



The MacNaughton Bride

Carolyn Faulkner

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By Carolyn Faulkner

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Published by Blushing Books[®],
a subsidiary of
ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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The MacNaughton Bride
ISBN 978-1-935152-64-4

Cover Design: ABCD Graphics

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Chapter One

"You're losing weight!" Jenny clucked disapprovingly as she moved about her charge, adjusting here, tugging there, until the young woman's undergarments were in their correct positions, a dance she was just going to have to repeat once she tugged the laces of the corset as tightly together as possible.

"Don't you know that men don't like skin and bones in their beds? They like someone of substance who can generate some heat under the covers – in more ways than one!" She cackled at her own joke.

Trying to put her maid's risqué comments out of her mind, Aislinn yawned for the thousandth time that morning, half out of exhaustion and half out of nervousness, and a fear she refused to confront. She was not afraid. Not. If she refused to acknowledge the unfamiliar emotion, then it didn't exist. The almost undetectable trembling of her pale, slender hands was due to the fact that she wasn't quite awake; it was certainly not attributable to the fact that the mere sight of her future husband was enough to make her whole body stiffen in trepidation.

Another loud, entirely unladylike, full body yawn made her lean slightly to the left, and she almost lost her footing and fell off the stool she'd mounted to make dressing her easier on the creaky old woman.

"Stand still, girl! That'd be just what you'd need – to fall and break your neck on your wedding day!"

Aislinn was a tiny woman – her father had always said she'd taken after her mother in her fine, aristocratic features and delicacy of stature. But despite her size, she had the heart of a lion. She – with precious little help from her father – had single handedly kept the Montgomery household running, a task she'd stepped into gradually as she grew up. Sarah Pierce Montgomery had died in childbirth, sending the normally good natured Albert into a self loathing spiral of drink that had ended a mere six months ago.

His brother, Aislinn's Uncle Bertram, being her only living blood relative, had reluctantly come to her rescue and housed her, but only long enough to find her a husband, which he had announced on the first day they had met was long over due for her, in his opinion. She could still see him in that shadowy library where he conducted his business – whatever that was, chomping on an obscenely huge cigar and looking her up and down as if she was a slave on the block, and obviously finding her lacking. Or perhaps just finding her female and considering that the two were synonymous. Either way, he had very little to do with her for the few months she was there, for which Aislinn was truly grateful.

She had been of a mind to suggest that he find the richest, doddering old man that he could to marry her off with – the better to deal with her biggest challenge – but she managed to hold her tongue, which was no small feat in itself.

Instead, she had been unceremoniously summoned to that very same room in the middle of the night less than two weeks ago. He had again perused her as if she was some particularly odious insect, then announced without preamble that he had found her a husband and she was to prepare herself for a trip to Northern Scotland to be wed.

So here she stood, in one of the sparsely appointed guest bedrooms in MacNaughton Castle, although she'd been surprised to see that it had a triple mirror vanity in it and the biggest bed in Christendom, being dressed for her wedding by her long suffering maid. Aislinn couldn't keep herself from asking the question she'd already annoyed Jenny with thoroughly several times this morning. "You're sure that Adelle is okay?"

With a patience she rarely displayed, Jenny, her mouth full of pins, mumbled, "Yes, yes, yes. She's fine. Resting quietly."

Aislinn knew she wouldn't be happy until she'd set eyes on Adelle herself, and as the thought entered her head, she stepped down and grabbed up her robe, heading for the door while Jenny sputtered behind, still leaning forwards, armed with the next pin for her bustle.

"Where are you going?" she asked, as if she didn't know.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," the girl promised as Jenny sat back on her heels and shook her head.

The castle was a maze of rooms that were going to take a long while to map out in her mind, despite her usually good sense of direction. This was by far the largest and grandest place she'd ever been, let alone lived. As she walked hesitantly through the halls, Aislinn made mental notes about what she might want to change – first and foremost being that there was barely any decoration or style. The walls were almost entirely bare. But decorating was secondary to her current mission.

As she rounded a corner, close to her destination and completely intent on her goal, she rammed head on into the MacNaughton himself.

Her bridegroom.

Crashing into him sent her flying back several steps, but he reached out as fast as a snake and grabbed her upper arms to keep her from falling in a heap on the floor. Aislinn could feel the strength – just in his huge hands – as he steadied her, then dropped his hands to his sides. Her eyes fell to the floor. Why did this man have the ability to cow her, when none other ever had? Her bullying uncle hadn't succeeded – she'd been just as happy to have him marry her off and get out from under his oppressive thumb. Her father - drunkard that he was – had had a mean, violent streak that she'd managed to fend off with few remaining scars. She'd always stood up for herself – and others. She'd had to. There was no one else to do it for her.

But this man . . . he towered her, and somehow she knew, just looking at him, that she'd more than met her match. The two men – the two primary men in her life – had been weak, or had just wanted to forget that she existed. There was nothing in Kell MacNaughton's demeanor that let her think she might get away with anything with him, including trying to handle him to her own advantage. They had barely met last night when the coach he'd sent to collect her had arrived at the castle, and had never talked. Yet this evening she would be lying in the same bed with him, and as Jenny had already advised, letting him "do what he would" to her, supposedly without objection.

Aislinn wasn't at all sure she could do that. Her father had been too involved in his own grief to want to have much to do with her. Aislinn had grown up largely on her own – with gentle guidance from Jenny, but Jenny was no match for Aislinn's headstrong tendencies. In large part, she'd done exactly as she pleased all her life, and there had been no one to tell her otherwise. No one who could say it and enforce it, that was. Her father's occasional, inconsistent, downright violent attempts to discipline her had left her even more determined not to trust anyone else for her wellbeing, and the wellbeing of those she held dear.

"Are you all right?" That deep bass voice rumbled through her until her chill bumps made her toes curl.

Inhaling deeply, Aislinn straightened her back. Even if she felt one, she didn't have to act the ninny around him. "I'm fine, thank you."

He was considering her all too closely for her comfort, those black eyes piercing and peering into her very soul. "What are you doing about this morning? I would have thought you'd be getting ready."

"I could say the same about you."

His eyebrow went up at her impertinence. Few men would address him so, and yet here was little Sassenach baggage coming right back at him about why he wasn't busy getting ready for their wedding – as if he didn't have a thousand other more important things to do. In fact, he had a devil of a time trying to make sure that his younger brothers were convinced that he didn't want to indulge in the usual traditions – even the ones that involved liquor. Traditionally, he should have started about a week ago, and made the rounds of all his friends, drinking all the way, only to end up at the ceremony, so hung he could barely open his eyes, and bedecked with all of the folderol they could come up with along the way – bows and bells and all manner of unnecessary and unmanly decorations. He was so tall he'd end up looking like a Christmas tree, and that was definitely not what the MacNaughton preferred. He knew he was already a big, hulking brute, not the refined type that ladies – most particularly English ladies, he imagined, preferred.

But she was exactly what he preferred. Her Uncle's representative had described her to him, but the man himself had only met her once, briefly, so there wasn't much for him to tell. What she looked like was considered to be completely unimportant, anyway, and there was no time for a portrait, and definitely not one of those newfangled stereoscopic photographs he would have loved. Kell had seen several stereoscopic images which showed images in three dimensions, and had become fascinated by it. He couldn't think of a better way to see his future wife.

But the more important factor was her dowry, which was extremely generous, and would be put to good use to make badly needed improvements to the castle and its outbuildings, increasing his herds of both sheep and deer, and his smallish herd of black Highland cattle. His mouth twisted at the memory of the man's spare description, which had lead him to thinking that he would end up having to do his duty by his wife, but he that he wasn't going to enjoy it much.

"She's plain and dull, and from what I could see."

Kell had steeled himself, not really trusting what the man had said, but knowing he would have to take what he got. Aislinn had arrived while he was out training with his men, and he'd not had time to clean up before presenting himself to her. In fact, he'd come into the great hall not knowing she was there, freshly sweaty and almost bare chested. Not the way he would have chosen to greet her, but then better for her to face the realities of life in the Highlands. Sometimes, the proprieties were forsaken for the sake of the practicalities of life.

Despite his attire – or lack thereof – he came to stand before her and swept a formal bow. She was bundled against the chilly northwesterly wind, and he could barely make out anything but the outline of her body, which, he knew, would be distorted by the current fashionable mode of dress which accented a woman's backside with an exaggerated bustle. Kell wasn't in the least adverse to a woman's natural backside, and disliked the idea of trying to improve on what God had made utterly perfect in a female.

What he saw shocked and delighted him, although he was not given to overt displays of emotion and none of it showed on his expression. His poker face had made him a tidy sum of money when his father had sent him to London, and he had frequented Whites – the exclusive mens' club – and had spent many a night drinking, gambling, and whoring as a young man. All of that had come to an abrupt halt when his father – the old MacNaughton – had died suddenly of cholera and he was called back to assume the mantle of responsibility his father had so wisely worn.

Her well-fed maid was fluttering about, gently folding back the hood of her blue sapphire cloak, which was of much to light a material to have done her a lot of good during the ride. Kell made a mental note that she would need much better attire in order not to freeze to death during a Highland winter.

His breath caught as her long, red gold ringlets were revealed, clinging and framing that pale, delicate face. Clear, bright blue eyes peered out at him from above full pink lips that were curved into a small, distinctly apprehensive smile. Her dress was very much like her coat – clean, but well worn and much too thin for the temperature. Kell frowned. Her dowry was more than ample for his needs and he had expressly left funds for her trousseau, so that she would have the things she needed – had her Uncle not seen fit to outfit her for the weather?

Kell saw her flinch as he frowned, but then watched with interest as she deliberately stiffened her back, never lowering her eyes from his face. She was a tiny little thing, barely a handful, but apparently she had backbone. As long as she kept to her place, that would come in handy. Even nowadays, life in the Highlands wasn't easy.

Peeling off cotton gloves that more closely resembled Swiss cheese, she walked up to him slowly, her hand outstretched towards him. He could feel the fine tremor in her fingers as he bent low over her hand and pressed his lips to the back of her hand, noting its iciness and the blue around her nails.

"Lord MacNaughton?"

Her voice was softer than any he'd heard before, melting over him slowly, like thick, hot honey. Not given to flights of fancy – ever – Kell's frown deepened. "Yes, and you are Miss Aislinn Montgomery." "Yes."

He tugged her gently but implacably over to the fire to warm up. Kell had been born and raised her. The cold rugged weather only served to invigorate him – there wasn't a chill bump on him. "Why don't you rest yourself here for a moment, and I'll go upstairs and change into something more presentable." It was as close to an apology for not being ready for her arrival that she was likely to get from him. He wasn't given to apologizing to much of anyone, much less a woman.

Aislinn nodded. She wasn't sure she was interpreting what he was saying correctly, but she sure did like how he said it. It was surprising to realize that they were both using the same language – generally. It was going to take her a while to get used to his brogue, but she had a pretty good ear for languages, thankfully.

Once he'd left, and Jenny had disappeared trying to find someone to bring her mistress a cup of hot tea, Aislinn rocked herself quietly before the fire for a moment, like the obedient betrothed she would probably never be. Well, most of her prayers about her future husband had gone ignored. She wasn't at all surprised that her Uncle hadn't heeded her wishes in the least, but she'd hoped that the Good Lord would listen to at least some of her requests.

But it wasn't to be, apparently. The man who, tomorrow, would have the right to do as he pleased with her was taller and broader than any mountain she'd ever seen. She'd never seen a man's naked chest before, and his was as close to that state as she'd ever encountered – just a slash of what she assumed was the clan plaid across it, his tanned flesh glistening with sweat even in the cold, muscles bugling and rippling with every movement. He was huge, and throbbingly male. His hand had completely engulfed hers, and, although he was obviously trying to be gentle about it, there was no denying him when he guided her over to the fire. She barely reached his shoulder, and he probably outweighed her by more than ten stone.

What would it be like to spend the long, dark winter nights with a man like this, who was so obviously physically fit and more than capable of fulfilling his husbandly duties? Aislinn was glad she could blame her flaming cheeks on the fire.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"I believe my maid's gone to get me some tea. I'm really not very hungry, but thank you, my Lord."

He was of a mind that she could stand to be fattened up some, but he held his tongue. She was so tiny – he was going to dwarf her in bed. The thought made him flush, thankful for his forgiving kilt as he adjusted his position.

Her maid appeared with a tray of tea, pouring him a cup automatically.

Jenny knew just how she took it – with plenty of milk and sugar. She watched her future husband closely, considering how absurd that tiny cup looked in that massive paw – she took heart that he hadn't broken it outright. Perhaps he knew how to temper his strength. Aislinn could only hope.

Kell leaned back in the chair, putting his cup and saucer on a chair side table, and studied her. He couldn't believe his good fortune. She was beautiful – and very obviously uncertain about him and her future, as one would expect. He watched her fiddle with one of the slightly ratty ribbons on her dress, and occasionally heard her cup rattle against its saucer, until she consciously stilled it. It appeared that his little bride had a not inconsiderable will of her own.

That was an element he hadn't considered, and he'd have to see just how far she tried to push it – not that he was going to give her much leeway. "I imagine you're tired after your long trip. Why don't I show you to your room?"

Aislinn was amazed that he wasn't having a servant do that. He was a peer of the realm, after all. Even if he was just Scottish. But he was up and offering her his arm before she had a chance to answer yes or no. He tucked her hand into his elbow and guided her up the huge staircase and down a sparsely furnished hall. When he threw open the door, she walked into the largest bedroom she'd ever seen – to her limited experience, it should have been a ballroom rather than a bedroom, although, beyond the monumentally huge bed, there was precious little furniture in it. The mere sight of the bed colored Aislinn's cheeks, although she did her best to ignore it.

Kell had originally intended to put her in a non-descript guest room, but then he decided that he liked the idea of his wife to be using his bedroom, and his bed. As she looked about the room, he caught her somewhat disappointed expression, and glanced about it himself, seeing it for the first time in her eyes. MacNaughton Keep had been without a female influence for quite a while – since his dear mother's death when he was barely out of breeks. The entirely male dominated population had done away with a lot of what they had considered feminine furniture and folderol. Kell frowned. Undoubtedly, the lady of the manor would like to make some changes, and he was fine with that idea. It would keep her busy – keep her from getting into his hair.

There were Irish lace inset curtains as well as heavy velvet draperies, in a hunter green that echoed the green in what she assumed was the clan plaid that covered the canopied bed. There was a dark mahogany highboy dresser on one of the walls, as well as a large wardrobe, but no other furniture in the vast room. The glass windows were chalky with soot and she could barely see down to the well manicured lawns, and the ledge had dust nearly an inch thick.

She would have her work cut out for her, she could see.

Jenny bustled past her Lord and set Aislinn's two ratty valises on the bed.

"There must be more in the carriage –" Kell found himself surprisingly uncomfortable in his own bedroom, with her eying it with obvious distaste.

"There's nothing more." The words were plain and quiet – not a complaint, but a mere statement of fact.

Already half way to the door, Kell turned and addressed the small woman . . . his small woman. "Where is your wardrobe? I left money with your Uncle –"

Her sharp guffaw startled him, coming from such a tiny source. "I fear whatever funds you left with him greased the palms of those merchants other than a courtier – a barkeep, most probably, and then whatever gaming establishments will still grant him entrance."

Kell sighed, grimacing. He should have been more careful about her Uncle. Something had told him that trusting that man wasn't a good idea, but he was in a hurry as usual, uncomfortable as always in

the South and trying to get as much done as he could before coming back to more familiar ground. "Were you able to get anything at all for the trip?"

Aislinn shrugged. "No. I came with what I own –" she nodded towards the two cases. "That's it."

Kell was astonished. Most of the women he'd known – not that there had been a thousand of them, but there had been quite a few, especially in his younger, wilder days – had had heaps and heaps of clothes, and changed four, five, sometimes six times a day, depending on what activities they were participating in. Different clothes for day, lunch, evening, riding, going out and about town . . . and here she was, his bride in two days, and all of her worldly possessions fit into two small bags.

She was staring at her feet, obviously discomfited by how having him see how little she came to him with in the way of material possessions. Most women also had some sort of a hope chest, at the very least, or even a houseful of housewares and furniture that they inherited from their family.

But apparently not his little bride. Kell was suddenly struck by how little he knew about her. "Your mother died when you were young?"

"Yes – when w- I was born."

He wandered towards her slowly. "And your father?"

"Drank himself to death," she replied starkly, and Kell nodded.

"What happened to the contents of where you lived?"

"They went to pay his debts and bar bills when he died. Uncle took us in, but only because of the money that my Mother's family had set aside for us – me – so that we would have a nice dowry with which to find a husband." Aislinn bit her lip and looked up at him. Sometimes he looked almost approachable, but not often. "May I ask you how much he told you there was?"

"Thirty thousand pounds." Kell watched her reaction carefully, amused by her derisive snort, and the resultant bright red blush.

"I apologize. That wasn't very ladylike of me." She was relieved to see his faintly amused smile. "There was at least forty-five there the last time I saw a statement, which, granted, was a year or so before Father died. I was concerned that he'd convinced the executor of my grandparents' estate to give him the money to 'safekeep' while he found me a husband."

"I'm surprised he let you go at all." Kell leaned against the wall, his arms folded over his chest.

Aislinn could see the barely leashed power in the way his biceps bulged – he could barely get his arms crossed over themselves, they were so big around. She averted her gaze to the toes of her nearly worn through slippers where they peeped out from beneath her skirt. "So am I, but I made sure I was enough of an annoyance to him that he would want to get rid of me as soon as was humanly possible."

Kell's bushy eyebrow rose at that statement. An annoyance, hmmmmmm? Best to nip that kind of thing in the bud, he thought, his face closing tight and dark, like a storm cloud looming over rolling green hills. "Well, just in case you were thinking of continuing any sort of shenanigans like that here, I'm more than prepared to take care of it in a manner that will surely deter any further such behavior."

There were times in her life when Aislinn would have considered that statement to be a direct challenge. When she was younger, she was much more likely to rise to that type of bait. But life of late had dragged her down a bit. She was a little older, and hopefully a little wiser. "It was more in the manner of merely having to make my presence known, frankly – a single, unmarried female in his house discouraged him from indulging in . . ." she hadn't realized where she was going to have to go with this explanation, but pressed on while her skin burned like a beacon in the evening, "his acquaintances with woman . . . ahh . . . of loose virtue."

Chapter 2

"I see," he said gravely, suppressing a smile at her obvious discomfort. Kell shouldered himself away from the wall and bowed in front of her. "Well, I'll leave you to get settled. There's a pull in the corner that will summon a maid if you should need assistance. I will be on the same floor – two doors down to your right when you come out of the door – if you should need me."

But here and now, on the morning of their wedding, beyond the superstition about a groom seeing a bride on that day, to which he did not subscribe, he would have thought that she would have been deep in her own preparations for the moment when they would be joined as man and wife. Instead, she was wandering around his – their – house in her robe for some strange reason, and was apparently trying to turn the question around to him.

It wasn't too soon to let her know how he expected her to behave. Not too soon at all. "I want to know what you're doing, and I want to know now."

Aislinn knew he wasn't going to let her get away without some sort of plausible explanation. She could just see it in the way he held her eyes. This was a man who was used to being obeyed. He wasn't her father, who was willing to let her do almost anything as long as she didn't interfere with his steady supply of spirits, nor was he her Uncle, who, in her opinion was much worse than her father. At least her father had never pretended to be anything other than what he was – a weak, fallible man whose lady love had died as a result of his own lust, and whose new love was a much harsher, more unforgiving taskmistress.

Uncle Bertram was an oily snake who presented himself as one thing to pleasant company, but showed an entirely different demeanor to anyone for whom he did not have a high regard. Anyone not worthy in his estimation – and that most distinctly included his nosy body niece – was subjected to the bite of his tongue at least, or the back of his hand at worse. He had cracked Aislinn across the face only once, and then she had been careful not to get within striking distance from that point forward, not that that had stopped her subtle efforts to make sure that he foisted her off on someone – anyone – before he ran through her entire fortune.

Biting her lip, she looked up at him, her face as open as possible. "I was going to go up on the roof. I just need . . . a breath of fresh air."

Kell wasn't sure whether or not to believe her, but he decided to give her the benefit of the doubt, taking her hand and turning her completely around. "You're headed in the wrong direction. The stairs to the roof are at the end of the hall down here." He waved his finger at her pointedly. "Don't spend too much time up there – you'll catch a chill."

"Uh, thank you." Aislinn knew that already – one of the first things she'd done once she was sure that the rest of the house was asleep was a little judicious exploring. She needed to find a small, unused room. And in a place this sized, she hadn't figured it would be a problem, and she was right. She'd found one on the forth floor, well away from the servants' quarters. It wasn't fancy, but then neither of them was

used to fancy, anyway. It had a small bed – especially in comparison to the parade ground she was currently occupying, Aislinn had thought wryly – and one good-sized dresser. It was also only a few steps from the roof top.

After spending what was a surprisingly refreshing few moments gazing out over what would soon be her homeland, Aislinn snuck carefully back downstairs, trying to keep her eyes and ears as peeled as she could. That man seemed to have eyes in the back of his head – and was hard as a brick wall to run into. She made it out to the shack near the stables, which was the first place Jenny had been able to find that would keep Adelle out of the elements.

She was asleep atop a bale of hay, huddled under several blankets. Aislinn closed the rickety door behind her and walked over to her sister, placing her hand over that thin shoulder and shaking gently. Calling to Adelle would have been both a security risk – someone might have overheard it and grown suspicious – and useless.

Adelle – who turned her mirrored face up to her sisters with a huge grin and threw herself into Aislinn's arms – was both deaf and mute.

Once she was able to set her sister – who was younger than she was by a few minutes and smaller by a pound or so when they were born – away from her, their conversation commenced at a frantic pace.

Although Aislinn and Adelle had developed their own sign language as they grew, Aislinn had had taught herself – and then subsequently her sister – the more accepted, British version that Aislinn had hoped might help Adelle, if she ever got a chance to interact with the rest of society.

Father had ignored Adelle. Aislinn was sure that he wouldn't have noticed if Aislinn had disappeared, much less Adelle. Adelle hadn't had much of a chance. Everyone ignored her – except her sister – and before Aislinn grew enough to assume responsibility for her sister, Jenny had taken care of the infant, while putting forth the rumor that although Madam Montgomery had birthed twins, only one of them had survived. Since Jenny and their Father were the only two in attendance when Sarah gave birth then died just a few hours later, Adelle's existence – or lack thereof – was never questioned. Albert was too stunned by the loss of his wife – too deep in the bottle from that point onward – to question the servant when she gave him the sad news that the smaller, obviously weaker infant – who hadn't made even one peep from the moment of her precipitous birth – had died.

Despite her inauspicious beginnings – and surroundings, which were always quite secretive so that no suspicions were aroused, Adelle thrived, and it was due in large part to Aislinn, whose love for her sister knew no bounds. She did her best to teach Adelle everything she learned, never expecting that she couldn't learn. Aislinn was a smart girl – everyone kept telling her – and Aislinn expected that Adelle would be smart, too. The girls were inseparable, even as adults, and Aislinn was fiercely protective of her sister.

When they were all moved to Uncle Bertram's, Aislinn was extremely careful to make sure that arrangements were made for Adelle to move, also. She wasn't about to spring Adelle on Uncle Bertram, although she'd considered it until she got to know the man. Since things had turned out differently, she had secreted her sister in the attic and put into motion her plan to get them both out of there as soon as possible.

Adelle was driving her sister crazy with questions about their new home. What was the house like? Was her betrothed old and gray as Aislinn had wanted? Was she being treated well?

Aislinn answered each question patiently, stumbling a bit on the one about her betrothed being old and gray. He most certainly was not. She'd fervently wished that Uncle Bertram would marry her off to some old man who might die soon after their wedding, leaving her a widow who was free to do as she pleased. Aislinn had had so much freedom in her upbringing – however unintentional it might have been on her Father's part – that staying with their Uncle, who had insisted on the strictest of proprieties in regards to her behavior – had had her chafing at his restraints. She could barely find time to slip away and see her sister.

Her betrothed – Kell, he'd said when he'd executed that courtly bow before her when they'd first met – was probably less than thirty and hadn't a gray hair anywhere near him . . . and she'd seen more of him than she'd seen of any man in her life. Even his chest hair was coal black, although distinctly thinner than the thatch on his head. She didn't relay these disturbing facts to her sister, choosing instead to gloss over her description of the MacNaughton himself.

Aislinn didn't spend too long with Adelle – she did need to get back and finish getting dressed. Adelle hugged her sister when she rose to leave, then stopped her as she stepped towards the door, tugging on her arm then turning to grab something from under the blankets. It was a set of pillowcases, meticulously embroidered with the MacNaughton crest.

Of the two, Adelle was much more adept with a needle than Aislinn, who was truly hopeless, but she knew how many hours of work this represented on Adelle's part. Aislinn hugged her sister to her as tightly as she could, feeling the tears she'd been trying to ignore since her father's death seeping into her eyes behind her lids. If she didn't stop, her eyes would be swollen and puffy during the ceremony, and that wouldn't look good.

Although it tore at her heart for some reason she didn't understand, Aislinn put Adelle from her gently, looking into those eyes so like hers. Silent as always, Adelle had a small smile on her face as she nodded and gripped her sister's arms tightly, rhythmically. It was as if she was trying to support her sister in her time of need - trying to convey that everything would be all right - which was a complete reversal of their usual roles.

Aislinn sniffed a little and turned away, slipping back into the house and up to her room without incident.

Meanwhile, Kell was trying to deal with the exuberant spirits of his brothers. He was the eldest of the MacNaughton boys at nearly thirty one. Burke was next in line and the one most likely to give himself to the Church . . . if he could ever settle down long enough. Of the three of them, he was the most scholarly, although that was somewhat a case of damning with faint praise. But he had already confided to Kell that he felt that might be his calling, and with Kell marrying and presumably producing heirs, it was highly unlikely that the title would pass to him. Kell was the quietest – such as he was, the one least likely to start a feud or punch someone out in a public house or be caught with a whore. But if he decided you needed punching, then the job was done more thoroughly than by him alone than by the two of his younger brothers put together. All of his punches were knockout punches. Few men dared to challenge him a second time.

Together, the brothers were a legend around the small town of Kilarnan, and well beyond the lands they owned. When they were younger, they drank, whored, and generally caroused together in Scotland and beyond, and the stories of their exploits had already taken on legendary proportions. Kell, in particular, did nothing to stop any of the rumors, especially those of their prowess in bed sport, which he found to be the most boastful and the most truthful at the same time.

The baby of the family – all six foot three and nearly eleven stone of him – was Grant Chevres MacNaughton, mercilessly teased and still fondly referred to as Cheesy. Their mother had had an unfortunate fondness for goats' milk cheese during her pregnancy, and their father had been so enamored of her – and over the moon about the successful birth of his third son – that he had indulged her and let her name the infant.

He had been the first to nickname him Cheesy, much to their mother's distress.

Despite the hindrance of his middle name, and two older brothers who enjoyed perfecting their punching skills while holding him down, Grant prospered, as did the entire family in general. Grant was an almost disturbingly good natured fellow who enjoyed drinking at least as much as his brothers, and

women quite a bit more so than either of them. Women loved him. They flocked around his youthful good looks and wanted to mother him, and he was all too happy to let them attempt it, anyway.

But he was also in possession of the MacNaughton temper. Kell controlled his the best of all of them. Cheesy the least – and his nose had been broken more times than any of them because of it. It took a lot to get Grant going, but once he had decided that a fight was necessary, he was as deadly accurate and adept at it as his brothers. He had to learn to be to survive the loving attentions of his two older brothers.

There were several things that would get Grant's ire up, but two were predominant: the mistreatment of a female – for he had the utmost respect and admiration for any woman of any rank or station – or any animal. No two things were more likely to guarantee a miscreant a thorough beating such as he had never experienced than either of those two acts.

None of the brothers was married – Grant being the least likely candidate, not simply because of his age, but because he was constantly being offered the chance to sample yet another lovely who was throwing herself at him. Why would he confine himself to just one woman?

Of course, that was all going to change today, and the brothers were doing their level best to make sure that the eldest had as good a time as was possible, despite himself. They were of a mind that Kell took himself and his station entirely too seriously sometimes, and this was one of them. He had banned the usual round of celebrations with his friends, which should have been a week or so of drinking their way from house to house, only to end up here, this morning, to get married.

"What's she like, brother?" Burke asked. He almost waggled his eyebrows, but decided against it.

Kell sank down in a chair, considering the question seriously. "She's a tiny little sparrow."

Grant leaned forward, looking at Kell as if for the first time. "Why, I do believe our dear level headed brother is in love, Burkey."

Burke, of course, had to assume the same position, leaning forward so far that he almost fell out of his chair. "You think so?"

Kell scoffed at the thought. "How could I be in love with her? I just met her less than a day ago." He squirmed uncomfortably in his chair, and his brothers adopted knowing grins that increased his discomfort several fold. "Besides, whether I love her or not doesn't mean a thing. I've already accepted and largely spent her dowry. She's going to be my wife, regardless."

Grant sighed dramatically. "So much for your romantic poet's heart, big brother." His tone clearly stated that he was quite sure that Kell didn't possess either the poet or the heart.

"Is she pretty?" Burke asked boldly.

Kell vaulted out of the chair and out the door, but his brothers were in hot pursuit, not about to let him duck out of their fraternal inquisition. He was the first of them to marry, and the younger two were bursting with curiosity about his bride, and their soon to be sister in law.

Kell ran up the huge staircase as if the hounds of hell were following him, and the closest equivalent on Earth was. Ducking into the room he was using short term didn't help one bit – they followed him in like they belonged there.

Finally, he turned and confronted them. "Boys, I'm perfectly capable of getting dressed for my wedding with no assistance from you."

They didn't take the hint, and they'd deliberately told his French valet, Pierre, to make himself scarce for this particular ritual. There were no chairs to sit in, so they leaned against the sill and the wall, staring at him as if he held the secret to eternal life.

"So, you never did answer the Cheese's question. Is she pretty?"

Kell wasn't about to encourage their behavior by revealing that he thought that his wife was incredibly gorgeous. If they got a whiff that he was well on the way to falling in love just by spending about five minutes with her, they would never let him forget it. "She's passable," he said, deliberately

without much enthusiasm, rummaging in the wardrobe and bringing out his outfit for the wedding: full Highland regalia, dress kilt in dress tartan – which differed from the every day tartan quite considerably.

The everyday MacNaughton tartan was a deep, rugged red and hearty green. There were a couple of variations – a “muted” tartan in which the green was almost washed out, that few favored – and a “weathered” pattern where the green was a little more prominent but gray was also included. Kell preferred the every day style over everything, and even in this day and age, when the fashion even in Scotland was trousers and top hats. The dress version of the MacNaughton tartan was done in various shades of blue, from a deep navy to almost a sky, run through with stark white and a tad bit of red in thinner stripes throughout.

But Kell preferred the traditional Scottish garb over just about anything. Being the Chieftain of his clan, he wore the finest of accoutrement – his plaids weren’t merely woolen, but wool and silk combined, which alleviated some of the usual itch that accompanied the wearing of them. He donned a starched white shirt which he tucked neatly into the waistband of his kilt and shouldered his way into a vest, then Burke held the arms of his Prince Charlie jacket and he eased into it, stretching the fabric a bit across his shoulders. It had been quite a while since he’d had to dress so fancily – since his father’s funeral several years ago, and apparently he’d added some weight – all of it muscle across the breadth of his shoulders, apparently.

The deep blue jacket was short and ended around his waist. The lapels of both the jacket and the vest open, revealing much of his shirtfront. The jacket was plainish, except for the decorative gold buttons shaped like a shield, three of them each side down the front and sleeves of the jacket. Grant affixed his “flying plaid” on his left shoulder with their father’s gold plaid broach and pin, draping the swatch of dress tartan fabric down his back until it ended just above his white kilt hose and flashes.

Kell sat down on the end of the entirely too small bed he’d used last night and slipped his huge feet into his dress ghillie brogues and laced them up his thick calves. Burke handed him his dress sporran and chain, which he looped around his waist, so that the pouch settled just below his privates. Kell allowed himself a small smile, remembering the first time he’d dress in formal Highland garb with his father’s grave assistance, and had commented on the weight and location of his small sporran. His father had lifted one of those bushy gray eyebrows and commented acerbically that its purpose was as a purse of sorts, but that it would also serve as a good reminder that little boys wearing sporrans should conduct themselves like gentlemen.

Kell had given his father a quizzical look, and the older man had bent down a little, as if sharing a secret. “Young man, if you jump and run while you’re wearing a sporran, I can assure you that you’ll only let the cantle hit you in the balls once before you settle down.”

The old man had been dreadfully right, as Kell recalled. It had only taken once for that big silver clasp to knock itself into his privates, and he was quiet – and slightly nauseous – for the rest of the event.

His dress sporran had a solid gold cantle – it had been his father’s and his father’s before that for generations back – that was carved with the family crest. Originally, sporrans were used as purses, since kilts didn’t have any pockets. Now they were really just decorative accessories.

Burke dragged him down to his own bedroom so that he could see himself in a full length mirror. Burke had much more care for what he looked like than Kell ever would. But when Kell looked into the glass, he had to admit he didn’t look too bad. Grant slapped him on the back. “You’re a fine figure of a man, Kell. You’re almost passable, even!” He preened in front of the mirror. “But neither of you’ll ever hold a candle to me. The good Lord saved the best for last in this family.”

Of course, his brothers both had to smack him sharply as they all tromped back down to Kell’s temporary room to finish dressing him.

Aislinn, meanwhile, was being fluttered around by Jenny. The dress Aislinn was wearing had been her mother’s, worn years before and carefully preserved by Jenny herself. It was one of the few things that Aislinn had of her mother, and she was determined to wear it, despite the fact that its hooped skirts

were out of fashion. The dress hadn't been the most fancy of dresses even in its time, but it was the finest garment Aislinn had ever worn. Its linen was fine woven and a deep blue – “married in blue, love will be true”. She hoped the singsong bride's rhyme would bode better for her than it had her mother.

There were two bodices with the ensemble, one for fancy, with lace insets and pearl beading and buttons which she was wearing for her wedding, and one plainer one so that the dress could be worn for more every day events. The lace and bead encrusted skirt was supported by not one but two hoops, and fell to just above Aislinn's toes. Her shoes were the only part of her outfit that she was concerned about, since she had only the one pair, but they would have to do. Her train was full court, trailing along behind her like a fabric tail. When it was spread out, the lace designs and beading was breathtaking. For now, though, Jenny bustled the train against her bottom.

Her veil was of an intricate blue lace that complimented the dress, and fell down her back in glorious waves, much like her hair would if Aislinn had had her way. But Jenny prevailed in the area of hair styles, impressing on her charge that she was a woman now, and needed to wear her hair up. Tendrils of it escape from the beautiful coiffure, of course, and formed fine baby hair ringlets around her pale face. Jenny had brushed just the barest touch of color to Aislinn's cheeks, which generally needed little such artifice, and did the same to her full lips. Aislinn's eyes sparkled with intelligence and good health, and were surrounded by sooty, thick lashes. There was no need for any sort of assistance there.

While Aislinn had disappeared this morning, much to Jenny's dismay, Jenny had busied herself doing an errand that Aislinn had presented her with upon waking. It was no mean feat. But the last touch she added to the young woman's ensemble – after the diamond teardrop earrings that was the only jewelry her mother had left her – was to use a plainish brooch of her own to fasten a good sized square of the MacNaughton tartan she'd found by rummaging around the place. Luckily, it was also blue and white, and it matched the dress perfectly. Aislinn had decided that it might do nicely to try to adopt something of her husband's into her dress, and an homage to the family – the clan – she was joining.

Finally, she was ready for the short trip to the church, which was on the castle grounds. Once the ceremony was over, they would return to the great hall for a hearty meal, dancing, and music. Once Aislinn had fallen asleep, Jenny had found the man who was to be her master to find out the details of what was going to happen on their wedding day, and had translated them as best she could to her mistress this morning.

The coach that brought them to the church was a simple one, but it had been adorned by someone – they didn't know who – with all sorts of flowers and ribbons in both blue and white. The trip was thankfully short. Jenny could see that Aislinn was growing more and more nervous by the minute; she kept fidgeting with her hair and her dress, and fretting aloud about her shoes.

When they came to the stop, the footman jumped down and tried to open the door, but Aislinn held it shut, saying, “Not just yet, please.” She was trying to decide whether to give in gracefully and get it over with, or see how far she could run before the train got caught in the bushes.

Chapter 3

Jenny put her hand over Aislinn's and waited for the young woman to notice her. She could almost see panic in those frightened eyes. She leaned out the door and told the footman to go away until he was called. Then Jenny switched sides of the carriage and hugged the girl to her tightly, rocking just a bit as she had when Aislinn awoke screaming from a nightmare. "Now, a lot has happened pretty quickly for you, hasn't it? And now you're going to become that young man's wife, and you barely know him." Aislinn nodded against her chest. "But I can tell he's a wonderful man, my girl. Just from meeting him last night. He's seen to your comfort, hasn't he? He gave you a right proper room, didn't he? And I could tell he was none to happy when you told him that your Uncle had probably spent the money he'd left for your trousseau. He looks like a healthy, brave man, and you're going to settle into life here before you know it. We both will. Why, you're going to be a fine lady, and I'm going to be forgettin' to bow and scrape to you, like I should!"

Aislinn almost laughed at the idea of Jenny bowing to her, and that was just what the older woman was after. It wasn't like Aislinn to be frightened. She'd been through a lot in her young life, and she generally met things head on. But this was different, somehow, and Jenny understood her hesitation. In a few minutes, Aislinn was going to confer upon a total stranger the right to share more than just her company – he was going to have complete and utter rights to her. All of her – including her body. Aislinn was as pure as the driven snow – Jenny knew that for a fact. She'd never encouraged any man to court her because of her father – she never knew if the young man would come over on one of her father's "bad days", and the older she grew, the fewer and few good days there were.

Jenny had wanted to talk to Aislinn about what she could expect – Jenny's husband Arthur had stuck by Aislinn's family right along with her, functioning as a jack of all trades, and they had been married for almost thirty years. But that kind of thing wasn't discussed in polite company, and there had been no openings that Jenny had seen to begin such a conversation. Jenny couldn't even be sure that the girl was a true version – there was no telling what kind of evil mischief that Uncle of hers got up to when she wasn't around to guard her chick. There was very little that Jenny would put past Bertram Montgomery. He was pure snake in human clothing.

And if Lord MacNaughton found out that Aislinn wasn't a virgin – if she wasn't – Jenny was sure that they'd all be tossed out in the cold on their ears, with no place to go. They certainly couldn't go back to Aislinn's uncle, not that they would even consider that. They wouldn't. So they would be left penniless in the street if Aislinn's uncle hadn't been able to keep his hands to himself.

She didn't know if that was the case, but then and there Jenny made up her mind to do something to assure that the Master had no doubt at all as to Aislinn's innocence in their marriage bed. There were always ways around things, and Jenny knew them all.

Someone knocked sharply on the carriage door. "Is everything all right?"

Even after such short acquaintance, both Jenny and Aislinn recognized the owner of that no nonsense voice. "Yes, everything's fine," Aislinn answered, proud that her tone revealed no tremor at all, despite the fact that butterflies were still somersaulting in her stomach.

"We're ready," he said, subtly letting her know that they were waiting for her.

"That's good," Aislinn answered, not aware that she sounded somewhat flippant to her anxious groom.

Kell wasn't at all happy with that response. He had a whole church full of people – relatives, friends, townspeople, who all had waited what they considered to be an inordinate amount of time for him to select a bride. They were interested in waiting much longer, to say nothing of the fact that they were anticipating the ales and lagers that would flow – as well as the feast – at the reception.

It was in Kell's mind to pull open the door and drag her out, but Grant and Burke each laid a hand on his shoulder when he made a preemptive reach for the handle. "Give her some time, brother," Burke advised, speaking low and slow, as he would to a wild animal he was trying to calm. "She's not one of your men to be ordered about and forced to your will. She's new to you – new to here – new to everything. Let her come to you in her own time."

Kell gaze down at his a man who was a mere year his junior with a sharp eye. "How did you get to be so wise?"

"I had a good teacher," he smiled back.

Kell let himself be corralled back to the alter, where he tried to wait for his bride as patiently as possible, fidgeting the entire time and causing small smiles to be exchanged between his brothers, who found a nervous Kell – which was a heretofore unknown commodity – vastly amusing.

Aislinn, meanwhile, had taken several deep breaths and made peace with herself and her future, at least to the extent that she'd asked Jenny to get the footman to help her get out of the carriage.

What surprised her was that the two men who appeared to assist her weren't the footman she'd seen when she entered the carriage. They reminded her of her husband to be, but each of them was just a bit different from him.

Before she could say a word, they each offered her a hand and assisted her to the ground. Jenny manned the train, unbuttoning it from the bustle but draping it over her arm until they got into the vestibule. "Please allow us to introduce ourselves," one of the gentlemen addressed her. "I'm your groom's brother, Burke MacNaughton." He was grinning from ear to ear, and it was positively infectious.

"And I'm the cute one of the brothers, my dear new sister, Grant MacNaughton, at your service," he winked rakishly at Aislinn as he bowed, also smiling goofily.

Aislinn was feeling better by the minute. "It's wonderful to meet you kind sirs. I'm Aislinn Montgomery – soon to be a MacNaughton, too." she executed a deep, formal curtsy to each of them, a smile of her own wreathing her face.

But Burke could see those cloudy eyes. She'd been crying. There were no streaks in her make up, thankfully. Kell hated made up women. Eager to reassure her, Burke said, "A most welcome and beautiful addition to the family, I must say." His brother nodded eagerly in agreement.

"We knew you didn't have a father or an uncle in attendance at the wedding, so we've deserted our brother in hopes that you'd do us the honor of escorting you down the aisle," Grant offered graciously, as they wandered slowly into the church.

Tears came unbidden and spilled down her cheeks. That two complete strangers would have thought of her – cared enough about a woman they didn't know to want to do that for her. She was touched beyond belief. "I would be honored to be on your arms."

Jenny fanned out the elaborate train and gave Aislinn the once over, not hesitating in the least to push either of the brothers aside to get to the young woman she considered her daughter. "Smile, lovey. This is your day of days. Today you are queen."

When Jenny pronounced her ready, the brothers produced a small bouquet of roses and orange blossom – the roses for love, and the orange blossoms a sign of purity and innocence. Aislinn didn't know what to do when faced with such kindness.

The inner doors of the church were closed, so no one had seen them yet. They were free to make their arrangements as they would. Another bouquet was produced out of nowhere for Jenny, who was then hustled to the door, protesting all the way. "But, sirs, I was just going to sit at the back of the church. I'm just a maid!"

Aislinn started to protest that she'd never been just a maid to her, but the youngest beat her to it. "Go on with you now. You'll find we don't stand as much on formality here as you might be used to. From what I gather from my brother, you've seen to this young woman since she was born and her mother died. You should stand up with her." He looked to Aislinn for agreement, and found her crying and nodding at

the same time. "Good. That's all settled. Go down to the altar and try to keep Kell from fidgeting himself to death. Tell him we'll be right there."

Burke turned Aislinn towards him and considered her gravely, lifting her veil to daub at her tears gently. It was then that he noticed the patch of MacNaughton plaid at her shoulder, smiling broadly. "Aye, lass, you'll do, I say. You'll more than do." He didn't know if anyone had told her to reflect fairly closely the flying plaid her husband was wearing, but it was a very endearing thing to do. Kell – and everyone else – was going to love it.

Finally, it was time. Each man tucked her small, cold hand into an elbow and Grant looked over at a man that Aislinn hadn't even seen until then – a Highlander, no doubt, who began blowing an almost mournful tune on his pipes. The double doors opened as if by magic, and they began their walk down the aisle as the piper followed them in.

The church was small and plain, but each pew, as well as the altar, had been tastefully decorated with heather and bows and ribbons of the favorite plaid as well as complimentary colors. It looked gorgeous, and Aislinn was again touched by the outpouring of affection she felt from people who didn't a whit about her. They walked very slowly, the men next to her nodding and smiling at the people they knew – who seemed to be pretty much everyone in the church – as they passed by. Aislinn was concentrating on not falling down, she was shaking so much. She tried to give herself a talking to – it wasn't like her to be nervous or afraid about anything. She'd always met life's challenges head on and dealt with them fearlessly.

But not this, apparently. Her knees were knocking so loudly she was afraid the guests could hear them. She was pretty sure the brothers could . . . It took all too short a time for them to make it down the aisle, no matter how slowly they were moving. Before she knew it, she was being handed over to her groom, who smiled at her as he tucked her hand into his arm. Kell was alarmed at how frigid her fingers were, and he could feel them tremble at the crook of his elbow. He patted those fingers in what he hoped was a reassuring manner, but it didn't still her shaking one bit.

Even her voice shook when she had to say "I do." She was ever so glad that she wasn't going to be required to say anything more – she wasn't at all sure that she'd be able to get it out. Her throat and mouth were as dry as any desert she'd ever read about.

Contrary to her, Kell's responses rang out, strong and true, so that everyone – even those at the back of the church – could hear him. The brothers responded with unbridled glee when the clergyman asked who was giving the bride away, but even that couldn't get her to crack a smile. When Burke produced the ring with a flourish that called forth titters from their audience, Kell took her hand and could barely get the thick gold ring onto her finger; it was shaking so badly. Kell felt compelled to whisper, "Relax. This really isn't the gallows."

Biting her lip, and worrying that she'd made a bad impression, Aislinn barely got out, "I know."

It wasn't quite the response Kell was hoping for. She looked more nervous now than before he'd spoken to her. Sighing, he patted her hand again as he tucked it back into his elbow.

When she looked back on it later, Aislinn would realize she couldn't remember much of the ceremony, at least until they were pronounced man and wife, and her husband turned her gently, reaching for the fringes of her veil and carefully pulling it up and over her face. Before he bent down that great distance between them and kissed her though, he fingered the scrap of tartan at her shoulder. "That was a very nice thing to do, Aislinn MacNaughton. Thank you for honoring us by wearing our plaid."

"You're welcome," she croaked up at him.

Those big hands tugged her just a bit closer, so that she was pressed up against him in a very improper manner. One paw drifted up and cradled the back of her head beneath her veil, tilting her head slightly as his face filled her vision. The surprising thought that it was a very pleasant face, indeed, flashed through her mind before he kissed the tip of her nose, then softly pressed his lips to hers. It was an exquisitely tender kiss, with his hand framing her face as if she was made of the most delicate crystal.

When he drew back, she smiled tentatively up at him, and Kell was lost. He couldn't believe she was his. Caught up in the moment, he hugged her tightly to him. His parents had been matched by their parents, yet they had grown to love each other endlessly. He was definitely hoping that history would repeat itself for them. They had a lot of "getting to know each other" to do, and he had a very important decision to make about what would happen between them tonight.

But he put that out of his mind for the moment, and turned himself and his new bride to their guests, starting down the aisle to the loud and raucous cheers of everyone around them, and the melodic sounds of the piper, who followed them down the aisle after their cobbled together wedding party. Both sets of church doors were thrown wide open and, although her husband was doing his best to shorten his stride to match hers, Aislinn felt as if she was gliding down the aisle under no power of her own. She could see ahead of them that the small, plainer carriage in which she'd been brought to the church had been replaced by a large, more ostentatious one with the family crest painted prominently on the door, liveried footmen and four perfectly matched white horses.

Her husband handed her up into the carriage and then followed her in himself, tapping on the ceiling to set the carriage in motion. Aislinn found herself sitting on the opposite seat from her husband, a position she found infinitely comforting, but apparently he had other ideas and joined her there, forcing her to scrunch herself either into the corner of the carriage, or closer to him. He seemed to watch her carefully as she struggled with her decision as to which was the lesser of the two evils.

"I don't bite. I promise," he whispered with a conspiratorial wink. Experimentally, Kell held his arms open to her, hoping she'd trust him enough to come into them.

Aislinn bit her lip, looking up at him, which she was only beginning to realize was something she was going to have to get quite used to doing. Very few people in her life had ever offered her a hug, and she realized with a start that this man was her husband, and he was simply doing his best to offer her comfort. With that thought in mind, she leaned herself gingerly into his arms, feeling their overwhelming strength as they closed around her. His body was hard as a rock, and she was certain that she would find no comfort here, but as his arms settled into place locked loosely at her waist, and she could feel the heat seeping from his body to hers, even through the layers of clothing. It was very nice to be held like this, she decided, daring to wiggle a little to adjust herself better.

"There – that's not so bad, is it, lass?" His voice rumbled to her ears through his chest, low and quiet.

"It's wonderful," she sighed, and Kell smiled to himself.

"What about the ceremony? Was it to your liking?"

She tried to sit up and away from him, but he wouldn't let her. She settled for drawing back a bit, enough to see his eyes. "Oh, dear me, it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen! And your brothers coming to walk me down the aisle, and Jenny being able to stand up with me . . ." The tears that had never really left her flooded back into her eyes. "Thank you. It was better than I could ever have expected."

One of his arms squeezed her tight for a moment. "I'm glad you liked it, Aislinn," Kell tipped her chin up, so that she had to look him in the eye. "This is the first time we've had to talk to each other alone, and I just wanted to let you know that I'll try to be as good a husband as I possibly can. I'm not the easiest man to get along with, but I rarely drink and I'm not a spendthrift – I'm too Scottish for that," he smiled. "I'm also not given to hitting women, unless they misbehave."

Aislinn was stunned. If he decided to take his fists to her, she wouldn't last past the first punch.

Kell saw the terrified look on her face and rushed to clarify his meaning. "No, I would never belt you one as some men seem to have a fondness. I'm speaking of the right of a husband to correct his wife – I believe the English term is 'rule of thumb' – that a man may use a rod no thicker than his thumb with which to chastise his wife for misbehavior." She was still looking at him goggle eyed. "I doubt I'd use any

implement on you – you're too small. Even a tawse would surely wrap around to areas that are much too tender for such abuse.

"But make no mistake, Madam, if you misbehave, you will find yourself taken over my knee in an instant and I will deliver the swiftest of justice to your bare behind with the flat of my hand until you repent and beg my pardon."

Aislinn was finding it hard to breathe, or swallow. This man was going to spank her? She had felt she'd long outgrown spankings. Why, she'd barely been spanked as it was – her father was too much in his cups to deliver much in the way of discipline. Arthur had tried, once, to spank her for nearly setting fire to the house by playing with a lit candle near the curtains of the front window in the parlor of her father's house, and he had even succeeded in getting her over his lap . . . but not for long. Aislinn was like a whirling dervish, and kicked and bucked and finally bit him on his calf before he gave up and let her go.

She wasn't under her Uncle's thumb long enough, and he didn't pay enough attention to her anyway, for him to have taken any sort of an interest in disciplining her. She had grown up doing very much as she pleased, and she had never considered that her husband might expect to exercise his right to control her behavior as he saw fit. Come to think of it, no one had successfully accomplished a spanking that they intended for Aislinn. It just wasn't done.

Unable to even begin to process his statements, Aislinn shut her mouth slowly after only just realizing that it had been hanging open like a barn door.

Kell watched her carefully as she absorbed what he'd said. Apparently it wasn't something she'd considered before, but it wasn't at all unusual in this neck of the woods. He didn't know how things worked in the land of the English, but around here a man kept close track of his woman, and if she didn't behave herself, he was expected to take matters into his own hands and deal with it. Most Scottish cottages had a tawse hanging from a hook in the living area, for use by the man of the house on his wife as well as their children.

Now Kell knew full well that some men abused their wives and used their rights as an excuse to do so. But he was not now nor would he ever be that type of man. His wife didn't know that, however. She had only his word to go on, but she would soon learn that his word was worth more to him than all of the titles or bank accounts in Scotland. He was a man of his word, and everyone around these parts knew the truth of it. Eventually, she would know, too.

They had arrived at the castle, but Kell made no move to get out of the carriage, or even let her go. He wanted to bring something up before they went in that had bothered him. "Aislinn, I always want you to tell me the truth, do you understand? Lying is something I won't tolerate from anyone, much less my wife. It's one of the things that'll get you a spanking that'll leave you standing for a month at least."

Aislinn nodded, becoming more and more concerned about all his talk about hitting her, open fisted or not.

"Well, I want you to tell me why you delayed in coming into the church? I'm not mad about it, or anything, but I just want to know what made you wait so long to come in? Were you ill?"

His new wife shook her head "no", looking down at the hands in her lap as she fidgeted with her wedding ring, as if it chafed her.

Kell sighed. He hated guessing games. "Were you nervous?" He put his hands over hers, surrounding them completely and enfolding them in his warmth. "Thinking about running away?" Kell felt her start at his words, and knew he had hit the answer on the head. "I know that what I'm saying is just so much talk right now – you have to get to know me. But I'm not an ogre, and I'm not insensitive to your situation." He couldn't believe that he was even considering saying what he was going to say, but it came out anyway. He couldn't stand that scared little girl look in her eye another minute. "We'll take our time and get to know each other. Do you understand what I mean?"

Aislinn had no clue, but what he was saying sounded very good to her – not being rushed and taking their time. "I – I would appreciate the opportunity to spend some time with you."

He could see that she was as innocent as he'd feared, and sighed, patting her hand. "Don't worry, lass. I don't want you to think that I'm going to push you into something you don't want. But – " he leaned down and looked deeply into her eyes. "if you had run away, you would have been learning your first lesson over my knee this very moment. You are never to run from me. Am I making myself completely clear?"

She nodded, more out of habit than anything else. It just seemed like the right thing to do. His eyes were so dark and mysterious; she was losing herself in their unfathomable depths. She'd never felt so overwhelmed by anyone, and yet, at the same time, so safe and secure. He made her feel that he would never let anyone hurt her. That the only person she had to be on her guard around was him, because if she truly let herself go around him, she'd fall in love with him, and be the most vulnerable she'd ever been in her life.

"Good. Now, what do you say we go in and join our guests at our reception, Madame MacNaughton?" He surprised her by rising with her in his arms, shouldering open the door and stepping out of it with her still in his arms. A lot of their guests were milling about outside, waiting for them to decide to get out of their carriage. It seemed that the two of them were adopting a habit of spending inordinate and discourteous amounts of time locked away in conveyances while everyone waited for them to appear.

Chapter 4

But when they all got a gander of the new Lady MacNaughton in the arms of her dashing husband, a great cheer rose up from the crowd. Kell kept her in his arms until he settled her into her throne like seat at the head table. The guests poured in around them, offering the bride their best wishes and the groom their congratulations on a fine marriage. Aislinn was hugged by everyone she saw, even the brothers, who each took the opportunity to hug her (again?) as they made their way to their own seats at the head table.

Kell pulled out his chair and sat down as the signal that everyone else should, and the meal began. When Aislinn mentioned to Jenny – who was amazed to find herself sitting next to her little girl – how gorgeous she thought the hall was with the ribbons and sprigs of heather artfully displayed everywhere, Kell leaned over and whispered into his wife's ear that their servants had decorated both the church and the hall for them as a present.

"Oh, how can we thank them?"

He was enchanted by her, more so than he wanted to be. If she was truly as innocent and wonderful as she appeared to be, he was going to be a lost cause. She was going to be able to wrap him around her finger any time she wanted to. He would have to be on guard against that – it wasn't what a wife needed, as far as he was concerned. She needed a firm – but loving – hand. Not a besotted husband who didn't have the will to correct her when need be.

Chuckling slightly, he moved a bit closer. "If you like, I can arrange for them to introduce themselves to you tomorrow morning." Kell took her hand and lifted the back to his lips. "We won't have time right now for a real honeymoon, Aislinn. I'm sorry, but I just can't get away right now."

She had never expected to have any kind of a honeymoon, so she wasn't going to miss it, and although she thought it might be a mistake to do so, she said exactly that to him.

His chuckle turned into outright laughter. "You're nothing if not forthright in your speech, are you, lassie?"

Aislinn shrugged and continued to look up at him, her face open and guileless.

"Well, I hadn't intended to put you to work immediately, so it's up to you. You can wait a while if you like before you dive into running the house. We'll take a real honeymoon in the spring – maybe go to London or Paris?"

"I would love to go anywhere. Besides going to my Uncle's, I've never been out of the town I grew up in, but I've always read about wonderful places."

"You read for recreation?" Kell asked as he casually took a sip of the champagne from one of his – their – fine crystal flutes.

"Oh, yes, since I was about three."

He was impressed. Most upper class women read and did maths, but only enough to run a household and not get cheated in the market place. "Did you go to school?"

"No, not a formal school, but Jenny was a teacher early on, before my Father hired her to help my Mother. She taught me all sorts of things – reading, writing, maths – which I didn't excel in – some

French and Italian, art, literature . . . it was the literature that started me reading. She read me to sleep with Shakespeare when I was little, and I graduated from there on my own. I've even written myself a little, but I never like what I write."

"Then you'll be glad to know that I – " he grinned almost stupidly at her as he corrected himself, "we have a fairly good sized library. It's in my office, on the second floor, but you're welcome to come in any time and read while I work or take a book back to our room, whatever you like."

"Thank you, Sir – your Lord – "

He stopped her from stumbling over her words by pressing his finger over her lips. "Try Kell. You're my wife not my scullery maid."

Aislinn smiled, tentatively, for the first time that day – at least that Kell had the pleasure to see. It transformed her already beautiful face into something that Rembrandt or Boticelli should have painted, but even then he decided neither of them could have done her justices. She was radiant. Now if he could get her to do that more often. "Kell," she said, as if trying the name on her tongue, like a vintage glass of wine. "What, exactly, is a scullery maid, anyway? I don't know of any part of a house – or a castle like this – that's called a scull, do you?"

He knew he was grinning like a complete idiot, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. He was enchanted by her, and it felt good to let himself go with someone, anyone, and since she was his wife it just seemed appropriate. He was the eldest, and with his brothers he'd always had to be just that – the one that made sure that the two of them didn't kill themselves, putting a stop to their stupid stunts as a judicious older brother should. He was the Lord of his manor, and had to be staunch and confident and somewhat stern with his employees. Especially since he'd assume the title, Kell hadn't had much chance to just be himself, to let his guard down. His most carefree time had been when he was in London as a youth, and that was a long time ago.

If she was as fresh and innocent as she appeared to be, and as intelligent and inquisitive, he was going to like this being married thing. "Hmmmm. Not that I know of, although I think I remember reading somewhere that there used to be a room of the kitchen that was called something like an 'esculier' several hundred years ago, or something like that. It's probably been corrupted since then down to scullery maid."

Speaking of scullery maids, one of them had been pressed into serving in the Hall, and handed plates to both the bride and the groom. Aislinn accepted hers and thanked the girl, which made her color and walk away quite flustered. She wasn't hungry in the least, probably partly since her husband kept looking at her like he was going to devour her any minute. "Did I do something wrong already?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

He frowned, and she decided that that was a look she would endeavor to receive from him as little as possible. He looked positively scary when he scowled like that. "No, why?"

"Because you're looking at me as if you're slightly amused at something I've done."

Kell, who was tucking into his own dinner with gusto, noticed that she was playing with hers, pushing the food around the plate but not eating anything. He took a bit of roasted chicken breast on the end of his fork and turned it towards her, feeding her from his own plate. Their audience thought this was incredibly precious, and "oohed" and "awed" at them until she took the chicken just to shut them up. Aislinn had never gotten applause just by taking a bite of dinner, and she wasn't sure she liked the idea at all.

"No, you haven't done anything wrong, but I do like the way you are with the servants. Up here, they tend to be long standing members of the family – rather than in the South just treating them as chattel."

Aislinn nodded, chewing thoughtfully. "Jenny is the person I'm closest to in the world – she's like my mother."

"Well, not everyone would bother to use courtesy with their servants."

"I don't really think of myself as someone with servants – Jenny and her husband Arthur are more like friends. I've never had maids or butlers or anything like that."

"Now you do. It's a big place, but if you're organized, running it is relatively easy."

"I'll do my best, my Lo – Kell."

The reception was loud and raucous, and that was just the meal. Afterwards, the tables were moved so that there was room for dancing and a lot of country dances – ceilidhs – that were extremely fervent and joyous, with everyone smiling and laughing. Aislinn hadn't got to any dances so she didn't know any of the steps, but her husband dragged her out onto the floor anyway, patiently showing her the steps, then catching her up in it and not saying a word when she stomped on his leather clad feet several times while he was whirling her around the floor.

Kell was amazed to find that she didn't know how to dance, but delighted in teaching her. She was a quick learner, and after the frenzy of the reels, a small group of country musicians who lent their services to their Lord as a gift on his wedding day settled things down by playing a waltz. The teaching process began again for Aislinn, but since the waltz was much less complicated than a lot of the ceilidhs, she was letting him guide her around the room in seconds, much to everyone's satisfaction. Everyone else moved to the sidelines and left the bride and groom to dance alone.

They were wonderfully matched – she came just to his shoulder, and her bright coloring complimented his darkness perfectly. Despite the Highlanders' natural inclination to hate anything English, this little bit of a woman was warming their hearts. And the fact that she'd chosen to wear a bit of their plaid as a part of her wedding ensemble had cemented their favor towards her more surely than anything else they could do beyond producing a healthy air as expediently as possible.

Full of food and more wine than she'd ever consumed in her young life, as well as unfamiliar feelings about her incredibly gorgeous and masculine new husband she wasn't at all sure she wanted to explore. They left her with a slow ache in the pit of her stomach . . . but not quite her stomach. Lower, and in an area of her body she'd always been taught to staunchly ignore.

Kell kept a lazy eye on his wife as he allowed various women to entice him into a dance or two. Despite the fact that he was a giant of a man, he was an excellent dancer – very light on his big feet. She didn't seem particularly concerned that he was dancing with other women, and he liked that. Of course, she didn't know that the current occupant of his arms was a woman he almost married.

"Kell, darling, you're still the best dancer in Scotland!" Charlotte Douglas rhapsodized as she fluttered her fan at him.

Not for the first time, he wondered exactly what he'd seen in her – she was brassy and bold and wearing more makeup than an Edinburgh trollop. Charlotte certainly wouldn't have put up with him dancing with other women at their wedding, but then that was probably because she was just as likely to proposition a married as a single man, and she considered that every other woman had her complete lack of scruples.

He shuddered as he thought just how close he'd come to ending up with her. She was his first real love – crush really – and he thought the sun rose and set in those emerald green eyes. Thankfully, his brothers had sat him down before he'd asked her father for her hand, and set him straight about the fact that while she'd been dangling herself in front of him as the ultimate virginal prize, she'd been busily copulating her way through the Highland countryside – quite literally. Some picnickers had stumbled on one of her trysts near a stream on a picturesque hillside. There was no mistaking what had been going on.

Charlotte's blinding, full blown smile was meant to entice him, but he was looking past it and her to his wife, who, although it was only about four in the afternoon, was practically falling asleep in her chair. Not thinking what it would look like to anyone, Kell abruptly ended his dance with Charlotte even though the song was nowhere near over, and practically dragged her to her brother, who was her only living relative and entirely overwhelmed in every way by his sly sister.

With a barely courteous bow, Kell headed single mindedly to his bride, picking her up and onto his lap as he reclaimed his own chair. "Tired, little one?" he whispered, trying to disturb her as little as possible.

She could only nod against his chest. One of her small hands came up to clutch at his shirt front, and Kell felt such a surge of conflicting emotions that he wanted to scream with it. On one hand, she conjured deep within him a very feral, basic urge to protect. That small hand looked so meek and defenseless against just about anything or anyone in the world. He wanted to wrap her up in cotton and carry her around, making sure nothing and no one ever had the chance to hurt her again – not her loutish Uncle or even the memories of her drunkard father. Her father's brother was only too happy to unload all sorts of family secrets to the man who was going to take the burden of his niece off his hands.

The only one he knew he couldn't protect her against was himself, and his even baser urges. He adjusted himself – and her – in his seat, thankful for the forgiveness of a kilt, and the innocence of his bride, who might still be wondering just what it was that he was wearing that was poking insistently into her hip.

Kell pressed his lips to that pale forehead with its damp tendrils of hair and stood up all at once. Aislinn barely stirred in his arms until everyone noticed that the guests of honor were leaving and they rushed to throw nuts and rice at them as they ascended the stairs. And even then she only awakened enough to peep sleepily over his shoulder. Her still somewhat fuzzy gaze fell of all people on Charlotte, who hung to the back of the crowd, eying the couple with malice in her eyes.

Aislinn, who wasn't trying very hard to wake up, did something in all innocence that could not have been more calculated to passively slap Charlotte across the face: she wrapped her arms around her husband's neck and squeezed, burying her face against his neck.

Charlotte had a hard time not being physically sick as the other guests insisted in indulging in wave after wave of congratulations and best wishes as the couple ascended the stairs. She was incensed at having lost Kell MacNaughton to another woman – and a Sassenach at that. She had never really given up hope that he would come to his senses and ask her to marry him. Charlotte knew that it was his brothers that had poisoned his mind against her with their foul lies and completely unfounded gossip about her.

Well, mostly unfounded gossip, anyway. She did enjoy having a good time, and Kell was such a stick in the mud about most things. But he was a peer of the realm, and she had never been able to stomach the idea of anyone else being Lady MacNaughton.

Somehow, some way, she would find a way to ingratiate herself with Kell, and get rid of that little interloper. She didn't know how yet, but Charlotte knew from experience that a solution would present itself in good time, and she had infinite patience.

Upstairs, Kell took her to the same room she'd spent last night in. He saw her puzzled look when he lay her carefully down on the bed. "This is my – our room," he explained as he began to undo the buttons down her back, playing lady's maid in a way that he'd never enjoyed so much before. Aislinn tried to pull away, but he gave her a gently sharp command to stand still, saying, "You don't want to sleep in this gorgeous dress, do you, lassie?" He undressed her like a child, putting the dress on a hanger inside the wardrobe then removing the hoops so that she was standing before him in just her underwear and her hands – which were covering the already covered strategic areas, which put a small, indulgent smile on his face.

Lifting her again at his whim, Kell pulled back the covers and tucked her expertly under them. "I want you to stay in bed and sleep until I come to you a little later. Don't get up," he warned, hoping his

words were getting through to her. She looked like she was already asleep, “or you won’t like the consequences, little one.”

Aislinn couldn’t respond. She was so tired from all the excitement, and the trip that she still hadn’t recovered from, and the wedding and the reception . . . and the fact that he kept feeding her morsels of his meal even though she didn’t touch her own. Her full stomach as well as all the other things that had been going on around her within the past couple of days conspired to make her want to sleep through the first day of her marriage, it seemed.

Kell was wonderfully understanding, and put her to bed like a child. After he’d pulled the covers up and over her, there was a soft tap at the door and Kell went to see who it was. Aislinn was nearly asleep by that point and couldn’t have gotten out of bed to greet the Queen herself.

“Yes, Jenny?” Kell only opened the door a small way, and stood in front of the opening as a subtle clue to the other woman that he wasn’t going to let her in.

“I came to see if I can help with my – Ais – Lady MacNaughton, m’Lord.” She looked a little flustered, as if she might seriously consider trying to bluster her way past him.

He tried to be as gentle as possible. This woman was used to doing everything for his wife, and had done an excellent job taking care of her. But now was not the time. “No, thank you, Jenny. I think I have things well in hand. You may go down and join the rest of the festivities, and, for your exceptional service to my Lady, you may have the rest of the week to do with as you please. I’ll see to Lady MacNaughton myself.”

Jenny’s eyebrow rose. She’d never been given extra time off in her life. The holidays were about the only time she ever got off, and even then she had been responsible for taking care of the basic things around the house before she was allowed to leave. She didn’t want time off, though, and didn’t intend to take it. But she did want to let Aislinn know that there was a small bladder of chicken blood at the top of the headboard. She hoped the MacNaughton would leave her alone long enough that she could sneak back up here and explain to Aislinn why – and how – she should use it.

Jenny thanked the giant profusely for his generosity, and made her way back to the festivities, mumbling to herself all the way.

Kell returned to Aislinn’s side and found she was fast asleep. Chuckling softly to himself, he practically backed out of the room, trying to make sure that he didn’t do anything that woke her up. “Hey, what are you doing out of that room?” Grant practically yelled in amazement. “We had bets going that you wouldn’t come up for air until the turn of the year – you’re costing me money, man!”

His older brother frowned at him. “You were betting on my wedding night?” Kell didn’t really know why he was surprised at that fact.

“Of course! I took January fifteenth, myself, knowing how slow you are in all things . . .”

Kell slapped his younger brother on the back in a way that, to someone who wasn’t paying much attention, would have looked like a brotherly gesture of affection. But he put enough of himself into it that he made sure that Grant felt it. Kind of like being patted by a brick.

They made their way back to the reception, where the drinking and dancing had reached epic proportions. Since he was the richest man in the region, and the head of the clan, he was providing all the food and drink, as well as the hall for the celebration. If they had merely been a poor Scottish couple just beginning their lives together, the guests would have brought their own food and drink – with extras for others – as well as bringing substantial gifts to help the couple start out their lives well equipped with the necessities.

But he was master of all he surveyed. Perhaps not quite as definitively as his father, or his father before him, but he was still the power in the region. The feuds and the raids that were common place in years gone by were much fewer and farther between – less likely to be well organized, well run raids conducted by feuding clans than by out and out robbers whose only interest was the money the sheep or cattle they stole would bring in – not in sparking or revenging a clan feud.

He spent the next several hours dancing occasionally and eating, keeping a careful rein on his alcohol consumption. Kell didn't intend to clumsily deflower his virgin bride. She was much too delicate for that. He wouldn't hurt her for the world, and he knew that a bad experience this evening could lead to a lifetime of dissatisfaction for the both of them, when there was no need. Kell intended to make this one of the most wonderful experiences of their lives, and to do that he couldn't be in his cups.

Charlotte had been eying him eagerly from across the room – she was nearly salivating when they danced together. He had seen the look of triumph in her eyes when he arrived downstairs to be surrounded by curious well wishers. Apparently he unintentionally managed to impress the women in the room when he announced that he knew Aislinn had had a hard few days, with travel and the wedding, and he wanted to give her time to rest.

The one woman who was not impressed was Charlotte, and he could see that from across the room – she was rolling her eyes and shaking her head, deliberately catching his eye while she did so. When they danced again after he'd gotten a bite to eat – not at Kell's behest - he wasn't particularly surprised that she spent her time alternately sympathizing with the fact that his little wife had gone to sleep on him when she should have been seeing to his pleasure, and putting her hands in completely inappropriate places.

Kell stopped dancing in the middle of the floor and held Charlotte's jaw in his fingers hard enough that she would likely have faint bruises that no one would see under all that powder. "Charlotte," he hisses, his face so close their noses could bump, "you never listened to me before when we were close, but you'd better damn well heed my words now: that woman upstairs is my wife, and you will show her respect in this house or I will toss you out on your more than ample buttocks and you will not be welcome at MacNaughton Castle again. Ever. Do you understand me?" Kell didn't wait for her response. For the second time that day, he left her in the middle of a dance – only this time he didn't bother with the courtesy of taking her back to her brother.

Charlotte was nodding when he abandoned her, out of habit more so than any comprehension of his words – much less the feelings behind them. Someone of his caliber certainly couldn't have any feeling for some nobody woman from England – just because she had an adequate dowry. She could feel pitying eyes on her as she found her way back to the wall where other wallflowers tittered at her from behind their hands. But she was made of sterner stuff. Charlotte stiffened her back against the ridicule of others.

She would have him back – eventually. She just needed to bide her time.

Aislinn, meanwhile, was rudely awaked by Jenny, who looked like there was some sort of an emergency. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, trying to wipe the sleep from them and not having much success. "What? What is it? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, my dear, it is," Jenny soothed the hair back from her eyes and sat down on the edge of the bed. She'd already put the small parcel on the headboard where Aislinn could easily reach it. "I just wanted to let you know about something I have for you – because – because I think it might help you on your wedding night."

Chapter 5

Aislinn was instantly fully awake. She didn't know what went on during a wedding night, but she was certainly curious about it. Something happened between a husband and his wife – that apparently couldn't happen between unmarried people – that no one would talk to her about. She knew they would sleep together – and that was a strange enough concept. Besides Jenny occasionally, Aislinn had never shared her bed with anyone. Although with the size of this bed, they weren't very likely to bump into each other, she thought.

But there was something else that went on . . . something mysterious and interesting, and Aislinn desperately wanted to know what it was, and it seemed that Jenny might be on the verge of telling her something at least.

"Yes?" she responded eagerly.

Jenny looked distinctly uncomfortable at her unabashed interest. "Well, I have something for you..."

"You said that already."

Her maid issued a pained sigh. "It – well, you need to – uh, use it – tonight – when he –"

"My husband?"

Anxious nodding. "Yes, Lord MacNaughton. When he – you –" She couldn't finish her thought. It just wouldn't come out. Finally, she got up and obsessively straightened her clothes. She knew she was making a mess of things, but she just couldn't get anything out. She couldn't.

Instead of telling Aislinn what she'd done and why, and the mechanics of using the thing, Jenny became so flustered that all she could think about was getting out of this room. She kissed her young mistress on the top of the head, saying, "Remember, my girl, that I love you like you were my own daughter," and scurried to the door as if the hounds of hell were after her.

Aislinn was left to puzzle through what had just happened, feeling that she'd missed something, and no more enlightened about what would happen this evening than she had been before Jenny made her mysterious visit. She wondered just what it was that Jenny was so flustered about – Aislinn had never seen her so distraught.

Fully awake now, she threw back the covers and pulled a worn robe over her slim shoulders, wrapping it around her waist and heading for the door, intent on visiting Adelle, who was as curious as she was about what happened between married people. But when she turned down the next hall, heading towards the servant's stairs, history repeated itself and she ran headlong into the man who was now her husband.

It was in that moment, as she steadied herself and he reached out to keep her from falling over, that she vaguely remembered him saying something about staying in bed until he came for her . . . but she had been so sleepy when he said it, and then Jenny had awakened her out of a sound sleep with that strange visit – she hadn't thought anything about it until just now.

But the way he was looking down at her, with a somewhat indulgent frown, made a fissure of fear run down her spine to settle on the part of her body that he had threatened to wreak vengeance upon if she didn't behave. Her bottom was suddenly flushed and hot, and he hadn't even touched it!

Looking down his nose at her, he asked in a gruff tone, "Didn't I tell you to stay put until I came to you, Mrs. MacNaughton?"

Aislinn bit her lip, but looked up at him and batted her eyelashes. "I was?" she asked in her most innocent voice.

Kell threw back his head and laughed heartily at her attempt to flirt with him. "Are you trying to wile your way out of a spanking, lassie?" he asked on a chuckle.

"I'm a married woman. I'm too mature to be spanked."

That wasn't going to work either, and she'd known it the moment the words were out of her mouth. They should have, because it was true. Grown, married women should not be punished like children, as far as she was concerned, but apparently her husband felt differently.

She felt herself being guided back towards her – their – bedroom. "Well, I warned you, Aislinn. I'm sorry to have to do this so early in our relationship, but I'm not about to let it go, either. That would set a very bad precedent, and I'm not about to have you thinking that I don't follow through when I set a rule."

Kell ushered her through the door, pushing gently on her back to propel her forward. He could feel the heat of her through her thin gown, and knew he would have to steel himself against his desires in order to spank her. It was a thought in the back of his mind to let this go, but he knew that would be a bad start to their relationship. He wasn't going to be an ogre by any means, but he would not have a disobedient wife. Things weren't as wild as they used to be in the Highlands – civilization was creeping even into the rebellious and sometimes violent clans – but he still needed to know that if he told her to do something, she would do it. It was not improbable that her life could be forfeit if she got it into her head that she could just ignore any order he gave her.

Still he didn't want to make her frightened of him, either – at any time – but especially just before they were to come together for the first time as man and wife. She had to be somewhat apprehensive about that – if she had any idea about what was going to happen. It was hard to determine just what a woman knew about nowadays, but he felt it was safest to assume that she didn't know a thing and go from there.

He brought her over to the end of the bed and sat down, keeping her in place in front of him by holding onto her hands. They were growing colder by the minute, and he looked up at her to see that she was chewing on her lip. "Let's get you out of this," he said, reaching up to slip the robe off her shoulders. Aislinn tried to step back, but Kell caught her and tugged her back. "It's all right. I'm your husband, remember? I'm going to see you wearing a lot less than this."

Her eyes widened. What could he mean by that? She didn't intend to let him see her in the all together under any circumstances! There were some times that a lady just had to draw the line, and as she saw it, that was one of them.

But it wasn't more than a second before she found herself devoid of her bloomers and draped over his hard as a rock legs, making an intimate inventory of the Aubusson carpet that was all too close to her nose. "Let me up this instant!" she shrieked, struggling with all her might.

Kell was unexpectedly impressed by her strength. She was a tiny little thing, but she could wiggle and twist so violently that he almost lost her several times – almost. He always managed to bring her back into place, but ended up having to trap both of her slender legs between his to keep them from rearing up and knocking him in the head, as well as catching her far arm that was whacking and digging away at his calf and locking it down at the small of her back with the fingers of his left hand around her wrist.

"Damn you! Let me go!"

"Language, Mrs. MacNaughton," he tsked his tongue against his teeth. It was astonishing to hear vulgarities coming from such a tiny thing. But he wasn't about to tolerate that, either. "I won't have you swearing. You've got a spanking coming for getting up when I told you expressly not to. And that's exactly what you're going to get. Plus an extra couple of extra hard whacks at the end so that you'll think twice before using bad language again."

He took just a few seconds and laid his palm over the crest of those beautiful mounds. She was as gorgeous of bottom as she was of face. His palm covered generous flesh that was as fine and soft as any velvet he'd ever touched. She was perfect – and she was his. To discipline, but even more importantly, to

love. And, if he let himself think about it, he knew he was already most of the way in love with his intriguing, passionate little wife.

Thankfully, he didn't like to explore such things. They were unimportant. It wasn't necessary that he love his wife. Just that he beget an heir with her, which was a task Kell knew he was going to enjoy enormously.

But there was a task at hand right now, and he wanted to get it over with so that they could get on with the begetting. He wasn't going to be too hard on her this first time – just enough to let her know she didn't want this to happen again, and adjust her behavior accordingly.

He brought his hand down on her bottom once, too softly. The second time was too hard. He didn't hit his stride until the third swat, which was just right – crisp and hard, leaving a pinkish blush on her nates that contrasted beautifully with the rest of her creamy skin, and elicited a hoarse howl from the recipient that meant he knew meant he was getting through to her. His smacks took on a terrible rhythm as he proceeded to make that pale landscape a sharp shade of red, all the way down her thighs and over every cringing inch of her writhing bottom.

Aislinn had wiggled and struggled so hard before he started spanking her that she was badly equipped to deal with the actual event. And he'd locked her down so tightly that she could barely move except for a few protest wiggles that didn't help her avoid even one slap. To her deep embarrassment, she began to wail not long after he'd started, although whenever the thought popped into her head to beg him to stop she forced her jaws together stubbornly, despite how completely the words crowded her throat.

Throughout the entire episode, Aislinn fervently wished she could reach to bite his thigh, but she was too far over it, and the bed defended his legs from her chomping teeth. Eventually, hot, wet tears overwhelmed her as he set fire to her rear. It seemed like he was never going to stop, and that thought made her burst out with a wail that both surprised and embarrassed her. She'd never been driven out of control by anyone or anything. She was always the one who took care of people – most importantly Adelle. She was the strong one, the one in control, and she liked it that way.

Yet here she was, over her husband's lap getting a spanking like she was a bratty child – and there was nothing she could do about it except endure it, reduced to sobbing and yowling, knowing that no one would help her or save her from this.

Or from him.

Kell drove home more of a lesson with this spanking than he had intended. Aislinn had never met the immovable object. She'd always been able to maneuver her way around people and situations. Her father was easy – he was rarely sober and sleeping it off much of the time. She'd had free rein to do as she pleased. Her Uncle was easy, because he was so interested in getting rid of her.

But this man, who was making mincemeat of her nether parts, wasn't going to let her do as she pleased. He would expect that she would do as he told her, and this was the consequence for not doing so. And she wasn't sure how much of this she could tolerate. She might well have found her match – found the one person in this world who could truly curb her behavior. The thought was extremely disturbing, only because she knew she wasn't willing to give up that much control over her life . . . and her well being.

Kell stopped when he heard her crying in earnest, not wanting to beat her, but knowing that the mournful sobs were the indication of true repentance. He laid both of his palms over her heated flesh, seeing the imprint of his individual fingers on that soft, fair flesh. For a moment, he indulged in a flash of regret that he had a hard time shaking. It was their wedding night. He didn't want to hurt her – he wanted to pleasure her beyond bearing. He wanted her to break apart uncontrollably in his arms, and welcome him into her body despite the small pain she would know by then that it would cause her. He wanted to be a part of her, and make her a part of him – to begin to forge a bond that, if they were lucky, might even result in the same kind of feeling for each other that his parents had – however unusual that was between arranged couples.

Keeping her close to him, whether she wanted to be or not, and at this point he had no doubt that she would have preferred that his hand fall off and he melt into a puddle at his feet, Kell brought the both of them to the head of the bed. He was careful to assure that her well seared bottom didn't come in contact with anything – even the softness of the duvet cover. She wasn't really struggling to get away – which surprised him considering all the kicking and wiggling she did while he was spanking her – but wasn't acknowledging what he was doing, either. She was just limp in his arms, as if reacting was too much of an effort.

She was so small in his arms – Kell didn't think he'd ever get over the size of her. Even after such a punishment, the sight of her frail looking, pale limbs and soft body against his tanned strength amazed him. He'd never been with a female who more closely resembled a wood sprite than a woman. He would have to be extra careful – keep it foremost in his mind that he could easily hurt her without meaning to just by means of his size . . . in more places than one.

He drew a deep breath. Despite his rampantly hard interest, he was going to take it slow. He just had to keep repeating that to himself, along with snippets of the Shakespeare he'd been forced to memorize and various stanzas from the Magna Carta, in hopes of keeping his desire somewhat in check. Kell brought his hand to her cheek and she flinched, a look of fear in his eyes that he hoped to never see again. "No, oh, no, sweetie. Don't cringe from me. Beyond the occasional spanking your behavior might earn you, I will never, ever hit you." He caught her chin and forced her to look into his eyes – to see the truth of his words. "Never, ever," he repeated firmly, hoping his convictions rang true with her, although he recognized that it must be a hard concept to accept when one's bottom was still burning like hellfire.

Aislinn blinked slowly, mortified when that produced even more tears. Her rear hurt like nothing she'd ever felt before, and it made her want to cling to him, which was ridiculous since he was the source of her pain. His voice was hypnotic, slow and rhythmic and deep, and full of conviction.

Somehow, against her better judgment, she began to believe him. The same huge, callused paw that had stung her bottom mercilessly now cupped her cheek with an infinite gentleness. His face inched slowly towards hers, until his lips were just sitting atop hers, not demanding, not slanting and trying to gain access, just lying unthreateningly against hers, occasionally depositing a butterfly kiss at the corner of her mouth.

That hand began to move over her face, as if he was trying to memorize her features with his fingertips, and it was the tenderest touch she'd ever felt from a man. As if she worried it might break the spell, Aislinn kept her eyes shut, feeling those exploring calluses as well as the heat from his nearness working slowly to dispel the heat in her backside.

Those lightly nibbling lips planted tiny, soft kisses everywhere – her eyelids and lashes, the spot where ear meets neck, the tip of her chin and the side of her nose. Kell could feel her relaxing, and she was no longer shrinking away from him. He hated that. He wasn't a brute – he was just a man who expected to be in control of his marriage – and his wife. There were far too many much more pleasant things to do with his wife, and he preferred to concentrate on those.

Carefully, experimentally, he pressed his entire body against her, tilting her backwards and listening for any sounds of distress he may have caused. Aislinn mewled a little when her still naked bottom touched the thick, fluffy duvet for the first time, but by then his mouth had found hers, settling over it just the slightest bit more firmly, making it more of a kiss and less of an accidental meeting.

Aislinn arched a bit to hold her curves above the bed, bumping her bare lower half against the rough, woolen pole he apparently kept in his bed. She heard Kell groan slightly, then more loudly as she withdrew and settled herself gingerly onto the bed. Surprised and concerned, Aislinn asked in a tentative voice she didn't recognize, "Did I do something wrong?"

"No," the word came out fiercely, like a guttural shot from his lips. He thought he was going to disgrace himself and explode all over the inside of his kilt. Kell spent a long moment trying to get a hold of himself, and the outcome was not at all certain until he opened his eyes and looked down at her. She

looked worried, as if she thought she had hurt him. Her innocence charmed him and dampened his ardor like nothing else could have. Clearing his throat, he threaded his thick fingers through her hair. "You didn't do anything wrong, lass. Do you believe me?"

Aislinn nodded, still curious. "Do you usually wear a knife to bed?"

Kell raised his eyebrow at her, until he realized what she thought was a knife and grinned broadly. "That's no knife, lass." She opened her mouth to ask another question, but he put his finger over her lips. "You'll find out about it later, I promise."

He had never taken such time with a woman in his life. He explored every inch of her, even those inches that made her blush so furiously he thought she was going to explode. When he divested her of the rest of her clothes, she made the usual maidenly attempt to cover herself, but Kell kissed away the hands that shielded her breasts from him. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he whispered, and it was the bone deep truth. For someone so tiny, she was perfectly endowed – just the slightest touch over generously in the best areas. Her breasts were firm and wonderfully round, their dusky tips hardened as he watched, as if they were seeking his attention, and he was only too happy to provide it.

When he drew a virgin nipple into his mouth, Aislinn thought she would die from the pure pleasure of it. He tugged insistently, licking around and over the tip within his mouth, letting her first gasp of pleasure flood over him like molten lava for the barest of seconds.

Aislinn didn't know what to do with the feelings he was conjuring effortlessly within her body – she was again out of control, being touched and fondled by him in a shamefully sinful way that, granted, was much more pleasant than being spanked . . . but the pleasure! It was as if every inch of her skin was alive and aware for the first time in her life – and certain inches of her were much more alive than she was sure they were ever intended to be! The area between her legs – the one that no nice woman, no decent woman ever even admit to herself that she owned – was throbbing and aching in a distractingly pleasant way that made her want more – made her want him to touch her down there, or let her rub against him, and various other truly scandalous things that almost made her question her sanity.

Why, she couldn't even rouse herself to stop him from suckling at her as eagerly as a newborn, flicking the tip of that broad flat tongue incessantly over her nipple until she arched unknowingly, inviting him to take more of her into his mouth – practically demanding it.

Kell was counting himself a lucky man more times over than he could count – she was responding to him. She might not really know it, and could even be fighting against it within herself, but her body was encouraging him with her tiny whimpers and the way she pressed herself to him, offering herself to him like a vaginal sacrifice.

Emboldened by her response, Kell let his hand slide down her tummy, stopping just above that thatch covered mound to reach up and capture her lips with his as he slid one finger between her moist lips.

Aislinn had had no idea what he was going to do, but she certainly didn't expect that! With one monumental effort, she threw herself away from him, across the vast expanse of the bed, scrambling off it to face him, hunched, poised to defend herself despite her nudity.

Kell could still taste their kiss on his lips as he watched her watch him warily. He'd been too involved, had forgotten how skittish she was likely to be about some things. He sighed heavily, his own aching flesh throbbing between his legs, actually jerking and seeking the warmth his finger had barely experienced.

"Don't you ever touch me like that again!" Aislinn hissed at him as she felt about the bed for her chemise.

Without a second thought, Kell grabbed the cloth and threw it over his side of the bed, his eyes never leaving hers. "You are my wife. I will touch you where and when I please, and you'd best get used to that fact."

Aislinn didn't have a response. She hated the fact that she had no control over her life any more. That she, in essence, belonged to him, that she owned nothing but that which he allowed her to have. So she remained silent, still tense and ready for him to follow after her and drag her back into his depraved arms.

Instead, he seemed to settle in, pulling up the covers and arranging himself as if he was going to go to sleep. Kell sighed again. He didn't want to take her when she was afraid. He knew that if she was tense, his invasion would hurt her just that much more. There had to be a better way.

They stayed that way – in a stalemate, neither giving an inch – for a long while, until Kell noticed that she was beginning to shiver. He folded back the sheets and duvet on her side in invitation, but there was no such tentativeness in his tone. “Come to bed, Aislinn.”

She made absolutely no move to obey him.

“Do you need to have your bottom warmed again to remind you to obey me, lassie?” He didn't rush her. If she got another spanking, it would be because she made a conscious choice to ignore his order, and he was going to give her every opportunity to make the right decision. He didn't want to have to take her over his lap again, although he would if he had to.

He could see the thoughts running around in her head, and nudged her just a little more. “Apparently I went too easy on you if it's taking you this long to decide whether or not you want to avoid another trip over my knee, Aislinn.”

That poor lower lip was going to be ragged and bloody by the time she finished with it. He was just about to reach across the bed and pull her over his lap when she slid into bed, barely clinging to her side, a whisper away from falling off, clutching the sheet to her as if it would save her from his evil attentions.

Kell slid over just far enough to loop his big hair arm around her slim waist and drag her backwards into his arms, pressing that poor bottom that seemed to be constantly in peril of getting much more attention than its owner wanted against him, holding her tight when she jumped and tried to get out of his arms.

Chapter 6

"You're naked!" she accused.

He chuckled at her indignation. "Yes, lassie, I am. I don't usually sleep in my wedding finery. And, may I remind you, that you're naked, too."

Not the smartest thing to say, because it sent her lunging – unsuccessfully – towards her side of the bed, presumably to get some sort of a gown. "Let me up! I need to get my nightgown."

"No." Softly said, but, she knew by now, firm as a rock.

"But you – I – we should sleep in something!"

"Why?"

Aislinn huffed, still straining away from him, for all the good it was doing her. He held her in a depressingly secure, completely pain free manner that only served to anger her more. "Because it's the decent thing to do!"

"That doesn't sound like very much fun."

"Let me go." She wasn't begging, and she wasn't really asking, either. It was the closest thing to an order he'd heard directed his way in a long time, and it made him grin at the thought of his feisty little wife trying to order him around.

"No. Not ever, Aislinn. You're my wife, and you'd best make peace with that fact. I set the rules of your behavior, and I mete out your punishments if that behavior doesn't meet with my approval. And I have free and complete access to your body at any time. Do you understand me, lassie?"

Tears flooded her eyes, making Aislinn extremely happy that she was facing away from him.

One of his huge palms covered a recently tanned cheek, patting it possessively. "I'm not going to ask again, Aislinn. Answer me."

Crossing her fingers in the childish manner of one who is telling an out and out lie, she answered softly, "Yes, Sir."

"Good." Kell wrapped his arms around her, although she merely lay in his arms like a lump. His lips lay up against her ear. "Even though I probably should, I'm not going to demand my husbandly rights from you tonight in hopes of proving to you that I'm not some unfeeling ogre. I may spank you from time to time, Aislinn – and that depends entirely on you and your behavior – but I'm not a cruel man. Maybe if I give you some time to get to know me you'll start to believe that."

To her horror, those tears overflowed and trailed down her cheeks, despite how she tried to blink them back. He had no right to be nice to her after all of that. How could she be angry with him – how could she hate him for beating her – when he was so blasted nice? Aislinn didn't know very many men who would be as patient as he was being. And he was holding her so nicely – she was surrounded by him, and despite the fact that he was naked, it felt good to be held so closely to someone. She felt . . . secure, for the first time in a long time, and she barely recognized it, it had been so long. She was so used to being the one that saw to everyone else's comfort, the one that stood against those who might try to hurt those she loved, that she couldn't recall a time when someone had tried to protect her from anyone or anything.

And he was trying to protect her from everything – including her headstrong self.

Confused and tired and more emotional than she'd been in a long time, Aislinn fell asleep even as she was trying to keep the fires of her anger burning. It was just too comfortable, too safe, for her to keep up her defenses against him.

Her heart, the traitor, whispered deep inside her, that with him she didn't need all those walls . . . and her befuddled brain gave up the fight, letting her slip off into soft white dreams within the arms of the enemy.

Something was tickling the underside of her nose every time she breathed. Aislinn wiggled her nose, but that didn't seem to do the trick. She shifted her head a little, but it was still there – even worse, now. Finally she roused herself to see what the problem was, and she was appalled when she realized her position: she was lying against the MacNaughton's side – no, she was mostly on top of him, one of her downright thin thighs between his thick tree trunks, far hand resting casually on his shoulder, as if they slept like this all the time, and her face buried in the coal black dusting on his massive chest – hence the tickling. Every time she breathed in, she tickled her own nose with his chest hair.

When she lifted her head and braced herself to get out of that obscene position, her still bleary eyes collided with his snapping ones.

"Good morning, Mrs. MacNaughton. Stay right where you are. How did you sleep?"

He slipped that order in there between two niceties, so it didn't really even seem like an order, but Aislinn knew the truth of it. For the rest of her life, she would be expected – by him even more so than conventional society – to obey his orders. She wasn't at all sure she could do it.

Out of sheer stubbornness, she did stay exactly where she was – tense and poised to leave him as soon as he released her. She refused to lean back against him – to slide back into that shameful position where her thigh pressed up against parts of him that it shouldn't.

"Fine, thank you."

His hand stroked up and down her back, pressing gently, encouraging her to relax into his arms, but she refused to, even when her muscles started twitching with the strain. Finally, he tugged her arms out from under her in one swift movement, forcing her to crash down on top of him, then clamping her to his side – never hurting her, but not letting her move away from him, either.

"I liked you sleeping on top of me. Maybe tonight I'll sleep on top of you."

Aislinn thought she probably wouldn't survive that particular position – he was likely to either smother or crush her, and neither idea was pleasant.

Suddenly, Aislinn cocked her head, concentrating. There seemed to be voices coming from the lawn outside their bedroom, like a crowd was yelling up at them for some reason she couldn't possibly fathom. Kell moved her gently to one side, then vaulted out of bed to the window, throwing it open and yelling down at them in Gaelic, which meant that Aislinn didn't understand one word of the exchange.

Sighing in frustration and running a weary hand through his hair, Kell came back to the bed – and for once his eyes weren't on her. They were, instead, considering the sheet beneath her for some strange reason.

"Okay, lassie, here's your chance. Get off the bed," he said, already in the process of pulling the sheet towards him. For once, Aislinn did what she was told without a word, watching him curiously.

How the dirk got into his hand, she would never know, but before she had a chance to stop it, he'd gouged his free hand, squeezing it into a fist to drip blood onto the sheet. At her horrified, yet quizzical expression, he explained as he milked a little more blood from his hand, "They want proof of your virginity, Aislinn. I didn't take it last night, but there's no need for anyone but us to know that. There's many a bride whose gallant husband has saved her reputation by letting a little of his own blood for the show."

Dumbstruck, Aislinn watched him bring the sheet to the window and hang it out, the prominent red stain apparently meeting with the crowd's approval as a loud cheer swelled through them. Aislinn was

appalled that they would demand such proof in this day and age, and endlessly humiliated that he had had to provide it, although she did worry about what it was that he should have done to her that would have been bad enough to make her bleed . . .

"Bloody rabble," he complained, turning back to her, noticing that she looked as if she'd seen a ghost. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to make a real explanation about what had just gone on. He wasn't even sure that he knew exactly what had happened; he only knew that it was a long standing – if nosey and obtrusive – tradition.

As soon as he began to walk towards her, she began to back up. "Stay." He considered it a small victory that she stayed. Kell stood in front of her, turning her so that they were standing next to the bed. "Don't be frightened of me, Aislinn. I'll say it as often as I need to until you believe me – beyond spankings, I would never deliberately hurt you."

Kell lifted her into his arms, and tumbled the two of them onto the bed on top of the pillows. Their weight together jarred the little packaged that Jenny had planted, hurling it off the bed to land with a wet smack on Kell's thigh. Intrigued, he looked down, saying, "What's this?"

Aislinn was just as curious as he was.

It seemed to be a small, stretchy pouch of skin that, when squeezed, oozed deep red blood. Aislinn was just reaching for it when Kell snatched it away from her, standing up from the bed in all his naked glory and glaring down at her as if she was an English invader.

"Did you really think you could get away with this?" He murmured, his words all the more terrifying for the fact that they were whispered.

"Get away with what?" she asked. She had no idea what he was talking about.

Kell chuckled humorlessly. "I'm not that stupid, you know. I would have been able to tell, regardless."

"Tell what?"

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. Aislinn felt like a rodent in the jaws of a terrier. Just a little harder, and he'd snap her neck. "You can stop the innocent act. Your scheme's fallen apart. I'm just glad I found out before I actually had you – there's no telling what kind of disease I might have come away with – nor how many men have been before me." Kell didn't think he'd ever been so angry in his life. He couldn't believe how completely he'd been played for a fool. She must've been in on it with her uncle, and probably that maid of hers, too. A nasty little triumvirate passing off her damaged goods on an unsuspecting man. She might not have gained a lot of money, but she had a title and his good name.

If he'd been thinking clearly, he would have realized that there was an easy way to solve the question of her virginity or the lack thereof – all he had to do was to tumble her onto her back and delve between those creamy thighs, and he would have had all the evidence he needed, one way or the other.

But he'd let himself get taken in – get all romantic and dreamy about how they might have as warm and loving a relationship as his parents, however unusual that was for him. He'd wanted her to be what she presented herself as – a young, innocent girl who would be proud to be the mother of his children and a credit to his clan.

As it was, he got her money, but wouldn't lie with her now for all the tea in China. His brothers would have to produce the heir and a spare. He wouldn't touch his wife now if his life depended on it. Without another glance at her, he put the bladder on the bedside table and walked to the door, turning back only to say in the most lethal tone Aislinn had ever heard, "Your father and your Uncle might have let you run around like a hoyden, but you'll not shame my family or my name. You're not to leave this room without an escort – either myself or my brothers. You are not to address any other men at any other time. You will take your meals in your room. I shall make your excuses to our guests." He made his little speech to the floor, as if he couldn't stand the sight of her.

He slammed the door behind him, leaving Aislinn to sit in a heap in the middle of the bed and wonder just exactly what it was that he thought she'd done, and why in Heaven's name someone would put blood into a chicken bladder.

It was several boring hours later when Jenny finally arrived, opening the door slowly and looking carefully behind her and up and down the hall before she disappeared into the room. She flew to her charge, having seen both the bloody sheet, and her Lord's behavior of this morning. He was charging around the place like a bear with a thorn in his paw – nothing he saw and nothing he did was right, and anyone else's efforts were beyond consideration.

Jenny had been spending time below stairs, chatting with the other servants, who were a little in awe of her inclusion in the marriage ceremony. Jenny had explained to them that the MacNaughton's brother had insisted, and that their Lady was like a daughter to her, having lost her own mother at birth.

The servants were all baffled by Lord MacNaughton's behavior. From what she could glean from them, this was an aberration. He wasn't an easy man to work for by any means – he demanded a lot from his people, but it wasn't anything more than he was willing to do himself. He expected their best effort from everyone, himself included. People were clamoring to come work for him, and those who did were well cared for – he made sure those who wanted them had good houses and wages, and he encouraged his servants to marry and have families, and he made it easier to do so than he might have.

No one could come up with a reasonable explanation for why he would be in such a bad mood – he'd just married a gorgeous woman who came to him an innocent and seemed to be interested in joining her husband's family and observing the clan's traditions. What more could he ask for?

The general consensus was that one could never tell with the gentry, but that didn't really set well with most of the staff. They felt they knew this man better. He wasn't given to fits of temper that weren't attributable to something – thieves, bad weather, sickness, something.

Jenny was growing more and more alarmed the more she heard from everyone else. Something had gone badly wrong. Finally, she was able to sneak away from them and go to her Lady's room.

Aislinn was just sitting in the middle of the bed, biting her lip, deep in thought.

"Milady, did something happen between you and Lord MacNaughton?"

Aislinn didn't have any interest in answering that question. Instead, she asked, "Jenny, why would there be a bladder full of blood on my headboard?"

It was Jenny's turn to bite her lip. "I'm sorry. That was my fault. I wanted to let you know about it and explain how to use it, but I didn't – I couldn't. It – it –"

"You left it? Why?" the word shot back at Jenny accusatorily. "Explain everything to me. All of it," Aislinn demanded.

Her face flaming the entire time, and completely unable to meet the other woman's eye, Jenny got the story out in fits and starts – but enough that Aislinn had a good idea why Kell had reacted like that. Of course, it would have been nice if he'd given her a chance to explain as much as she could and not just jump to conclusions, but the evidence against her was quite damning.

Better armed and informed about what had happened and what would happen between herself and her husband – if he ever spoke to her again – Aislinn felt sure she could explain the situation to Kell calmly and quietly, so that he would understand that she hadn't known what Jenny had done, and that she had no idea what it was for even after he discovered it.

The only way to prove her virginity to him seemed to be to let him do what Jenny had very reluctantly described the bare bones of as what transpired between a married man and his wife. Personally, Aislinn couldn't understand why anyone would want to do something that disgusting, but she would go along with it to clear her name and restore her husband's faith in her, she supposed. Although she wasn't very happy that he was so quick to jump to conclusions about her with only that small amount of proof. As Jenny had described, he could easily have done an examination of her person – however

humiliating it would be to her, she was sure he wouldn't have hesitated if he'd thought of it – to determine her innocence.

But instead he decided to believe that she would participate in some sort of a conspiracy to dupe him into accepting her as his wife, even though she was – according to his conclusions – a soiled woman. Well, Aislinn thought, he didn't know her very well, but he would. And he should have given her the benefit of the doubt – should have sat down with her and discussed what had happened and heard her side of the story rather than jumping to incorrect conclusions and making her a veritable prisoner in this room.

If she couldn't get out of the house without an escort, then she was going to have to rely on Jenny and Arthur to take care of Adelle and explain to her that Aislinn was all right, just in dutch with her new husband already because of a misunderstanding.

It was almost a week before she was able to get out of that bedroom, and if it hadn't been for Jenny and the servants who brought her meals, Aislinn would have gone stark raving crazy. As it was, Jenny spent as much time as she dared with her – apparently their new master had decided that since Aislinn wasn't going anywhere, that Jenny needed other tasks to occupy her time, so she had been consigned to the kitchen a lot of the time, but she had been able to steal some books from himself's library, on the sly. Aislinn had never been so happy to see books in her life, and she loved them more than most people.

Although his library was apparently very well stocked with all sorts of classic literature, Aislinn was slowly becoming of a mind that the rest of the household in general needed some work. Having spent innumerable hours in that bedroom, she noticed early on that there was quite a bit of dusty on every flat surface, and that the rugs badly needed beating. The room became stuffy and smelly very quickly . . . and that wasn't saying anything about the quality of the food – or rather the distinct lack thereof.

She had had some of it at the reception, but it had all tasted like so much sludge to her, anyway at that point. The food wasn't the high point of the day, as far as she was concerned. It wasn't any part of that day. But now, eating it three meals a day, she realized very quickly that it wasn't up to snuff. Especially not for something from the kitchen of a Highland Chieftan and a man with a British title to his name. His food should have been impeccable.

After two days of eating that slop, Aislinn declined to ingest one more ounce of that horrid fair. Jenny was nowhere to be found when she decided that, and wasn't the one who brought her her evening tray. Instead, it was a small, mousy woman she'd seen before – Sile. She scurried in, obviously nervous, and set the tray down on Aislinn's bedside table, turning immediately to go.

"Sile?"

The woman jumped when Aislinn said her name, even though she deliberately used her softest tone possible. "Yes, Ma'am?" Aislinn could see her shake as she turned back towards her.

Aislinn's gaze settled on a dirty bandage that decorated the small woman's forearm. Gliding forward, Aislinn exclaimed, "Oh, you've hurt yourself! What happened?" as she reached out to the girl, who shrank back immediately.

Sighing, Aislinn sat down on the bed, ignoring the offensive stench that wafted to her nose from the tray to her side. "Sile, I'd like to help you. Please come here so that I can look at your arm."

It didn't take the frightened girl very long to decide that obeying her was probably better than the consequences of not, but she moved forward very reluctantly, until she was barely within Aislinn's reach. Aislinn patted her lap. "Put your arm right here, please."

But Sile snatched her arm back instead. "I couldna do that, Ma'am."

"And why not?"

"I'd be getting your pretty dress all dirty . . ."

Aislinn snuffed. "No need to worry about that, Sile. It's been much dirtier, believe me." She deliberately caught the girl's eye, and smiled broadly, holding out her hand.

Sile again approached her like she was going to certain death, but eventually Aislinn was able to position that pathetically thin arm on her lap. When she began to untie the dirty rags that were covering the wound, Sile began to wail, as if in anticipation of terrible pain, although Aislinn was going as slowly and being as careful as she could. The closer she got to the burn, the worse the pain, because the rags were sticking to the seeping skin, and removing them was tugging and tearing the flesh.

"Shhahhhh, shahhhh, shahhhhhh," Aislinn soothed wordlessly, automatically the way Jenny used to soothe her many hurts when she was a rambunctious little girl. What was revealed was an oval burn, about two inches wide and four inches long – not too deep, but wicked looking and extremely painful. The initial blister had burst, leaving raw, tortured skin that had just been tugged and ripped. It was bleeding and seeping fluid.

Aislinn looked over at her dinner – some sort of unrecognizable meat and a runny, tasteless gravy, as well as over boiled potatoes. "Sile, go down to the kitchen and bring me two good handfuls of the potato scraps – the skins that were peeled off them. Nothing else, just the skins. Oh, and a hot cup of water." She looked at the tea cup on the tray and new it was lukewarm at best.

Sile looked at Aislinn like she'd just commanded her to scale Everest. "But, Ma'am . . ."

Aislinn stood and said again, firmly, "Potato skins and a cup of hot water. Go now and come right back."

Sile left quickly, mainly because she was glad to get away from the Lady MacNaughton. She was terrified, but she knew she must do as she was told. So she skulked about as carefully as she could, but not one was much bothering the kitchen scraps at this point – eventually they'd be fed to the animals, but they were still in a pile outside. The cup of water was harder, but she managed to get it once the cook left to use the necessary.

When she returned, Lady MacNaughton was sitting on the side of the bed again, rummaging in some sort of valise, pulling out various small jars of things. She took the cup from Sile and poured some sort of powder and chunks of something into the steaming water, stirring it around a little with the spoon, then presenting it to Sile. "Drink it slowly. It will ease your pain."

Sile tried to back away, but Aislinn had a hold of her hand. "No, Ma'am, I couldn't drink from a cup like that –"

Aislinn brought the cup to the young woman's lips. "Don't be ridiculous. It's just a cup."

Sile swallowed a little, then said, "A cup like that's not for the likes of me, Ma'am."

With a small smile, Aislinn answered, "It's not for the likes of me, either, Sile. Believe me. Now hold this cup while I work on your arm."

She did as she was told, pondering both the strange woman who was her new mistress and why she might want kitchen scraps to help heal a servant's burn. Aislinn lifted her dress and ripped several strips of cloth from one of her petticoats. Sile opened her mouth to protest, but decided not to. It hadn't gotten her anywhere so far. She watched intently as her mistress cleaned the wound with some water from her own private pitcher, then carefully spread some sort of poultice or ointment directly onto the wound. Sile knew that the woman who was helping her was doing her best not to hurt her, but she squealed and whimpered occasionally anyway.

Chapter 7

Amazingly, Lady MacNaughton apologized the entire time she was dressing the wound for the pain she knew she was causing, and whenever she looked up at the other woman, there were tears in her eyes. Sile had never known anyone to sympathize so with a servant. It just wasn't done, in her experience, unless one was a lady's maid or a valet. The serving girls and scullery maids didn't as much attention or affection as was engendered by close contact with the Lord or Lady they all served. Not that they were treated badly – just the opposite. Working for Lord MacNaughton and his brothers was considered a very prestigious post, no matter what the capacity. They were given good food, warm shelter, and were treated better here – less like slaves – than in a lot of other of the gentrys' households.

But still, the new mistress was going above and beyond the usual courtesies extended to the household help. After she'd dabbed on the ointment as gently as possible, she put down a layer of skins, meat side down, to cover the wound, then wrapped it again in her much cleaner petticoat strips.

Tying it in a nice bow, Aislinn said, "There. Keep it clean and dry, and come back to me in two days and we'll do this again. Bring skins and water with you when you come. Make a tea out of this," she pressed a small container of powder and bits into Sile's hand, "when you can, and it'll help ease the pain."

Indeed, her arm was already beginning to feel better. "Thank you, Ma'am," Sile whispered through tears. No one in her hard life had taken such an interest in her, or cared so much that she was in pain.

Squeezing her eyelids tight so that the tears wouldn't fall, Aislinn whispered back just as gutturally, "You're welcome, Sile. Now take this tray back to the kitchen. I'm not at all hungry, and even if I was, I wouldn't eat that for love nor money."

Sile grabbed up the tray quickly, willing to do pretty much anything for this woman who had cared for her so gently. "Yes, Ma'am." She curtsied and skittered towards the door where she paused for a second, staring at the ground as she whispered, "Thank you, Ma'am. I – I know I don't have no right to say it, but I don't think it's right that his Lordship has you all bottled up here. If there's anything I can do for you, I will. I'll try to get your trays for you as much as I can, so if there's anything extra or special you want, I'll do my best to get it." It was the longest speech Sile had ever made in her life, but she meant every word.

The woman on the bed smiled at her softly. "You're welcome, Sile. And thank you."

Bowing and scraping all the way, Sile left Aislinn alone in her room.

Sile was as good as her word – either she or Jenny brought her trays from that point on, but Aislinn was refusing to eat to protest the poor quality of the food. She didn't think the ingredients were necessarily bad, but the way they were prepared was horrid. Besides, she thought that not eating might get her husband's attention. He seemed entirely prepared to ignore her for the rest of their lives, but Aislinn wasn't interested in spending the rest of her life in this room. She could see him sometimes, striding off on business, those impossibly broad shoulders set, purpose in every stride. Sometimes he was mounted, and that was even more of a treat. The man rode like a centaur. His horse was a gorgeous black stallion who puffed and reared in the cold, but he kept his seat as if it was his own idea to try to buck him off.

Aislinn didn't like that she took such enjoyment at just looking at the man – she should have hated the very sight of him, stubborn, wrongheaded cur that he was. Didn't even give her a chance to defend herself before imprisoning her here, all alone and in disgrace, as far as he was concerned.

Then an unexpected knock came at the door. Aislinn put down her book and came to stand at the end of her bed. "Come in." It was too early for dinner and she'd already sent the lunch plate back without her compliments. Jenny wouldn't have bothered to knock . . . She wondered who it was. "Come in?" she called out tentatively.

She was pleasantly surprised to see his brother, Grant in the doorway. He conspicuously left the door open, but came well into the room, looking her over anxiously. "I – I'll understand it if you don't want to see me."

Aislinn smiled hesitantly. "Don't be silly," she walked over and gave him a gentle hug. "To what do I owe this honor?"

To his own horror, Grant blushed. "Well, I thought you might be getting a little cabin fever. Would you like to go for a walk?" As if they were in a grand ballroom, he bowed and offered her his arm.

Aislinn chuckled for the first time in what seemed like ages. "I do believe I would love to take a stroll with you, kind Sir." She curtsied deeply back to him, then they set off through the house, collecting amused and amazed stares from everyone they encountered. They met Burke on the way, and he gleefully abandoned the stuffy paperwork his brother had set him to and assumed his own post on her other arm.

Sile saw them going out the front door, and flitted up to the room to grab a shawl for her Mistress, fussing about her like she was a stray chick. The other servants were amazed to see mousy Sile doing much of anything beyond that which she was directly told to do, but Sile had become devoted to the new mistress, despite the rumors that were flying about just why the Master had locked her up. No one could say a word against the mistress within Sile's hearing, or they'd see a side of her they never dreamed existed.

Aislinn thanked Sile for the wrap, then set off again with her seethingly masculine escort. As they walked, they danced completely around the elephant that had accompanied them. They discussed the weather, the crops, the flora and fauna of the area . . . everything but the situation between their brother and the tiny woman on their arms.

Until Grant stopped dead in his tracks and turned her to him, holding both of her hands in his. "We – my brother and I – just wanted to tell you that we don't subscribe to the eldest's opinion of you, Madame."

Those tears that were never very far beneath the surface lately, it seemed, flooded her eyes and trickled down her cheeks at his words. They believed in her innocence. Her own husband didn't, but they did. She squeezed Grant's fingers, whispering a heartfelt, "Thank you."

Burke turned her back to him, blushing furiously. "We believe in your – your innocence, Ma'am, even if our brother doesn't. It's as plain as can be, and he's that much an idiot for not seeing it, regardless of any evidence to the contrary."

Aislinn didn't know what to say or do, and she knew she was blushing at least as brightly as they were. "Thank you both, so much," she sniffled. "And, please, call me Aislinn." She started walking again, staring at the ground beneath her feet. The brothers caught up with her and fell into stride beside her. "But don't be too harsh on your brother. There was – evidence against me, and he doesn't really know me."

The men nodded. "But neither do we – but we believe you."

This conversation was very strange, and they shouldn't even have been having it. But it was nice all the same to hear that someone was on her side besides Jenny and Sile. Aislinn grabbed each of their hands. "Thank you. You'll never know how much this means to me."

The threesome wandered through town, making the introductions that Kell should have. Despite the fact that not every reception was glowing, Aislinn was wonderful with everyone in town –

exclaiming over their children and any wares or services they offered. It was a thriving place, and she knew that that would have been due to her husband's hard work. She also offered advice to anyone who had a health problem, and by the end of their rounds, several people had asked if she might see to some of their ailments. Because she wasn't allowed to leave her room without her escorts, she invited them to come to her tomorrow.

Grant and Burke looked over her head when she suggested this – entirely out of the kindness of her heart, they were sure. But finding most of the town at his wife's door wasn't going to make Kell feel any better about her.

And it didn't. He tromped into the house at about eleven the next day, just a half hour before he was to meet a business man up from Edinburgh to discuss the price of some land he was looking at acquiring near the borders of their current lot. But the sight that greeted his eyes made him blink furiously. For some reason, there was a line of townspeople – all of whom he recognized – men, women, and children, in the great hall, and lined right up the stairs and as far as the eyes could see.

"What's going on here?" he bellowed.

Suddenly, there was silence, and the women in the line clutched their children a little closer. Simon, the blacksmith, stood where he was in line – not wanting to lose his spot – and answered as politely and succinctly as he could, "We're here to see your lady, Sir."

Kell's eyes widened as he dismissed an evil thought that she was entertaining men in her room. There were only a few men in line, anyway. He took the steps two at a time, watching the line wrap around the stairs, right down the hall to her – his – their – room. The closer he got to the door, the fewer townsfolk and the more household servants he saw. "What are you all doing here? Go back to work?"

"But, Sir – " It was his own valet, Pierre, the traitor, who was the next person in line to be seen, apparently, "your wife issued the invitations herself for anyone who had a health complaint to come see her and she would see what she could do about it."

Some scullery maid he barely recognized stepped forward with her arm outstretched at him. Silently, he thought her name was. "Yes, Sir. She's a right good healer, your sainted wife is. She fixed up my arm almost good as new, changing the dressing regular and making so sure not to hurt me much in the process. And she gave me some willow bark tea, she did, so as to ease off the pain when I can." As if suddenly realizing to whom she was speaking, she shrunk back into line, mumbling. "The woman's an angel. Anyone can see that."

Grunting angrily, Kell stalked past everyone and threw open the door, only to reveal his wife, bending over old Mrs. Fitzgerald's foot as she wrapped it with some sort of ruffled material that looked like she'd ripped it from her under things . . . it looked like a petticoat, and the closer he got, the more and more it looked like just that.

"Out!" he bellowed. It was not the usual for him to yell like that, but he was just overwhelmed by what he was finding.

Aislinn looked up at him and scowled, making him feel as if he'd been scolded by some schoolmarm when she was the one who had wronged him in the first place, not the other way around, and she was the one causing this spectacle. She then proceeded to take her time finishing what she was doing, ignoring the fidgeting Mrs. Fitzgerald was doing as she gathered her things and prepared to do exactly as she was told. When she was finally finished, Aislinn assisted the older woman onto her feet, handing her her cane. "There you go. Keep it up and dry as much as you can, change the dressing every evening and use this as well as the cleanest cloths you can find to dress it, all right?" She pressed a bag of Kell didn't know what into the woman's hand as she saw her to the door.

"Please give my husband and I a few minutes to talk, will you, everyone?" Aislinn asked in a sweet voice. Turning back into the room, she addressed her maid. "Jenny, would you go down to the kitchen to see if there's some tea and biscuits we can give to them while they're waiting?"

Kell was incensed. "No! You stay right where you are, woman," he roared as Jenny had hastened to do as she was bid by her mistress. "We're not going to get into the habit of feeding the entire town. They'll never go home." Jenny stopped in her tracks, but didn't move any further, frowning back at the man who had accused her wonderful girl of awful things and locked her away from those she loved. Why, Aislinn hadn't seen Adelle in a terribly long time. It was unnatural – even in the worst times, they had seen each other almost daily, and spent long hours together. The sisters were very, very close.

Jenny had gathered her wits about her and confronted Lord MacNaughton as soon as she'd heard about what had happened. She knew it was all her fault – if she'd left well enough alone, things would have worked out fine, but how was she to know? While he glowered at her – managing to look like he was looking down at her even though she was standing and he was sitting behind that huge desk of his – she spilled the whole story and admitted her guilt, begging him to believe that Aislinn had nothing to do with it and no knowledge whatsoever about the subject. That she was as innocent as the day she was born.

He'd let the silence stretch to exceedingly uncomfortable proportions, then said, as he guided her to the door without touching her, "Apparently you don't believe so, or you wouldn't have done what you did."

Jenny was largely unimpressed by their Lord and Master, so she stood her ground.

Kell's attention had turned to his errant wife. He had deliberately stayed away from her for the past few days – he was just too angry. He didn't trust himself not to strangle her with his bare hands. How could he have been so taken in by a pretty face? How could he have given the MacNaughton name to a woman of loose morals? A harlot? She was so damned beautiful – that was all he saw. And he could still see it, and, to his complete disgust, he could still become aroused by her. She was in a dress that was barely more than rags, stained with whatever concoctions she had been using on his people, the ragged hem of her petticoat peeping out from under her full skirt. Her hair was up, but several strands escaped the coiffure and curled around her face in a haphazard but entirely enchanting manner.

He wanted her. Badly, and it made him hate himself almost as much as he hated her. Or tried to hate her. He never quite achieved the level of hatred his mind thought her actions warranted. His desire always interrupted him, settling into his loins and setting him to throbbing fit to drive a weaker man crazy. Alone in his chaste, monk-like room down the hall, he tossed and turned for want of her, dreaming about her all night and waking to find that he'd defiled himself in his sleep.

Of late, he had come to the realization that what was done, was done. He decided that he would keep track of her monthly cycle, and once she was over her next one, and he knew she wasn't pregnant, he'd come to her every night until she was pregnant with his son and heir. It would be a much different relationship from what he'd hoped for – what he'd pictured. Certainly nothing like what his parents' had, which had been his dream for them, ultimately. He would use her so that he could get the heir he needed, but beyond that, she would remain locked in her room, and firmly locked out of his heart.

He knew his brothers didn't agree with what he was doing – that they believed in her innocence, despite that fact that he'd explained exactly what had happened and his reasons for his opinions. Somehow, she'd bewitched them. Too. He'd heard about their outing yesterday, and that her reception in town had been cool at first, but that she had redeemed herself considerably by dispensing medical advice and suggestions to those who were obviously ailing. There was little else that could ingratiate someone to the townsfolk faster than someone with doctoring skills.

What he hadn't realized was that she'd apparently set up shop in her room and invited the entire county to come by for an examination. He practically yelled this at her, but she didn't so much as move in reaction.

"Do you have nothing to say in your defense, woman?" he roared.

Aislinn shrugged. "What do you want me to say? Aside from the fact that we're occupying your house, what do you care what I do? I'm the lowest of the low in your eyes. You don't want to be anywhere near me. Fine. I, on the other hand, can help some of your people with their ailments, and they apparently want me to. As I understand it, the nearest doctor is quite a ways away, and I'm not going to charge them an arm and leg. Besides, I'm glad to be of service to them in any way I can."

He wished she wouldn't talk like that. It would be easier to sustain his hatred for her if she wouldn't be so damned noble. Would a whore be noble? He wondered, then dismissed the thought. That didn't matter. "This is my house not an almshouse. You are not a doctor. I do not want you to treat my people like this –"

"You don't want me to help them? Heal them? Give them any sort of relief from their pain?"

Aislinn stood and met him, nose to chest, without so much as a whit of concern for her own safety. The people in the hall, who were beginning to realize that they probably should leave, hung around because they wanted to hear what the outcome of the fight would be, and if the Mistress won and was able to continue to see them, they didn't want to lose their place in line. "My, now I see it's not just me that you don't like – you don't even like your own people."

He wanted to slap her, but he didn't. He couldn't. He wanted to punch something or someone, but there wasn't anyone or anything available for that purpose. "I do not need to explain myself to the likes of you."

"No," she agreed with complete calm, surprising him not only by her words but her tone. "You don't need to explain yourself to me." She walked over to the door and opened it, revealing the mass of humanity that was still milling about. "You need to explain yourself to them. They're the ones you're hurting. Not me."

Kell raised his face to the heavens, praying for calm and peace, and the wisdom to deal with this completely aggravating woman. "All right then. You can see them. Lord knows I don't want to be accused of consigning my people to lives of misery when there's someone around who can apparently help." A smattering of applause greeted his ears, but he wasn't looking at them, he was looking at her. "But – only at certain times, and only when you're properly chaperoned – so you'd better sweet talk my brothers into spending some time with you, because I don't have the time to baby sit you."

He turned and made as if to leave her when she shot back, "Where?"

"What?"

"Where do you want me to see people? I am still confined to my room –"

"Yes, you are." He would be lenient with his staff and the townspeople. Not with her. He figured he might as well get some use for her, since she was living in his house and eating his – "And that's another thing – I've heard that you're not eating. I expect you to eat every morsel on every tray." He wouldn't have her dying on him just when he'd decided to use her to get an heir, despite her considerable shortcomings.

"I wouldn't feed that slop to a dog."

"Hey!"

The outcry of indignation didn't come from Kell, it came from behind him – from the cook, who was standing patiently in line to see if the Lady could help her with a nasty sore throat she had. "I do the best I can with what I have."

The rest of the household staff grumbled things along the lines of, "if that's the best you can do..."

Kell turned back to Aislinn. "She's a perfectly fine cook."

"Yes, but Sile would make a better one. She enjoys working with food. And if a person is happy in doing what they want, then the results are better. Cook?" Aislinn asked, trying to walk past her husband but finding herself blocked by his big body so that she couldn't get out of the room. She craned her head around his side. "Are you happy cooking?"

The older woman shuffled her feet. "N-no, Ma'am. I always wanted to be a lady's maid."

“Well, then why don’t you begin training with Jenny while she cares for me – such as she’s able – “ Aislinn threw in as a dig to her husband, “and then Sile can cook. She told me once, when I was dressing her burn, that she used to cook for her whole family, and she’s won several contests at county fairs for her dishes.”

“I am Master here, and I’ll thank you to stop issuing orders.”

Aislinn pulled herself up to her full height. “And I am mistress here, supposedly. And apparently, you don’t even know good food from bad, or that your servants are miserable, or hurt or sick. Some Master you are. I’ve been here all of a week or so, and have been imprisoned for most of it, yet I know them better and take better care of them than you do. Your brothers said, before they walked me down the aisle, that Jenny could be my maid of honor because you treated your servants like family. Well, considering the way you’ve treated me, and the way you’ve treated them, I’m not sure it’s even healthy to be a member of your family.”

Kell had never been so angry in his life. This little woman had the ability to insult his intelligence, assault his honor, and intimate that he was a bad overlord, all in one breath. He wasn’t sure that even if she had been entirely innocent that he wouldn’t have wanted to shake her till she rattled anyway, especially in a situation like this. He was so mad he was literally trembling, and he didn’t trust himself not to put her over his knee – and that would be getting much too close for comfort. If he had her over his lap, as he dearly wanted right about now, he knew he would end up inside her, and it was much too soon. He had to know that any child they produced was his, and no one else’s.

“Do as you please. But except for when you’re chaperoned, you’re still to stay in this room. And all of you people get back to work. My brothers will let you know when she’s going to be available and where.” He stormed out of the room and out of the house, and Aislinn couldn’t resist running to the window to watch him stride across the courtyard.

She sighed. She’d won, sort of. She hadn’t won her freedom, but the right to treat the villagers, and also, hopefully, bring the cuisine in this place to a somewhat higher standard. It was a small victory, but it was something.

Too bad her husband still hated her.

Within the next few days, the brothers, on her behalf, had commandeered a small cottage on the estate for her to use as an office. They picked that location because it was a ways away from the house, and she would be able to have a good walk to get there, spending some precious time out of doors. They rotated coming to get her, which was great. Grant and Burke were wonderful – it was too bad their older brother was such a pigheaded ass. She’d referred to him as just that in front of each of them, and they had both dissolved into giggles, which made her laugh, too, at such a high pitched sound coming out of such strapping lads.

Chapter 8

"Don't say that around him, Aislinn lass. You'll get a strapping like you've never felt before," Grant imparted to her as if he was telling her a state secret. "I mistakenly said something I oughtn't not too long after our Father died, and I couldn't sit down for a month." He absently began rubbing the offended part before he realized he was in polite company.

Aislinn couldn't resist. "I have a poultice for that, too . . ."

Grant looked abashed, then laughed when she burst out giggling. "You are a bad, bad girl."

"Am not."

They laughed there way to the small house. As he helped her off with her cloak, Grant said, "I wish my brother would come to his senses, lass. I'm sorry he's treating you so."

Aislinn tried to smile, but didn't really accomplish her goal. "It's okay, Grant. It will resolve itself, eventually."

She worked hard, every day, but it was one of the most fulfilling things she'd ever done. And the people were incredibly thankful, and almost always tried to pay her in some way. The food in the castle was getting better only because the women of the village were gifting her with breads and cakes and pies as a way to pay for her services. The men most often offered repairs to her "office," and soon the run down little cottage sported real glass windows and a beautiful stone fireplace as each man repaid her by using his own skills to her benefit.

Kell continued to ignore her, making sure that Sile and the cook, who were now assisting Jenny regularly in Aislinn's care, knew to inform him when the Lady began her show of blood for the month. That hadn't happened so far, but he questioned them occasionally, just to be sure they hadn't forgotten. Eventually, it got to his ears that she had been venturing beyond her little station to treat some patients who couldn't get to her, and that his brothers were gradually leaving her alone rather than staying with her while she worked. They had things to do themselves, but he needed to make sure that she wasn't alone with any men. She couldn't be trusted.

One night, she didn't come home on time. His brothers were nowhere to be found, but he knew for a fact that Grant was off on a trip to Edinburgh at his own behest and Burke had gone to visit the one and only lady that was a true rival to his devotion to the Church. For his part, despite what a travesty his marriage was, Kell hoped that Burke chose Tavia Douglas and had a hoarde of kids instead of spending his life in devotion. It just seemed more natural, and he wanted Burke to have a chance at the kind of happiness that he himself obviously wasn't going to have.

Kell spent the evening in an extremely uncomfortable chair in the shadows, lying in wait where he had a clear view of the door, a bottle of good – family brand – scotch by his feet and a half full glass in his hand. It was nearly midnight when she decided to come home, peeping in the door and looking around, obviously not seeing him in the shadows. She crept in on tiptoes, closing the door with nary a sound, then making her way slowly, so slowly, to the stairs. Kell was able to get up and across the foyer just as quietly, and as she lifted her foot to use the first step, he leaned forward so that his mouth was inches from her ear, and said, "It's nice of you to come home."

Her shriek hurt his ears, but he ignored it. Several servants came running, but Kell waved them away.

"It's especially nice since you shouldn't have been out in the first place," he hissed, grabbing her upper and pulling her up the stairs, then pushing her into her room ahead of him.

She shirked out of her coat herself – her husband being the gentlemanly type that he was didn't offer to help her – and threw it on the bed. She didn't need this right now, but apparently she was going to get it anyway. "Yes, I was out. Yes, I was by myself. But –"

"I don't want to hear a 'but' – not from you. I don't need those kinds of details rolling around in my head – I've already conjured enough of them from the morning after our wedding night, thanks to you and your maid."

Aislinn sighed and began to get ready for bed. There was nothing else she could do. She didn't intend to spend the rest of her life defending herself against a charge that was bogus to a husband who really didn't want to believe her anyway. So she disrobed as far as she could, but with no Jenny appearing, she had no way to get to the buttons that ran down the back of her dress. She walked up to him and turned around, piling her hair in her hand and lifting it out of his way. "Would you unbutton me, please?" He'd seen most of her already, she reasoned, and he was her husband anyway.

Disconcerted by her request and her nearness, Kell did what she asked without thinking, watching the line of her back as it was revealed by the parting fabric. God, he wanted her. He thought he would give his left testicle to be able to throw her onto that bed right now and drive himself into her. His somewhat besotted mind – fogged not only by the fine, smokey liquor he'd consumed but by the teasing scent of her lilac perfume and the softness of her hair as it fell down onto his hand before he removed it.

He knew there was a reason – and a damned good one – why he shouldn't do it, but for some reason he couldn't seem to remember it. She smelled so good; she looked so good, that he just couldn't resist her a second longer.

As she turned to remove her dress, the bands of his fingers locked around her arms and Aislinn found herself guided over to the bed. Before she could marshal any sort of resistance, he had her over his lap and her skirts hid almost the entire room from her view – she could only see exactly what was beneath her nose – that awful carpeting she'd seen much too closely once before. She recognized this position, and knew she didn't want to see where this was going, but even in his cups, as he apparently was from the wreaking smell of his breath, he was too strong for her. No amount of struggling or contortions was going to help her.

In her own defense, she didn't think she should have seen this coming. He hadn't come near her in a long time, and she'd forgotten that he intended to take pretty much any time she displeased him as a reason to spank her. She had begged to be let up the last time, begged him to stop spanking her long before he'd finished, and it was humiliating – the entire experience was humiliating, but it was that much worse to remember that she'd wasted her breath pleading with him to stop when he acted like he'd never heard her.

So Aislinn resolved not to do that this time. In fact, she resolved to take this spanking as quietly as she could.

That firm resolve lasted through about eight swats with that broad, flat hand, and when the tears she tried desperately to hold back began to flow down the set of cheeks he wasn't reddening, she found she could no longer suppress her voice. It was like his swats hurt a thousand times worse when she tried to ignore them and convince herself that they were little love pats. His hand cracked loudly against her nates, sometimes hitting exactly the same spot twice. It was this – coincidence or not, she wasn't sure – that made her cry out for the first time as tears raced down into her open mouth.

"Please noooooooooooooo!"

Again, it was as if she hadn't spoken. She reverted to trying to be as quiet as she could, but it was damned hard. Even drunk, he was extremely methodical, and had covered every bit of her vulnerable flesh in his first round of spansks, and now he was covering the same, already inflamed skin, for the second time. It was awful. It was only the second time in her life that she'd met a pain she couldn't handle, and part of

that was that she didn't know how long it was going to go on. A healing bone got gradually better. But his spankings only got quickly worse.

Spanking her cleared some of the alcohol induced fog in Kell's mind. Maybe it was her groans and pleas for mercy, maybe it was the sight of that gorgeously rounded bottom of hers, but whatever it was, it sobered him up more quickly than anything else could. But he continued to spank her even after he'd come more to his senses, because she had disobeyed him.

When he finally stopped, the sobbing girl fell to her knees between his legs, snuffling and choking loudly, reaching back in that automatic, age old way of the recently spanked to feel what horrid damage had been done by the spanker. Of course, there wasn't anything beyond a lot of redness, but the rubbing still felt good, Kell remembered all too vividly from his own myriad trips over his father's knee.

She tried to raise herself off her knees, but Kell's feet were on her skirt. "Let me up," she repeated that oft used phrase from just a few minutes ago.

"No," he answered gruffly, putting his hands under her arms to lift her onto the bed. Aislinn found herself on her back on the bed, with her only somewhat sobered husband leaning eagerly over her. He peeled off the dress that he had already unbuttoned, and split her chemise down the front with one well aimed rip. Her ample breasts spilled out, and she found that covering them with her hands or arms only managed to plump them up as if she was offering their bounty to him, which couldn't have been the farthest thing from the truth.

Kell descended on those gorgeous globes as if he was a starving man at a buffet. He was a little less gentle than he might have been if he was truly in his right mind, but his desire for her overruled a lot of his more gentlemanly tendencies. If the whole chicken bladder incident had never happened, he would have taken her with infinite care – believing until the last moment that she was a virgin – and made sure that nothing he did frightened her, gently talking her through everything that he did to her . . .

But now he knew there was no reason for all of the careful tenderness he would have smothered her with. There was no need to make sure that she liked what he did, since she probably knew more about it than he did and could teach him a thing or two.

He captured each nipple in turn, suckling and flicking his tongue over the tip, using his spare hand to tug and turn its sister. She was moaning again, but not pleading – not yet anyway. And the moans were distinctly of pleasure rather than pain, although they sounded slightly apprehensive, too, as if she was worried that he might hurt her when he took her in revenge for not being the virginal bride he'd contracted for.

But Kell didn't like to hurt women. He'd always gotten a lot more satisfaction out of being able to bring them to pleasure. It made him hard just thinking about making his lover scream in pleasure, but he was so hard already he didn't think that he was going to have time for his usual tendencies this time. That was all right – he was sure she wouldn't miss it and he could make it up to her another time . . .

There was something nagging him in the back of his mind as to why he wasn't supposed to do this right now, but he couldn't put his finger on it . . . and he could put his finger on her . . . and more . . .

Kell scrambled between her legs, thoughts of eventually using all of his tricks to make her scream with pleasure playing through his mind, making him want to drive into her with all of his considerable might. He lay atop her, reaching down to adjust his kilt and free his already rock hard member. Her bloomers were already long gone from the spanking, and when he settled back down onto her, he found her notch immediately and began to push against her.

Because of her exceedingly embarrassing chat with Jenny, Aislinn had a reasonable idea of what to expect, but she refused to participate in any way, and simply lay there, letting him do what he would. Now he would finally find out what kind of a woman he'd married.

Kell pushed and pushed, a sweat breaking out on his forehead. Something was blocking his way. He was big, but it shouldn't have been so hard for her to accommodate him. Finally, he leaned back and pulled her legs up onto his shoulder, leaning every bit of his weight onto his aching member. That

leverage alone should have had him cozily wrapped up in her in seconds. She let him in, eventually, but not until he felt that telltale, slow ripping of her maiden barrier before she swallowed him to the hilt.

Aislinn groaned through the lip she had bitten, swearing that she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of making her cry out or beg yet again tonight, no matter what he did, no matter how much she wanted to. And once he was inside her, stretching her and hurting her that much more, there was nothing that she wanted so much as to roll onto her side in a ball and cry her eyes out. If this was what was going to happen to her at his will any evening during the rest of her life with him, she thought she might give herself to the Church instead, or run away to America – something. She couldn't bear this ever again; it was too painful and downright humiliating.

It was as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice water over Kell. He'd never sobered up so completely or so fast in his life. She hadn't been lying. She was a virgin. Her maid had been telling him the truth that Aislinn hadn't known anything about it. She was a virgin. No man had had her but him.

A virgin. He wanted to pull out. He wanted to apologize and beg her forgiveness. He wanted to bang his head against the wall in penance. But the bald truth was that his genitals were committed to the act he'd begun, and they weren't about to let him back out. But he did stop and look down at her, his face contorted with the effort not to plunge in and out of her with complete abandon. Aislinn's eyes were closed tightly, tears leaking out of the sides. She had such a hold on that lip with her teeth that he could see that she had broken the skin.

Kell leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. "I'm sorry," he whispered, drawing back slowly, making her groan slightly. He couldn't help it. He needed her. He would have preferred if things had been different – much different – but he couldn't fix that now. At least his body was so wrapped up in her that it only took him a few strokes to lose himself in her completely. Of course, she wouldn't know that that was embarrassingly quick, and he was thankful for at least that.

When he was done, he rolled off her as quickly as he could, not wanting to prolong her misery. He thought she might get up and away from him as soon as she could, but she simply lay there, unmoving. It was almost worse than having to get up and chase her down as he'd thought he'd have to. Not moving, not saying a thing said volumes to him. She might as well be yelling at him that she was right and he was wrong. That she was as innocent as the day she was born, and he'd been as nasty to her as he could in thinking that she was a woman of loose morals – imprisoning her, shaming her in front of his relatives and the townsfolk . . .

A horrid thought struck him. If he'd been wrong about her innocence, he wondered if he'd been wrong in spanking her about being late. "Why were you late tonight?" he asked, feeling like it was going to be an answer he really didn't want to hear, but had to anyway, like a tongue that always sought out an aching tooth.

"Old Mr. Kendall died tonight. There was nothing I could do for him. I stayed with his wife and daughter as long as I dared."

Kell sighed. Every foot he put with her was wrong. Well, it was never too soon to try to make amends. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"I know what you thought," she answered in a matter of fact voice that drove shards of shame and guilt into his heart.

"I was wrong about that, too," he braved his way right to the heart of the matter, not wanting it to fester between them. Kell rolled over towards her, wanting to touch her, but feeling strongly that that wasn't the right thing to do just yet. "I'm sorry. I should have believed you like my brothers did. I just found the evidence so damning . . ."

She just shrugged. That was it. That was all the response he got. A delicate shrug. He thought it was a pretty big issue, but apparently she didn't share his opinion. She got up, sucking in her breath when she moved herself upright on the bed – no doubt several parts of her were reminding her of his presence.

"Are you done?" she asked in the same cold, clinical tone she'd been using, reaching behind her to remove her shredded chemise as she brought a nightgown out of the armoire.

Kell felt as if he'd been hit right in the chest with a huge log. He didn't know why he was having that kind of a reaction – she wasn't being nasty or ranting or raving, which she had every right to do, as far as he was concerned. But this . . . withdrawal . . . he didn't know how to deal with it. Everyone he knew confronted things head on – he and his brothers were renowned for their loud arguments, usually conducted at the local pub, especially when they were younger. She was acting as if nothing of any import had happened. He'd apologized. There were few people – alive or dead – who had ever heard him say he was sorry. Apparently she didn't appreciate how unusual that was.

He realized how self-absorbed that sounded, and knew that it was more likely that he'd hurt her more than she was willing to deal with at this point, and the problem was he didn't know what to do to make it up to her. This wasn't the kind of thing that an apology – however rare – was going to smooth over.

But he wanted to make things better between them. Much better, as soon as possible. But he wasn't going to dignify her question with an answer. Instead, he got up and began to disrobe. Aislinn did her best to ignore him, but when he started to take his clothes off, she knew she had to draw the line.

"Shouldn't you be doing that in your own room?" she hinted broadly, moving to put her hand on the doorknob.

A small, almost regretful smile touched his lips that she was so eager to get rid of him. "I am. This is my room."

Her eyebrow shot up, but she didn't waste any time in gathering some of her own clothes into a small bundle and returning to the door. But Kell had beat her to it, blocking it with his body. Aislinn stood with her hands on her hips. "Get away from the door. If you're sleeping here, then I'm sleeping somewhere else."

"No." It was a deceptively soft word, but she knew that her idea of slipping out of the room to an unused guest room wasn't going to happen as long as he was standing in front of the door. He was too damned big for her to push past or move. She wasn't going anywhere until he decided to let her. As usual.

Sighing, she moved towards the window and the chaise lounge she'd had Arthur move in for her, setting herself up there instead, with one of the extra pillows and her robe to keep her warm. Kell snickered a little at her creativity, but wasn't about to let this stand. He wanted her in bed with him, not across the room near the drafty windows. So, after she was off her guard and had settled down, however uncomfortably, Kell got up and picked her up – robe and pillow and all, placing her carefully back down on her side of their bed.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked indignantly, trying to get up again.

"Putting you where you belong. In our bed." He lay atop her so that she could barely breathe, much less move.

"Get off me, you big oaf!"

He just smiled down at her benevolently. "No. I want you right here, and as you may have noticed, I get what I want."

Aislinn rolled her eyes and puffed out a breath – she could no longer draw a deep one. "Would you please get off me so that I can breathe?"

Kell moved just a little to one side, but not enough so that it would be easy for her to wiggle out from under him, and leaned his head on his palm. "I know we got off on the wrong foot because of me and I'm sorry. But I want us to get past that. Neither of us is going to sleep anywhere from now on except right here. Eventually, I hope you'll forgive me. In the mean time, I know there's no way for me to really make it up to you, but I imagine there are some changes you've probably wanted to make around the place, and I just want you to know that you can do anything you like – improve your office or tools or

plants or whatever, paint or redecorate or anything. If you want new furniture, I'd be glad to accompany you on a trip to Edinburgh to pick out whatever your heart desires."

"Thank you," she said, her eyes remaining closed. Her lack of enthusiasm was goading, but he persevered.

A thought struck him of a surprise he could give her tomorrow, without even having to leave the house, but he decided to save that for tomorrow. "And despite what you must now think of what goes on between a man and a woman, I promise you it will be different next time – I won't be in my cups and it won't hurt you, I promise."

Her lips twitched in what he interpreted as a purely sarcastic manner, but she said nothing.

"I do know how to make it very pleasant for you, Aislinn. And I will." Kell reached for her and pulled her against him into the spoon position, brushing his hands through her hair in a manner that he hoped she would find soothing. This was going to be very hard for him. He'd never had to do much to get a woman, and his lovemaking had always been his ticket to keeping those he wanted. He prided himself on being able to pleasure even the most reluctant of women. But when it was the most important, he'd lost his head, as well as the trust of the most important woman in his life.

But he would do whatever he needed to do to make it right between them. He still clung to the hope that they might have as good a relationship as his parents had had. It wasn't too much to ask for, he hoped.

The next morning, she had slipped out of bed before him, and when Kell awoke he was alone. She had spent the night in his arms, even if she was asleep through most of it. He took it as a good sign that she really hadn't struggled much when he pulled her against him – but then, maybe that was a bad sign because she was just giving up. Kell wanted to punch something – anything – but mainly himself. She hadn't done anything wrong – in fact, despite the way he was treating her, she went ahead and did something wonderful in taking care of the people around him even though he didn't make it easy to do.

Chapter 9

He got up and got dressed quickly, hoping to find her downstairs at breakfast, or at least somewhere in the house so that he could try to arrange his day so that they spent at least some of it together. He would move or put off anything that he could if he could just spend some time with her, hopefully showing her that he wasn't as bad a man as she no doubt thought he was.

She wasn't anywhere to be found. He searched the house from bottom to top – and stopped for a moment in the attic to glance over all the furniture there. That was his surprise for her for today – if she wanted to redecorate, or change things, or take some things for her office, then she could use anything of what was up there. He just had to find her to give her the surprise.

He checked around the courtyard and asked some servants, who said she had headed out of the house early in the morning. Figuring that she might have had some early patients, he returned to the house and ate his usual hearty breakfast, intent on visiting her to see exactly what it was that had the people around him so enamored of her. He couldn't go two feet in town without someone singing her praises to him – it had been annoying before he'd know the truth about her. Now it made his heart swell – with guilt. She was doing more for them than he was, and he hadn't appreciated it.

Until now. With a set face, he put down his napkin and stalked out the door, only to catch his wife as she climbed down out of the loft in the stables. What in bloody hell was she doing? Was she meeting a lover up there? Was she cuckolding him under his nose in his own stable?

The accusations filled his mind before he had a chance to stop them, and he knew they were wrong as soon as he thought them. She wasn't that type of person. He knew it now. She wasn't. Kell did his best to keep the accusation out of his voice. "What were you doing?"

She looked very nervous. Unusually so for her, especially for a woman who had braved his wrath with out so much as turning a hair. She fidgeted, and sidled away from him, as if trying to diver his attention away from the ladder. "Nothing." Aislinn almost rolled her eyes at herself. How could she possibly look or sounded any guiltier?

Kell sighed. He wasn't going to trust her on this. He knew it. He just had to see what – or who – was in that loft, especially since he could hear something rustling around in the hay.

As he climbed the ladder, Aislinn nearly bit her lip off, and tried not to think about ways to stop him. She wanted to jump on his back and pull him down, but she knew she didn't have the strength.

When he got to the top of the ladder, Kell saw what had been making the sound. It was a young woman – one he didn't recognize. She wasn't someone from the town or even any off the offspring of the house servants. He knew everyone around. Moving closer to her, his hand outstretched as she shrunk back, he was entirely lost until she pulled her hair away from her face.

It was Aislinn. She looked just like Aislinn.

His wife was busy sneaking up the ladder behind him, then skirting around him to go to her sister, who was visibly frightened at this hulking, if unintentionally threatening man. Keeping his voice very soft so as not to scare the girl further, Kell nonetheless never took his eyes off her, "Who is this, Aislinn?"

Aislinn hugged the other woman tightly, staring at him as if she expected him to attack them or otherwise hurt them. Swallowing hard, she answered, "She's my sister."

Kell sighed, running his hand over his face and up into his hair. "I want to hear all about this when we get back to the house. But first I want to take her back there and get her cleaned up." He watched as she did some sort of organized movements with her hands, and then the girl did the same thing back at her.

"She's not sure she wants to go with you."

His eyebrow rose. "She told you that?"

"Yes," Aislinn answered indignantly. "With her hands. That's how we talk."

He looked extremely doubtful, but didn't say anything more. Apparently, the girl wasn't in her right mind, and although he wasn't sure that she belonged in the house or could be trusted to behave herself there, he wanted Aislinn to know that he wouldn't shy away from doing whatever was necessary to take care of her sister.

Hours later, they were all in the salon – all of the brothers, Aislinn, and her sister, as well as Jenny, who corroborated Aislinn's story about the need to hide her sister. Kell was appalled at the idea, and he quickly explained that there was no longer a need for Adelle to live in the stables. She would be given her choice of rooms – hopefully close to her sister – and everyone who would be close to her would need to learn the sign language that she and Aislinn used. Furthermore, he stated that Adelle would be given every possible privilege, and was to be treated with the utmost respect.

Aislinn couldn't believe her ears. She had been almost single handedly been taking care of her sister for so long, keeping her away from prying, rude eyes and pitying looks, that this turn of events seemed like she must be in a dream. To not have to hide her away, to pretend she didn't exist . . . it was a miracle, and she couldn't believe her eyes or her ears that her husband was being so wonderful about it.

Kell couldn't believe that she had felt that she needed to keep her sister's existence a secret from him, although, after hearing her story he supposed he understood it a little. If he had been in her place, he probably would have done the same thing with either of his brothers. But he was glad to take that burden off her slim shoulders.

"So she's been living in the stables all this time?" he asked, still not quite believing that someone had managed to stow away on his estate and he'd had no idea she was there.

"You can talk to Adelle, Milord. I'll translate for you," Aislinn offered. She was anxious that he like her sister, for some reason. It really didn't matter – he'd been generous to a fault as far as she was concerned that he hadn't once mentioned putting her into some sort of asylum, as she'd known so many men – and women – would have wanted to. That was why she'd kept Adelle to herself as much as possible.

"Well, it's you I really want to question, more so than her. She just seems to have been dragged along by you. You're the one who kept her in the stables instead of introducing her to me, right?"

Aislinn didn't like his tone or his accusatory words. "I did what I felt was necessary. I had no idea you'd be as accepting of her as you are, and I didn't want my sister – who, by the way, is at least as intelligent as I am if not more so – ending up in some filthy asylum. She's not crazy or retarded; she's just deaf and mute. But she can communicate, if you'll just take the time to learn the signs we use."

"I'll go further than that," Kell said, walking over to Adelle, who although she shrunk a little, stood her ground against the giant. "It's very nice to meet you, Adelle," Kell executed a courtly bow, to which Adelle responded with a beautiful curtsy. He could see her look to her sister for a translation of what he had said, but she looked at him as her hands and fingers flew in response.

"She says she's very happy to meet, you too, Milord," Aislinn repeated for her sister.

"As I said," Kell continued, patting Adelle's arm awkwardly then turning back to the collected audience, "I shall make it mandatory for anyone who works in the house to learn Adelle's language, so that she'll never have any problem making herself known if Aislinn isn't available. Furthermore, I'll have someone sent from Edinburgh to help teach Adelle how to read lips, then she'll be able to understand anyone she meets."

"Read lips?" Aislinn had always wanted Adelle to have that skill, but she'd never trusted anyone enough to find a teacher.

"Yes. How much schooling has Adelle had?" He was asking very intelligent, practical questions, but Aislinn was having a bit of a hard time dealing with them just the same. All of the decisions regarding her sister had been made by her alone, from a very early age. And here he was, trying to take over, not even consulting her about what she thought should be done.

But he was being incredibly wonderful. "She's gotten the same schooling as I have. I used to teach her anything I learned once I'd mastered it."

Kell nodded. "Good. Then there's no need to hire a tutor, also." He turned to his wife. "Find a suitable room for her, near us, I would think, and have it aired out." He extended his hand to her and guided her up the stairs. "I was going to show you this today anyway, but you can use it even more now." He helped her up a somewhat rickety set of steep, narrow stairs up to the attic of the huge house. Aislinn couldn't believe her eyes. It looked like a furniture store. There were settees and chairs and desks and books and bookcases and vanities and bedroom furniture . . . several whole houses could be outfitted from top to bottom just from this room. "Feel free to use anything you'd like from here – decide what you want and have the servants clean it up for you. If there's something you find you want that you don't see here, come get me, and we'll think about a trip to the city."

Aislinn felt like he'd just given her the keys to the kingdom. She loved to decorate and arrange things, and she was having a hard time containing her glee at being given such a generous gift. And she might even get to do a little traveling and see Edinburgh, which she would also enjoy doing . . . despite the fact that she thought he was probably going to insist on accompanying her.

Within the next few days, Adelle had settled into a beautiful room just a couple of doors down from the room that Aislinn was being forced to share with her husband, and was blossoming under all the attention she was receiving. Everyone seemed to love her as much as they loved her sister.

Aislinn had, of course, broached the idea with her stubborn husband that married couples didn't generally sleep in the same rooms – that she needed her space for her own things, and he would, naturally, need his own room for his own possessions. The problem was that that line of reasoning didn't really work with either of them – at least at this point. Kell didn't much care what he wore – beyond the fact that there were certain functions at which he had to appear in full Highland gear. Other than that, when he was just working about his lands, he had several kilts and shirts that were interchangeable, and that was perfectly fine with him – he had less than no interest in owning anything more than that for any reason whatsoever.

But he insisted that Aislinn, as the lady of the house, needed more clothes. It amazed him that he was the one having to insist about it, but he was happy about the fact that she wasn't going to be bankrupting him trying to get the latest finery from Paris every season. She needed some practical clothing – a coat that wasn't worn to the bone in several places, some hats, and several pairs of better shoes – dress and casual. But he also wanted her to have so nicer clothes in general, even just for wearing around the house. Everything she owned – which wasn't much – looked like it had been worn to within an inch of its life. He could well afford it, and he wanted his wife to be dressed nicely – unless she was receiving patients, and then she could wear whatever she wanted – it would become unrecognizably dirty almost instantaneously, anyway.

Even with her soon to be expanding wardrobe, however, he refused to find another bed to sleep in at night, and had firmly forbidden her from doing so. He didn't care what convention was. His parents had shared a bed every night of their lives, as had his grandparents and their parents and so on, for as far back as anyone could remember. The nights were too cold not to huddle for warmth when one could, and that was exactly what he intended to do – at least – with his new wife.

Aislinn and her sister had done a wonderful job turning the enormous house into more of a home. The servants were expected to be more on the ball, and they were even happy about it, because they loved the woman they served. She was smart and attentive and affectionate, and she always did whatever she could in the way of doctoring without ever expecting anything in return. Working for Lord MacNaughton had always been somewhat prestigious, but now people were clamoring to be in his employ, and he knew it wasn't because of anything he'd done.

The twins didn't do away with any of the furniture that was already in the house – it was so sparsely furnished that all they did was add, unless something worn or truly repulsive caught their eye, in which case it was consigned to the attic, which was quickly emptied of a lot of its occupants.

A tutor in lip reading was quickly located by Kell's man in Edinburgh, and Aislinn had begun to teach him signs that first night. He proved to be an extremely adept student, those big hands flying through the air with as much grace as even Adelle's little hands. And he wasn't shy about speaking to her that way, either, although he often made mistakes that had the sisters in unintended stitches. The brothers learned next, and picked up just as quickly as their eldest did. Soon their evenings were filled with conversations flowing both verbally and manually, and laughter erupting frequently both ways.

Kell was biding his time, watching his wife when he thought she wasn't looking, holding her through the night, but not pressing his rights on her again. He preferred to let her come to him, and he was prepared to wait for that event.

At least another week or so.

That was probably all he would be able to stand. Having her in his arms every night, that firm, compact bottom pressed against his privates – it was enough to drive him even crazier than he already was around her. All she had to do was enter a room – bloody hell, all she had to do was enter his thoughts – and he became agonizingly aroused and had to shift himself all around in polite company to try to shield his reaction. His brothers were always giggling when he did that, but he refused to acknowledge their gleeful looks. If he ever did, it would be all over for the MacNaughton brothers – all three of them.

Adelle was taking some of their rabid attention away from him, though. He was beginning to wonder if one of his brothers might ask him for her hand, but then he couldn't see that either of them was a clear favorite. Adelle had a sunnier disposition than Aislinn did – but, in his wife's defense, he could see why she was a little more serious than her sister – but then, she hadn't really had a lot to worry about in her life – her sister had always seen to things. Adelle was a natural born flirt, and when she didn't want to know what was being said to her, she merely turned away from the person who was speaking at her, thus effectively ending the conversation. She had only tried that trick on him once and he had let her know in no uncertain terms that he wouldn't put up with it any more so than if she didn't have hearing and speech problems.

She was very careful not to do that with him any more.

But neither Grant nor Burke had put his foot down yet that Kell could tell. It would happen eventually, he supposed, probably once one of them had been culled and branded. Adelle was going to get an eyeful if she continued to try to play things that way when they weren't competing for her affections. None of the MacNaughton men were known for their infinite patience . . . although Kell was beginning to think that he should put his own name in the hat for saint.

Aislinn didn't seem to be warming towards him one bit. She stopped trying to get into bed with clothes on, because he had patted her bottom – hard – twice in a row when she'd done it, cuddling her back to his front while she was still sobbing and her only slightly roasted nates surrounded him with their glowing warmth. She never touched him. She never showed him any sort of affection, and never solicited any from him. She tolerated his closeness in bed, probably because she'd deduced correctly that if she'd put up too much of a protest he wouldn't hesitate to warm her bottom again for her, even if he'd already done exactly that just a few minutes before.

He had to stop daydreaming about his wife, he chastised himself as he barely got out of the way of a rampaging bull that was heading right for him. That wasn't the first time today he'd almost been gored to death. She had to be a witch to have gotten him so entranced. It was the lack of her that was doing it to him, he knew. If he had just insisted on his marital rights and taken her every night – several times each night – and gotten his fill of her, he wouldn't be thinking about her at inappropriate times . . . like now . . . and church . . . and when he was trying to concentrating on the boring paperwork that went along with running a large estate . . . and when he first woke up in the morning and she was sometimes asleep against his side . . .

He was living in a state of perpetual, painful, compete arousal. His balls had gone well beyond just blue – they were working on deep purple by now. It was his fixation on his lithe, gorgeous wife that caused him to be much less vigilant than he usually was about where he and his horse were going. The horse reared unexpectedly, throwing him to the ground and knocking his head against a rock.

She hadn't been with him for very long, but already Aislinn knew that it wasn't like Kell to miss a meal. If he had expected to be gone for dinner, he would have told her – it was an excellent habit he'd developed, and she'd come to rely on it to plan their meals with the cook. But dinner had come and gone, and there was no sign of him. The last person who had seen him was Grant, who had thought that he was heading towards the house to do some paperwork before dinner.

Aislinn was trying to keep herself from thinking the worse, but it wasn't working very well. In the middle of dinner, Grant and Burke took some of the footmen and stable hands and set out to find her husband. Adelle, who had been following the conversation through everyone's translations, came to sit next to her sister and hugged her. It was a rarity that she got to comfort Aislinn – it was almost always the other way around. Aislinn was so strong, and generally wouldn't accept much in the way of comfort from anyone. But Adelle wrapped her thin arms around her sister's equally frail shoulders and just rocked her, stopping every once in a while to kiss the side of her head.

It seemed like forever before Aislinn heard the horses in the courtyard. She jumped up, Adelle trailing after her, and ran through the double front doors only to see her husband coming towards her, held up between his two brothers.

"Kell!" Aislinn couldn't keep the exclamation from bursting through her lips. She ran to him, but as soon as he saw her coming, he straightened up as much as he could – which unfortunately wasn't nearly enough for him to wipe that scared look of her face, nor the pained one off his own.

"I'm fine, lassie," he breathed. Despite his considerable discomfort, he took heart at the fact that she looked honestly worried about him.

"Bring him up to the room, please, gentlemen. Sile, go to the cottage and bring me my bag. Jenny, get a bottle of scotch and some sheets to rip into bandages."

His little wife was quite a commander when given the chance. Everyone danced to her tune, including her brothers, who were having a devil of a time complying with her orders. She had run up ahead of them, only to return to kibitz and tell them to hurry along faster so that she could get to him and treat him.

"We're haulin' him as fast as we can, Ma'am," Burke informed her with a wry look. "I think you've put on at least a stone since Sile started cooking, Kell. You'd best cut back – oooooof!" His older brother was feeling well enough to drive his elbow rudely into his side.

The two men laid Kell down none to gently on the bed as Aislinn immediately began to flutter around him. She could see the big gash on the side of his head, but he wasn't walking under his own power, either, although there was nothing gory that she could see immediately.

Grant and Burke exited quickly, realizing just how unnecessary they were, but they kept looking back at him as if they couldn't quite believe what they were seeing. Aislinn, of course, was too busy hovering over her patient to notice their quizzical looks, and Kell had been trying to glare them out of the room since they'd put him on the bed. Sile arrived with Aislinn's bag as they were leaving, and Jenny had

already left some scotch on one of their side tables. Aislinn chased Sile out with her hearty thanks as soon as she could grab the bag from the girl and close the door behind her. The three of them – four once Adelle joined them – stood staring at the bedroom door for a short moment, some of them libidiously wondering what exactly was going on, and some wishing that they could take care of someone they loved.

Aislinn was buzzing around him like a busy little bee, patting him down quite provocatively and asking him a million questions. “Were you knocked out? Does your back or neck hurt? Can you see all right? Can you turn your neck without pain? Does it hurt when I touch you here?”

In answer to her last question, he merely grinned evilly and moved her ever seeking hand to the prominently tended portion of his muddied and grass stained kilt. “No more than when you don’t touch me here, lass,” he groaned.

Scarlet right down to her toes, Aislinn removed her hand as if he’d deliberately held it to a hot flame, trying desperately to cling to her most professional of demeanors. She might not be recognized as a doctor or been to school for it, but she had a healing touch and a good knowledge of herbs, as well as a budding subscription to the new fangled tendency to want everything and anything that touched a patient to be as clean as possible.

“Which of your legs hurts most?”

Kell groaned as she probed gently, and it had nothing to do with pleasure, unfortunately. Here she was, touching him voluntarily for the first time, and he was in agony with her every poke. “Both. Rory managed to fall back and roll over me.”

Aislinn let another dramatic exclamation escape, and Kell felt heartened at the sound. She seemed to care whether or not he was hurt. It wasn’t much, he supposed, but it was something, and he was willing to take pretty much anything as a sign of a step in the right direction.

Chapter 10

He relaxed and watched her from between eyelids that were mere slits, until he saw her opening a bottle of twelve year old Scotch that Jenny must've found in his office. Kell was in the process of trying to sit up, figuring that she was going to pour him a dram of sweet fortification, but instead she poured it liberally over the gash on his head, and he almost screamed the house down.

"What in heaven's name do you think you're doin', woman?" he roared.

Aislinn continued to dab at him as if he hadn't just nearly deafened her with his unnecessary outcry. "Why I would think that it would have been obvious to you – I'm cleaning your wound." She sounded as if she was speaking to someone who had been discovered to be quite slow and a bit tetchy.

"Not with the best liquor in the county you don't! Are you out of your mind?" He made a grab for the bottle she held in her far hand, but Aislinn easily kept it out of his reach, and every lunge made his head throb as if he'd been on a five day pub crawl.

"Stay still."

"Give me the bottle, woman."

"Stay still."

"Give me the bottle woman."

Neither of them was likely to give in – they were both stubborn people. But Aislinn knew she had the upper hand, since he couldn't go very far at this point without his brothers to help him. She didn't even want him trying, though, which she knew he would do if she didn't comply. So she took the easy way out, knowing in her heart that she could easily have won the argument. She surrendered the bottle to him and got up, grabbing a different bottle and holding it up to him for his approval. "Is this sufficiently cheap to use?"

He nodded, not missing a swallow from the bottle he'd immediately raised to his lips.

Aislinn wasn't going to say anything to him about drinking. She'd already recognized that, for a Scotsman, he didn't favor the drink anywhere near as much as she'd thought he would, so if he wanted some medicinal alcohol to help him tolerate the pain he must have been in, that was fine with her. She had a small supply of laudanum, but hesitated to use it if something else was available. Some people reacted badly to laudanum, so she used it as sparingly as she could.

Once his head was cleaned and dressed, Aislinn did what she really should have addressed first, but she couldn't quite make herself until now. She raised his kilt to his hips so that she had a clear view of the entirety of both of his legs, trying desperately to be as detached as she could about what she was looking at, despite the fact that she knew her skin was as red as it ever got from a sunburn.

Kell had put the almost empty bottle on the nightstand and leaned back against the headboard, anxious to see exactly what she was going to do with and about him. He loved to see her blush like this. It was incredibly becoming and very endearing, reminding her of just how innocent she still was. She was his wife, and he had barely made love to her. Actually, he had yet to make love with her. He'd taken her virginity, but it was a clumsy drunken episode and not indicative of the lover he could be – he desperately wanted to be – for her.

He'd sworn to himself that he'd let her get used to him, even come to him for affection and sex, rather than forcing himself on her as he had their first time.

He hadn't taken into account the fact that she would end up doctoring him, though, staring down at his naked legs after having pulled his kilt up to lie on his hips. No doubt she could see what she did to him with just a touch, not that she was bothering to look at him anywhere but where she absolutely had to. God, she was running her soft hands up and down his legs, making him groan from something distinctly other than the occasional pain she was causing.

Frowning in concentration, lips twisted, she started again at the top of his right thigh, leaning over him with that light lilac scent of hers, her hips pressing against the side of his as she prodded him as gently as she could. "Hmmmmmm. You're not groaning in the same place twice."

Kell swallowed hard, realizing that he was going to have to try to keep his desire under control as much as possible.

She poked and pushed, hitting several truly tender areas. But then she moved to the insides of his thighs, and he couldn't resist the urge to pull her across him, arranging her on top of him, with her body between his legs, his prominent desire poking her at least as insistently as she had been prodding him. "What are you doing? I need to finish examining you -"

Before she could finish her sentence, he very, very carefully leaned down to melt his lips down onto hers. Considering how he felt, it was an extremely non-demanding kiss. He wanted to flip her over and drive into her. He wanted to slant his mouth across hers and delve into her with his tongue. He wanted to rip her shirtfront and chemise and gather those firm, soft mounds into his palms to tweak her nipples into ripeness just before he claimed them with his hot, wet mouth.

But he did none of that. He held her in place with one arm across the small of her back, but didn't try to force anything. He just . . . kissed her.

And she wasn't struggling. In fact, her left hand came up to cup the side of his cheek. She pulled away first, but not far, just enough to look down at him. "I was very afraid when you were so late," she admitted.

Kell drank that in. It was a balm to his savaged ego. It was the first thing she'd said to him that indicated any sort of feeling for him beyond anger and or annoyance. He squeezed his arm a little, and kissed her cheek. "I'm fine, really. My legs hurt, but then anyone's legs would hurt if a big behemoth like Rory had his way with them. I'm lucky to be alive," he said, then continued in a whisper, "and I'm very lucky to have you as my wife, Lady MacNaughton."

Aislinn's eyes grew very large and to her horror her tears began to splat down onto his chest. "I - I wish you wouldn't say things like that."

Kell hugged her tight to his chest, amazed that she would allow him to do so, running his fingers up and down her back. "Why not? It's the truth. You're a wonderful wife - you've organized the house, gotten a much better cook, doctored everyone in the county, I swear! I'm very proud to have you as my wife."

Instead of getting better, her tears increased until she was sobbing on his chest as if he'd just taken the tawse to her naughty little bottom. Gingerly, so as to hurt either of them the least, he leaned over so that they were both on their sides. His legs were moving much better than they had been. There was some swelling around his knees, but he could bend them and Kell figured that a few days in bed should make him right as rain.

But his wife was bawling as if she hadn't a friend in the world, and he didn't like it. She wasn't the crying type - unless he'd given her something obvious to cry about. Her sobs were the only thing he'd found so far that could completely eliminate his desire. Kell found himself in a quandary. He'd never really had to deal with a crying woman before. Certainly not a crying wife. And he wasn't used to not knowing what to do. He was the one with all the answers, the one who was always in control.

This was new territory for him, and he didn't like it at all. He didn't know why she was crying, and he had no idea at all how to get her to stop. So he did what he wanted to do - he put his arms around her and pulled her to him, rocking slightly, as if she was a cranky bairn. Surprisingly, it seemed to work.

She relaxed and settled into his arms, and her crying died away as if it was never there. Kell pulled back experimentally, looking down into her face. Aislinn looked back at him, her eyes cloudy with shed tears but clearer than he'd ever seen them. There was no fear, no loathing, no anticipation of pain at his hands. She was just looking at him as if seeing him for the first time.

And then she did something that brought every part of him to full attention: she leaned over and kissed him, full on the mouth, even going so far as to slant her lips over his and touch his teeth tentatively with her tongue.

He resisted the urge to squeeze the stuffing out of her, and just let his arms settle naturally around her, not too loose, not too tight. It had never occurred to him that she might take things into her own hands, as it were, but he wasn't about to object.

Aislinn pulled back to see him considering her with an almost amusingly hopeful look. She knew what he wanted, but hadn't been able to face the idea of a repeat of what had happened the first time they had had marital relations. It had hurt. Granted, he had been drunk and thought that she wasn't a virgin, so he was far from careful with her, but it was still a scar on her soul and her heart. She had so wanted to think that they were a good match, and could make a reasonable go of it, perhaps even be happy.

Other than their terrible misunderstanding, he seemed to be a pretty good man – he didn't drink to excess, usually – and he obviously loved his brothers a great deal. She wondered if he would spread some of that love over to her if she let him do what he wanted . . . but then, he seemed content to let her set the pace this time.

She bit her lip, though, and asked the question that was on her mind. "Are you – are you hurting too much . . ." she would never be able to say what she was hinting at. Never.

Touched at her concern, Kell flicked the tip of her nose. "I would rise from my grave to be with you, Aislinn," he breathed, and the words came from the very bottom of his heart.

She looked at him, as if weighing the truth of what he'd said, then leaned forward to kiss him again, starting out tentatively then deepening it slowly, slightly, carefully enough that he was sure that he was going to die, that his heart was going to pound its way out of his chest and into hers. When her tongue first touched his, he nearly lost control of himself, thrusting automatically and making her start a little away from him, but he clamped down as much as he could on his instincts and intentions and remained still, enticing her back to him with his nonthreatening quietness.

The kissing went on forever, and Kell knew he had never indulged in such an orgy of mouths and tongues in all his life. It was incredible, but he wanted more – much, much more. Yet he didn't want to pressure her. So he suffered, but not quite in silence. He relaxed his usual tight rein and moaned softly against her mouth.

Aislinn's heart swelled at the sounds he was making – it sounded like he was truly enjoying what she was doing – and, to her surprise, she was also. She would never have thought that kissing would be so enjoyable. She'd been kissing people all her life, and it had never felt like this!

But parts of her were craving even more of him – she wanted to touch him. All of him. She wanted to feel all of his skin against all of hers, with no clothing as a barrier. It was an entirely sinful wish, she knew, but also one she intended on fulfilling.

Her husband pulled a little away from her to sprinkle butterfly kisses all over her face. "I just want to say something to you. This is our bed. We are alone in this room. What goes on between us is entirely between the two of us – and whatever happens, as long as we both want it – will be glorious, I can tell." Kell caught her eyes and stared into them seriously. "There's nothing you could do to me that would hurt me. I adore your touch, and you can touch me anywhere you like." He rolled onto his back and stretched, then finished with, "I am yours to do with as you wish."

Aislinn's eyes grew round, and he almost burst when she innocently licked her lips, looking him up and down eagerly. "Would it hurt you to take your clothes off?" Aislinn, always curious about things regarding the human body, had wondered just exactly what the thing looked like that he'd used to stab up

into her when he'd taken her virginity. If he was going to let her do as she pleased with him, then she was going to take full advantage. If he thought that she was unladylike for it, then so be it.

Kell was only too happy to disrobe for her. It was a question he'd wanted to hear from her for a long time.

When he lay stretched out on the bed before her as she sat tailor fashioned, Aislinn knew immediately exactly what weapon he'd used – and what a weapon it was. That part of him – that Jenny had said was a penis – was humongous, and stood out from his body as if it was an entity in and of itself. It was slightly curved, veined in blue but overall reddish at the same time, with a big, bulbous end that looked like there were very few places it was likely to go comfortably.

And well she knew that. But still, it was fascinating. She reached out tentatively towards it, then glanced up at him. "Is it okay if I touch it?"

Kell swallowed hard, hoping it was. "Yes." He wasn't hesitant in his response, because he didn't want her to think that he didn't want her to touch him. He did. He just wasn't sure that he would live through it, was all. His body was just about as tense as it had ever been in his life, and he waited patiently for the moment when her small fingers would close around him, and send him straight to heaven.

But they didn't wrap around him at first. Instead, having gotten permission from him to touch that part in which she was most interested, Aislinn started at his forehead, and asked a question she'd been dying to ask since Jenny had given her that little talk about husbands and wives and what they did in the privacy of their own bedroom. "Are – are there any other ways that men and women are made differently besides this?" She waved her spare hand towards his huge erection while the fingertips of the other hand ran gently down his face, as if she was trying to learn every crag and dimple.

He wasn't sure he whether or not he could give her a coherent answer, but he tried. He was already breathing heavily, as if he'd already impaled himself on her, which was his most fervent wish right now. "No, lass, I – I don't think so."

Aislinn nodded and continued to touch him – everywhere. Those tiny fingers ignited fires over his broad shoulders and down to his own fingertips, then across his collarbone and down the other arm. Aislinn adjusted herself a little, and leaned over him, putting her palms on his chest, sliding them down and over his nipples.

Kell couldn't help it. He jumped as if she'd hit him with a whip. Aislinn noted his reaction, almost clinically, then did it again, carefully watching him. He groaned loudest when she touched his nipples, so she settled there for a while, enjoying the fact that there was a second way that she could elicit cries of pleasure from him.

She carefully plucked at his nipples, which made him arch and moan, writhing beneath her touch.

Suddenly, Kell abandoned his passive role and reached up to the collar of Aislinn's dress, and with one sure tug he ripped it down the front. Her chemise was worn and frayed and even more easily dispatched with. Aislinn tried to back away from him, but he held her in place until he'd left her top half nude and exposed to his lustful gaze.

Then he took her stiff arms and put her palms over his own nipples, and did the same thing to her, cupping those delightful breasts and flicking his finger over her nipples, coaxing them out as gently as possible. Aislinn finally got what he was trying to do, and as she began to want to writhe and moan from his ministrations, she started to do the same things he was doing to her, to him. He was showing her that their pleasure in each other was mutual. That what she did to him that felt good, would feel just as good to her.

They stayed that way for a long time, fondling each other, plucking nipples, moaning and groaning and playing a sensual follow the leader that had them both breathing heavily by the end.

Kell couldn't take any more. He removed his hands from Aislinn's breasts, and removed her hands from him, saying, "Stretch out beside me, Aislinn. I want to feel you against me." But he stopped her from moving first, and removed the rest of her clothes.

Aislinn began to shiver as the remainder of her clothing fell to the floor – partly from nerves, and partly just from the discomfort of the situation. Despite his rules about not wearing clothes to bed, she wasn't used to being nude, especially not in front of a man – not even him.

Kell held his arms up to her, and she came into them somewhat reluctantly, but Kell didn't give her time to wallow in feeling uncomfortable. He took her hand and placed it where he'd been wanting it desperately for an hour or more, closing her fingers around his throbbing self and trying not to pump in and out of them.

Aislinn looked down at the way he filled her hand, felt how solid he was, how much power was there – no wonder it had hurt her when he'd invaded her body! He was practically as thick around as her wrist, and completely solid and unyielding. Yet his skin there was soft – not rough and callused as she pictured in her head from her previous experience with it. The tip was like velvet, and she began to concentrate her attentions there, enclosing him and pressing him through her fist, twisting slowly, loving the feel of him in her hand.

Kell jerked his hips away from her, making Aislinn look up at him, startled out of her reverie. "Whoa there, milady, or this'll be over before it's started."

Of course, she had no idea what his statement meant. She only knew that he was pressing her onto her back, his hand feathering lightly over her lower stomach before it settled to cup her mound. Aislinn twitched, trying not to, but not succeeding. The last time he'd been down there, he'd hurt her, and the response was natural.

"Shahh shahhhh shahhhh," he murmured, slipping his middle finger between those plump, moist lips, dipping down to see if any evidence of her arousal greeted his fingertip – and it did. He was bathed in her moisture, which he crooked onto his fingertip and brought forward a little, to that tiny bud of hers that lay in wait for him to teach it the miracles of her body.

As he stroked the broad, flat pad of his finger over and around and up and over her nub, he began to slowly slide himself in and out of her lightly curled fingers. They each groaned at the same time, and Kell leaned down to swallow that sound of hers into his own mouth. "Dear Lord, woman, you're going to kill me with the way you make me feel."

Aislinn didn't know why, but his words made what his finger was doing to her feel that much more intense. She liked that he responded to her – it made her feel powerful, when she'd had little of that familiar feeling since she'd been under his protection. He'd been the one in charge, the one in control, the one who confined her to her room and the one who had forced himself on her and hurt her with his body, not to mention taking her over his lap like a naughty little schoolgirl whenever he saw fit.

But here, now, she held a part of him in her hand that meant something to him, that affected him incredibly, that could make him cry out and jerk his hips and cry out to God. Power.

And something more.

Something she didn't want to consider too closely. She was beginning to like him – this gruff, autocratic Lord of all he surveyed. Worse than that, she thought she was beginning to love him, and that was the last thing she needed.

But still, that unfamiliar feeling was there, mixed up with the sensations he was conjuring in that dark, mysterious area between her legs, pleasuring her almost beyond endurance, making her blush and writhe and jerk her hips in much the same rhythm she'd seen him use as she stroked his length up and down.

Kell kissed her breasts and face as he pleased her, taking her mouth when he deliberately wandered a little further down her crevasse, tickling her about the very opening that was weeping its tribute to him and what he was doing to her. Aislinn was trying to wiggle away but wasn't getting very far. Kell held her fast but made sure he caused her no pain. Slowly, very slowly, he eased his finger up inside her, despite her protestations.

Aislinn fully expected that what he was doing would hurt her as much as it had before when he'd used that other part of himself, but it didn't. He slid right into her, much to her surprise, and it felt . . . good. Almost too good. And then he started to move it – wiggling it just a bit inside her, making her buck within his hard arms, then plunging in and out of her, slowly at first, then faster until he was being less gentle and careful and it was just what she wanted – she wanted him hard and fast within her, her hips lifting to greet each thrust.

“Ahhh, lassie, you're so damned beautiful like this,” Kell sighed, aching to join them together in a more natural way, but not wanting to upset her and fall on her like he wanted to.

“Please,” Aislinn breathed, hating that she sounded like she was begging, and she didn't even know for what. She sounded uncomfortably like she was begging him to stop spanking her, and yet it was pleasure he was subjecting her to now – unbelievable, aching, throbbing pleasure that was going to drive her out of her mind if he didn't stop. But if he stopped, she was sure she would wither away and die from the lack of him.

Kell thought the time was right, finally. He'd begun to wonder if he'd live until this point, but apparently he had. None the worse for the wear, but not if you asked his privates. He was as tender, as careful as he could be in that state, parting her legs a little more, then a little more, until he could fit himself between them, lying down atop her, watching her face all the while, trying to gauge just how she was taking what he was doing.

Chapter 11

She just seemed to be watching him, apprehension creeping into the back of her eyes, and she was saving on her lip fit to make it bleed, but she wasn't trying to get away. There was just a wariness about her that he didn't like – he wanted her to want him, to want what he was going to do to her. But that first bad experience was still in her mind – until he replaced it, millions of times over – with a great one, which was just what he intended to do.

Kell held Aislinn's face between his hands and caught her eye. "Just like my finger didn't hurt you when it was inside you, the rest of me won't either now. I promise. You'll be stretched a little, but it won't hurt," he said the latter with a lot of conviction, and hoped to hell it was true, positioning himself at her nearly virgin entrance, feeling the warm moistness of her christening him, and feeling better about what he was going to do because he knew what that wetness meant – she wanted him. She wanted him!

He took it as carefully and slowly as he could, more gently rocking himself into her than thrusting or plunging violently, as his genitals wanted him to do. All he wanted – all he wanted as a result – was to be completely surrounded by her marvelous feminine warmth, and the incremental, tedious method he was using to achieve that result was going to put him over the edge. His clamp on his control was slipping as surely as he was seating himself within her.

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his buttocks that was quickly moved higher, to his lower back, and then, all at once, he found himself completely inside her, as far as he could go. Both of them heaved an audible sigh of relief. Then Kell pulled back a little and started an inexorable rhythm, that Aislinn joined, wrapping her arms around his broad back and holding on for dear life. Mid stride, Kell reached down between them to put his index finger on that very pleasant spot of hers, and continued to rock back and forth, in and out of her.

"Kell – stop – no –" she breathed, sounding scared.

He was of a mind that she was close to her own end for the first time, and it was frightening her. But he didn't really have a manner to soothe her – his entire body was occupied. So he used his voice, low and soothing. "That's it, Aislinn. That's it. Relax. I'm right here. I won't let anything bad happen to you. It's a wondrous thing between you and I, it is. It's a gift you'd be giving me, and that I'll get in a minute or two, too. Let go. Let it come to you, lass. Let go –"

And she did. To her embarrassment, she did. Loudly. She screamed with it, unable to control the volume of her voice, the pleasure was much too intense for any sort of reins to be put on it. It flowed through her, convulsing in that one sweet spot but spreading out from there to every molecule in her body, and out through her fingertips, she swore, and right into him, the man who had brought such infinite paradise to her.

Her husband.

As she convulsed around him, Kell let go of himself and found his own ecstasy within a few short strokes, grunting gutturally over her, pressing himself as far into her as he could possibly manage, trying to merge the two of them completely together, and nearly passing out with the effort.

The two of them couldn't move for the longest time, not that they wanted to. Kell laid his head on Aislinn's heaving breast and just lay there, trying to get his senses back, and they didn't seem like they were any particular hurry to return, not that he really cared. He didn't have anything to do tonight except love his woman, and he intended on doing that several times to cement their physical relationship. She responded to him with an abandon that was something he'd never seen before in any woman – tentative at

first, but near the end – he'd watched her explode at his own behest, to fly apart in his arms, and heard her scream from the joy of it.

It was just what he'd always wanted – to have a woman – his wife – who enjoyed his embrace, who reveled in the closeness of their bodies, rather than disparaging it or finding it distasteful. Kell knew that in that one encounter, he'd lost his heart to her, completely. She was a handful, his wife, but she was already much beloved by people he'd known all his life. His brothers thought she was a saint, and she'd put up with the way he'd jumped to awful conclusions about her. She was just what he wanted, what he needed.

And she was his.

Kell turned to Aislinn several times that night, driving the both of them to holler their profound pleasure at the merger of their bodies. He stopped himself the fourth time he reached for her though, having noticed that she was wincing just a bit. He could have enjoyed her several more times over – despite the fact that he was no longer a randy youth – but he didn't want her to associate their lovemaking with anything but pleasure.

She was still asleep, her face pale and a little wan from being up all night. He tugged her to him for a little while longer, then decided to see if he could stand, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and groaning about it as quietly as he could. His knees were killing him – they were quite swollen, above and below as well. But he managed to stand, and walked around a little, and the more he used and bent the joints, the better they felt. His head was hurting pretty badly – and he wasn't the least surprised that he hadn't felt it at all during the night – there was too much else going on.

He stood for the longest time, grinning brainlessly down at her, until she stirred and looked up at him, sleepy eyed, blinking owlshly. "What are you doing up? You should be in bed!" Aislinn got up quickly and stood beside him, her hands on his hips to help steady him.

"I'm fine, woman, I'm fine," Kell hugged her to him tightly. "My head hurts a little, but it's hard as a rock – it'd take more than that to break it open. My legs are a better since I've been up and walking. If I stay in bed, they'll just stiffen up."

"Sit down, sit down," she fussed, ignoring what he was saying and using the pull to summon some one from the kitchen.

Jenny knocked on the door and came in to curtsy to the both of them prettily, taking in the condition of the bed and grinning broadly.

"Please bring me a cup of hot water, Jenny. I want to make his Lordship some willow bark tea for his aches and pains this morning."

"Yes, Ma'am," Jenny was off immediately.

"I don't need any tea, Mrs. MacNaughton," Kell started, but she was completely ignoring him in her doctoring frenzy. She peeked under his bandage while Kell's hands roamed freely over her more private places. She slapped his hands away with little conviction. Her body had become much more accustomed to his touch, and she was doing her best not to pay any attention to him at all, although that wasn't quite working. "I think you're all right today, but this evening I'm going to change this bandage and put some more salve on it. Just please take it easy today and don't do a lot. Don't jostle yourself – don't ride for a few days. Please."

She was asking so prettily, how could he refuse her anything? "Yes, Ma'am. I'll be careful, I promise."

He answered, standing slowly to give her a hard hug. "I don't know about you, but I'm famished. Something about last night worked up a considerable appetite . . ." he winked at her rakishly. "Shall we breakfast together, milady?"

"I'll be down in just a minute. If you see Jenny would you send her back in to help me dress, please?"

That made him turn mid stride. "No need to bother Jenny with that, lassie. I'd be more than happy to play ladies made to you."

She was amazed she could still blush after some of the things he'd done to her last night. Parts of her were still tingling from it, kind of like the ones that still stung after a spanking. "You don't have to do that . . ."

He came forward and tilted her chin up to him with his index finger. "I know I don't. I like to."

So he did, and actually was pretty darned good at it. Aislinn decided not to question him too carefully about where he'd acquired such skills . . . she figured she really didn't want to find out. When she was fully clothed, and having been thoroughly groped by her licentious husband, they went downstairs to breakfast together, and the brothers nearly broke out in applause. It was the first time they'd done that, and Grant and Burke somehow recognized that things were going well between the two of them.

Somehow at breakfast talk turned to them having some sort of a ball or soiree. The brothers somehow decided that a celebration was in order, for some reason, and so a ball was planned right there at the breakfast table, for two weeks from that day.

During the next two weeks, in addition to her usual round of seeing patients and overseeing the running of the household, which was running much more smoothly than it ever had been, according to the brothers, Aislinn also made time to discuss with Sile what should be on the menu for the dance. She was extremely busy, and fell into bed each night near exhaustion. But her husband wasn't any help in that area, since as soon as he wrapped his arms around her they were both lost, and often made love until dawn, then had to get up and do it all again.

Aislinn was running down quickly, and just before the dance, Kell took a good look at her as she struggled to get out of bed, and pushed her back down.

"Kell," she wailed, "we can't! I have to get up!"

"No, you don't, Aislinn lass. I wasn't going to have a roll with you – not that I wouldn't like to, you understand – but I want you to stay in bed today and rest. You'll be all up in arms tomorrow with the preparations and people arriving, and I want you to take some time today to sleep. You look like I've been working you hard from dawn to dusk –"

Aislinn cut into his speech. "It's the dusk to dawn that you've been driving me hard, milord," she interrupted cheekily, rolling over despite her protestations and nearly falling back to sleep immediately.

Kell patted her bottom possessively. "Watch yourself, woman. I haven't heard you complaining, although I should have. You're worn out. You are not to get out of bed today for anything other than to use the necessary. If I find you have, you'll be sitting on a very sore derriere all day tomorrow, and I'd hate to have you have to explain just why to our guests."

She turned back to give him a nasty look, but knew he was as good as his word. He used the bell pull in the corner to summon Jenny, who enlisted in the cause as soon as he explained it to her. Aislinn huffed from the bed, but she really wasn't putting up too much of a fuss.

At least not until her husband left, anyway.

As soon as he'd given her a lingering kiss goodbye, Aislinn sat up and gave Jenny a list of things that needed to be done or at least checked on. It was the day before the ball, and there were a thousand things to do. She chafed badly at being confined to bed, and seriously considered disobeying her lord and master.

But then, she knew he would have told the entire household that she was not to get out of bed, and she also knew that they knew what side their bread was buttered, and she'd be ratted out immediately, as soon as her toes hit the floor, despite how well she'd taken care of them.

So she sighed and instead ran Jenny and Sile ragged. The cook had to leave the kitchen to come up and discuss things with her mistress, which made lunch and dinner both late, which didn't set well with his lordship, but he got no sympathy at all when he complained as they ate dinner together in their room. He wouldn't even let her come down for dinner. Instead, they ate together and then he gave Aislinn a long, sleep inducing massage that, although he was more than ready and willing, didn't end in sex. He wanted her to sleep and recover. He also wanted to teach himself some control around her, so that he wasn't exhausting her every night. He needed to learn to pace himself – they had their whole lives together.

Aislinn awoke the next morning well before her husband, and lay there with his head on her shoulder, their limbs entwined, wondering if he could like her just a little bit. She knew better than to look for love – their relationship had been much more along the lines of an exchange of cold hard cash. But she hoped he might at least come to like her a little, enough that he wouldn't feel the need to seek out any other woman. Even though he sometimes treated her like a naughty little girl, she liked him a lot. He was an intelligent and honorable man. He'd admitted it and apologized when he was wrong about her. Most men would never bother doing so to their wife. He let her have a free rein with the house and wasn't a drunken sot, either.

She just hoped that she could be enough for him.

That evening, the guests had all arrived and were, as far as she could tell, was having enjoying themselves. Nearly everyone was dancing in the big hall, or indulging in the refreshments that she and Sile had so carefully planned. Everything had come off wonderfully. She was enchanted by the presents her husband had given her for this evening – he'd had a gorgeous lavender and lilac dress sent, with a beautiful pastel underskirt and a hat to match, as well as a parasol and a fan, and shoes to match. Kell dressed her himself, promising more clothing to come on a trip they would take shortly to the city. He wanted to take her there and replace her entire wardrobe, such as it was – everything from the inside out – new shoes, hose, boots, coats, hats, day dresses, evening dresses . . . he even promised to have the couturier make her something to wear while she was seeing patients – a smock or something to hold her tools and potions.

He was so generous, Aislinn couldn't believe it. A trip and a new wardrobe! Surely that meant that he felt something for her – a Scotsman and his money were rarely parted without a very good reason. Maybe he liked her, just a little bit.

Her other hint that he might just feel something for her was that he had filled up her dance card before she'd even put it on. He'd saved two dances – one for each of his brothers, but all of the others were claimed by him.

Actually, they were each somewhat obligated to dance with others, but he let her know in no uncertain terms that he didn't like that idea, and gave her up only reluctantly to the other gentlemen, who were all sweethearts and took very good care of her. He reclaimed her from them after every dance, even if someone else was determined to take her away from him for the next dance. At one point, he declared that she looked famished, and he sat her on his lap and fed her from his own plate, which just wasn't done in polite company. Married couples could be cordial to each other, but they did not indulge in public displays of affection. But Kell didn't seem to worry much about that particular convention. He fed her and kissed her, then fed her a little more and kissed her a little more . . .

Until Priscilla Douglas came over to greet them, having arrived late as usual. Kell stood, putting his wife down in the process, and making Priscilla laugh heartily behind her fan. "Well, I had come over to beg a dance from you, but I can see that you're much more pleasantly occupied . . ."

Priscilla was an old friend, and couldn't be refused. With an apologetic look back at Aislinn, he allowed himself to be led onto the floor. Apparently that broke the ice, and from then on he could barely come up for air.

Aislinn sat by herself for a while, nodding politely at anyone who met her eyes. Suddenly, there was an occupant in the chair beside her who wasn't her husband, it was some woman she recognized as having been introduced to during the wedding reception – Charlotte something.

"Hello, Aislinn dear," she greeted the younger woman as if they were the best of friends, when she should have been addressing her as milady.

"Charlotte," Aislinn said politely, wondering what the woman wanted.

"I was so surprised to get the invitation to this ball. Like everyone else, I had heard that things weren't going so well between you and your husband . . . although I can't say that I'm surprised. Kell is . . . well, let's just say that he's not everyone's kind of man. I've heard, though, that if anyone could handle him, it would be you . . ."

Aislinn couldn't believe the not so subtle attack she was facing in her own home! She stood, her hand drawn back to slap the woman silly. But someone had grabbed her wrist from behind, and it was Kell. "Whoa there, lass. Please try to restrain yourself from beating up on our guests," he hissed into her ear.

Leave him to take her side, Aislinn thought, livid with the both of them. Regardless of how it looked to anyone else, she took a step back from them and gathered her skirts, practically running for the stairs. She could feel everyone's eyes on her, but it didn't matter to her in the least. She ran right to their room and threw herself on the bed. If that was what Charlotte thought, then she was sure that everyone else knew and thought exactly the same thing – that she and Kell were having problems, and that she was a loose woman.

Aislinn was mortified. She buried her head in her pillow and sobbed as if someone was ripping her heart out.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder and lifted her onto his lap. Kell. "What's the matter, lass? What happened between you and Charlotte?"

Aislinn could barely get the words out. She was too embarrassed, and didn't even want to repeat them to him. But he dragged it out of her, and was looking none too happy at Charlotte himself. Aislinn expected him to continue to pat her back and soothe her, then maybe let her go to sleep.

But instead, he stood her up next to the bed and rearranged her clothing so that it looked less like she'd slept in it. "Come on, Mrs. MacNaughton, we're going back down there."

She tried to pull her hand away from his, but he had too tight a hold of it. "No, we're not. I don't want to go back down there with people who think I'm a whore and that I can't keep you happy and that we're having trouble and we've only been married for less than a month . . ." She started to sob again with the retelling of it.

Kell shook her slightly, then looked into her eyes. "You are not going to let them drive you away from your own celebration party. You're not. You are made of much sterner stuff. They can think anything they like, but when you ran away, you confirmed their thoughts. It looks like we're having problems if you're up in your bedroom crying. So you're going to come down with me, and we're going to have a wonderful time, and give them all something to puzzle over."

Aislinn looked down, fiddling with her lace handkerchief. "Maybe you'd be happier with Charlotte, Kell," she whispered. "I'm young and inexperienced and –"

Before she could finish the sentence, he had her bloomers around her ankles and her hips over his knee. It was a short spanking, but he had her bucking and wiggling within a matter of about three slaps. "I don't want to hear anything like that coming out of your mouth ever again, or I'll take my tawse to you."

Aislinn didn't know what a tawse was, but she was fairly sure she didn't want to find out – his hand was quite bad enough. "Stop – Kell – please!"

"Do you understand me?" Nothing she was saying was making him stop or even ease off the tremendous swats he was distributing all over her poor bottom.

"Yeeeeeeeeeeeeessssssss!" She was sobbing again, but this time it wasn't because of Charlotte.

Kell gave her another ten very hard smacks, mostly at the very bottom of her bottom, where butt met thigh for the first time. She would be remembering this spanking vividly every time she sat down for the rest of the evening.

When he'd finished, he set her down on her feet and turned her to him, hugging her fiercely while she continued to sob. "Don't you ever let me hear you say anything like that again, Aislinn MacNaughton. You're my wife, and I – I love you." He was a ruddy red when he said it, but he meant every word.

"Everyone around here loves you – the staff, my brothers, the villagers. If I got rid of you they'd slit my throat in my sleep and follow you without a thought." He cupped her cheek. "And I love you, too. How could I not, stubborn wench that you are."

Aislinn was still crying, but this time because of what he'd said. She couldn't believe that he loved her, and that he'd admitted it to her. She was sorry that it had taken that hateful woman to drag it out of him, but it was wonderful to know. Shyly, she looked up at him. "I love you, too, you stubborn, autocratic man." She reached back to rub her rear. "And you have a hand like an oar! I knew your head was solid wood, but your hand???"

Kell frowned at her, patting her bottom through her skirt, which made her jump away from him. "Come on, milady. We need to rejoin the party and give them all something to talk about for years to come."

And they did. The dance went on through the night, and Lord and Lady MacNaughton were never out of each other's sight, and rarely out of each other's arms. It was quite the scandal. It just wasn't done. They were so frightfully, obviously in love that the gossips of the day simply simmered with indignation at the idea that the young couple didn't seem to have any propriety when they were together. They sat next to each other at dinner – even though they weren't seated together, as a matter of course – she rarely occupied a chair when they weren't dancing, because she was sitting on his lap, sipping wine from his goblet . . . he fed her from his plate and they kissed with positively disgusting abandon.

And although the bets were that this abnormal infatuation would ease off after a couple of months, they were still at it – to nearly everyone's amusement – years later, after she'd presented him with three sons and two daughters, and they had left nearly every ball they'd attended early, escaping at a frightfully impolite early hour to get home and happily spend their night working on a sixth child.

Gossips be damned, they were monumentally happy, and each considered themselves incredibly lucky to have found the other. Their home was their sanctuary, their heaven on earth, and they celebrated their love every evening in each other's arms.