith so tangible she was certain he would have struck her if Uncle Elliot hadn't been present. His thin mouth twisted into a sneer. The bulging veins at his brow turned white against his plum-colored face. "I wanted him awake to feel his execution. He did not waken until this afternoon."

"He didn't look awake to me," she replied, recalling the limp form tied to the burning pyre.

"Aye, well, you can't expect a man in his condition to remain alert for long. Now, may we continue, or do you have any other . . . questions?"

Faith fought the urge to hurl her cup at Harold. "He is your *son*—"

"I've no wish to speak of this vile thing more than once." Elliot offered Faith's hand another squeeze. "I'll begin when your men bring Draven in."

Harold opened his mouth to reply, but the sound of the hall's door banging open against the wooden walls called all of their attention to the two brawny men carrying in the limp body of Draven Cameron, clothed only in a square of filthy cloth that covered his privacy. Faith quickly turned her gaze to her lap, unable to face the battered, bloody body of the man her uncle was about to accuse on her behalf.

The men dropped Draven to the floor with a loud thump, causing Faith to look up once again in reflex. Apparently, his rough treatment was enough to bring him from his stupor. Draven groaned and rolled onto his side, his hauntingly blue eyes flickering open.

She choked on her breath.

His gaze darted from Elliot to Faith, where it lingered for an uncomfortable length of time. Faith squirmed and looked away. Everything she knew of Draven the Devil should have calloused her against feeling sympathy for the man. But what she'd just seen in Draven's eyes had been the soul of a man, the soul of the wounded.

"Sit up, Draven. We have guests here who claim you've wronged them." Harold motioned to his men, who quickly bent and seized Draven under his arms, pulling him into a sitting position before letting him fall back in a slump against the wall.

"Your son sullied my niece," she heard Elliot say. "He seduced her and left her to bear the shame of a bastard child. What have you to say to that, Cameron?"

Cameron's roar of outrage nearly brought Faith off of her seat. Only years of practice kept her seated firmly on the bench while her heart hammered in her chest. Expecting Draven to cry out his denial, her gaze fell to the beaten man across the room. His blue eyes had widened. His mouth fell open. But he said nothing.

"Is this true?" Cameron demanded of Draven.

Draven struggled to his feet, tilted to his left, his right leg so badly wounded it was apparent it wouldn't support him. He looked at his father, blood-encrusted black hair falling over his heavy-lidded eyes, then turned his glare upon Faith. Still, he said nothing.

When it became apparent that Harold would receive no contradiction from his son, he turned to Faith. "Do you truly carry my grandchild in your womb?"

Faith contemplated the blood trailing from Draven's face, down his sunken stomach and legs. There were too few parts of him unmarred by blood and wounds. She searched for the devil in his eyes but found only a look of adamant disbelief and perhaps a bit of loathing.

Knowing her next words would decide her fate as well as Draven's, would force her uncle to demand Draven make the child within her legitimate, Faith nearly gave in to the darkness threatening to smother her. But, never being one to swoon, she breathed deeply and prayed for God's forgiveness.

"Aye," she said, her voice shaking with unshed tears. "I carry Draven Cameron's child."

Two



Faith's entire body numbed. She'd done a good thing and an appalling thing with one simple sentence.

"You carry Draven's child?" Harold Cameron leapt from his seat and strode to his son's side, shoving Draven to the floor even as he struggled to his feet.

Draven's head cracked against the wooden wall, bringing both Faith and Elliot to their feet. The fear and guilt and revulsion that had dizzied her all morn were now pushed to the rear of her mind as cold fury took their place.

"Touch him again, Cameron, and I shall bring the wrath of the Maitlands upon your head." Her anger forced the uncertainty of the lie she'd told from her mind. "He is to be my husband, thereby leaving you no further rights to lay your foul hands upon him."

Elliot's strong grip found Faith's wrist, gently forcing her back to her bench. "You're in no condition to work yourself into such a state, lass. Harold won't be doing any more damage." Elliot's gaze turned to Harold. "Will you?"

Harold sent a scathing look at Draven, who now lay sprawled on his side. "Nay. He's not worth it." He turned

back to Elliot, his eyes narrowed. "You wish your niece to wed him? With all the black marks upon his soul, you wish to hand over the future of the Maitlands to him?"

"Lady Faith is to be chieftain . . . not her husband. And no man will try to gain power through her. Not even her husband."

Folding her trembling hands on her lap, Faith focused on the man she'd just committed herself to saving. Why did he not cry out on his own behalf? Perhaps he'd realized her lie had just saved his life. Surely that was why he didn't deny siring the child of a woman he'd never before met.

If she confessed now that it had all been a lie, that she had falsely accused Draven because she believed him dead and therefore unable to be punished for her deceit, he would be killed by his own father's hand. He'd be burned alive, made to watch as his flesh melted around him. She closed her eyes at the thought; then, when she couldn't release the vivid image her mind had conjured, she opened them again.

Faith thought she might lose her morning meal. It roiled inside her until she choked on the acrid taste of bile building in her throat.

His face was badly battered, his features hidden behind welts, bruises, and blood. He was too thin to be healthy, but the sinewy muscles beneath his taut skin revealed a man who had once been the portrait of strength. What sort of inhumanity had been doled out to him to leave him in such a tattered state? No man, no matter his sins, deserved this sort of treatment.

Not even one accused of sorcery.

If she continued her lie, he would at least be given the chance to live. Lord knew, her accusation wasn't as foul as some of the others that had been cast upon him.

Tell the truth, and the man dies.

Lie . . . and he lives.

"He is not like others," Harold said, sneering down at his son. "He has unnatural means of persuading people to do things against their will."

Elliot scoffed. "Even if I was addlebrained enough to

believe such nonsense, no man has a greater will than my Faith. I'd like to see the one who tries to bend her to his way."

Faith focused on the salt cellar in front of her. Why weren't Elliot and Harold affected by the sudden sway of the hall, the rocking of the wood beneath their feet? Surely they noticed the odd flickering of candlelight, the strange haziness of the air around them.

Her gaze settled on Draven's wide eyes, and the sound of Harold and Elliot's voices faded slightly as they bickered back and forth. Was this Draven's dark magic? Was he truly guilty of the black things he was accused of?

Faith's stomach lurched. This was no magic. This was her body's rebellion against her actions, her condition.

"I want to return home," she heard herself say.

Both lairds stopped talking at once, and Elliot placed a protective hand on her shoulder. "Are you feeling ill, lass?"

"I'm just weary of this." Unwilling to allow Harold to glimpse even the slightest weakness within her, she lifted her head to stare defiantly at him, all the while feeling Draven's burning glare burrowing into her cheeks. "We've made our demands. Will they be met or not?"

Harold scratched his beard and looked from Faith to Elliot. Neither man seemed to care that while they carried on, Draven was still wounded on the floor, unattended and quiet. She was beginning to fear Harold had cut off his son's tongue as further punishment.

"Are you willing to return home with me?" she asked Draven.

Sky-blue eyes flickered up at her, and his head gave a slight, negative shake. Would he truly prefer to die rather than pledge himself to her? She realized she was no prize, and, after all, she'd just accused him of a crime he hadn't committed. But surely she was not so offending that he would choose death?

"The lad has no say," Elliot said. "He'll come whether he wishes it or nay, and come tomorrow's moon, he'll say his vows before Father McKinnon."

Harold thrust his hand toward Draven. "Take him, then. Maybe the Maitlands can beat out of him what I could not."

Elliot nodded curtly and tossed a silk purse at Harold. "Take this. Consider it a payment for the cart I'll be taking with me, as well as a nice sum for your discretion on this matter."



When the Maitlands had taken Draven outside, Harold Cameron strode to the window to watch. He gripped the windowsill, wishing the stone would crumble in his fist. His intention hadn't been to kill Draven today but to frighten him into compliance. And now, Draven was gone, delaying Harold's plans for the stubborn bastard. It had been a tiring job, constantly trying to persuade Draven to join Harold's war. But with the lad gone, the difficulty had just increased tenfold.

He swore and slammed his palm against the stone wall. "Damn Elliot Maitland."

His advisor and confidant, Beatan, joined him and softly cleared his throat.

"I cannot believe you let him go," Beatan said. "What of your plans to use him as a weapon against King James?"

Harold gritted his teeth, watching as Elliot took a cart from the stable master and hitched it to one of the steeds. As they loaded Draven's limp body onto the cart, Harold pressed his hands to the window, fighting the urge to yell. Damn that bitch for spreading her legs for the devil and costing Harold his most prized possession.

"If the Maitlands had declared war upon us, we'd have no men left to fight the king, and I prefer to postpone that war until Draven joins us, even though I'd sorely love to put Elliot Maitland in his place," he said, drinking in a deep breath in order to gain control over his rising temper. "I'll have Draven back, Beatan. Those powers of his could bring down the entire royal palace if he would only see reason. He'll win me the throne. It's only a matter of time."

The brilliant white clouds and vibrant blue sky accompanying the Maitlands home mocked Faith. The *clop, clopping* of the cart they'd taken from Cameron jarred her nerves, reminding her with each stone the wheels overturned that Draven Cameron lay once again unconscious and very much on his way to becoming her husband.

"Slow your paces, lads. We've two with us in need of our consideration, even if one of them truly deserves far worse than a rough journey home," Elliot said.

He rode in front of the others rather than in their center as he should. He preferred to lead his men at all times and never cowered behind any. Slightly behind him, John and Otis, the most trusted of Elliot's men, rode in silence, occasionally glancing back at Faith and inquiring about her comfort.

Other than Elliot, John and Otis were the only members of the Maitlands aware of Faith's condition. Elliot had insisted their people believe she conceived her child *after* her wedding to Draven. They were to be given no reason to believe her child was ill-conceived. He'd even made Harold Cameron swear a vow of silence before they'd left the Cameron territory—though that vow had cost a good bit of gold.

Faith was certain the other Maitlands would realize her lie when the child was born two months earlier than they would expect, but she had not refused her uncle's wish. He was so dearly devoted to her, she wasn't certain she could ever deny him anything.

To prove to him that she was faring well, she quickened her palfrey's steps and rode to Elliot's side. "I cannot thank you enough for being my champion with Harold. He is a simpleton and a barbaric animal—"

"Who is as deadly as a viper when provoked." Elliot narrowed his concerned gaze. "Don't underestimate him simply because he's wise enough to know when he's out-

numbered. He is not an enemy you should go out of your way to gain."

"You didn't cower before him. I don't intend to, either." Even though her insides had gone from barley to ale during her confrontation with Harold.

Elliot smiled. "I raised you to keep a good head on your shoulders, not to mimic my displays of irrationality."

His expression sobered, and he turned his gaze to stare at the miles of snowy pasture ahead of them. "You're certain this is what you want, Faith? To marry a man with so many black marks against his soul? To tie yourself to a man who took advantage of your trusting nature and left you alone with the consequences?"

Nay. It wasn't what she wanted at all. What she wanted was to return to that afternoon two months ago and choose not to take a stroll through the forest. She wanted to not have met a man by the river whose golden beauty turned dark with the menacing act he'd forced upon her. She wanted to not be with child, on the road to motherhood.

"I'm certain, Uncle." She hoped her doubt didn't reach as far as her eyes. "I don't believe the foul things they say about him. I choose to give him a chance to prove he is a godly man."

"Then you are either the bravest woman I've ever known or the most foolish."

Elliot winked at her, then pulled back on his steed's reins. She turned in her saddle to watch him circle around his men. He slowed only when he rode side by side with the cart toting Draven Cameron. Faith shifted and turned back around, unwilling to watch her uncle study the unconscious man with such suspicion. It pained her that Elliot would think badly of Draven when, in truth, he'd been given no cause.

He's been given cause enough. Sorcery, thievery, murder.

Faith winced. But there was no proof of any of those atrocities. Her word that he was a seducing rogue, however, was all Elliot would need to treat Draven with disdain. The

rest of the Maitlands would be just as unforgiving should they ever find out.

Suddenly, her head throbbed, and the need to lie down made her want to weep.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered to the mountains in the distance. "I'm so incredibly sorry."

Draven awoke to the sound of hushed whispers and the putrid stink of blood and sweat. *His* blood and sweat. He tried to force his eyes open, but his lids were too cumbersome to lift.

"Find your supper, Judith," a familiar, feminine voice said. "I'll care for him for the remainder of the evening."

It was *her* voice—the lying wench who'd stepped between him and blessed death. Anger and contempt offered him the strength he needed to pry open his eyes. She stood with her back to him, her arms limp at her sides. Long waves of golden hair spilled down her back, and Draven prayed for the fortitude to raise his hand and snatch a fistful of those locks. He wanted to yank them from her scalp and make her scream for mercy—mercy she'd stolen from him with her lies.

She turned slowly to face him. The green eyes he'd found stunning before she'd spoken her fabrications in the Cameron hall now looked upon him in wide astonishment.

"Y-you're awake." She wiped her hands against her thighs and quickly swung her gaze away.

Her name was Faith. He remembered Laird Maitland referring to her by that name. No other name could have suited her less.

"You should eat. Judith brought you warm broth, and I have bread, as well. Perhaps some mulled wine—"

He seized her wrist to quiet her rambling tongue. A startled gasp escaped her, and unwilling to be beguiled by the soft, warm flesh in his grasp, he flung her arm away from him in disgust. Caught off balance, she stumbled into the washbowl stand by the foot of the bed and sent it crashing

to the floor. When she'd steadied herself, her chest heaved and her hands trembled, but she glowered at him defiantly. Anger wound around every fiber in his body, but even so, it wasn't enough to bring forth his voice.

"Your displeasure with me," she said through gritted teeth, "does not give you leave to put your hands on me. *Ever.*"

Draven struggled to sit. When he finally admitted he could not manage so simple a feat, Faith had righted the stand and was scooping up the earthenware lying in pieces at her feet. It pleased him that she trembled. It pleased him to see her so shaken. She deserved no less.

What did not please him was the faint hint of dampness pooled along her lower lids.

Christ.

Placing the last of the shards atop the table, she turned to face him again. "I'm sorry I lied," she said, her voice unsteady but clear. "They were going to kill you."

The pity in her voice bore into his soul.

He hated her even more.

"Do you hear me? They were going to *kill* you!"

Frustrated, he pinched the fingers of his right hand together and mimicked writing.

"What? Oh . . . oh your voice. You still can't speak?"

Draven prayed for patience and shook his head. He furiously scribbled in thin air.

"All right. I'll find you something for writing."

As she left the chamber and disappeared down the corridor, she made nary a sound. For such a tall woman, she walked with grace. She was beautiful. But he knew better than anyone that villainy often appeared in enticing parcels. He would not play the fool to another such woman again. He'd learned his lesson well.

He turned his head to take in his surroundings, but now that his body had calmed, the aches and pains of his wounds allowed him little movement. He felt as though every muscle in his back was exposed. His neck throbbed, and when he reached up to test the damage, he found a wide strip of

cloth wrapped around his throat. His father's lashing had done serious damage, but he would survive.

Draven blamed Lady Faith for that bit of bad luck.

"Here you are," Faith said, returning with a scroll of paper and an inkhorn. She pulled a quill from behind her ear and handed it to him. "Are you certain you can write? You've a deep cut between your thumb and finger."

Draven glanced at his hand. Ah, yes. He'd made the mistake of catching his father's whip in his fist before they'd found the sense to bind him to the whipping posts. The error had nearly cost him a finger. He gripped the quill with more determination and pointed to his eye. Then, he pointed to her eyes and then at the parchment.

"Can I read?" she asked. "Aye. Uncle Elliot taught me well."

Relief welled within him. He would be able to tell this woman exactly what he thought of her. Allowing his anger to push through the pain in his hand, he wrote quickly and handed her the note.

As Faith read his words, she crumpled his message in her fist.

"I'm sorry you would rather die than marry me. Unfortunately, I didn't know that at the time I saved your sorry hide. You've no say in the matter now." She pointed a finger in his face. He noted with satisfaction that she could not hold it steady. "And if you think you'll earn my uncle's allegiance by telling him you did not sire my child, I shall save you the trouble. A man with so many marks against him will not be believed over a woman such as me. I will save your pitiful life whether you like it or not."

Draven's mouth fell open. Save him? She didn't even know him. Ignoring the searing pain in his back, he leaned forward and snatched the paper from her hand. Once he'd smoothed it out as much as possible, he palmed the quill once more.

Perhaps the babe's da will believe me.

Faith laughed when she read his words, but the sound was not a joyful one. Instead, he heard a ring of deep sor-

row in the noise. She turned her back to Draven and crossed her arms over her chest. "He'll not be claiming anything."

When she turned back, the tears had vanished from her eyes. She stared down at Draven with a stubborn set to her jaw. "Is your throat so injured that you cannot speak at all? Perhaps if you write what's wrong, we can petition Matilda for a stronger concoction."

Obviously, she'd decided the matter of Draven's anger deserved no further attention. He lay back against the mattress, too weary to continue their battle just now. Once again, his body shaking with the effort it took to simply hold the quill, he wrote his thoughts and handed them to Faith.

What would she think of marrying him after reading this bit of information? He waited, studying her while she read his words, waiting for the look of disgust or horror that always came with the discovery that he hadn't spoken a single word in twenty years.

How quickly would she set him free when she learned she had just betrothed herself to a mute?

Three



Faith carefully folded Draven's note in half. She could feel Draven studying her, could sense he was waiting for her reaction to his declaration that he was a mute, but she refused to give him one.

Instead, she stared defiantly into his eyes and forced a smile. "Since you cannot speak, I suppose I needn't worry you'll go about declaring that this child belongs to another man, will I?"

Draven's eyes widened. His swollen lips fell open, and the little color staining his cheeks drained away.

Faith widened her smile, turned on her heel, and walked calmly from the chamber. When she'd shut the door behind her, she leaned against the wall and clutched her heart. Draven Cameron had not only been beaten and threatened with death by his own father, he was mute. She opened his folded note and stared at his words through bleary eyes.

My voice has not worked in twenty years. You, dear lady, have committed yourself to a mute.

She could almost hear the sarcasm in those words. He'd thought to scare her off, to free himself with his confession.

Little did he know he'd only deepened her need to keep him safe from those who would see him as evil.

All of the accusations cast toward Draven made sense to her now. Of course people would accuse him of witchery. He was mute, and less sensible people believed such was proof of Satan's kiss.

Witchery. It was laughable. The poor man only needed someone to see the good in him, the God in him. She would allow him to take his anger out on her, but in the end, she'd make him understand that she'd saved him, that she'd given him a chance to prove everyone wrong. Perhaps . . . perhaps one day, he'd even thank her.

Footsteps sounded on the stone steps leading to the second floor. Faith wiped her sleeves across her face, drying the tears she'd allowed to escape. She hurried down the hall, away from the approaching footsteps, and pushed open the door to her chamber. Alone once again, she tossed Draven's confession into the fire. With a heavy heart, she watched the paper crinkle and curl into itself. She was going to marry the man who had written those words. In a sense, they were the first words he'd "spoken" to her.

She walked to her bed and slid beneath her covers. Childhood fancies of becoming someone's wife, mother to a brood of impish children, were no longer hers to create. Instead, she would be married to a man she did not love, one whom she was forcing to spend his life as her husband. She was carrying a child she did not want, one whom she might never be able to look upon without remembering the most terrifying event of her life.

There would be no marriage bed, no lullabies.

A future without dreams. That was all that awaited her now.

One action . . . one choice had negated a lifetime's worth of effort. The next morning, Faith listened with frustration and shame as the council members in the great hall debated the consequences of allowing the wife of a witch to

become their next laird. All her hard work and study meant nothing now. They would see only that Faith intended to wed a man they considered evil. To them, it was an unforgivable sin.

She glanced at Uncle Elliot. He sat to her right at the high trestle table atop the raised dais. His face slowly deepened to purple; his knuckles whitened around his goblet. She wished she could share his anger at the prospect of losing all she'd worked for, but in the last few months, too much had occurred that made her wonder whether she truly merited their trust anymore. What right did she have to fight for what she no longer deserved?

But even so, their displeasure and disappointment was a hurt she hadn't properly prepared for.

"For such intelligent men," Elliot said, "you're simple-minded enough to believe that man upstairs knows magic? The lot of you have been touched in the head."

Faith sat up straighter on the bench, unwilling to allow Elliot to fight alone on her behalf. Whether she deserved the clan's respect or not, she would not allow them to attack Elliot or cause him any humiliation because of her.

"If he was truly the witch you claim, why did he not free himself from the punishment his father was delivering?" Faith said, pleased to hear the steadiness in her voice. "Surely a man as powerful as that could have made easy work of his bonds."

No one argued, but irritated mutters rippled throughout the hall.

Elliot looked pointedly at Cedric, one of the most respected of the Maitland clansmen. "Is it not enough that you have known Faith her entire life, that she has always proved reliable? Yesterday morn, the lot of you were ready to accept her as your chieftain, yet you doubt her on this very momentous decision. If anyone in this chamber has been proven undependable, 'tis all of you."

Murmurs rippled through the group of men. Otis turned his gaze to his cup, but Cedric stood and pointed a finger in

her direction. "Ye brought evil into our lands, Lady Faith. This is no simple matter."

Elliot reached beneath the table and squeezed Faith's hand. The familiar gesture should have reassured her, but his paternal display of comfort only expanded her guilt.

"There will be no more discussion," Elliot said. "Father McKinnon will arrive afore noon meal, and the vows will be said afore supper. Any man who plans to bring foul words or thoughts to the ceremony need not come at all."

Faith sucked her breath through her teeth and listened to the whispers around her. She could well imagine that finding a man anywhere on Maitland land who did not have foul thoughts of her marriage to Draven would be near to impossible.

"Pardon me, Uncle," she said, pushing herself to her feet. "I'm due to relieve Judith of her post as nursemaid."

But before the council could begin their outrage at Elliot again, she turned back to the men she'd known her entire life.

"You should know," she said, looking purposefully at her uncle, lest he, too, harbored any hope that she might change her mind, "my decision on this matter is final. If marrying Draven Cameron means I lose your support in becoming your next chieftain, then so be it."

Angry muttering started once again.

"You cannot mean to say you hold more importance in him than in us?" Rupert, an elderly clansman, demanded.

Faith squared her shoulders. "Nay, but it seems you may hold more importance in his reputation than in mine. The choice of chieftain is yours. My choice of husband remains my own."

"But we've yet to hear your reasons, lass," Rupert continued.

Faith ignored him and tried to walk out of the hall with dignity. But before she could get too far, Shane clasped Faith's wrist. She flinched. Her heart hammered. When she yanked her arm away, she stared down at the man she'd always found so appealing. For the moment, that infatuation

was gone. The unmasked disgust and disbelief painted on his face made her feel only anger toward him.

"You canna truly mean to marry that Cameron cur, Lady Faith. It should be a Maitland man who marries you," he said, his dark eyes deepening to a forbidding black.

Elliot chortled. "Truth, Shane. Do you disapprove of Draven as Faith's choice of husband, or are you merely disappointed she chose someone other than *you*?"

Shane's face reddened so deeply, the bloody color seemed to stain the very roots of his golden hair. He turned back to his morning meal with no further comment. Grateful for the reprieve, Faith bade the rest of the men good day and hurried into the cool morning air.

As she made her way across the inner bailey to the keep, her gaze drifted toward the fields of grass turned yellow by winter's arrival. A wooden fence separated a portion of the bailey where members of the Maitland clan buried their loved ones. Among them lay Faith's parents, and just now she wanted to sit near their graves and confide in them the worries of her heart.

She wanted to hear them say they forgave her for being soiled, for walking unescorted into the forest and allowing her innocence to be stolen by a savage stranger. Shame filled her, nauseating her as it did each time she remembered his unwanted touch, his foul-smelling breath. Even now, she could feel his hands ripping her plaid, baring her breasts to the world. Then—then the sharp pain of his penetration, of his thievery.

No one would want her now . . . just as she wanted no one.

Perhaps that was why she'd allowed herself to declare Draven as the father of her child. Was she only fooling herself into believing she'd done it for him? Or had she truly thought that, by legitimizing her babe, she would also be legitimizing her fraudulent, sullied self?

On a better day, the irony of the situation she'd gotten herself into might have made her laugh. She, a woman terrified to speak so many truths, was marrying a man who

could not speak at all. She understood his silence better than he could ever know.

Are you hungry? I could ask Judith to bring you some warm broth . . . perhaps some bread."

Draven turned his head slightly to stare at Faith. She'd spent the last hour chattering about nothing in particular. She was anxious, nervous, and he sensed that his presence was only part of the cause.

He closed his eyes, willing her to go away. He'd tried sleeping on his belly, thinking to ease the lashes on his back, but his chest was just as scarred. No matter how he turned, agony had kept sleep at bay. If only he could convince the she-devil pacing his room to bash him over the head with something sturdy, he might have hope for rest sometime soon.

"Then perhaps you'd like me to apply another poultice to your back? Judith said the last batch seemed to be working to seal your lacerations."

He shook his head. They called *him* the Devil? This woman was far better able to deliver punishment and misery with her incessant prattle. Why did she not understand he only wanted to be alone? He was weak. Too weak. In order to regain the strength he would need to free himself from the Maitlands' clutches, he needed to concentrate on healing himself. No poultice, no brew would heal him as swiftly and absolutely as his own powers.

He searched behind his closed lids for the blinding flashes of healing light he'd been working at summoning since the eve before. Still, they did not come. He would have to find a way to sit in the sunlight for a few hours. The dank lighting in his chamber would not aid his search for the light.

A cool, damp hand touched his brow. He opened his eyes and caught Faith's wrist in his hand. Remembering her violent reaction the last time he'd touched her, he quickly released his hold on her and reached for the parchment and

quill on the bedside table. Balancing on his left arm, he scribbled a note and threw it at her.

Go away.

She read his words, her brow raising gracefully. She opened her mouth, closed it, and placed the quill to the paper. After a moment of writing, she handed the parchment back to him and crossed her arms over her chest.

Curious, he glanced at her elegant penmanship.

No.

Was she mocking him? He studied her for a moment and thought he saw the faint trace of a smile. He snatched the quill from her hand, pausing when her fingers brushed his. They were like satin against his calloused skin. A rapid flood of life pulsed throughout him, reminding him cruelly that the death he had prayed for had been stolen by those very fingers she touched him with.

He let his renewed anger write for him. *Then go to hell.*

When she read his words, her faint smile vanished. She crumpled the paper in her fist and threw it in his face.

"I suppose marrying you is the same thing, as you *are* the Cameron Devil," she said, turning back to the washbowl at the foot of the bed.

The stiff, high pull of her shoulders slackened the slightest bit, and her head tilted down. "Do you not understand that I only wanted to save you?"

Unwilling to allow her to chip away his resentment, Draven quickly grabbed another piece of paper, straining his torn muscles as he did so. When he finished writing, he struggled to sit completely upright and nudged her in the back with his note.

She turned and took it from him hesitantly, then read quietly to herself. "Aye. I am truly with child." Sitting on the edge of his bed, she stared at him, her green eyes glassy but her chin strong. "I meant it when I told you I was sorry for accusing you of siring my child. But, when I saw what your father had done . . . was planning to do to you, I couldn't tell the truth."

He wrote so quickly, his fingers ached.

I was prepared to die. I was not prepared to wed. Have you not been warned of the dangers of allying with a man like me? Have they not told you what I am?

Faith rolled her eyes. "That you're a witch? Aye, they warned me. I don't believe such nonsense. Tell me, why do they claim such things?"

Disliking where this conversation was headed, Draven sank back onto the bed and searched once again for the healing white light behind his eyelids. It was as elusive as the solitude he so desperately wanted.

"All right. You don't wish to speak about that. I understand." The bed beneath Draven shifted, and he could feel Faith edging a tiny bit closer. "But you need to know, Father McKinnon will arrive before sunset to marry us. If you refuse to say your vows willingly, you will force Uncle Elliot's hand. He'll have to return you to your father. Is that what you want?"

Draven couldn't answer. The heat of his frustration finally brought forth the elusive white light he'd been searching for. Pain exploded behind his eyes. His brain swelled, and heat seared his body, covering him like a new layer of skin. Anger and frustration fed his powers. He used them, concentrating on them, until he felt the warmth seep into the lashes on his back, into the torn muscles in his arms.

Faith gasped and stepped away from the bed. Even as she kept her gaze steady on Draven's face, two of the bruises around his eyes and mouth vanished. Her heart fluttered. Her knees went weak. The purple bruises faded to gold, the green faded to a light pink. The cuts sealed closed leaving only a faint scar. In her quick steps back, she stumbled into the table and sent it clamoring to the floor. Bits of dust and rush fluttered into the sunlight pushing through the closed shutters.

Faith sneezed. In doing so, her steady gaze broke. She squeezed her eyes shut and seized the edge of the bed to steady herself.

"Wha . . . what did you—" Faith made the mistake of opening her eyes.

The blue of his gaze forced her mouth closed. The dazzling deep blue flickered to white, then yellow, then back to blue. Fighting the scream building in the back of her throat, she continued backing away until she was close enough to the door to turn and run from the room.

But the moment she pivoted on her heel and presented her back to Draven, the open door slammed shut. Faith whimpered. She flung her body against the door, pulling with all her strength to free herself.

But even though the door possessed no lock, it would not budge. She was trapped.

Four



Fear as solid as the very walls holding Faith prisoner burst from her lungs in a violent scream. She pounded on the door, then dug her fingers into the tiny crack between the door and the wall. It was no use. She could no more escape Draven's chamber than she could explain the sudden vanishing of his hideous facial wounds.

His lithe form moved across the bed and scandalously dropped the sheet protecting what innocence Faith still possessed. A well-toned thigh lightly dusted in tight, black curls, a torso elongated by a tapered waist and muscular hip. The lash marks that had covered Draven's belly only moments ago were now naught but angry welts—no more than the small wounds a woman's nails might make against such taut flesh.

So, he truly did have powers.

She straightened her shoulders, determined not to allow this strange man to get the better of her with his magic tricks. Whatever possessed him . . . it would not intimidate *her*.

"It is no use," she said, quite proud of the steadiness in

her voice. "If you are truly a witch or spawned by the devil as they say, it will do you no good to flaunt such in front of me. My mind is not so easily swayed."

Even as she said the words, Faith knew they weren't the complete truth. Her mind *was* being dissuaded by the proof that her intended might very well have evil running through his veins. How far was she willing to go to save his life, and in turn her own, by continuing to claim that Draven the Devil sired her child?

He pushed himself to his feet and turned to the bedside table, grasping the quill pen and paper. His back, like his stomach, was nearly healed. All that remained was dried blood and scratches, and a few pebble-sized purplish green markings along his ribs. The sheet he'd been clutching fell in a pool around his ankles, revealing a bronzed backside that captured her attention.

Sickened by the prolonged stare she'd indulged in, she quickly turned back to her struggle with the enchanted door. When she next turned back to her captor, she let out yet another startled scream. He stood so close she could now see the flecks of silver lining the blue of his eyes. Heat radiated from him, as did a sense of quiet power that sent an unexplainable quiver up Faith's spine.

He thrust his note at her just as someone pounded on the door.

"Lady Faith? My lady, are you hurt?" It was Essie, the old woman who saw to tidying the keep for Uncle Elliot. "Shall I fetch your uncle?"

Faith choked back her fear and looked to Draven. "You must release the door," she whispered. "If you do not, they will come and break it down."

He looked as though that was precisely what he'd hoped would happen, but to her relief, she heard a soft click and felt the door press into her back.

"Now lie down afore she sees how quickly you've healed," she ordered quietly. Draven didn't budge. Instead, Faith stuck her head through the crack in the door and forced a smile at Essie. "I'm fine, Essie. Thought I saw a rat

and screamed like a ninny.” Thinking fast, she added, “Luckily, it didn’t wake Draven. He still sleeps, so we must be quiet.”

“But the door, my lady. It was locked.”

Lies did not normally come so easily to Faith, but as of late, she found herself in constant need of the Lord’s forgiveness for a good deal of falsities. “I’m afraid I fell into it when I tried to avoid the rat. I must have jammed it.”

Essie didn’t appear appeased. She stretched to the tips of her toes, straining to see around Faith, but Faith gracefully blocked her view in case Draven hadn’t the sense to at least move out of sight.

“I must finish his bath, Essie, afore he awakens to protest. I do swear I’m fine.”

That, at least, she was pleased to find true. Her heart had calmed, and she was no longer in danger of falling to her knees to recite the Lord’s Prayer for the remainder of the afternoon. Whatever she had witnessed, there was surely a reasonable explanation. She gripped Draven’s note tightly in her fist and smiled at Essie.

Essie nodded and backed away slowly. The moment she disappeared down the corridor, Faith shut the door and sank against it. Suddenly, she had no strength in her legs. And when she looked to Draven again and glimpsed his nakedness, she had no strength in any other part of her, either.

“Cover yourself.” Faith pressed a hand to her heart, disgusted by the warm flush covering her body. She couldn’t possibly be attracted to this man, desiring him after what had happened to her two months ago. A man who could very well prove far more dangerous than the rogue in the forest.

Had she ever been more foolish than at this moment? Choosing to remain in this chamber with a naked madman with powers she could not fathom? A sane woman would have fled the moment the door opened. A sane woman would have run to her uncle and demanded the persecution of a man like Draven.

Instead of fleeing, she waited for Draven to crawl back

beneath the covers on his bed, and she collapsed onto the stool near the wall. She opened the crumpled note in her fist and tried to make sense of the hurriedly written words.

Have you not the sense to stop this nonsense? Did you not see what I can do?

“Aye, I saw what you can do. But what proof have you that your powers come from such darkness? There is more than one being in this world capable of bestowing gifts and curses.”

Faith knew he was no more convinced by her words than she was. No matter how desperately she wished to believe his power was not a curse but a gift, she could not be certain. His powers could just as easily have been delivered from darkness as they might from the light of God.

Where else? he wrote.

She thought for a long moment. She would start by convincing him. Convincing herself would have to come later.

How best to persuade a man he might possibly have been wrong his entire life? She knew well and good from living day to day surrounded by men that admitting any sort of error came more difficult to them than bearing children seemed to be for women.

“It is my belief that men know enough of evil and cruelty without Satan’s help. But goodness in mankind, well, that needs a good deal of assistance, does it not? What better way for the Lord to make use of you than to bestow upon you gifts so rare, others might fear them?”

He threw back his head and let out a garbled noise much like laughter. Faith cringed at the horrible sound, and a chill crept up her spine.

“Do not laugh at me, sir.” Anger fed her convictions now, and she wanted to convert him as much as she needed to persuade herself that her theory was true. “Just because you have magic within you does not mean it must be evil or used to harm. I have heard the rumors of your deeds—rapine, famine, even murder. But I do not believe them.”

For a moment, Draven did not move. A look of bewilder-

ment crossed his features. He raised his brows and held up his hands as if to ask why.

"I do not believe you capable of such things because I have been alone in your company several times since your arrival at our home. You've proven your ability to heal yourself, your strength and power—but not once have you tried to harm me. You've made it quite clear you have no liking for me, but not once have you tried to harm me," she repeated. "Most *normal* men could not claim the same were they standing in your place now."

Some would even take what they wanted from her without caring about the damage done to her.

She watched the bemused look settle upon Draven's face and wondered if her own face looked as unconvinced. Did she believe any sort of mystical powers might come from goodness? Matrilda, the clan's healer, worked wonders with herbs and poultices. Father McKinnon used the power of prayer to heal. Faith supposed that, in a sense, was its own sort of magic. What then made Draven's powers so different?

There certainly wasn't time to find out.

"Father McKinnon will expect to meet you afore we speak our vows," she said. "Have you decided yet whether marrying me is more foul a punishment than death?"

Draven rubbed the still-aching wound above his lip. He studied Faith, saw the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. The adamancy he had heard earlier in her voice when she'd spoken about their marriage was no longer there. He'd succeeded in frightening her, in causing her to doubt her decision to pledge herself to him. He could see it on her face.

It was a small victory, one in which Draven suddenly felt very little satisfaction.

What if he did choose death? What would become of Faith Maitland should her people learn she'd lied about her child's conception? Would she return to the man she'd bedded, or would she live the remainder of her days as a dis-

reputable, lowly member of the clan that seemed to revere her now?

More questions plagued him. Why was she so insistent on saving him from a fate he deserved? What made her so different from everyone else in this world who would sleep better knowing he rested beneath freshly turned soil?

Draven wasn't certain the answer was worth living for.

Instead, he shrugged and commanded the door behind her to open. Faith looked as though she might say something, but backed out of the chamber.

"Very well," she said, steadily holding his gaze, he supposed in an effort to appear brave. "I dare hope you'll find it harder to refuse with my entire clan ready to run you through should you not speak your vows."

He watched her go, and once her whispered footsteps disappeared around the corner, he used his power to push the chamber door closed. Pressing his head into his pillow, he closed his eyes and ran his fingers along his face. A slight bump below his lip was all that remained of the wound on his chin.

If he could only heal the wounds beneath his skin . . . if he could only force his powers through the blood and bruises, through the ripped muscles and tendons to what lay beneath and hidden . . . perhaps he would feel as whole inside as he now did outside.

Which proved her assumption that his gift could come from good was dead wrong. Good magic would be able to heal the parts that mattered. Dark magic forced those wounds to fester.

Draven thought of Faith's face, the fear and uncertainty she'd clearly tried to hide. He could read her well, and while she might truly wish to save him for some unfathomable reason, he was wise to her real truth. She was trying to save herself, as well.

But from what? The real scoundrel who'd seduced and abandoned Faith to her fate? Marrying Draven would keep her secret, would prevent others from learning that she'd been loose before marriage.

He thought of her pretty head thrown back in the heat of passion, of her golden hair spread upon a naked man's body. Draven's own body ached for a brief, torturous moment. He'd bedded women before, but none who had been able to call themselves pure or virginal. Certainly, since she was with child, Faith could not call herself such names, either, but her demeanor and grace proclaimed them on her behalf.

She *had* saved him. She hadn't been horrified to learn he was mute, and she hadn't condemned him for the curse of his blood.

Her earlier inquiry pestered Draven's mind. Was marrying Faith a worse fate than death by his own father's hand? Nay.

But Draven *wanted* death, had lain awake begging for a death he was too cowardly to deliver to himself. He didn't want marriage any more than he wanted to adapt to a new clan whose opinions of him would be no better than the Camerons' had been.

The only true rest and peace he would know would be found beneath the earth, in a cold, wet grave where no frightened eyes or disgusted faces would stare upon him again.

But there would be no death for him tomorrow. The fire he'd started hadn't merely killed Bridget, but also the unborn babe she'd carried in her belly. One woman's lie had caused him to kill a child; now another woman's lie was forcing him to claim one. His conscience would not allow him to refuse.

He would marry Faith Maitland.

Five



Father McKinnon had seen many men who'd needed demons exorcised from their desecrated souls, but Draven Cameron wasn't one of them. Intimidating as Lucifer, perhaps, but certainly not possessing the evil soul with which he was accused.

The young lad Father McKinnon had met so many years ago still looked out at him from behind Draven's eerie, pale blue eyes. Distrust. Dislike. Perhaps even dark secrets lurked in those eyes as well. But there were no demons. On that, Father McKinnon was willing to wager his life.

Though he could not speak, Draven's demeanor was that of a man one did not fool with lightly. The stern set of his jaw, the clenched fists gripping the linen beneath him, the glower in his intense stare. If Father McKinnon hadn't known Draven as well as he did, it would have been enough to bring silent, constant prayers for his own safety, and he prided himself on rarely using his prayers for himself. God was more likely to heed them if they were only used when needed most.

But Father McKinnon was no fool, either. Just because

he knew Draven wasn't possessed by the Devil did not mean the man couldn't be provoked into acting rashly. Cornered prey of any kind was the most dangerous sort, and knowing how often Draven had been cornered by Harold Cameron, Father McKinnon knew he'd be foolish not to be wary.

Father McKinnon chose his words carefully. "Might I assume you'll agree that a nod or a shake of the head will suffice while the vows are being said?"

Silly lass, Lady Faith. Had she any notion of what she was diving into, wedding this lad? He cringed to know that the superstitions regarding Draven would most certainly come to darken Faith's reputation. More than likely, she was too blinded by the beauty of Draven to see the danger for what it was. Father McKinnon knew well that when in top form, women who didn't know of his reputation flocked to Draven like sinners to vespers.

When Draven made no move to answer, Father McKinnon continued. "I'll require a signature since you cannot speak. After the ceremony, I'll present you with a parchment that you'll sign, stating that you have willingly wed Lady Faith."

The steely blue eyes watching him made the priest wonder. "You *are* planning to marry the lass, are you not?"

He received a sort of smirk in response. Nothing more.

Frustration allowed him to glower back at the silent man. "If I do not believe you to be a willing participant, you do realize I cannot allow you to be wed? You must give me some inclination as to what your intentions are. Will you attend the ceremony or nay?"

Draven's sudden jerk startled Father McKinnon, sending him back several paces toward the chamber door. When he realized Draven had only moved to gather paper and a quill from the bedside table, the blush of injured pride stung Father McKinnon's cheeks.

Cautiously, he stepped forward to peer at the writing.

They've burned my plaid. Will you expect me to attend in naught but my bare arse?

Smiling, Father McKinnon silently cheered on Draven's spirited temper. Better this bitter and angry man than the one he'd seen a few months before: broken, with no will to live.

"I take it this means you will attend willingly? Very well, I'll make certain someone fetches you something clean. I'd certainly hate to have to you stand before the chapel in only the covering God made for you."

Faith had already confessed she'd had to burn the foul bits of fabric he had arrived in. Her uncle had explained quite a bit as well, and from the outrageous treatment Draven had been dealt, Father McKinnon had expected to see the man a bit more tattered than he was.

The Highlands couldn't boast to having a plethora of priests among them. Therefore, every two weeks, Father McKinnon traveled between the three bordering clans of the Maitlands, Camerons, and Frasers. In doing so, the priest had learned quite a lot about the accusations continually being cast against Draven—the most recent involving a woman named Bridget O'Banyon, Draven's latest lover. Her body had been found among the rubble of her burned-down cottage, and the blame had immediately been cast upon Draven.

But since Bridget had been carrying Draven's child, Father McKinnon held no belief that he was guilty. However, a man by the name of Godfrey had claimed to have witnessed the tragedy, and Draven's death had been ordered.

Everything from floods to droughts, from kidnappings to murders had been blamed on the poor man. Father McKinnon didn't believe any of it. Draven was very much like his mother had been: intimidating and perhaps a bit too pagan in her beliefs to suit the Church. But if evil lived among the Camerons, then it lay with their laird, Harold.

That man possessed demons no living being could cast out.

A piece of crumpled paper hit Father McKinnon squarely in the nose, jolting him from his reverie. Draven

made a noise much like clearing his throat, and pointed to the ground where the balled-up message had rolled slightly beneath the bed.

"Not the most dignified way to gain my attention," he muttered, stooping to retrieve the note.

I will attend.

The scrawl was elegant but hurried, further proof that Draven was not the simpleminded man some foolishly mistook him for.

"I'll prepare for the ceremony, then," Father McKinnon mumbled.

He started for the door, grateful to have this meeting over with. But just before Father McKinnon left the room, he paused and turned back to face Draven once again. "I do hope you realize how fortunate a man you are to have been chosen by a lass such as Lady Faith. It is her nature to be loving and loyal, sometimes to her detriment, I might add. I hope you'll treat her as the gem she is."

Draven waited until the door closed behind Father McKinnon to snatch the candlestick from the bedside table. He threw it against the closed barrier, the satisfaction of hearing the clang against the wood easing a bit of the burn in his injured arm.

A gem. If Faith Maitland was a gem, then she was as opaque as an obsidian stone. He couldn't see through her deeply enough to find her true reason for wanting to marry him. He suspected her motives were the selfish sort, hoping she could hide the shame of her predicament behind the jest of marriage vows. She did not look at him with pity or disgust, and he had not sensed a complete lie behind her avowal to save him from his father. But he *had* sensed a half-disguised fear behind her eyes.

Not the sort of fear with which his people had looked upon him. That had been the fear of seeing the Devil in flesh, the fear of losing their souls or sacred places in Heaven. The sort of fear Faith portrayed had been that of a woman's hesitancy to be alone with a man. A fear of being struck down or mishandled by a stranger.

The very idea of such things brought forth Draven's curiosity. He couldn't help but wonder what would happen if he abruptly raised his hand near her. Would she fall back in fright, suspecting an encounter with his fist? Or would she lean forward, expecting a caress? He could tell a woman's past easily with such a simple action, and had grown far too used to women recoiling, overly familiar with the rough treatment of the very men sworn to protect them.

He tried to imagine Faith, cowering in a corner while a man hovered over her, waving his fist. The stiff-spined lady didn't appear to lack courage—or at the very least, she possessed a strong will not to let fear show. Imagining her in such a scene was difficult but not impossible. She was hiding more than a sinful conception. Pondering that secret made the looming nuptial ceremony slightly more palatable.

~

The wreath was worn and dried, but Faith eyed it lovingly as it stared up at her from her bed. One had to handle the garland of ribbons with great care, else it would crumble into tiny pieces of debris. The delicate flowers that had once adorned the wreath had been carefully plucked off years ago, but the frayed, brittle ribbons, yellowed with time, were still braided together in perfect little knots that the years had not destroyed.

Faith had been handling the wreath since she was ten and five, bringing it out of its box every now and again to imagine it in her mother's hair as she spoke her vows to Faith's father.

It wasn't beautiful anymore, but it was priceless. She'd dreamed of wearing it on her wedding day—her way of making certain her mother was near at the ceremony. Now it mocked her, mocked the laugh of a marriage to which she was about to commit herself. If she wore it today, she would feel as though her mother was hovering behind her, ashamed and scornful of the choices Faith had made.

Her throat constricted, Faith carefully fingered the gar-

land and set it inside the special box Elliot had created for it, then stuffed the box back into the chest at the foot of her bed. She would not disgrace her mother's memory by wearing the garland today. Perhaps she'd have a girl child, and that child might be able to wear it with pride when she became a woman. That honor was no longer Faith's to take.

She couldn't believe Draven had actually agreed to marry her. He'd been adamant in his refusal of her proposal. Cruel, in fact. She should be relieved that he'd had a change of heart. Instead, she felt as though she'd been tossed into a bottomless well with no hope of resurfacing.

Would this persistent constriction ever leave her chest? No matter which direction she turned, she found another fortress standing between herself and peace of mind.

"You're not to wear the ribbons, then?"

Faith turned to find Essie standing in the doorway, her aged face downcast as she stared with wise eyes at the closed chest.

"Nay, but I'd like very much if you would plait my hair for me. Elliot wants the ceremony to begin within the hour."

Essie tsked and stepped into the room, shutting the door behind her. "A wedding with no bans posted. A man and woman need a goodly amount of time to get to know one another before making such a commitment. You'll be regretting your haste later; mark my words."

"I'm in need of your hands at the moment, Essie. Not your advice," Faith snapped, immediately regretting her harsh tone. The woman had been the closest thing to a mother Faith had known for the past five years and deserved far better treatment and much more respect. "I'm sorry, Essie. I'm having a bout of nerves, is all."

But Essie didn't seem bothered in the least. She was too busy straightening the pleats in Faith's plaid. "When're you plannin' on telling everyone the true reason behind the rushed nuptials?"

Faith's stomach dropped to the tips of her toes, and her hand slid shamefully to her belly. "What do you mean?"

Since she was bent over, examining the pleats around

Faith's hips, Essie had to tilt her head back to smirk at Faith. "You know well and good what I mean. Fool the others if you must, but not the one who sees you bare as the day you were born. I know the signs of a woman blossoming into motherhood."

Faith imagined all the color from her face melting into a puddle around her feet and wished desperately that she could drown herself in it. "Essie!"

"Och, lass. You cannot be angry because I see through your sham." Her cheery pink face lit up. "So confess. When did you find your dalliance with Draven Cameron? I've heard tales of his scandalous seductions but never imagined he'd be trapped by his own carelessness. Not that you've trapped him, mind . . . you ken what I mean to say."

Panic held Faith in a tight grip. She seized Essie by the shoulders and forced her to stand. "You must hold your tongue, Essie. No one knows of my condition save for Elliot, Otis, and John, and no one else must know—*ever*."

The cheeriness receded from Essie's face. "Mind who you're talking to, Faith. I didn't reveal your secrets when you told me of your desire for Shane. Nor did I tell when you snuck into the pantries in the wee hours of morn to nab more than your share of sweetmeats—"

"This is hardly the same thing," Faith hissed.

"Rest your mind. These old lips are too tired for gossip. Your secret is safe with me."

Even with Essie's reassurances, dread wove a tidy knot in Faith's belly. What if others in the clan were as perceptive as the old woman?

Her reputation would be damned, and she would have wed herself to Draven for naught.

Her gaze found its way to the looking glass and traveled to reach her belly. There was no bump to tell her secret, only the merest hint of growing hips and breasts that only those most familiar with her body would detect. And since Essie was the only person in the keep who had ever seen her free of dress, Faith exhaled and calmed.

She now had a woman to talk to about her condition, and

that knowledge eased the remaining tension from her body as she allowed Essie to continue her fussing.

"Just tell me, lass," Essie said, her normal, boisterous voice lowered to a disarming whisper. "Do you love him?"

A soft sigh escaped Faith. "Nay, Essie. I do not. Nor does he love me."

"Do you at least like him? I should think you wouldn't willingly give yourself to a man if you believed his reputation was as black as they say."

She hadn't willingly given herself to *anyone*.

The thought brought a horrified gasp from her throat. *That* was why Draven had agreed to marry her! Surely not . . . surely he hadn't agreed to marry her because he expected to bed her?

With her plaid trailing behind her, Faith ran from the chamber, nearly knocking Essie over in her haste to get to Draven.

Six



The moment Faith burst into Draven's chamber, her anger dissolved, and the reason for her visit left her mind. He was sitting upright in his bed, a fresh plaid wrapped around his body, his face cleanly shaven. He looked so normal, so human, she lost her ability to form any words at all.

Flustered, she glanced down at her own apparel, realizing appallingly late that she wasn't quite as dressed as she should be. Her plaid had not been fastened, and it was all she could do to keep it spread modestly across her body. If not for the tunic she wore beneath, her indecency would have left nothing for his imagination.

"You're awake," she managed, brushing damp strands of hair out of her eyes. The movement caused her plaid to slip, exposing her bare thigh.

Realizing her folly, her cheeks colored. She stooped to gather the rest of her plaid and wrapped it around her body like a blanket.

"Your hair looks shorter," she managed, struggling to recall what her purpose in coming to him had been. She was

too captivated by the disappearance of his previously elbow-length hair, which appeared to have been shorn off, and was too confused by why the sight saddened her. "Did they cut it all off?"

Staring up at the ceiling, Draven wondered if, from somewhere above, God wasn't enjoying himself thoroughly. For the last hour, he'd been poked and prodded by two trembling lasses who'd been instructed to bathe and groom him for the coming celebrations. Their clumsy work had bruised his still-sore body as they'd tried not to look him directly in the eye. And finally, they had gone, leaving his fresh-smelling, cleanly clothed person alone in a solitude so sweet, he thought he might weep from the sheer pleasure of it.

And now here he was again, pestered beyond measure by yet another woman.

But his frustration didn't linger. He couldn't help but smile at the sight of Faith. Her composure had shattered. Her plaid hung half off her slim body. Her tiny hands flitted here and there, trying to keep the fabric in one place.

When she caught him staring, she stepped back. Her plaid fell to the floor in a heap of green and black. Draven gazed at her long, slender legs peeking from beneath the tunic that hung to her knees. He itched to see if her legs were as smooth as they looked, to discover exactly how far they stretched before meeting her heat. His body reacted instantly, forcing him to fuss with his own plaid as he tried to subtly hide the evidence of his body's betrayal.

What was wrong with him? He didn't even like this woman!

Looking for a means to distract himself from her naked legs, he tried to recall what she'd asked him while she gathered her clothing around her once more.

His hair. Aye. She'd asked about his hair. He grabbed the queue of hair hanging at his nape and tossed it over his shoulder so Faith could see the length had not been touched. The black strands still reached his chest, and with any luck, she would find it distasteful.

She didn't appear to. In fact, Draven swore he saw relief wash across her face along with a slight grin.

"Right, well, whatever you prefer."

In her effort to sit on the bench on the far side of the room, Faith tripped over the long fabric around her feet and caught herself on the wardrobe. When she was finally seated, she lifted her chin and straightened her spine. The flustered Faith was gone, and back was the rigid Lady Propriety.

"I wanted to make certain we were clear on what our marriage will be," she said, the rosiness as prominent as ever in her creamy cheeks. "Any . . . notion you may have of sharing a marriage bed with me will be sorely disappointed."

Her gaze searched his face as though she'd expected a reaction. Draven had none to give her. There'd been nothing in her glances to suggest she'd wanted to become his bride in the truest sense of the word. And even if she had expressed such interest, he hadn't.

Faith was far too frigid a woman to sustain his lust for more than a few moments. Comely, aye. And legs long enough to wrap around his waist without much effort.

But as warm as a Highland winter.

Since she appeared to be intent on receiving some sort of reply to what she obviously considered a momentous announcement, he gave her one. He shrugged and buried himself back into his pillow.

"That's it? You don't mind sharing separate chambers? Forever?"

Again, he shrugged and pried open one eye. He didn't feel like writing his response, so he gave her a look he hoped clearly stated his distaste for their union was as strong as hers. He liked his women soft and eager. Not icy and terrified.

"Well, then. Good." She stood, her gaze finally falling away from his. "I'm glad we've settled that matter. There'll be no changing my mind. I warn you now."

Did she want him to be upset? Was that a look of disap-

pointment he saw hiding beneath her golden lashes? Could it be that Lady Propriety might actually be forlorn at the prospect of a sexless marriage? He could grab her and find out for himself, but her violent reaction the last time he'd touched her stopped him.

His calmness seemed to wear on her. She relaxed her posture and leaned against the wall, tucking her plaid under her chin as she studied him.

"Since you've agreed to marry me, might I . . . ask you a question?" she asked.

His nod was hesitant.

"I've seen you heal yourself, and I witnessed you bar me from leaving this chamber. Is that the extent of your gift, or is there more that you can do?"

The muscles in Draven's face tightened. As far as he was concerned, this conversation had just come to an abrupt halt. She wanted a show of his dark side? Wanted to see his evil come to life? The only interest anyone had ever truly had in him had been because of his powers—the very powers for which they wanted him killed.

She was no different than the others, just as he'd expected. Reaching for his writing tools, he kept his stare on hers. *I will tell you of my curse when you tell me of the babe's da.*

He handed the message to her and rolled onto his side to face her.

As she read, her face paled. She cleared her throat and crumpled the parchment, then threw it into the fire. "You need your rest if you're to attend the ceremony."

Draven allowed his stillness to speak for him. After a few excruciating moments, the door opened and closed, and Draven was once again left alone. Still, he could not find peace. She'd called his powers a gift. What sort of nonsense was she trying to peddle? A gift? He'd never been given a gift in his life, and most especially not one born of his powers.

And yet she'd seemed to believe her own words. If she truly thought of his *gifts* in such a way, why then had she

come to him with demands that their marriage bed remain cold? Did she truly believe she could convince him she didn't fear his powers one moment, and then demand that he never touch her the next?

His thoughts continued to stray to Faith and her desire to remain free of his—her potential husband's—touch. Perhaps her babe's da was the reason she didn't want Draven in her bed. Did she still harbor a great love for a man who would abandon her and their child?

That thought disturbed him enough to prevent him from finding any rest at all before the ceremony.

The afternoon may as well have been twilight. Dark clouds blocked the sun, and tiny flurries of white snow offered the only true lightness to the day. Draven's right leg throbbed. More than likely, the injuries he'd sustained to that leg would never fully heal, and he would spend the rest of his life being forewarned of any rain to come. But, otherwise, the weather suited his mood well.

The half-dozen Maitlands who'd chosen to attend the ceremony stood sullen-faced, watching him with such suspicion Draven hardened his stance to make certain they found no reason to think him weak.

The small chapel steps barely allowed room for himself and Father McKinnon, but Elliot Maitland had insisted on squeezing in between them to await Faith's arrival. Draven had to admit, he was quite eager to see her, too.

He considered changing his mind, ruining her plans and robbing her of her reputation the way she'd robbed him of his death. But the wild imaginings of Bridget's unborn babe, screaming inside her womb as its mother's flesh went up in flames, kept his decision firm.

He would claim Faith's child.

"I'm thinking you'll treat my Faith well," Elliot muttered through a forced smile, his lips barely moving. "I'm thinking you'll prove everyone here wrong and make her a

very happy woman. I'm thinking this because a smart man chooses not to have his manhood filleted with a dull blade."

The colorful threat clenched Draven's gut, but he gave no outward reaction. Elliot's reputation preceded him throughout the Highlands, and his threats were not to be taken lightly by anyone. Draven's threatened manhood all but shriveled up and crawled into his belly.

He glanced down at his clean plaid and resisted the urge to fidget. His nerves were more disorderly than they'd been when he'd discovered his father's plans to set him afire. The sound of horses approaching from the keep alleviated his discomfort.

Faith rode atop a pure white palfrey whose mane had been plaited with ribbons that clung to the rose-colored decorations in Faith's own hair. She wore the same plaid she'd displayed in his chamber earlier, only now it was nicely pleated around her slim body, belted at the waist and fastened over her left shoulder as it should be. She clutched the reins so tightly in her fist, even from his distance, Draven could see the white of her knuckles. Otherwise, she appeared completely composed.

Then she met his gaze.

Whatever false assumptions he might have made about her composure wasted away into uncertainty. She looked as though it had been she who'd been forced into this wedding ceremony. Fear stared back at him from her watery gaze, and as her uncle rushed forward to help her from her palfrey and guide her toward the steps, Draven noticed the unsteadiness of her stride.

Father McKinnon opened his mouth to welcome her but quickly closed it when Faith froze where she stood and pulled on Elliot's arm.

"I can't do this, Uncle Elliot. I can't force him to marry me."

Astounded, Draven reached behind him to feel the stability of the chapel wall and leaned against it. She was trying to tell the truth, willing to suffer the consequences. He watched a range of emotions flicker across her face: fear,

frustration, anguish. The crowd seemed to move in closer, and Draven took in the sight of them. The five men and one woman in attendance looked eager, as though they had been awaiting this moment. They eyed Faith with a hunger he had seen reflected in his own clan's eyes when he'd been bound and ready to burn for their entertainment. He couldn't know for certain that they wouldn't turn on her.

The Camerons certainly would have.

Draven glanced at Faith's flat belly that would soon swell with child.

"Nargh!" The garbled noise escaped him before he could give it much thought. He stepped forward, pushing aside the desire to let her tell the truth that would set him free.

A gasp echoed through the small crowd, and as a group they seemed to move back a step. His exclamation had stopped Faith and Elliot where they stood. They stared at him, seemingly transfixed by his outburst.

"I thought you said he couldn't speak, lass," Elliot whispered.

"That hardly sounded like speech to me!" someone in the crowd jeered.

Ignoring Faith's previous eruption at being touched, Draven snatched her by the waist and pulled her aside so that the only person who could see the front of them was Elliot Maitland. Then, Draven placed his hand upon Faith's belly. The sounds he expelled sounded more like grunts than coherent words, but each time he touched her belly then pounded his chest, he knew he was delivering his message.

God save him, he was actually declaring to her and to Elliot that Faith's child was his.

Faith couldn't breathe. The air had been ripped from her lungs, causing her heart to cease its beating and her head to spin. What was Draven doing? Didn't he understand that she'd been prepared to confess to her lie in order to give him what he'd wanted?

Oh, she'd tried to convince herself she'd only had his

best interest at heart. But the truth of the matter was, she'd only been trying to save herself. She could not use another person for her own gain. She'd made up her mind the moment she'd set eyes upon Draven, standing beside her uncle and looking so very human.

"I'm letting you go, Draven," she said, her cheeks burning. "Do not try to find your voice now."

He grabbed her hand, all but dragging her to the chapel steps where Father McKinnon was watching them with wide eyes. Once there, he spun her around to face him, glanced at the crowd, then kissed her.

Seven



He was kissing her. Faith could hear the people in front of the small chapel gasp, could feel her own heart burst through her ribs as first pleasure at the feel of Draven's soft lips on hers, then fury at his audacity, shook her core. She shoved at his chest, digging her nails through his plaid to get at his flesh. When he wouldn't step away, she bit his lip, tasting the bitter warmth of his blood on her tongue.

Draven moaned, snapping his head back. Faith wiped the back of her hand over her mouth, fighting the desire to spit at his feet.

Were all men like this? Bent on taking what was not theirs to sample?

Her entire body trembled with the desire to punish him, to pour all of her wrath into him until it became so overwhelming, it killed him.

"Bastard!" she whispered, her sight blurry with anger.

"Now is not the appropriate time to be kissing the lass, Draven," Father McKinnon said, clearly unaware of Faith's outrage. "I need to marry you first."

Marry them? Faith would rather face the shame and disappointment of her people than go through with this sham.

Or would she? Feeling Uncle Elliot's stare boring into her face, she glanced at him and realized that, while she might be willing to endure whatever consequences she had coming, she was not willing to place such a burden on the man who had cared for her these past five years. He did not deserve such a blow.

But did she truly deserve to commit herself to Draven, a man who would take such liberties? She had clearly stated she would never allow his touch, and yet touch her he had.

Aye, she deserved to imprison herself. Even while she'd pushed at him . . . even while memories of her rape threatened to return, her body had betrayed her by finding the feel of his lips sinfully indulgent.

Oh, what a wicked woman she was. It was no wonder she had allowed herself to be accosted by the stranger in the forest. Had she been born loose? Wanton?

Hoping her choice would redeem her in the eyes of her Lord, as well as in her own heart, she stepped closer to Draven once more. Careful not to look him in the eye, she nodded to the priest.

"You may wed us, Father McKinnon," she said.

Her lie had cost them both their freedom, but there was naught to be done about it now. Turning back would mean Draven's certain death and her exile from the people she loved most.

In a matter of a few moments, they'd exchanged vows. She in a quiet voice, and Draven with a simple nod of his head.

She had handed over her life to a complete stranger.

There hadn't been ample time to prepare a proper wedding feast in the great hall. Not that it mattered; the food went untouched by most, and the mood felt more like a wake than a celebration. Faith, Draven, and Elliot sat apart from the rest of the clansmen in attendance. Their

table on the raised dais had been decorated with white cloths and fresh flowers, and their goblets were ever overflowing from the pages' eagerness to serve.

Faith studied her food with blind eyes, unwilling to meet anyone's gaze. Her life had gone from wonderful to unbearable in a matter of weeks, and at the moment, she wanted to claw her way free of her skin and seek refuge in the wooden planks beneath her feet.

To her left, Draven seemed composed, even relaxed, as he sipped his third goblet of ale. Uncle Elliot seemed a bit more tense, and between them, Faith feared her spine might very well collapse into a jumble of bones. The majority of her strain came from anticipating Draven's next move. He'd been far too unwilling to marry her for her to believe he'd had a simple change of heart.

What was his game?

Would he shock her clan with a show of magic? Or perhaps reveal to them all that the woman they'd chosen to become their next laird had lied to them? He could have done either without committing himself to marriage.

The few times she dared look around the hall, she'd seen the men and women staring apprehensively at Draven, as though they, too, expected Lucifer himself to make an appearance. Worse, they were staring at Faith as though it was her fault Lucifer was dining with them.

And they were right. She had married Draven in hopes of retaining the clans' respect, but she had still managed to lose a good deal of it. It would be up to her to convince the Maitlands to accept Draven as one of them. Otherwise, she would be as excluded as she would have been had she told the truth.

Clearing her voice, she stood on quivering legs, clutching her goblet of water to her chest. "It occurs to me that, other than my uncle, none of the Maitlands have come forward to welcome Draven into the clan."

John and Otis, sitting at one of the closer tables, turned to look at each other, distaste clearly etched across their faces. If anyone would cast aside their dislike in order to ap-

pease Faith, it would be those two men. Her fate, Draven's fate, was in their hands.

"Ye are right, Lady Faith," Otis said, raising the weathered hand holding his goblet above his head. "I would be the first to say welcome."

Faith exhaled a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. Relief washed over her as one after the other, the rest of the chamber's occupants followed suit.

"And let me also be the first to say," Otis continued when the hall quieted, his dark brown eyes narrowed into tiny slivers and focused on Draven, "that ye'd best be treating our lass well. For yer sake, I pray the rumors about ye prove false."

An enthusiastic "Hear! Hear!" echoed about the hall. Faith scowled at Otis, but his stern expression did not soften.

"As my husband—" those words stuck in Faith's throat like overcooked venison—"cannot speak for himself, my word will have to be enough for the lot of you to trust. I'd like to believe the Maitlands are above gossip, and that a man's actions are to be judged for what they are. If that is not the case, you may take the matter up with me, in private."

From the corner of the hall, Father McKinnon grinned and raised his cup to her, then returned to swigging it down with much enthusiasm. Bolstered by his support, she turned back to the men.

"Whatever your opinions may be, I expect you to keep them to yourselves from this day forward. As you would not tolerate foul words against your women, nor will I against my . . . my *man*."

Her man. It was all Faith could do not to burst with obnoxious laughter at the image the words conjured in her mind. She had just claimed Draven, as though she were a lustful lad staking his claim on the prettiest, available maid.

It was all ludicrous. She was running from the memory and scars a man had inflicted upon her straight into the hold of a man who was certain to inflict his own sort of damage.

Simply ludicrous.

She felt a hand on her arm and looked down to find Draven tugging at her, his eyes narrowed and cold. Before she could pull away, he yanked on her, forcing her to sit. Only then did she realize that speaking on his behalf may not have been wise. She was used to taking charge, and the fact that her new husband may feel ill at ease with her boldness hadn't occurred to her.

It would probably be best for all if Draven fought his own battles. Having a woman fight them for him would not be judged kindly by many.

Suddenly far more weary than she'd imagined possible, she turned to Elliot and made her apologies.

"You're goin' abed?" he asked, a puzzled expression on his face. "Without your husband?"

She narrowed her gaze upon him, then glanced over her shoulder to see if Draven had overheard her uncle's comment. He was staring at her with lethargic eyes, and his face wore only a slightly bored expression. But when she stood to leave the hall, to her utter horror, Draven followed suit.

Her position was a precarious one. If she demanded Draven stay seated, her clan would become even more suspicious of the marriage. If she allowed him to follow her to the keep, she would be forced to deal with him in private, where he could very well demand she become his wife in every sense of the word.

He'd already kissed her without permission, after all. What was to stop him from going farther with his liberties?

On the verge of tears, she fell back onto the bench and closed her eyes. She would wait it out, outlast him if possible, and slip away when he was too besotted with ale to demand *anything* of her.

Eight



Draven waited two hours more before he finally gave in. Faith had long since fallen asleep at her seat, her head lolling to the right, her body swaying. He'd made her nervous when he'd moved to escort her to her chamber earlier, but he'd only wanted to thank her for standing up to her clan on his behalf.

Her actions had humbled him. He wanted to tell her that her initial deception upon their meeting could be forgiven if she was willing to attempt a peaceful union.

But now, his body was rebelling against his prolonged stay in the hall. His powers were wearing off, and though most of his wounds would remain visibly healed, the bruises and aches would need further concentration each day until his power to heal them reached its peak.

It was a never-ending circle. Because of his wounds, his potency was weaker. Because his potency was weaker, his wounds could not fully heal.

But he would remain at this table as long as Faith. He'd seen the fear in her eyes and in the eyes of the Maitlands when he'd stood before them, a man far more whole than

the one they'd dragged into the keep the day before. He'd be damned if he'd let them, especially Faith, see him weaken now.

With a bit of difficulty, he raised his arm to wave down one of the pages. The young lad approached him nervously, making certain to remain a good distance away.

Staring at his small, filthy boots, the lad said, "Aye, sir?"

Draven reached out and tilted the lad's head up, forcing the page to watch while he mimicked writing.

"A quill, sir? Aye, sir."

When the young lad returned, he'd brought a torn bit of paper, as well as a small bottle of ink and a ragged quill. "Thought ye mi' be needin' these, too, sir. They're my own."

A look of such pride over that statement reached the page's eyes; a boy who took his post most seriously. Draven nodded in appreciation, impressed that such a child would have need for such materials. Surely he couldn't read?

Before Draven could inquire, the page scampered off to begin refilling cups once again. He turned his attention to the paper and found his gaze fascinated by the small, dirty fingerprints along the edges. Soon, Faith would bear a child the world would expect him to father. A young lad, perhaps, who'd like to go hunting, or a daughter who'd beg for his hugs.

What did he know of fathering? His own father had touched him far more often by whip than by hand, and on those few occasions, that hand had been a fist.

He shook off his thoughts, discomfited by the nervousness that suddenly ran through him. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

Glancing at Faith, he watched her body tilt slightly toward him. A feminine snore escaped her before Elliot could place his arm around her shoulder to keep her still. Draven sighed and scribbled his message to Elliot.

If someone will show me to Faith's chamber, I will take her there.

Elliot read the note, then nodded, gently shifting Faith

out of his embrace and toward Draven. Pushing himself away from the table, Draven ignored his protesting muscles. He bent and scooped Faith into his arms.

Each of his senses was instantly assaulted. Her golden hair tickled the bare flesh of his arms. The flowery soap she'd used to wash dizzied him and at the same time made him want to lean in and smell her more deeply. All this while the lacerations on his back stung as though they'd reopened, and his right leg nearly buckled beneath the added weight of Faith's sleeping body.

If he could just keep his composure long enough to escape the watchful eyes of the Maitlands, he'd be free to sit in solitude and concentrate on finding the light of healing again. But for now, he must appear to be as strong as any man here.

"Come. Essie will lead the way." Elliot motioned for Draven to follow him to the great door leading to the bailey. Once they reached the fresh air of night, Elliot turned back. "You'll find Essie in the keep by the fire. She's always resting there this time of night. She'll fetch you whatever you need to make the night more comfortable, as well."

Draven nodded, but before he could take two steps away, Elliot seized a rather sensitive, tender spot on Draven's arm. "You can ask for a spare bedroll if you'd like, but if I discover you dared leave my niece's chamber this evening, there won't be a tomorrow for you to wake to."

Elliot *wanted* Draven to spend the night with Faith? His face must have asked the question for him, because Elliot searched the grounds as though making certain they were alone, then narrowed his eyes and whispered, "I'm not foolish enough to believe this is a love match, but the clan will be given no reason to believe differently. They'll believe tonight was a wedding night in every sense of the word, or you'll have me to answer to. And I'm not fearing whatever devilry they say you possess. I'm too old for such nonsense.

"You saw fit to seduce my Faith once. For her sake, as

well as the Maitlands, we will pretend that night was tonight. Do you get my meaning?"

Indeed, Draven did. The clan would want bloodied sheets to prove the consummation of the nuptials. Should Draven disappear to his own chamber before dawn, more doubt would be cast upon Faith and later, the legitimacy of her child.

But Draven wasn't about to be bullied by the likes of Elliot Maitland. Instead, he turned his back to the old man and strode toward the keep, careful not to limp.

As Elliot had promised, the ancient woman they called Essie glanced up at them when he carried Faith into the keep. She set aside her needlepoint and, without a word, motioned for him to follow her up the stone steps. At the top of the stairs, she plucked a candle from a sconce on the wall, then pushed open a door that was only two away from the chamber in which they'd placed Draven.

Essie hobbled to the small round table near the head of the bed, then tilted her candle so that its flame kindled the one already resting on the table. "I stuffed a bedroll beneath her bed, should you be wantin' it," she whispered, looking everywhere but at Draven's eyes. "I don't care much for your staying with her, mind, but himself instructed me to make certain you do."

Without waiting for his reaction to her small insult, she backed out of the chamber and closed the door behind her, leaving Draven to wonder what the hell he was supposed to do now.

What he did know was that his arms were going to snap in two if he didn't unload his burden soon. A week ago, he could have lifted Faith above his head and carried her that way across the widest berth of the forest loch.

A week ago, he'd thought he'd been on the verge of the first true happiness in his lifetime, on the brink of true fatherhood with a woman he thought he loved.

And, a week ago, he'd been taught the true meaning of betrayal and the true depths to which a woman's wickedness could delve. Bridget. The rip in his soul that had al-

lowed the demon in him to escape long enough to see her dead.

Faith stirred against him, flinging her arm up and around his shoulders, the back of her hand smacking him in the chin. Pain shot through his jaw as his day-old wound declared itself alive and well once again.

None too carefully, Draven dropped Faith onto the bed. She moaned and rolled onto her side, giving him a goodly glimpse of her rounded backside and nicely curved hip. She'd had no trouble finding her own sleep tonight. He wouldn't be able to claim such.

Limping toward the closed shutters, he pulled them open, allowing the glorious light of the bright moon into the chamber. A strong gust of icy wind tugged loose several strands of hair from the queue at his nape, and he turned to find Faith drawing her knees in closer to her chest, hugging them to her body.

The ache returning to his cut hand made removing his plaid difficult, but he managed to unwrap it from his body until he stood bare as a babe save for the wool tunic that reached just past his hips.

Silently chiding himself for being such a soft fool, he carefully spread the plaid over Faith's shivering body, then stepped back to watch her huddle more deeply beneath it.

She was certainly lovely.

More reason to be wary of her motives.

His thoughts threatened to stray once again toward another lovely woman with flaxen hair and skin as soft as freshly churned butter, but he quickly shut them out of his mind. His concentration must be solely put to gathering his strength and healing himself once again. With no warmth to stir the magic in him, the task would be a long one.

With his joints protesting, he lowered himself until his bare backside lay pressed against the rough, rush-strewn floor. He tilted his head until his face fell directly into the light of the moon. It took only a few moments for the light to consume him, to begin casting out every other thought,

absorbing his pain and fatigue the way a cat consumed a bowl of cream—in steady, rhythmic strokes.

But each time he came close to losing himself completely, his mind replayed one simple statement that sent him back to the beginning of the process.

I am married.

Focus on the light, on the healing.

I am married.

As though the world hadn't seen fit to punish him enough, he had managed to deliver the last lash of penalty onto himself. Trapped into matrimony not by Faith but by his own sense of honor, whatever that might be.

He'd not believed he'd had any left. A chuckle born of lunacy crept up his throat and threatened to burst through his closed mouth, but he held fast, refusing its escape.

God was playing with him, the way a young lad plays with the unfortunate spider in his path. First pulling off one leg, then another, leaving the pitiful creature to spin in circles until some benevolent predator finally ended its pathetic life.

Had he learned *nothing* from his experience with Bridget? By God, he was living the whole, horrid experience over again, the only difference being that Faith was not misleading him into believing the child was his.

Bridget, however, had convinced him she'd carried his child, and he'd been overjoyed, thinking for the first time in his life that happiness would not be completely out of reach.

Draven grabbed a fistful of his hair and pulled hard, the pain forcing him to clear his mind for the task at hand.

Heal yourself. Forget the women and heal yourself.

But it was impossible. His mind kept showing him the image of the Maitlands huddled around the church, closing in upon Faith as though they meant her harm. But how could he know they would harm her? Though Elliot Maitland was a strong leader, and in truth a bit intimidating, he'd never heard tell of the man ruling his people with an iron fist the way Harold had ruled the Camerons. The

Maitlands had no cause to turn on their chieftain or his niece, did they?

Perhaps then, they'd have no real reason to turn on Draven, either. If death wasn't to be granted to Draven, then perchance a new life had been.

A flicker of hope played games with his sensibility. What would it be like to live within a clan that didn't cower in fear when he was among them? Even if they could never like him, mayhap they would eventually accept him as the Camerons could not.

He chided himself for having such a fanciful notion but couldn't deny the spark of hope he'd ignited at the thought. He thought he'd given up a life filled with maybes, but it seemed he was not as coarsened as he'd like to believe.



Faith awakened to the feel of brisk winter air chafing her skin. She pried open her eyes and tested her tongue against her mouth's thick, cottony interior. She must have slept curled on her side all evening, for this morning her back ached terribly, and the rough blanket covering her was pressed so deeply against her face, she could feel the imprint of it upon her cheek.

Groaning, she rolled over, blinking sleep from her eyes. The sight that greeted her nearly startled a scream from her lips, but she managed to stifle it into a soft gasp.

On the floor before the window lay Draven. Dressed in a simple white tunic that had bunched around his waist, the curve of his bare backside stared up at her like a darkened half moon. The leg facing her was bent at the knee, hiding the full body part from her view, but what she could see of his manhood confused her breath so that it escaped in a half hiccup, half sigh.

It was only then that she realized that the blanket wrapped around her body was indeed Draven's plaid. How had he gone the entire night without freezing? More importantly, how had her body allowed her to sleep so soundly

throughout the night while he'd slept so close and so . . . bare?

Though she was certain the loud pounding of her heart would wake him, she moved as quietly as she could from the bed, pulling the plaid with her. She was still wearing her wedding garb, but she most certainly wasn't about to change with Draven in the chamber, asleep or nay. She would simply have to make do.

Carefully dropping his plaid over his bare backside, Faith held her breath. Draven didn't move. With a sigh of relief, she pulled her mantle from the peg on the wall and backed into the empty corridor.

Pausing only to slide her feet into the slippers near the keep door, Faith hurried into the frigid morning. She would choose to forgo her morning meal in order to find solace in the chapel. The small, stone building sat nestled just behind the keep, a cobbled, snow-covered path leading the way. Smoke curled from its chimney, alerting her that Father McKinnon was probably already inside.

While she had no desire to see Father McKinnon or anyone else this morning, it wasn't the threat of seeing him that made her halt. What caused the dull ache in her chest and slight roll of her belly was the sight of the stone steps leading to the chapel. Her mind imagined Draven standing there, bravely and foolishly declaring her child was his. She heard his garbled refusal to allow her to speak the truth, felt his hand upon her belly.

She was married. She was Draven the Devil's wife and carried inside her a madman's child.

Her knees wobbled, and as she tried to steady herself, her slippers sank deeper into the snow. The chapel wavered, shrank, then enlarged. Just when she was certain blackness would consume her, a hand gripped her arm and secured her.

"You should be breakin' your fast with the others," Father McKinnon said, wrapping his arm gingerly around Faith's shoulders and pulling her against him.

She bristled at the unexpected touch, but she needed his

strength far more than she needed his distance. Faith allowed the priest to lead her along the path, knowing she could not abide it should anyone else witness her pathetic state.

The child within her had thus far caused her nothing but grief. She wanted to hate it for the trouble it had brought to her life but could find no real sentiment toward it at all.

"Are you ill?" Father McKinnon asked, pulling Faith up the steps and into the chapel.

Aye, she was ill. If she didn't soon set them free, the truths and lies inside her were likely to dissolve all the vital parts that kept her breathing.

"Father," she whispered, longing for the days when her voice had always been strong and sure. "I'm in need of confession."

Nine



Telling Lady Faith she needed time to compose herself afore continuing her day, Father McKinnon allowed her to sit alone in the chapel for some time. But the truth of it was, he was a coward.

Her confession had been unexpected, the tale horrifically brave and foolish all at once. He'd absolved her of her noble lie but had not been successful in convincing her that the guilt of her assault lay elsewhere, not with her.

It was a sad truth that her tale of ravishment was not an uncommon one, especially with a band of rogues wreaking havoc in the Highlands as of late. Despoiling women was a favored pastime of theirs, and it seemed Lady Faith might have stumbled into their path at the wrong moment.

But rather than try to ease her mind with empty words, he watched her bow her head in silence. Watched her hands wring her plaid, her tiny shoulders straighten then slacken.

Strong lass. Brave lass. Foolish lass.

Had she truly thought declaring Draven as her babe's father would save him? Would prevent the Maitlands from learning what had happened to her? When the babe came

early, they would know she'd been no maiden on the night of her wedding. What then?

Who was going to save *her* when the truths of her lies were discovered? A lass's reputation was worth more than flesh to a leper.

Father McKinnon shook his head and turned his gaze to the marble statue of the Virgin Mary at the front of the chapel. She, too, had borne her husband a son who was not his. At least now Father McKinnon knew why Draven had been so disagreeable to the marriage. It was not his son inside Lady Faith's womb. Now he was destined to raise the child as his own.

And yet, Draven had said his vows. Why?

The answer made the priest smile. A notion both surprised and pleased him. Could it be possible that Draven Cameron might have finally done something to save his own life?

He'd never known Draven to step out of danger's way or off of death's path. Father McKinnon felt his smile wane. More than likely, it had been saving Faith's reputation that had urged the man to take such actions. Now *that* sounded more like the Draven he knew.

Only because he did not wish to draw Lady Faith's attention to his presence again, Father McKinnon managed not to scoff aloud at the irony of the situation. Men raising bastard children—it seemed a cycle never-ending.

~

Draven rounded the keep, half expecting someone to shout for him to halt. It had become a rare occurrence with the Camerons that Draven was allowed to wander anywhere alone. He'd lived the last several years closely watched, if not imprisoned within the Cameron walls for fear of what he might do outside of them, forced to sneak out of the castle during the darkest hours in order to meet Bridget.

But here, no one called out. The few who saw him leave the keep had stepped aside. He could tolerate their scowls

and looks of suspicion. And in fact, he found himself on the verge of smiling as his walk remained uninterrupted past the keep and near the chapel.

Did they trust him not to flee from his marriage? Did any save for Elliot and Faith even know he'd not wanted to wed her at all? Likely not. He could not imagine either of them wanting others to know she'd tried to force a man to marry her.

Even if he'd been thinking of fleeing, which he had not been, his body was still not back to its normal strength. Instead, he wanted only to walk amongst the trees and animals, to find a clearing of light in which to bathe himself. And what reason was there to flee if he was allowed such luxuries? An unwanted wife? As far as he was concerned, he would simply see how life with the Maitlands treated him . . . and pretend Faith was no more than a comely maid he barely knew.

As though summoned by his thoughts, the chapel door swung open, and Faith stepped outside. Her face was pale, her expression drawn. When she spotted him, her eyes widened, and her stride halted. Father McKinnon appeared at the door behind her, a look of melancholy distorting his weather-worn face.

"Good morn, Draven," Faith said, her stiff-legged movements carrying her down the stone steps. She gripped a tree and leaned against it. "You should have a mantle. You'll freeze without one."

Concern? Feigned interest in his well-being?

And where did she think he was to have found a mantle? They'd not brought a single one of his meager possessions with him to the Maitlands.

"I've a spare if you'll wait a moment," Father McKinnon said, disappearing inside the chapel. He returned a moment later, a well-worn wool mantle hanging over his arm. "We're near the same size, so it should fit you well enough."

With ungraceful hands, the priest attempted to wrap the mantle around Draven's shoulders, but Draven snatched it

away and finished the task himself. He knew Father McKinnon had only been doing his duty when he'd married Draven and Faith, but that didn't help the resentment Draven was feeling toward the older man.

The priest was the only other soul within the Maitlands whom Draven knew, and, though he would never let the old man know it, the only one he liked. He couldn't help the sting of betrayal that caused him to scowl at Father McKinnon before turning away to head into the forest.

He wasn't truly angry with Father McKinnon, but the priest was one more hand that had locked him into this marriage to Faith.

"Where are you off to this morning?" Faith called out.

Draven didn't look back. Would she try to stop him?

His question was blessedly answered when he stepped off the path and into the forest, still very much alone. He hadn't realized his body had been so tense with expectations until the knots released and eased within him. The day was his own to do with as he pleased. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so fortunate.



Draven had just spotted the clearing he'd been hoping to find when a loud yelp sounded from somewhere behind him. He heard a thud, then a few curses muttered by a young, boyish voice. Draven retraced his path until he came to a mess of green and black tartan wrapped around a scrawny mess of flesh and bones.

Reaching out, he helped the lad to his feet, nearly smiling at the sight of the small, bare arse exposed by the disarrayed plaid. His cheeks pinked by either the biting cold or his predicament, the lad patted the fabric in place, then thrust his head back to look up at Draven.

"I'm no' broken," the lad managed. "'Tis a good thing, that."

It was the page who'd served him last eve. Satisfied the lad was unharmed, Draven turned to find his clearing once again, but the small hand on his arm stopped him.

“Ye’ve my thanks. This was my da’s plaid. A bit big. Got me all twisted up in those branches.”

Draven offered a curt nod to tell the child farewell, but when he resumed his path, the lad followed.

“They call me Patrick-Hugh,” he said, his small legs all but running to keep pace with Draven. “Patrick was my grandda’s name. Hugh was my other grandda. I don’t s’pose that matters to ye, since ye canna call me anythin’ at all.”

Stopping in the middle of the path, Draven placed his hands on Patrick-Hugh’s shoulders, spun him around, and pointed toward the keep.

Patrick-Hugh simply laughed. “I’d rather go with ye. I can show ye the best hidin’ spots in this forest. I can show ye where the wolves like to sleep, too, so ye ken where ye ought not go.”

Draven simply stared at him. His solitude once again stolen by unwanted company, he prayed for patience not to frighten the lad to death with a show of temper.

“Is it true yer da was the Devil? I think it’s rot.”

Scowling, Draven bent, scooped Patrick-Hugh into his arms, then set him atop the nearest tree branch. The branch was low enough to allow the lad to climb down without coming to harm, yet high enough to give Draven a moment or two to find his clearing alone.

Patrick-Hugh sputtered and kicked his feet, nearly toppling over backward.

Draven frowned and turned to walk away. The lad didn’t seem to fear him one bit. He found himself glancing back over his shoulder to offer Patrick-Hugh another curious glance.

Patrick-Hugh had already managed to scurry down from the tree and was standing behind Draven. “Can ye teach me to shoot a bow? Or use my fists? Can ye teach me that?”

Draven’s exasperation must have shown, for Patrick-Hugh’s smile faded, and he took a tentative step back.

“Are ye angry wi’ me?”

Draven shook his head and compelled himself to smile.

"My da's name was Luke. When he was alive, he got soused so often people called him Lucifer. Does that mean we're brothers?" Patrick-Hugh asked. "I mean, they say yer the Devil's son, and I am Lucifer's."

Draven's breath hitched in his throat. Hearing such rumors repeated by the lad's young lips appalled him. He narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

"I ken Da wasn't truly Lucifer." Patrick-Hugh glanced down at his leather-encased feet. "But I wouldna mind bein' yer brother."

Disbelief lodged in Draven's throat like a child-sized fist. Brother? Draven had accustomed himself to possessing no true family of his own since his mother was killed. No one had ever wanted to so much as *know* Draven, let alone claim kinship to him. His own brother, Iain, hadn't acknowledged him since he'd stopped speaking. His father called him *bastard* at every turn.

But this wee, young lad wished to claim him as his brother?

Let the Devil have his soul, but at that moment, Patrick-Hugh had stolen Draven's heart.

Ten



Ordinarily, Faith's afternoon rides across the Maitland territory were her favorite time of day. She could clear her mind whilst riding Gertie, or organize her thoughts if the need arose. The latter had been her purpose for this afternoon, as both regret and relief were waging wars within her over her impetuous confession to Father McKinnon.

Someone other than herself finally knew the whole truth, but now she wondered what good it was, as she was certain she'd never feel quite comfortable in his presence again.

As she guided Gertie along the eastern-most wall surrounding the keep, a shriek called her attention toward the cottages behind her. Faith turned Gertie around and squinted into the glare of sun upon snow to see what was amiss. A flash of plaid edged along the front of the third cottage.

Draven.

He was walking with purpose, his stride defiant and proud, until he finally disappeared into the forest. A moment later, Magdalene, a sour-faced widow, stormed out of

the cottage pulling her young son, Patrick-Hugh, behind her.

"Silly fool," Magdalene muttered. She turned and bent slightly, glaring at Patrick-Hugh with eyes no woman should ever set upon her own child. "Haven't we enough troubles wi'out ye takin' up wi' the likes o' that one? Aren't ye friendless enough all on yer own?"

With none-too-gentle hands, Magdalene turned Patrick-Hugh around, swatted his bottom, then shoved him lightly toward the cottage. Before the lad could enter his home, however, Magdalene glanced up and noticed Faith's presence.

"Beggin' yer pardon, my lady."

Anger alone kept Faith seated atop Gertie. She clutched the reins tightly in her fist and lifted her chin. "'Tis not my pardon you should seek, Magdalene. Do you truly find it so appalling that young Patrick-Hugh should find a friend in my husband?"

"Meant no disrespect, o' course," Magdalene said in a tone that said she was more sorry for getting caught than for saying what she had. She snatched Patrick-Hugh before he could disappear inside the cottage and wrapped her arm around his shoulders. "I was jus' worried he was bothering Sir Draven."

Sure she was. Faith scowled and turned her gaze toward the lad beside her. His warm brown gaze melted the chill from her skin. She smiled, pleased to find the gesture genuine. "And how did you find my husband to be, Patrick-Hugh?"

Patrick-Hugh's cheeks pinkened, and his gaze dropped to his damp boots. "He's kind enough, though a bit crotchety."

Dazed by the lad's honesty, Faith felt her smile broadening even as Magdalene stepped down upon Patrick-Hugh's foot to silence him. "It's all right, Magdalene. I think Patrick-Hugh is a very clever lad. What happened here before I arrived? I heard a shriek."

Magdalene opened her mouth, but Faith held up a hand

to silence her. "From Patrick-Hugh, Magdalene, if you don't mind."

Magdalene wrung her hands together and remained silent. Patrick-Hugh shrugged.

"Nothing happened, truly," the lad said, finally moving his bright gaze back to Faith. "I found 'im in the forest. Think 'e wanted to be alone, though, 'cause he picked me up and brought me out of the trees."

"And the shriek?" Faith asked.

He looked up at his mother and shifted nervously on his feet. "She spotted 'im carrying me and took me from 'im."

Faith looked to Magdalene. "Does my husband truly frighten you so much that you would scream at the sight of your child with him?"

"My lady, he was carrying my Patrick-Hugh like he was a sack o' seed, slung over 'is shoulder, like. It looked to me that my lad had been hurt."

"He dinna hurt me, I had fun," Patrick-Hugh said. "But I dinna ken he likes me much."

Faith found herself so filled with sympathy for Draven, her anger with Magdalene was pushed aside. Had this been his life? Suspected of wrongdoing simply because he was present and breathing?

Frustrated that the people she had loved, her very own clan, would be as guilty of such treatment as the Camerons had been, Faith's appreciation of Patrick-Hugh's attempt to befriend Draven tripled.

"I don't think he likes anyone much," she said, then instructed Patrick-Hugh to return to the keep to see to his page duties.

As she rode Gertie hard into the forest, she searched out the path Draven had taken. Was she as bad as the rest of them? She had been Draven's accuser as well, but wasn't her incident different? She'd lied to save him, to save herself. She hadn't done it out of some sick sense of righteousness and judgment.

So why, then, did Draven seem so set on liking Faith

least of all? And worse, why did his opinion of her matter so much?

Draven truly liked Patrick-Hugh, and because he liked him so very much, he'd promptly taken the lad home and sworn to himself to keep his distance. The lad was going to have enough difficulty growing up without being isolated for befriending Draven the Devil.

Brothers.

Aye, it was what he would have done for his own brother. And it didn't mean Draven couldn't watch out for the lad from afar.

Any hope Draven had of finding a place for himself within the Maitlands had been dashed the moment Patrick-Hugh's mother looked upon him with fear and disgust. He'd seen the accusation in her eyes. Had heard the venom in her words as she shrieked for him to leave her son be.

With a resigned sigh, Draven stepped into the clearing he'd been trying to get to all morn. A large, gnarled root protruded from the snow, offering him a dry place to sit. He took it and inhaled a deep, icy breath, letting the chill of it cool his lungs and clear his mind.

Just ahead of him, the sun broke through the treetops in a wide ray. He tilted his head toward the light, its warmth brushing a bit of the cold from his flesh.

"Magdalene was wrong to scold you as she did."

Faith's voice rippled around him like an unwanted fog, chasing away the lightness his mind sought. He glanced over his shoulder to find her sitting atop a magnificent palfrey the color of freshly turned dirt. The palfrey stood still between the trees just outside the clearing, nuzzling the snow while Faith studied Draven.

Shrugging in hopes that his disinterest would send her away, he turned back to the sunlight and closed his eyes.

Faith watched Draven's shoulders slacken. The sight of him sitting so calmly in a place that encased her darkest secrets mesmerized her, nearly allowing her the courage to

dismount and step into the wide circle that had once been her favorite place within the forest. But even as she'd nearly convinced herself she was brave enough to do so, her body remained petrified atop Gertie, unable to carry through on her thoughts.

For a brief moment, her mind betrayed her, turning Draven's black hair to auburn, his slim shoulders to wide ones. In her mind, Draven's silence became the self-satisfied laughter of her assailant, sapping every bit of dampness from her throat and mouth.

She wanted to speak with Draven, to assure him that she didn't fear him as the others did, but how could she convince him of such a thing when she was certain her face belied her fear?

He would believe that fear was directed at him, wouldn't understand that her mind had traveled to another time and day when this clearing had become anything but peaceful.

When she tried to speak to Draven again, her voice cracked from lack of moisture. She swallowed and tried again.

"A festival is to arrive near the Frasers' land in a few days. I thought you might like to go. Th-there will be craftsmen of variable skill, and I know you must want to purchase some belongings of your own."

She cringed, aware far too late that her offer had been insensitive. Surely he was frequently the object of stares and whispers. What had she been thinking, asking him to venture willingly into a crowd?

But to her surprise, Draven stood and faced her, nodding in agreement. He gestured to the mantle Father McKinnon had given him.

"Y-you want to go? I would understand if you'd prefer not to. We can always bring someone here with the things you might need."

Draven's gaze narrowed on her, and he answered her with one curt nod.

"All right. You're sure you'll able to travel the few hours it will take to ride there?"

Again, he nodded before sitting back on his tree root and giving his back to her once more. Thinking she should be congratulating herself on their first real courteous encounter, Faith couldn't help the tug of sadness that pulled at her from Draven's abrupt dismissal. Something about him mimicked the sadness weighing down her own heart. She was drawn to him, attracted to him, but was unsure what to do about such feelings.

When she arrived at the keep, Elliot was pacing before the hearth, his hands clasped behind his back in a posture Faith knew meant he was worried. He spotted her and attempted a smile so stiff, she would have laughed if he hadn't appeared so distraught.

"Is the council giving you a difficult time of it still, Uncle?"

"It's those damned thieves," he muttered. "The outlaws of Macnab were spotted stealing two cattle from Angus last eve. That makes a clean dozen they've stolen from him over the last two months."

"We should set guards to keep watch. Shall I have Shane and John take first post tonight?"

Rounding on her, Elliot waved off her question. "I have something to discuss with you that holds far more importance to me than a few head of cattle."

He was looking at her just as Da had so many years ago when he'd found her sheltering kittens in her chamber. Suspicion, perhaps. Or disappointment? But what had she done? She could think of nothing about which he should admonish her, and the likelihood of his discovering her lie about Draven was minuscule at best.

"Has something happened?"

"That would be the question I'm putting to you, lass. I'm certain it's not my affair what occurs between a man and his wife, but as you are my niece and the chieftain-to-be, I am making it so." Elliot bent and pulled from the fireside chair a long, white sheet of linen. "Judith pulled this from your bed this morn."

Elliot's face had deepened to purple, and his old hands

twisted the sheet. "There's blood," he said, thrusting the sheet at her. "I wanted to make certain you were not forced . . ."

Faith took the sheet, her mind fighting her heart for control. Forced? Aye, she'd been forced. But not last eve, and certainly not by Draven. "I don't understand, Uncle." She dropped her voice to a whisper lest anyone overhear. "There should be no blood."

He, too, glanced around the empty hall. "Since you are carrying his babe already, I know as much. Only your first time should cause such bleeding." He wiped a hand over his face and shook his head. "'Tis times such as these when I wish your mother was alive. I do not like speaking to you about such things."

Barely listening, Faith stared at the sheet, the sight of blood making her empty stomach tumble. She had bled severely after her attack, and it had been no small spot such as this. Where had the blood come from?

"You see why I had to know if he abused you," Elliot said, his voice as awkward as his stance. "Even if you chose to bed him willingly, there should be no blood."

"Perhaps when Draven put me to bed, one of his wounds reopened?"

Elliot's features eased, and his scowl turned into a smile of comprehension. "Of course. If he did not—"

"He did not assault me, Uncle."

"Then it must be his own blood."

Happy to have assuaged his worry, Faith leaned forward to allow Elliot to kiss her cheek, and watched him walk away. But when she was left alone by the fire, she stared at the bloodied sheet and collapsed onto the chair.

When she'd awakened this morning, she'd found herself sleeping atop her coverlet. Her bed had never been turned down.

Draven had slept on the floor beneath her window. How then had his blood managed to find its way beneath the coverlet and onto the concealed sheet beneath it?

Eleven



Are your injuries no longer healed?" Faith put the question to Draven the moment he limped into the keep. His leg was throbbing, but for now his outing to the clearing seemed to have soothed his other aches and wounds. Still, he was exhausted and in no mood to partake in a discussion with his new *wife*.

He glanced at her as she stood before the great fire, her arms full with what appeared to be white linen. His gaze was drawn to the halo of light surrounding her face and golden hair, and his heart stuttered for a moment as he realized this was the first time he'd ever looked at her without seeing her deception. Without being reminded of Bridget's guile.

Faith was lovely. He'd known that before, of course, but just now, he took in her plump bottom lip, her slightly upturned nose. Even in the dim light of the keep, her green eyes sparkled with life. Life, but not joy.

Draven stepped deeper into the chamber. Faith's mouth was moving, but her words were elusive. Perhaps it had been the solitude he'd enjoyed in the clearing that had

altered his perception, but he was suddenly fascinated by the story her eyes told. They were the eyes of someone far older and wiser than a lass her age had the right to be. Haunted eyes. Eyes like those he saw each time he caught a glimpse of his own reflection.

He hadn't realized he'd walked so far until Faith stepped away and thrust the linen into his arms. They'd practically been nose to nose, and the inquisitiveness of her gaze had turned to one of trepidation.

Was she frightened of him, after all? He would have smiled, but the small circle of blood on the fabric he now held caught his attention.

"I-is this your blood on my bedsheet?" she asked, moving herself until the fireside chair stood between her body and his.

Nodding, he studied the small stain. It had looked so much bigger this morn when he'd cut himself. When he'd awakened to find Faith gone, it had occurred to him that some of her people would want proof that a wedding night had truly taken place. He'd managed to pull up a sharp piece of splintered wood from the floor and had used it to reopen the wound on his hand.

He held out his hand, showing her the raw cut between his thumb and finger, but the understanding he'd hoped to glimpse in her eyes never came. Irritated and weary, he tossed the sheet into the fire. He was going to find restful sleep even if he had to use his power to bar every door and window in this place.

Faith watched in confusion as Draven walked out of the hall and up the stairs. So Draven's wounded hand had caused the blood? Lord she wished he could speak.

Why would he do such a thing?

"You look pensive, Lady Faith. Are you all right?"

Faith jerked her gaze up to find Father McKinnon entering the hall. As he untied his mantle, bits of snow fell from his graying hair.

"I am fine, Father," she said, fighting the urge to excuse herself from his company. He knew her ugly truths, knew

her shame. It took great effort to smile and attempt to appear welcoming. "Come. Sit by the fire and warm yourself."

She watched the priest move slowly across the room, his arms already held in front of him, ready to warm his hands by the fire. Perhaps his arrival could be used in her favor. After all, he was the only one around who knew anything about her husband.

Patiently waiting for him to sit, she took the chair across from him. The moment he was situated, she pounced. "Why doesn't he speak, Father McKinnon?"

His eyes widened, and he stopped dusting himself off to look her over. "'Tis a question best put to him, Lady Faith."

And one she was willing to wager Draven would not answer. "He can barely stand to remain in my company long enough to glare at me."

Father McKinnon leaned back in his chair, studying Faith so closely it was all she could do not to fidget in her seat. "From what you told me this morn, I'd have thought you feel the same about being in *his* company." The soft expression on his face turned momentarily hard and stony. "Besides, can you blame him? You, yourself, told me you trapped him into this marriage."

Her stomach clenched, and Faith looked around hastily to make certain no one had overheard the comment. "I did *not* trap him. I *saved* him."

Sighing, Father McKinnon closed his eyes and laid his head against the back of the chair. "I didn't mean to rile you, Lady Faith, but yours is a marriage built on lies. You can't expect him to accept you more readily than you accept him."

There was no arguing with that truth. Faith nodded and tried to soothe her irritation with a deep, calming breath. "I believe it will help me to understand him a bit better if I know why he does not speak. I know he has been mute a long while, but I've heard rumors that it has not been his *entire* life."

Father McKinnon remained silent for so long, Faith was

afraid he would say nothing. Eventually, however, he straightened in his chair and stared wistfully into the fire.

When he turned his head slowly to look at her, he appeared lost in reverie. "He could speak until he was a lad of five summers. When his mother died . . . we've not heard his voice since."

Draven was silent by choice? She knew the story of Aileas Cameron's death. Burned at the stake by her own husband for witchery.

Sadness gripped hold of Faith's heart. An image of sweet, innocent Patrick-Hugh entered her mind, and she imagined him with black hair and pure, blue eyes. Imagining Draven suffering at such a tender age sparked a compassion toward him she hadn't believed she was capable of feeling.

"Were you there that day?" she whispered.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, Father McKinnon shook his head. "Nay. By the time I learned of her fate, it was far too late to intervene on her behalf. Harold Cameron knows better than to be doling out his own sentences with a priest as a witness. It's why I wasn't there when Draven was being tortured so. Harold conveniently waited until I was due elsewhere. But that is all the answers I can give. The rest must come from your husband, Lady Faith. It is not my place to divulge more."

How did one persuade a silent man to speak of his past? She didn't know how to go about convincing him to confide in her. She wanted to get to know the man who'd kept her secret. Wanted to know if she was right in believing there was more to him than was visible at first glance.

"Thank you, Father," she said. "Shall I see you at supper?"

He smiled and closed his eyes. "Perhaps if I don't sleep through it."

On her way to Draven's chamber, she stopped in her own to retrieve her letter-writing tools. She and Draven were bound as husband and wife, and whether they liked one another or not, they should at least know one another.

She supposed she would have to be the one to take that frightening first step.

~

She wasn't going to get what she wanted from him. Draven gripped the quill and paper Faith had handed him and tried to figure out her game. She claimed to want to know about his mother, about his childhood.

Why? What could any of that possibly matter to her? The lass was full of her own secrets, and yet she demanded his?

He sat down on the chest at the foot of his bed and used his thigh as a writing table, noticing she had scarcely moved from her spot in the doorway. For someone who had tried so hard to convince him his powers might have come from goodness, she continued to make him feel like a predator.

Hurriedly scratching his reply, he tried to dismiss the weight of her stare, but her presence was as heavy as the woolen mantle he'd taken off moments ago.

I will not speak of my mother. He handed her the note, relieved when her stare moved from his shoulders to the words.

As she read his response, her full bottom lip curved downward, and as though it had occurred only seconds ago, he recalled the way that lip had felt pressed between his own. When he'd kissed her at their wedding, he hadn't considered that the memory of her mouth would linger so long on his. When she spoke, he didn't tend to dwell on how nicely they had fit together, but in these blessed moments of her silence, he liked her mouth so much more. Everything about her was tender, save for the lie regarding her child's conception, and even his anger regarding that lie was beginning to soften.

She handed him the paper and crossed her arms over her chest. "Then don't tell me about your mother, but tell me *something*. Tell me why you choose silence. What purpose

does it serve? Can you talk at all, or has your voice dried up without use?"

Several years ago, Draven had attempted to use his voice again. But he'd been so appalled by the grotesque, raspy sound, he hadn't tried since. He certainly wasn't going to tell Faith that, though.

Instead, he wrote, *Tell me about your babe's da. Do you still meet with him? Love him? What does he think of our marriage?*

When Faith read Draven's words, her hand fell to her belly, her fingers spanning the breadth of her abdomen. Shame prevented her from divulging the details of her child's conception.

It was odd that she was able to put the child out of her mind as frequently as she did, refusing to let it consume her life the way its conception had. Acknowledging the babe's presence inside her brought forth horrible thoughts and feelings she had no wish to possess.

Like wondering if she'd ever be able to look at it without remembering what its father had done to her.

Was she capable of ever doing so?

"The babe's da," she said in a low whisper, "will never know he sired this child. He is gone from my life. That is all you've need to know."

Who is he?

It was not a question she could answer even for herself.

"It appears we both have secrets the other will never learn," she said. "Will you at least tell me why your blood came to be on my bedsheet?"

This one answer, it appeared, he would give her.

You needed proof of a wedding night.

Faith studied his words, then moved her gaze to his cut hand. His reputation would not be tarnished by her lack of virtue, yet he had used his blood to cover her secret? She smiled and glanced at his face, thinking to offer him a word of thanks, but the intensity of his stare stopped her.

Draven's deep blue gaze settled upon her mouth. She tucked her bottom lip between her teeth. The guarded man-

ner in which he usually held himself had slackened, and it seemed his mind was no longer on their exchange.

"Draven?" she whispered, hoping to pull his uncomfortably warm gaze from her lips. "Will you tell me nothing of your life? You are my husband, and I wish to know you better."

He blinked rapidly, as though pulling himself from a trance, and once again took the quill and paper into his hand. Dipping the quill into the inkhorn on the chest, he glanced up at her, the strange warmth still lingering in his eyes and resting upon her face.

You would do well to leave me be.

Thankful that whatever spell he'd been under had broken, she smiled. "Should I be afraid?"

He returned her smile with a lazy one of his own and shook his head.

"Then why should I leave you be?"

He hesitated a long moment before putting quill to paper again.

I'm afraid I'll forget I do not like you.

The written words sparked a tiny flame of hope inside Faith. It would do her conscience well to know Draven might forgive her lies.

"Then there is hope that this union between us might become a friendship?"

Again, he took his time with the quill. When she took the parchment from him, the scrawled writing had become the lovely script of a man who knew the written word well. Beneath the beauty of his script, however, were words filled with such angst, her heart truly ached for him.

Hope, Lady Faith, is the Devil's greatest tool.

Twelve



A few days later, a crowd as dense as the snow beneath Draven's ill-fitting boots attended the Winter Festival. Placing himself in a group such as this had been as foolhardy as a worm leaping into a barrel of live herring.

Even a normal man should be wary of taking company among so many. Draven had learned long ago that a rotten suggestion from one man could trickle into the minds of others, and normally, Draven became their target. He kept his alert gaze on those around him, prepared for any sudden cause for alarm.

He'd agreed to attend the festival in hopes of bartering for a few materials he liked to carry with him while hunting. Now, however, he was beginning to wonder if a few supplies were worth this apprehension.

"You look as though you're heading for battle rather than fun," Faith murmured beside him.

He glanced down at her, disconcerted by the lack of worry he saw on her face. Since he'd met her, there had been too few times when her features were relaxed and

carefree. As Faith grinned up at him, the smothering presence of the crowd seemed to have lessened.

"Is there anything you'd particularly like to do while we're here?" she asked.

Draven glanced at the sky, his gaze searching for a way to communicate. When he saw the falcons circling above a bright blue canopy, he pointed at them.

"Oh! The falconer. You wish to watch him?"

He nodded, remembering his brother Iain's falcon, Bride. It had been Draven who'd trained Bride each day, but never had he been allowed to take the bird on a hunt. When Bride died four years past, Draven had been blamed, and Iain had never allowed him near the one that took Bride's place. His affection for the astute hunters had never quite left him.

As he walked with Faith and Elliot, the other Maitlands who'd accompanied them trickled away, each eager to find entertainment suited to their various tastes. The young Maitland, Shane, however, hadn't left Faith's side. On the journey here, he had made it a point to tell Draven he'd intended to marry Faith, which explained the scrutiny Draven found himself under.

In fact, Draven had spent a sickening amount of time during their journey to the festival wondering if Shane was the father of Faith's child.

Jealousy. The moment he'd recognized that emotion creeping into his belly, he'd cast it out. What did he care who Faith dallied with? Why should it bother him that Shane made no attempt to hide his desire for Faith?

But it did bother him. He was beginning to enjoy her smiles and didn't much like the thought of another man appreciating them as he did.

Now, Draven allowed the many distractions to steal his attention from the painfully obvious love-struck fool. Bards and troubadours strolled amongst the masses, their off-tune songs cutting through the icy winds to clash with one another in disharmonious notes and rhythms.

Faith stopped long enough to purchase hot mulled cider

for the four of them, but Draven refused his offered cup. Warmth was the last thing he needed to find in a crowd this large. He couldn't chance allowing the heat to bring forth his powers.

Even though the fragrant aroma of the cider made him salivate, it was better that he stay cold than allow his powers to heat out of his control.

"Graham MacTavish has set up his wares," Faith said, pointing ahead of them at a bright red tent. "He uses the finest wool for the lining of his mantles and cloaks. We should start there."

Draven was so consumed by the chaos around them, he barely paid any attention to Faith as she bartered with MacTavish for Draven's mantle. She'd removed the worn one from his shoulders and had fit the new one in its place while he'd been engrossed in listening to a nearby troubadour's ballad.

*The Devil he hides in well-placed disgrace;
Pretty he be, to the ones he preys on;
But Highlanders stare wi' disgust on their faces
At the Dev'l o' Cameron.*

The song brought an angry smile to Draven.

Faith was still fussing with his mantle. Draven shrugged her off. Deliberately, he stepped closer to the crowd, lifted his hands in front of him, and clapped, loudly . . . slowly, three times.

Since the troubadour had not finished his ballad, Draven's applause caught his attention, as well as those around him. Recognition settled over the troubadour's rat-like face, making it clear he hadn't known the villain of his ballad had been present.

The man's eyes widened. He took a few steps backward before turning and fleeing into the crowd. Some of the on-lookers had followed the singer's stare, and upon noticing Draven, they, too, disappeared with haste. Those brave

enough to remain leaned in to whisper in their companions' ears, or else pulled their children closer.

The frustration of being outcast was not new to him, but knowing Faith and the Maitlands stood close enough to play witnesses to his humiliation brought a bitter taste to his mouth. Stepping up to take whatever these people wanted to cast at him, however, was the only way he knew how to endure.

Mock them so his pain would remain his secret.

Never let them know how much their taunts injured him.

He glanced back to find Faith standing frozen where he'd left her, her eyes wide, her mouth agape. Beside her, Elliot watched Draven with interest, and Shane wore a look of silent triumph.

Draven smiled at all three of them in turn. Let them see what they have brought into their clan. Let them be prepared for the trials that came with his presence.

Still feeling the crowd staring, he turned back to them and swept dramatically into a deep bow. Most backed farther away. To his left, however, a young lad, who appeared to be near to ten summers, lifted his sister in his arms.

"Best run, Nellie," the lad whispered to the babe. "The Devil eats wee lassies like you."

The tiny, cherubic face turned to him. Large blue eyes welled with tears, then she released the most horrific wail Draven had ever heard. He stepped toward them, wanting to soothe the child, but the lad misread his intentions and ran away with his sister tucked in his arms.

"Fools," Faith whispered when she finally managed to find her voice. She watched Draven's jaw clench, watched him lift his head to stare defiantly into an old woman's eyes.

He didn't fool Faith.

The ballad had cut him. She'd known it when his shoulders had fallen for the brief moment when the ignorant child had insulted him.

A bubble of pride swelled within her the slightest bit that he had done such a good job of concealing his pain. Better that they fear him than ridicule him.

Faith's hope that Draven's reputation had not been deserved flourished. Had he truly been the monster they claimed him to be, he would have made that troubadour pay for his ballad. *She* had certainly wanted to.

When Draven bent to retrieve his new mantle from the ground, Faith leaned closer to Uncle Elliot. "I will not abide such treatment of him from the Maitlands."

"Our Maitlands are not so foolish," Elliot muttered. "For a moment, I feared he would make the troubadour's head pop or some such."

Faith bit back a grin. "I thought you did not believe in such foolishness."

Clearing his throat, Elliot darted his gaze away. "I don't."

"And you agree he should be treated as we treat all Maitlands?"

This time, Elliot's gaze held steadily to hers. "He's not yet proven himself to be a true Maitland, Faith."

She squared her shoulders and pulled Elliot back a few steps. Draven's back was still to them, but the man was mute, not deaf.

"He has not proven himself *not* to be a Maitland, either."

Elliot's eyes narrowed, and he tugged at his beard. "What is it you're wanting?"

"Gold. I'd like you to take half of what's in your purse and give it to him."

His narrowed eyes widened. "You're mad. Have you any notion of how much coin I brought with me today? I intended to purchase horses—"

Faith held up her hand. "These people already think poorly of him, Uncle Elliot. What will they think if they see us paying for his necessities?"

"They'll think we don't trust him with so much gold, and they'd not be wrong."

Faith scowled. Elliot didn't trust Draven with the gold, but he had trusted Draven with *her*? Seeing as how she was in the process of asking her uncle for a favor, she chose not

to point out that rather telling detail. She had no intention of causing a row.

In front of them, Draven was moving slowly away, his head back and his gaze on the falcons flying in the distance. Faith linked her arm in Elliot's and pulled him beside her in order to follow Draven.

"It would be foolish to give him *anything*," Shane said, catching up to them.

"You've no say in this, Shane." Faith glared up at him and wiggled her fingers toward the games carrying on to their left. "Go and find something to entertain yourself."

"*You* entertain me." He smiled, but his flirtation didn't charm her as it used to.

"She's married to someone else. Best to keep that in mind. You no longer have the right to take such liberties." Elliot glanced toward Draven, whose back was still turned. "She's right, Shane. Go occupy yourself elsewhere. This matter doesn't concern you."

His cheeks red, Shane opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. He let out an unmanly huff and cast a withering glance at Draven. "Very well. I shall find the two of you later."

When Shane disappeared into the crowd, some of the tension in Faith lessened. She'd always enjoyed Shane's company, mostly because he was a beautiful man with a lovely laugh, but his possessiveness of her lately had grown uncomfortable.

"Best walk with your husband, Faith." Elliot gestured to where Draven was turning behind an apothecary's tent. "We wouldn't want people to talk more than they do."

"The gold? Will you give it to him?"

Elliot let out a sigh and rolled his eyes. The display nearly made Faith chuckle. This man was feared by most Highlanders. He was a master with sword and strategy. Yet one request from Faith could have him looking like any other softhearted uncle.

"Can't I just give it to you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Lest you've forgotten, he doesn't

“speak, Uncle. It would be much easier for him to make the purchases himself, rather than try to let me know what it is he’s needing each time. Consider it my dowry if it soothes you to do so.”

“Oh, very well.” Elliot jerked the purse strings looped around his belt and thrust the bag at her. “Just take it all. Give him what you will, but buy yourself something, as well.”

“I’ve no need for any—”

“That’s my condition. Take it or leave it.”

Faith smiled and wrapped her arms around Elliot’s neck. “I’ll take it. But it is *you* who must give him the money. It would injure his pride to accept such a gift from a woman, but he could not refuse it from his new laird.”

She placed a quick kiss on his cheek. He chuckled and pointed toward the apothecary. “Go on with you.” He snatched the purse from her hand and plucked out two coins and closed them in his fist. “I’m keeping these for myself. I’ll be wanting to drink myself into forgetting how much coin I’m about to put into your husband’s hands.”

He left her so abruptly, Faith didn’t have time to react. Spending the afternoon *alone* with Draven had not been part of her plan. She’d expected Uncle Elliot to accompany them. She felt as though she’d just swallowed the heavy purse Elliot was now taking to Draven.

However, she couldn’t expect her people to quell their fears about her husband if she could not. Taking a deep, calming breath, she started for the apothecary.

Draven was browsing through an assortment of bandages when Elliot called his name. Glancing at the tent’s opening, he found Elliot waving for him to step outside. When Elliot ushered Draven around the side of the tent and away from the crowd, curiosity prevented Draven from protesting.

“You’ll not shame the Maitlands by making my Faith

purchase your goods," the laird said. "Take this, and acquire what you need."

Elliot placed a heavy, silk purse in Draven's hands, then stepped back and nodded. Draven could do naught but stare. Gold? Elliot Maitland had just handed him gold? He'd been contemplating what he might have to barter in order to acquire his supplies, wondered what he would do for clothing and the other necessities he'd been stripped of. And here was Elliot, offering him the very thing he needed.

Why?

"I don't care what you purchase, the gold is yours. But . . ."

Ah. Here it was. The reason behind the kind gesture, the knife that would make this gift painful.

Draven waited while Elliot glanced around. Seemingly satisfied that they would not be overheard, he leaned in and spoke in a low voice. "Purchase something nice for my Faith. I've told her to find something she likes, but I know she won't. So I'm counting on you to find it for her. Something pretty and frivolous, mind. Nothing she might be in need of."

That was it? That was the task that came with so much gold? Draven had had to earn every bit of coin he'd ever needed. His own father had never so much as given him a piece of silver, yet this man gave him wealth in a tiny bag.

He couldn't take it. Such gifts never came without a heavy price to pay later. But when he shook his head and tried to force the purse back into Elliot's hands, Elliot stepped back and narrowed his eyes.

"You would shame me by returning the gold? Tuck it away before I find a far more clever place to shove it."

Draven hesitated, but when Faith turned the corner in front of him, he decided that arguing with Elliot in front of her was not how he wanted to begin this day with her.

As he tied the purse to his belt, Elliot nodded with satisfaction. "Besides, that gold is rightfully yours. You're Faith's husband, and what belongs to her belongs to you now, I suppose."

Pained by the sudden tightening of his chest, Draven nodded. He'd never had anyone to share anything with before, let alone anyone who might share anything with him. He thrust out his hand, and Elliot took it, giving it a hearty shake before walking away.

"Did you wish to purchase something at the apothecary's, or shall we make our way to the falconer?" Faith asked, her gaze following Elliot as he disappeared behind the tent across from them.

He could return for the bandages later. Right now, he was still too astounded to actually spend any of the coin he'd been given. He pointed toward the falconer's tent, the weight of the purse on his hip bringing him a tiny burst of anticipation.

Elliot had seemed to want him to have the gold, and Draven couldn't suppress the desire to spend a bit of it on a falcon of his own.



Godfrey couldn't breathe. The mad injustice of what he was witnessing crept through his veins like a strong dose of hemlock. She couldn't have married the bastard. Draven Cameron could not possibly have taken what was Godfrey's once again.

Yet there they were, strolling through the festival's crowd, seemingly oblivious to the scandal their marriage had caused. Who would have thought to see the fine Lady Faith married to Draven the Devil?

Godfrey pulled at his hair and yanked the feather bonnet from his head. Damn and blast Draven Cameron. For once, Godfrey had been so close to something of his own, so close to claiming the power of the Maitlands as his. Faith had been his only hope after Bridget's death.

Once again, Draven had gotten there first. But why? Why would Faith have married a man with such a blackened reputation? It was supposed to have been Godfrey who'd wooed her into marriage. That's why he had set out to meet her in the forest two moons ago.

Nay, he hadn't accepted her rejection. But when he'd taken her there on the forest floor, he had been certain it would only be a matter of time before she came looking for his pleasuring again.

She'd not returned once. Now he understood why.

Draven must have been keeping her away. Not only had Godfrey been forced to sit by while his love, Bridget, had spread her legs for Draven, now he was being forced to do the same with Faith.

He remembered arriving at Bridget's cottage and watching Draven bend over her body—the body carrying Godfrey's child. She'd let Draven believe he'd fathered the babe, hoping to further seduce him into using his powers for Harold Cameron's campaign against the king. Harold had threatened Bridget with proof of her father's involvement in a plot to dethrone King James—proof he'd had no trouble finding, since Harold, too, had been one of the primary schemers. In order to keep her father safe, Bridget had agreed to seduce Draven. If she could convince Draven to join Harold's revolt, his powers to control and heal would have handed his father the throne.

And in return, Harold would remain silent about Bridget's father's involvement.

But Bridget's plan hadn't worked. Even when Draven had believed she'd carried his child, he'd refused her pleas to turn against King James.

In a fit of outrage at his refusal, she'd foolishly revealed the truth about the child's conception, and Draven had murdered her for it a few days later, taking Godfrey's child with her.

Everything Godfrey and Bridget had been struggling to achieve had been for naught. Her father had been beheaded two days later, and Harold Cameron had been given a nice sum of gold for reporting the scheme.

Now that Godfrey was forced to watch Draven walking with Faith Maitland, his hatred for the devil increased tenfold. His only hope for the life he wanted had been in finding a woman of wealth and power to wed. He couldn't hope

to love another woman the way he'd loved Bridget, but he could certainly grow fond of a life of riches.

Faith Maitland had been his last hope. Nowhere in the Highlands was there a more beautiful or powerful lady to give him the life he deserved.

She was giving that life to Draven Cameron.

"You and I shall meet," he whispered, glaring at the silent couple as they passed. "But not before I've taken back everything you've stolen from me."

Thirteen



“He is magnificent,” Faith whispered, afraid her voice would boom in the mews where she and Draven stood. She certainly didn’t wish to be the cause of alarming the peregrine perched on Draven’s arm.

Draven ran his fingers along the falcon’s back feathers. He didn’t smile, but his eyes glowed and sparkled with obvious pleasure. The stunning bird opened and closed her beak and blinked her curious eyes up at him, seemingly as mesmerized by him as he was by her.

This was the first time she’d seen him show any real joy. The childlike expression he wore knocked the breath out of her. The loving strokes he laid upon the falcon riveted her, and when she boldly touched her own fingers to the downy, soft feathers, his hand brushed hers. Confusion and warmth spread through her belly.

Such large hands. But *gentle* hands. Hands that should have made her cringe, not contemplate whether or not his gentleness was reserved solely for birds of prey.

The jesses tied around the falcon’s ankles jingled. Faith jerked her gaze away from Draven’s hands, her cheeks

suddenly too warm. She pulled back her hand and pretended to adjust her pleats.

"You handle her well," she managed, turning her scrutiny to a muddy-colored male peregrine on a nearby perch.

When silence greeted her, she chided herself and offered Draven a sheepish grin. How easy it was to forget he couldn't speak. Other than a limp she noticed every now and again, the man was the portrait of health now that he'd recovered from his father's beating. That his voice didn't work still surprised her occasionally, especially in these rare moments of normalcy.

"Will you buy her?" she asked, watching him place the bird back onto her perch.

He shook his head. She wondered if he realized that while his body said *no*, his hand was playing with the coins on his belt, and his eyes were still lovingly attached to the falcon.

She certainly didn't wish to row with him today, but she couldn't hold her tongue. "'Tis a shame. She seems to want you as badly as you want her."

Draven moved his gaze to meet Faith's, and it lingered there for a long while. Something soft and warm flickered behind his heavy lashes, and Faith felt herself being lured into their depths. Bit by bit, she leaned toward him as though pulled by those hypnotic eyes.

The flap to impermanent mews opened to let in a group of gangly lads consumed with fits of laughter. Faith started, stepping away from Draven, her cheeks aflame with embarrassment.

When they saw Draven and Faith, the four young men sobered and stepped back.

"Blimey. We'd best be comin' back later," the foremost lad said.

Draven scowled and shook his head, gesturing behind him with a sweep of his hand. Understanding his meaning, Faith spoke up. "No need to go. We were leaving."

Irritated by the look of relief on the lads' faces, Faith

stubbornly shoved her arm through Draven's and pulled him out of the tent. She'd seen him without his tunic, had even bathed some of his wounds. But neither of those instances had prepared her for the flex of muscle beneath her palm. Such arms would make a woman feel safe and protected—a woman who trusted him, that was.

Once outside, she realized the liberty she'd taken in touching him and started to pull away. But her contempt for the people turning to gape at Draven once again forced her to fight the discomfiture of being so near to him.

She would not disgrace him by pulling away in front of those looking for any reason to fear him more.

Stretching her lips into a painful smile, she patted his arm with her free hand. When she glanced up at Draven, she caught him staring down at her with curiosity.

"Shall we watch the archery tournament?" she asked, all too aware that her frozen smile was not moving gracefully as she talked.

His mouth twitched and puckered slightly, but he nodded and guided her along the path to where the contests were taking place.

Faith thought to ask him whether he was a skilled archer, but she held her tongue. The way the Camerons had feared him, she doubted very much Harold would have allowed his son to be trained with anything deadly.

She couldn't fathom being feared by so many. Aye, his powers were strange, but she'd yet to witness him using them in any evil way. Only once had he turned them loose, and to what harm? He'd frightened her a bit, but the incident had resulted in a healthier Draven. Even when he'd used his powers to lock her inside his chamber, it had been for his own protection. He hadn't hurt her in any way.

If Draven Cameron had been truly evil, Faith was certain he would have proven it to her already. Lord knew she'd given him every cause.

Feeling much more at ease now, Faith's stiff smile slackened into one of sincerity. The aggressive ugliness of the crowd's reaction to Draven had lessened considerably, and

truth be told, she was enjoying his company, silent or nay. She let go of Draven's arm and led him to a barren birch tree where they could watch the contest away from the congregation encircling the games.

When Draven pulled his mantle from his shoulders and laid it upon the ground, gesturing for her to sit, she was so pleased, she pulled him down beside her. The nearness of his body to hers brought a flush of heat to guard against the chilly air. She watched him sprawl out, pressing his back against the tree, his gaze focused suspiciously on the crowd around them.

She'd hoped he would be able to enjoy the day, but that idea seemed ludicrous to her now. Perhaps she could change that. Her mind wandered back to the image of him holding the small falcon, and she knew just how to improve his day. The first moment she was able to get away, she was going to give Draven something to call his own.



Nearly an hour passed when the archery champion was given the small, golden bow statuette prize. Faith's feet had grown numb, and the rest of her body trembled with cold. The snow had finally stopped falling, but Draven's new mantle had become damp beneath her.

Uncomfortably aware that she'd been too engrossed in the games to have spoken to him for a long while, she glanced at Draven. Obviously, he hadn't minded her silence. He was leaning against the trunk of the birch tree, his eyes closed, his mouth slightly agape as he slept. He must have been truly exhausted to have let his guard down long enough to fall asleep in a crowd that had obviously made him uncomfortable.

Her gaze fell to the purse protected beneath his palm, and she smiled.

Carefully, silently, she rose to her feet. The mews were only just across the way. Draven had wanted that falcon badly, but for reasons unknown to her had not purchased it. She wasn't at all certain what the falconer would ask for the

creature, but she had more than a bit of gold tucked in the purse at her own waist.

Surely it would be enough.

Smiling as she walked, Faith hurried across the way and slipped inside the falconer's tent. The falconer placed the bird he'd been holding onto a perch, then turned to greet her. "Looking for a falcon, eh?"

"I want to purchase a gift for my . . . husband." She cleared the awkwardness from her throat and pointed to the small, speckled peregrine on the center perch. "He fancied that one."

Several moments later, her mood lighter than it had been in months, Faith paid the man and promised to return for the bird before closing. When she left, she was pleased to see luck remained with her. Draven was still lying beneath the tree, and she wouldn't have to spend the rest of the day searching for him.

She waited for the moving crowd in front of her to offer an opening, but when she tried to step forward, the solid bulk of a man stepped into her path.

"Pardon me," she said, still smiling.

When she raised her gaze, her smile faltered, and her blood turned colder than the biting wind.

Staring down at her with narrowed eyes was her child's father.

~

Draven stirred beneath the birch tree as hundreds of voices began dribbling into his head one by one. Slowly, the smells of the festival trickled through his nose, bringing him more fully awake: horse dung, sweat, hay. At the sound of giggling, he opened his eyes and found two watchful stares gazing down at him.

The two lassies were pointing at him and whispering. One noticed his eyes were open and gasped, grabbing her friend's arm, and together, they darted away.

His body and mind still groggy with sleep, he turned his

head to find Faith. She was gone. Other than a few stares, the crowd was essentially leaving him be.

He took only a moment to revel in that fact when the smell of bannocks wafted beneath his nose. His stomach growled. A few feet away, a woman and her son were selling food, along with cups of mulled wine. More than the food, his chilled body craved the warmth of that drink, and he pushed himself to his feet. He gathered his now-soaked mantle from the ground and tucked it under his arm, then pulled two coins from his purse.

One cup of warm wine shouldn't charge his powers so much that he couldn't control them.

So long as the crowd left him be . . .

It was odd, this feeling of normalcy. In fact, the lack of anger within him at this moment made him feel a bit empty. It had been so long since he'd had any real hunger for food or drink, fury and guilt constantly feeding and filling him. He wasn't sure he liked being without it.

Food made him feel alive, and for so long, he'd been trying to deaden himself as a penance for his sins.

But not now. Right now, all he wanted was a bannock and the warm drink.

"A bannock, sir?" the small lad asked when Draven approached the cart.

He nodded and pointed to the mulled wine.

"That'll be one bit," the mother said, ladling the wine into a cup.

Draven pressed two coins into the woman's palm. It was more than she'd asked for, but that didn't stop the scathing look she gave him. She wanted him gone from her stand. It was perfectly obvious in the way she nervously looked about at the other customers now passing her wares by.

He didn't care. He wouldn't let it anger him and ruin his enjoyment of the drink. After stuffing the chilled bannock into his mouth, he swallowed the dry oat taste down with a large gulp of wine, closing his eyes as the warmth of it slipped down his throat and brushed the bite from his skin.

The rest he sipped more slowly, savoring every drop be-

fore she could ask him to return her cup. Brimming with newfound vigor, he finished it off and smiled at the still-frowning woman. He handed the cup to the lad and made his way down a path on his right.

He itched to return to the mews, to purchase that speckled peregrine. Instead, he headed toward a nearby smithy. Perhaps here he'd find a bauble for Faith that would leave him enough coin for the bird.

The smithy was sharing his spot with a skilled armorer, whose display of claymores caught Draven's attention the moment he stepped inside the makeshift stall. It had been two years since he'd owned more than a dirk for protection. Harold hadn't wanted Draven to own anything so deadly as a sword.

"You won't be wanting to buy that."

Draven turned to find Elliot Maitland behind him, eyeing the fine basket hilt of a nearby claymore. Draven was tempted to snatch the claymore from the wall and pay the entire contents of the purse just to prove to Elliot that he could not control what Draven did.

They wouldn't trust him with a sword any more than the Camerons had.

"Our own is the finest arms craftsman in the Highlands. If you're wantin' a sword, best you speak with him."

Draven narrowed his eyes. Elliot didn't mind him having a weapon? What sort of trickery was this? He wished he had a quill and parchment so he could ask.

Before he could ponder Elliot's words further, a small stone caught his eye. He stepped toward the wall on which it hung and fondled the teardrop amber stone hanging on the end of a long, silver neck chain. The stone was perfect, with flecks of brown and gold meshed together with spi-dery black veins.

"Now *that* is something worth spending the gold on," Elliot said. "My Faith has always had a liking for ambers."

Draven didn't look at him. Instead, he waited until Elliot left the stall before he purchased the chain. He counted out the gold for the smithy, all the while calling himself every

sort of fool. It took more than half the bag of gold to pay for the jewel, which meant returning to the mews would be pointless.

Still, the thought of seeing the silver chain looped around Faith's ivory neck appealed to him even more than the weight of the peregrine on his arm.

When had he stopped hating her? And why was he anxious to find her again? He should be luxuriating in the respite from her prattle. And he certainly shouldn't be so anxious to see her reaction to his gift.

He'd never had enough gold to purchase such nice baubles for Bridget, a fact he was grateful for now that he knew what she'd been. She hadn't needed anything from him other than his powers; she'd had another man to make up for the trinkets she hadn't received from Draven.

But Faith wasn't loose. He could tell as much by her sometimes timid, sometimes outraged reaction to his touch. She hadn't flirted outrageously with Shane, either, even though it had been apparent the lad would have been more than willing to give her all the jewels she might want.

His thoughts had distracted him so much, Draven hadn't realized he'd left through the wrong side of the stall. Rather than stepping back into the crowd, he had left through the back side near the bordering forest. Gently palming Faith's gift, he turned left to make his way around the stall.

As he turned to walk between the mews and the smithy, a whimper stopped him.

Against the back walls of the mews, a man and woman were entangled in what looked to be the heat of passion. Smiling, Draven turned to leave them in peace, but the sound of the woman's voice prevented him from moving.

"—touch me," was all he'd heard her say, but it was enough for him to recognize the voice.

Draven stepped around to the side of the mews so that his body stood partially hidden by a large tree. It was Faith. She had her hands pressed against the man's shoulders. His face wasn't visible. It was buried in her neck, his thick auburn hair curling around her neck.

Telling himself to walk away, that he didn't care what she did or with whom, Draven continued to stare, his gaze riveted on the bronzed hand now traveling from Faith's creamy neck to her breast.

God save him, he was reliving Bridget's betrayal through Faith. The only difference was, he didn't *love* Faith. But she was his, and he damned well protected the few belongings he possessed.

Draven regretted the hot mulled wine he'd savored such a short time ago. The warmth in his belly was now stoking his anger, making it impossible to pull his gaze away from the cur's hand, pressing and squeezing *his* wife's breasts.

A hand taking liberties not earned, taking liberties that, by all rights, were Draven's.

A woman screamed.

Realizing the agonized sound had come from his wife, Draven moved his red-hot gaze from Faith's breasts to her face. Her lovely features were now contorted with what looked to be pain. A flash of smoke-encompassed orange snared Draven's attention back to her breast.

"What the—" Faith's lover, previously oblivious to his partner's distress, glanced down at the smoke issuing off of Faith's smoldering plaid. He stepped back, snatching his hand away from the flame, his eyes wide. When he stumbled toward Draven and fell to his knees, he let out a gurgling sound and goggled at his hand, which had become no more than kindling for Draven's powers.

He'd set them on fire.

Fourteen



Draven watched in horror as Faith's lover fell to his knees behind the mews and wisely plunged his hand into the white snow, throwing back his head and releasing a howl of outrage.

Ignoring the man's pain-filled cries, Draven started for Faith. He'd known better than to allow his anger to get away from him, to chance transferring the heat inside him to another. As he approached her, he noticed his uncontrolled anger had burned through the plaid, leaving threads that were curled, frayed, and blackened to cover Faith's right breast. The tunic beneath the plaid was still intact, though a sooted handprint stained it.

He gripped her by the shoulders, forcing her to look up at him. Her green eyes were clear, save for the tears brimming them. She was unharmed. A pity he would not be able to say the same for her lover.

Faith couldn't think. Her breast stung, but the burn pained her far less than the man's brutal groping had. She glanced back and forth between Draven and the man who'd been moments away from assaulting her person yet again,

unsure which man she should fear more: the man who'd attacked her or the man who'd set her on fire.

She'd seen the reflection of flames in Draven's eyes, had seen the anger on his face when she'd looked at him. She shook Draven's hold from her shoulders and slipped out from beneath his arm. The fury in his eyes seared her nearly as badly as the flames on her plaid had.

He was angry with her?

She could read the accusation in his eyes. He hadn't realized what he'd intruded upon. He thought her loose, perhaps, but that was no worse than what he must have thought before, knowing she was carrying another man's child.

Her assailant retched, calling her attention to him. The sight of him weakened her knees and made her stomach rebel, but she would not scream at him as she so desired. Her secret was still safe. Draven need never know of her shame.

Praying she could make it to the shelter of the forest before she lost the contents of her stomach, Faith pushed past Draven and ran.



Elliot rounded the smithy's stall where he was due to meet Shane, but he was nowhere to be found. Elliot had taken great pains to keep track of Shane today. Hadn't wanted the lad intruding on Faith's outing with her new husband. He'd thought a bit of recreation might soothe the tension between them.

It was true enough Elliot hadn't been keen on his sweet niece wedding a Cameron; be he the warrior, Iain, or the gossiped devil, Draven, it did not matter. The entire clan was a bad lot he'd successfully avoided allying with for years. But when Faith had her heart set on something, it wasn't within Elliot's ability to deny her.

And since the deed was done, it would benefit all concerned if the couple could make the best of it and try to get along. After all, they'd created a child between them. Surely

they could rekindle whatever fondness for one another that had led to *that* occurrence.

As Elliot rounded the corner, he spotted Shane in the crowd moving toward the next series of contests. He motioned for Shane to join him, and as he waited, a sparkle caught his eye. Nearly covered by the snow lay a long silver chain attached to a stone. He recognized it immediately as the one Draven had been eyeing in the smithy's.

As he palmed the jewel, he noticed three sets of footprints surrounding his own. Two sets led into the forest, one toward the festival.

As Shane approached, chatting about the brunette he'd left behind, Elliot followed the footprints into the forest.



When something brushed her shoulders, Faith nearly screamed. Draven stood behind her, wrapping his damp mantle over her own burned one. As she watched his hands secure the mantle around her neck, she tried not to flinch. She'd been foolish to want to believe his powers had come from God. There was no godliness in the ability to set someone aflame, even if that someone was a monster.

But neither was there godliness in being grateful for such a brutal display of violence.

Draven must have seen the trepidation in her eyes, for he stepped back and dropped his arms to his sides. She opened her mouth to ask that he leave her alone, but she shut it again when she heard Elliot's voice calling out to her.

"I'm here, Uncle!" she yelled.

Grateful to escape having to face Draven just now, she spun to face her uncle. Shane walked alongside Elliot, his gaze hardening when he caught sight of Draven. For a moment, Faith wondered how differently her life would have turned out if she'd never been violated and had been free to marry Shane as she'd planned.

He was certainly a fair man, still as lovely to look upon as she'd always thought. Had she married him, she would

not be terrified of what each day might bring, would not be chained to a man who confused her ability to think straight.

"You're shivering," Elliot said, rubbing her arms. "Is everything all right?"

"Here," Shane moved toward her and deftly removed both her own and Draven's mantles from her shoulders. "Take mine."

He'd pulled off his own mantle and had begun to swing it around Faith's shoulders when a puzzled look came across his face and he froze. "What the . . ."

Too late, Faith remembered the hand print on her tunic, the singed plaid that no longer covered her breast. She gasped and snatched Shane's mantle from his hands, covering herself.

"What's the meaning of this?" Elliot asked, pushing Faith's hands aside so he could get a better look.

Taking a threatening step toward Draven, Shane demanded, "What did you do to her?"

"An accident, Uncle," Faith said, reaching out to prevent Shane from further approaching Draven. "And I'd thank the three of you not to stand there staring at my bosom."

Quickly tying Shane's mantle around her shoulders, she turned and attempted to walk away with what little dignity she had left. Her legs would not comply. Her knees buckled, forcing her to grip a nearby tree for support.

"I'd like to know what sort of accident leaves a hand-print such as that," Elliot said, taking Faith's arm and wrapping it around him. He stooped and lifted her into his arms, then glanced back at Shane and Draven. "We're returning home. I'll have my answers before the day is through."

Not if Faith could help it.

She peered over Elliot's shoulder and watched Draven bend to retrieve the two discarded mantles. He eyed the hole in hers, rubbing it between his fingers, then glanced up to meet her gaze.

Whatever fear she'd felt toward him softened at the expression of remorse clearly etched across his features. She

knew well the look of guilt when she saw it, and just now, it looked to be eating Draven alive.

He'd saved her body and, quite possibly, her life. There was no shame in that, but she could not thank him without revealing her secret.

The feel of the cur's hand squeezing her breast still lingered, overwhelming her enough to ignore the sting of her burn. Even now, she fought the urge to retch, recalling the stench of his breath and the unseemly, foul words he'd spoken in her ear.

Draven had saved her. He had no reason to harbor any guilt at all.

It was Faith who owned the right of guilt. In truth, she was a bit surprised that Draven would care at all whether he found her with another man. That he didn't know she'd had no choice in the matter shamed her.

A man would have been able to fight. She had not been.

What sort of chieftain could she ever become knowing that about herself?



He could have killed her, just as he'd killed Bridget. Draven's stomach clenched at the thought, and he cursed himself for caring. For not hating her as he thought he had.

He shoved Faith's sooted tunic under his bed. He'd saved it when Essie had gone to toss it in with the soiled laundry, but he hadn't wanted to see that handprint washed away. It would serve as a reminder of the harm he'd caused today as well as of the many reasons jealousy was to be avoided at all costs.

Finding a way to assuage his regret over hurting her was of the utmost importance. He'd begun his repentance by refusing to give Elliot the answers he'd demanded for more than an hour after they'd arrived home. The laird had been displeased by Draven's noncompliance, but Draven had felt he owed it to Faith to keep her secret. He doubted she'd ap-

preciate his informing her uncle that he'd caught her in a dalliance with a lover.

Now, he would try again to appease his guilt. The keep was finally quiet. Most everyone had retired for the night as midnight had now come and gone. He could do what needed to be done, and come morn, no one need know what he'd been up to.

Still clad in his day clothes, Draven pulled his mantle from the wall and put it on. He ripped the blanket from his bed and wrapped it around him. His body wasn't warm by any means, but he was warmer than he'd be without the coverings. Faith would most likely have a fire burning in her chamber, as well. That would help him find the heat he'd need to do his magic.

He was halfway to his chamber door when he remembered the necklace he'd purchased for Faith. Elliot had given it to Draven during his inquisition, claiming to have found it near the mews. Uncertain why he did so, Draven took it from his bedside table and slipped it around his neck.

Faith's chamber enveloped Draven with more warmth than he had expected. He'd allowed his own chamber fire to dwindle, thinking it best to remain cold to keep control of his powers. But the warmth here would aid him now.

Already, a tingle of life kindled in the pit of his stomach, feeding the magic within him, but this time, he did not recoil from it. He embraced it as he did when he needed to heal himself. He was about to attempt something he'd never done before: heal and control at the same time. Fearing the impact doing so would have on his strength and restraint, he'd never used both of his powers simultaneously. He certainly hoped he could manage the feat.

What if he was wrong, and the fire he'd started hadn't wounded Faith, after all? Was it possible the heat had not touched her skin? If so, then he was violating her privacy for no reason.

He recalled the bits of flesh that had hung from her lover's hand and the handprint emblazoned on Faith's tunic.

It was impossible to believe the flame hadn't reached her body.

Steeling himself for what he must do and knowing it would not aid him in his desire to remain distanced from Faith, Draven crossed the chamber and sat carefully on the edge of her bed. He focused on her troubled face and coaxed his ability to control her to the front of his mind.

Your sleep is restful, he thought. *There is no one in your chamber.*

Though she gave no outward sign of hearing him, the energy she dispersed tangibly settled as though peace had been cast over restless slumber. She would not feel his ministrations or sense his presence but would likely feel the lack of it when he left her.

His anxiousness left him. The desire to take his time and study her emerged in its place.

It was a pastime he had often enjoyed with Bridget, watching her sleep while the world around them was as silent as the world within him. There had been no arguing, no chastising him for his unwillingness to use his powers for her slightest whims. Asleep, Bridget had been content to sleep in his arms, content to allow him his belief that he alone was enough for her.

Now he found himself examining Faith in much the same way.

Nay, it wasn't truly the same, for Faith had not asked him to use his powers for her gain. There had not been sufficient time for her to do so. Once she realized he could maneuver a coveted bauble from its display into her hands, she was likely to urge him to do so.

Only once had he stolen for Bridget, and the greed the gesture had inspired in her had been enough for him to return the trinket to its rightful owner the next morning.

Never again had he done such a thing.

Never again would he.

Faith sighed, a soft smile born of pleasant dreams touching her full lips. Disliking the memories stirred by watching her, Draven gingerly reached out and pushed down the

blanket covering her. He slipped his hand behind her neck and untied the ribbon holding her sleeping gown to her.

He guided the gown down her shoulder. When his hand brushed the flawless, creamy flesh, he hesitated. He took a fortifying breath and pulled the gown farther down, revealing a full, perfectly round breast, marred pink by a light burn and topped with a tight, rose-colored nipple.

Then Draven bit his lip and filled his palm with her supple breast.

Fifteen



Faith's breast was warm to the touch.

Raw, red, and angry looking, the mound of flesh was still beautiful. An ugly reminder of what he'd done to her, perhaps, but beautiful nonetheless.

Summoning the magic from within had never been a particularly enjoyable task for Draven. It was tiring and painful, often making him feel as though his bones were being stretched far too long beneath his skin. But he'd never been so challenged to call it forth as he was at this moment. Instead of a burning, healing heat in his belly, he was consumed by a fiery blaze between his legs.

Faith's chamber had taken on a smothering haze. This was not his purpose here. He meant to heal Faith, not fondle her. But God, the feel of her soothed a bit of his soul.

He could not fault his body for its reaction, nor could he control it. He could, however control his mind. He searched for the blinding white light of healing he knew lurked somewhere behind his lust. Behind his closed eyelids, what looked like the purest snowflake appeared, then burst into a band of silver and wrapped around his mind. The heat of it

traveled down his face, his throat, then finally settled in his chest like an aching need, powerful enough to kill if not quenched.

The bones in his fingers cramped, forcing his hand to contract around the breast in his palm. Light pulsed behind his eyes, but Draven held on to the small thread of control he needed to keep Faith asleep. The union of powers collided in his head, causing a spasm of pain so intense, he fought the all-consuming need to heave.

Then, as profoundly as its appearance had been, the heat retreated, and an icy numbness flowed through him. Slowly, afraid he might collapse before he could hide the evidence of what he'd done, Draven opened his eyes and stared down at the pale breast he held.

No evidence of the burn remained. Faith did not stir.

His first attempt to combine his powers had been a success.

Reluctantly, he withdrew his touch and gently pushed her gown back in place. As he tied the ribbon behind her neck, his fingers trembled. The task complete, he stood, desperately clinging to what strength remained to keep from falling. His arms felt burdened with iron chains as he lifted them to pull the amber jewel from his neck. After placing the gift on Faith's pillow, he sent her a silent apology for the pain he'd caused her and stumbled back to his own chamber.

He stripped himself bare of clothing and fell onto the bed, allowing a deep, heavy sleep to chase away his lingering guilt.



When Faith awoke the next morning, two thoughts occurred to her before she so much as opened her eyes: she would learn to defend herself against ever being assaulted again, and she would convince Draven to speak.

A bubble of excitement expanded in her belly despite the fact that she didn't have a plan for either course of action. She would not let one man's actions control her any longer.

She would fight, both for herself and for the possibility of a civil future with a husband she'd never wanted.

Feeling as though something deep in her spirit had been mended in her sleep, she smiled and greeted the daylight. The first thing she noticed was that the pain in her breast had vanished. Before she could investigate, however, the twinkle of silver on her pillow caught her eye. Curious, she sat up and found the silver belonged to a chain on which dangled a perfect amber teardrop.

A gift from Elliot?

Her smile broadening, she slipped the jewel around her neck. Something about today was different. She could feel it in her soul. It wasn't just that this was the first morning in two months that terrifying dreams hadn't awakened her. Nay. She felt strong. Alive. Connected to herself just as she used to.

Not bothering to call for Essie, Faith slipped off her sleeping gown and fetched a clean tunic and plaid from the chair by the wall. Her gaze fell to her breast, and she touched it tenderly, glad to see the glaring red reminder of the day before gone. Humming softly to herself, she dressed quickly and shoved her hair into a messy plait, then went in search of food.

That was different as well. She was hungry. Her stomach wasn't rebelling at the thought of breaking her fast. She craved eggs, and butter, and bread. She wanted a large, frothy cup of milk to wash it all down.

Afraid this feeling of contentment was only temporary, she all but ran to the great hall.



Draven hadn't taken kindly to the rapping on his chamber door. Nor did he take well to Essie ushering him out of bed at cock's crow on Elliot's orders. His entire body ached, and sleep still weighed heavily on his lids as he watched Essie straighten his bed and fuss about the chamber.

She didn't seem to mind that he stood before her, naked

and immodest. In fact, she seemed to take delight in disrupting his morning, and Draven suspected her presence in his chamber was Elliot's punishment against Draven's having not confessed to his actions the day before. Elliot Maitland was proving quite creative in his methods of revenge.

Essie sighed and thrust open the shutters. The instant the cold air blanketed him, Draven's entire body froze.

"I suggest you cover yourself, sir," Essie said, tossing a bit of coal in the fire. "Such temperatures are flattering for no man."

She turned to face him. Her grin faltered as her gaze lingered on the part of his body that hung before her. "O' course, there are always exceptions."

Draven managed to find enough humor in her remark to fight the awkwardness it had caused. Essie collected his clothes and thrust them at him, murmuring some nonsense about blessed steeds and lucky mares.

"Will you break your fast in the hall, or should Judith bring you a tray?" she asked, her gaze carefully avoiding that part of him.

At the mention of food, Draven's stomach rumbled, and he nodded.

"Well, lot of good a nod does. Are you nodding about the hall or the tray?" She propped her hands atop her thick hips and narrowed her eyes. "Surely there's a better way for you to let your thoughts be known."

He shrugged and sorted through the clothing in his arms. Wanting to make certain he had better control over his powers today, Draven tossed his tunic on the bed, thinking it best not to become too warm. As he wrapped his plaid around him, Essie must have resigned herself to the fact that she would get no further answer from him, for she huffed and set to adjusting his pleats.

When she was done, she looked him over and nodded. He expected her to ask why he'd not donned his tunic, but instead she said, "Stay put. I've got summat that'll do the lot of us a world of favors."

As he watched the stout woman walk away, Draven felt a smile creep onto his face. It had become wonderfully obvious that no lairds in creation differed as greatly as Elliot Maitland and Harold Cameron. He'd thought as much when Elliot had given him the gold yesterday. But the fact that Essie thought herself free to deliver any sort of orders confirmed his suspicions. It also reinforced his hopes that the clans would differ as greatly as their lairds.

And perhaps the Maitland women—Faith in particular—might differ from the Cameron lassies as well.

The image of Faith locked in her lover's embrace pulled him from his fanciful notion. He'd known she hadn't wanted theirs to be a true marriage any more than he had, but it didn't help the sting of betrayal her actions had wrought.

Bridget of the Camerons.

Faith of the Maitlands.

The similarities between the two soured his mood.

"Here, take this." Essie marched back into the chamber carrying a leather tube with a cord attached to the cover.

"Faith gives them to the pages to use when she teaches them their letters. You can carry it around your neck so you've paper handy if you've summat you'd like to say."

Draven didn't move to take it from her. He was too lost in thoughts of Faith taking the time to teach the pages their letters—something Harold had forbade until the lads of the clan reached manhood.

"Take it, then," Essie urged, stuffing the leather tube into his hands. "There's a small, corked inkwell and a quill inside, as well."

No one at the Camerons had ever tried to make communicating with him easier. They hadn't cared to know what he thought. Draven offered her a nod that he hoped conveyed his gratitude and slipped the cord over his shoulder.

He untied the lid of the tube and pulled out a curled piece of paper, the inkwell, and the quill. Then, gesturing for Essie to stay put, he scrawled his question for her to read. He hadn't had the chance to return to the apothecary

at the festival to purchase the hunting supplies he'd wanted, but now he thought he might find these necessities here, in the village.

Essie might be able to help.

She read his note and nodded, handing it back to him. "Matrilda is not a true apothecary, but she's our midwife. If anyone would have bandages and ointments to part with, it would be her."

Her gaze drifted over him. "Are your wounds still painin' you? Can't say as I'm surprised. I'm still no' quite believin' how well you're looking now after I seen you so damaged naught but a few days ago."

Draven didn't answer but stuffed the writing tools back inside the tube. As he stepped around Essie, he couldn't stop himself from lightly patting her on the shoulder in appreciation for her kindnesses.

"Och now," she muttered, her cheeks pinkening a bit. "None of that. I'm too old to be dazzled by that smile o' yours, ain't I."

But her soft expression said differently. Gestures of kindness were rarely unappreciated by anyone. He smiled and started for the door, but Essie caught his hand and searched his face.

"Was it magic that healed you? Is what they say about you true, then?"

He hesitated only briefly before nodding, feeling it best that she hold no misconceptions about what he was. His affirmation seemed to baffle her, but she didn't release his hand. Instead, she squeezed it and smiled.

"If it eased what they done to you, then I see no devilry in that."

At a loss for any response, Draven could do nothing but watch her go.

That afternoon, Faith found Shane in the bailey practicing his swordplay with a young lad who looked near to fourteen summers old. This was what she'd always found

so appealing about Shane, the fact that he was never too busy to pass on his masterful skill with weaponry to those who wanted to learn. He was so passionate about the skills of battle, it irritated him to see a poor swordsman who dared call himself a fighter.

"A man would never call himself a tailor simply because he owned a needle," he had told her several winters ago. "No more should he call himself a swordsman simply because he owns a claymore."

"Head up, Michael," he told the youth he sparred with now. "That's it. Now widen your stance."

The lad obeyed but was still too slow to fend Shane off. The practice ended with the lad on his back and Shane gloating over him, offering words of advice for their next meeting. Faith waited until he'd helped Michael to his feet before announcing her presence.

"I wondered if I might steal a moment of your time," she said.

Michael, seemingly abashed at having his defeat witnessed, thanked Shane before hurrying toward the armory. Shane smiled and slid his sword into its sheath.

"I have always had all the moments in the world for you, Lady Faith. That has not changed."

Shane hadn't referred to her as *Lady* in so long, the formality of it caught her by surprise. "Are we no longer friends, Shane, that you feel you must address me so?"

His fair features hardened, and his expression looked pained. "You are a married woman now, as your uncle is so fond of reminding me. I don't wish to offend."

"You could not offend me."

Once again, Faith was burdened with the guilt of knowing yet another life had been affected by the choices she'd made. She and Shane had always been partial to one another, and she'd known how much he'd wanted to marry her. Had she gone to him and told of her assault, perhaps he would have cared for her enough to keep her secret and claim the child as his own.

She would never know.

"If I didn't offend you, why are you so silent?" he asked, snatching his mantle from the tree on which it hung. He wrapped it around himself, studying her intently.

Faith cleared her throat and smiled. "I would like you to practice with me. Uncle Elliot has taught me much about the strategies of war, and I'm a decent shot with a bow, but neither would help me if I found myself in need of protection."

Shane's expression darkened. He glanced at the keep with narrowed eyes. "You wish to protect yourself from your husband."

"What? Oh! You misunderstand." Telling herself she shouldn't be angry that Shane had leapt to such a conclusion, considering the incident at the festival, Faith tempered her irritation. "I don't wish to protect myself from anyone in particular. I simply mean to acquire more skills should the council decide they still wish me to succeed Elliot."

"But a sword? They are so heavy—"

"Nay, not a sword, per se, though I'd do well to at least learn to handle one. I was thinking perhaps a dirk, but more than that, my own hands."

At this, Shane chuckled and looked upon her with familiar fondness. "Dare I hope you wish to pummel your husband to death? Or a vicious gossip, perhaps? Come, Faith. Tell me whose face you're wanting to smash."

She couldn't help but laugh. The sound felt so wonderful rolling about inside her that her heart fluttered in her chest.

"No one. Truly. But what if I were caught in the middle of a skirmish, or someone tried to take me for ransom? It happened to Lady Moira of the Frasers several years ago," she said. "I only want to be able to fight back, to know my strengths and my foe's weaknesses."

Shane watched Faith's face blush and fought the urge to pull her into his arms as he would have done a few days ago. She was still as charming as ever, and he was more than pleased she'd sought him out.

He'd sorely missed her company these past few months.

She'd become more inclined to spend time with Elliot than to go riding with Shane as they used to do. Now that she'd married, he feared her distance would only worsen. He could live with the knowledge that she'd chosen another man, so long as it didn't cost him her companionship. He only wished she would have made a wiser choice than Draven the Devil.

That turn of events had certainly deflated Shane's confidence. Surely he was a better catch than a mute?

He studied Faith, wondering what had come over her. Her old self seemed to have emerged, casting aside the melancholy Faith who'd possessed her lately. Was that Draven's doing? Was there a chance the man was actually making her happy?

Shane grinned, surprised the possibility of such didn't taste quite as bitter as he would have expected.

"Find me in the morn, and we'll begin your lessons."



Draven had followed Essie's directions to Matrilda the midwife's cottage exactly as she had given them and found himself nearly in the forest and staring at a dilapidated cottage far removed from the others. Surely this couldn't be right. All the other cottages along the way had been well-tended and alive with the bustle of daily life.

An eerie silence surrounded this one, and it stuck out as a dead tree would in the midst of a green, lush forest.

The steps groaned when he stepped upon them, and a chunk of the thatched roof chipped away and fell with a *thunk* at his feet. He knocked. A cough sounded inside, followed by the *thump, step step, thump* of someone approaching the other side of the door. An elderly midwife, perhaps, who needed the aid of a cane to assist in walking.

As he waited for the door to open, he unrolled the note he'd been holding, ready to hand it to the midwife. He'd written his list of requested items before he'd arrived, wanting to be done with this chore as quickly as possible so that he might spend the rest of the afternoon hunting.

The midwife was not obliging in her speed—or lack thereof. It was several more minutes before the door finally cracked open, and he found himself staring down at long, stringy gray hair.

“Mm . . . wha’choo want?” she demanded without looking up to greet him. She was so short, her head barely reached his chest, giving him a perfect view on her hunched shoulders.

Draven coughed and held out the prepared list of goods. She did not take it, but did, finally, tilt her head back to look in his general direction. He saw, then, the reason she hadn’t reached for his note.

She was blind.

The blue of her eyes nearly matched the white of them, and while they stared up, their gaze did not fall directly on his face but slightly off to the right.

“What’s wrong with ye?” she asked. “C’mon. Speak up.”

But he could not speak.

And she could not read his note.

Disappointment clenched Draven’s fist around his note, and he quietly left the cottage with no way to pardon himself. His plans for the day ruined, he made his way back through the cottages, tempted to ask Essie to speak to the midwife for him, but someone called out to him, stopping his stride. Squinting into the sunlight, he made out Patrick-Hugh running toward him, his small arms waving.

When he finally reached Draven’s side, Patrick-Hugh bent over his knees to catch his breath. A moment later, he stood back up and smiled at Draven.

“Mornin’, sir. Been lookin’ ever’where for ye.” He gulped for air, his small chest expanding with the effort. “Ye’ve got a present, sir, but Trevor didn’t want to send for ye. Afraid of ye, I think. But I’m not, am I, so I came for ye instead.”

Curious, Draven squatted so Patrick-Hugh wasn’t forced to stare into the sun to see him.

“Will ye come?” the lad asked, tugging on Draven’s hand.

Draven thought of refusing, not liking the thought of Patrick-Hugh being seen in his company, but his curiosity got the better of him, and he found himself being led toward the stables. To his surprise, however, they walked past the stables to another, smaller structure he hadn’t seen before.

How had he missed it? How could he not have known the Maitlands might have mews? Eagerly, he followed Patrick-Hugh inside, the squawks of the falcons a balm for the disappointment he’d been dealt with Matrilda. The falconer turned from feeding one of the birds when they entered, his smile faltering when he spotted Draven.

After giving Patrick-Hugh a nasty glare, the falconer pointed rudely to the left wall and turned back to his duties.

Draven glanced at Patrick-Hugh for answers and found the lad still grinning. “It’s there. The speckled one. It came for ye this morn. Trevor says it was got at the festival, but no one collected it. They sent it here.”

As he stared at the young peregrine he’d wanted so badly yesterday, an ache spread through Draven’s chest and gripped his heart. He stepped forward and caught sight of a small note tied to the falcon’s foot: “Purchased by Lady Cameron.”

The falcon was from Faith?

He hadn’t thought it possible to increase his guilt over having wounded her, but indeed it was. She must have purchased the bird while he’d slept, just before she’d met with her lover.

Why would a woman buy such a considerate gift for her husband just moments before partaking in a tryst with another man? Guilt, perhaps.

The falcon cocked its head and blinked at him, then squawked as though in greeting.

“You’ll be wanting to me train her, I suppose,” Trevor, the falconer, grumbled, wiping his hands on a filthy cloth tucked into his belt. “Can’t say as when I’ll have time.”

All thoughts of hunting cast aside, Draven shook his

head and offered his wrist to the peregrine. It stepped cautiously onto his ungloved hand, bringing a huff of indignation from Trevor.

"You cannot just handle it like so. You need gloves, man."

But Draven didn't mind the sharp pinch of claws against flesh. He clucked his tongue at the falcon, and the bird shook her feathers.

"Don't ye 'ave a pair 'e can 'ave?" Patrick-Hugh asked. "Ye've a mess of 'em on that shelf in the back."

"I can't be giving them away, lad." Trevor's voice sounded anything but generous.

Remembering the purse still attached to his belt, Draven reached in with his free hand and tossed three bits of gold to Trevor.

"There, see," said Patrick-Hugh. "He's buyin' it from ye."

A few moments later, Draven stepped back into daylight with the falcon tethered to his newly gloved hand.

"It's a nice eno' present, I s'pose," Patrick-Hugh said, chasing after him. "But she could 'a got ye one a bit less scrawny."

Draven smiled. The bird was perfect, scrawny as it was.

But why would Faith give him something like this? Had Elliot coerced her into buying a gift for her husband as he had done with Draven? That possibility soured his mouth, and he hoped it wasn't true.

Just once, he wanted to be given a heartfelt gift, without wondering about the intentions behind the gesture. But the truth was, no one paid the Devil without expecting something in return.

The question was, what exactly did Faith want from him?

Sixteen



Do you like her?" Faith asked Draven. As she was returning to the keep, she'd seen him returning her gift to the mews, and she'd been filled with anticipation to see his reaction.

The expression he wore resembled the elated feeling Faith had awakened with—a slight smile he was probably not aware he wore, the first smile she'd seen of his that reached his eyes. She was glad to know she'd had a hand in causing it. She was only sorry she'd forgotten the pet at the festival, for if she'd given it to Draven yesterday, perhaps he would have lost the guilty somberness he'd worn so expressively that much sooner.

"Aye, he liked it all right," a small voice said from behind Draven.

Faith saw Patrick-Hugh squatting in the snow. His little, pink hands dug a hole in the white flakes as he smiled up at her.

"Spent all day wi' her," he added in a sulky tone, his breath emitting a cloud of white fog.

"He did, did he?" She glanced at Draven, her cheeks unexplainably hot. "I'm glad."

His gaze dropped to her breast, and the lightness of the moment vanished. When she brought her hand up to block his view, Draven brought his hand up as well, colliding with hers. Before she realized what he was about, his fingers were wrapped around the chain hanging around her neck. Her pulse quickened. She swallowed the knot in her throat.

When his fingers brushed the bare skin at the base of her throat, his icy touch caused her to flinch, but she composed herself enough not to gasp. If she wanted Patrick-Hugh to continue befriending her husband, it wouldn't do to let the lad see any fear of Draven from her. Faith forced herself not to step away from Draven's touch and smiled awkwardly.

"A—a gift, from Uncle Elliot," she managed. "Do you like it?"

His gaze caught hers, and his smile faded. He dropped the chain, nodded curtly, and turned to Patrick-Hugh. Draven pointed in the direction of the cottages, then at the approaching dusk-gray sky.

"Momma won't look for me till dark," Patrick-Hugh protested.

His cheeks were pinkened with cold, his nose rubbed raw. When he shook his head, tiny white flakes of snow rained from his carrot-colored hair.

Again, Draven gestured for Patrick-Hugh to leave them, this time more strenuously.

Sensing the lad was about to continue his refusal, Faith intervened. "I'm sure Judith would appreciate if you arrived at the keep early for your supper duties. Why don't you go on, and I'll have word sent to your momma that she can fetch you home after the supper hour."

Patrick-Hugh stuck out his glum lower lip a bit but was old enough to know better than to argue with the laird's niece.

"I'll find ye t' morrow," he told Draven.

Before Draven could dispel the notion for the lad,

Patrick-Hugh sprinted toward the keep, his oversized plaid tangling between his wee legs.

Faith chuckled. "I've offered to get him an appropriate plaid, but I think he'd rather cling to his father's, large though it is."

Draven made no motion to indicate he'd heard her. Instead, he turned his back to her and started after Patrick-Hugh toward the keep. Unsure what had caused the sudden departure of his good mood, Faith stood where she was, dumbfounded, for a long moment.

She'd been so pleased with herself today, so delighted that she hadn't awakened with the usual pit of terror plaguing her as of late. She'd taken matters into her own hands and now had a sound plan to learn to defend herself. She couldn't end the day on a bitter note, not when she had one last plan to set into motion.

"Draven, please wait. I wanted to discuss something with you."

He looked back at her only briefly before continuing on, forcing her to run to catch up to him. The snow beneath her feet crunched as loudly as the nervous patter of her heart. She stepped around the front of him, blocking his escape, not caring that he glowered down at her or could simply knock her from his path.

He didn't. His glower seemed to be enough for the moment.

"I wanted to know if you might be willing to work with me a bit each day." Determined not to show her nerves, she clasped her hands behind her back before continuing. "I think with a bit of time, we might be able to coax your voice out of hiding."

His glower turned to an unappealing smirk. As though she weighed no more than a feather, he slid his hands under her arms and lifted her from the ground, then placed her back onto her feet behind him. Before she could reason out what had just occurred, Draven had disappeared inside the keep, his quick departure as clear an answer as would have been a screeching *nay*.

Draven knew he was behaving like Patrick-Hugh, sulky and petulant. He didn't care. Receiving the falcon from Faith had once again given him hopes he had no right raising. He knew he shouldn't be angry that she thought the necklace had been from Elliot—especially since, by all rights, it had been. It had been Elliot's gold that had purchased the jewel.

She hadn't worn it because it had been a gift from Draven. She'd worn it because it had been a gift from Elliot. Would she have displayed it with such pride had she known it had come from Draven?

He should be relieved she hadn't suspected he'd been the one to place it on her pillow. How would he have explained why he'd been in her chamber while she slept?

On his way to his chamber, he passed Essie in the hall and reached for the tube of parchment hanging around his neck, intending to ask her to speak to the midwife for him in the morn. He also meant to let his frustration at Essie's failure to warn him about Matrilda's blindness be known. He'd grown accustomed to having tricks played at his expense, and had numbed himself to them long ago. It was his own fault if he allowed himself to be affected by one now.

He'd thought Essie had begun to like him, at least a little, and that maybe he had finally found an ally within the Maitlands. But now he had to wonder if she hadn't set him up for the disappointment he'd experienced that morning at Matrilda's cottage.

When Essie noticed him at the top of the stairs, Draven already had his note ready for her. She read it, her lips curving into a smile while she shook her head.

"Of course I know Matrilda's blind, silly lad. But she talks just fine without being able to see."

Draven grabbed the paper from her and scribbled, "But she cannot see my words."

As she read the note, this time her smile only broadened.

“Never met a blind person who *would* be able to. My, wouldn’t that be summat to see.”

Essie didn’t seem bothered by his glare. She didn’t back away or stutter to find words that might appease his anger as most people did. Instead, she bravely turned her back to him and continued on her way. Draven caught up to her and blocked her path down the upstairs corridor.

Still, the woman showed no sign of fear. She merely sighed in frustration and propped her hands on her waist as she’d done that morning.

“The way I see it,” she said, scowling at him, “if you can manage to get Matrilda to understand you, you can make your point to anyone gifted with sight. If you’re as clever as I think you might be, you won’t be askin’ anyone else to do it for you, either.”

Then, to Draven’s surprise, she elbowed him lightly in the ribs, dislodging him from her path. He hadn’t been mothered since he was a lad of five, and yet the familiarity of Essie’s setdown had taken Draven back to a time when his true mother had lectured him on the reasons he should learn his letters.

He didn’t know which he enjoyed more. The fact that Essie cared at all about Draven’s ability to convey his thoughts, or the fact that she’d shown absolutely no fear of him since he’d met her.

~

The next morning, Elliot caught Faith on the staircase, greeting her with a warm hug. She’d always enjoyed his embraces, even now when any other man’s touch made her skin feel infested with bugs. But this morning, she was in a hurry to find Draven. He’d taken supper in his chamber the night before, refusing to give her another opportunity to broach the subject of his lost voice.

Since she only had a little while before she was expected to meet Shane in the bailey, she patted Elliot’s shoulder and eased around his robust body. “Good morn, Uncle!”

"You'll be at the council meeting this morning, will you not?" he called after her.

She pivoted on the stairs, gripping the wall to keep her balance. "Not this morning. I'm still needing a bit of time to sort things out. You do understand?"

Elliot did not look at all pleased but rubbed his hand over his face and nodded reluctantly. "Then you'll not be hearing today's grievances in the hall, either, I suppose?"

She knew she was letting him down, but she'd awakened once again with a fire in her belly and the sense of contentment that beckoned her to continue with her tasks. It was only a few days. Surely, Uncle Elliot would understand.

"Would you be terribly upset if I did not assist you?"

He stepped toward her and whispered harshly, "You've a babe in your belly that you're not payin' much mind to. Running around like a madwoman. I thought perhaps when you ate a hearty meal yesterday morning that you were coming around. You need your rest, Faith. Do not make me command it of you."

The contentment in Faith melted into a puddle of guilt. She covered her belly with a protective hand, shamed to have had her uncle notice her lack of concern for the child. No matter the cause of its conception, the babe inside her deserved to be cared for by its mother, even if she could not fathom a day when she could look upon it without remembering its sire's abuse.

"You are right, Uncle," she whispered, a burning sting of tears threatening to spill from her eyes. She held them back, not wishing to disgrace herself further. "A few more days is all I ask."

Elliot did not answer. Instead he waved his arm, dismissing her, and continued on his way. Faith would make it up to him. He would forgive her as he always did—she was confident on the matter. If she took the time to let him see her eat, rest, and tend to her child as if she loved it, there would be no more cause for concern.

She watched him go, taking a moment to compose

herself before hurrying down the rest of the stairs, her hand still pressed against her belly.

Essie had already told her that Draven had awakened at dawn and had disappeared outside. If luck was on her side, and she felt sure it was, she'd find him before she had to meet Shane for her training and invite him to spend the afternoon with her.

The misty morning air was both painfully chilling and cast in the dark hues of lingering midnight shadows not yet chased away by the rising sun. Faith found Draven making his way toward the clan cottages, his mantle hanging over his arm and not about his shoulders as it should be.

As she ran to catch up to him, her gaze focused on the long hair hanging free of a queue, so very black against the white backdrop of snowy mountain it was as visible as a raven's feather on a blanket of ice.

Everything about her new husband seemed oddly out of place here, and Faith realized with a pang of confusion that she very much wanted to change that. She wanted her loved ones to give Draven what he had so obviously not been given amongst his own people. If he did not possess the worrisome powers he'd displayed, they would have already embraced Draven as one of their own. She was sure of it.

The likelihood of his powers being driven away, however, was as likely as his becoming chieftain of the Camerons. If only she could convince everyone to try to see his powers as she was trying to—as a gift from God rather than a curse from the Devil—Draven might stand a chance at acceptance one day. But she knew firsthand how frightening his powers could be, and she understood her clan's fear of her new husband.

Faith stopped running long enough to catch her breath. The icy air chilled her lungs but brought clarity to her mind.

Why was she focusing on trying to convince Draven to speak? If he spoke tomorrow, it would make no difference to the Maitlands. Her efforts would be better spent if she could find a way to gain his acceptance *because* of his powers. Let them see Draven's ability to heal. Did his magic

work in such a way? Was he even able to heal another person?

Smiling to herself, her confidence resuming its eagle flight, Faith decided it was time to find out.

Seventeen



Draven was halfway to Matrilda's cottage when he heard the crunch of snow behind him. Without turning around, he knew the footsteps belonged to Faith. Her presence as noticeable as a drastic rise in temperature.

His entire body came alive as it would if he'd stepped into a steaming hot bath after a brisk walk through a blizzard.

Slowly, he turned to face her, simply because he did not wish her to know where'd he'd been going. If he was going to try to make the midwife understand him, he certainly didn't want any witnesses to whatever foolery he might be reduced to.

The sight of her running toward him, one hand pressed to her belly, the other pointlessly holding back her streaming hair, caught him off guard.

She was the visage of strength and innocence wrapped in a savory package that, by all rights, was his to open.

She reached him, out of breath, her cheeks ruddy with cold. The familiar, fresh, clean smell of her wafted over him in the breeze, and without thinking, he brushed the hair

from her face so he could better see her green eyes. His hand had barely brushed her soft cheek when she flinched. But she didn't pull away.

A small step, but a good one. One that gave him a sense of power, reminding him how fragile she truly was, stiff-spined or nay.

"I . . . wanted . . . to ask," she started, fighting to catch her breath, "if you might . . . walk with me . . . this afternoon."

The invitation was so unexpected, it took Draven a long moment to realize he hadn't answered her. He'd planned on hunting this afternoon, that was, if he could get what he needed from Matilda. In answer to Faith's question, Draven pointed toward the trees.

"You wish to walk in the forest?" She glanced nervously at the trees, then back at Draven. "Couldn't we just take a stroll around the bailey?"

Slightly irritated that she hadn't understood him properly, he pulled out his writing tools.

I planned to go hunting.

"Oh." She stared at his words as though they'd made no sense. "But you've nothing to hunt with . . . but that's none of my affair. If you've set your mind to hunting, I suppose I'll have to accompany you if I wish a moment of your time."

What was so urgent that she was willing to spend a day in his company? Before he could attempt to write the question for her, Faith was already taking small steps backward in retreat.

"I have somewhere I need to be just now," she said. "But I will find you after the noon meal. Will you wait for me?"

Against his better judgment, Draven allowed his curiosity to sway him. He nodded.

"Good then. In front of the hall."

And in the next moment, she was running away from him as quickly as she'd run toward him a few moments before.

Draven waited until she disappeared before turning back

toward Matrilda's. As he walked, he pondered the odd interlude with his wife. She wanted to spend the day with him. Each time he repeated that fact to himself, he found himself anticipating the event.

But in the next instant, the anticipation was beat down by the image of her standing in her lover's arms.

That scene he'd witnessed at the festival was proof enough that she shouldn't need *Draven's* companionship. So why insist on spending time with him when there was no intention of a true marriage?

Did she hope to keep him content to ensure he remained silent about the child she carried?

That possibility deadened his steps toward Matrilda's. He stood still, listening to the howl of the wind and the indiscernible noises coming from the cottages around him.

He was more determined than ever now to prove to both Essie and himself that he didn't need anyone to acquire what he needed.

So long as the Maitlands continued to leave him be, he would live life on his own terms. The desire for death had lessened a great deal over the last few days as bits and pieces of hope for a new life had stealthily sabotaged his plans. Never again would he return to the way the Camerons had forced him to live.

He resumed walking, his thoughts heavy on his mind. Death was still more appealing to him than the life of a feared prisoner always praying for but never receiving moments of true happiness. In the small amount of time he'd been free of the Camerons, he had come to learn one thing: if he wanted happiness, he would have to create it himself, rather than continue awaiting its deliverance.

He would have to be content to lead a solitary life, because hoping for companionship that never came was far more difficult than never hoping for anything at all.

It wasn't until he heard the squeak of a door in front of him that Draven realized he'd arrived at the midwife's cottage. Jarred from his reverie, he stared down at Matrilda's hunched shoulders, her blank eyes staring just over his left

shoulder. From the opened door, the potent mixture of herbs and heat cloaked him in an overwhelming fog that made his eyes water and his nose burn.

"You again?" she said, her face contorting into a scowl. "I've no time for foolishness, so either speak your mind or be gone."

You again? How had she known his presence?

As he examined her, Matrilda muttered an obscenity and started to close the door. Quickly, Draven shoved his foot inside, forbidding her retreat.

"Well? You goin' to speak, or is it my beauty that has you struck dumb?"

Not wishing to startle her, Draven brought his hand up slowly and tentatively touched her blind eyes.

"Aye, I'm blind. What'choo gettin' at, lad?"

But when he gently lifted her hand and placed it on his mouth, her scowl softened, and she nodded slowly.

"Ah. I know who you be. Lady Faith's mute husband."

Keeping her hand on his face so she could feel his movements, Draven nodded. With his free hand, he dug through the purse on his belt and placed a few coins in her palm, hoping she would understand he had need to purchase wares from her.

It seemed she was as wise as she was blunt. She opened the door wider, gesturing for him to step into her home.

"Find what'choo need and set it on the table. Mind, I know what I got, and the number best be the same when you're gone, save for the bits you buy, o' course."

As he stepped inside, the heady aromas plugged his nostrils. How did she live among the varied scents without a continuous headache?

Matrilda hobbled along the wooden planks, sweeping her cane ahead of her. When she reached the center of the cluttered room, she spun back to face him with a speed that baffled Draven.

"You ain't plannin' on using my things for devilry are you?"

She studied him as though she *could* see him, as though

assessing his intentions through intuition. Seemingly content that he would not be sacrificing virgins come the next full moon, she moved to a shelf at the far end of the wall.

"There's ointments here, herbs in the small pouches on the bottom shelf. Wound supplies are on the other shelf by the door."

He turned to the shelf by the door and grabbed an assortment of cut linens to be used for bandages. His true intention in coming here had been in hopes of finding peppermint leaves to keep his mind clear and senses alert.

These items he found on the shelf near Matrilda, and set a half-dozen pouches of the leaves on the table for her to count. She picked them up, one by one, and sniffed them carefully, then fondled the bandages and counted them out.

"What'choo need all this for? Are you hurt?"

He contemplated the ache in his leg that still pained him and considered purchasing a compress for it but immediately discarded the notion. The wound was the only physical reminder of his father's cruelty, and Draven had no wish to forget so soon what being controlled could cost him.

Still, wanting to assuage Matrilda's misgivings about letting him purchase the goods, he sat at the table across from her and placed her fingers over his scarred hand.

"Feels healed to me. No need to bandage it."

Even her blind eyes were able to cast a suspicious glare at him. The image was eerie. This was the woman the clan allowed to deliver babes into the world? The woman they trusted with their dying?

How was it that this woman, who was almost frightening to look upon, was revered for her skill in healing, but he, who could do the same, was thought to be the Devil? The hypocrisy of it would have had him seething with anger had he not allowed himself to believe the rumors about him to be true, as well.

As she named her price for the items, he only half listened and was barely aware of slipping the gold into her hand. The dusty cottage was making his head pound, as was the overwhelming mixture of herbal scents.

But he had achieved what he'd come here to do and couldn't help the swell of pride in that accomplishment.

Today, he would be able to resume his hobby of hunting animals in need of healing and would once again take part in the activity that allowed him a tiny bit of relief from his mountain of guilt.

As he stood to leave, Matrilda clutched his hand, her grip so intense it forced him back into his seat. If possible, her eyes had become even whiter. They fluttered in her head, and her mouth fell agape.

"Tell Lady Faith," she whispered. Her head jerked forward as though emerging from a trance. "Tell her you must know her secret. Make her tell you of her child's conception."

Startled, Draven pulled his hand free and backed away from the table. He hadn't made it two steps when Matrilda rose from her chair, her eyes and cheeks wet with sudden tears.

"Tell her . . . the troubadour and the brigand . . . they are the same."

Eighteen



Godfrey wasn't sure if this was hell, but if it was, he had certainly not prepared himself for the agony of it.

His left arm throbbed just where the hand met the wrist. He tried to move his fingers but could not tell if he'd managed it. God, what was that smell? It smelled like sick and burning flesh all in one. Whiskey. Aye, he smelled whiskey, as well. The only sounds he heard were his own raspy breaths and the crackle of a nearby fire.

The depths of hell would certainly possess hissing fires and searing heat. He distracted himself from the pain long enough to imagine Draven Cameron looming over him with curling horns, bloodred eyes, and a forked tail. The image was fitting, and while Godfrey wasn't fool enough to believe Draven to be the true Devil, he vowed to make certain they were companions in hell very soon.

"Ah . . . you're awake. A bit more whiskey and perhaps we'll stop those tears."

The voice was coming from somewhere behind Godfrey, but he was too damned weak to move his head to look. His mind was so staggered by the sudden voice, it took a mo-

ment to realize the man had said he was crying. That couldn't be right. He hadn't cried in years.

It took every bit of strength in him to lift his aching arm to his face. When he tried to touch his face for proof of tears, the sight that greeted his blurred vision brought a throat-bloodying roar from his soul.

Where his fingers should have been there was only air. Where his hand should have burgeoned from his wrist there was only a putrid-looking stump, badly sewn together with filthy thread. Dried blood crusted around his arm like a soiled sleeve, and in that moment, the memories of the night before returned to him with such vividness, he thought it might be happening again.


His charred, fleshless hand. The filthy leather strap they'd placed in his mouth to prevent him from biting off his own tongue. But most of all, he remembered the last things he'd been aware of before slipping into blessed unconsciousness: the struggle he'd put up against the two sour-breathed men who'd held him to the table and the chilling sight of the rusted saw an old woman had carried into the room.

They had cut off his hand. He wanted to rip out their throats. More than that, he wanted to rip out Draven Cameron's heart. The injustice of the injury being caused by the man who had already taken everything from Godfrey dulled his pain enough for him to find his voice.

"Whore's son!" he screamed, his body jerking so violently, he toppled off the table on which he'd been lying.

Someone tried to lift him to his feet, but Godfrey pressed his weight into the dusty floor, his gaze riveted on his disgusting stump. Bridget. He would do it for Bridget. He would have his revenge. He would show Draven how it felt to lose everything he ever valued in his life.

And now that he'd seen the jealousy Draven's precious wife had inspired in him, Godfrey knew just where to find his vengeance.



Shane wrapped his arms around Faith's upper body, his breath hot against her ear. Biting down on her lip, she concentrated on what he'd shown her. She flung her elbow back, nailing him squarely in the ribs. His hold loosened, and he released a whoosh of air, but she was still his prisoner, still at his mercy. Hoping she wouldn't hurt him too badly, she lifted her leg and brought her foot down solidly atop his boot.

When Shane cried out and released her, she gasped and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, helping him to stand upright.

"I didn't mean to do it so hard," she insisted, trying not to smile at the sight of his cheeks puffed out with what she was sure was a captive expletive.

He let out the air, his cheeks bright red as he rose to full height. "You did . . . well. I'm not at all certain I want you practicing on my manly parts later."

Bits of snow dust had gathered on his lashes, just as they'd done when they were children. A sudden flush of familiarity cramped Faith's belly. This comfort she felt with Shane's nearness seemed a betrayal of a husband she barely knew. It should be Draven whose touch did not bother her; granted, she'd cringed when Shane had first put his arms around her, binding him to his body in training. But that discomfort had not lasted more than a few moments.

Shame filled her. She hadn't given Draven a chance to become familiar to her. It was *her* fault, not his.

She glanced toward the great hall where the clan was finishing the noon meal she'd chosen not to eat. Elliot would be angry with her lack of concern over nourishing her child, and by now, Draven was likely awaiting her arrival.

If he truly intended to allow her to accompany him on his hunt.

Of its own will, her gaze swung toward the chapel steps and lingered there. The ramifications of the vows spoken on those steps ate at her once again. In truth, she hadn't

thought past the wedding and into the marriage that would be its result. Like it or not, she was a wife now, though one would never know it with as little time as she'd spent in Draven's company.

"Will you come again tomorrow?" Shane asked, causing Faith to snap her attention back to him.

She nodded, her innards still running amok with confusion. "If I can. You're a superb teacher, Shane. I only hope I'll never have use for what you've taught me."

"I'm glad to teach you what I can, though in truth, it surprises me that you see the need. You've a husband now. It's his duty to protect you."

He was looking at her in that uncomfortable way of his, with eyes that saw into the deepest part of her. She knew others often saw Shane as arrogant and overeager, but those people never truly knew him as she did. He'd fought long and hard to gain the skill he'd acquired throughout his life and had every right to be proud of it.

"Och, Shane," she said, brushing the snow from her shoulders. "You know as well as I that I'm no ordinary wife to sit idly by while her husband does battle for her honor. I'm to be chieftain—if the council has not decided I'm no longer worthy—and plan to be in the thick of things when I'm needed."

Odd that an army of angry Highlanders didn't frighten her but the memory of one man's foul touch had the toes of her boots digging into the snow. She tried to convince herself that her rebounding courage of the last two days was only waning because she knew she was due to enter the forest with Draven. It was the forest that held those nightmares for her, not the thought of being alone for so long with a man who had nearly set her breast aflame with the powers in his mind.

So why then hadn't she hurried to meet him as she'd said she would? It had been her idea, not Draven's. He wasn't forcing her to do anything she hadn't volunteered for. In fact, she was certain he wasn't at all happy knowing she planned to intrude on his afternoon.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Shane asked, his brow furrowed with concern. "Future chieftain or no, you look like you could use a rest about now."

Faith opened her mouth to reassure him, but something in the air had shifted. A tension. A presence that had not been there a moment ago. She need only look at the glare in Shane's eyes as he peered over her shoulder to know the cause of it.

Draven.

But when she turned to greet him and apologize for not meeting him, he had already turned away, his stride deliberately set for the forest. She hurried after him, ignoring Shane's protest. Regret urged her onward, despite the biting winds.

"Draven!" she called. "Please wait."

He glanced back at her only briefly. His shoulders moved as he walked, as though fussing with something in front of him. When she finally caught up to him, he stopped abruptly in his path, causing her to collide with his stony back. Using his shoulders, she steadied herself, but was nearly knocked over yet again when Draven turned to face her. It was then she realized what he'd been doing while she'd chased him, for he handed her a note with ink so fresh, it stained her fingertips when she reached for it.

I'm your husband. You belong to me.

The words swam before her eyes, bringing back other, similar words that had set into motion the most horrific day of her life. Words whispered into her ear by a man who had not known the meaning of the word *no*.

Her offender had whispered, "*You will belong to me, Lady Faith. I can make you the happiest woman alive.*"

Anger thundered inside Faith's ears, her throat, her chest. The juncture between her legs ached in painful reminder of the ravishment she'd endured. She crumpled Draven's note and resisted the urge to shove her fingers in his eyes.

"My loyalty belongs to my people," she seethed. "My

soul belongs to God. But my *body*, husband, will always belong solely to *me*."

She tossed his note at his feet, the desire to spend any time with him gone, perhaps forever.

As she turned to go, he gripped her arm, spinning her back around to face him. Faith raised her foot and swung the tip of her boot swiftly into his shin. He released her at once, bending to cup the injured spot, but Faith did not flee. She did, however, take a tentative step back, awaiting his reaction to her attack, whatever it might be.

From his bent position, he tilted his head back to look up at her and shook his head slowly. Even as he righted himself, he was pulling another piece of paper from its carrier. Faith commanded her heart to quiet as she watched him write deliberate, perfectly scrolled letters onto the parchment.

You are frightened of me. You believe me to be the Devil after all.

The words calmed her racing heart as her quiet commands had not been able to. She'd allowed one statement to steal the joy from her day, to take her back to the place she'd sworn never to return to. In her quick overreaction to his words, she had possibly undone everything she'd been struggling to achieve with Draven. She longed to make him believe that there was goodness in him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, handing his note back to him. "Your words made me remember something . . . I am not afraid of you, nor do I believe the rumors about you to be true."

Draven narrowed his eyes skeptically and studied her for a long moment. When he turned to leave, Faith panicked.

"All right," she said hurriedly. He turned back to face her only partially. Faith clasped her hands together and stepped toward him. "I'll admit that your *powers* frighten me a good deal. Your powers. Not you. Can you at least believe that much?"

Again, he took his time in studying her, but when she'd decided he must need to hear something more from her, he

surprised her by holding out his hand. He nodded his head toward the forest and wiggled his fingers.

He wanted her to go with him. Knowing this was the moment in which she could prove her trust, she slid her palm against his. He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, his skin surprisingly warm around her fingers. A shiver streamed up her arm and down her neck as he offered her a soft smile.

In the next moment, she was being led away from home and into the thick of trees before them. The heady scent of wood and Scottish pine filled the air. Even if she hadn't seen the tracks on the snow, she would have known deer had recently passed through this very spot by the heavy odor of damp fur still lingering around the trees.

Every now and again, Draven rubbed his thumb across hers in a reassuring manner, and each time he did so, Faith's insides hopped around within her like overgrown fleas.

She was comfortable with their silence until they'd left the barren land behind and were surrounded by the grays and whites of winter trees. No birds sang, no animals chattered. The only sound was that of the crunching snow and snapping brambles beneath their boots. Faith's heart thudded heavily once again, a dreadful beat that made it difficult to catch her breath.

She hadn't even realized she'd stopped walking until she felt Draven tug on her hand. She stayed rooted where she stood, fighting the staggering need to cry.

"I was just—well, what is it exactly that we're hunting?" she asked, proud of the steadiness in her voice.

Draven shrugged. The glazed, damp sheen on Faith's eyes took him aback. A few moments ago, her cheeks had been pink with cold. Now the pallor of her skin was only slightly darker than the snow resting on the branches around them. She truly *was* frightened.

But of what? He didn't believe her fear was caused by him, not when her grip on his hand had steadily grown firmer. She held his gaze, but it was the erratic cracking of limbs and twigs around her that had her looking ready to

leap from her skin. Was it the animals, perhaps? When she'd found him in the clearing a few days ago, he had noticed that she had seemed ill at ease in the forest. So why in God's name had she invited herself along with him today?

He pointed at her, then at the bailey they'd left behind, his eyes searching hers for an answer.

She shook her head and delighted him by turning her hand so that her fingers were laced between his. He was suddenly aware of the largeness and awkwardness of his own chapped hands. Hands so weatherworn, he doubted she could find his touch as indulgent as he found hers.

"I don't like the forest much, but I've no wish to turn back."

She was lying about not wanting to turn back, but it pleased him that she was willing to suffer through her fears to accompany him. He squeezed her hand softly and smiled down at her, then led her along a path to their right, close enough to the outskirts of the forest that she could leave whenever she chose.

Perhaps if they had a pleasant time in the forest, some of her fear of the place might be cured. Of course, he hadn't started their journey off well. He'd allowed his jealousy of seeing her laughing with Shane to distort his logic. In that moment, he'd seen a bit of Harold in himself, and the constant suspicion he had cast upon Draven's mother during their marriage. A suspicion that had eventually driven Harold to sentence her to the burning pyre.

"Draven," Faith hissed behind him.

A loud screech and hiss sounded from behind a dying bush. A moment later, two wildcats rolled onto the path, tumbling together in a whirlwind of protracted claws and bared teeth. The larger of the two nipped the smaller one's ear, then shifted its body and straddled the female's backside.

Draven chuckled as he watched their mating dance. It seemed the male had gone too long without mating, for he was not wooing his match kindly. The female cried out,

tossing her head about wildly as though trying to buck her rider from her long body.

"Stop it!" Faith yelled. "Make him stop."

She stepped toward the copulating creatures, but her gaze rested solely on Draven. Her eyes were wide and once again watery, and as she moved her gaze back to the cats, he felt the bit of warmth in her hand vanish beneath the now-icy flesh.

Her teeth chattered as she watched the pair and released his hand to place her own protectively over her breast. The other hand cupped her throat, and she let out a strangled cry.

"He's hurting her! She doesn't want this. Make him stop!"

Her words and her reaction brought a heavy ache to Draven's chest. It was as though Faith was reliving a battle of her own.

The female wildcat cried out and threw herself backward. The male lunged, sinking its teeth into her neck to hold her steady. The awful sound of bone cracking caused Draven to flinch. The male wildcat had broken the female's neck so he could complete his task.

Anger kept Draven frozen where he stood. Watching the creatures. Watching Faith. The image of her locked in her lover's arms at the festival was as vivid to him now as it had been the day he'd witnessed it.

But now . . . now he saw it more clearly. Faith's hands pressed against the man's shoulders. The whimper that had called Draven's attention to them. Her head tilted dramatically to the side. He'd first seen that encounter as a lover's rendezvous. But perhaps he'd read it wrong. A whimper of fear? Pushing the man away? Head turned, not to expose her neck as he'd assumed, but perhaps to avoid a kiss?

Was that the moment she was reliving? Had she been about to be raped? But Draven had stopped it. She *hadn't* been ravished.

"God damn you!"

Hearing the blaspheme come from such God-fearing

lips spurted Draven into action. He grabbed Faith by the shoulders. Jerking her away from the creatures, he tried to bury her face in his tunic so she wouldn't have to witness any more. She struggled against him, her muffled words warm against his chest.

"He took what he wanted. Damaged her. Used her." She tilted her head back to look at him, her eyes and face soaked with tears.

In that moment, he forgave the lie she'd told that had trapped him into this marriage. He understood her better, realized what she'd been struggling to hide.

"Make her tell you of her child's conception."

Matrilda's words were like a ray of light to him now. Faith had no lover. Her body had been raped, and the child within her would be a living reminder of that brutality until the day she died.

Faith twisted free of Draven's hold, her sight nearly gone behind the fury of what she was witnessing. She would stop it. Even though she knew the female was dead, she would save the poor creature from further abuse. She would be its savior as no one had been hers.

Tears hindered her vision as she crashed toward the ground, her arms outstretched for the creatures at her feet. As she reached for it, the large male wildcat looked at her. He revealed his teeth just as Draven grabbed her arm. She fought Draven's pull even as she clutched the male's body, ripping it away from the dead wildcat now lying oddly quiet on the forest floor.

The male hissed at her, twisted its slick body like a snake, and lunged for Faith's face. It sank its needle-sharp teeth into her cheek, its growl nearly as loud as Faith's scream of pain.

Behind her, she heard a deeper, human growl. She tried to throw the creature away from her, but it latched onto her shoulders with its pointed claws. A large hand reached over her shoulder and gripped the creature by its nape. A moment later, the only sound was that of the beast's hasty

escape, almost muted by the horrible retching noise coming from Faith's own throat.

She hunched over, afraid she might lose her morning meal. The pain in her face and shoulders was nothing compared to the agony she'd felt watching the two animals. Draven's hand on her shoulder brought yet another cry from her. She flung his hand away and bowed her head to relieve the dizziness. She sobbed as she breathed deeply, then when her mind had cleared a bit, she turned her attention to burying the female wildcat.

She had barely dug a handful of snow from the ground when Draven grabbed her wrist, stopping her. She couldn't look at him. She couldn't bear to face his reaction to her hysteria. What would he think of her response to a simple act of nature?

Blood dripped from her face onto the pure white snow. Then, Draven's warm hand was cupping her cheek, and he was kneeling beside her. So strange that his hand could be this warm on such a cold day. But then she dared to look up at him. His blue eyes paled to near white, and his warm touch turned hot against her flesh.

As gold colored his eyes, she recognized what he was doing. She'd seen the same look when he'd healed himself before their wedding.

He was trying to heal her. The power of his magic brought a tingle to her skin and a calmness to her body. She closed her eyes, her sobs quieting as though lulled to sleep by the soft rhythm now pulsing through her blood. She could feel the wound stretching to heal, could feel Draven's body shudder though he touched her only with his hands. She didn't even flinch when his hands moved lower, closer to her breasts. The heat traveled with him, moving from her cheek to the divots just below her shoulders where the cat's claws had penetrated her.

She opened her eyes and found his were almost black. There was no breeze where they knelt, yet Draven's hair whipped savagely around his face and shoulders. His tunic billowed in a nonexistent gust of wind.

His flesh, already the golden color of polished bronze, shimmered and glowed. Where was the evil in such beauty? All doubts she had ever possessed about the nature of his gifts were laid to rest, for just now, she was certain she was staring at the light of God. Aye, God was using Draven, and knowing that she believed it with every bit of her soul made Faith want to weep with relief.

She lowered her head, her gaze falling to the hands still pressed mere inches above her breasts. The heat in his fingers traveled through her clothing and warmed her entire body against the cold. His hands were as red as if he'd just pulled them from a basin of boiling water, and as her lethargic gaze traveled over his arms, she noticed the red heat seemed to be traveling through his veins. Red lines striped his arms, his throat, and now that she looked closer, she could see they striped his cheeks, as well.

His hands fell to his lap. In the absence of his touch, her body was instantly aware of the frigid temperature again. But even though his touch was gone, the places where his hands had pressed still pulsed with warmth. It was as though her body had started breathing again after years of being dead. She was filled with a strength she hadn't even possessed before the injury. Life coursed through her, an erotic tingle that felt wonderful and forbidden all at once.

Her gaze fell to Draven's face. His eyes were closed, his head thrown back. Faith licked her suddenly parched lips and tried to shake the dazed fog from her mind, but it did not help.

When Draven opened his eyes, they had returned to their normal color, only a darker shade of blue than she remembered.

She was probably drawn to him because of the magic, but it didn't matter. The horror of the wildcats' mating vanished, if only momentarily, and Faith felt shrouded by an unseen, cleansing light.

Her gaze fell to his mouth. She recalled the taste of his lips when he'd kissed her at their wedding. That she could think of kissing him at all made her wonder how much of

her he'd healed. It was the first time in months that she'd felt like a woman, that she'd wanted to be touched by a man.

Slowly, not wanting to break whatever spell they were under, Faith rose on her knees and inched closer. Draven's eyes cleared and looked upon her in curiosity. Before she could lose her nerve, Faith parted her lips and placed her hands tentatively on Draven's shoulders.

In the next instant, she was lost to the world, conscious only of the damp, silky warmth of her husband's lips on hers.

Nineteen



Faith's mouth was warm and welcoming. Her lips parted slightly, offering Draven a teasing taste of her tongue. Everything inside him screamed that he should back away, told him it was the heat of the healing that had persuaded her to kiss him. After witnessing her extreme reaction to the wildcats' dance and guessing at what had caused it, he thought it unlikely that she would have the desire or the courage to press her mouth against his of her own volition.

And if she suspected he knew her secret of carrying a babe born of rape, she hadn't said. The image of Faith being taken by force had sent a surge of fury throughout Draven. He'd wanted to bellow his outrage and coddle Faith at the same moment. But with each featherlight tickle of her mouth against his, his rage allowed itself to be pushed aside, ready to be dealt with later.

For the moment, all that mattered was her icy strands of hair, now locked in his fists, the hunger for a soft touch that skillfully mimicked his, the half whimper, half moan purring deep in her throat.

The primal beast inside him beat his invisible chest before sighing quietly in contentment. But then, it was gone. All of it. The feel of her hair. The taste of her breath.

Draven opened his eyes to find Faith pink-cheeked and watching him with downcast eyes.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I shouldn't have . . . I don't know what came over me."

Before he could think to stop her, she was standing, leaving him kneeling at her feet like a beggar. Slowly, his body unsteady from the mixture of magic and passion, he stood, wishing he could voice one simple word that might ease her confusion, to let her know that enjoying his kiss was not a sin.

But as he watched her stare at the dead female wildcat, his voice remained as distant as ever.

"I—I can't be here just now. I wish to be alone," she said, glancing back up at him with eyes that begged for understanding that he willingly gave. "Will you . . . will you bury the creature?"

Draven didn't hesitate to nod. He couldn't blame her for needing to find solitude in order to contemplate what had just occurred between them. Lord knew he could use a bit of that himself. But before she could disappear, he hurriedly retrieved his writing tools and wrote his request for her to read.

We must talk. Will you meet me after supper?

She carefully folded the note and handed it back to him. She didn't look at all eager to agree, but rather than refuse as he'd suspected she would, she nodded.

"I will come to your chamber this eve," she said quietly, a hint of defeat in her voice that told Draven she was well aware that she'd probably given her secret away today. "I will give you the explanation I know is your right as my husband to have, but I hope you will treat whatever occurred here today as an event best left untold to others."

Somehow, Draven knew she wasn't referring to their kiss.

Hoping to lighten the moment, he dragged the back of

his fingertips up his throat and past his mouth, ending the gesture with a cavalier shrug. Her smile was strained, but he was glad to see a bit of the flush leave her cheeks.

"Aye, you cannot speak. But you're proving more than adept at making yourself understood."

She turned and left without sparing a single glance back at him. Left alone to perform the requested burial, Draven pushed the lingering memory of the taste of Faith from his mind and focused on the task at hand.

He knelt once again in the snow, his knees already aching from the long moments he'd spent pressing them into the powder while he'd healed Faith. It was odd, but while his body ached, he wasn't consumed by fatigue as was normal after such strenuous use of his magic. He felt almost rejuvenated with life, as though, somehow, by healing Faith, a bit of himself had been touched by his own powers as well.

Of course, it could have been the kiss—the first true intimacy he'd known with another person since Bridget—

Casting the ugly memories of Bridget from his mind, he dug through the snow, shoveling fistfuls to the side until he'd formed a reasonably deep hole in the snow in which he could bury the wee wildcat.

That evening, Faith took her supper in her chamber. She spent the time rehearsing what she planned to tell Draven and contemplating how much he deserved to know. But each time she thought she knew the right words to say, she remembered their kiss and was disturbed to find herself focusing on how badly she wanted more.

She didn't fool herself into believing she was ready for his touch—that she may never be. But his kiss had been gentle and soothing. It didn't frighten her as she might have expected it to—due in part, she suspected, to the fact that he'd kept his hands to himself during their interlude.

And now, as she soaked in her evening bath and allowed Essie to wash her hair, Faith closed her eyes and told

herself that her decision to tell Draven the truth was the right one. It wasn't as though he hadn't likely figured out why she'd gone into such hysterics on his own. He would have to be a very simpleminded man not to see why she'd reacted to the wildcats' mating as she had, and Draven was anything but simpleminded.

"I'm thinking you look to be nearing three moons," Essie said, wringing the water from Faith's hair.

"What do you mean?"

In hopes of washing away some of the sleepiness weighing down her eyes, Faith splashed a bit of the rose-scented water onto her face. The warm, crackling sounds of the fire made her want to bury herself in bed and sleep until her daylight demons got tired of waiting for her to awaken and left her forever.

"Your belly is a bit swollen beneath your navel," Essie explained. "So I'm guessing you're not quite three months along, but more than two."

Almost two and a half months to the day, Faith thought, skimming her hand along the water, bringing it to rest on her stomach.

"There's something a bit off about you, though."

Faith pushed herself higher in the tub. "How do you mean?"

Were remnants of Draven's kisses still lingering on her? Bits of his magic? She glanced down at her body. It looked normal enough to her. Maybe it was something on her face?

"Well," Essie said, walking around to the front of the tub so she could look Faith in the eye. "Most women have a bit of a glow to them when they're with child. You're different. You've glowed since the day I first held you in my arms and swatted your tiny backside. I liked to think there was a light keeper in your soul, making sure the candles inside you were burning for the world to see—out your eyes and skin and smile. Never met a person so taken with life as you."

Essie's plump face turned somber. Faith's gut twisted as, for that one blessed moment, she felt as though she was being watched through the eyes of a mother.

"But I've changed?" she asked cautiously.

"It's like your light keeper up and died these last few months. I'd thought it was due to your marriage, but as I thought on it, I realized your glow had dimmed long before you said your vows."

Faith's false smile ached so badly it reached her bones. "You worry overly much, Essie. Always have. Light keepers. Bah."

As she struggled to pull herself from the tub, Essie gripped her arm, stilling Faith's efforts. "I've not once seen you preen about your child as other mothers do."

Faith's heart stopped, and her fake smile trembled. The fact that she felt no motherly feelings toward the child inside her was something she certainly didn't want others to know. Especially Essie.

"I can hardly preen about it when I've no desire to have others know of my condition yet," she murmured, hoping her explanation would appease Essie's worry.

It seemed to, for Essie nodded and assisted Faith from the tub. But as the old woman turned to fetch Faith a linen to dry herself with, Faith thought she saw a flicker of doubt in Essie's eyes. Guilt chilled away the morsel of warmth her bath had given her. It seemed she was disappointing everyone lately, forever handing out lies and half truths to those who were most important to her.

It was amazing to think how one day, one horrifying event, could affect so many truths in her life.

And now she would have to face one truth with Draven, shed her shame, and bare her soul.

~

Draven had been fighting the desire to sleep since he'd come to his chamber after supper, all of the magic he'd performed that day leaving him drained and ready for a long rest. But his hope that Faith would keep her word and come to him as she'd promised kept him somewhat alert. Apparently, however, Faith's word didn't mean as much to

her as he'd hoped. It was well past supper and still no sign of her.

Too tired to wait for her any longer but unwilling to allow her to continue ignoring his place as her husband, he flung open his door, ready to demand his way into Faith's chamber to get the answers he deserved.

For the first time in years, he found himself expelling a startled gasp.

Faith took a surprised step back, her eyes wide. "I—I wasn't sure if you'd still be awake."

She'd probably hoped he wouldn't be.

Knowing what they needed to discuss would require all the calm he could muster, Draven cast aside his irritation and swung the door open wide so she could enter. She clutched her housecoat more tightly to her, holding it closed at the neck, then stepped around him, the subtle, clean scent of soap and rose water wafting by him.

His body had been starved for softness and kindness for so long, it instantly reacted to her sweet fragrance. His muscles contracted. His fingers flexed, struggling not to reach out and grab hold of her.

When she was settled neatly on the bench against the wall, she turned her worried gaze toward him. The pleading in her soft green eyes bothered him a good deal. He'd been prepared for the anger this topic would rouse in him, but had naively failed to prepare himself for the effect it would have on *her*.

"Draven," she whispered as he sat on the edge of his bed. "I want you to know . . . I came here with every intention of baring my soul because, as my husband, it is your right to know the secrets I harbor. But . . ."

Her lower lip trembled, and in the faint candlelight, he saw the nervous glint in her eyes. Unable to watch her fight for control any longer, he reached for the tube of writing tools on the bedside table, pulling each instrument out in preparation for his questions.

"We both know I gave my secret away in the forest today. Can't we leave it at that? Will you take my actions as

proof enough of what I'm sure you already suspect and leave the horrid details alone?"

Draven glanced at her, glad to see she'd seemed to gather control, then turned his attention to the question he most wanted answered.

I believe I know it wasn't a lover who sired your child, but why then did you kiss me when you clearly don't desire my touch?

She read his words with a somber expression upon her face. But when she handed the paper back to him, he was surprised to find a faint smile on her lips.

"I'm not sorry for kissing you," she said, her voice still little more than a whisper. "Your lips are pleasant, and it is the truth that I would like to kiss you again."

When her gaze moved to her lap, Draven took that moment to compose himself. His insides squirmed, and it took a long moment for him to regain control over his suddenly erratic breathing. He certainly hadn't expected such a bold statement as that. Nor had he expected she could say anything to make his thoughts turn lustful in the midst of such a serious conversation. Regardless, she had done just that.

"You *are* my husband, Draven. I know you have certain rights. But you see," she looked up at him, her cheeks pink, her eyes watery yet again, "it's the things that come with the kissing that I may never be all right with giving you."

The knowledge that she didn't regret kissing him, that she acknowledged him as her husband, exhilarated him. The rest did not matter. Hers was a far greater acknowledgment than he'd ever received before, and he could be content with that.

For now.

Who was he?

That much he *did* need to know. Thus far, he'd kept tight rein over his temper, but her confirmation of his suspicions had turned his fury loose. He handed her the question, needing to have a name at which to direct the anger that now twisted his gut. Such crimes deserved to be resolved, even if other men might see it differently. Draven knew all

too well the degradation that came with being used, with being abused. He'd been unable to punish his own abusers, but he could right the wrongs done to the woman who had tried so valiantly to save him from them.

"I don't know his name. Only that he said he was a troubadour."

Once again, Matilda's words came to him: "*The troubadour and the brigand . . . they are the same.*"

The man at the festival? he wrote.

Faith nodded. "I believe you saved me from yet another . . ."

Rape. He'd saved her from another rape.

The desire that had sent his blood racing moments ago had turned icy with anger. No woman, no *person*, deserved such treatment. Rage shoved aside his lingering regret over using his powers at the festival. He only wished he hadn't hurt Faith in the process and that he'd done more than send the vile man's hand up in flames.

But he'd only inflicted such pain on her attacker because he'd assumed she had betrayed him and their marriage vows. He'd wronged her by leaping to such conclusions. The familiar taste of guilt coated Draven's mouth.

Faith's hand traveled to her belly. "The babe is his."

Draven's hand shook as he wrote his reply. *Nay. The babe is mine.*

Twenty



Nay. *The babe is mine.*

Faith read Draven's declaration again, her eyes so blurred with the onset of fresh tears, it was difficult to make out each individual word. He'd given the same message to Uncle Elliot when she'd tried to retreat on their wedding day, but then she'd felt almost as though he'd made the proclamation in order to ensnare her. This time, she could feel the passion in those words like a protective net he was trying to cast over her.

She was reading the note for yet a third time when Draven slipped another piece of paper into her hand.

You can try to be my wife, and I can try to be your husband, but we don't have to try to be this child's parents. We simply are.

Fighting an overwhelming amount of self-disgust, Faith peered up at Draven, wondering what he would think if he knew she had no feelings at all toward the child growing within her. Draven had spent most of his life being hated and feared but had found it within himself to offer affection to a child not born of his blood. Yet she, a woman who had

grown up loved and cherished, could not say the same about a child whose blood was her own.

"You are nobler than you like others to think," she whispered, sliding from the bench onto her knees.

She leaned forward; the bed where Draven sat was close enough that she didn't have to go far to reach him. She cupped his face in her hands. "I was right to believe God lives in you."

This time, he had not used his magic. There was no doubt in her mind that the urge driving her was solely her own. She closed her eyes and placed a feathery kiss on his tender lips. When she backed away, Draven caught her wrist, preventing her retreat. His grasp was gentle, as was his slight tug as he pulled her to her feet.

He stood to meet her gaze, and before she realized his intentions, had pulled her into his arms, buried his face in her neck, and held her as though he knew how badly she'd needed to be embraced at that moment.

Blessedly, she didn't feel the need to pull away. His hands did not roam where they should not. They stayed diligently at her waist while she wrapped her arms around his neck and lost herself to the tears she now felt safe enough to release against his chest.

He let her cry for several long moments. Neither made a sound nor any movement to break their embrace. She wept for the parts of herself she'd lost in the assault. The desire to have a family of her own. The innocence. The confidence. All of it gone. She wept for the child inside her whom she feared would never know true affection from its mother. A child whose very appearance might well remind Faith of the most horrid day of her own life, rather than joyous memories of his or hers.

She couldn't catch her breath. Her tears clogged her throat, constricted her chest.

Faith gasped for air against Draven's tunic. She felt his hand leave her waist, and a moment later, his finger pried her chin up, forcing her to look at him. She watched his face lean closer, knew he was going to kiss her, *wanted* him to

kiss her. The man who'd taken everything from her could not take this as well. He had violated every other bit of her but had left her mouth untouched by his vile lips.

But her mouth . . . she could still offer that tiny piece of herself to her husband and praise God that the enjoyment of Draven's kiss was still hers to claim. His tongue teased her mouth open, and she hungrily permitted its entrance. The kiss was soft and warm and right. She inhaled the strong, woodsy scent of him, allowing it to cocoon her insides in an embrace of their own.

She was still hungry for more when Draven pulled away. He eased her onto the bed, then sat carefully beside her. He reached for the writing tools, igniting a barely containable flame of anger in Faith. She didn't want to read his words. She wanted to hear his voice, wanted him to speak to her, to tell her with his mouth that everything was all right.

Grabbing the paper from him, she crumpled it and threw it on the floor. "Say my name, Draven. I beg it of you. If you've any voice left within you at all, say my name."

Draven watched the grief vacate Faith's eyes, watched a flare of anger burn in its place. The need in her voice made his soul ache. He could not give her what she asked for, and if he did have the softest of whispers left within him, didn't she realize that her name would be the one word he would have the most difficulty speaking?

Faith.

He had very little faith left in his life. It would be as difficult for him to speak the word *faith* as it would be to kneel and pray to a God who had abandoned him long ago.

The Devil. Hated by God and feared by men. That's who Draven was, but not who he wanted to be. He'd felt more human in Faith's arms than he had in any other time of his life. In that moment, he'd felt like a man, a husband, and he wanted more of the same.

He bent and retrieved the crumpled paper, smoothing it out on his knee. He could not look at her as he wrote, afraid she would see his shame at not being able to provide what she needed in that moment.

I cannot say your name, and I cannot heal your deepest hurts. But if you let me try, I can be your husband in every sense.

Doubt flickered behind her damp lashes. "The bits that come with the kissing. You're asking for more than I am willing or capable of giving. I thought you understood—"

Draven held up his hand, silencing her before she allowed her anger to dissolve the silent understanding they seemed to have come to.

I will never force you, Faith. I will never ask for more than you can give.

"Yet you do. Why are the pleasures of the body so bloody important to men?" She rose to her feet and began pacing in front of the closed shutters. "You can't speak. You won't even try. I ask about your powers, and you scowl at me. I get nothing from you, and yet you ask the world of me."

This was the strong, capable, fighting Faith he had grown used to. He held back a smile, knowing it would only anger her more. Besides, she was right. She had approached him several times to discuss things he was uncomfortable with. He had no right to ask of her what he, himself, was not willing to give.

So, how badly did he wish to have her as his true wife? Badly enough to fall on bended knee and beg it of her. But enough to allow her to coax from him things he'd kept hidden all his life? That was another matter.

His fatigue long forgotten, he hurriedly scribbled his thoughts onto parchment and handed them to Faith.

Let me try to undo the damage done to you. Let the memories of your assault be replaced with kind hands.

"I cannot do so any more than you could try to find your voice for me. Any more than you could try to win over my people with your powers rather than continue to allow them to fear you because of them."

She looked ready to flee. He knew he had only a few moments before she would leave his chamber and this sensitive topic.

If you are strong enough to try, then so am I.

She met his challenge with wide eyes. She closed her fist around the note, narrowed her gaze, and searched his face with such scrutiny, he shifted uneasily where he sat.

"You would try to speak? Perhaps try to heal members of my clan, just for the allowance to touch me?"

The disbelief in her eyes nearly made him smile, but he held back and nodded.

"Then you are stronger than I," she whispered, backing toward the door. "My body is not a bargaining tool, *husband*, and I'll not pay its price no matter how badly I wish to hear your voice."



Godfrey threaded the last stitch into the left sleeve of his tunic. Now, every garment he owned was closed at the wrist, ready to hide the gnarled stump where his hand should have been. His small camp lay just a couple days' walk from Cameron territory, and he had pushed on toward the clan holdings, traveling by night so that the shadows might hide him, the winter cold numbing a bit of his pain, his anger dulling a bit of the chill.

It was time to claim justice on Bridget's behalf.

He gathered his belongings, folding them into his spare plaid, and slung the bundle over his shoulder. As he trekked through the pastures and forests leading to the Camerons, the memory of Bridget's death accompanied him. The fire blazing around her lifeless body. His struggle to reach her before the flames consumed her. Draven standing over her body, the flames licking at his ankles but apparently causing him no pain.

Godfrey had never been a rich man, but Bridget had managed to keep him fed and sheltered quite comfortably with her father's gold. When Draven murdered her, Godfrey had been forced to take his meager possessions and find a life as a petty thief in order to survive. Over the last several months, he'd found more than a dozen other miscreants in much the same sad state as himself. The rogues were the

only family he had now, and he hated leaving them behind to tend to this business, but it could not be helped.

Godfrey remembered too late that there was no fist to clench on his free arm. He was intelligent enough to know he was on the path to madness with his obsession with Draven Cameron. But madness would be a welcome relief from the pain of losing Bridget and their child. And Faith Maitland, the woman who'd so reminded him of Bridget . . . the woman he imagined might be capable of making him forget. Draven had stolen her, too.

With only one hand, Godfrey would no longer be able to take Draven on himself, but he knew someone who could.

It no longer mattered how Draven died or by whose hand. So long as the bastard was dead. It was time to find Harold Cameron, and perhaps the laird would allow yet another bargain to be made. But before that, he would pass through the Maitland territory and pay a visit to Draven's future widow.

~

The next several days went by at a snail's pace. Faith kept herself isolated most of the time, too confused by her attraction to Draven to bear facing him again. Uncle Elliot grew more irritated by the day as Faith continued to shirk her duties of sitting with him at the council meetings, but none of that mattered. She was content to spend hours by the fire in her chamber, pulling needle and thread through tattered garments.

She'd seen Draven only once in the past three days, and the meeting had been an awkward one. His request that she allow him to try to touch her as was a husband's right still lingered in her belly like foul fish, making it difficult to meet his eye.

And yet, she hadn't been able to scrub the feel of his kisses off her mouth. It lingered there, constantly reminding her of his request and making her wish she'd had the courage to agree to it.

How long could she expect him to kiss her without his

desire for more corrupting such moments? It wasn't fair to him, which was why she'd decided that she could not allow herself to kiss him again. Not until she was ready to give him more. And since that was likely to never happen, she would have to be content with the memories of the few she'd shared with him.

A knock on her door turned Faith's attention away from her melancholy. A moment later, Essie entered, her eyes wide.

"Himself wants you in the hall straightaway. Says he'll take no more excuses from you, either."

Faith rolled her eyes. "Tell Uncle Elliot I'm too tired this morn."

"Go on, now. It'll be *my* ears he boxes if you refuse again."

"I have enough grievances of my own not to want to listen to other people's today. Don't worry, Essie. You won't be in trouble for my disobedience."

Essie's marched across the room, took Faith by the chin, and forced her to look up at her. "You best be tellin' me where my Faith has gone, 'cause you're certainly not her."

She released Faith's chin, a flicker of anger lighting her normally soft, brown eyes. Dumbfounded by the uncharacteristic temper in the old woman, Faith gaped at her.

"What's come over you, Essie?"

Essie jabbed a finger at Faith. "That's what I'll be wantin' to know about you. Summat isn't right with you. You used to care what happened to our clan, and now you seem to care only for yourself. If I was a wee bit younger, I'd lay you over my knee and smack some sense into that head of yours."

Faith swallowed the bitter shame clogging her throat. Essie was right. Essie was *always* right. Faith *had* been neglecting her clan. But knowing as much didn't make her eager to step back into the role of her uncle's successor. How was she supposed to give advice to anyone when her own life had become so soiled with problems it would take an army of Elliots and Essies to put them right again?

"Essie," she started, pushing herself to her feet. "I still care about our people. I never stopped caring. I'm just not sure what good I can be for any of them just now."

Essie's glare did not soften. "You can tell that to your uncle then. I'm certainly not repeating such nonsense to him. Go on with you. The brigands raided our winter stores last eve, and the whole council's in a right temper."

The brigands? Stealing from the Maitlands?

Anger spurred Faith into action. Taking only enough time to slide her boots onto her feet, Faith offered an apologetic glance at Essie and fled downstairs. She ran all the way to the hall, so that by the time she finally arrived, she had to bend over to catch her breath.

The uproar among the council instantly stopped, and she could feel and hear several bodies turning to stare at her. She stood, forced a smile, and straightened her spine.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, ignoring the gawking stares that reminded her she had not so much as run a comb through her unkempt hair.

A few of the men stood to greet her, but others remained stubbornly in their seats, obviously not impressed with her lack of participation as of late. She nodded at some of them, eager to look anywhere but at her uncle's angry face. Trying to appear unruffled by Elliot's glare, she took a seat beside him on the dais and folded her hands together neatly on her lap.

An instant later, the chaos started again. Men murmured, yelled, pounded their fists. An elderly man by the name of Cotter hobbled down the aisle between the rows of benches until he stood directly in front of his laird.

"You're the man they stole from?" Elliot asked, his voice brittle with indignation.

Cotter nodded. "Wiped me clean of cattle. I've only one calf left, and he won't be enough to feed my family this winter, let alone any contribution to the clan stores."

"An' we're short ev'ry one o' our roosters," Shane's young student, Michael, proclaimed.

Faith watched John and Shane shake their heads, then

join Otis at the back of the hall, where they could stand ready should the people turn rowdy. Shane drew his claymore, earning him an irritated look from his brother, John.

Cedric and a few of the older clan council members pounded on the dais table to gain the crowd's attention. Elliot nodded at them in appreciation and waited for the room to quiet down.

Then, without even bothering to look at Faith, he addressed the crowd in a tone that told her his words were meant to catch her up on the latest events.

"As we were saying, John and Otis will set up a patrol beginning before sunset each evening. Apparently, these brigands aren't even courteous enough to wait till dark to dupe us, as Mr. Cotter's cattle were stolen before he'd even begun his supper." He nodded toward Shane, who appeared all too eager to make use of his sword. "Any man found sleeping on duty will report to me, and I can promise the lot of you there will be hell to pay."

"Wasn't there a trail or any hint of where these rogues have got to?" Faith asked, pleased to find that her uncle's displeasure at her hadn't weakened her voice. "Surely, they can't have gone far."

Finally, Elliot looked her way, exasperation wringing his aging features into a mass of fretful lines. "My dear. In your prolonged absence, you might not be aware that life in the clan has continued marching on. I can assure you I have not quit *my* duties, and, as we speak, a half-dozen Maitlands are following the faint trail not yet wiped away by this morning's snowfall."

Never had Faith heard such degrading tones directed at her from her beloved uncle. Her chest constricted. He was not only giving her a setdown, he was doing so in front of the council and clan.

Had his opinion of her changed so greatly to make him treat her so? Had her behavior truly been so unforgivable? Did he doubt, now, his decision to name her as his successor?

The many questions fogged her mind, and she deter-

minedly looked away from him. "Of course," she said, her voice no longer strong.

The childish part of her wanted badly to march right back out of the hall and skulk back to her chamber. But the stubborn woman in her was stronger, and she sat still, determined to appear unfazed by Elliot's treatment.

The doors opened in the back of the room, bringing another quiet to the meeting as all heads turned to look. Draven stepped between John and Shane, then quietly took a seat against the wall. The sight of him flipped Faith's heart and belly, and a tingle of awareness gripped her flesh like tiny hooks. On his wrist perched his falcon, hooded and dancing uneasily along Draven's gloved hand. When Draven caught her eye, he nodded a greeting that she returned, then moved his gaze to study the crowd around him.

Several of the clan members continued to stare at him with nasty sneers, but most had returned their attention to their laird and the matter at hand.

"Now," Elliot continued as though nothing at all had changed. "As I said earlier, we suspect to find the brigands hiding out in one of the caves off the side of the northern cliffs. But seeing as how there are more than two dozen such caves, it'll take a bit of time in finding the right one. Most are closed off, of course, but that's not to say these conniving curs won't have found another way in. The Frasers have sent men out in search of the cliffs closer to their borders, but that still leaves a good dozen on our end."

Cedric cleared his throat and rubbed his hand along his bald head. "But now that we're short so many cattle, we'll be needin' most o' our men here to see to providing food for the clan. We can't spare too many."

"I'll go," Faith said before she could properly think it through.

Just as Elliot exclaimed, "You will *not*," Draven stood, nearly knocking over his bench. He glared at her and shook his head.

Elliot leaned toward her and whispered harshly in her ear. "You are in no condition. Hold your tongue, lass."

"You're a skilled enough tracker, Lady Faith, but what would you do, should you come upon the brigands? You're not skilled in the ways of fighting." This comment came from Rupert, a portly man Faith had thought she'd seen sleeping in the back.

Ignoring Elliot's angry glare boring into her right cheek, Faith shrugged. "I could return with the whereabouts and send in a group to reclaim what was taken. I'm not foolish enough to try to fight."

"You're not going anywhere, and that's my final word." Elliot pointed at Shane. "You go. Otis can help John set up the patrol duty. Take a dozen men with you and use them as you will."

Shane nodded, his face glowing with pleasure. "When should I leave?"

"First light. It'll take you the better part of tomorrow to make your way to the closest cliffside. You can set up shelter and wait till dark to make your explorations."

As the crowd around them began to talk amongst themselves, a feeling that the meeting was over fell over the hall. Faith made haste to leave Elliot's side, not wanting to give him the opportunity to chastise her yet again.

She wound her way through the many bodies heading toward the door and stopped dead when she saw Draven gesticulating wildly to Shane. She knew in an instant what he meant by gripping Shane's arm, pointing to his chest, then pointing at Shane.

He was trying to convince Shane to allow him to go along on the hunt.

Twenty-one



You're not going with us to look for the brigands," Shane told Draven, turning his gaze to Faith. "I'm sorry, Faith, but I can't take a man with me who can't easily communicate."

Faith needed no apology from Shane. She was overcome with relief at his refusal, grateful she hadn't been forced to voice her own objections.

Shane looked back to Draven, but the apology in Shane's eyes was blatantly false. Draven narrowed his gaze, his cheeks turning red. He glanced at Faith, as though expecting her to speak out on his behalf, but she quickly looked away and tried to hide the blush of guilt she feared stained her own cheeks.

When he tugged angrily at the tube of writing instruments hanging around his neck, Faith gently guided him and Shane toward the corner of the hall, where they wouldn't be pushed and shoved by the crowd.

I can help them.

Faith knew what Draven's message meant, knew he could use his powers to help her people, should they run

into difficulty, but she couldn't bring herself to plead on his behalf. If Draven left, he might never return.

The memory of his battered, nearly broken body the day she'd met him ripped through her mind like a storm. It had saddened her when she'd seen him that way, but now that she was beginning to know and like him so much more, the image of him in such a state was simply intolerable. She never wished to experience such again.

She glanced at the crowd still spilling from the hall. Several young men nodded in Shane's direction, quietly letting him know they were willing to accompany him on the hunt. Such young lads, eager to fight but not yet trained in the possible pain and suffering that accompanied it.

Draven could help them. He could make sure they returned home safely to their wives and mothers. She'd wanted him to try to use his powers to persuade the Maitlands to trust him. This could be the perfect opportunity for him to do it.

But she couldn't be content to let him go. If she did, who would make sure Draven returned home safely to *her*?

"I'm sorry," she heard Shane say.

Faith glanced up to find Shane patting Draven on the shoulder in a way that said he wasn't sorry at all.

"I already have my men picked out. Maybe next time, eh?"

As Shane walked away, Faith knew she should feel remorse over the disappointed expression on Draven's scowling face. Instead, relief eased the tension tying her belly into knots.

"It's for the best," she whispered.

He turned away, followed the crowd outside, and didn't bother looking back.

~

Draven was standing in the darkest corner of the mews, feeding his new pet a chicken leg, when he heard someone enter. The scent of soap and rose told him Faith had finally found him. Without turning to look in her direc-

tion, he allowed Bride, as he'd named the falcon in remembrance of his brother's beloved bird, to rip the last few scraps of meat from the bone, then gently re-covered her face with her hood.

"I was hoping you might ride with me today," Faith said, closing the door so that the mews was cast once again in shadow.

Draven considered refusing. She hadn't allied with him against Shane, after all. The fact that he'd expected anyone, especially the wife he'd never wanted, to champion him surprised him. He hadn't relied on anyone in so many years, the concept was as foreign to him as speaking. And yet, he'd half expected Faith to stand up for him against Shane.

The truth was he'd wanted to join Shane's forces because he was worried about *her* safety. Not the clan's. Matrida had claimed that Faith's troubadour and the brigand were one and the same. If her assaulter was nearby, he could very well come for a taste of Faith once more.

But he'd spent three long days without seeing much of Faith at all, and since the day he'd held her so closely in his chamber, the desire to see more of her had eaten at him. For today, he would let the matter drop.

Besides, he didn't *need* anyone's permission to do what he knew was right. If Shane's hunt proved unsuccessful, he would take the matter into his own hands. One way or another, justice would find its mark against the rogues responsible for all the havoc.

Securing Bride's jesses to her perch, he nodded at Faith and gestured for her to precede him out of the mews.

As they stepped outside, the midday sunlight caught her hair, bringing forth a halo effect around her pale face. She smiled, and the sight warmed him far better than the meager rays shredding the dreary sky. The need to kiss her, to test whether or not she would be as welcoming of his mouth as she'd been before, cuckolded him like the blunt side of a claymore being thrust against his ribs, but he resisted. He would see how their day went before deciding how receptive she would be to his touch.

The pink in her cheeks was likely not solely due to the cold. She caught his gaze for a brief moment before smiling shyly and turning toward the stables.

A short while later, Draven found himself settled atop an enormous, dirt-colored steed named Goliath, following Faith beyond the walls of the keep to the miles of white pasture beyond. He noticed she kept a good distance away from the bordering forest, riding slightly ahead of Draven at all times.

Why had she asked him to ride with her when she was obviously in no hurry to speak with him or even look at him? Squeezing Goliath firmly with his legs, Draven pushed a bit faster until he caught up to Faith and took her rein in his hand. Forcing her to walk her mare more slowly, he smiled, hoping to soften his silent command.

The timid smile she offered in return spoke of a quiet understanding, and though she didn't look at him, she slid her fingers briefly over his before taking the rein away. The unexpected touch of her cool, slender fingers fired a flame of awareness down Draven's arm. He ached to lace his fingers through hers, but it was best to leave her to her own pace.

Having never been granted much in the way of wishes, he'd become a very patient man. However, having a wife so tenderfooted challenged him now that the desire to share her bed germinated in him. But should she ever decide he was worthy of her, it would be a night well worth waiting for.

Hoping to make it clear he didn't wish to dwell on their earlier confrontation, he pointed toward the cliffs that separated the mighty sea from the walls of the Maitland keep. She rode ahead of him, apparently understanding where he wanted to go, and Draven repeated the word *cliff* over and over in his mind.

He found himself doing that a lot lately—picking a word out from conversation and trying to discover how each letter could be formed. His tongue played with the roof of his mouth, and he wondered whether a *la* sound would issue forth if he voiced it. The wind whistled past his ears, shut-

ting out the sound of the horses beating down the snow as they trotted along. He used the noise to cover his garbled sounds, his *la* sounding more like a growl than part of a word.

When Faith looked over her shoulder at him, the fear that she may have heard his sorry attempts halted the exercise. They rounded the village cottages where the aroma of midday stews drifted from the chimneys to remind Draven how little he'd eaten today. His stomach rumbled, and he entertained the notion of enjoying a private meal with Faith on the rocky cliffs.

A hacking cough caused Draven to turn in his saddle to see a woman toting a young girl in her arms. The child's cough turned into a tight wheeze that sounded so painful, Draven's chest constricted in sympathy. The child couldn't have been more than three or four summers old, and her mother was patting her lightly on the back while trying to adjust the lass's hood over her face.

"Good morn, Ingrainia," Faith said, circling her mare back and approaching the woman. "Is this weather troubling sweet Frances's lungs?"

Draven watched Faith dismount with all the grace of a queen, then bend so she could peek inside the child's hood and offer a warm smile that did nothing to help the tightness in his chest.

The little girl let out a wheezy sigh and buried her face in her mother's neck. The mother, Ingrainia, offered Faith a bright smile, which promptly faded into a scowl when she glanced in Draven's direction. She hugged her child closer to her bosom and stepped away from Faith.

"My pardon, Lady Faith. I'm on my way to Matrilda's." With another quick glance at Draven, Ingrainia turned and hurried for the outskirts of the village toward Matrilda's cottage.

When the mother and child had vanished from sight, Faith mounted her mare and cleared her throat. "Poor child. She's always had trouble breathing. Especially in this weather."

She wasn't fooling him. She'd noticed Ingrainia's earnest departure and had to know it was because she'd seen him. But rather than say anything, Faith clicked her tongue and nudged her mare into a canter, heading for the cliffs once again.

Draven followed, his gaze falling to her rounded backside as it sat so unladylike atop the horse. She rode with the skill of a man, without any remorse as to the lack of femininity she might exude, though to Draven, she still managed to look the portrait of a lady. He caught up to her, listening as she spoke with affection about the trouble the young girl had with her lungs, and allowed her to ramble uninterrupted for the remainder of their journey.

When they reached the jagged cliffs, they dismounted and guided the horses up the narrow ridge to a flat bit of land sheltered from the snow by a few pines. Once they'd tethered the horses to a branch, Draven watched silently as Faith stared over the ledge, her hair billowing behind her in the icy breeze.

Her plaid clung to the curve of her legs, her tunic pressed against her slender arms. His gaze fell to her slightly rounded belly, visible against the flapping, clinging fabric. A child grew within her womb, born with no knowledge as to the pain its conception had caused. A son or daughter he would raise as his own, if only to prove to Faith and the world around them that the sins of the parents need not be cast onto the child.

Faith sighed, bringing Draven's attention away from his melancholy thoughts. She looked wild and free with her head tilted toward the sky, her eyes closed. He wanted to know one brief moment of the freedom she was taking part in but couldn't fathom how it must feel. He felt like an intruder, an interloper, a barrier between Faith and the unseen God she looked to be quietly communicating with. He closed his eyes but felt nothing other than snowy wind, and when he reopened them, the crater in his soul had widened its berth to encompass his spirit as well.

Envy. It coursed through him as Faith smiled upon the

world. She inhaled a deep lungful of the crisp air and raised her arms above her head.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she said, her voice carried on the wind like a sweetly scented gust. "Look at the loch from here and the field of snow."

He saw what she saw, and aye, it was lovely, but he didn't feel a part of it all as she seemed to. Even with her scars, she hadn't become as isolated from the world as he had.

Envy.

Draven kicked the snow away from the tree roots until a clear patch of stumps poked through, then sat himself upon it. He watched Faith for several more minutes, until finally she turned that glorious smile onto *him* and eased onto a nearby stump. She gathered her mantle around her and gave a light shiver, then brushed her hair from her face.

"You healed me the other day . . . in the forest," she said, her words preceded by small puffs of white air. "I hadn't known you were capable of doing so."

He nodded, his gaze traveling to her breast. He'd healed that part of her as well, though she didn't know it. The chilly air was chased away by the memory of her breast in his palm. Ripe, supple, perfectly formed. Certain muscles in his body tensed and heated, forcing him to look away.

"Did you ever try to do that with the Camerons? Heal others, I mean."

Draven bit back a laugh. Had he ever tried? He shook his head in response, the truth of his answer too bitter to tell.

He'd spent the first fifteen years of his life trying to do good works with his powers, but the only people who had allowed him to get close enough to try had been so badly wounded or ill, they'd been quiet and unconscious while he'd tended to them. They'd awakened the next day to praise the Cameron midwife for her skills. After that, he'd spent his powers only on his own person and on the animals who did not judge him.

"Would you here? If the Maitlands are willing to allow it, would you try to help my people?" Faith spoke but did

not look his way. Her hands wrung nervously in her lap, and she'd become all too fascinated by the snow at her feet. "I know you said you would try if I allowed your touches, but I cannot, and little Frances could certainly use a bit of what you did to me. What ails her isn't a wound to be healed, of course, and I'm not at all certain you're even able to heal ailments as you are injuries."

Draven felt her gaze move to him as he fumbled with his writing tools. She still wanted what he'd offered her that night in his chamber, and yet was still unwilling to consider what he'd asked of her. Did she think what she asked of him was more easily done than what he'd requested? Did she believe he was stony enough to confront being scorned over and over while she, herself, was unwilling to face her own fears? It was an unfair thing to ask of him.

It does not matter whether I am able or not. They will not be any more willing to allow my touch than you are.

His remark caused her to stiffen on her stump. "Perhaps their fear will not be as great as mine."

He shrugged and studied her, watched her pull her bottom lip between her teeth and nibble.

If I cannot even persuade my own wife not to fear me, how can you ask your people not to?

Faith read Draven's words and was nauseated by the truth of them. He was right. How could she ask of her people what she was not willing to do, herself? It was true that, over the last few days, she'd wanted badly to kiss him again, but each time she considered doing so, the image of his hands on her breasts, on her waist, on her body, made even so simple an act repugnant. And why? He had taken no liberties with her during any of their kisses. Why should she not trust him to continue being gentle with her?

But she would not allow the truth of his words to prevent her from trying to convince him that showing his powers to her people might be the best way to gain their trust. He could not be expected to keep them hidden forever, after all, and it would be far safer to allow them to see the magic being used for good.

"I allowed you to touch and heal me," she said. "That is the same sort of touch I am asking for my clan."

It appeared he was having difficulty fighting that argument, for he poised the quill over the paper for a long moment before scribbling his reply. A few flyaway strands of ebony hair escaped the queue at his nape to lash at his cheeks. The beauty of him in that moment—his wild hair, his long fingers working diligently to speak by composing, his lean, sculpted arm moving frantically as he wrote—stole Faith's breath. She daydreamed about sitting on his lap and wrapping her arms around his neck, nuzzling him, loving him, as she'd often watched her mother do to her da.

The image she'd conjured didn't frighten Faith. It was what such a thing might lead to that shoved the daydream violently from her mind.

Very well. I'll do what you ask so long as you're prepared for the repercussions.

"What do you mean?"

He handed her his response, removing the lingering spell his presence had conjured in her.

I'm not always in control of my powers. At the festival, I could not control the Devil in me.

"Stop speaking such nonsense. There is no Devil in you, Draven."

He hesitated before placing his quill to the parchment once more. *There is, indeed, Faith, and it's killed a woman simply because I couldn't control it.*

The blood in Faith's veins turned cold and felt as though it had stopped its flow completely. "You're jesting."

Slowly, Draven shook his head. *I'm no better than the man who raped you. And if you ask me to use my powers on your clansmen, it could very well lead to another murder.*

Twenty-two



Faith had no doubt that Draven spoke the truth about his powers' tendency to spin out of his control. She's seen proof at the festival. But deep within her soul, she simply could not believe he'd been capable of murder as he claimed.

"Tell me what happened," she whispered, praying her confidence in his character sounded through her voice.

Draven wrote for a long while, giving Faith plenty of time to remind herself why she didn't believe such of him. He'd never intentionally harmed her, or threatened her, or tried to force the consummation of their marriage. A murderer would have had no qualms about doing those things.

He handed her his words and leaned back against the tree while she read.

Her name was Bridget, and I thought we'd marry. When I discovered the child she carried did not belong to me, I was furious. The only reason she'd been with me at all was because my father had blackmailed her into trying to seduce me to use my powers in his schemes; everything I thought to be truth was shattered.

I tried not to hate her. I even understood why she'd done it. If she hadn't, Harold would have informed the king of her father's treason, and he would be killed. But knowing that I had loved a woman whose heart already belonged to another was more than I could stand. So I went to her cottage where I knew she often met with her lover.

They weren't there. My mind taunted me with images of their secret meetings, imagined that they laughed about the fool Draven while they sweated in the very bed from which she'd professed her love for me. My powers took over, and the cottage went up in flames. It wasn't until there was nothing left but rubble that I discovered Bridget had been inside after all.

Faith glanced up from the parchment, her throat painfully constricted. It was the most he'd ever told her about himself, and she felt all the sympathy in the world for what he'd gone through. For what Harold's ploys and manipulations had done to Draven and Bridget and even to the child she carried.

"It was an accident," she said. "You didn't mean to kill her."

Her voice echoed over the vast cliffs around them, the fog of her breath turning the frigid air into puffy little punctuations to every word she spoke. Draven stared at her with a bemused expression on his face, as though he believed her to be naive.

"It's true," she urged. "It seems to me you've been surrounded by devils your whole life, Draven, but you are not one of them."

And it was true. She no longer feared the magic in Draven's hands. Instead, she found herself curious as to what other wonders he might be able to perform.

Draven scribbled words onto the paper on his knee, then handed it to her, watching her with an intense gaze. She shifted on the tree stump where she sat and read his message.

You still wish me to use my powers on your people, even after what I've just confessed?

Faith nodded. "If you are willing."

Why should I do this for you when you are not willing to try to grant my request?

And so they were back to his request to be her true husband. Faith frowned. How badly did she want to know whether or not he could heal sweet Frances's lungs? Very. But the true question was, how badly did she want to regain the trust of her people, trust she'd lost when she'd married Draven?

Enough to face her own fears?

Swallowing the bitter taste of bile in her throat, she stood and brushed the snow from her plaid. Without saying a word, her mind too jumbled with Draven's request to even find her voice, she untethered her mare and mounted her before Draven could even stand.

"I will come to you, and I will try to give you what you want," she said, her voice quivering nearly as badly as her resolve. But her gaze dropped to his mouth, and for a moment, she felt a thrill of anticipation that numbed a bit of her fear. "And tomorrow, you will go to Frances."

She didn't wait for his reaction. Instead, she clicked her tongue and rode recklessly down the narrow ridge, eager to get home so she might contemplate the experiment she had just committed herself to.

Draven sat on the cliffs for several hours after Faith's abrupt departure. He stared down at the sharp edges of rock, feeling as though he'd just pushed Faith over the edge and impaled her upon them. He'd never expected her to agree to his request, had never expected to have to use his magic on the other Maitlands. Now he was trapped.

And so was she.

There was no doubt in his mind she would come to him as promised. She was not bartering for herself but for her people, and he knew from experience she would put herself through torture to help others.

But hell's fire, he'd never expected her to react so calmly

to his confession of murder. Especially after she'd been the victim of a violent man, herself.

Perhaps he would sleep elsewhere tonight and prevent either of them from having to follow through on their promises. But as quickly as that notion appeared to him, it burst with a prick of anticipation. He could kiss her again and perhaps this time, coax her fears away so that a small touch would be pleasurable to her.

She deserved to know the pleasure of a man's touch, and with each day, he wanted badly to know the pleasure of hers. He wanted her to ache for him as he was for her at this moment, to anticipate their meeting as he did.

But that wouldn't happen. Not tonight. Tonight, she would have been forced to allow his touch in hopes of helping a young lass, and that thought was so unappealing, he grumbled beneath his breath. The sound stunned him, jerking him crudely from his self-loathing.

For a few more moments, he sat in solitude, playing with his raspy voice, until a raw scratchiness raked its fingers down his throat preventing further sound.

Finally accepting he would not coax a coherent word from his parched throat, he rode back to the keep. By the time he handed the steed's reins over to the stable master, an evening gray had settled upon the land like an unwanted guest. Supper soon. His chamber later. Then Faith.

He walked with heavy feet to the hall, where the scents of roasted game and vegetables mingled with the chaotic chatter of those eating them. When it didn't appear that Faith had chosen to dine in the hall, he allowed relief to quicken his steps. But a moment later, that relief was gone, and his apprehension returned. She was, indeed, here, partially hidden by Elliot's broad form.

A few people roaming around the front of the hall sat down, giving Draven a better glimpse of the laird's table. Elliot sat at its center looking none too thrilled with Faith, who sat regally at his side. Her hair was now coiffed in a long plait, the end of which hung over her breast and disappeared behind the table. She was watching Elliot with wor-

ried eyes, but neither of them appeared to be speaking to the other.

Draven considered turning around and spending the supper hour alone, but his body didn't comply. Instead, he found himself marching through the crowd, his legs stepping up onto the raised dais, his backside placing itself firmly on the laird's bench on the left side of Faith. He was through running. Through hiding. He was who he was, and he had the right to eat a meal properly. He was a strong enough man to cope with gawkers and gossips. He'd done so all his life.

Faith cast him a quick, demure glance from beneath her lashes, then took a petite bite of carrot. A red blush stained her cheeks, but Draven wasn't certain if its cause was his presence or her uncle's obvious displeasure with her. Why were they quarreling? No one could miss how devoted the pair were to one another. Draven had sensed something amiss during the council meeting this morn but had never considered there might be true animosity between them.

Before he could think over the matter further, a small hand reached across him and plucked his goblet from the table. Draven looked up to find Patrick-Hugh smiling broadly at him, pouring a splash more wine into the cup.

"Good eve, sir," the lad said.

Draven nodded his acknowledgment and, thinking that was all Patrick-Hugh had wanted, turned back to the large trencher of food before him. He chose a few slices of what looked to be wild boar and placed them on his own trencher. Patrick-Hugh set the goblet down where it belonged but did not seem ready to leave. Draven looked at him in inquiry.

The lad leaned in closely, his sweetly scented whispers hot against Draven's ear. "I saw ye in the mountains . . . heard ye tryin' to speak."

Draven didn't move. For the first time in many years, the heat of embarrassment crept into his face. He glanced quickly toward Faith to make certain she hadn't heard the lad's confession.

When he turned his gaze to Patrick-Hugh, the lad's eyes were alight with pleasure. "I can help ye wi' that. If ye . . . ever want to practice."

Uncertain what irked him more—that Patrick-Hugh had spied on him today or that he seemed to think Draven might be helped by such a wee child—Draven stabbed his knife purposefully into his meat and glared a warning at Patrick-Hugh.

Patrick-Hugh's smile faltered. He stepped back, his wide eyes steadily gazing at the knife in Draven's fist, then scampered away to the far side of the room to refill more cups. Draven bit back a smile as the lad's shaky hand dribbled more wine onto the tables than into the cups.

"What was that about?" Faith whispered.

She didn't look at him but rather watched Patrick-Hugh's clumsy strides around the hall.

Draven shrugged, paying far more attention to his food than was necessary. He certainly didn't want Faith to discover he'd been trying—and failing miserably—to find his voice lately. She was just the sort of person who might try to persuade him to allow her help, just as Patrick-Hugh had. Draven wanted no witnesses to his failures, especially the woman he wanted so badly in his bed.

"He's taken a great liking to you. Patrick-Hugh, I mean." Faith's voice was shaky, and Draven couldn't help but wonder if she spoke to him because she was trying to smooth things over, or in order to fill the silence between herself and Elliot.

He smiled, hoping to feign an interest in Patrick-Hugh's companionship. She needn't know he was doing everything in his power to make the lad stay away from him.

Elliot's grumbling snagged Draven's attention. The laird was grumbling beneath his breath, his hand firmly gripping Faith's wrist. Faith jerked her hand back and tried to rise, but Elliot forced her back to her seat, his glare anything but kind.

"You will sit until the supper hour is through," Elliot commanded through clenched teeth. "I don't know what's

gotten into you, Faith, but I'm not having you disrespect our people any longer."

"Let me go, Uncle." Faith pulled hard against Elliot's grip, her eyes wide, her lips trembling.

When Elliot refused to release her, anger pushed Draven to his feet. In a mere second, he had moved behind Elliot and had seized the old man's arm, wrenching it away from Faith's with more force than he had intended. He knew Elliot would do nothing to harm Faith, had seen the shared adoration in both their eyes toward the other. But he also sensed that, at this moment, Faith was not seeing her uncle but another man who had once held her against her will. Draven would not let that fear hold her any longer.

Elliot pushed away from his bench, his brown eyes alight with fury. His cheeks red, he puffed out his chest and stood nose to nose with Draven.

"You dare to touch *me*? You? I could have your innards in my fist in the next minute if I choose."

Faith gasped, sliding between Elliot and Draven, prying them apart with a shaking hands. "This is *not* necessary. Draven, sit down. Uncle, do not threaten my husband."

"And you," Elliot turned his glare to his niece. Neither man moved to do as Faith had asked. Draven stood ready to intervene again if needed, and Elliot wore an expression that dared her to demand anything of him again. "You dare to chastise *me*? Where's the lass I raised to be honorable? The lass who tended her people with love and devotion? I have not seen her in months!"

Ignoring the stares of the people around them, Faith suffered the quiet tears rolling down her cheeks with dignity. Draven itched to wipe them away, but the fire of defiance in her eyes held him at bay.

"She is gone, Elliot," Faith whispered. "Run off with the uncle who I've not seen in days, as well, for he would never have treated me the way you have lately. He would have understood that something was amiss and given me time to sort through it instead of demanding of me what I cannot give. Tell me. Where is *that* Elliot? The man standing

before me now is more kin to Harold Cameron than to the uncle I know and love, casting threats and demanding obedience. I don't know *you* anymore, either!"

In her haste to flee the hall, Faith shoved into Draven's chest, catching him off guard and sending him onto the bench with a loud *whoomph*. She didn't run through the murmuring clan, however. Rather, she walked stiff-spined with her head held high, sending a ripple of pride through Draven. He glanced at Elliot, who looked so taken aback by Faith's outburst, Draven nearly felt sorry for him.

Elliot didn't know that Faith had been violated and therefore couldn't know what she'd been battling all this time. But it wasn't Draven's secret to tell. Faith would make her confession when she was ready, and he certainly wasn't going to make her hurry.

Twenty-three



Draven's chamber was cold and damp, the basket for wood and kindling by the hearth bare. Faith paced the path from the window to the door, chafing her arms with her hands in an effort to warm herself, but she doubted that even the hottest of fires would fix her at that moment. Draven would come here soon, expecting to find his chamber vacant. But she'd chosen to wait here, knowing that if she'd returned to her own to await a more proper time to seek him out as she'd promised, she might never gather the nerve.

The weaver had delivered half a dozen plaids for Draven this afternoon. They lay in a heap on his bed, untouched by their new owner. She paused in her pacing long enough to run her fingers over the wool fabric, imagining them draped across her husband's chest.

She wanted badly to allow herself the fantasy of fully enjoying his company without trepidation, of admiring his beauty without fear of his misinterpreting her desires. But she couldn't allow herself to dwell on either image. Not

until she was ready to give him every bit of her, which was likely never to happen.

Her promise to allow him a simple touch would be met so that Frances's wee lungs might benefit from his magic, but Faith truly could not see herself enjoying the payment he'd asked of her. Other than her mouth, there were too few parts of her body left unsullied by the man who'd ravaged her. Too few places left for Draven to claim as his own.

Wanting to test herself, she dragged her hand over her cheek, down her throat, across her breast. She pressed her palm to her swollen belly and slowly slipped it lower, barely brushing the juncture of her legs. As the image of her hand moving changed into that of a man's, her body recoiled, and she jerked her hand away.

She couldn't do this. No good would come of it. She would only succeed in making Draven feel guilty and increasing her own fears. She should go now, before he returned, and hope that he'd believe she'd fallen asleep before their meeting.

But as she moved to do just that, the chamber door swung open, and a startled-looking Draven stepped through the doorway. He quickly regained his composure and closed the door, giving Faith a moment to catch her breath. She'd been too late in her escape.

"I thought it better to do this sooner . . . rather than later," she mumbled, backing up until she could sit on the window bench in order to hide her shaky legs from his gaze. "I hope you don't think I was too forward, coming into your chamber uninvited."

Shaking his head, he turned to face her and leaned against the door. He crossed his arms over his chest, his gaze falling onto the pile of new plaids atop his bed.

"They arrived for you today. I'm sorry you've gone so long with just the one."

He nodded in appreciation and pulled his writing tools from around his neck.

"Don't." Faith held up a hand, stopping him from writ-

ing to her. "I'd rather you didn't say anything. I'm—I'm not at all sure my nerves will allow me to linger here long."

Holding her gaze with narrowed eyes, he tossed the leather case onto the bed and crossed the room. Faith's heart sputtered and died before galloping at twice its normal staccato. Lord save her, the heat emanating from that piercing blue gaze held her pinned to her seat, unable to do aught but brace herself for his approach. He sat beside her on the bench, taking her hand and cupping it in both of his. He would grab her, touch her, do what he wished.

Any moment now. Any moment at all.

But he did nothing.

With a lump in her throat, she glanced at him. The anticipation of his plans churned her supper in her belly like a boiling pot of stew. He was watching her, studying her, but seemed to be in no hurry to do anything more than that.

Unwilling to steep in her own fears, she looked him boldly in the eye and lifted her chin. "What is it you want from me, Draven?"

The corner of his mouth lifted into half a grin, but he surprised her by releasing her hand and striding toward the bed. The space on the bench where he'd been sitting now felt oddly empty and colder than before. Faith took the precious moments that Draven's back was to her to regain what poise she could find.

He looked to be writing something, but then he knelt on the floor and pulled what looked to be falcon jesses from beneath the bed.

It took every bit of strength within Faith not to leap from the bench and bolt toward the door. "What, exactly, do you expect to do with those?"

He handed her his note, and she was almost too frightened to take her gaze away from those jesses long enough to read his words.

I will not lay a hand on you. Any touching to be done will be done by you alone.

"Wh—" She glanced up from the note to find Draven

standing against the wall, his hands bound together by the jesses.

“Draven? What are you—”

Instead of answering her, he walked toward the wall, lifted his hands over his head, and secured the knot on the jesses to a peg on the wall. He caught Faith’s stare, smiled, then pulled hard against his restraints, showing her that he’d wedged the head of the peg securely between the knot’s crossings. He would not be easily freed.

Faith opened her mouth to protest, but Draven shook his head. He tilted his chin in a jerky manner, gesturing for her to come to him. She’d vowed to allow him a chance to earn her trust, but she didn’t like the thought of his imprisonment any more than she’d liked the thought of her own.

But the amount of trust he was putting in her hands gave her the courage to stand on trembling legs and make her way toward him. He was at her mercy. She could hurt him or leave him ensnared in his own trap. Yet he trusted that she wouldn’t.

Her confidence in him grew. This was not a man capable of murder.

When she was finally standing in front of him, she stared, mesmerized by the sight of his chest rising and falling with heavy breaths.

“What is it you want me to do?”

Lured by the heat of his gaze, she looked up at him and, without thinking, brushed a wayward lock of ebony hair from his brow. As she did so, Draven leaned down and dragged his lips over hers. Faith’s breath caught in her throat, the warm, sweet scent of his kiss bewitching her, offering her the courage to lean closer into his frame.

“Again,” she whispered, focusing on the plumpness of his lower lip.

This time, when he lowered his mouth to hers, she captured his face in her palms and rose to meet him. A strange, enticing empowerment coursed through her. She could taste him and touch him without worrying about the consequences. If he truly wanted to, there was no

doubt in her mind that Draven could pull free of his bonds. Delight deepened her kiss as she realized she trusted him not to do so.

His tongue coaxed her lips apart, his throat emitting a soft moan. Faith's hunger grew, and she opened for him eagerly. But, as her hunger increased, she could feel his do the same. Worried he might be reaching his limits, she pulled back and rested her brow against his chest.

"I don't wish to push you beyond your control. I know most men can only be tempted so far before there's no turning back."

When she tilted her head to stare up at him, the look in his eyes spoke to her as clearly as if he had written his thoughts on paper.

He was not most men.

He'd bound himself to give her the freedom to touch him without threat, and her hands shook with a nervous anticipation. She lifted them, lightly placing her fingertips on his shoulders, then met his gaze as she trailed them over his chest and pressed them there.

"I don't dare do more than this," she whispered, stretching to her toes in hopes of another kiss.

He complied, the sharp stubble of his unshaven chin scratching the sensitive flesh around her mouth. She didn't mind it. In fact, she found the strange texture of the prickly beard yet another thing she enjoyed. His tongue skated over her teeth, then lapped gently at the corner of her mouth. Then his lips were gone, traveling over her cheek and finding a new, sensitive spot just below her ear. She wished she was taller, wished she could grant him better access, for the sensation left the rest of her throat aching to be explored in such a way.

A powerful yearning agitated her stomach, then crept between her thighs. The wonder that her body could respond in such a way brought a mewl from her throat, which inspired a husky moan from Draven.

Wanting to lose herself in his mouth once more, she nuzzled his cheek, coaxing his face toward hers. But his move-

ment knocked Faith off balance, causing her to fall against him. The hard, rigid length of his desire rubbed against her lower belly. The feel of it brought a vivid series of images to her mind, reminding her that she was playing with dangerous fire by allowing such intimacy.

Faith stepped away, panting for breath, her body suddenly devoid of all the heat Draven had ignited within her. While his mind and soul might be softer than the man who'd sullied her, his body was created with the same parts that had caused her so much fear and agony.

"I'm sorry, Draven," she said, reaching up to untie the jesses around his wrists. "I can go no further."

He didn't scowl at her, didn't cast a look of disappointment in her direction. Instead, he lightly cupped her face with his now-free hands, and placed a soft, gentle kiss on the tip of her nose. Relief steadied Faith's legs a bit, as did the growing respect and trust he was inspiring in her every moment she was with him. He turned to the door, opened it, and offered her a smile that silently told her she could go without guilt.

"Thank you." She was nearly in the corridor when she found the courage to say more. "If this wasn't too painful for you, I'd like to try again."

The blue of his eyes flickered with surprise, then he nodded . . . slowly . . . as though uncertain she'd meant what she said. Grinning, she hurried to her own room, praying that Essie wouldn't be waiting for her. Tonight, Faith wanted to be alone with her thoughts. She wanted only the memories of this night's wonders to keep her company.



Draven had spent many pain-filled nights fighting aches in search of sleep, but no other agony penetrated his body, mind, and soul the way his desire did that night. He was surprised the heat of his erection hadn't set his bed aflame. Faith had been gone from this room for hours, and still, every time he conjured the memory of her mouth, he grew hard again. And again. And again.

Saints save him, he'd been so long without a woman.

But it wasn't the desire to be with a woman that kept him awake now. What tortured him was the desire to know every inch of *Faith's* body. To know what sounds her pleasure might make. To know how tight she might feel, to hear her cry out his name when Heaven claimed her. He'd wanted to show her he didn't need his voice to be the man she needed. He imagined her welcoming his body, bold and unafraid. Waiting for him in his bed on the coldest of nights. On the hottest of nights.

He'd bound himself to the wall for her, a position that had so often been accompanied by the most horrific of torture. Now the position would forever symbolize one of his greatest moments of pleasure.

He doubted he would ever look at *Bride's* jesses the same way again.

The muscles in his thighs twitched, and Draven clawed at his blanket. The only thing he'd ever wanted as badly as he wanted *Faith* had been death.

It appeared he might never claim either.



A muffled cough woke *Faith* the next morning. She allowed her eyes to flutter open, and swallowed a gasp when her gaze settled upon *Essie* hovering over her.

"'Bout time you woke up." The old woman nodded in satisfaction, then stalked across the chamber and fell into a corner chair. Without offering even one more glance at *Faith*, *Essie* began regally pulling a needle through a man's tunic.

Stretching, *Faith* sat up and struggled to blink the burning from her eyes. Her dreams had been tormented with recollections of her encounter with Draven, leaving little time for true rest. Now, her body was protesting the act of rising to meet the day.

"You missed your morning meal," *Essie* grumbled.

Faith rolled her eyes heavenward and tried to rub feeling

into her face. "Can't you at least wait until I'm out of bed before berating me, Essie?"

"I could." Essie laid her work to the side and folded her hands in her lap. "But I won't."

The anger creeping into Faith died away with the worry she saw in Essie's eyes. There was no disappointment, no vexation. Just distress and the sort of glazed upset she'd seen in her mother's eyes the day Faith had fallen out of a tree at the age of six.

"What is it, Essie? Has something happened?"

"I was hoping you could tell me." Essie pushed herself to her feet, her old body protesting so loudly, it made Faith cringe in sympathy. "The whole clan has gone mad. Your uncle is biting at any hand foolish enough to come too near. You with your sullen ways. That husband of yours who won't say a word to people but's been walking about all morn, talkin' to that bird of his—"

"He's *what*?" Faith bolted to her feet, her heart hammering in her chest. "You must have heard the wind, Essie. Draven can't speak."

"Can't? Nonsense. He won't speak. There's a difference, mind."

"Where is he?" Faith tore off her sleeping gown and reached for a clean tunic and a green plaid.

Draven speaking? *Please, oh please, don't let Essie be mistaken.*

"Bird, bird, bird. Been walking around muttering that word like a loon." Before she could slip her tunic over her head, Essie was at Faith's side, assisting.

The thought brought an unabashed grin to Faith's entire body. A bit of her soul had been healed by Draven's show of trust the night before. Perhaps she'd managed to heal a bit of him, as well.

Essie finished fastening the plaid over Faith's chest with the Maitland brooch, then took her by the shoulders, her firm grip commanding Faith to look at her. "I love you, gel. But sometimes I wonder if that'll be enough."

Smiling, Faith bent and enfolded Essie's wide but short

frame in her arms. "You're as good a mother as my own was. You worry as she would, too."

"Is it the babe what's been troublin' you? Your marriage perhaps?"

Faith inhaled the powdery aroma that always seemed to accompany Essie's hugs. The scent made Faith recall sitting by the hearth with her mother and Essie while they tried to teach her how to sew. Now, that familiar memory suffocated Faith's lungs, absorbing any air she might have held inside. She brushed it aside, her mind refocusing on the extraordinary news Essie had just shared.

"Not now, Essie. I want to see Draven."

I want to hear his voice.

Twenty-four



Bud.”

“Ye keep forgettin’ the *er*.” Patrick-Hugh propped his tiny fists on his hips and stared up at Draven with half a smile painted on his face. “It’s *birrrd*.”

Biting back his frustration at being tutored by a child, Draven practiced rolling the *er* sound around in his mouth. He hadn’t wanted anyone to overhear his attempts to talk to Bride this morn, but he’d found Patrick-Hugh sneaking around, following him, and barely containing his childish laughter.

“Bud,” he managed.

“Birrrd.”

“Bird.”

Patrick-Hugh’s face lit up, and he clapped his hands together in delight. “There. Ye’ve done it. Go on. Try it again.”

“Bird,” Draven said, managing to stifle his own grin. “Bird. Bird. Bird.”

“Now try Patrick-Hugh. Can ye say that?”

Draven raised his brow and rolled his eyes.

"All right. Bird is good eno', I s'pose." Patrick-Hugh tentatively stuck out his hand and ran his small fingers down her feathers.

Draven swallowed. The inside of his throat felt as though both ends had swollen to embrace one another, rubbing together to start a small fire in the back of his mouth. He needed a hot drink, perhaps with a touch of honey for soothing. He led Patrick-Hugh toward the mews and placed Bride on her perch, eager to find someone in the great hall who might brew him a concoction. They stepped back outside, Patrick-Hugh running circles around him like a pent-up pup.

"What'd ye call that bird? Does it have a name?"

Imagining the sound of each letter, Draven cleared his throat and tested his raspy voice again. "Bride."

"Och. See. Now ye've moved the *er* and *aye* around. It's bird, not bride."

Draven shook his head. "Bird is Bride."

Patrick-Hugh's wide eyes lit up with comprehension. "Oh. Her name is Bride."

As they rounded the mews and headed toward the great hall, Draven stopped short at the sight of Faith. Her vivid green eyes shimmered with tears. Her delicate fingers were pressed against her sweet mouth. She dropped her hand and smiled, her lip trembling.

"Your voice is beautiful."

The discomfort in his throat magnified tenfold, and the horrifying heat of embarrassment burned the cold from his cheeks.

He managed an awkward smile and touched his throat. "Hurts."

"I can brew something to help with that."

She brought her hand up, her fingers brushing along his jaw. The touch took him aback, stole his breath, and stopped his heart. He found himself leaning down, closer, ready to kiss her, but the small voice standing beside him broke the moment like an arrow through a pane of glass.

"I helped him learn," Patrick-Hugh said, stealing Faith's attention.

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, then stooped to speak to the lad. "Then I shall make certain the cook saves you an extra treat after supper tonight. You've both given me a wonderful gift."

When she stood back up, she shifted on her feet and chewed her bottom lip. "Not that I believe you did this for me. I just meant—"

"We ken what ye meant," Patrick-Hugh said, taking her hand and pulling her toward the keep. "C'mon. Let's see what sort o' pastries Judith is makin'."

Trying to ignore Faith's continual glances over her shoulder, Draven allowed her and Patrick-Hugh to walk ahead of him. A simple spoken word from him had obviously thrilled her, and thrilling her was exhilarating. This wasn't the sort of thrill he'd had in mind—not nearly enough touching was involved—but it would do . . . for now.

As soon as they reached the great hall, Patrick-Hugh sprinted off, and Faith pivoted in the doorway, preventing Draven from following the lad.

"Can you say it? My name?"

This was why he hadn't wanted her to hear him speak until he was ready. In all his hours of practicing in solitude, he'd tried several times to form her name, but the word *faith* had felt so sacrilegious in his mouth, he hadn't been able to push past the bitter taste of it to form its sounds.

He was destined to disappoint her, and knowing as much dampened the pride he felt at the few words he'd managed.

With a half grimace, he whispered, "Wife."

She winced and looked up at him with slightly narrowed eyes. "My name is not *Wife*."

To Draven's great relief, he was saved from attempting an explanation by the sudden appearance of Father McKinnon in the corridor. He nodded a greeting to Faith, but his gaze didn't linger on her long before swinging to Draven.

"Patrick-Hugh is blustering nonsense about you speaking. Is it true?"

Something in the older man's eyes took Draven aback. Father McKinnon was staring at him with something akin to excitement, and while it was true that he had known the priest since he was a lad, Draven couldn't imagine Father McKinnon caring so much about a few spoken words.

Unsure what to say or if he could say aught at all, Draven looked to Faith, who blessedly seemed to understand his plight. A few words did not make him capable of holding a full conversation, which was what Father McKinnon seemed to be hoping for.

"He is still learning, Father," Faith explained, her smile returning, lighting her face in a glow that clenched Draven's stomach.

"Sweet Lord above," Father McKinnon said. "I never thought . . . after all these years . . ."

The priest's eyes were growing moist, just as Faith's had, and Draven was suddenly more uncomfortable in his skin than he'd ever been before—and that was saying quite a lot. He was used to ridicule and jeers, taunts and teases. But pride and gushing were as foreign to him as kindness had once been.

Had *once* been. That thought startled the discomfort right out of him. When had he become accustomed to Faith's kindness? When had he stopped being troubled by showing *his* kindness to her?

"May I . . . may I hear you speak?" Father McKinnon asked in a timid tone so unlike his normal assured one.

The tone and question so took Draven aback, he answered without thinking. "Aye."

The priest turned a beaming smile onto Draven. "Aye. Aye, indeed."

"If you'll excuse us, Father McKinnon," Faith said. Her voice, too, was trembling slightly. She cleared her throat. "Draven and I have someplace we need to be."

Father McKinnon said nothing but nodded and stepped aside to allow Faith to pull Draven down the corridor.

Draven could feel the heat of the man's stare against his back until they stepped once again into daylight and snow.

Once she'd pulled him down the steps, Draven stopped, forcing her to turn and face him. "Wh-where?"

Before she could answer, Patrick-Hugh came bounding outside, liquid spilling over the goblet he carried in his small fist.

"Ye forgot this. I had Judith make it for ye."

He handed the goblet to Draven, who took it with a grateful smile. His throat was on fire, but he'd allowed Faith to make him forget what they'd gone to the great hall for.

Hell. The truth was, he forgot most everything when she was near, anyway.

The hot, honeyed water slid down his throat and filled the scratches his voice had left behind. He finished the drink in two swallows, not caring that he'd managed to scald his mouth, and handed the goblet back to Patrick-Hugh. He wanted to offer his thanks, but his *ths* still sounded like *ds*.

"Can I go wi' ye? To where'er yer goin'?"

"Well, of course we'd love for you to come, Patrick-Hugh, but I was rather hoping you'd do something quite important for me." Faith knelt, her knees brushing the snow, and looked Patrick-Hugh in the eye. "Will you keep an eye on Father McKinnon? He's looking a bit peaked."

"All right." He sounded uncertain and muttered something about not having fun.

When Patrick-Hugh was gone, Faith stood, laughing quietly. "He's a good lad, but I didn't think it wise to bring him to Frances's cottage with us."

Frances. The lass with the ailing lungs.

Draven had forgotten his promise to try to heal her. As a cloud of uncertainty washed over him, his good humor disappeared. He'd never attempted to heal aught but physical injuries. What did he know of healing ailments such as the one plaguing the young lass?

He didn't like the thought of failing, especially when

Faith would be there to witness it. Would she still believe his powers came from God if he couldn't heal the child?

He supposed he'd find out. He'd never broken his word in his life and wasn't about to begin now.



I was hoping to speak to you about wee Frances," Faith told Frances's mother, Ingrainia, when they stepped into the small cottage. "How is she feeling today?"

The warmth of the small fire did much to chase away the chill of the outdoors, and Faith smiled as she glanced around the snug, cozy residence. Little Frances played quietly in the corner, a wooden toy in her hands. She cast only the quickest of glances at her guests, wheezed a heavy sigh, and resumed her play. Her mother looked at Draven, her eyes wide with worry and suspicion.

Faith placed a reassuring hand on the woman's arm. "It's all right, Ingrainia. My husband has not earned the reputation he has been given. You may speak freely in front of him."

While the suspicion in her eyes didn't vanish, Ingrainia smiled faintly and looked lovingly at her child. "This weather is no' good for her. Matilda says there's naught she can do but ease the discomfort."

Gesturing for the woman to sit, Faith took a seat at a small table. Draven remained standing by the closed door, his arms folded solemnly over his chest. His stance would do nothing to ease Ingrainia's trepidation, but Faith couldn't very well say anything to him without causing more tension between the pair. It was obvious Ingrainia did not want him in her home and more obvious that Draven had no wish to be there.

"Have you been properly introduced to my husband, Ingrainia?"

Ingrainia shook her head. "Heard enough about 'im though."

Draven scowled, his gaze focused on the child playing by the fire. Faith patted Ingrainia's hand. "Gossip dark

enough to give you night terrors, no doubt. You need not believe what's said about him."

It was an awkward position she'd put Ingrainia in, and Faith knew it. Ingrainia wouldn't wish to offend her lady and therefore wouldn't say anything insulting to Draven. But her fears needed to be quelled.

"Speak freely, Ingrainia. Ask the questions I know you must be wanting answers to. You won't offend me."

"Is that so?" Ingrainia pursed her lips together, doubt still lingering in her eyes. But she searched Faith's face as though seeking the truth, then finally nodded. "Then please tell me why you've brought him into my home."

Faith had to swallow the bite of irritation at Ingrainia's insinuation that Draven wasn't worthy of entering the cottage. The last thing she wanted was to upset the woman further. So she stiffened her smile and tried not to glare.

"You see, Ingrainia, some of what they say about my husband is true. He's come here for Frances."

Ingrainia bolted to her feet and rushed to her daughter's side. She scooped the lass into her arms before stepping back with a fearful expression on her face. "What's he want with my daughter? She's nothing to him."

"He wants to try to help her. What have you heard about Draven?"

The mother pressed her cheek to Frances's head and glared at Draven. "He's the Devil's son. Can do black magic to hurt others."

Indignation created a ladder in Faith's belly for her frustration to climb upon. She shook her head and walked toward the pair, wishing Draven would try to look less intimidating. If he would only smile . . .

"It is true, my husband has power he'd rather not reveal, but that it comes from the Devil is pure nonsense, Ingrainia. You've taken Frances to see Matrilda because Matrilda has a bit of magic herself, have you not?"

Ingrainia nodded but took another hesitant step away. "They say he murdered a lass in his clan. Is it true?"

Draven winced as though being struck, and when he re-

alized both women were staring at him, turned and sat alone at the eating table.

"I've seen his powers," Faith said, hoping to brush aside the question. "He can heal. He healed me when I was injured in the forest. I was hoping you'd let him try to do the same for Frances's lungs. There's no guarantee, mind you, but what harm could come from his trying?"

Ingrainia's blue eyes softened with what looked to be a glimmer of hope. She stared down at the child in her arms. "A good deal, should my husband discover I've let him touch her. I'm not certain I believe what you say, Lady Faith, but even if I did, Jaime would never allow for it."

As though beckoned by her words, the back door to the cottage banged open, and a tall, broad-shouldered man entered the cottage. His bearded smile broadened when he settled his gaze on Faith, then he bent to kiss his wife and child.

"Lady Faith," he greeted her, stripping off his gloves. "A special day this. It isn't often we are paid a visit by the future laird—" Jaime's head jerked to the left, his cheeks reddening as deeply as his cold-colored nose. "And her husband."

Clearing her throat and cursing Jaime's timing, Faith pivoted toward Draven and held out her arm. "My husband, Draven, Jaime. I don't believe you've met."

As though expecting a confrontation, Draven stood and braced his feet apart, folding his arms over his chest as he nodded curtly at the newcomer.

"He . . . he wants to try to heal Frances, Jaime," Ingrainia said. She curled her fingers around her husband's wrist, keeping him at her side. "Lady Faith believes he might be able to do it."

But rather than look at his wife or even at Draven, Jaime turned his scowl to Faith, his future laird, and said in an icy tone, "If he so much as breathes on my daughter, I'll be hanging for murder by morn."

Twenty-five



Godfrey stood beneath a pine canopy just on the outskirts of the Maitland village. He slipped his good hand beneath his plaid and expelled a hot breath when his fingers wrapped around his throbbing sex. It was midafternoon, and the village was alive with bustle. The possibility of being seen in this manner excited him all the more as he stared directly through the window in front of him.

A small, quaint cottage with smoke curling from the chimney. And inside the window stood Faith, red-faced and angry just as she'd been when he'd taken her. Draven was in there, too. He'd seen the pair enter several moments before. Any thought of catching Faith alone had left Godfrey then, but that didn't stop him from finding pleasure with her in his view. It would placate him until he could speak to Harold Cameron.

He leaned against the tree for support, his hips bucking wildly with his quick strokes. He imagined Faith's mouth circling around the tip of his cock. Pictured her staring up at him as she drew him into her throat. But it was the image of Draven watching the act, helpless to stop it, enraged with

jealousy, that finally made Godfrey gush his desire into the palm of his hand.

Faith suddenly missed her training lessons with Shane. Since he'd been off hunting the brigands, she hadn't learned anything about defending herself. Though, just now, she didn't want to defend as much as she wanted to cause physical injury. She longed to deliver a punch that would knock sense into Jaime MacNeely.

"You're a fool." Faith glared at Frances's father, her blood coursing an angry river through her body and pounding loudly in her ears. "You would lose a chance to help your daughter because of rumors about a man you don't even know."

Jaime didn't look as though he cared one bit that she was his future laird now. He was a father, irate on his child's behalf, and the determination in his eyes stole all hope from Faith that Frances might be healed by Draven.

"I would rather have an ill child than one touched by the Devil. What's to stop him from putting evil into her? Who has more right than I to say it will not be allowed?"

"Jaime, perhaps—"

Jaime's glare cut off his wife's words. He strode to the door, flung it open, and pointed outside. "Leave. The both of you. Should my laird be angry with me for speaking to you thus, my lady, I will answer to him, but in *my* home, I am laird. Do you understand me?"

Draven stepped forward, his fists clenched, his chest heaving with heavy breaths.

"Let's go," she whispered, feeling the threat of tears. "They don't want our help, and I don't wish to cause Frances any distress."

He looked at the child and relaxed his fingers. Faith took his hand and laced her fingers in his, trying to still the tremble of fury shaking within them. As she led him outside, guilt made words difficult to find. She'd brought Draven here, had been the reason he'd been forced to listen to

insults against his character. He hadn't wanted to, had warned her that they wouldn't let him touch their child, but she hadn't listened.

Jaime slammed the door shut behind them, and Faith choked back her tears. She stretched onto her toes and placed a kiss on Draven's lips. "I'm sorry," she whispered, caressing his cheek. "I should have listened to you."

Draven's clenched jaw did not slacken. He stepped away from her, and before she could discover what was going through his mind, he started back to the keep, leaving Faith behind. Sorry that she'd soured the wonderful day with her insistence they visit Frances, she let him go and prayed this incident would not affect his newly found voice.



Draven half expected to find Faith waiting for him in his chamber again that evening, since there'd been no sign of her at supper, but when he finally retired, he found his chamber cold and vacant. He wasn't angry with her and knew he should have made certain she knew that. But the truth was, he was embarrassed by Jaime's treatment of him, and more so by the fact that Faith had witnessed it.

He'd warned her, but her belief in the goodness of others could not be swayed. Perhaps now she'd see the error of her thinking and would not ask such of him again.

Just as he unpinned his plaid, a knock sounded on his door. He repinned the garment and opened the door to find Faith standing in the corridor, wringing her hands.

She looked up at him with wide, uncertain eyes. "I wasn't certain you'd still want me to come. I can go if you'd like."

He swung the door open wider and stepped aside to allow her entrance. She had come to him, had kept her word. He would have another chance to woo her confidence and perhaps gain her trust.

His falcon jesses still lay on the floor where he'd left them the night before. He loathed the thought of not being

able to touch Faith as he so wanted, but he picked them up and began winding them around his wrists.

"I'm sorry," Faith whispered. "You are my husband. You shouldn't feel you have to bind yourself because I am afraid."

He smiled, hoping to ease a bit of the tension that had found its way back between them. "Come."

"I'm sorry?"

Draven held out his bound wrists and pointed to the peg on the wall. "Do it."

Her pink mouth formed a small *O* as understanding lit up her eyes. "You wish me to bind you to the wall?"

He nodded.

She stepped toward him, her movements not at all certain. As she brushed by him, he gave in to the need scratching at his belly, swiftly bent his head, and pressed his mouth to hers. Before she could bind him to the wall, he would take a moment to touch her face, her hair, so he might remember how they felt when they were beyond his reach.

Her breath was warm and tasted slightly of sugar, and to Draven's immense relief, she softened against him, welcoming his kiss with an eagerness that rivaled his own.

Then she pulled away, only slightly, resting her brow against his chin. She brought her head up, her gaze capturing his, her chest heaving as mightily as his own. "Say my name."

Instead, he smothered her further insistence with another kiss, this time prying her lips apart with his tongue to get to the richer taste of her mouth. The slippery, silky feel of her tongue brushing his brought a moan from his throat. She mimicked him, her moan more a purr, and brought her arms around his neck.

Afraid she might panic should they continue without securing him, he broke the kiss and fought for air, then nodded toward the peg.

"Tie me."

Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and she flicked her

tongue over her partly opened mouth. "I—I think I trust you not to touch me, Draven."

Her words stopped his heart. He grew rigid, his erection painful and throbbing. "I don't."

To his surprise, she smiled and touched him beneath his shoulders. Slowly, she drew her fingertips along his arms, sending chills over his entire body. When her touch reached his bound hands, she lifted them over his head and backed him against the wall. Kissing him, she pushed on the jesses until they were fastened securely to the peg, then brazenly moved her lips over his jaw and down his neck.

"I've been curious to know whether the rest of you is as sweet as your mouth," she muttered, her moving lips tickling his throat. "I can touch you? And stop when it suits me?"

He hesitated before nodding, uncertain as to whether he would be able to keep his promise now that she was becoming more bold. Desire had painted her cheeks and glazed her eyes. Every one of her subtle movements beckoned him, tempted him.

But before he could find out how strong his resolve to remain true to his word was, someone pounded on his door and called out for him.

It was Patrick-Hugh.

"Is Lady Faith wi' ye?"

Faith broke away, her cheeks burning hot. She hurried to pull him free from his bonds, composed herself, then walked to the door. She swung it open, revealing an anxious-looking Patrick-Hugh on the other side.

"Thought ye mi' be here when ye weren't in yer chamber."

Faith cleared her throat. "What is it?"

"Frances's mother's brought her here. Says she wants to see Sir Draven."

She glanced at Draven, the embarrassing interruption clearly replaced by uncertainty once again. "Should we see her?"

But Draven was already adjusting his plaid. He was be-

ginning to know Faith well enough to understand her measure of hope was endless. She would ask this of him, regardless of the consequences it had wrought before.

He nodded and took her hand, leading her into the corridor where Patrick-Hugh guided them down the stairs and into the great hall.

"She's in there," Patrick-Hugh said, pointing toward the front of the hall.

Ingrainia paced the length of the dais, a sleeping Frances cuddled in her arms. When she saw them, she stopped her pacing and turned her tear-filled gaze upon Draven.

Striding quickly down the aisle, she pressed her child into Draven's arms, forcing him to take her.

"I beg it of you," she pleaded. "Heal my daughter."

Twenty-six



Baffled, Draven stared at the lass in his arms. He'd picked up Patrick-Hugh before, but the lad had been all skin and bones, a gangly child sprouting from toddler to child. But Frances . . . she was fleshy and soft, warm and tender. She smelled of honey and apples, and when her tiny hand reached out to tug at Draven's hair, the trust she offered nearly caused him to drop her.

If Faith's child was a girl, would she be so sweet and trusting? Would her smile constrict Draven's heart as wee Frances's was doing now?

The feel of her was so foreign to Draven, he didn't quite know where to hold her without hurting her. He tucked one arm under her bottom, the other around her back, and pressed her to his chest while her mother, Ingrainia, spoke anxiously with Faith.

"She's worse now. Her cough is preventing any of us from finding sleep. Sounds like every breath is an effort."

Draven confirmed as much, pressing his hand to Frances's back. For such tiny breaths, her back heaved as though she'd just sprinted through the forest on a hunt.

"And Jaime?" Faith asked. "Did he change his mind, as well?"

"I made sure he was plenty soused before I came to you. If he found out . . ." Ingrainia cast a furtive glance at Draven. "Will you help her?"

His first instinct was to tell the woman no. But the soft, pink smile on Frances's rosebud mouth made him nod, instead. It didn't matter how the lass's parents had treated him, she had done him no wrong. He would help her, *if* he could. And if he couldn't, he hoped Faith would understand that he had tried.

Gingerly, he carried Frances to the great fire, which had begun to dwindle into tiny flames. He eased onto the wooden floor and cradled Frances in his lap.

"Need heat," he managed. "And light."

The women needed no further prodding. Ingrainia worked at stoking the fire while Faith hurried about, collecting candles and setting them to light. The great hall was still dim, still chilled, but soon, it became workable for Draven's magic.

"Leave," he said, unable to string together the words that would soften the command.

Faith took Ingrainia's arm, but the woman stayed put, shaking her head. "I'll not leave her."

"Please, Ingrainia. Let him work," Faith pleaded.

A throat was cleared in the doorway, calling all of their attention. Father McKinnon stepped into the hall, nodding a greeting as his gaze settled upon the lass in Draven's lap.

"I'll stay and watch over them if he'll allow it," he offered.

Draven looked to Ingrainia for any objection. He wouldn't need solitude so much as he would silence, and he couldn't trust the mother not to panic when he laid his hands upon her child. He knew his powers became visible through his body, had seen his skin glow, had been told his eyes changed colors. Seeing such would likely bring a cry from Ingrainia and would therefore interrupt the healing.

Father McKinnon would doubtlessly be more controlled with his reactions.

Ingrainia looked uncertain, her hands reaching out to Frances. But she pulled them to her sides and, with a trembling mouth, asked Father McKinnon, "You'll call for me if there's trouble?"

The priest nodded. The women left. Draven looked at Father McKinnon, who was settling himself on a bench by the fire.

"Silence."

Father McKinnon smiled, nodding. "You've my word."

Father McKinnon leaned his back against the wall, trying to appear only vaguely interested, and praying Draven wouldn't sense the excitement bubbling within him. He'd never seen Draven use his powers, but, on more than one occasion, had watched Draven's mother cast her magic to heal. He'd grown up as childhood friends with Aileas Cameron. She, Father McKinnon, and Father Buchannan had spent nearly every day with one another until they reached adulthood. She'd shared the secrets of her powers with them, and when, as two young men, they'd decided to give their lives to God in the priesthood, the threesome had still remained close. It had been Father Buchannan who'd persuaded Father McKinnon to believe Aileas's powers weren't to be feared. Father McKinnon had come to enjoy watching Aileas perform her magic.

Even to a God-fearing priest, the sight had been beautiful to behold. Would the son be as fascinating?

A shiver of anticipation ran through Father McKinnon. Many of his peers would call him sacrilegious for accepting such magic so openly, but they had never played witness to such a thing. Father Buchannan, the one fellow priest that Father McKinnon could have enjoyed such with, had died several years before Aileas's murder. If others could witness this, they would surely feel as Father McKinnon did, as though he was observing God's miracles. All naysayers would do well to watch such powers at work, for Satan's absence just now was as tangible as God's presence.

He watched Draven close his eyes, watched him tilt his head toward the ceiling. Frances played quietly with Draven's long hair, not at all upset by her mother's departure. But when Draven reopened his eyes, revealing a blue so dark they appeared black, and cast his gaze upon Frances's face, the child released a contented sigh and drifted off into a quiet slumber. Draven did nothing for a long moment, save for staring unblinkingly at Frances.

Father McKinnon leaned closer as realization settled over him. Draven was using his magic to make the lass sleep. Was such a thing possible? His mother hadn't been able to do such a thing—at least, she'd never shown that particular ability to Father McKinnon.

A soft hissing noise pulled Father McKinnon from his reverie, bringing his attention back to the magic being played before his eyes. Draven was carefully shifting the lass's plaid, rearranging it to cover her indecent areas but leaving her snow-white belly bare. Obviously uncomfortable with the intimacy the process required, Draven glanced to Father McKinnon.

Then Draven closed his eyes again, rubbing his thumbs along Frances's tiny ribs. He settled both palms over the area, an almost painful expression coming over his face. Tight-lipped, grimacing, as though it was he who was experiencing the difficulty breathing rather than the child.

When a soft, silver-colored glow lifted from Draven's flesh, hovering around him like moonlight on the water, Father McKinnon struggled not to gasp in amazement. The silver shimmered, but Draven's flesh turned an angry shade of red. Tiny stripes resembling veins crawled up his arms and over his face. His hair blew about as though he was standing in a gust of wind.

Father McKinnon shivered. A chill raced up his neck, making his hair stand on end. Aileas's appearance had never changed like this when she'd healed. Rather, she'd simply emitted a glow, a calmness, to those in her vicinity. What Father McKinnon was witnessing now was a far cry

from calm. It was savage and frightening and stunningly beautiful.

Father Buchanan would have been awestruck by the sight. As would Aileas Cameron.

The child in Draven's arms gasped. Her eyelids popped open, revealing an alarmed gaze. Her tiny mouth trembled, but as Father McKinnon looked to Draven and saw that the magic had not stopped, the reminder that he'd asked for silence sent Father McKinnon to his knees in an eager effort to calm Frances before she could cry out.

She grinned up at him and quietly closed her eyes once more, seeming to realize she was safe. With a sigh of relief, Father McKinnon pressed his backside to the floor. His gaze met with Draven's, whose eyes had suddenly reopened. Irises the color of liquid fire stared back at him, and this time, Father McKinnon could not stifle a cry of dismay. The red of Draven's eyes turned pale yellow before sliding back to their normal sky blue, and Father McKinnon feared he might never return his heartbeat to normal again.

"Take her," Draven whispered, his voice as rough as mountain gravel. "Power . . . barely in control."

Draven swayed where he sat, his head dropping to his chest.

Father McKinnon scooped Frances into his arms, and in the next moment, Draven collapsed onto his back, sound asleep. Father McKinnon stood there and stared at Draven for a long moment before he realized why the silence around him felt so odd. Then it dawned on him. The quiet was due to sweet Frances's ability to breathe without wheezing. She was healed, but whether or not the change would be permanent, they would have to wait and see.

Lady Faith poked her head through the doorway. He motioned for her to enter quietly.

"Did it work?" Her gaze fell to Draven, and she gasped. "What happened?"

She fell to her knees, but before she could touch her husband, Father McKinnon reached out to still her hand. "Do not touch him."

She glared up at him, defiance in her eyes. "He is my husband, Father McK—"

"He is resting. Leave him be." He took Lady Faith's arm and tugged her to her feet while trying to keep Frances comfortable in his arms. "Take the lass to her mother and fetch me some blankets. Draven will sleep here tonight. I've something I need to fetch, then I will return to tend him."

No one was going to touch Draven or disturb his rest after what he'd been through. Not even his wife. Father McKinnon thrust Frances into Lady Faith's arms and ushered her out of the great hall.

He followed her, hurrying past Ingrainia to dash into the chamber Elliot always reserved for his visits. He found what he was looking for at the bottom of his traveling trunk—a long oak staff possessing a tip crafted from pure silver. A Celtic knot was engraved in the metal, just where the hand was meant to grip. He'd held on to this treasure long enough. It was time to deliver it to its rightful owner. And after seeing what Draven was capable of, Father McKinnon knew without doubt that the staff should belong to him.

At Draven's side, he knelt on the floor and propped the staff against the wall. He peeled off his mantle and gingerly lifted Draven's head and slid the mantle beneath it. It was a sorry pillow, but it would do. He'd done so little to protect Draven throughout the years, but seeing him so vulnerable now, so weakened after such a good deed, Father McKinnon would have fought the archangels themselves to keep Draven undisturbed.

Ready and willing to stand guard over Draven throughout the night, he leaned against the wall behind him. When Lady Faith returned a short while later with a bundle of blankets, he allowed her to wrap them around Draven, making certain she didn't move him too much.

She finished her task, her gaze softly lingering upon Draven's face a moment before glaring at Father McKinnon. "He should be in his bed."

"He is fine where he is," he whispered. "Have Judith

wake us before the morning meal is served so I can get him out of here without being seen.”

She nodded but looked in no hurry to leave. “Let me stay with him, then. You can find your bed, and I’ll sit the night with him.”

Father McKinnon shook his head. “Leave us.”

He knew she wouldn’t understand the protective need eating at his gut just now. He owed it to Draven to stay by his side. He owed it to Aileas to make certain there were no ill effects lingering from the magic.

He owed it to himself to keep Draven safe, as he had failed to keep Aileas safe.



Faith backed out of the great hall, her hands trembling, her stomach queasy. She was reluctant to let Draven out of her sight. He’d been so pale, so lifeless. If not for the steady rise and fall of his chest, she would have thought him dead.

But for whatever reason, Father McKinnon had wanted her gone. She respected the priest enough to trust he must have his reasons, but she had no intentions of obeying. The moment Father McKinnon fell asleep, she would find her own comfortable spot in the great hall, where she could see for herself that Draven remained well throughout the night.

In the corridor, Ingrainia was staring longingly at the sleeping child in her arms. When she spotted Faith, she smiled faintly.

“Do you think it worked?” she asked.

Faith brushed Frances’s curls away from her sweet cheeks. “We’ll have to wait and see, I suppose. You’ll let me know in the morn how she fares?”

“Of course. Of course.” Ingrainia buried her face in Frances’s hair for a moment. Then, a panicked look of pleading in her eyes, she looked back to Faith. “Jaime can never know, Lady Faith. I love my husband, and if he comes after yours, I know my Jaime will be punished for it. Please. Let this be our secret.”

Faith frowned. She'd wanted Draven to help Frances because the child needed healing but also because she wanted her clan's fears of his powers to die away. If no one learned he'd healed Frances, how would they ever know the good his magic could bring them?

"For now," she agreed, the worry on Ingrainia's face pushing her to consent. "But only on the condition that you let others know you don't fear my husband, Ingrainia. If you hear them talking about Draven, let them know they are wrong."

"Oh, I will, my lady." Ingrainia's lips broke into a wide smile. "I'll be singing his praises to any and all who are willing or unwilling to listen. I owe your husband my life for this favor."

"If it worked the way we hoped, I'm certain Draven would not want you to feel so indebted to him. But what will Jaime say when he hears you speaking so kindly of Draven? He'll become suspicious, and what's more, when he sees Frances is no longer struggling to breathe, he'll want to know the reason why."

Ingrainia thought on that for a moment before saying, "I'll have Matilda brew me up something strong and lay the praise on that. Jaime will come around, Lady Faith. He's a good man who loves his daughter fiercely. It'll just take time."

And meanwhile, the rest of the clan would go on believing the Devil lived inside Draven.

Faith sighed and bade good night to Frances and Ingrainia, fighting her anger at the unfairness of it all. Draven's good deed would go unnoticed. Frances would be healed, which truly was reward enough, but Faith so wanted the rest of her people to see the wonderful qualities in her husband that she had already discovered for herself.

Quietly, she chanced a glimpse into the great hall and was relieved to find Father McKinnon sleeping soundly beside Draven. His care for Draven took her aback. She knew they'd known one another but had never thought the priest's fondness ran so deeply.

Surprises were bountiful, it seemed.

Faith settled herself by the fire. She stared at Draven, tracing the contours of his beautiful face with her gaze. She wanted him. She knew the desire in her belly wanted more than a few kisses from him. The first time she laid with her husband would no doubt be terrifying, but she now knew in her soul that she would most definitely allow him to claim her.

For God above knew, she was more than ready to claim *him*.

Twenty-seven



When Draven awoke the next morning, his first thought was that his spirit had been displaced from his body. He had no notion of where he was or how he'd gotten there. He groaned, his head aching as though someone had bashed through his skull with a cleaver.

He looked over his shoulder and bolted upright at the sight of Father McKinnon sitting behind him. The priest's head lolled to his chest, a croaky sort of snore barking with each rise of his chest.

The memory sliced through his brain, intensifying the throb. Frances. He'd worked his magic on the lass, but had it worked? Father McKinnon had been with them, Draven remembered, but nothing else about the night came to him.

A soft sigh called his attention to his right where, to his immense surprise, Faith was sitting in much the same position as Father McKinnon. Had they sat with him all night? As Draven rubbed a kink from his neck, he glanced to and fro between his two guardians. His gaze lingered on Father McKinnon for a long moment, a vividly detailed memory unfolding in Draven's mind's eye.

He'd been no more than ten years old, severely beaten by Harold. The beatings had become routine, and Draven had finally been pushed to his limits. He had crawled into the nook beneath the stone keep steps, pulled his brother Iain's knife from beneath his plaid, and ran the sharp blade over his wrist.

The blood flow had been grotesquely beautiful and endless, but it had not succeeded in releasing his tainted blood.

It had been Father McKinnon who'd found Draven that day. The priest had cried when he'd seen the morbid mess Draven had made of himself. He'd seized Draven in his arms and had run to the Cameron midwife, screaming for help along the way. For the first time since his mother had died, Draven had felt cared for and nurtured.

And now, here was Father McKinnon offering that gift for a second time. Gratitude lodging in his throat, Draven let his gaze fall to his left wrist where the indistinct white scar of that youthful experience still glared at him in accusation.

"Thank you," he whispered to Father McKinnon's sleeping form, knowing the priest would not hear him.

Slowly, he rose to his feet. He swayed a moment before finding the ability to take a cautious step forward. Morning light had already begun to filter through the closed shutters, and soon, the morning meal would be served and the hall would be teeming with Maitlands ready to eat. He didn't want to be found here so out of sorts, but neither did he want Father McKinnon and Faith to be discovered in so odd a position.

He bent and nudged the priest's shoulder, and when the man's eyes fluttered open, Draven turned to do the same to Faith. The instant her gaze fell upon him, she smiled and slipped her hand into his, allowing him to assist her to her feet.

"Are you rested?" Father McKinnon asked, now standing behind Draven.

Draven nodded. "Frances?"

Father McKinnon glanced at Faith. She shook her head.

"I'm not sure," she answered, her smile fading the slightest bit. "She seemed much better when I returned her to her mother last eve, but I'll have to pay them a visit to find out whether the magic took on a permanency."

Her gaze darted between Draven and the priest, and she nibbled on her bottom lip. "I've promised her we wouldn't allow Jaime to find out what took place here, so I'm afraid the others will never learn what you did for her."

Draven opened his mouth to tell her not to worry about how others perceived him, but Father McKinnon interrupted his attempt.

"You can't control anyone else's mind-set, Lady Faith. Ingrainia will know what was done for her daughter. That will have to be enough."

A door banged open, and Judith backed into the hall, pushing the door open wider with her backside. She turned, revealing arms toting trenchers of food, and nearly dropped them at the sight of her unexpected guests.

"My pardons," she said, her black and gray hair falling over her eyes. "I'll just set these down, and I'll be out of your way."

"Don't hurry, Judith. We'll leave you to set up the morning meal." Faith looped her arm through Draven's and tugged him toward the door. Father McKinnon followed obediently behind them.

"A moment before you go, Draven?"

Draven halted, noticing for the first time the staff in the priest's hands. He'd never before seen the man with it nor witnessed any weakness that might require its use. Father McKinnon, too, stared down at the staff for a long moment, then finally raised it and handed it to Draven.

"Until last eve, I'd never before been certain you had truly inherited your mother's powers. I'd thought, perhaps, her reputation had mistakenly led others to believe you were like her. This was hers." He pressed the staff into Draven's hands. "She asked me to hold on to it in case you ever needed it as she did."

Draven was too transfixed by the notion of receiving the

gift from a mother long dead to say anything, but thankfully, Faith had the sense to voice the question he, too, wanted answered.

"Why should Draven have need for such a thing? His limp is rarely even evident any longer."

Father McKinnon smiled. "This is no walking staff, though I daresay you could use it as such if the need arose. Nay . . . this was your mother's conduit. Her gift of magic had the unfortunate habit of growing beyond her control at times. The staff was made for her by a druid priestess just after you were born. Aileas didn't want to chance harming you in any way, so she sought out the priestess and elicited her aid."

Faith ran her hand along the wood, lightly brushing her fingers over Draven's. "How does it work?"

"I'm not quite sure," Father McKinnon said. "I know she held it when she used her powers. It seemed to absorb some of her energy, leaving her better able to contain her magic. She also stopped becoming so drained as you became last eve with Frances. Perhaps it gave her back some of the energy it absorbed when she was through?"

"Amazing," Faith whispered.

Draven quietly agreed. He looked up at Father McKinnon. "Thank you."

Father McKinnon's cheeks reddened. "It was yours all along. I was only meant to deliver it. I hope it brings you the same sort of use."

It didn't matter to Draven whether the staff aided him or not. It had belonged to his mother, and that meant more to him than anyone could ever know.

"It would have been of much use had you given it to him last night," Faith said. "Perhaps he wouldn't have exhausted himself."

Father McKinnon started to respond, but Draven cut him off. "Last night. See Frances," Draven muttered. "Need to know."

He felt as though he'd connected to the child, unintentionally, when he'd touched her. Whether or not his magic

had done its job, he had to find out. A part of him would not fully rejuvenate until he knew for sure, one way or another.

"I'm not sure it's wise—"

But Father McKinnon waved off Faith's protest. "I'll take you to her. You've the right to know how she fares. We can be discreet."

The worry on Faith's face gave Draven a moment's pause before he nodded his appreciation to Father McKinnon. It had been she who'd promised silence to Ingrainia, and therefore Faith, of course, would be wary of approaching the family and breaking her word. Draven would make certain her promise was kept but would go to Frances regardless.

He found enough strength within his body to smile as he stepped outside, clutching his mother's staff firmly in his hands. Somewhere in this twisted journey of being an unwilling groom, he'd stopped caring so much about gaining the clan's acceptance. Faith accepted him, treated him as a human, and he knew, deep in his soul, that no one else's opinion would ever matter as much.

~

Faith and Father McKinnon sat at Ingrainia's small table, watching quietly while Draven played with a wooden horse, teasing young Frances with sounds as garbled as her own. Faith's mouth couldn't seem to dislodge its grin, a grin that had traveled all the way to the tips of her toes.

Faith noticed he still had not set aside his new staff, obviously protective about keeping it near. She loved that he had a piece of his mother to cling to now—much the same way as she still clung to her own mother's wedding garland.

Occasionally, Ingrainia would pause in her hurried chores to cast a similar glance at her daughter and Draven, though Faith noticed her worried gaze flicker to the windows every few minutes, as though she feared Jaime would

return at any moment. They wouldn't stay long enough to cause the woman any trouble. Faith had gained that promise from Draven before they had knocked on Ingrainia's door. But for these few blissful moments, Draven's peacefulness would feed her soul, and hopefully his as well.

Frances giggled, bouncing up and down, while Draven dangled the whittled horse over her head. She leapt forward onto him, wrapping her tiny arms around his neck, muffling her laughter against his skin.

Faith's breathing stopped. He looked so right, so natural with the lass in his arms, that an image of him holding another, younger babe interrupted her bliss. Her heart wrung itself out like a sopping linen and sent painfully hot tears to her eyes. Unwilling to shed even one tear that might concern anyone, she turned her gaze away. Her slowly rounding belly held her fascination. A babe with ebony hair, sky eyes, and the most dazzling of smiles. *That* was what she wished grew inside her. And *that* was what she knew did not.

Oh, how different she would feel about becoming a mother if the child had been Draven's. She wanted *his* child, wanted him to see he and she had created something as wonderfully lovely and innocent as Frances.

Instead, Faith would bear a child who would never truly belong to either of them, for she was certain she would never look upon this babe the way Ingrainia looked upon Frances. Perhaps, in time, Faith might be able to care for her child the way she cared for other children. Patrick-Hugh, Frances, the other young lads and lasses who smiled so brightly at her.

But would that ever be enough?

That evening, Draven jumped at the sound of knocking on his door. He'd been sitting in silence for several hours, studying his mother's staff, and the sudden, unexpected noise jangled his nerves. As he stood to open the door, he half expected to find Faith on the other side.

Instead, he found Elliot, who looked as weary and worn as Draven felt.

Without awaiting permission, Elliot sidestepped Draven and entered the chamber, then collapsed onto the window bench. He released a heavy sigh and looked at Draven.

"I hear you're speaking now."

Draven nodded, folding his arms across his chest, ready for whatever Elliot had come to say. "Little."

"Good, good." Elliot fingered the hilt of the claymore strapped to his belt.

Watching the glint of the sword with suspicion, Draven stepped back and widened his stance.

Smiling, Elliot removed his hand from the weapon. "Stand down, lad. If I'd wanted you dead, I would have left you in the hands of that sorry da of yours." The older man tiredly rubbed his palms into his eyes and leaned back against the wall. "My Faith cares for you."

Those words were far more suspicious than any claymore. Faith was Draven's wife and was clearly trying to accept him as her husband. But caring for Draven the way a wife should? Nay. She wanted to. He could see that as clearly as anyone, but her traumatic past and his blackened reputation would forever be a wall between them and any real affection.

"I don't think I'm wrong in saying you might care for her a bit, as well."

When Draven made no response, Elliot continued. "You see, I've gone round and round with myself, trying to figure what's been making my responsible, strong niece become so sullen, so sad. Thought it was your doing at first, but truth be told, she's been this way for months now. Long before we brought you here.

"I thought perhaps it was the babe the two of you created before the wedding, thought that maybe she knew what her dalliance that day would cost her. That would explain the change." Elliot's sharp gaze met Draven's and held it for a long moment. "Only, it doesn't explain a thing.

"Now that you can speak, lad, I want to hear words of

truth from that mouth of yours.” He pushed off on his knees, rising to his full height, and walked toward Draven, stopping when they were nose to nose. “It’s not your child Faith’s carrying, is it?”

Twenty-eight



Faith has loved children her whole life, has doted on them to the point of spoiling them,” Elliot said, stepping away from Draven only a bit. “And yet, not once has she shown the least amount of excitement over her own. Essie believes something happened to Faith, and the more I thought on it, the more I recalled Faith trying to speak to me before she claimed you as the father of her child to Harold. I wonder now, what truth might I have learned if I’d given her a chance to talk?”

Draven’s stomach flopped, and a sickened feeling rushed up his throat and into his mouth. He reached for his writing tools, knowing this was not a conversation he was able to have with spoken words, but a light rap on the door stopped him. He and Elliot turned to find Faith in the doorway, a smile on her face.

Her golden curls were loose around her shoulders, a plaid cinched at her waist by a gold rope. All thoughts of what he might say to Elliot fled Draven’s mind at the sight of her. He wanted to tug at the rope belt and let the plaid fall

about her ankles so that she stood in its center like a goddess in a lake.

"I'll speak to you later," Elliot said, his gaze bouncing back and forth over Faith and Draven.

"Did I interrupt?" Faith asked. "I can come back later."

"Nonsense. I've plenty of time to finish my talk with your husband." Elliot bent slightly as though to kiss Faith on the cheek, but seemed to change his mind and pushed past her instead. "I'll see you both on the morn."

Elliot waited until Faith stepped further into the chamber, then lowered his voice to a whisper and said, "I don't ken the whole truth of what my Faith has done, but I do ken that you wed her and claimed a child I'm certain you didn't sire. For whatever reason, you protected my niece. That makes you a Maitland whether you wish to be or nay."

And without another word, Elliot turned and strode down the corridor, disappearing inside the very last chamber. Draven stood still as a stone column until a hand on his shoulder yanked him from his stupor.

"What was that about?" Faith asked from behind him.

Turning slowly on his spot, Draven wondered the very same thing. Elliot had just thanked the Devil of Cameron. Would wonders never cease?

To answer her inquiry, however, he shrugged. He didn't want her to know Elliot had become suspicious about the conception of her child. The last thing Faith needed was more worry.

He slid his free hand behind Faith's neck and pulled her to him. The overwhelming scent of lilac blossoms nearly caused him to lose his hold on the staff, but he clung to the conduit as desperately as he clung to Faith.

"Are you going to kiss me?" she whispered, her breath hot against his nose, mouth, and cheeks. Her own cheeks reddened, but she looked him boldly in the eye. "If that is your intention, you're taking far too long."

A painfully wonderful ache traveled through Draven's chest to swell between his legs. He sucked air through his teeth, the need for her constricting his lungs and making

him light-headed. Sliding his hand from her neck to the small of her back, he slowly guided her backward into his chamber and kicked the door closed behind them.

As he maneuvered her deeper into his chamber, her breasts pressed against his chest, making his own nipples grow taut and tingle. Never in his life had he wanted a woman this badly, and knowing it would likely be a very long time before she was ready to allow his claim on her made him want to scream with his newfound voice. But the look of desire flashing behind the green of her eyes quelled his frustration and deepened his craving.

She wanted him, and it terrified her.

Tossing the staff onto his bed, he pulled her more tightly to him, damning the barrier of fabric between their bodies. Faith closed her eyes and raised onto her toes, stretching to offer him better access to her lips.

With a muffled groan, Draven ran his bottom lip over both of hers, drinking in the scent of blossoms and femininity. Softness, kindness, affection. All directed at him from a woman he would never have dreamed he'd be capable of knowing at all. All as foreign to him as death, the only thing he'd ever wanted this badly.

But he couldn't allow his body to control his mind, couldn't chance frightening her when she was so obviously close to accepting him as her husband in the truest sense. He pulled away, his body hard, his heart pounding.

"Bind me," he managed, turning away from her only long enough to snatch Bride's jesses from the floor.

He held them out to Faith, who accepted them with trembling hands. "Are you certain?"

He nodded and lay one wrist atop the other, holding them out in front of him. Faith tied a braided rope around one wrist, then the other, before tying them together. Her fingers brushed Draven's bare arms, his wrists, his palms, sending shivers of anticipation throughout his body. And as quickly as her touch left him, it returned, this time touching his shoulders. Her fingertips caressed the length of his

arms, fondled every scar, until they reached his bound hands.

Just as sweetly, she lifted his arms above his head, pressed her mouth to his, and walked him backward toward the wall while her mouth made a million apologies with its kisses.

When his back met the cold, stone wall behind him, the kiss was broken, the taste of her sugary mouth gone. Faith's attention strayed to the peg on the wall, her pink tongue flicking over her lips as she concentrated on securing him.

God, but he wanted to touch her, to feel her. He wanted his hands to know the pleasures his mouth had discovered, wanted his chest to be as intimate with hers as his lips had become with her tongue. He wanted to feel her nipples constrict in his fingers, feel the heat and dampness of her glaze his body.

What was she doing? Her hands were fussing with the belt tied around his waist, her shaky fingers fumbling in the task.

"What you did with Frances . . ." she started, her gaze still carefully avoiding his. "You are no villain."

The belt was gone. The slide of fabric against his aching body scratched and itched all at once.

"You're a good man."

The plaid slid down his back and chest. Draven shifted where he stood, knowing that, in a moment's time, he'd be revealing the frightening degree of his lust.

"I want to know you."

Wool fabric slithered over his hips, brushed his cock.

"I want to see you."

Good God, he couldn't swallow. Couldn't breathe.

Cold air rushed over his groin the moment the plaid hit his feet.

"I want to touch you."

This time, Faith raised her head to look him in the eye. A nervous jitter made her gaze unsteady, but her courage and boldness sparked a new fire within Draven—one so fiery, he feared he might spill himself then and there.

"May I? Will you stop me if it becomes too much?"

Would he be able to stop himself from losing control and ravishing her? That was the question her eyes begged him to answer.

He wanted to say yes, but that seemed far too inadequate a promise.

Instead, he whispered, "Trust me?"

Faith made no reply. She lowered her head, pressing her brow against his bare chest. He thought she only meant to ponder whether she could trust him or not, but he knew the instant her gaze fell upon his rigid shaft. The heat of her stare pulsed inside him, as tangible as a caress. She uttered a quiet gasp, but still she stared.

Draven kept his focus on the top of her head, afraid to breathe lest he scare her off. Something warm and moist swept across his chest. Her head was moving. She was kissing him, her tongue darting over his stomach, then his nipple. He no longer needed to worry about breathing, for it was now an impossible task.

She trusted him. Not enough to loosen his bindings, perhaps, but enough to believe he would not lose control and loosen them with magic. The ache in him dulled to a sharp pain in his chest. For the first time in his life, Draven was afraid.

He was falling in love with his wife.



Faith's insides quivered with a surge of power she hadn't felt in months. A glimmer of who she'd been before her body had been raped rippled before her eyes—a woman who knew who she was and what she wanted.

And just now, she wanted Draven.

His tawny body stood bare before her, the proof of his masculine desires the arrow that could pierce her newfound courage. She knew the pain such a shaft caused, knew well that it would not be easy to lie beneath Draven and allow him to fill her. But just now, as she trailed her nails over his

bare chest and stared riveted at the long, pulsing member, she also knew Draven would cause her no intentional pain.

This was not a brutal stranger, bent on pleasuring himself at her expense. This was her *husband*, a man who'd allowed himself to be bound to a wall in order to make Faith feel more secure.

But could she do it? Could she lie down and spread her legs willingly, knowing what was to come?

A tickle of desire heated the trail leading from her neck to her toes. The juncture of her thighs grew moist. Her breasts ached.

Aye. She could do it. Perhaps with time, the act would become easier, and she would suffer through the consummation willingly if it meant knowing the feel of Draven beside her, his tongue on her tongue, his hands on her breasts.

Moving her gaze up his flat belly to the curved contours of his well-toned chest, she continued on until her eyes rested with his gaze. The blue of his eyes had darkened to near black, but she saw within them the same uncertainty she knew hid behind her own.

Test him. She could release him, let him know she was willing, and if she asked him to stop and he complied, her trust in him would grow. But, if he did not . . . What then?

Holding steady to his gaze, she slid her cold, wavering hand down his stomach and curled her fingers around him. Draven's eyes fluttered closed, a soft moan escaping his parted lips. He hissed. When he opened his eyes again, they were as pale as the winter sky—not quite blue, not quite gray.

"Is—is this all right?" she asked, the change of his eyes bringing forth a nervous flitter to her chest.

He nodded, his head dropping forward a bit. His hips jerked, and the skin covering his shaft moved in her palm. Faith let out a soft "Oh," fascinated by the strange texture, the odd pulsing, the sudden heat she held in her hand.

Curious, she moved her hand, squeezing him tighter, milking him.

"No more." Draven bucked against her hand, forcing her to lose her hold. "No more."

Afraid she'd hurt him, Faith jerked her hand away and pressed it to his chest. "I'm sor—"

But before she could finish her apology, Draven had captured her mouth with his. His lips were cool, but his mouth . . . his mouth was wonderfully warm. His tongue glided over hers again and again, each swirl successfully pushing her lingering doubts farther away until all she could think of was how desperately she wanted this feeling of euphoria to go on.

As she lost herself to his mouth, she clumsily fumbled with the belted rope at her waist. She pulled the knot free while Draven nibbled the corner of her mouth, and her plaid fell around her feet while he flicked his tongue between her lips.

Gasping for breath, Faith stepped back, her body hot and aching in a manner she had never before experienced. The distance between them allowed Draven to see her fully, his gaze falling to the simple tunic that barely reached her knees.

"What—"

Faith didn't let him finish. Afraid her courage would wane if she did not hurry, she seized the hem of her tunic and pulled it over her head, revealing her breasts to the chilled room and to the heat of Draven's stare. He muttered something she could not understand. He looked as though a spasm had taken him over, his body jerking wildly against the bindings holding him to the wall.

Faith clutched the tunic to her chest, blocking his view. Perhaps she had gone too far. Perhaps now if her fear overpowered her own desire, he would not be able to stop.

"Please," Draven managed, a pained expression tightening his jaw and narrowing his eyes. "Show me."

Sending a silent prayer that she was not being foolhardy, Faith squeezed her eyes shut and let the tunic fall into a puddle with her plaid. Even without looking, she knew the places Draven's stare lingered. His gaze was as solid as his

hands might have been—stroking and tender and blazing hot.

Cautiously, she pried open one eye and found Draven's had returned to the color of coal.

"Frightened?"

Faith tucked her bottom lip between her teeth. "I'm trying not to be."

And God's truth, her efforts seemed to be working. More than she wanted to cover herself . . . more than she feared his potential loss of control . . . Faith wanted to feel her chest pressing against his, wanted his hands to stroke her back, her hair, her legs. He was bound. At her mercy. She could do whatever she liked and no more, for she trusted his word to stop when she asked it of him.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled his face toward hers and inhaled the arboreal, clean scent of him before finding the nourishment his mouth offered. As the kiss deepened, she fulfilled her desire and pressed her breasts to his chest, her nipples rubbing against his as she stretched to her tiptoes. Draven nudged her head away with his chin, then buried his face in her neck where he kissed and licked and suckled the tender flesh there.

When his mouth found the fleshy part of her ear, Faith's hairs stood on end. Tiny bumps covered her bare flesh, and chills ran rampant throughout her. Each movement of his mouth stole away one more doubt, until she found her arms rising to find his hands. Slowly and only slightly nervous, she stretched even higher until her fingers found the knots in his jesses.

One yank, and he was free.

Draven had been so consumed by the taste of Faith that the sudden weightlessness of his arms took him by surprise, nearly sending him to his knees. He wobbled, catching himself against the wall, and stared at his unbound wrists. He looked to Faith.

"Why?" he asked, not trusting his voice to say more.

She did not look like a victim just now, with her hair unbound and clinging to her shoulders and breasts. Her

cheeks were pink, her lips puffy, her eyes slightly glazed. She wore the look of a woman possessed by desire, and the sight of her standing so courageously before him made his cock swell and pulse even more.

"You are my husband," she said, her gaze falling onto the part of him that hungered to be inside her. "I would try to be your wife."

She took his hand, pulling him away from the wall. Her gaze moved nervously from him to the bed. Draven fought off his own sort of nerves. Lying on that bed with her would be final, complete, no turning back. He didn't want to hurt her or frighten her, but God save him, if he lay down beside her, if he touched the golden curls between her thighs, he might have no choice.

But it seemed she was taking the choice from his hands. Before he could so much as utter a word, she was lying on the bed, holding out her arms to him. Draven swallowed the fist lodged in his throat and washed it down with his doubt.

Bracing his arms on either side of her, he lowered himself over her, his heat brushing the sweet gate of her depths. Faith's body tensed beneath him, and rather than lift her arms around his neck as he'd expected, she laid her palms flat against his chest as though preparing to push him away. Her wide eyes danced with panic. Unsure what to do to ease her fears, Draven lowered his mouth to hers and lost himself in her kiss. Her hands softened against him, her body relaxed.

Supporting himself on one arm, he slowly crept his hand along her ribs until the fullness of her breasts filled his palm. When his thumb flicked across her nipple, she moaned and pulled him closer. Her fingers gripped his hair. Her hips moved against him. It took all of Draven's control not to plunge himself inside her, not to thrust until she was filled with his seed.

He pushed himself up and nudged her chin so she had to look at him. "Stop?"

She shook her head. "I'm—I'm ready."

With an unfamiliar gratitude to God, Draven pressed his

brow to hers and reached between their bodies. He guided himself toward her slick heat, but the moment the tip of his cock entered her, Faith pushed at his chest and sobbed.

She wasn't ready, didn't want this the way he did. Her fear bothered him more than knowing he was likely to go to bed unsatisfied, and that he had such priorities bothered him all the more. He wasn't falling in love with Faith. He already was.

He rolled onto his back and pulled her shivering body against him. She lay curled on her side, silent sobs racking her shoulders. Draven turned onto his side to face her, stroking her hair away from her face as he allowed his desire to cool a bit.

"Shh . . ." he whispered, nuzzling her ear with his chin.

She sniffed and pushed herself up onto her elbow. "I want this. I do. But the moment you were on top of me, I just . . ."

Hope sparked anew in Draven. He felt his mouth twitch into a slight grin as an idea sprang forth in his mind.

"You want this? Still?"

She nodded, closing her eyes to allow him to brush away her tears. "More than I've wanted anything in a very long time." She bowed her head for a long moment before looking at him. "You . . . you make me feel beautiful."

Draven's breath caught in his throat. He leaned up, kissing her softly on the mouth. "You are."

She smiled. "Thank you." She brushed her cheek against his, her lips sweeping by his ear long enough to whisper, "So are you."

He shifted and took her chin in his hand. "Want to . . . try something. Trust me?"

It was the second time he'd put that question to her, and without hesitating, she nodded.

Rolling onto his back, he brought her with him until she lay flat against his chest. "You control."

Her eyes widened. She'd been fine when he'd been bound to the wall and control had been hers. The moment she'd lost that control, that power, however, she'd become

timid and frightened again. Perhaps if she retained control throughout the act, she might be able to see it through.

"But, I can't . . . it's not possible . . . is it?"

Draven chuckled and slid his hands to her shoulders, forcing her to sit up and straddle him. "It is."

He slid his palm between her thighs and pressed his thumb against the hot nub there. Faith gasped. He rubbed the nub with small circles, each rotation seemingly massaging her lingering doubts away. She closed her eyes; her head fell back. Long, golden curls fell about her shoulders, partially hiding her breasts from his hungry gaze. She rocked against his hand, urging his movements faster. He complied, simultaneously slipping a finger between her slick folds, penetrating her, preparing her.

When her gaze met his again, her pupils were wide and dark, the green barely visible. "Please."

"Stop?" he asked, sliding his hand away from her.

"Nay!" She seized his hand and urged him to continue his ministrations. She slid her hips slightly farther down his body until his cock sprang up against her belly. She gripped it, caressing the swollen head until Draven feared it might pop.

"Show me. How can I . . . how can *we* . . ."

She was ready. She wanted him inside her as badly as he wanted to be there. He reached down and held the base of himself, then, with his free hand, gently prodded her hips into the air. She caught on quickly, releasing him and maneuvering herself so that her entrance hovered just above the tip of him.

Bracing her hands against his chest, she lowered herself, torturously slowly, onto him, and this time, when he inched his way inside, she did not balk.

She slid down him with a control he admired, until he filled her, and her body squeezed around him. He bit down on his lip and placed his hands on her hips, gently showing her how to ride him. She shivered and rose a few inches, gasping as she lowered herself once again.

A tear rolled onto each cheek, but she held his gaze, her lips curved into a provocative grin.

"Hurt?" he asked, stilling her hips, confused by the contradictory tears and grin.

Faith shook her head, wishing she could find the words to explain her tears. Her body was full of him, but so was her heart. All these months, she'd feared this act of love-making would forever be foreign to her, that she would never be able to feel what a woman deserved to feel in the arms of her husband. But Draven had just proven those fears were folly. She'd never felt more like a woman in her life.

The desire etched onto Draven's face blazed in his eyes and scorched her heart. She'd been used, discarded, left with the burden of a bastard child, but still, her husband looked at her as though she was a gift to *him* and not the other way around.

"Don't stop." She shook his hands from her hips to resume the movements that gave her so much pleasure. "Don't ever stop."

She curled herself over him, moving her hips to drink him in and slide him out. She pressed her mouth to his and mimicked their lovemaking with her tongue as a pressure built inside her with alarming speed. Need coiled inside her belly like a spring begging to be released. Breath came only in small gasps. Words were impossible.

Choking on her breath, she straightened, her body tightening. An odd sensation of a pending explosion spread inside her belly.

"Draven, I . . ." But she did not know what she'd intended to say.

The pleasure was mind-numbing, thought-stealing. One thought was confused with another, and she could no longer feel her legs. Her movements became clumsy, hindered as her body turned rigid. Blessedly, Draven seemed to understand. He took her hips in his hands and impaled himself inside her.

A cry burst from Faith's lungs as her body shuddered

over and over, relaxing and tensing with waves of delirium. The power of her release made her limp, forcing her to fall against Draven in order to lose herself in the searing rapture.

But he was still moving. Faster. Harder. Deeper. His body turned stiff beneath her, his fist gripping her hair and pressing her cheek to his.

She relived her own climax as he experienced his own, knowing what he felt, and enthralled with the knowledge that she'd been its cause.

He bucked against her, his head thrown back. Then he clenched his jaw and found his release.

As the elation overtook him, he cried out, "Faith."

It was a gift far greater than courage and power. He'd said her name. In that one simple word, it was as though he had given her back her identity. He had reminded her who she was.

Without thinking, without considering why she felt the sudden urge to say it, she kissed him and whispered against his mouth, "I love you."

Twenty-nine



She'd said she loved him.

Draven stared at the ceiling in his chamber, Faith's steady breathing beside him providing a false sense of calm. Calm. Peace. Did such things truly exist? It was hard to fathom, especially since the last time he'd been told he was loved, it had been the cruelest form of deception.

Careful not to move Faith overly much, he turned slightly onto his side, his body spent. He was in love with her. *That* was no lie. But to believe she loved him as well . . .

He slid the sheet off her, his eyes roaming over her naked body draped only in the slits of moonlight drifting in through the partially closed shutters. He drank in the sight of her breasts, still swollen from his affections, and delved lower to the slight mound of her pregnant belly. His fingers played around her navel, gently testing the taut flesh. The child was not his, no more than Bridget's had been. But Faith was willing to let him father it, didn't think him a monster as had Bridget.

His mind played with memories he didn't wish to ex-

plore. Not since that day. Not since his own actions had led him to the truth everyone else had seemed to already know about him: that he was a devil with no right to exist.

Bridget, her belly close to exploding with her pending labor. Bridget, whose deception had cost him every truth he'd ever known. Bridget, whom, until he met Faith, he'd thought he'd loved beyond reason.

Bridget had used him, just as Harold had used him—for his powers, for his strength. Control the minds and hearts of others, use his magic to destroy in the name of war. Harold's use of him had never been so painfully personal as Bridget's, however. So bitterly, heart-stoppingly brutal.

He'd met with Bridget every few nights in an abandoned cottage several miles from Cameron borders. The place had become his haven, his sanctuary, the only place where love existed for him. But in one moment, Bridget had changed all that, had devastated his world with truths he would rather not have known. He remembered looking at Bridget for some sign of remorse as she told him the child she carried did not belong to him. She'd given him nothing but a cold sneer and words that cut far beyond the bone.

"You're not a man," she'd taunted. "Think you I'd have willingly spread my legs for you had I known you'd prove so cowardly? One request. That's all I made of you, and you could not give me even that."

Aye, one request. Use his powers to fight for Harold against King James.

"My father will be killed if you continue to deny Harold what he wants!"

But he'd denied her request, unwilling, even for her, to become the monster people accused him of being.

The ability to temper his powers had come dangerously close to dissolving as she continued her tirade. "I've borne your love-struck stares, your insufferable silence. And for what? I've reaped no reward. All you had to do was fight with Harold. A craven witch is all you are, you bloody fool."

With this last insult, Bridget had hurled a goblet at his

head, missing her target by a mere whisper. Afraid his anger would take over his powers, he had started for the door, his legs like leaden columns slowing his paces.

“My Godfrey suffered because of you! Had to sit back in silence knowing I rutted with you like a lowly whore.” She’d chased Draven outside, pelting his back with words that slowly killed him. “The only thing that saved Godfrey’s sanity was knowing I took every precaution not to beget you a child. When I think I might have had a wee version of you in my womb . . . I would have thrown myself off the battlements afore bearing such a horror onto this world.”

He could take no more. It hadn’t been his magic that had whirled him about to face her. It had been rage, stronger than any black art could ever hope to be. He lifted his hand, inches away from throttling her. It had to have been an act of divine intervention that kept him from killing her right then and there, for he dropped his fist and walked away, never looking back for fear of what he might truly be capable of.

He didn’t know what had possessed him to return to the cottage a fortnight later. One last look at Bridget, perhaps, or maybe the chance to get a glimpse of the man she’d found the ability to love as much as she’d claimed to have loved Draven. But return he had. He’d paced the circumference of that damned piece of property for two hours, waiting for any sign of life. No candles flickered in the windows when darkness fell. No laughter or footsteps sounded from the surrounding forest. They were gone. Bridget and her lover were nowhere to be seen.

Unable to stand the sight of the place where Bridget had fooled him into believing he’d finally found love, the cottage where she’d probably spent hours mocking him whilst lying in her dear Godfrey’s arms, Draven had summoned every bit of heat within him and had burned the cottage to the ground.

He’d experienced a few moments’ elation at the sight of the charred remnants. Had found pleasure in kicking his way through the ashes.

Until he saw her.

Bridget.

Dead.

Her body had been burned beyond recognition, the only clue to her identity the crucifix she faithfully wore around her neck. It lay upon her scorched body, glinting up at him in accusation. No longer could he deny what others said about him. He was a murderer. A monster.

He deserved to die.

"Draven?"

For a moment, he thought it had been Bridget who had spoken his name, the memory of her so vivid in his mind. But then a soft hand touched his cheek, and he looked down to find Faith blinking up at him with worried eyes.

"You don't look well," she said, nudging his thighs apart with her knee to slide her leg in between. "Can you not sleep?"

Where moments before he'd felt content and at peace, loving the feel of Faith against him, now his past churned up a turmoil inside him, leaving him restless and uncomfortable. He wanted to push her away and leave the bed, wanted to prowl the snowy forest in search of solitude and penance. But Faith had trusted him with her broken spirit, her bruised body. Any sign of distance from him would likely make her doubt that decision, and while Draven believed he didn't deserve her trust and respect, *she* didn't deserve to be punished for giving it.

He stroked her hair from her face and forced a smile. "I'm fine. Sleep."

Blessedly, she obeyed.

It was near to midnight when Draven's efforts to find sleep were completely interrupted by a loud boom, followed by several yells. The racket coming from outside the window spiraled through the shutters, the sounds of panic, screaming, running footsteps.

Rolling Faith away from him, Draven leapt to his feet and thrust open the shutters to clothe his naked body in the icy, smoke-filled air. Black puffs billowed from cottage

rooftops. A cow mooed. Goats screamed their own sort of panic. And everywhere, everywhere, there were people running away from the village and toward the rising, clanging portcullis.

As Draven turned to find his plaid, a shout from near the forest wall called his attention back to the devastating scene. From such a far distance, he could barely make out the shapes of a dozen men, arms thrown into the air in mocking victory.

The brigands.

"What's happening?" Faith asked in a frighteningly alert voice.

He turned to find her wrapping the bed linens around her body, hurriedly struggling to make her way to the window.

After donning his tunic, Draven seized his plaid, draped it around his waist and shoulder, and hastened to fasten his belt. He snatched up his mother's staff, which lay on the floor beside the bed, then gripped Faith by the shoulders as she watched the spectacle below with wide, horrified eyes.

"Stay here," he commanded, giving her a firm shake to make certain she knew he was serious.

She gave no indication that she heard him, but there was no more time to waste. He shoved on his boots and rushed out of the chamber.

Panic filled Faith as she watched the village men run with pails of water from the loch to the fires. She couldn't bring herself to move, couldn't bring herself to answer Draven, though she knew he awaited her answer. But then she saw Ingrainia running with wee Frances toward safety, saw Patrick-Hugh, soot-faced and barefoot, struggling with a bucket of his own, and her sensibilities returned.

These were her people. *Her* people, whom she had neglected for far too long.

She glanced over her shoulder to tell Draven she could not obey his request that she stay put and realized with another surge of hysteria that he was gone. More than likely running toward the disaster the others were trying to flee.

Dressing as quickly as she could, Faith stumbled from

the chamber on numb legs and was nearly trampled on her way down the stairs by a group of armed men shouting for archers to take aim along the battlement.

Archers. The rogues responsible must have been spotted.

Eager to see the faces of the men who'd harmed the Maitlands in so cowardly a manner, Faith hurried her paces. She would take part in their punishment, in their justice, and should even one Maitland be harmed, she would throttle the outlaws herself.

As she reached the foot of the stairs, a hand snaked around her arm and pulled her out of the path of the running warriors. Faith gasped and kicked out, only to find herself face-to-face with Shane.

"Return to your chamber, Lady Faith. It is not safe out there."

"But . . . I thought you were off hunting the very men likely responsible for all this."

It took her a moment to realize he was clutching his shoulder, a red stain spreading outside of his fingers along his tattered tunic. "Saints save me. Shane, you're hurt!"

He smiled softly, his face pale. "Not as bad as all that."

Faith slowed her breathing and forced a calm she did not truly feel. Aye, get control. Tend to the wounds, to the frightened. Busy herself so that her own fear could be dismissed.

"You'll see Matrilda. She'll stitch you up."

"When this is over, Faith. There will be plenty of stitching to do." He grimaced and moved his quiver of arrows to his uninjured shoulder. "We found their hideout, but they ran. We realized too late that they headed back this way. They must have taken exception to the fact that we destroyed their home, and so they've come to even the score by destroying ours."

Confused, Faith scowled. "But there can't be so many of them that we could not overtake them easily."

"A dozen perhaps. But they have the cover of night and a knowledge of these woods that a deer would envy. Every

time we found them, they vanished again just as quickly.” Shane’s eyes turned soft, and he lowered his gaze to the ground. “I failed in my duty, my lady. Our laird trusted the wrong man for it.”

Careful not to brush his wound, she touched his arm and offered a light squeeze. “You’ve not failed anyone, Shane. We will rebuild what has been lost.”

“But if anyone’s been hurt—”

Faith held up a silencing hand. The thought that *anyone* might be harmed by this tragedy was unthinkable.

“We’ll not be saying such things. Do you hear me? Everyone will be fine, or they’ll answer to me.”

Knowing he would protest her words and once again try to persuade her to return to safety, she wheeled about and ran from the keep where the chaos outside deafened his calling of her name.

Women and children poured through the gates. Faith rushed toward them, lifting a child out of the mob’s way and passing him into his mother’s arms. She repeated the action with three more children as she pushed through the crowd, her gaze constantly searching the men running by.

Where was Elliot? And blessed God, where was her husband?

The stench of smoke choked her and burned her eyes. A man knocked into her shoulder, nearly sending her to the ground. Faith caught her balance and pushed onward, toward the stables. She would be better able to maneuver atop Gertie, would have far greater speed.

After what seemed an eternity, Faith had mounted and steered Gertie toward the village. Several of the fleeing women had deposited their children safely within the keep and were now running back toward their homes, fighting the sea of people running at them. Faith made a path in the crowd’s center with Gertie, leaving a clear trail for those trying to return to aid in extinguishing the spreading flames.

When she finally reached the gates, Elliot stumbled into her path, his face sweaty, soot filling the wrinkles in his skin. “Go back, Faith! You’re in no condition—”

"Where is Draven?"

"I *said*, go back dammit!"

Faith glared down at him from atop her palfrey. Now that she'd seen her uncle was well, their strained relationship was obvious once again.

"I'll find him myself."

Leaving Elliot shouting every curse ever muttered, she tore off toward the cottages, frantically searching for Draven while keeping her eye out for any who might be in need of tending. She pushed Gertie through the tight streets, between the cottages, around the small gardens. Bits of timber and ashes fell from rooftops, lifting big puffs of snow from the ground. Gertie reared and spun around, unwilling even for her mistress to venture farther into the fires.

Her heart racing, Faith leapt from the palfrey's back and slapped Gertie's hindquarters, letting her know she was free to flee. Three men rounded the corner, empty pails clanging in their hands as they ran by her. Faith seized one by the arm, startling his attention her way.

"Tell me what we need," she demanded. "More men? Water?"

The man shook his head, his eyes teary. "Won't help. The fire's spreading faster than we can gather the water."

She thanked him and asked, "Have you seen my husband?"

"Nay, my lady. But can't see much o' anything in this blackness," he said, already moving to rejoin his companions.

Faith watched him go, her heart climbing clumsily up her chest, making her ill with worry.

"Saw him go to Matilda's a bit ago," a small voice said.

Faith glanced down and found Patrick-Hugh staring up at her with wide, frightened eyes.

"You saw Draven?"

He nodded. "Don't ken if he's still there, but that's where I saw him."

"Thank you, Patrick-Hugh." She gently steered the lad

away from the nearest cottage, afraid the fire there would soon grow bigger. "Where's your mother?"

"At the keep minding the other children. I want to help with the fire, Lady Faith, but my muscles aren't big enough to carry those pails."

"Then you can help me." She bent slightly and, though panic still threatened to overtake her reason, she kept her voice calm in hopes of not further frightening Patrick-Hugh. "Run to the keep. Find Judith and the two of you gather as many spare linens and bedrolls as you can find. Bring food and drink to the people waiting there."

"But that's woman's work," Patrick-Hugh muttered. He jerked his head up and stared, horrified at Faith. "I didn't mean—"

Faith pulled him into her arms and hugged him tight. "I'm not offended, but it's not woman's work. It's important work." She released him and forced him to look her in the eye. "Those women and children at the keep are scared, and I'd wager it would do them good to have a brawny lad such as yourself there to make them feel safe."

"I will not let you down." He offered a slight bow, as though she were his queen, and took off to do his duty.

Faith spared only the shortest of moments to watch his small body disappear in the murky night before resuming her search for Draven. He was a smart man, a capable man, she told herself. No harm would come to him. Of all those here, he was likely safest of all, for he had powers the others did not.

But until she saw him with her own eyes, she knew she would not believe her own thoughts. And as she wended her way around the last street of cottages toward Matrilda's, her hopes of seeing Draven escaped.

The midwife's cottage was smoldering. Flames still licked the walls, but it appeared as though the worst of the fire had been put out. The roof, however, was gone, and had Matrilda and Draven not made it out in time, they would surely have been crushed beneath the weight of the structure.

Lifting her plaid in her hands, she ran until her chest begged for air. The door to Matilda's cottage was gone, but the empty shell was so filled with smoke, it was impossible to see within.

"Draven?" she called.

She coughed and squinted. Coughed again.

"Draven!"

There was no answer.

But then, a hacking cough sounded from somewhere closer to the forest trees. Faith hesitated. The outlaws may not have fled. They could still be watching the devastation they'd caused, and if so, the most likely spot from which to witness their sport would be within the forest. The very forest that already caused her so much fear.

She inched closer, squinting into the darkness. "Draven? Matilda? Is that you?"

A figure stepped out of the trees carrying something large in its arms. Faith stepped backward, preparing to flee until she realized the object being carried was a person. Someone *had* been hurt.

A tremor of fear quivering in her belly, she stepped sideways in hopes of allowing the moon to offer a bit of light, but the air was still so thick with smoke, even the moon seemed to have been burned away.

"She is hurt," the figure said, and to Faith's enormous relief, she recognized Draven's voice.

He was safe, unharmed, and blessedly alive.

Her hesitation gone, she rushed forward to help however she could. Matilda coughed in Draven's arms, her entire body jerking with the force of her hack.

"Found her running . . . wrong direction. Leg's burnt," Draven explained, laying Matilda on the snowy, ash-covered ground.

Poor Matilda. Though blind, her senses had always been acute. The smoke and noise must have disconcerted her when she'd tried to flee.

"We'll have to get her to the keep," she said, brushing the hair from Matilda's cheek.

Draven nodded, scooping the old midwife into his arms once again. By the time they reached their destination and left Matilda in the care of Essie and Judith, their swift pace left Faith breathless, but Draven wasn't remotely winded.

"Don't follow," he commanded as they started back for the door. "Please. Stay this time."

Faith shook her head and pressed her palms to his chest, desperate to cling to him should he disappear into the night once again. "These are my people, Draven. I'll not sit in safety while everything they hold dear is destroyed."

She raised a hand to wipe a streak of soot from his brow, and his gaze fell to her belly. "The babe. You must stay."

But of all the people consuming Faith's worry just now, the babe in her was nowhere on that list. And she would most certainly not remain inside simply because of *this* child. It would not trap her now as it had done in so many other ways.

"I'm coming with you, and you can stand here and argue for the remainder of the night if you wish, but I refuse to do so."

And with that, she stepped back into the night. She would prove to Elliot, to Draven, and to herself that this babe would change nothing. It would not weaken her. She wouldn't allow it.

Draven caught up to her, his gaze narrowed. "Stay with me."

She followed him back down the path to the gate, where they stopped to finally take in the magnitude of the fire. She'd been so focused on trying to find Draven before that she hadn't allowed herself to wallow in the wreckage.

"There's too much fire," she whispered. "They'll never be able to tote enough water to put it out before it catches the rest aflame."

Even now, out of more than twelve-score cottages, only a little over fifty or so remained untouched by flame. Families would be forced to sleep in the great hall, the keep,

the chambers. She doubted there would be enough floor space for all those who'd lost their homes in this horror.

"I want the men who did this," she said, her eyes burning from the concoction of smoke and tears. "I want them punished."

Draven seized her arm, spinning her around to face him, his jaw set determinedly. "Get them all to the keep. Every one."

"Draven, I cannot ask them to stop fighting to save their homes."

"You will tell them." His gaze softened but he looked no less determined. "I might hurt them."

"What do you mea—"

He pulled his staff out from beneath his belt where it had been strapped like a sword, then he'd run off and now stood dangerously close to the east of the fire. Faith started to follow, but a strange glow emanated around him, stopping her in her tracks.

"Blessed Mother Mary," she whispered into the darkness.

He was the brightest beacon of light on the Maitland property now, his hands raised overhead as though offering his staff to God. Men stopped what they were doing to stare, pointing at Draven, who looked as though he, himself, had caught aflame. Whispers and gasps cocooned Faith, and dread filled her belly like overstuffed cabbage.

He was not on fire, though in truth, he stood so close to the lit-up cottages that his safety was a concern. Nay, what he was doing was magic.

He was going to save the Maitlands.

Thirty



Despite her aching need to watch what Draven intended to do, Faith wasted no time leaping into action. She turned away from him and dashed toward the group of men still gawking at her husband's sudden glow.

"Into the keep! Everyone!" She gave a light shove to Ingrainia's husband, Jaime, who hadn't seemed to have heard her. "You can't be out here while he's doing this."

He stared down at her with wide eyes. "You can't mean to let him spill his devilry over our lands."

"Go!" she shouted, biting down on her anger.

Several of the men looked so frightened of Draven, they did not hesitate to obey. They made haste for the gate, urging the others to follow.

A stiff wind lifted the smoke from the rooftops to the east. Debris sailed overhead, finally forcing the remaining men to their senses. Even Jaime reluctantly ambled off, walking backward so that he might still watch what Draven was doing. Casting around for anyone remaining in harm's way, Faith's gaze settled upon Draven. His arms were still lifted into the air, his head thrown back.

Faith backed into the stone wall, ready to flee behind the gate should danger present itself, but for the life of her, she couldn't take her eyes off her husband.

He stepped forward, and the flames around him followed, encircling him like a fiery cage. He was gone, disappeared from sight, swallowed up by those angry walls around him. Paralyzed by fear, Faith couldn't run to him as she'd commanded herself to do.

"Someone help him!"

It wasn't until she felt a hand on her shoulder that she realized the plea had been her own. She looked up to find Elliot beside her, his eyes looking upon her with worry.

"There's nothing to be done, lass. That fire is too—" His comforting tone turned into a curse of amazement. "The rumors . . . he truly *does* have magic."

Following his gaze, Faith watched in horror as the ring of fire traveled the path between the next two rows of cottages as though with a mind of its own. The cottages burning around the circle seemed drawn to the sphere Draven had created, leaving the homes to follow him. Much in the way the sun extracted morning dew from the grass, the circle of fire seemed to do the same to the flames eating each cottage. Beckoning them to join, to follow the path away from the village.

Finally, only a few cottages remained on fire at the western-most borders of the village, and then, they too, had attached themselves to the leader. The breadth of the ring had grown thicker than the breadth of the keep, melting fields of snow, and finally disappearing out of sight behind the large, stone wall.

Someone shouted from the parapets, calling Faith's attention. "There it goes. To yon loch!"

Gasps and mutters abounded. Had it not been for Elliot's gentle prodding, Faith wasn't sure she would have been able to make herself move. Terrified of what she might find on the other side of that wall, she allowed Elliot to pull her toward it as she fought the urge to be sick.

Draven. Dear God, please let him be all right.

It seemed an eternity before the wall came to an end and the loch came into sight. The bright orange circle still moved steadily onward, narrowly missing trees and brush to slither toward the loch shores.

Faith held her breath. The soft hiss of flame on water resulted in a cloud of black smoke rising from the loch. Enchanted to meet its death, the rest of the fire followed, until all that was left of the disaster was blackness and stunned silence from the onlookers.

"Dead," someone muttered.

"Got to be, hasn't he?"

Faith looked to Elliot, too afraid to voice her own concern aloud. His stare was apologetic, as though he, too, believed the worst.

She jerked her arm from his hold and lifted her plaid, running madly toward the water. A root wrapped its way around her feet, sending her headfirst toward the ground. She struggled to stand, but the pain in her ankle wouldn't allow it.

If Draven had survived the fire, he'd been underwater too long to hope for more of the same. Sobbing, Faith twisted to look at Elliot.

"Find him," she demanded through clenched teeth. "Bring me my husband!"

But her words were drowned by the sudden rise of cheers throughout the battlements and parapets. Faith looked to them, watched them raise their arms in triumph and holler into cupped hands. Slowly, afraid her hopes would be for naught, she followed their stares toward the loch and watched her husband walking toward the shore, water dripping off of his obviously uninjured body.

He was alive.

Forgetting the pain in her ankle, Faith bounded to her feet and limped toward him, wading into water so cold, she feared her bones might shatter. It did not matter. She threw her arms around Draven, burying her face in his neck.

He scooped her into his arms, his own steps faltering. Remembering how healing Frances had weakened him, she

tried to make him release her, knowing his power must have made him weary enough to sleep for days. But Draven only tightened his hold, carrying her on to shore, around the wall, then through the gates where the mob of villagers threatened to swallow them whole.

When they had nearly reached the stone steps leading to the keep, Draven swayed and dropped to his knees. Then, with Faith still pressed against him, he collapsed onto his back, asleep before Faith could so much as blink.



While every other chamber had made room for extra bodies—including Elliot's own personal chamber—Faith had refused to allow even one other person to step foot into hers. Draven needed his rest, and even Father McKinnon's concerned presence had not been welcomed.

After stripping him of all his soaked clothing, she'd covered him in a mountain of pelts before shedding her own clothes and creeping beneath the covers with him. She pressed her slowly warming body to his icy one, curled against his side, and flattened her hand over his heart so she could feel him breathe, feel his heart pulse with life.

Damned fool. When he woke, she would kill him for taking such a chance with his life. But for now, she would revel in the fact that he was alive and unhurt.

She'd wanted so badly for her clan to accept Draven for what he was, but none of that mattered now. He could have been killed. Their acceptance didn't matter to her in the least anymore. Her belief in him would simply have to be enough. After what he'd done for the Maitlands tonight, she was sure he probably gained a few supporters among her people, but as far as she was concerned, it was too late. He shouldn't have had to risk his life to gain their trust.

When she was done throttling Draven, she would throttle herself for putting him in such a position to begin with.

With a deep sigh, she snuggled closer, tracing the outline of his muscular chest with a testing finger. Funny, but the feel of him so strong beside her caused her no alarm. He'd

saved her village, but what he may never realize was that he'd saved Faith as well. His patience had been successful, had coaxed her fears aside so she might enjoy being a true wife to him. She imagined a future of kisses and passion-filled nights, of touches and pleasures she'd never dreamed possible.

The perfect future. And it was hers.

The way others looked at Draven, as though it was his fault he was born with powers they feared, would never cease to bother her, but perhaps by example she would show them all how wrong they were. It wasn't a child's fault if it was different. And differences only made them all special, after all.

Slowly, her hand crept to her belly. Her eyes grew damp, and shame torched her heart and soul. She was no different than anyone else. Open-minded enough to accept a witch as her husband, aye. But she couldn't accept her own child's conception. What a hypocrite she was.

As though a bolt of lightning lit up her heart, Faith's fingers splayed over her belly, and tears spilled over her cheeks. She choked on a sob, one created by realization rather than disgust. This child did not deserve her disdain any more than Draven deserved her people's. He or she was created as much from her blood as from her attacker. Family had always meant the world to her, and yet she had been neglecting the one member of her family born truly of her body.

Mortified by her attitude, by her abandonment of a child not yet born, Faith made a silent prayer for God's forgiveness. This child was *hers*.

And Draven's.

God save her, Draven had managed to claim the child long before she had, though he'd had no obligation to do so.

Love swelled within her, and the wonderment that she'd spoken her love to him aloud only hours ago before she'd truly realized she meant it overwhelmed her. She *did* love Draven, which was amazing considering a few weeks ago, she hadn't been certain she'd ever be able to love a man.

But she'd forced him into marrying her. Aye, he'd refused to allow her to speak the truth of her deception at the wedding, but all in all, he *had* been forced. If she told him he was free to go, would he?

Or was it possible he'd found some sort of affection for Faith strong enough to keep him here as she so desperately wanted?

Draven awoke to the feel of soft, warm flesh beside him. Daylight poured through the open shutters, as did cold morning air, but oddly, the only thing Draven felt was warm.

And aroused.

His body, it seemed, had sensed Faith's presence long before he had. He was hard as steel, a pain that far outweighed the ache still lingering in his bones after his mid-night swim.

He turned, curling Faith into his arms, and nuzzled her neck. He wanted to take her while she slept, awaken her to the feel of him inside her. But he didn't. He wondered if he would ever stop needing her permission before touching her as he so badly wanted to do. Without her awake and consenting, his touch would be a violation of her trust.

To his immense relief, her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled up at him sweetly.

"How do you feel?"

He answered her with a kiss, breaking his fast with the taste of her. She moaned, rolling onto her back and pulling him with her.

She broke the kiss, her grin wide. "I feel the same."

Cautiously, he nudged her legs apart, and blessedly received no hesitation from her. She arched against him, and while he longed to take the time to devour every bit of her, to taste the warmth between her legs and examine her flawless skin, his body rebelled. There would be time for exploration later, but for now, she seemed just as eager as he to find fulfillment.

Her nails raked at his shoulders, and as he entered her, her groan became a gasp. Her eyes flew open, the dusky green of them watching him intensely.

"I would have you, husband," she whispered.

Aye, she would.

Thankfully, she was quick to find her release, for Draven's weakened state disallowed for self-control. He quickly followed her into paradise, reveling in the sound of his name on her lips.

Satiated, they held onto one another, lying side by side.

"You were foolish to act so rashly last eve," Faith said, breaking the pleasant mood. "You could have been killed."

Unwilling to lose the glory of the morning, he kissed her nose and smiled. "You worried?"

"Of course I worried. I've no desire to be a widow," she teased. "I thought that staff would keep you from exhausting yourself."

Draven shrugged. "Too much. I did feel its control. Powers never felt so strong."

Tracing the slight arch of her brow with his thumb, Draven studied her face. She *had* been worried, and her teasing tone couldn't hide that fact. Sleeplessness pocketed her green eyes. Her face was still lightly dirtied with soot, and her hair smelled of ash. *She'd* been worried about *him*, but he could have just as easily have lost her, as well.

"They'll probably mob you when you go downstairs," she said. "I think you earned their respect last night."

He shrugged, fascinated by the full swell of her mouth. When he lowered his head to kiss her, she laughed and gently pushed him away.

"There will be time for that later. Last night made me realize that I've neglected my duties for too long. I wish to attend the council meeting I'm sure Elliot will hold this afternoon."

As Draven watched her dress, he replayed the night's events in his mind. First the panic that had consumed him as he pictured Faith meeting the same fate that had taken Bridget. The overwhelming awareness that the man who'd

stolen Faith's innocence had likely been nearby. Draven had felt helpless, knowing he was the only one who could put out the flames, but worrying over the chaos that could have provided Faith's attacker a nice opportunity to force her into a few moments of horror.

But he also recalled the amazing sensation of being in complete control of his surroundings when he'd lifted his mother's staff. Worries over Faith's safety had left him, replaced by a new confidence that he could take on the world and still manage to save her and the village if he needed to.

Control. There was so much power in that staff, he was certain *that* was what had left him so drained at the end of his ordeal.

He smiled as Faith struggled to wrap her plaid around her slightly expanding waist.

His mother had been with him tonight, and he had a strong suspicion she'd saved his life.



Opposed to Faith's prediction, the mass of Maitlands in the great hall did not thrust themselves at Draven's feet to give thanks for saving their homes. A few muttered words of gratefulness, but other than Essie, Patrick-Hugh, and a weary looking Matrilda, most everyone kept their distance from Draven as he and Faith entered the council meeting.

This did not upset Draven overly much. He'd expected it. It was one thing to fear a man expected to hold such powers. It was quite another to actually witness his use of them. He'd known their fear of him would only grow after he'd used his magic in front of them, but the morose look on Faith's face was the only reason their standoffish postures bothered him at all.

"Sit down, sit down," Elliot said from the raised dais at the front of the hall. He sat, gesturing for both Faith and Draven to take the empty seats to his right. Draven watched him smile at Faith and pat her hand. "After what's happened

to our village, we've much to discuss before our noon meal."

Once Faith and Draven were seated, the hall quieted down. Most eyes were settled upon Draven, even when Elliot cleared his throat to gain their attention. He nodded at Draven, a small smile on his old and tired face.

"First, I think we all owe a great debt to my new nephew for risking his life for your homes. We didn't stand a chance of putting out that fire ourselves—"

"Wasn't worth it!" someone shouted from the back.

"Who speaks?" Elliot asked.

All heads turned to the back of the hall, where Jaime stood glaring defiantly at Draven. "I do. That man spread his devilry among our land. Certainly, he saved the cottages. No one's disputing that. But at what cost? Our land has been tainted. What we could have rebuilt will now be forever sullied by his Devil magic."

Mutters of agreement rippled over the crowd. Draven reached beneath the table to squeeze Faith's hand. He'd felt her tense beside him, sensed her desire to speak out on his behalf. She had already stood up to her people on his behalf many times, but he wouldn't allow it again. She was only distancing them from herself.

Nothing good would come of it, because the Maitlands would never be ready to claim him as a member of their clan, no matter how many times she tried to make it happen.

"I ken I'm just a servant here, but I wish to speak," Essie said. She stood near the door, her hands folded in front of her.

"You've never been silenced before, Essie. Let's have it," Elliot said.

"My thanks, Laird Elliot." She turned her stern gaze on the crowd and moved her hands to her hips. "The lot of you are daft. Surprised you can wrap your plaid without Ingrainia's help every morn, Jaime MacNeely, you're so muddle-minded."

"Now look here—"

But apparently Essie was not willing to listen to Jaime's

protest now that she had the floor. She pointed a finger at him and waved it. "Wouldn't hurt to knock some sense into that daft head of yours. Quiet down afore I do it myself. Now, himself has given me the floor to speak, and I plan on saying my piece."

As he watched Essie pace the small spot behind the fuming Jaime, Draven fought to suppress his smile. That feeling of being mothered had returned, and he didn't mind it one bit.

"I've known most of you since you were lads and lasses. Some of you I've seen bare-arsed and covered in your own muck. But never have I seen you more childlike than you're behaving now. Devilry, och. If you can't find it in you to thank Sir Draven for what he done for you, then at least shut up entirely."

"Essie's right," Shane said, now pushing himself to his feet. He stood in the front of the room, his arm bandaged to his side. "We all had our doubts about the man when Lady Faith brought him here, but I'm man enough to know when I'm wrong. I was given the duty of catching the culprits, and my failure led to the disaster last night. Yet none of you scorn *me*."

"It wasn't your doing," several people muttered.

Jaime MacNeely's face was red, his hands clenched at his sides. "I'll not stand here and listen to the Devil be praised."

"Then leave." Faith rose and pointed to the door. She shook Draven's hand from hers and braced herself against the table. "That goes for anyone else who feels as Jaime does."

Jaime glared at her, obviously stunned by his dismissal. Scowling, he turned and marched for the door. More than a dozen others followed him, but their small number surprised Draven. More than fifty Maitlands remained seated, and though he knew it didn't mean they felt differently than Jaime, they were at least willing to hold their tongues.

It was definitely an improvement.

Elliot pounded his fist on the table, quieting down the

mumbling of the remaining men and women. Faith sank back into her seat, her breathing labored.

"I never thought I'd ever find myself ashamed to be a Maitland," she whispered, winding her fingers around his again.

"Don't." He squeezed her hand. "They're frightened."

"They're foolish."

Her support constricted his heart. She was still loyal to the Maitlands, but she'd proven she was loyal to him as well.

All the doubt he'd had over her words of love dispersed behind the surge of pride swelling within him. She loved him.

For the first time in his life, Draven had received a gift that made him want to live forever.

Thirty-one



That evening, the great hall was disrupted once again by Jaime MacNeely. He slammed through the great doors, swaying slightly on his feet, jolting Draven and Faith from their intimate conversation regarding better, more enjoyable ways to spend the supper hour.

“I’ve come to challenge the Devil!” Jaime roared, his slurred speech evidence of his overindulgence of spirits.

“Come now,” Faith said, forcing a smile onto her face, when all she truly wished to do was throttle the man. “I thought we settled this nonsense this morn.”

Jaime stumbled his way through the tables, his hand slapping the sword strapped to his hip. “Aye. That was before Ingrainia told me he laid his foul hands on my wee Frances!”

John and Shane stood and grabbed Jaime by the arms, pulling him back toward the doors.

“Time to sober up, Jaime,” Shane said.

The three men disappeared from the great hall, and Faith, like several others, rushed to the windows to watch from inside. The brothers all but dragged Jaime toward a

large barrel where fresh fish awaited Judith's retrieval. Together, they bent Jaime over the barrel and shoved his head into what must have been icy water. Several onlookers in the hall clapped and praised the brothers, though they wouldn't have been able to hear it. Others just watched in silent awe as Shane and John pulled Jaime from the water and escorted him to the stables.

"They'll make him sleep it off in there," someone stated.

Jaime would freeze to death in the stables. The least she could do was make certain he had enough blankets to keep him warm. Despite her anger at him, Faith couldn't let that happen.

Excusing herself, she found Essie upstairs and gathered several blankets from her before hurrying into the cold night. She'd send Patrick-Hugh with some food for Jaime later, though she wouldn't mind seeing the oaf go hungry for a day or two.

Before she could reach the stables, half a dozen Maitland men appeared, blocking her path. For a moment, fear gripped her. These were the men who'd sided with Jaime, who'd wanted to see Draven punished. How deeply did their anger run? Deep enough to try to harm *her*?

"Good evening," she said, forcing a calmness into her voice that she did not feel. "Please step aside so I might deliver these to Jaime."

They didn't move.

One of the men stepped forward, carefully avoiding looking her in the eye. "Just wanted to tell you, Lady Faith, that we've thought on it, and decided Jaime's barking mad. You'll get no trouble from us."

"Neither will your husband," another said.

Her body relaxed, and Faith let her smile turn genuine. "I'm glad to hear it, though I suppose it's my husband who should be listening. Not me."

"And we plan on telling him, my lady. Just wanted you to know it first."

And with that, they stepped aside, creating a path for her to resume her course to the stables. She'd only managed to

get a short ways, however, when one of them called out to her again.

"My cottage didn't get touched a lick by that fire. Sir Draven saved my family's home."

Her heart full of pride at her husband's accomplishment, Faith nodded and continued on. From behind, she heard the men's footsteps disappear into the great hall, and she was once again left alone in the night. She was near enough to the stables to hear Shane and John's laughter mingling with Jaime's sputtering protests. She wondered what sort of mischief they were causing the soused man. Nothing he didn't deserve, she was sure.

Her smile broadened. Perhaps the stables hadn't been cleaned today. It would be justice indeed if Jaime was forced to sleep with the smell of dung around him all night.

As she rounded the stables toward the entrance, a hand clasped around her shoulder. Thinking its owner was one of the men she'd already dismissed, she turned around.

"Please, I really should deliver these—"

"I think it's past time that I introduce myself, my lady," the man said, his familiar voice slicing a blade of terror through Faith's heart.

Her gaze traveled upward with dread, knowing in a moment she'd be staring into eyes that haunted her still. She dropped the blankets in her arms and turned to run. His hand gripped her arms.

"The name is Godfrey Canonach, and I've come for my child."

~

Draven had watched through the great hall window as Faith walked across the bailey toting an armful of blankets. He'd seen the group of men stop her, and, worried over her safety, he'd attempted to run to her rescue. But now those very men were surrounding *him*, muttering clumsy apologies and still unable to look him in the eye. Satisfied that they'd allowed Faith to resume her journey to

aid Jaime, he humored the men, slightly embarrassed by their gratitude.

After what seemed ages, they finally left him, but Draven found himself cornered once again. This time, it was Ingrainia and Frances who begged his attention. Ingrainia's eyes were brimming with tears, her hand nervously patting Frances's back.

"I knew I shouldn't have told him," she said, guilt staining her cheeks. "But I thought, maybe if he knew you were the reason our Frances has not been sick as of late, he might rethink his stand against you."

"Not your fault," Draven said, still inching toward the door in hopes of catching Faith before she returned. He wanted to kidnap her, take her to bed, before others noticed they were gone. "He had the right to know."

"But it does not give him the right to speak to you as he did." She raised onto her toes and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "You're a good man, Draven. A better man than my Jaime."

He was so dazed by her kiss that it took him a long moment to realize she'd gone. But once his senses returned, he stepped out into the night. Following the path Faith had taken, he made his way along the darkness, unmet by anyone. Anticipating being alone with his wife, his stride was quick and impatient.

But the moment he rounded the stables, fear and alarm gripped him, holding him prisoner. There at his feet lay the pile of blankets Faith had been carrying, and she was nowhere to be seen. Enough moonlight lit the path to allow him to see two sets of footprints heading east. He followed them, his heart in his throat, until the trail he followed had become only one set of footprints.

Where had the other set gone? He all but ran along the tracks, where he saw the man-sized boot prints take the shape of a horse's.

He should never have let her wander off without him, not when he knew the outlaws, and possibly Faith's rapist, had been in the territory.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe his gut was lying. Maybe Faith had gone into the stables and . . .

But why would she have left the blankets?

He had to check. Had to know for sure. He ran back to the stables, nearly colliding with Shane as he dashed through the entry.

"Faith," he breathed. "She in there?"

Shane shook his head, his jovial expression turning to worry. "What's got you so bothered, man? Faith was in the hall with you."

But Draven wasn't listening. He pushed past Shane, searching every crevice of the stables until he was certain Faith was not there. She was gone, and his instincts told him someone had taken her.

"Tell Elliot," he told Shane and John as he opened a stall and pulled a horse from it. "Faith is missing."

He mounted and made a mad dash toward the door, nearly knocking Shane and John over in his haste. Whoever had Faith—and please God, don't let it be who he feared it was—they couldn't have gotten far. If Draven rode fast enough, he could catch them before anything happened to her.

But he was riding blind. There was not enough moonlight to allow him to see the snowy tracks from atop the horse, and not enough time to track them on foot. As best as he could tell, the path had been leading toward the eastern side of the forest. Whoever had her would likely have traveled through the trees to keep from being seen. Praying he was right, that was the path Draven chose.

A few broken branches and a trail of trampled snow gave him hope that he was headed in the right direction. Though he stopped every now and again to listen for a struggle, for hooves pounding snow—anything that might give away their location—he could hear nothing over the pounding of his own fear in his heart.

But then he heard her. A whisper at first, then a scream.

"Draven! Go back!"

He thought he'd imagined it. Prayed he hadn't. Spurring

the horse faster, he dodged branches and limbs, some of which cut through his tunic and tore at his skin.

"Go back!" he heard again.

It was Faith, and there was terror in her voice that ripped through his heart.

"It's a trap!"

But it was too late. The arrow struck his shoulder, knocking him from the horse before he could so much as focus on the darkening path. He barely had a chance to push himself to his feet when a man stepped in front of him wearing a nasty grin of triumph.

"Do anything stupid, lad, and I'll have her throat slit afore you can muster any of that magic you refuse to share."

It was Harold. His father.

Come to take Draven home.



"I've done my part of the bargain," Godfrey said, pressing Faith closer to his chest. "Let me take her now."

Just the smell of her was making him hard, and he couldn't wait to be inside her again. But now that they'd finally reached the Cameron castle, Harold didn't seem to be in any hurry to let them leave. And thanks to the foolishness of the band of brigands, Godfrey feared he'd be forever running from the Maitlands if Elliot ever discovered he was their leader.

Their bit of sport could very well cost Godfrey his life. Amazing what one night's absence could do to a group of men with no leader. When he'd offered Harold the chance to get Draven back in exchange for Faith, Godfrey hadn't counted on things falling apart this way.

"You'll leave when I say you leave and not a moment sooner." Harold lazily walked around the Cameron hall, circling his bastard son with a joyous expression.

To Godfrey's immense delight, the Cameron laird had not been gentle in bringing Draven home. He was now kneeling on the floor, his gaze steadily watching his wife, though one of his eyes was swollen shut. The threat of

Faith's murder had been enough to prevent any tricks from the devil, but Godfrey feared it wouldn't last. After all, the man had murdered Bridget. His record with women did not lead Godfrey to believe Draven would allow himself to be sacrificed for a woman. Godfrey wanted to get her out of there and into his bed before Draven's sense of self-preservation returned.

Godfrey had taken Faith and lured Draven away from the Maitlands as he'd promised, damn it. Why wouldn't Harold let them go?

"You've a choice, Draven," Harold said, grabbing Draven's jaw and tilting his head back so he was forced to look up at him. "Do what I ask. Use your magic against our king in the name of war, and I'll let your pretty wife go. Deny me, and I'll have her killed. But not until I've made you watch Godfrey here take his pleasure with her."

"Godfrey," Draven muttered.

The devil could talk. While it was merely an unpleasant surprise for Godfrey, however, Harold seemed to have taken the revelation personally. He pulled back his hand and struck Draven across the face.

"You speak?" Harold hit Draven again. "All these years of refusing to speak to me . . . it was by choice?"

His voice became a roar, and he lashed out, kicking Draven in the chest.

But rather than react to Harold's obvious outrage, Draven turned a deadly gaze to Godfrey, who found the look quite unsettling. He shifted so that Faith was standing solidly between him and Draven's glare. Should the devil decide to set him on fire again, the bitch would take the brunt of it.

Something snapped in Draven's eyes. Recognition, perhaps. But of what, Godfrey didn't know.

"Bridget," Draven said, a bit more clearly than he'd muttered Godfrey's name.

So, he was realizing that Godfrey had been Bridget's mysterious lover. Good. Let him know that Godfrey had

found pleasure in both of his love's bodies. Godfrey smirked at him.

"Aye, Bridget. And Faith. And any other woman you mistakenly think to claim. I had them both first, and I'll have them both last." Godfrey leaned Faith backward and flicked his tongue over her mouth.

She spat and jerked her head into his chin, causing him to bite down on his tongue. Cursing, he curled her hair around his fist and yanked, earning a satisfying yelp from her.

"Enough!" Harold roared, shoving his boot into Draven's chest, forcing him to sit. "Who cares about women? A silly woman, anyway. I killed the bitch, not Draven. She'd sworn to convince him to lend me his powers and failed. She had the audacity to try to blackmail *me* into saving her father. I couldn't chance letting her go if there was the slightest possibility she had the same proof of my activities as I had of her father's, so I killed her."

Harold had killed Bridget? But Godfrey had been so sure . . . had seen Draven standing over her body at the cottage.

"But, I saw—" Draven started, obviously as surprised by this announcement as Godfrey was.

"You saw the remains I'd left there," Harold interrupted. "It was only my luck that you started that fire, and everyone assumed you killed her. Now, I want to know if you're finally ready to lend your magic to my army, Draven. I want war, and you can win it for me. If it's a matter of love, hell, keep your woman. She can remain here with you. No harm will come to her."

Rage surged through Godfrey, nearly causing him to drop his hold on Faith. He wanted Harold's head. Not only had he just admitted to killing Bridget, and with her Godfrey's child, he was now stealing another woman and child from his grasp.

"We had a bargain!"

"One more word," Harold started, glaring at Godfrey, "and I'll slit *your* throat."

"Let her go," Draven said, pushing himself to his feet. "I'll do as you ask."

Harold began circling his son again, scrutinizing him as though deciding his worth. "But you see, there's a bit of a problem. If I let her go, there's nothing stopping you from breaking your word to me. The Devil's not known for his honor, after all. Nay, I think we'll have to keep her. You do what I ask, *then* I'll let her go."

Opening his mouth to protest, Draven shook his head. Harold gripped Draven's hair and pulled. "Godfrey, you've my permission to lift the lass's plaid and take her. Let him watch. He'll come around."

Excitement purged Godfrey of his anger. Bedding Faith would have been satisfying in itself, but doing so in front of Draven would be a victory he hadn't counted on. Eagerly, he spun Faith around and whispered into her ear.

"Fight me, and I daresay your husband will do something foolish enough to get himself killed."

The fear in her eyes vanished. She lifted her chin and stared at him defiantly.

"Do what you will. My body may be taken again, but my heart and soul will remain my own." She smiled and turned her gaze to Draven. "Nay . . . that is wrong. For they will always belong to *Draven*."

Temper forced Godfrey's hand. He raised it and brought it down upon her flawless cheek, then steadied her so she maintained her balance. "Then I shall have to fuck the devil right out of you."

Thirty-two



Faith cringed at Godfrey's vulgarity. Her flesh was crawling at his touch. She fought a wave of nausea brought on by his foul breath. She wanted so badly to fight him and knew she hadn't had enough lessons with Shane to do her much good. And any action on her part could lead to pain for Draven.

While she'd meant what she'd said about Draven possessing her heart and mind, she had been bluffing when she'd told Godfrey she wouldn't care if he took her. God save her, she did not want him to touch her, to hurt her as he had in the forest. And what if he struck her again? There was nothing stopping him from harming the child inside her.

Her child. Draven's child. Their child.

It may have taken her a long while to want to be his or her mother, but surely it was not too late to defend the babe with her life?

She felt Godfrey bend in front of her and turned her gaze to Draven, hoping he would offer her courage, or at least some hint as to what she should do. Godfrey's stump of a

hand brushed the inside of her thigh, and she fought not to cry out.

A flame flickered in Draven's eyes. He stepped forward, only to be snatched back by Harold, then looked sharply down at his leg. She watched him bend it, lift it, a movement so small she might have missed it had she not been watching him so intently. She understood instantly.

As Godfrey started to rise, she lifted her plaid over her hips and kneed him in the nose. She felt the warmth of his blood on her legs. Heard his curse. Watched him stumble backward.

"Run!" Draven screamed, bringing his elbow back to pound Harold solidly in the chest.

Faith moved away from Godfrey, but could go no farther. At least half a dozen men stood ready to snatch her should she obey Draven. They all inched toward her while Draven and Harold struggled against one another.

But then a flash of light stopped everyone. The men coming at her turned slowly. Godfrey stopped stammering. Harold stared down at himself, eyes full of terror. Draven's body was most definitely glowing, but not half as brightly as Harold's. The laird was on fire.

Without breaking his focus on Harold, Draven yelled out, "Run! Now!"

Faith didn't hesitate. She bolted for the door, running with a speed she hadn't known herself capable of. There was no hope for it. She'd have to make it to her uncle, would have to get help. If she stayed, she would only hinder Draven's ability to escape.

Fighting the urge to cry for leaving the man she loved behind, Faith leapt onto a horse tethered nearby and fled the Cameron lands.

~

Elliot pulled his steed to an abrupt halt at the sight of Faith flying toward them on a horse that looked out of control. He held up his hand, signaling for the men following him to stop as well. He'd ridden this way, prepared to

wage war to get his niece back, and here she was, coming home on her own.

He dismounted and seized her horse's reins when it threatened to be unable to stop on its own. Faith slid off the horse and into his arms, sobbing so loudly her words were unclear.

"Got Draven," was all he understood.

"The Camerons?"

She nodded and fell limp in his arms. Cursing, Elliot gestured for Shane. "She's ill. We turn back."

He lifted Faith up into Shane's hands, who placed her gently in his lap. When Elliot had mounted his own steed again and turned in the direction of the Maitland castle, however, several of his men closed in around him, looks of puzzlement on their faces.

"She said they've got Draven," John said.

"We can't leave him there," Otis added.

"I'm going nowhere without Draven," said Father McKinnon, who'd demanded to ride along against Elliot's better judgment.

Elliot didn't disagree, but the fact that the clan seemed to have come to that conclusion without his prodding forced him to hide a smile. Faith would be pleased.

Testing their resolve, he said, "We did what we set out to do. I want her back home where she can be tended."

But the men did not move.

"You're daring to defy me? For a man none of you would mourn?"

"He is a Maitland." Shane rode closer to Glenn, the oldest warrior among them. "Take her home, Glenn."

He passed Faith into Glenn's arms, who obediently turned and rode in the direction from which they'd traveled. When they were out of sight, Shane turned his scowl back to Elliot.

"We don't leave a Maitland behind. Ever."

Elliot nodded. "I agree, so long as all of you do. I want it known that you are saving him by your choice, and thereby making him an *accepted* clansman. I won't have

him return with us only to be shunned, or feared, or treated like a dog again in what is rightfully his home.”

“Won’t be gettin’ none of that from me,” someone said. “He saved my cottage. My wee Moira was sleeping when the fires started. Coulda killed her.”

Not bothering to hide his smile anymore, Elliot turned to Shane. “And you? You are willing to let her go? To accept that she’s wed to another?”

Shane nodded without hesitation. “So long as he causes her no harm.”

Satisfied, Elliot slowly turned his steed back around to face the Cameron castle. “All right, then. Let us go and save the very devil who’s caused us all these woes.”



Draven had known the moment he focused his powers on Harold that he was a dead man. As soon as Harold’s men had put out the flames, Draven had fallen to the floor, weak and spent, unable to so much as lift a finger to protect himself. They had dragged him into the night to the bailey and had tied him to the very pyre from which the Maitlands had saved him such a short while ago. He was going to die.

He’d stopped believing in prayer long ago, but now, as his mind threatened to slip into darkness, he spoke quietly to God and was surprised to find he had faith again, that God might hear him.

Show me the way out. I don’t want to die. I want Faith and our child. I didn’t kill Bridget. I don’t deserve to die like this.

There was no flash of lightning, no sudden downpour of rain to let Draven know he’d been heard. But he knew in his heart that he had been. Even if he died today, he would not die alone. He was not responsible for Bridget’s death. God was with him. The Devil was gone.

If I die, I die for good reason, he thought. I saved Faith, and that is enough.

But regardless, he would fight.

He struggled against his bonds, wanting to free himself and live the life Faith had promised him.

He had no intention of suffering quietly this time. This time, he had a voice.

As the first lash split open his back, he roared. He clung to the image of Faith's face in his mind, imagined he could smell the sweet scent of her hair. He kicked out, catching the nearest guard in the knee—a puny attempt, but all he could manage.

Harold stepped around him, forcing Draven's head up. The fire had been put out before it could do more than sear his clothes and a bit of his leg, but apparently, his anger numbed him to any pain Draven might have caused.

"Think I'm going to let you go? Let you use your power to help the Maitlands? You cannot help the man who raised you, but you would go to *them*?" Harold sneered, a bit of spit flying from his mouth.

He looked like a rabid dog, foaming at the mouth. Draven closed his eyes, praying for sleep to take him before the whip could find his back again. The anticipation of the strike was worse than the blow itself. The longer it took in coming, the worse his belly cramped and tensed.

"I am the Maitland!" he heard, and was able to turn his head enough to see Elliot Maitland sitting astride a steed at the top of the hill. The fool seemed to have come alone, but that he had come at all stole Draven's breath. "And I'll declare war on these lands if my demands are not met this day!"

No one had ever fought for him before. One man doing so filled a hole in Draven's heart he'd never known was there. He smiled, content to let his head fall toward his chest in fatigue. It was taking all of his strength not to collapse and have his arms ripped from their sockets by the rope tethering him at the wrists.

"This is none of your affair, Elliot," Harold cried out. "The gates will not open for you this time. You will not steal my son's death as you did before!"

"*Your* son?" a new voice, familiar but definitely not

Elliot's. "The time for lies is behind us, don't you think? Draven is no more your son than he is the Devil's."

So Elliot hadn't come alone, but whomever he'd brought with him was mad. Of course Harold was Draven's father. But even as he tried to make sense of the newcomer's words, it dawned on him whose voice they'd belonged to.

Father McKinnon.

The man who had known Draven's mother long before she'd had Draven. Every time Harold had ever called Draven a bastard, Draven had only taken it as an insult, never as truth. Was it possible the priest was right? That Harold Cameron wasn't Draven's father?

These thoughts did nothing to help clear his mind. He struggled to lift his head. His guards had taken up arms. Most were stepping backward, alarm blazing in their eyes. He knew Elliot was feared, but surely even the craven Camerons wouldn't back away from battling two men. Especially when one of those men was a priest.

With what little strength he had left, he turned his head to see what had them so terrified. The sight that greeted him would have sent Draven to his knees if he'd been unbound. Over the hilltop, more than two hundred men were bearing down upon the Cameron gates.

"We never leave a Maitland behind!" Elliot roared.

"Never!" A hundred voices echoed Elliot's, a hundred swords thrust into the air.

"He is ours, Cameron. Give him to us, or we shall breach these walls."

Choked by the threat of tears, Draven could do nothing but watch in silence. It wasn't just Elliot and Father McKinnon who offered to fight for him. It was the Maitlands, whole and undivided. He'd cared nothing about gaining their acceptance hours ago, but now that it seemed he'd found it, it was a possession more dear to him than any, save for Faith's love.

Harold looked ready to murder, but Draven knew he'd never chance war with a clan as powerful as the Maitlands.

Growling, he looked to the guards flanking Draven and nodded.

“Untie the bastard. Let him go.”

The moment his wrists were free, Draven fell to the ground in a heap. The cheers of the Maitlands gave him the strength to find footing, urged his awkward, slow steps toward the gate, where he walked out of the Cameron bailey on his own two feet before collapsing again just outside them.

Two Maitlands jumped from their horses to help Draven to his feet. Father McKinnon held him up on his right, Shane on his left. They walked him toward Shane’s horse, and Father McKinnon stopped.

“I’m a sorry man for keeping my secrets all these years.”

Draven swallowed, his throat burning for water. “My father?”

“Is not Harold Cameron.” Father McKinnon smiled wearily. “I will explain it all later. For now, you have a wife whom I’m sure would be most grateful to have you returned.”



Faith sat on the Maitland hall floor in front of the hearth, her head resting on Essie’s lap while the old woman cooed and brushed Faith’s hair with her fingers. Faith had finally stopped crying. She simply had no tears left in her. She had left Draven to an unknown fate in hopes of getting him help, but she wasn’t sure her decision had been wise. With no knowledge of what they might have done to him once she’d fled, she felt the worst sort of coward. The worst sort of wife.

“He’ll be all right, love,” Essie said for the hundredth time. “Trust him to stay alive long enough for the men to bring him home.”

Faith nodded, praying Essie was right. “He used his powers for me, Essie. He’ll be weak and defenseless against them. I should have stayed, should have—”

"Should have gotten yourself killed and him along with you? Nonsense."

The sound of the rising portcullis lured Faith and Essie to their feet. The men had returned, but had they brought Draven home with them?

Too slowly for Faith's taste, the Maitlands filed in through the gate, handing their steeds off to the stableboys as the sun began its ascent behind them. She caught a glimpse of Patrick-Hugh, on tiptoe, straining to see over the crowd. There was Elliot and Father McKinnon. John and Otis. A hundred more.

Then, finally, there was Shane and Draven, together atop a magnificent white destrier. A whoosh of air expelled from Faith's lungs, and she felt Essie's hand on her arm, holding her steady.

"He looks hurt," she whispered, bringing a trembling hand to her heart.

"He looks alive, love. The rest will heal."

As soon as Shane dismounted, he helped Draven to the ground. Faith wanted to run to them, to throw her arms around Draven and apologize a million times for leaving him. But he didn't look able to stand on his own, let alone bear the weight of her embrace. Timidly, she stepped forward, willing him to look at her so she might know what to do. When his gaze finally found her, he smiled. The sight sent her running into his arms.

"I'm so sorry," she breathed against his neck, not caring that both Elliot and Shane were helping Draven hug her, keeping them all from toppling to the ground.

She felt his breath on her ear. "I love you, Faith, but I need to talk . . . Elliot."

Faith stopped walking. Her heart leapt into her throat. "You love me?"

He looked at her as though he hadn't realized he'd spoken those words, and for a moment, she feared he might take them back. "Aye, I love you. Now will you go?"

Smiling, Faith seized him around the neck and kissed

him with every bit of strength she possessed. The crowd cheered and hooted, but she paid them no mind.

"I'll go, but only if you promise to hurry, husband," she whispered.

Pleased by the faint pink creeping into Draven's cheeks, she hurried back to the keep, anxious to make their chamber warm for his return. She wouldn't allow him his own chamber any longer. Hers would be theirs from this day on. She'd come far too close to losing him to ever again spend a night without him.

As soon as Faith vanished inside the keep, Draven managed to hold himself up long enough to ask Elliot for a moment to speak in private. Elliot helped Draven sit on the keep steps while the men divided to either eat or see to their horses.

"What is it, lad?" Elliot asked, his voice softer than Draven had ever heard it.

Draven swallowed. God, how he wanted to be the one to hand Godfrey's heart to him. But he couldn't be. If he killed Godfrey, he'd prove to himself and to everyone else that he was as dangerous as they all feared. It would be enough to know the bastard was dead. And, as the Maitlands' laird, it was Elliot's right to see the job done. Draven would have justice without having to betray Faith's secret.

"The leader of the . . . brigands. I saw him."

Elliot allowed a moment of silence to hang between them before speaking. "Who is he?"

Draven cleared his throat. "Name's Godfrey. At the Camerons. Blond man. Troubadour."

"The troubadour and the brigand, they are the same." Thank you, God, for Matrilda's prophecy. It would be enough to send Elliot after Godfrey.

Without blinking or changing his expression, Elliot nodded. "I'll see to it, lad. I believe you have better things to be doing tonight." He leaned back, and Draven felt his gaze on his back. "One lash. Is it painful?"

"Don't know. Too cold to feel anything."

And it was true, for his plaid was barely hanging as it

ought to, and the Camerons had shredded his tunic before the whipping.

"I'm sure Faith will have a fire waiting. Go to her." Elliot helped Draven stand, but before Draven could do as Elliot commanded, the laird gripped his arm. "You should know, those men did not come to you on my order. I came to you on theirs."

Understanding the value of that truth, Draven allowed his appreciation of them to settle inside his bones. For the first time since the day his mother died twenty years ago, Draven had finally come home.

~

"You said you loved me," Faith said by way of greeting Draven a few moments later. "Did you mean it?"

Draven opened his mouth but wasn't able to utter a single word before she continued on. "Because that's not something you can just take back if it doesn't suit you."

She grabbed his shoulders and steered him toward the bed, then eased him onto it. "In fact. I forbid it. Don't answer. You love me, and that's the way of it."

She unpinned his plaid, letting it fall around his lap, then pulled a damp linen from a basket by the fire. "I won't have you give me something like that and then snatch it away."

After crawling behind him on the bed, she lightly touched his wounded back, washing away the blood, too afraid to stop talking lest he say something that broke her heart.

"I mean, unless you truly *don't* love me. Then, I suppose—"

She was suddenly on her back, looking up at eyes so blue they made her want to weep from the beauty of it.

"I love you, Faith. Should have said sooner but . . . thank you . . . saved my life."

His words faded in and out with each kiss he pressed against her throat. She knew he must be tired, but his words, his touch made her forget her vow to let him rest. She lay still, allowing him to undress her. His movements were

slow, painfully slow, but she knew with patience there would be great reward.

And she wasn't wrong.

She gasped in surprise when his mouth found the aching pulse between her legs, but she did not push him away, would never again push him away. She loved him with her body and soul and allowed herself to be loved just as thoroughly. But near to an hour later when he pulled himself out of her and rolled onto his back, she spoke the words she'd been dreading.

"I'm not sorry for making you marry me. I know it was wrong, but I found you through all the lies and secrets. But I'm telling you now that I only want you here if you truly wish to remain my husband. I'm letting you go, Draven, but hoping you'll stay."

His hand stilled its loving caress of her hair. Faith leaned up on her elbow to see him and found him scowling at her.

"You tried to let me leave. At the wedding," he said. "Thought I married you to protect you. Did it to protect me. You saved my soul, Faith. And my heart."

He kissed her lightly on the nose. "I'll never leave."

They were the words she'd been dying to hear, and they sent her into a relentless cry. He held her and rocked her in his arms, and Faith was so filled with love for him she thought she might burst.



Draven crept out of bed around midnight, his body healed, his bones rested. He hated leaving Faith's warm body alone in such a big bed, but he needed time to make plans before she awakened.

The question she'd put to him about forcing him into marrying her had made him think long after she'd fallen asleep. He had to prove to her that his answer had been true, but it hadn't been until a few moments ago that he'd figured out how to do it.

He crept into Essie's room and woke her gently with a pat on the shoulder. She bolted upright, swinging both arms

at him, but once he'd calmed her down long enough to explain what he wanted, she brightened and dressed with haste, promising to speak with Patrick-Hugh and Judith.

Next, he pounded on Elliot's door, and his mussed hair and scowl told Draven he didn't enjoy being awakened in such a way. But again, once he explained what he was about, Elliot agreed to cooperate eagerly.

When Draven turned to continue his tasks, however, Elliot seized his arm, his expression suddenly somber. "The man you sent me for, the troubadour . . ."

Draven nodded, his gut twisting into a coil in anticipation of what Elliot might go on to say.

"Thought you'd like to know he won't be bothering our lands again. Shane and I found him making his way back to the caves a couple of hours ago."

Anger and disgust raged a battle inside Draven against relief and hope. "He's dead?"

Elliot nodded and bade Draven good eve, leaving him standing in the corridor on trembling legs. *He'd* wanted to be the one to deliver justice to Godfrey, and it rankled that he'd had to allow others to do it for him. But still, the cur was dead. Faith was safe, and Draven hadn't needed to use his powers to harm another.

Taking a deep breath, Draven turned and made his way downstairs. There was only one person left to talk to, and it was a discussion Draven knew he must have before he could ever be at peace. As quietly as possible, he stole downstairs and found Father McKinnon whittling by the fire in the hall. It seemed Draven wasn't the only one still awake at such an ungodly hour.

"Figured you'd find me. Sit." Father McKinnon gestured to the spot beside him on the bench.

Draven didn't say a word. He sat in silence and watched Father McKinnon whittle for a few moments. Finally, the priest spoke.

"I loved your mother like a sister. Other than my own, she was the one woman I can say that about. Together with another childhood friend, Jackson Buchannan, we spent our

entire youth together. Then Jackson and I entered the seminary, but I later discovered that even his priesthood hadn't been enough to prevent him and Aileas from following their hearts. They fell in love . . . conceived you. Aileas wouldn't hear of Jackson giving up his collar for her, and before Jackson could choose, he was accidentally killed when he fell from a horse."

Draven clenched his fist. His father, a priest? The son of the Devil was truly the son of a holy man? Aye, but a holy man who'd committed a horrendous sin.

As if reading Draven's thoughts, Father McKinnon smiled weakly. "Don't be judging him too harshly, lad. He truly loved Aileas. He was a good man—much like his son."

Draven swallowed. "My mother was left to face consequences alone." Draven struggled to remember his mother ever mentioning anyone by the name of Jackson or Buchannan. He could not. "Why tell me this now?"

"I should have told you long ago, but I thought I was being loyal to two deceased friends by holding my tongue. I watched over you as best as I could, but I was rarely around when Harold was his meanest." Smiling, Father McKinnon warmed his hands over the fire and glanced at Draven from over his shoulder. "I tried to tell you years ago, but Harold wouldn't hear of anyone learning he was raising a bastard child. I admit, I was a bit relieved that he'd given me a reason to keep their secret. His pride wouldn't allow him to let anyone know he'd married a woman already several months pregnant with another man's babe."

"Why did he, then?"

"When Jackson died, Harold was determined to marry Aileas. He didn't know she was pregnant, and he wouldn't take no for an answer. I think Aileas thought to protect herself and her son by marrying the lord. But, of course, Harold learned you were not his, and he was not forgiving." He looked to Draven with teary eyes. "She used her magic to make the best of her life with Harold."

"I'm not Harold's," Draven muttered, wishing he could

find some anger toward Father McKinnon for keeping all of this a secret.

But the truth was, he was so thankful to know he did not have Harold's blood in him that the rest just didn't seem to matter.

He rose, feeling older than his years, but Father McKinnon reached out and gently grabbed his arm. "Your parents can finally rest easy in their graves, Draven. You would have made them proud today, and perhaps, now that you're beginning a beautiful family of your own, their guilt won't be weighing down their departed souls any longer."

A blessed sense of forgiveness washed over Draven. He'd been a product of love, created by two hearts that even vows made to God had not been able to keep apart.

"Thank you for being . . . their friend," he whispered. "And mine . . . as well."



Faith stumbled downstairs the next morning, chilled by the silence of the keep. There was no bustling of servants, no shouts from Elliot, no sign of Draven. She'd dressed herself in a green and black plaid, booted her feet, and plaited her hair. Still, Essie had never arrived to aid her.

Relief swept through her at the sight of Essie standing near the entrance to the hall. "Where is everyone, Essie? Why is everything so quiet?"

"They've all decided to give thanks to God for sparing our village. They'll be pleased to see you. Come, now."

Still confused, Faith allowed Essie to lead her outside and down the path that led to the small stone chapel behind the keep. Faith's knees weakened at the sight that greeted her. Every Maitland, man, woman, and child stood lining the path to the chapel, dressed in their best and grinning broadly at her. At the church door, Draven looked devastating in a green and black plaid, his staff at his side where a sword might have been, his hair blowing wildly about his face as he stood by Father McKinnon.

"He wanted it to be on his terms this time, lass." It

wasn't Essie who spoke, but Elliot. He'd stepped into view, his hands behind his back. "Loves you fiercely, that man. Had us all awake before dawn getting everything ready."

Faith couldn't move. Couldn't think.

"Come on. I'm to take you to him." Elliot linked his arm through hers and smiled. "You'll be wanting this first, though."

He held out his other hand from which dangled a sorry-looking wreath of yellowed ribbons. She recognized it instantly. It was her mother's.

"Essie thought maybe this time you'd feel right about wearing it."

Fighting sobs that were already racking her shoulders, Faith nodded and allowed Elliot to set the wreath atop her head. Indeed, the shame that had walked her down the aisle the first time she'd married Draven had gone forever. She stood with pride before her people, her heart swelling with adoration for the man who had brought them all here.

"Faith Maitland!" Draven shouted from far too far away. "Will you be my wife?"

Faith didn't wait for Elliot's escort. She ran down the aisle, one hand holding the wreath to her head.

"I would marry you, Draven. Today, tomorrow, and every day after, I would be your wife."

While the crowd laughed and applauded around them, Father McKinnon led her through her vows once again to love, honor, and cherish her husband.

And this time . . . she meant it.

Epilogue



Two years later

It took ninety-seven minutes to bring the first cry of pain from Draven Cameron. He could stand no more. Let Essie scream and yell at him if she must, but he would be damned if he spent one more moment pacing the corridor with Elliot outside of his and Faith's bedchamber, listening to his wife's earsplitting screams.

It hadn't been like this with Jack. Jack had come easily into the night, and Faith had certainly not screamed so much. Something was wrong.

Pushing past Elliot, Draven shoved the door open and stormed inside.

"Get out!" Essie and Faith screamed together.

Judith looked up and smiled at him, waving her fingers politely toward the door. "Your child will come soon, Sir Draven. Best you're not here when he does. 'Tis bad luck."

Draven turned his gaze to Faith. She was covered in sweat, exposed to the world and anyone who might walk by the open door. The pain etched on her face constricted Draven's heart. He'd wanted to stay with her, to offer her his magic for the pain, but just as she had when she'd

birthed Jack, she'd wanted nothing to do with his magic. She was brave, and possibly foolish, claiming she wanted her mind clear for every second of the birth.

God, how he adored his wife, but he might very well have to kill her for putting him through this.

"Da?" The sweet voice turned Draven around. Jack had appeared behind him, thrusting out his short, chubby arms.

His son. Not by blood, but by heart.

"Look, Da." Jack held out a stubby hand and showed Draven a small cut on his thumb. "Da heal."

Draven smiled. "It's a small cut, Jack. Da must save his strength for your mother in case she needs me to heal her."

"Mother cut?"

Rather than answer, Draven pressed a kiss to Jack's brow, lifted the toddler into his arms, and stepped back into the corridor, not wanting Jack to see his mother in pain.

He handed Jack to Elliot. "Take him to bed."

But before Elliot could argue, the muffled cry of a babe leaked through the open door and silenced them all.

"I think Jack would like to see his brother or sister," Elliot said, pushing Jack back at Draven. "It seems you're a father again."

Cautiously, Draven stepped back inside the chamber, his heart in his throat, his son in his arms. Faith's expression had softened. Her gaze was settled upon Essie, who was busy bathing the cranky babe.

Afraid he might drop Jack, Draven set him down. The child instantly soared toward the bed, bouncing next to his mother with a joyful expression on his face.

As Draven went to remove Jack, fearing he might hurt Faith, her gaze caught his, and the smile she turned upon him melted his knees. "Leave my lad be. He's come to greet his sister."

Jack grinned up at Draven and reached out to take the babe's hand in his.

"Sister?"

Faith nodded. "We've a daughter, husband," she said,

beckoning him forward. "I'm going to call her Aileas, after your mother."

The knot in Draven's chest tightened and threatened to cave in upon itself. He eased beside her on the bed and pulled Jack into his arms before leaning down to kiss his wife.

"Thank you," he whispered.

She grinned, leaning back to allow Essie to lay their child on Faith's belly. "Amazing, isn't she?"

Nodding, Draven reached out and smoothed the thick thatch of black hair from Aileas's small face. Big, blue eyes blinked up at him.

From the doorway, Elliot cleared his throat. "Who would have imagined that the Devil could sire an angel?" he said, a smile widening on his face. He looked pointedly at Draven. "A word?"

Reluctant to leave his family, Draven grudgingly followed Elliot into the corridor.

"Wanted to wait till the babe was born, but I think you'll want to know I received word this morn that Harold is dead."

He studied Draven for a long moment as though looking for a reaction. Draven had none to give.

"It seems someone sent word to King James that the Camerons were plotting his assassination. Would you know anything about that?"

Draven tried not to smile, tried to find some small bit of remorse over Harold's death. He could do neither.

"Ah. I see," Elliot said, struggling to hide a smile of his own. "Well, I'm certain whoever sent the king the missive will have known what he was doing."

"I'm sure," Draven agreed.

After all, Draven *always* knew what he was doing.

Faith called to him, and Draven left Elliot to return to his family. He eased back onto the bed, letting his gaze roam over Faith, their sweet Aileas, and the ever-impish Jack. He was in love with the lot of them, and there was simply naught to be done about it.

Jack was smiling down at Aileas, who had wrapped her tiny hand around Jack's thumb. "Time for bed, Jack," Draven said. "Your momma needs her rest."

Jack sighed but plucked his hand away from Aileas long enough to kiss Faith on the cheek. When he bounced off the bed, he gasped, then giggled.

"Look, Da." He thrust his cut thumb toward Draven once again.

"I know, son. You already showed me your cut. If it still hurts in the morn, I promise to fix it for you."

"Nay! Look!" Jack shoved his finger just in front of Draven's eye. "No cut."

Sure enough, the small cut was gone. Draven grabbed Jack's other hand and examined it, thinking perhaps the child had his hands confused. Nothing.

"Aileas fixed it!" Jack yelled, laughing like a mad child, then dashed from the chamber to show the miracle to the rest of the house.

Draven's mouth went dry. "Aileas?"

Faith laughed.

Elliot moaned. "Shoulda known you couldn't father an angel. Lord save us, we've another like you to deal with."

But the old man smiled lovingly down at his granddaughter, and Draven knew without doubt that Aileas would have no trouble finding acceptance with the Maitlands. For the most part, they were an understanding lot.

The next morning, Draven attempted to steal a trencher of food to share alone with Faith in their chamber. But before he could manage the task, Essie demanded his attention.

"I'll be needing your help with summat," she said, wearing a look of mild irritation. "Gifts have been delivered for the child. There's a mess of them on the keep steps I'll be wanting you to help carry in."

Draven followed her outside, and sure enough, there was

barely room to walk through the mass of baskets and bundles. He helped carry them in, reading the notes attached to some.

"Many blessings, Baby Aileas."

"We think of you on this marvelous occasion, Lady Faith."

There were so many blessings and good wishes for mother and child, Draven's heart swelled with pride. The woman he loved was so well-respected, so admired by her people. They loved her nearly as much as he did.

"Did you read them all?" Essie asked, once they'd brought the rest of the packages inside.

Draven shook his head. "Faith will."

"Ah, but I think you should read those." She pointed to a dozen neatly wrapped parcels sitting closest to the door.

Curious, Draven reached out and opened one of the notes. His breath caught in his throat, and the words turned blurry. These last few good tidings weren't for Faith.

Nor were they for Aileas.

These gifts, these blessings, were all addressed to *Draven the Champion*.

