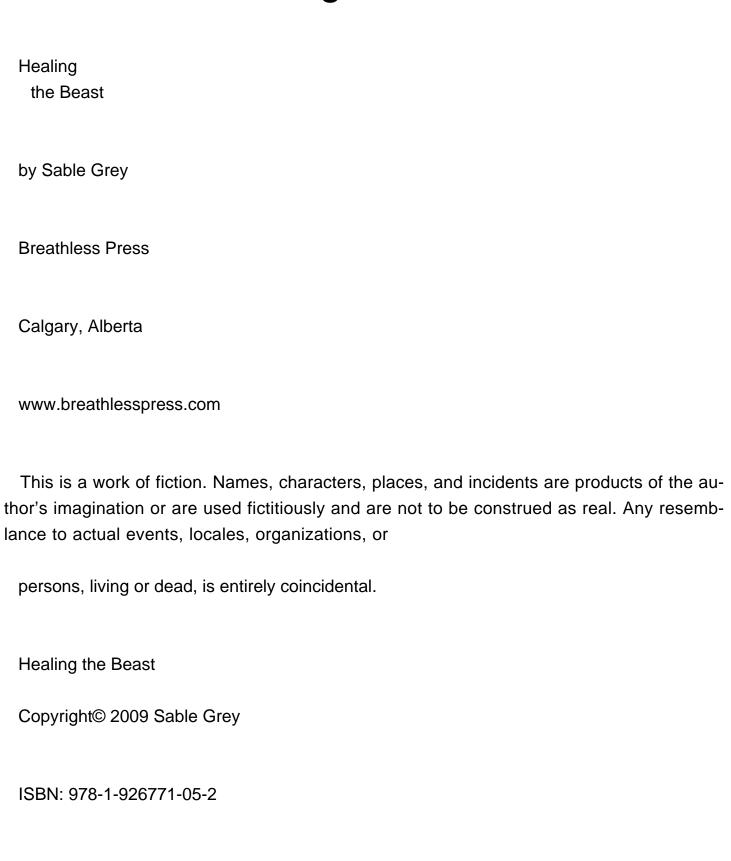


Healing the Beast



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Chapter One

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March

Conen opened his eyes to the crunch of soft steps and squinted, his hand tightening on the hilt of his sword; but he couldn't see anything through the snow. The pain in his side was dulled in comparison to the throb at his temple, even though he was certain the wound on his head was not the most serious.

He was no stranger to pain or the wounds of battle. His large body was covered with evidence that marked the truth of his loyalty. Though it stung the gash at his temple and brow would heal within days. The wound at his side would take longer. The muscles were slashed open but thankfully the blade had missed the more important areas of his insides. It was the blood that seeped from the wound, despite the pressure he was trying to place on it that caused him worry. He would have to stop the bleeding so the wolf inside could heal the injury.

Grunting and using his sword to lean on, he pulled himself to his knees, and then to his feet. He peered through the white blanket that rippled around him. It had been a victory despite the men he'd lost. He'd been left for dead after the enemy fled. Around him, piles of bodies remained.

And then he saw her. She stepped through the veil of snow like an angel wrapped in a woolen cloak. Pink cheeks, kissed by the cold and fair lashes that veiled her gaze as it swept over those left behind. She wore a plain gray dress beneath and he breathed out with relief. She was from the convent, no doubt, come here to help those, like him, who were left behind and injured.

Leaning on the strength of the sword, he took a breath and called out but the force of his own voice brought him back to his knees. Still the woman lifted her face, her blue eyes finding him quickly. She hurried forward, moving as smoothly through the battlefield of death as the flakes that fell around him.

"What are your injuries?" Her voice was strong, full-bodied, and sweeter than any he could remember. He turned his head, hoping she hadn't seen his face yet, enjoying the feel of her fingers on his arm when she touched him. It had been so long since he had felt a woman's tenderness that his wounds, and the life they drained him of, seemed suddenly unimportant.

"My side," he answered in a deep voice, slightly hoarse from bellowing commands over the noise of battle.

"Your head as well," she argued, reaching for his face but he ducked, still trying to hide the scar that he knew would have her stepping back away from him. He knew the reaction well. He'd witnessed it almost the entirety of his adult life.

He'd only been fourteen, his wolf still young and inexperienced in the healing process, his first time battling with his father's army, and the hand ax had cracked his jaw seconds before he'd sliced his aggressor's arm, cutting off the strength that would have split his head open. He'd always been a large size, larger than most men and the physician said that the strength of his thick bones was what saved him from death. Conen knew though, even inexperienced, it had been the wolf that had saved him from death.

'You are blessed,' the physician told him, 'that your speech will not be affected.' Conen saw no blessing in the years of having his jaw bound with a leather strap or in people's reactions since.

"It is nothing," Conen told the woman as he pulled from the memory, but she did not move and finally reached forward, cupping each side of his face to turn him towards her. Her gaze dropped to his deep scar but only for a moment, and Conen blinked when she did not jerk her hand away from him. Instead, she leaned forward to examine the wound at this temple. Perhaps the snow had blurred her vision and it did not look as deep as it was, he reasoned.

"You are correct. It needs but a stitch. Raise your arm; let me look at your side." She spoke directly, as if she herself were accustomed to telling others what to do. He tried to lift his arm as she instructed but grunted when pain speared through him. He shook his head.

"I cannot," he murmured and she dropped her hand from his face to his shoulder as she knelt beside him and leaned down to look for herself. Her long fingers pushed aside his breastplate and clothes and warmed his skin. Gently, she touched his wound and peered closer.

"There is no fatal damage but you will need it tended to. Come with me and let me help you." She straightened, her hand falling away from his shoulder.

"Have you a horse?" He guessed her to be closer to thirty than twenty, and thinner than he'd first thought. The cloak had made her seem more rounded, but her fingers were long and slender.

"No." She shook her head.

"Where are the others?" He dragged a breath, fighting to remain conscious.

"There are none but me. Let me wrap the wound so that the blood flow will stop," she suggested and he sank to his knees with a sigh of relief. Carefully, she lifted the breastplate over his head and set it aside. Before he could protest, she ripped the hem of her dress and tore a thick, long strip. She wrapped the piece around him tightly and tied it at the other side.

"My armor," he reminded when she'd finished but she shook her head.

"Leave it. It is too heavy and will make you slow. My home isn't far." She dipped her shoulder beneath his arm, her body warm against his.

Conen grunted. "I will break you in two."

"I am stronger than I appear."

He heaved himself back to his feet by allowing her to take some of his weight, surprised when she did not buckle beneath the little that he allowed her to burden. "You are not from the convent?" He gripped the hilt of his sword and used it to keep himself balanced.

"I most certainly am not. My home is just up the road, closer than the convent. You will have to walk the distance."

She was tall, he thought absently as he attempted to take a step but winced, and groaned against pain that ripped through him. He managed another step and she nodded with approval.

Moving closer to him, she wrapped her arms around his broad torso the best she could, in an attempt to help relieve him of some of the pain. He stared down at the top of her hood and then took another step, dragging the sword forward as if it were a cane.

"This shall take us the entire night," he said with a frustrated growl and her arms tightened around him. For a moment he didn't try to move, then laid his arm across her back, steeled himself against the pain, and began to walk, one little step at a time.

Nightfall had come and gone by the time they reached the cottage. Conen had to give the woman credit. She had done her best to help, but he could tell now that he would not remain conscious for much longer. The pain had consumed his entire body almost to the point that he could not even feel the cold of the night anymore. He stumbled as they reached the door and his shoulder struck the wall of stone with a solid thump.

"Call for your husband..." Conen managed to murmur.

"I have no husband," she said flatly and pushed open the door. "Just a few more steps and you can rest." She prompted and gripping her shoulder, he pushed himself inside. The cottage was small, just two rooms and the bed waited for him against the east wall of the front room. He staggered forward and then collapsed atop the wool blanket.

The blankets felt good beneath him and the room was warm, breaking through the chill that had settled in his bones. He groaned and turned his head when someone moved at his side, finding the woman bending over him. From beneath his heavy lids, he watched her lips part slightly with her breath and vaguely felt her hands on his body.

"Do not look at my face, angel. Close your...eyes. Kiss me." He murmured seconds before the darkness of unconsciousness swept around him.

Hours later, Marial examined the stitches she'd made in the soldier's side. They looked good, close together and pulled tight. The wound needed to be wrapped but it was late and she could not lift him alone so she would have to wait.

Her gaze drifted over his torso. She had cut away his tunic revealing many scars. Old pain ached within her. Her husband's body had bore the marks of bravery and honor as well. It had been nearly two years since Geoffrey's death but she still longed to feel the soft skin of his scars beneath her fingers again.

She shook the memories of her husband from her mind, focusing on the man who lay in her bed now. She'd tended many soldiers at the convent but none had ever been as large as this one. Thick muscle and solid bone, not an inch of softness, she marveled, like a great human mountain.

Her gaze rose to his face. He'd tried to hide it from her. Her husband had spoken of this man before, of the deep scar and of his fearlessness. He was Lord Conen Mars Sheridan of Glashire.

Leaning closer, she examined the scar closely; searching for the story it could tell. An inch and a half in width, deep, and it stretched from earlobe to chin. It had been wrapped, she could tell, but not tight enough and had healed so that his strong chin set slightly off center.

Probably an ax, she surmised as she reached out and gently ran her finger down its length. He was fortunate the strike had not blinded him or affected his speech. Still, she imagined, from the way he'd tried to shield her from it, that men's ignorance had done more damage than the ax.

Her gaze drifted to the rest of his face. Broad features, heavy brow, and deep-set eyes. They were blue, she remembered. A tiny scar on his left cheekbone, another at the top of his high forehead, and he would be left with a tiny new mark that divided his left brow. It had only required two little stitches and she smiled at the job she'd done.

She wondered if he had a wife awaiting his return. She would ask the nuns to write a letter and deliver it to Glashire, she decided firmly, so his family would not think he had perished.

She leaned away from him, stretched and yawned. She had tended him long past dawn and into the morning. But she had taken her time cleaning the wound, to be certain there would be no infection. Now, she rose to her feet and set to throwing out the bloodied water and sewing the tunic together.

He was a large man, she thought as she moved about, larger than most. She guessed him taller than six feet tall. It was not his height that was as intimidating as it was the width and solidity of him. Nothing but muscle, she remembered how he'd felt when she'd tried to help him. It was like trying to carry a bull.

When she sat down to sew his tunic, her gaze drifted back to him as she recalled the last words he'd spoken to her. Do not look at my face, angel. Close your...eyes. Kiss me. It had been so long since she'd felt a man's lips on hers. She'd been tempted on occasion to allow some of the men who'd called on her that privilege. But her common sense had always stopped her. She had more important things to keep in mind than her loneliness for a man's kiss.

Her eyes lifted to the door across the room, thankful that Geoff remained asleep when she arrived with the man. Only thirteen, her son worked from dawn and into the late afternoon each day for his uncle so that they could continue to live in what had been his father's cottage.

Marial had wanted more children but her husband had received a wound in battle that prevented them from having any more than Geoff. Her husband's brother did not understand why she had not remarried. She was only twenty-nine, still young enough to remarry and conceive. But she had more to think of than her own needs. Geoff needed a man who would take him in and show him the ways of men and most of those who had shown an interest in her had shown none in her son.

She started from her thoughts as someone rapped soundly. Carefully, she set her sewing aside and opened the door, smiling when she found Sister Iris and Sister Lorna on her step. They both wore expressions of relief when she opened the door.

"When you did not come to help us this morning, we were worried. We feared something happened to you in the snow on your way home." Iris exclaimed.

"Something did happen. Come in and I shall show you, but keep quiet for Geoff is still asleep. His uncle took pity on him and allowed him three days rest after he worked so hard with the sheep this past week." Marial stepped aside so her two friends could enter.

"Do tell us!" Iris said and then gasped when her gaze rested on the large man in Marial's bed.

"I went to the battlefield. I wanted to be certain none of the living was left behind. He was the only one who still had breath left in him." Marial closed the door and then stepped around the two women to the soldier's side.

Iris pressed herself back against the wall but Lorna had overcome her shock and took a bold step forward. "How on earth did you manage to get him here?" she asked, peering down at the man. "He's a face that only the good Lord can love."

"Lorna!" Iris whispered, scolding though she did not venture closer herself.

"He walked. It took little more than two hours for he could barely move. But he was very strong and did not give up," Marial told them, feeling a bit of pride for the man and how well he'd done under the circumstances. "I would not have brought him here except my husband had spoken of him to me as being honorable once. I recognized him from the scar Geoffrey described. And he would have died on the road if we had tried to walk back to the convent."

"The stitches look good. But then you have always been very good at sewing men up." Lorna observed as she leaned closer to the man and squinted down at the wound.

"I need to wrap him but cannot move him on my own. Will you help me?" She looked from one nun to the next. Lorna immediately stepped to the other side of the bed and after a moment Iris nodded.

They hefted him to sitting position and Marial quickly wrapped the linens she had cut into long strips around him, bracing herself against the bed as she pulled tightly and tied the bandage.

"He is as heavy as an ox." Lorna grunted. "Where is that horrible brother in law of yours when he is needed?"

"Let's lay him down again, gently now," Marial instructed and then beamed when he did not stir. "I thank both of you. I could not have done it on my own."

"Indeed not," Lorna agreed. "Always mending the broken."

Iris nodded, "A new baby bird to care for." Marial crossed her arms. She'd first met the two nuns when she was trying to mend a fallen falcon's broken wings. They walked upon her on the road and offered their assistance. She'd become fast friends with them both but, two years later, they still teased her about it.

"One extremely large bird," Lorna amended and Marial chuckled.

"Have you ever seen a man as big as he?" Iris whispered.

"A few." Lorna shrugged, "but not many." She stepped away from the bed and settled in the chair at the small table in the middle of the room.

"I haven't. If I had I would be too afraid to tend to him," Iris admitted.

"He's had no fever?" Lorna asked and Marial shook her head.

"Not yet. Pray that he does not develop one," she answered and both sisters nodded moments before the door across the room opened. Marial smiled when Geoff appeared, his fair hair disheveled, and rubbing his knuckles sleepily over his eyes.

"Good morning," Lorna greeted as the boy yawned loudly.

"I thought I heard clucking out here." He grinned as Lorna took a swipe at his legs but his expression dimmed and then sobered completely when his gaze fell to the man in his mother's bed. "Is he one of those that fought last night in Towton?"

"Yes." Marial reached out to smooth down his hair when he stepped near. "Poor thing nearly collapsed in the floor. I am thankful he did not."

"He'd still be there if he had," Lorna added and Marial nodded. "I don't think the four of us together could lift him."

"His face..." Geoff murmured.

"A soldier like your father was." Marial rested her hand on his shoulder, thinking he was nearly as tall as she. "Someone he knew, I believe." Pain tugged at her heart when Geoff took another step forward.

"If I were you, who I am not, I would send the ox home and then ride south to London. Find you a wealthy gentleman, make your cousin pay a handsome dowry, and live the rest of your life without worry of ever laying eyes on him again," Lorna said dryly and Iris shot her a scolding glare.

"He would not have to be wealthy gentleman. A farmer can make her just as happy as any lord," Iris corrected, and then smiled, "but it is a good idea. You should not be here alone like this, Marial."

"She's not alone," Geoff said, turning from the stranger. "She has me."

"Indeed I do." Marial nodded. "And I need nothing more."

Chapter Two

Groaning against the raw pain at his side, Conen woke up to warmth and the sound of a fire crackling. He was home. He breathed out heavily, and then forced his eyes open. He instantly stiffened as he stared at the ceiling. He was not at Glashire.

Turning his head, his gaze swept across the stone hearth that occupied the center of the room. A stool set in the corner, next to a basket where he spied his tunic. Another stool at a small wooden table was pushed against the wall. Near the door, his armor and sword had been cleaned so that they shined.

He shifted on the straw mattress so that he could peer across the room at the door near the corner and the wooden counter that stretched the length of the rest of the wall. He decided it was a woman's work area from the dried herbs hanging along the wall along with an assortment of woven baskets. Echoes of their fragrance lingered in the air though he could not determine which scents they were.

There were only two small windows in the cottage, both with wooden shutters closed to keep out the spring's chill. Fresh straw had been laid, soaking the moisture of the earthen floor.

Where in hell was he? How had he come to be there? The last thing he could remember was taking a blade in his side. His hand found its way to the bandaged area. Obviously, someone had found him and tended to his wounds. He could have bled to death, he thought, judging from the pain that the area was giving him.

When the door to the small cottage opened, Conen's gaze darted to the woman that bustled in. His throat closed. Thin ivory face, delicate pink lips, and nearly white lashes fringed her cornflower blue eyes. However, her hair was what drew his attention, silvery blonde like the glow of a new moon, braided and wrapped back from her face. She had the look of an angel. He suddenly remembered the slight savior who had rescued him the night before.

The woman did not even glance in his direction, dropping her armful of firewood near the door, one piece at a time. Conen watched her delicate fingers carefully lay each small piece against the one before. This woman was not the one who had saved him, he reasoned, gaze dropping to her thin waist. She could not have moved him without help. But one sweeping glance at the cottage again and Conen could deduct that she had no man. A woman living alone?

The woman removed her cloak and hung it on a small peg, then turned to the fire, holding out her hands to warm her reddened fingers. Though her waist was small, the swell of her hips told him she was indeed a woman and not a girl. He judged her to be near thirty, a bit old to have no man to look after her. Why hadn't he been taken to the convent where the nuns could care for him? Had his men all been defeated?

Her gaze finally darted towards him. For a moment, their eyes locked, but then she blinked and hurried forward.

"You are awake." Relief sounded in her voice. "I prayed that you would not perish. Have you much pain?"

He opened his mouth and wet his dry lips. "Yes."

She turned quickly to retrieve a canter and poured its contents into a wooden mug. "Here, drink this tea. It shall help ease your suffering." She brought the rim of the mug to his lips and

he took several swallows. She set the mug on the small table next to the bed and frowned down at him.

"You are sweating." She reached forward, causing him to start when she laid her hand against the skin of his cheek. "You are warm. I'd hoped there would be no fever." She turned and disappeared out the door, then returned moments later with a small wooden bucket of water. She set it next to the bed and retrieved a cloth to dip into the water.

Yes, he would have a fever. That's how it happened, how the wolf would heal him. He would have to send the woman away if he didn't want to terrify her. But whatever she'd given him to drink was making it difficult to focus on his words.

He nodded when she wrung it out and placed the cooled cloth on his forehead. "Where am I?"

Marial found another cloth, soaked it, and placed it beneath his chin. "My home. Do you not remember?" she asked softly and he shook his head. "I am Marial. I found you with the rest in Towton. You'd been left for dead but were the only one who still had life in them."

His lids were growing heavy. Good. The tea was taking affect. Henbane relieved pain but usually made the patient drowsy.

She kept her voice low as she continued, "My home is closer than the convent, so we came here. You were very strong and brave to have walked the way yourself." His lids closed but she could tell by the tension in his body that he had no drifted to sleep yet. "I went back and retrieved your armor just as I promised you."

He did not open his eyes. "Thank you. You should...leave now."

"Rest now, Lord Sheridan." She felt his body relax. Remaining at his side, she continued to bathe him with the cool water even after his temperature began to rise. He did not thrash and she was thankful because she was not certain she would have the strength to keep him from tumbling to the floor. He did however moan and call out until he was hoarse.

The next sound he made gave her chills. It was a deep growl that vibrated up from his chest and didn't even sound human, more like a beast. She leaned closer and started when his eyes suddenly opened. They glowed yellow up at her and his large hand grasped her arm.

"Leave me." They were barely words, sounding like they'd been forced out between the growls. "Go." He released her arm and placed his hand on her chest and shoved her gently back. She staggered backward but her feet rooted to the floor when he yelled out in agony. The bones of his large face shifted, sounds of popping and cracking filling the room. Long black nails grew out from his fingers and hair began pushing up from his skin along his arms.

She held her breath as she watched the transformation continue over the span of several minutes. Right before her eyes, the wounded soldier became a beast, like the results of a wolf and human mating. In one swipe those nails tore away the bandage around his side and her eyes widened as the tender flesh around his wound reddened.

He rose up and arched in pain as the wound closed itself, the flesh coming together until it became only a thin line of scar tissue. Then he fell back onto the blankets. His eyes closed and for a moment his body only shook. She started to step forward, and then halted when once again, his body changed before her very eyes. In minutes, he was again the man she'd helped from the battlefield, only scars now where his wounds were.

She moved backwards and sat down in the chair, staring at the man. Her husband had told her of men he'd known that carried the beast inside of them but she had never before, as far as she knew, met one. Now, she didn't know what to think. Had she not seen it with her own eyes, she might not have believed it.

"What in God's name is that?" A masculine voice made Conen's lids part but he hadn't the strength to open them completely, so he just peered out from between them. A pointed face stared down at him, mouth twisted with disgust.

"He is Lord Sheridan of Glashire and he's trying to rest." Conen managed to turn his head enough to see it was Marial who answered. "He was injured in the battle at Towton on Sunday."

"You should have left it to die." The man straightened and faced her. If Conen could have found the strength, he would have hit the man in his long nose.

Marial's pretty mouth tugged with a frown. "How is your family, Robert?"

"They are well. Ellen shall have the babe any day." The man she called Robert scowled. "She has become so ill tempered I cannot stand to be around her."

"It shall pass once the child is here." Marial waved a hand. "Be thankful Ellen has not condemned you to sleep in the stables. Geoffrey swore to strangle me and wed the mare if I did not bring him a son."

"I remember that," Robert said. "He'd stomped mud through the house when we had returned from our ride. You told him he could not move back into the cottage until summer when the ground had become dry again."

"I was only six and ten," Marial answered but smiled softly. "And I did give him the son he wanted."

"You gave him everything he wanted," Robert's voice deepened slightly and Conen watched Marial move across the room away from him. "You were always a good woman to him. I often envied him and wished I had married you."

Conen tried again to sit but could not find the strength. He'd healed himself but was left weakened afterwards. He could hear the lust in the man's voice and it was obvious that Marial wanted none of his attentions. When Robert neared her, her entire body stiffened.

"He was a good man to me and I loved him completely." Her lips were pressed when Robert reached out and caught her elbow, turning her so she had to look at him.

"I am good to you. I let you stay here. I don't push you to remarry. I gave my nephew work when he could find none elsewhere." Robert reached up with his free hand and ran a finger across her jaw but she turned her face away.

"Ellen is a fortunate woman to have such a generous husband." Every word was forced. Robert leaned forward, apparently intending to kiss her when the door of the cottage opened. Conen's eyes flew to the boy who entered.

Geoff was tall for his youth and built lean but solid. Conen breathed out when he saw the boy's eyes narrow on the man across the room. There was enough fire there that he could put a stop to anything the man might have been planning.

"Kill him." But his words were slurred and the boy only glanced at him as he stepped farther into the room, hanging his coat on the peg over Marial's cloak.

"Uncle, I did not know you would be here today. Aunt Ellen has been calling for you," the boy said and Robert nodded, quickly pulling on his gloves.

"Then, of course, I shall go to her and see what more she wishes to rail at me about. You say it is natural?" He looked at Marial as if nothing had transpired before the boy's arrival.

"Quite," Marial answered so Robert gave another sharp nod and headed for the door. When he was gone, Marial breathed out heavily.

"He was going to kiss you." The boy accused.

"He is gone now, Geoff, that is all that matters." Marial waved her hand, finally looking at Conen. "Lord Sheridan is awake and I must tend to him."

"I'm certain Lord Sheridan won't mind if I use his sword next time and run my uncle through with it." Geoff growled.

"No." Conan managed to force the word out. "Do it...slow...ly."

"I need more wood for the fire." Marial spoke over her shoulder so the boy turned to go back outside and collect some for her. When he was gone, she pressed her lips and looked down at Conen, hands on her hips.

"He is a boy and is very impressionable. Do not fill his head with thoughts of killing and bloodshed so young." She was scolding him, Conen realized and he would have laughed if he'd had the strength. "And don't listen to the things Robert said. He is as ignorant as he is ar-

rogant."

Conen remembered her brother in law's words about him. When he was stronger he would pay the man a visit. A few swallows of her tea later and he gratefully drifted back to sleep and away from his anger.

"No." Marial said firmly, placing her hands on Conen's shoulders. She pressed but he remained unmoved, staring at her as if she were the one with the scar marring her face.

"I have to get to my men," he insisted. "They think I am dead."

"They do not. I had the nuns write a letter to your family. It's already being delivered. My husband was a soldier too. I know what must be." She gave him another ineffective push. "You are still weak and must rest."

"Move aside, woman," he told her but she remained where she was ignoring the frown that pulled at his lips. "Then have you a chamber pot?"

Of course, she thought as she turned. He would have to relieve himself. She swiped the wooden bucket near the hearth and thrust it towards him.

"We can use this..."

"We?" He reached forward and snatched the bucket from her. "I need no assistance from you in this matter." She pressed her lips but turned and headed across the room and through

the door. Once inside, she pulled the door behind her, glancing around her son's small room. The bed was wedged beneath the window between two walls and there was just enough space for someone to walk to the chair that set between the bed and the fourth wall. She wished it was bigger for him but he'd not complained.

She tilted her head when she heard a heavy step, and then murmured an oath as she threw open the door to find Lord Sheridan attempting to stand. "You are a bullheaded man that I wish to rail in the head!" She snapped as she hurried forward. "Get back in the bed before you lose all of your strength." He stared at her a moment before finally relenting. The color was drained from his face and though he did not admit it, she could tell the bit of strain he'd endured had weakened him.

"If you get up again I shall beat you in the head with the sharp edge of your own sword." She warned, picking up the bucket and turning towards the door.

Conen watched her disappear. She was an odd woman; unlike any other he'd ever met. She didn't seem intimidated by his size or afraid of his face. She had remained while he'd healed himself; he vaguely remembered those wide blue eyes during the process. But she'd not run and had eventually ventured closer to make certain he was healed.

When she returned, she set the bucket within his reach, beside the bed and retrieved a small jar of salve. He didn't move as she dabbed a bit of it on his brow and used her fingers to massage it gently around the stitches.

Why did she go through so much trouble over such a small wound? Though, with her this close, he could smell rosemary, some kind of mint, and her natural feminine scent. His gaze lifted to the ivory skin of throat wondering if she would feel as soft as she looked.

"I am going to tend to the one on your side as well," she said as if she thought he did not like the attention. "I'll not have it ripped open again or becoming irritated before the redness is

gone."

"What is this foul smelling concoction you smear on me?" Conen growled when he could think of nothing else to say. He saw the slight curl in the corner of her lips.

"It shall help with the itching. It should not matter to you what it smells like." She said and motioned for him to sit and lean forward so she could apply some to his side. "I should have suspected you would make an irritable patient."

"How else would I be?" he demanded but some of the hardness had slipped from his voice. Instead, his attention remained on the way her fingers feathered against him.

She placed a knee on the edge of the bed and pushed herself forward so she could lean over him and rub the salve into his skin. He sat there staring at her for a moment, then his gaze moved down to her waist and then to her swell of her hips.

"My husband grew spoiled and never tried to fight me when I would tend to him, sometimes remaining in bed longer than he truly needed." She spoke absently.

"Where is your husband?"

She massaged more around the wound. "He died two years ago." Her voice dipped slightly.

"I do not blame him. It seems that would be the only escape from you." Conen's gaze ran back up her waist to her breasts. She was so close and he was tempted to touch her but did not. Women did not want his attention, not unless they were the kind who thought more of gold than any scar he bore.

"If you do not push yourself, you will be out of bed within the week, Lord Sheridan." It was meant to ease his temperament he knew, but the thought of just another week in bed made him groan.

He waited while she leaned back. "How do you know who I am? By some kind of witchery like you do with those herbs and ointments?" he asked when she moved to add more wood to the fire.

She gave a low chuckle, her gaze rising to his face. "Witchery? I was taught about herbs and how to use them by a convent of nuns! I doubt there is any witchery in what they've taught me. And I know your name because my husband had spoken it to me before. He met you once, years ago, and was very impressed with you. I knew it was you from his description." Conen turned his face away from her. His scar. That is how she knew who he was.

When he cut his eyes at her, she was looking over her shoulder at him. "You are a rather large man to be afraid of witches."

Conen's eyes narrowed. "I did not say I feared you." She gave a soft grunt as if she'd expected that kind of response and faced forward again. He stared at the back of her head; unsure of how to react to the strange young woman who treated and spoke to him as if he were like any other man she might meet, even after what she'd witnessed. It unnerved him.

A soft rap at the door and his gaze followed her across the room. Her hand rose to her mouth to muffle the half laugh that escaped her throat and she took a step back so the two women could enter. The older one was obviously a nun, garbed accordingly, but the younger one was dressed in tattered clothes and smudged with dirt.

"What...?" Marial looked the woman up and down but it was the other that answered.

"She was confined to her room, for talking when she should have been silent of course. This is her disguise."

"It is a pitiful one." Marial laughed against her hand.

"I sneaked away to bring you this for your wounded, little bird." The young woman held up a basket, glancing over at Conen as he pulled the blanket over his torso to hide the healing of his wound then froze. "He's awake."

"You did not expect him to sleep forever?" Marial took the basket and turned to set it on the table. "Lord Sheridan, this is Iris and Lorna, my dearest friends." Marial introduced when no one spoke. "And this is Lord Conen Mars Sheridan."

"And no little bird," he added causing the older of the two to grin.

"We have you some herbs there to mix with the broth you've been feeding him. It should help return his strength to him." Lorna said stepping farther into the room and removing her shawl. "Though I wish now we had brought something solid to fill him with." Their visit was short and Conen breathed out when they left. He didn't like the way the younger one kept staring at him.

"They mean well and are good friends to me," Marial offered after she'd heated the broth and brought it to him. He nodded and lifted the bowl to his lips, draining it as he remembered the older nun stating it would help strengthen him.

Marial smiled approvingly when he passed the empty bowl back to her. "A week is not so long a confinement. Most men would have to endure a month of healing." She spoke over her shoulder as returned to the other side of the room.



He shook his head. "No. Sometimes on the battlefield." "But you don't become complete beast." She sat on the side of the bed. "No. We feel the animal inside but it never takes us over completely." "Fascinating." "Is it?" He smiled. "Most are so frightened they can't settle themselves enough to want to be curious." "I have a curious nature anyway. And as I said, I had heard of it before." Marial shrugged. "There are enough things unexplained in the world and in the nature of men that this does not seem to me something that could not be accepted. I imagine however with this gift comes loneliness." "I have my men. They've accepted me and the wolf." Conen had never offered so much explanation in his life for what he carried inside himself. But he liked that Marial wanted to know of it and asked questions without judgment. "Have you a wife to share your secret with? One who accepts the wolf too?" She titled her head. "No. I am unwed." Her brow pulled with a frown. "Why? There are women who would accept a man's inner

beast. You are a warrior, one that I know from my husband's report, who is a great one, one that men follow."

He could have kissed her. "It is not the wolf that turns a woman away."

She stared at him for a moment. "You think it is because of the scar you bear."

"I know it is."

"Perhaps more your shame from it than the actual scar," she met his gaze. "Your wound is deeper and worse than the one on your face. I imagine you think of it as more than what it is. The woman who wishes to wed a warrior would not be put off by the evidence that he is a warrior."

Conen offered no more, uncomfortable with her scrutiny now and with the understanding of which she spoke. He was unaccustomed and wasn't certain how to react, so he didn't. Instead he closed his eyes and after a moment, she eased from beside him.

Chapter Three

Conen awoke just as Robert stepped into the cottage. The man barely glanced at him as he removed his gloves and then his coat. Marial offered her brother in law some stew that she had prepared earlier for their meal but Robert declined.

"I've only just stopped into visit and escape my wife's railing." Robert shook his head, "It is so I have no desire to be around her."

"Even though she carries your child?" Marial raised a brow when her brother in law looked at her. "It would seem at one time you did not find her presence so detestable."

"It is the babe." Marial offered. "It is a difficult time for her right now too. When I was with child I wept like a ninny. Poor Geoffrey did not know what to do with me. You know he was never very patient when it came to weeping women."

"He and I are the same in that." Robert nodded. "You miss him very much don't you?"

Conen did not miss the look of sadness on Marial's face. "Yes, I do. It has been two years but it does not seem that much time has passed."

"His laughter." Robert nodded.

"Yes and his companionship. I find myself lonely for that at times." Marial lowered her gaze

to the floor. "The days are empty and the nights are endless." Conen turned his head to stare at the woman. She'd been strong, determined, and without fear. Now he saw her vulnerability. He knew loneliness well. And he understood now why she was able to know he was lonely too.

"It does not have to be that way for you," Robert leaned closer. Marial stiffened slightly and Conen felt like hitting the man.

"I should tend to Lord Sheridan." Marial said but before she could move towards the bed, Robert caught her arm.

"Do not. He can keep. I too long for companionship." His voice was thicker and he did not release her when she tried to pull her arm from his grasp.

"I do not believe it is companionship you seek, Robert. I believe it is something else that I am not willing to give you."

Robert's expression became hard. "You would do well to please me. This is my cottage since my brother died."

"I owe you nothing. If you mean to put us out, then do so and Geoff and I will look for work in Towton."

"No, he may stay. He works hard and earns his keep, but what do you do?" Robert's mouth twisted. "What will you do is a better question."

"I was a soldier's wife, Robert Milbourne, you despicable heathen. I know what injuries are fatal and would make certain you left here with one!" She spat. "I could also give you tea to

make certain your wife never became pregnant by you again!" Conen stared at her. She'd grown claws and her eyes flashed fiercely.

"Do not speak to me of witchcraft. I am not as stupid as others who believe in that nonsense." Robert's arms tightened around her as she struggled against him.

"Then sit and join me for tea!" She hissed then cried out against his mouth when he kissed her. Conen forced himself to sit up, ignoring the dizziness that found him. Despite his lack of strength, the wolf inside was becoming angry too.

Robert shouted and when he leaned from the kiss, his lip was bleeding. "Bitch! You will learn gratitude before I leave here today." In an instant he wrestled her to the floor.

Marial screamed as Robert's hand delved beneath her skirts. She tried to kick at him but he had her pinned so she could barely move. She tore her hand free and clawed at his face but he raised his hand and brought his open palm down, snapping her head to the side.

Conen swung his feet to the floor and grunted as he stood. He took two painful steps towards them. His eyes met Marial's over Robert's shoulder and she ceased her struggles.

"She said no." Conen's voice shook with anger. Robert turned, and then looked all the way up until his gaze rested on Conen's face. His eyes widened and before he could rise, Conen reached down, grabbed his collar, and jerked him to his feet. He slung him to the side and into a wall. Yes, the wolf was very angry. Possessiveness drove strength into him where there had been none earlier.

"The woman said she did not want your attention." He reached down and held a hand out to help Marial to her feet. She accepted his hand and pulled herself up from the floor before releasing him to smooth down her skirts.

'This does not concern you." Robert nearly shouted at Conen. Conen turned and faced the man, causing him to take a step back.

He took up the man's coat and threw it at him. "Let yourself out." Robert looked as if he would argue but then pulled his coat on then swiped the gloves Marial held out for him.

"You will pay for this," Robert warned her then stormed from the cottage, slamming the door behind him. Conen stared at the door wanting very much to follow and rip him to shreds in the road.

"You shouldn't be out of bed." Marial's hands shook as they rested on his sides and caused his attention to return to her. She was urging him to move back to the bed so he silently obliged.

"Do not get up again. You need not put unnecessary strain on yourself until you are stronger."

"You mean I should have stayed in bed and watched him rape you?" He grunted and leaned forward so she could examine his side. "I may look like the devil but I am not a sadist."

"There you see. Just as I warned. It is reddened." She reached for the jar of salve and removed the lid. "You will be strong quickly if you do not exert yourself as you did today. By doing so, you've added another two days to the time you must spend in bed."

"Ungrateful wench, I was saving you from your husband's brother," his eyes traced the line

of her collarbone. "Perhaps if you knew more how to defend yourself I wouldn't have had to exert myself."

She massaged the salve into his side. "I did not say I was ungrateful for your assistance. But it is no good for you to throw men around my cottage when I am working as hard as I can to make you well again."

Conan grunted. "If I had been well I would have thrown his head around." He settled back onto the blankets when she moved away.

The corners of her lips curled. "You should not speak like that. This is his cottage and his land..."

"Enough pretense, woman. He is the despicable bastard you named him. He deserved a lashing," Conen interrupted and her lips curled a bit more.

"I admit I did enjoy seeing him hit that wall." She finally relented and Conen inclined his head sharply. "I never had to learn to defend myself. Geoffrey always took care of me." She started to turn but Conen reached out and caught her wrist. It felt tiny beneath his fingers.

"Do not allow any man to use your husband to weaken you like that again," he warned. "And he will attempt it again. A coward always does."

"He will most likely throw us out." She shrugged but he could see the worry in her eyes.

"No he won't. A predator does not rid himself of his prey until he has devoured it. He will see that bruise as a victory." Conen released her. "Have you any of that tea left you've been giving me?'

She nodded, staring at him. "It makes me drowsy and I must wait up for Geoff to return." "I want it for me," Conen grunted. Her face grew serious, "Are you in pain?" "Much." He nodded and she turned to guickly mix him a mug. "You shouldn't have gotten out of bed. It's too soon." She said when she brought the tea to him. He didn't reach for it, waiting for her to lift the rim to his lips. He took several long swallows. "Your husband's name was Geoffrey Milbourne," he spoke when she removed the mug. "I believe I remember him. Burly man, thick beard, boisterous laugh?" Her eyes brightened and she nodded, setting the mug aside. "Yes, that was my Geoffrey." "He talked more than any man I've ever met." When she lifted a hand to cover her laugh, he continued, "But what I remembered most was the barmaid that fancied him." "I do not wish to hear of this." "She was very pretty by most anyone's standards but your husband barely looked at her. When he did look it was without interest. The poor wench finally gave up her attempts to flirt

with him and moved on to another. I told him he was mad not to enjoy her when he could," Conen closed his eyes as the tea began to take away his pain. "He told me that his wife was the only woman he would be enjoying. That stuck with me and I had great respect for him for it."

For several minutes, Marial said nothing. Then he felt her lips touch his cheek and his eyes flicked open. When she leaned away, he could see the tears that filled her eyes.

"Thank you, Lord Sheridan." She stood quickly and turned away. Conen watched her, the warmth of her mouth lingering on his face. Hours later he watched her massage her neck as she draped a blanket over the chair.

She moved quietly so she didn't disturb Geoff in the next room, preparing to retire for the night.

"You needn't sleep in the chair. You can have your bed back now that I am healed. I can retire in the barn." She grew still when Conen stepped behind her and his large fingers took her first by the shoulders, and then moved up, pressing his thumb into her tight muscles.

"I will not hear of you sleeping in the barn." She closed her eyes enjoying the feel of his hands on her body. She remembered the way he'd tossed Robert to the side as if he were nothing. Yet, now, his hands were firm but gentle.

"It makes me feel a burden to you."

Marial tilted her head forward so he could massage the nape of her neck. "It is silly to fight over this. The bed is large enough for both of us."

His fingers stilled and then fell away from her so she turned to face him, nearly laughing at the expression on his face. "It isn't as if we've not shared the space before. I lay with you through the first night you were here."

"I've no wounds now." He glanced back at the bed.

Marial waved a hand. "It isn't as if we are strangers, Conen. And the bed is large enough. My Geoffrey was a large man and had the bed made to accommodate his size and mine." She turned and began adding more wood to the fire. She wouldn't tell him that she might like to have a warm body next to hers at night, even if only temporary.

He said nothing else, nor did he object when she crawled into the bed. He did hesitate before settling beside her atop the blankets and blowing out the lantern. She didn't mean to laugh but couldn't help herself.

"You needn't freeze because you of your honor. I trust you, Conen, and I am not afraid of your...beast." She spoke into the darkness, mocking him slightly. After another moment of silence, he pulled the covers back and then atop him. The heat of his body filled the bed and she closed her eyes. She was lonely. She missed this closeness.

"I've been told that I tend to dominate the bed in my sleep. If I touch you, it is unintentional." His deep voice revealed his fears.

She reached over and grasped his thick arm. "There now, we have the awkwardness out of the way. I've touched you first so you have nothing to fear."

"I didn't say I feared anything," he growled.

"I wouldn't have guessed you one to be so bashful. I held you when you were red faced and fevered and bathed you when I first brought you here. As I said, we are not strangers."

"I am no more bashful than I am afraid. I was merely attempting to warn you lest you became embarrassed," he snapped.

She grinned into the darkness as she withdrew her hand. "It is not the first time I've lain beside a man, Conen. Besides, My Geoffrey used to say I pulled all the blankets. We all have our ways and can learn to adapt."

After a moment he rolled onto his side, facing her. "As long as you are quiet, I do not care if you leave me to the elements with nothing to warm myself."

She chuckled and rolled to her side, facing away from him. "Sleep well."

She drifted to sleep quickly but surfaced again before light to find a large arm draped around her. Her back rested fully against Conen's warm body. His hand rested against her stomach and his deep breath brushed against the nape of her neck. Her body heating in response, she shifted, turning slightly and his arm tightened around her. He mumbled something sleepily and his lips brushed her shoulder. Her lids dropped and she snuggled against him. He murmured something but then his body became rigid. She realized he'd awakened completely, enough to realize how he close he was holding her.

"Are you awake?"

"Barely," she whispered, praying he wouldn't pull away from her. It had been so long and it felt good to be held.

"I didn't mean to...I shouldn't be holding you like this."

"It feels good." She snuggled closer. "Warm. Safe." She knew he'd not meant to tighten his arm. It was instinct for him to protect. She'd learned that about him.

"This makes me no better than your husband's brother."

Her eyes opened and she frowned before pinching his arm hard while still holding him around her. "Don't ever say that again. It's nothing like being pushed to the floor against your will." She rolled towards him, looking at his face in the dark. "Is it so terribly uncomfortable for you that you cannot indulge me a few moments? It's been so long since a man held me and..."

He shifted and slipped an arm beneath her head pulling her back against him. "If only to soften your tongue so that I might sleep." But she heard the thickness in his voice. Here in the dark, he didn't let his scar hinder him for when she turned her face up toward his, his mouth found hers instantly.

"Can you see in the dark?" She spoke against his firm lips.

"As well as the light," he murmured before his tongue plunged between her lips.

Marial slid her hands up his chest to his shoulders. His skin felt hot beneath her fingertips and his body hard and strong. Longing burned within her. It had been so long since she felt the strength and tenderness of a man's hands. She slipped her fingers around his neck, pulled him so that he would kiss her deeper. His fingers tightened and she moaned softly with encouragement.

Her heart pounded as he kissed her hungrily and when his arms tightened around her, she moaned at the desire that filled her. He shifted and positioned himself so she settled against the blankets and he bent over her.

"I have nothing to offer you, Marial. I have given over my father's home to my brother to rule so that I could continue as the leader of my men. If it were different, I would take you away from this place and your husband's brother."

Marial's chest tightened as she looked up at the slight yellow glow of his eyes. "I expect nothing from you, Conen, except a bit of comfort tonight to chase away the loneliness. I am not a silly ninny who does not know of the exchanges between men and women. I know that you will leave when your men arrive for you."

He hesitated and then lowered, brushing his lips again over hers. It touched her that he would think of her, that he would consider what she might expect of him. Many would not. They would take what they wanted and then leave without giving her another thought. She let herself slip into his kiss, enjoying the movement of his lips, the intimacy.

"Touch me, please," she whispered and his large hand covered her breast before slipping down to delve beneath her shift. Those hot fingers brushed her stomach, caressed her breasts, plucked at her nipples. When they ventured lower to touch her sex, she hummed with encouragement and anticipation.

He was a different man than she'd seen him. With no light shed on his face, he was confident and sure. His strokes were deliberate, not lacking in experience. He evoked heat in her body until she quivered from its intensity. And then he settled between her knees and his cock pressed against her.

"Yes," she pulled at his shoulders when he hesitated.

As he invaded, she arched at the intrusion, and cried out at the feeling of fullness. He was gentle, easing into her until she stretched to accommodate him. It wasn't until she lifted her hips to meet his strokes that he settled into a glorious rhythm that slowly pulled at the tension in her stomach. She lifted her hips again.

"Keep still, woman, or I will lose myself." His breath was hot against her ear as he leaned closer. The admittance of his own desire and struggle for control made her feel heady. She brought her fingers into his thick hair and lifted her hips once more. He rewarded her with low groan.

"Take your pleasure, Conen," she whispered back to him.

His hips jerked forward but then fell back into rhythm. Again he was thinking of her, allowing her to find pleasure before him. While it was thoughtful, it was in vain for him to wait. She was so close anyway; her body long neglected would not wait for him. Her fingers fisted in his hair as that tension began to unravel, and bucked against the intensity of pleasure that reached out from the very core of her and veined through every limb.

She cried out but his mouth covered hers, muffling her sounds. It wasn't until her body grew still that he released her lips again. He bowed his head next to hers, his ragged breath labored next to her ear.

"I feel as if I want to tear you apart." His voice shook.

"Do as you wish," she encouraged, releasing his hair and running her fingertips across his shoulders. He turned his face toward her and his lips parted over her shoulder. His teeth grazed her skin then nibbled, applying just enough pressure to send hot chills up her spine. She sucked in her breath and encouraged, he moved just an inch and applied pressure again.

This time, his hips thrust forward and he buried himself to the hilt. Her nails dug into his shoulders and the growl that vibrated against her shoulder excited her. She dragged her nails across his skin, this time harder than she had before and she felt his body tense. He liked it. The way he rocked back and thrust into her again told her that he did.

Hesitantly she leaned forward and nibbled at his shoulder as he'd done hers. His arms slid around her, pulled her up to him as he began thrusting wildly into her. She'd never felt so dominated before, held so closely. She bit him again, enjoying his passionate response.

"Harder," he commanded and she obliged, enjoying the way his body filled hers again and again. He pumped vigorously, seeking release within her and his arms tightened. She bit again, this time hard and without release. His entire body shuddered and then grew still momentarily as a shout tried to push from between his clenched teeth. His cock jerked and then released into her before his hips thrust wildly against her, as if of no control of his own.

He released her back into the blankets and then grasped her wrists in one hand pushing them above her. His body stilled but he remained hovered above her, dragging deep breaths into his chest. The hand around her wrists shook.

"What are you doing?" She finally asked.

"Fighting," he admitted in a voice that barely sounded human. "Trying to stop myself from marking you as mine."

"Marking me?"

"With my bite." He pulled from within her and released her hands. He rolled over to his back at her side, continuing to drag deep breaths into his lungs.

"Do you wish to mark every woman you bed?"

"No."

Again she felt a bit of headiness of having him want her so strongly. "Was I wrong in biting you?"

It was a strangled laugh. "No. Cease your talking, woman, and let me have a bit of peace now." She smiled in the darkness and snuggled closer.

When Marial awoke again, to her disappointment Conen was not beside her. She sat up. Sunlight filtered through the window and she was vaguely aware of the steady thwack sound from outside as she realized she'd slept later than usual. Rising quickly, she washed and dressed and then stepped outside to find the source of the sound that had filtered into her awareness.

Her throat closed. Conen wore no tunic, swinging an ax over his head to splinter the wood into pieces with one swipe. Her gaze darted to the large pile he'd already accomplished, then moved around but she found no sign of her son. Her attention returned to Conen's bare torso.

As if sensing her there, he suddenly turned and frowned. "Did I wake you?"

She shook her head, not trusting her voice until she was able to compose herself a bit more. His gaze darted down at her dress momentarily before he turned back and positioned another piece of wood on the block.

"Where is Geoff?"

"I offered to do his chores so he could visit a friend." He swung the ax and Marial marveled at the muscles moving beneath the skin of his back. She wanted to reach out and run her fingertips over every ridge.

"You shouldn't over exert yourself."

"I haven't." He retorted and tossed the splintered wood to the pile.

She moved forward and he went rigid the moment her hand touched his arm. He remained still as she examined his side. Satisfied he was not tearing it open again, she stepped back.

"You've chopped enough wood to last all spring and next winter too." She laughed this time when she dropped her attention to the pile.

"I needed something to do." He snapped and embedded the ax in the block.

She grinned at the back of his head. She remembered well how her husband became when he was hungry for her. Conen was showing signs of the same irritability.

She watched him snatch up and armful of the wood and carry it to the wood box. Then he came back and scooped up another. She remained there watching him until he'd put all the wood inside and then came back brushing dirt from his chest.

"I'll clean out the barn now."

"You won't come back inside?"

He was half way to the barn when he stopped, then turned and headed back to her. "I will sleep in the barn tonight. I'll make myself a bed there. It's for the best." He shook his head. "It's not right my sharing your bed and now that I've had....it will be difficult for me not to do every night as I did last night."

"I don't recall telling you I didn't want your attention." She tried not to grin.

"I'm close to grabbing your right now."

"What stops you? Perhaps I want to be...grabbed."

For a moment he just stared at her. Then her ran a hand through his hair, chuckling.

"While you indeed may, it still isn't right that I should use you like that. I'll stay in the barn."

She offered no more argument, retreating back into the cottage.

Chapter Four

The sound of horses brought Marial's attention from her sewing. She glanced at Conen as she stood when he peered out the window. Across the room, she opened the door and stared out at three men dismounting, each wearing the same tunic that she'd mended for Conen. Her heart dropped as she realized these were his men, come to retrieve their leader.

"We've received word that Lord Sheridan is here..." the man that stepped forward looked beyond her and apparent relief washed over his expression. "Milord, we thought you were dead."

"I very nearly was." Conen spoke from behind Marial. "This woman saved me."

"We are indebted to you." The soldier's gaze dropped back to Marial.

"It took you long enough to get here." Conen did not move when Marial looked back at him. He filled the doorway and there was no way for her to step around him so she remained there, between the men as they spoke.

"We rode hard and fast with no sleep for two days." The man's lips slanted, "Being cramped in a house with a beautiful woman could not have been terribly unpleasant. Perhaps we shouldn't have hurried as we did."

"Her tongue has a stinger," Conen growled, finally moving around her.

"It is not her tongue you should be interested in." The man chuckled.

Conen grinned back at him. "It is good to see you, Angus." Marial stared curiously as the two men embraced. Conen grunted with the obvious discomfort the affection brought his side.

"We saw you fall. We thought you were dead. You can imagine my surprise when we received a letter from a wagon of nuns that you lived." Angus spoke after Conen leaned away. "Your men are now under the impression that you cannot die."

"Humph!" Marial snorted causing the men to look back at her. "Do not rejoice yet. I may kill him myself before you take your leave. But he isn't well enough to ride just yet. He should not over exert himself for a few more days at least."

Marial gave the men a once over when none of them said anything. "I'll prepare some food for all of you. You must be hungry."

"Yes." Angus nodded.

"Geoff!" Marial turned and waited for her son to appear in the door. "Tend to these men's horses." He nodded and hurried to obey as she stepped inside. There were a few exchanges she could not make out but then Angus' words caused her to hesitate.

"Is she yours?"

"If she was mine, I would strangle her," Conen answered.

"Will you share her?" Marial's stomach clenched at the hopefulness in Angus' voice.

"She's not mine to share."

"She is pretty, milord. If she can stand your temperament, you should make her yours. Bring her back to the castle and put that brother of yours in his place once and for all."

Marial rested her back against the wall beside the door and listened to Conen chuckle. "My brother's place does not concern me."

"That woman could give you an heir," Angus continued. "Has she a husband?"

There was a pause of silence. "Not any more."

"Besides her tongue which you cannot find anything for her to do with but lash at you with, is she a good woman? Does she know of your wolf?"

"She is and she does but it matters not. She mourns the death of her husband still and I am too ugly a bastard for her." Conen's heavy step neared, then stopped. "And do not think I haven't considered the good many things she could do with her tongue." Marial's cheeks warmed and she hurried away from the door to begin preparing stew for the men, unable to ignore the tension that tightened in her stomach. Share her? She'd never been shared before, never had two men and wasn't sure what all that would entail but it did make her entire body flush and drew an ache deep inside of her. She did not look back at them when the two entered several moments later.

"Your father wished to ride with us, milord." Angus settled in the chair while Conen sat on



"He does not open easily to those he hasn't known for years," Angus agreed.

"I don't ramble on and on about myself if that is what you mean," Conen snapped in his own defense.

"Some things need not be said though," Marial began slicing a carrot, speaking over her shoulder. "The scars on his body tell me that he is brave and fearless. The way he stood up to my husband's brother told me he has honor and integrity. He complained of being confined so I know he is not lazy."

"He is unwed," Angus offered.

Marial kept her back to them, smiling when Conen made a sound of warning. "I imagine by choice. Too many women looking to wed someone just to inherit their gold." She scooped up the sliced carrots and dropped them into the kettle of water. She began slicing another.

"You are uninterested in gold?" Angus asked.

"There are more important things than wealth." She sighed. "My son is one of them. Gold does not make him become a man."

"Many at Glashire admire and respect Laird Sheridan. He shows great patience with the younger men in training," Angus supplied.

"Patience? That is a side of him I have not witnessed yet," Marial quipped.

"There are many sides to him. Patience and understanding for the young men. Hard and commanding when at war; and with women, he can be gentle and..."

"Go help the boy with the horses." Conen's voice was low. "Do it or I will pound in your skull."

"I was only trying to help." Angus chuckled as he stood.

"Meddling like a woman," Conen growled and Marial looked back when Angus muttered something before ducking out the door.

"Lorna is always introducing me to soldiers or men who happen upon the convent. I believe I am her cause. But her heart is in the right the place. She means no harm." Marial offered to ease Conen's embarrassment.

Conen's his heavy steps brought him closer. "Angus is not a nun and I am not a woman stranded on my own." He reached around her and swiped one of the slices of carrot, ignoring her when she slapped at his hand. He popped the vegetable into his mouth.

"He obviously looks up to you and wants you to be happy." Marial added the carrots to the stew pot and reached for the onions. She was aware of how close he stood to her and it made her entire body flush. He'd done as he said and remained at night in the barn. But she'd longed for him to come to her.

"He has known me a great many years and does not see the scar." Conen's deep voice was fringed with softness she had not heard before.

"I believe you are the only one who notices it, Lord Sheridan. No one else would if you didn't bring so much attention to it yourself." She cut into the onion.

"That is not the truth."

Marial sniffed as the onion's vapors drifted up around her face. "I do not lie."

"I am not ignorant and I have sight. I do see when people stare," Conen argued.

"But you do not know what they think." Marial sniffed and again ducked her head to wipe her eye on her shoulder.

"Let me do that before you start weeping." His large hand reached around her and grasped the onion causing her to turn and look up at him. "I have no patience for weeping women."

Her lips curled. "Only because you feel helpless. My Geoffrey was the same way."

"I've never felt helpless," he snapped. "Move aside and let me do this."

She lifted her hand, ignoring when his eyes narrowed on her, and touched her hand to the scar on his face. "It is only skin, Lord Sheridan, and as living and human as I am."

Conan stared at her. Her fingers were feather light against his face and her eyes were not filled with pity or disgust. She meant what she said. He leaned forward slightly but she did not react the way she had her brother in law.

"Most don't think as you do."

"Only because they are not accustomed to scars. I've seen many." She pressed her palm to his cheek.

He swallowed. It had been easy in the dark to be a man beneath her hands. She could not see his scar. But now, she looked at him with the same desire she had two nights ago. He searched her gaze then ducked his head.

"Milord, the men..." Angus' voice caused Conen to straighten so quickly that her hand fell away from him. "...are returning." Conen dropped the onion and nodded, heading towards the door.

"It can hold," Angus suggested guiltily but Conen stepped past him, waving for him to follow.

"Well?" Conen addressed the two men who swung from their horses. Gerald held up his hand, displaying the skin of his knuckles split.

"He lives but he shall do so miserably for a few days."

"Good. Not a word about it to the woman," Conen told them, then faced Angus, "There is no room in the cottage for all of us. You will have to use the stables tonight."

Angus smirked. "I am not so tender I must have a bed. You are the one spoiled by your father's wealth." He ducked when Conen took a half hearted swipe at him, and then grinned over his shoulder as he led the other two towards the stables. Geoff followed them, leaving

Conen to return to the cottage.

Chapter Five



"Why should I be intimidated? Though I imagine you are quite accustomed to making people cringe with your bellowing I do not fold so easily as others. Despite your size, you are a man just like any other." She dropped her attention back to her sewing. "And it was an irrational thing to do. You'd already punished him enough for what happened."

Conen cursed as he swung his legs to the floor. "I shall sleep in the stables myself if you do not unhinge your mouth, woman." He stood and stepped towards her but she didn't even flinch.

"Do as you like. Your health is not in jeopardy. Your wound is almost healed." She shrugged, but then stood. "Come here. I have sewn this and I believe it is large enough for you but I must make certain before you hide behind the horses."

Conen gritted his teeth. "I do not hide." His gaze dropped to the simple, linen tunic she held up. "What is this?"

She moved to stand before him, pressed the material against his chest, and stretched it across his shoulders. Her touch caused his body to heat. "Well I could not just sit here and stare at your scars. It gave me something to do." Her hands pressed flat against his sides and she smiled when she'd determined the garment would fit him.

It was a small smile, one that curled her lips gently into her cheeks. The light from the candle by which she'd been working, flickered shadows over her ivory complexion. "You needn't have gone to such trouble."

"Don't be foolish, it was no trouble." She looked up at him, hesitated, and then turned to fold the tunic, placing it on the table. "It isn't as fine material as I'm certain you are accustomed to but it will hold together."

"Marial." He spoke her name and she looked at him as if surprised he had. A flush colored her cheeks and she looked away quickly. "I promised your son that I would not assault you

but you make it difficult not to."

"Yes, I know. You wish to strangle me." She rolled her eyes as she laughed. "I believe I've heard it before and more than once. I do not care. You shall need to change clothes sometime. Another day and that which you are wearing shall be able to ride the horse without you."

"Give it to me then." He pulled his own tunic over his head in one swift movement. "I shall wear the thing if for no other reason to keep you from wagging your tongue at me any longer." His throat closed when she faced him and her eyes dropped to his torso. There was no mistaking the glitter in her eyes as she scrutinized him.

She held the tunic out for him to take, never releasing his chest from her gaze but when he stepped closer, her stare rose to his face. She sucked in her breath sharply and he felt the tremble in her hand when his fingers closed over hers.

For one long moment, their gazes met and the air around them stilled. "You are leaving to-morrow. I wonder would you spend the night here...with me." She looked away, flushing and his mouth dried.

"You could find a man to come to your bed. You are a comely woman." He watched her sigh heavily.

"It is difficult to do with my husband's brother watching my every move." She looked at him. "And many of the men who are interested in me are not...what I want."

He swallowed loudly. "And what do you want?"

"I do miss the feel of a man." She lifted her hand and her fingertips feathered across the hair

of his chest. She was barely touching him, yet he could feel the gentle stroke through every part of his body.

"I am an ugly bastard. I could call for one of..." His words caught in his throat when she pressed her palm completely against him.

"You are not ugly. You are lived in. I do not mind your scars. I appreciate them for what they are." She ran her hand over his skin, down his stomach. "If you do not want me then you only need to say so."

Not want her? Conen stared at her face, the soft curve of her lips when she smiled slyly. She knew very well that he wanted her. She only needed to dip her hand a bit lower to find the truth.

"You owe me nothing," he said in a low voice. "I do not expect you to come to my bed." He held his breath.

"It is not a debt I wish to pay." She brought a second hand to his stomach and lifted her face to look at him. He'd have been blind not to see the yearning in her eyes. She wanted for him.

"I am going to kiss you," he murmured and when she nodded, he leaned down and brushed his lips over her mouth. Soft, pliant lips and heat seared through his entire body.

Those lips parted instantly and her hands slipped up and over his shoulders. Her mouth opened, inviting him to kiss her deeply, her velvet tongue dancing against his.

She did not shy away from him. She did not stare at his face. Instead her palm rested against the scar that should have turned her away. When their lips parted, she gazed into his

eyes. It made him want again to make her his. Angus' words found him in his memory. You should make her yours. Bring her back to the castle.

That's exactly what he wanted to do. It would be easy to imagine her as his wife. She didn't fear him. She seemed to understand his moods. And she accepted his wolf.

"You are the dangerous kind of woman that makes a man like me hope for love." He didn't realize he'd said the words aloud until she blinked and stared at him.

"Everyone hopes for love," she said after a moment.

"Some of us don't." He lifted his hand to her hair, running those fine strands through his fingers. "Some of us hope only to hold a woman like you, to have the chance to bury ourselves inside of her for awhile. Perhaps hope she doesn't rob us in our sleep."

Her lips twitched with that ready smile she failed miserably at stifling. He leaned forward. "I am going to fuck you tonight, Marial. I am going to use you and take what I want from you. You weaken me to where I can't think to do anything else."

Her small pink tongue wet her lips. "I do not imagine you've ever been truly weak, Conen."

"With you I am." He stepped forward but she matched him with a step backwards.

"You cannot think I am not as affected by you as you seem to be by me." She crossed her arms. "What if I wish to use you too? You think men are the only ones who desire? Who have needs?"

"What is your desire, Marial?" he asked as she bumped against the table behind her.

Again she wet her lips. "Perhaps I fancy you and your friend." The words shook, as if she'd been hesitant to say them. His mouth dried and he felt like leaping on her.

"Angus?"

"He would not have suggested such a thing to you if you'd never shared a woman with him." She reached back to rest her hands on the edge of the table's surface.

"You heard that?" He winced.

"Has he a wolf inside too?"

He closed the distance between them. "He does. It doesn't frighten you?"

"No." She was trembling. Her cheeks were flushed.

"If it is your desire, I will have him join us." He leaned closer. "I would have you be satisfied too."

Her breast rose quickly with her breath and he expected her to shake her head. Instead she inclined it.

"Undress." He turned and strode from the cottage, returning with Angus moments later to

find her completely nude and sitting in her chair. She stood when Angus entered behind him.

"I...I've never been shared between men before." Her gaze dropped as they both began undressing. She didn't look back up at him until he moved forward.

"The bed?" Angus asked.

Conen reached for Marial and guided her backwards. Easing into the chair, he pulled her to him, between his legs. "Do as you wish now with me, Marial."

She looked down at his cock as that small smile returned to the corner of her lips. She seemed to be considering her options and then moved forward to climb atop his lap. She slid her thighs over his and he angled his hips so she could slip down onto him.

He knew she could see his eyes glowing as she began riding him, yet, it did not cause her pause. He rested his hands on her hips, and then slid them around her to pull her forward so he could kiss her. When Angus moved forward and rested his cock against her ass, she gasped against Conen's mouth but did not pull away from him. He felt Angus pushing into her through the small membrane that separated them. She moaned against his lips, her fingernails digging into his shoulders.

"Was this your desire, Marial?" He asked when she left his mouth.

"I did not know what to expect." She sucked in her breath as Angus rocked backward and then forward into her. "Mother of God, yes."

Conen slid his hands beneath her thighs, lifted her slightly so he could thrust upward into her. She cried out as he and Angus moved in unison so that one of their cocks was buried into her as the other retracted.

Marial closed her eyes. She'd never felt so full. It was a wonderful feeling. Angus' strong hands slid around her waist, down to her hips, holding her while they pumped into her. One of Angus' hands slid around and he plucked at her clit. Their sounds, low growls and heavy breaths filled the room around them and seemed to seep into her. Her body trembled and in response they quickened their rhythm. It was too much. She cried out as she found release and they continued rocking into her until her body stilled.

Conen lifted her from him and stood, laying her across the table so that her legs dangled over the edge. She watched Angus clean himself off with the cloth and bucket of water on the counter before returning to step between her legs. His hands lifted her behind the knees and a moment later he thrust into her sex.

"How hard do you like it, Marial? I shall give to you any way you wish me to." He stilled, waiting for her to answer.

"I will not break," she whispered and he smiled at her with an incline of his head. And then he thrust to the quick. He rocked wildly into her, his palm settled over her clit so that every movement rocked against her. She looked at Conen to find him, his fingers around his cock, dragging up and down. The sight of him aroused her, excited her, and made her want to reach for him.

She tried to push back at Angus but his rhythm was so wild she could not anticipate. Like Conen, his eyes glowed and got brighter as he neared release. He came into her in just moments. No sooner had he moved away, Conen took his place. He pushed into her and then pulled her up to him so that he could kiss her savagely. His arms wrapped around her, held her to him in strong embrace while he thrust into her as wildly as Angus had.

Her body shook as she felt Angus' hands moving along her shoulders, pushing her hair

aside. When Conen released her lips, Angus leaned in and licked at her mouth. He smiled when he leaned back, running a finger along her lips while Conen continued to fuck her. He pressed and then slid his finger into her mouth.

When her teeth grazed his skin, Angus groaned encouragement. She bit harder and heard the friction of his free hand on his cock. She realized it was the wolf in them that liked the biting. She bit harder and held, her body heating again when she heard his groan.

She felt as if she was enveloped in a fog, surrounded by sex. Conen lifted her onto him, one arm beneath her, holding her onto him. Angus moved behind her and again entered her, slipping his arms beneath hers so she was leaned back against his chest.

"Bite him too, Marial." It was a deep growl from behind her and she felt frenzied as she lifted Conen's free hand to her lips. She nipped at each finger tip then sucked his large thumb into her mouth, biting down. His response was wild, causing him to jerk into her.

Angus' hot breath hissed against her ear. "Take her Conen. Make her yours."

Marial moaned as Angus thrust in unison with Conen.

"Claim her so that we may have her as we like."

Marial bucked as she came again, her whole body moving without her control. She shook, and heard herself screaming her pleasure, though it seemed removed. All she could feel was the intense pleasure coursing through her.

"Take her."

Angus filled her with a shout of his own and Marial became away that Conen was shaking as he thrust in and out fervently, his eyes glowing bright, his nose flared, the planes of his cheeks flushed. He growled deep in his chest as he found his own release and Angus' arms tightened around her shoulders.

"Do it."

Marial couldn't explain the sudden need to have Conen do just as Angus suggested. She wanted his mark. She wanted to be his. He bared his teeth as his hips jerked against hers and she could see his canines were elongated. His wolf wanted her too.

She could see the need to do as he wished in his eyes but he didn't. He leaned forward resting his forehead on her shoulder as he dragged several breaths, grasping for control. She couldn't explain the feeling of rejection that filled her.

Slowly the men pulled from within her and steadied her own her own feet. She accepted the water Angus retrieved for her and drank thirstily. She watched them over the rim of the cup.

"You are a fool."

"Go back to the stables." Conen growled, clearly more irritated with himself than his friend. Angus shook his head but reached for his clothes, pulling them haphazardly on before stepping from the cottage.

"You don't want me."

He growled and leapt more like animal than man at her, in an instant with her bent back-

wards over the table. "I want you as a man wants to breathe." His eyes were not those of a man at all but those of the wolf.

"Why don't you ask me if..."

"What would you have done if you were my wife and my men came home to tell you I'd been killed in battle?" He released her and turned away. "My mother killed herself when she thought my father had met his death. I saw her anguish and would not do that to a woman."

"I would have wept. I would have lived for my son's sake. I would have come with your men to retrieve you once the nuns told me that you lived." Marial reached for his hand. "I cannot know the pain you feel for your mother but I have been married to a soldier. I know the way of things."

Slowly he looked at her. "You mean to tell me you would take my mark?"

Marial would have said no a week before. But this man had brought her back to life. He'd reminded she was a woman— that she was desired. He wanted for her and made her want for him.

"I would take your mark. I would be yours. You are a good man. You would not be cruel to my son." She touched his face. "And you make me hope for love too."

He moved lightening fast, as if he allowed the wolf freedom to run. She gasped at the sudden white pain that nearly blinded her, realizing his canines had sank into her shoulder. The pain subsided as quickly as it had found her and in seconds, heat began pulsing through her, veining through her entire body. Her nipples hardened, her own hips jerked her against Conen. Her arms circled him and pulled at him as if trying to bring him closer, into her.

Crying out, she held on to him as pleasure, so intense she shook, cascaded over her in fluid waves. Lights danced in and out in the corners of her vision. And following that rapture was a full feeling of belonging, so strong she nearly wept.

"Now you are mine and I will spend the rest of my life trying to deserve you." Conen's voice found her and she opened her eyes to look at him. There was so much tenderness in his gaze and she smiled at him.

Marial turned straightened the blankets of the bed, remembering the night before with a small smile. She and Conen had barely slept. He'd been reluctant to leave her when his men readied the horses for their return to Glashire. Without him in the cottage, the place felt empty. However, Marial had never felt so alive. While she'd worked to ensure he'd grown stronger, he'd healed something inside of her and left her with a gift. She didn't notice the changes the night before but she noticed them now.

Acute sense of hearing. Her eyesight was perfect. And it was as if she could taste the air, sense everything around her. Including the approach of Robert. Frowning she turned to the door just as he pushed it open and glared in at her.

"Your guest is gone I see." He stepped inside without being invited. "I am not happy that he was here or with how you behaved with him here."

Her gaze didn't miss the bruise on the side of his face. Conen's men had beaten him but they'd left him alive enough to seek revenge. She knew that was why he was there. As he advanced, she matched every step with one of her own carrying her backward until her bum hit the counter. She could see the anger in his eyes and fear shook in her veins.

"Go back home to your wife, Robert," she whispered.

"I shall come and go as I please. This cottage belongs to me along with anything in it — that includes you." He grasped her by the arm with one hand and raised the other. As his arm arched downward she felt the change inside. Something had suddenly opened its eyes and she felt the anger before his hand connected with her face. Her head snapped to the side.

"And now that you have no ogre to save you, I shall take what I want from you." Robert continued but his grip loosened when she faced him again. His gaze widened. Energy popped in white lights around her. The beast was angry.

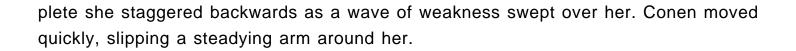
The sound came from her throat but was not her voice. It sounded more animal than human, followed by exploding pain that gripped her entire body. Her bones shifted and long sharp claws grew out where her nails had been.

Robert staggered backwards, his mouth opening and closing in silence. She could see the horror and, satisfyingly, the fear in his expression. She leapt forward before her transformation was complete, lifting her hand and leaving a trail of four red marks down the side of his face.

He turned, hand to his bloodied face, and fled, nearly running head first into Conen on his way out. Conen stepped out of his way and then looked back at Marial.

"Scaring people already, woman?"

She took a deep breath, then another, and groaned in paid as the beast retreated back inside her, returning her physical form to its natural state. When the transformation was com-



"It shall pass quickly," he assured her.

"Will it always feel like this?"

"Only the first few times. This time it is not so bad. You didn't even become full wolf. You'll have to learn a bit more discipline. I can help you." He stroked her hair back as she laid her cheek against his arm. "Are you ready to leave?

She shook her head, thankful that the dizziness and weakness were fading. "I only need to collect my herbs and I'll be ready to leave." But she didn't move as Conen leaned down and kissed her cheek. She smiled up at him.

"Foul smelling herbs that you may mean to drug me with."

"Afraid I might give you some kind of witch's brew?" she teased back.

"Just kill me slowly." He kissed her again.

Biography

Sable Grey resides in the deep south of the United States with her wonderful husband, very spoiled dog, and three crazy cats. She spends her time researching her genealogy, designing cover art, watching movies, and reading.

With favorite authors like Stephen King, Piers Anthony, and Iris Johansen, it's no mystery where the inspiration to write tales of love, adventure, and mystery come from. An avid reader and storyteller at a young age, Sable began writing small stories as a child for her mother. However, it wasn't until she was well in to her twenties that she realized that her calling was sharing her stories with a larger audience than just family members and friends.

Now, Sable is dedicated to her craft and to bringing her readers quality fiction with unforgettable characters.